

Chapter 27 — At The End of the Day

The Crux, Fear and Depression, Reality Check, Hope, Challenge, Change

The Crux

By this time you've heard it all from my point of view, so you're pretty familiar with my position on our environmental emergency. It's us. All of us. We have nobody to blame but ourselves for this mess. We blame big oil and big ag and industry and the ultra-rich as we consume their products. We blame the government and politicians when we're the ones who voted for them. We whine about all the construction as we grow our population. We're horrified at the decimation of wildlife as we buy food that was grown on land sprayed with pesticides to kill every last insect, and we apply poisons to our yards to keep them flat and green. We donate to save the elephants like that will make everything better. If only. What helps is not buying the products. Which means that we consumers have to change. We can't blame others for trashing our planet. We have to eventually look in the mirror.

Consumer: One who spends wastefully, squanders, destroys, uses up, devours. Merriam-Webster Dictionary

"Ninety percent of what we buy in a mall ends up in the dump within 60 to 90 days." Yvon Chouinard

Fear and Depression

It turns out that most of us are concerned about global warming, and there's even a new field of study evolving around climate change and mental health.¹ A poll in 2020 by the American Psychiatric Association found that 67% of American adults were concerned about climate change,² and a study in 2024 reported that 85% of Gen Zers are concerned.³ The deniers only make up 10–14% of the population, which means that most people in the U.S. do buy the science.⁴ Millennials are the first to truly understand the damage we are doing to our planet, and probably the last with the chance to do something about it. If so many people are worried about climate change, how can we continue to leave it by the wayside and not do anything about it? One reason might be that most people don't know where to start, so we experience a sort of paralytic complacency.

"I sometimes call it toxic knowledge. Once you know about overpopulation, overshoot, depletion, climate change, and the dynamics of societal collapse, you can't unknow it, and your every subsequent thought is tainted." Richard Heinberg, Post Carbon Institute.

The reality is that climate grief is real, and we should be talking about it and doing something about it. Yet we don't. It turns out that 65% of Americans report that they rarely or never talk about global warming with friends.⁵ For my part, I can say that when I bring it up, it makes people nervous, and they'll either change the subject or basically tune me out. When I realize that I'm speaking to a glass-eyed zombie I'll give it up. Numerous occasions, calling me out as tedious not only in writing this book, but also by activism, which helps a lot. This provides a educate locals and help to drive faster actions. sustainability is a depressing topic of be exciting. We can do this. Hilary and I already are, and my point is to spread the word about what can and must be done. It really does feel good and empowering to take action that truly makes a difference. I honestly believe that our planet and our species can have a good and happy future. If we can rein in our consumption, most of which we don't even need for happiness, and combine it with the awesome technology that our amazing and creative human minds have developed over millennia, we can have a wonderful world ahead for ourselves and future generations.

"Real leadership is extraordinary courage by ordinary people".

My own husband has shut me down on and annoying. I'm currently finding an outlet, involving myself in local environmental formal background in which to recruit and It's absolutely true that environmental conversation. Yet, it doesn't have to be. It can

Right now, we're a lot less happy than we've been in the past, so our current situation can't be good. In the past 20 years, suicide rates in the U.S. have increased by 33%, with current rates in the U.S. at more than 47,000 people per year.^{6,7} That's more than we lose from breast cancer, prostate cancer, or leukemia. A significant portion of these suicides are teenagers, probably lost in the midst of their parents' struggle to keep that income coming in as the kids get mentally neglected and left to fend for themselves socially in a ruthless middle and high school world. This may also align with increases in mass shootings.

"Although we have relative material abundance, we do not in fact have emotional abundance. Many people are deprived of what really matters." ⁸ Sue Gerhardt

About 20 million of us suffer from depression, which is the leading cause of disability. Does it sound like we're a very happy nation? Not to me. I mean, wouldn't that suggest that our runaway capitalist system and indoor synthetic lifestyles may not be working very well for us? Think about that. We're a species that evolved to spend most of our time outside, foraging, hunting, and walking for miles every day. Now we spend our lives inside in a controlled environment that's neither too hot nor too cold, we drive everywhere, and we consume mainly processed, packaged foods from the grocery store that are laden with toxins and microplastics.

We can do ourselves a lot of good by getting outside and taking a walk. We are meant to be connected to the planet, nature, the natural world around us, to know and feel the seasons, the outdoors, to feel the cold when it's cold, to feel the heat when it's hot. Our bodies naturally adjust to this by using our natural systems in our bodies: our enzymatic, hormonal, and endocrine systems. 45% of the U.S. population does not participate in any outdoor recreation, and we spend nearly seven hours per day in front of screens.⁴ We should be enjoying our creative nature, preparing our own food from real ingredients, gardening, hunting, fishing, making arts and crafts, doing sports and hobbies. Check out the land and the plants and the wildlife and even the rocks in your area; even deep in the city there are still a few surviving insects and birds. Most of us have no idea where our food really comes from, and wouldn't know a tomato plant if it jumped up and bit us on the nose. And, obviously, taking action on the environment. Go through the priorities in chapters 16–23 and pick something you want to start with, then do it. Buying bulk and recycling and seeking out local, organic food, cleaning, and personal care products takes time, but it helps our planet a lot, and when you change your choices, you'll feel good about it and want to do more. It becomes empowering, and you may start feeling who you are meant to be in this world. My point is that having a purpose helps a lot. Make sustainability your purpose. It works for me.

"I'm a total pessimist about the fate of the natural world. In my lifetime I've seen nothing but a constant deterioration of all the processes that are essential to maintaining healthy life on Planet Earth. Most of the scientists and deep thinkers in the environmental field that I know personally are also pessimistic, and they believe that we are experiencing an extremely accelerated extinction of species, including, possibly, much of the human race."⁹

Yvon Chouinard

Reality Check

Even though I continue to maintain that we are all at the root of climate change, in reality we've had help. That help has been in the form of professional con men paid by wealthy corporations to keep us thinking that our planet is a non-issue that doesn't deserve our attention. A hugely important example is the landmark study put together by Stanford Research Institute (SRI) scientists for the American Petroleum Institute, a trade association that represents the oil and gas industry. They warned that increasing CO₂ in the atmosphere would cause increasing temperatures that could cause melting ice caps and rising sea levels and serious climate problems. Their findings were buried for the sake of profit as climate denial and misinformation took hold.¹⁰ We also saw in chapters 24–26 that the oil industry is just one among many cons that we've been subjected to.

And big oil continues to destroy lives the world over. The Russian attack on Ukraine is all about gaining control over Ukraine's vast resources. A lesser known horror occurred in Mozambique, where Total Oil Company left thousands of locals and global oil producers, including Americans, to die when a production facility and entire village was attacked by ISIS rebels.¹¹ While it's true that Total is an evil company, it's also true that we're all to blame every time we stop at the gas station, turn on a light switch, or

heat our homes with natural gas or propane. This is yet another reason why we need to get over fossil fuels, the sooner the better. These companies aren't worried about the planet and they don't care about people. They only care about profits.

It's the same with every environmental issue we have—big corp is at the center of misinformation. Science tries to honestly report a serious problem, corporations and trade groups counter with misinformation, and the public has no idea who to believe. Let me put it this way: never trust big corp, trust the scientists. There are far more ethical scientists than there are ethical corporations. Indigenous protectors of land and wildlife in the face of mining, farming, and forestry are still under constant attack, supported by local political puppets. More than 1,700 Earth defenders have been murdered by corporate hit men in the past 20 years.¹² And those are just the ones that we know of.

As we lose wildlife and wild lands, we tend to forget how the world was over generations and view the current world as the norm, which is another reason why we lack urgency. There's a term for this, "generational amnesia," which describes what our parents and grandparents remember. Personally, I remember road-tripping by car as a child, and my dad had to clean thick blankets of smeared insects off the windshield every time we stopped for gas. Now we almost never have to clean, unless the roads are sloppy from weather, and it's mud we're cleaning off, not insects. We used to have hundreds of birds around our yard, and power lines would be covered with them. Now there are hardly any. They're so scarce that we can practically give them each a name. Oh my god, that blue jay came around today! Adults may see nearly dead landscapes, and kids see them as normal, because that's all they know.

In 1998, The Worldwatch Institute's "State of the World Report" showed that trends in environmental indicators were generally down: "Forests are shrinking, water tables are falling, soils are eroding, wetlands are disappearing, fisheries are collapsing, rangelands are deteriorating, rivers are running dry, temperatures are rising, coral reefs are dying and plant and animal species are disappearing."¹³ And that was nearly 30 years ago. Of course, now it's worse.

Our ignorance of the extreme value of insects in local and global ecosystems is scary. The war on insects that is being waged in homes, gardens, and on farms reflects that ignorance. In the U.S., the fear and loathing of insects started only about a hundred years ago, when big corp began promoting toxins to make them go away, playing to our human mentality to control and dominate anything that we might find annoying. They buzz in our ears, some may bite us and carry diseases, but, hell, you can say the same for pets as well as children and even some grownups. The reality is, we ALL carry diseases. We absolutely need to build more compassion and appreciation of nature, including and particularly for these small creatures, and not just despise them across the board.

"Man's attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself. [We are] challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves." Rachel Carson

To overcome our ignorance, we need to advocate, educate, and set an example. Ecoliteracy is the basic understanding that everything is connected, and that we humans are animals and are dependent on the Earth and all the other creatures that live here.¹⁴ Pollution and pesticides have consequences for other life and for us humans even if we may not understand the details of the impacts. Even if we live in a city and don't feel connected to nature, we're still dependent on the photosynthesis of plants for oxygen. A study in 2023 identified six different interventions to motivate behavior change: educating others by providing data, giving feedback on past climate-related behaviors, setting personal goals, urging people to act more sustainably, providing financial incentives, and establishing social comparisons that highlight sustainable behavior wherever it appears. The last was found to have the most impact.¹⁵ Basically, we notice what others are doing, do it ourselves, and spread the word. I hope what I'm doing in my life and in this book inspires somebody to take action. With every inspired person, we can move another step closer to salvaging what's left.

I've heard a story that the Dalai Lama was once asked how to change the world, and his answer was to teach children to love insects. I don't know if it's true, but I do think it's a great idea.

Despite the devastation we are inflicting on our wildlife, a huge array of life yet remains, and this should be our entire reason for being. After all, we are a part of the intricate web of life on our planet. From the joy of listening to birds sing, to the luck of seeing a moose while on a hike, of watching squirrels and chipmunks racing around, we can experience the special talents and contributions of each. We can't fly, so watching a bird fly can be magical if we choose to look at it that way. Magic seems to die as we grow up and forget that the real world outside is full of mystery and beauty that we stop noticing. But it can return to us as soon as we restore our connection to the Earth and our brethren by getting outside. We need to remember that our bodies and our being are part of the Earth and made from the Earth, just like all the other life on the planet.

Our true nature is to be energetic and vibrant, and we don't need to allow all the wild places and sanctuaries to be destroyed. We have to fight back against the dystopian future that's being crammed down our throats by nasty politicians and the extremely wealthy and get our planet and wildlife back in balance. We have to stand up as individuals, but we also have to unite as humans and leverage the power of our numbers to get this done. With the mess we have on our hands, it can be tempting to give up, but if we can view nature as our greatest ally and give it the space to recover, it will. We've already seen that recovery in marine sanctuaries can happen in just a few years.

Some countries, in an effort to protect young people from the brainwashing that's adversely impacted our thinking, have actually banned advertising aimed at children under 12, which I think is awesome. Also, some cities have banned the "visual pollution" of street billboards. If we could get rid of advertising and just let people search for what they need, it would help a lot. This will be a challenging hurdle because of the enormous amount of money in advertising, but we can get rid of a lot of it by not buying the products that are advertised and instead favoring local products. And we can feel better about ourselves knowing that we're spending more locally and paying less to gigantic, far-away faceless, corporations.

It would also help a lot if media would cover more climate change, since it's our biggest global problem. Currently, people don't understand the disastrous situation we're in and what's really going on because it rarely makes the news. In fact, in 2023, corporate TV news (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox) only spent 17 hours covering climate change in the entire year, which is less than 1% of total news.⁴ The more of us who are actually aware of the urgency of our situation, the better, obviously. If you really want the truth, turn to ethical and balanced publications like High Country News, National Geographic, Discover Magazine, Outside, Mother Earth News, Organic Gardening, and Audubon, to name a few examples.

Challenge

The true challenge is to change our ways. It's true that we will inevitably be forced to change eventually because if we don't, the planet will force us to, and it won't be pretty. I strongly believe that we'll be much better off in the long run if we change now. We have a lot to do in the coming decades, so a good time to start is now. Start simple. How long can you go without buying something you don't need? Can you strive to at least include 10% organic food in your diet? Can you reduce meat and dairy by 10%? Can you start shopping at the local farmer's market? Then go from there.

"Today most Americans are aware we are facing an environmental crisis. In surveys, 75% identify themselves as environmentalists. But you are what you do, not what you say you are."⁹

We individuals have to take necessary actions to reduce our individual carbon footprints. It's not hard. We're spoiled, and now we have to grow up. This is a time of great opportunity. We know what we have to do, and the challenge is to do it. And we can enjoy watching things turn around and know that we made a big difference in our lives, our world, our wildlife, our families, and future generations. We can take a hike through a beautiful meadow or a vast forest or an endless desert and feel the clean air around us, see the birds flying above and singing among the bushes and trees, catch a glimpse of a lizard or a chipmunk or a beautiful beetle or even a moose or fox, and feel good about it. We can visit the ocean and swim among the healthy coral reefs thriving with colorful tropical fish, the clear clean water enveloping us as we glimpse all manner of colorful fish, and, yes, the occasional shark, and feel good about it.

Environmental topics should be woven into studies in schools from K–12 through college. This would be easy to do, and it would go a long way toward building a sustainable society of engaged adults.

There is Nothing Naïve About Moral Clarity

What if we approach the climate crisis with the moral clarity of children?

Some things are simply right and some things are simply wrong.

It is right to steward life and justice on this magnificent planet.

It is right to quickly transition to renewable energy.

It is right to protect and restore habitats and species.

It is right to hold corporations accountable.

It is right to ensure a just transition, leaving no one behind.

It is right to enact strong government policies that will accelerate all of this.

It is wrong to make this magnificent planet unlivable.

It is wrong for the corporations that got us into this mess to continue to profit while they set the world on fire.

It is wrong to drive one million species extinct by changing the climate, destroying habitats, and dousing the planet with pesticides.

It is wrong to create hundreds of millions of climate migrants and then close our borders when they seek shelter on our shores.

It is wrong to force the most marginalized and vulnerable to bear the heaviest climate impacts – from surging seas to raging fires, to pummeling storms, to enduring droughts, to frequent floods, to unbearable heat.

Some people might tell you that seeing stark right and wrong is naïve. It is tempting to succumb to endless compromise as the norm. Resist.

And let’s be clear: Moral clarity is not the same thing as naivete.

Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, from speech at Global Climate Strike in New York City in September, 2019

Change

Table 1 reviews the carbon emissions reductions that my husband Hilary and I have achieved, which is well on the way towards the needed 80% reduction for the U.S. by 2050. Our average is probably about 80%, because in years when we don’t make a major purchase, or take a long airplane flight (in 2024 we did both), our reductions will actually be very close to 80%. This has been a long journey over about 20 years, starting with small things, like recycling, eating organic, minimizing meat and dairy, and growing from there. The solar panels, battery, and all-electric equipment were installed in three stages over an eight-year time span, and we went to an EV three years ago. It feels good to do something about our problems, certainly better than looking the other way and hoping they’ll take care of themselves by magic or something.

Table 1 — Summary of Smith Family carbon reductions (2024).

Category	Chapter	U.S. tonnes CO ₂ e/capita	CO ₂ e, % of U.S. total	Smith reduction, % of U.S. Total	Smith net CO ₂ e, % of U.S. total
Food	17	4.54	20.7	14.8	5.9
Construction	18	3.65	16.6	13.3	3.3
Residential buildings and personal transportation	19,20	6.54	29.7	24.1	5.6

Commercial buildings and water/wastewater	21	3.30	15.0	4.0	11.0
Single-use containers and paper	22	1.27	5.8	4.3	1.5
Non-military aviation	20	0.39	1.8	-4.3	6.1
Textiles and the rest	23	2.29	10.5	5	5.5
Total	27	21.98	100.0	61.2	38.8

If you start your journey now, or if you've already started it, you should easily reach an 80% reduction by 2050, and your carbon footprint will continue to decrease over the years. If we all do this, it will help our planet, our wildlife, and humanity a lot. It's up to us to make carbon footprint reduction cool socially and the alternative unacceptable. And think about how fun it will be to actually see our metrics improve. To see emissions decreasing. To see wildlife increasing. To see forests increasing. To see our happiness index increasing. Now, wouldn't that be a joyful environmental story for a change? Fingers crossed.

"Not only does it feel good to be useful, it's the rent that we pay to live on Earth. Our Earth is not a hyperbole or a rhetorical analogy—Earth gives birth to us. And for all that we take, we must offer back. That is reciprocity." Ayisha Siddiq, climate activist