

Chapter 7

The Broken Present

Many of us contemplating these possibilities might answer quite simply, “Why should I care? The events you describe, if they take place at all, will change human life on Earth after I am gone. Besides, the problem is so vast, and the actions we must take are so difficult, that I can make very little difference on my own. I’ll just live out my life in the best way I can and let history take its course.”

There is a kind of sanity in this response: in many circumstances of life, repression may be a fine thing indeed. But is it truly possible to set aside the reality of what might take place to us all in the future? Can we simply divorce our present actions from their consequences?

If, as I suggested in the previous chapter, every human society has cultivated a strong image of the future, it has done so because such an image is necessary to justify its activities in the present. Some kind of future, some orientation to a goal or destination, is intrinsic to all of our intentional activity as individuals and as members of groups. Whether or not we care in a deep or heartfelt way about what will take place to our society, or for that matter about the human race or the Earth itself, *some* kind of investment in the future is implicit in our situation as human beings. Even if we repudiate the significance of that future for us on a conscious level, the fact that we are purpose-driven beings implies that our actions will betray us, endlessly demonstrating that in fact we *do* care, that we are everywhere and always invested in creating a livable future.

So there is no way for us to evade some difficult questions. If *that* kind of future is in store for us, what happens to the goals we have set for ourselves and that we seek through our various efforts? Everything we do in our ordinary lives is based on the assumption that we will have a future—that our houses will remain standing, that we will continue

to have a home in the nations in which we live, that the skills we have acquired will be useful in some fashion, that we will be able to participate in the cultural activities we care about, and that we will have some chance to achieve our goals. Our businesses run on credit, borrowing their very capital from the financial resources of the future; our governments staff and equip standing armies to defend against attacks that may come to pass; and we insure our properties, bodies, and lives against harm that may befall us. Many of our daily activities are directly oriented toward ensuring that the future will be livable. Sustaining our loving and erotic relationships, cultivating our family ties and our friendships, raising children, giving or getting an education, giving or getting preventative and acute medical care, and building and maintaining the physical structures in which we live and work: all these, and countless further activities, reveal how greatly we wish to sustain the lives we already know, to hand them down to further generations, and to maintain something like our current level of abundance and happiness. Our orientation to the future, in short, provides the very pith and substance of our present.

Individual lives take for granted that they are shaped by narratives with a past, present, and future—that they are oriented to satisfactions, achievements, or realizations that will reward lifelong commitments. Only through such narratives can we live our lives ethically, for only through them can we establish a context for intentional action, whatever it may be, in relation to everyone and everything that matters to us.¹⁰⁵ Such narratives also shape the collective life of families, communities, and nations, as well as political groups, commercial enterprises, and religious faiths. Without such narratives, it is hard to imagine that modern, democratic societies could legitimate themselves at all, for from the start they are founded on the principles of liberation and progress. This orientation is so deeply embedded in our activities that even an outright nihilist who repudiates all notions of a collective good nevertheless assumes he will be able to sustain that identity and share that perspective in the future. Merely speaking of that viewpoint to others takes for granted the timeline of persuasion, the long-term contexts of argument and debate.

At times, of course, people sacrifice too much of their present lives for the sake of the future: they too eagerly practice the well-known art of deferred gratification, working so hard in the present that they almost

forget what all the effort is for. We often tell such people that they should stop living for the future and enjoy the present. No doubt we are giving them good advice. But we should not assume that it is truly possible to live *only* for the present. Even the most dedicated contrarian, one who rejects a job and ignores her friends, will still turn off the water after taking a shower, knowing it would be nice not to flood the bathroom. Our practical actions constantly speak of our knowledge that the next hour and next day will come, even if at times and for specific purposes we might not wish to emphasize that fact.

But what happens when, in reviewing the narratives of our lives, looking ahead to the futures we hope to have, we realize that climate change will damage our world in ways that will directly and permanently affect us? What happens to our orientation to the future when its livability is cast into doubt and begins to dissolve? What if the place we choose for our abode becomes unlivable, the profession for which we have been trained is no longer needed, or the income we hoped would support us threatens to disappear? What if we realize that the life we wanted to lead is ecologically outrageous, that the children we've been raising have no chance to live as well as we have, and that the political causes for which we've been fighting may never succeed?

The answer, I think, is clear: all our practical activities, our human relationships, our professions and goals, are harmed in their very substance. The value of our ordinary activities begins to fray, and the entire framework of our lives becomes suspect. Climate change does not just melt the ice caps and glaciers; it melts the narrative in which we still participate, the purpose of the present day. In this sense, too, we are already living in the ruins of the future.¹⁰⁶

Climate change devastates the future and the present alike. But that is not all. Most of us hope to transmit to new generations something of the values, achievements, and joys we inherited from our forebears. When our future is cast into doubt, so also is the transmission of that past. In much the same way, the memory of our own pasts, which we may still regard as strongly continuous with our present, shifts more emphatically into the past tense, as if it now speaks clearly of something that is gone. At certain moments, perhaps, we might almost sense that our very present should be rendered in the past tense—as if, like those on board the

ship I mentioned above, we live in a society that is already dead without knowing it.

This bizarre possibility extends well beyond the framework of our own lives. We live in cultures that have long and storied histories, that have produced and been shaped by the deeds of monarchs and rebels, the achievements of statesmen and engineers, the thoughts of theologians and philosophers, the works of poets, playwrights, and intellectuals, and the discoveries of scientists. But without a future, these heritages, while still crucial and precious, subtly change, as if they endure after their foundations have disappeared. Suddenly, all these legacies belong to a planetary era that is passing away, for they were built on the security of ecological foundations that have collapsed. When the future goes, so do the present and the past. The entire framework of human time tilts, decays, disappears.

Does our situation leave us without hope? On one level, it does: we can no longer hope that the civilization we inherited will thrive or that future political changes will give all human beings a chance to participate in the abundance we have known. If that hope came true, the Earth would perish very quickly. As Robert Jensen says, hope of that kind is lazy, and the traditions it relies on are dead.¹⁰⁷ As long as we stick within the framework of what we have known, we will no longer envision great things, only the prevention of the worst. We will imagine no utopia, only the best dystopia we can get.

But if we change our perspective and abandon the premises of fossil-fuel culture, another kind of hope may be given to us: we could hope for a post-carbon culture that could thrive even on a greatly wounded Earth. *That* kind of hope, however, is far more than the bare emotion, for it can arise only out of the activity of reinventing who we are and becoming uncharacteristically honest about the difficulty we face. Yet even that hope cannot come without its shadow: as I argued earlier, converting to renewable energy sources for everyone on this overpopulated planet would *still* do great harm. The hope we now have, it seems, will always be mixed with a certain dread. Rebecca Solnit, writing about the challenges that will always face political activism, calls this “hope in the dark.” In our moment, that darkness is darker yet.¹⁰⁸ In our broken present, however, this may be the best we can do.

I have been suggesting that an awareness of our future ruins harms the very substance of our present activities. Does it follow that we should simply give up, abandon all our efforts, renounce the world, and live in a kind of catatonic despair? Why not just stop all our labors and lie passively on the sofa? *That* would hardly be a solution; before long, the guy on the sofa would wonder how to get food to eat, how to keep the roof over his head, and how to satisfy other basic physical needs. If he *truly* gave up taking care of himself, eventually his friends would have to do so for him. He'd become a pain to everybody he knew. However great our awareness of what may come, the basic imperatives of life demand that we carry on. In fact, the more we deny those imperatives, the more we tacitly acknowledge them: you can't *deliberately* ignore something unless you already know it is there. Even the guy on the sofa has to acknowledge that life goes on.

Would it work, then, to embrace our everyday lives with a vengeance, as if to escape our knowledge in doing so? Why not respond to our dilemma by saying, "I'll just keep working until the waters rise up and carry me away"? But if a person makes this declaration, she would show that she values activity for its own sake, not for any purpose it might serve. She might hope to prove that she will not submit, that she can conquer any despair. While such a choice reveals a certain courage, it too is ultimately desperate, for rather than truly responding to the conditions around her and adjusting her life accordingly, she would attempt to value what she knows is futile. Although ignoring climate change might seem to protect her from it, the uselessness of her efforts would necessarily strike her from time to time, especially when she relaxes from her heroic strain, and since she had not created a viable response to it other than sheer stubborn effort, it would hit her with special force. Pure stubbornness is no better a response than passive despair.

The difficulty of our situation only becomes clear if we realize that the future is in ruins *and* that life goes on. As a result, even if we are aware that the blow has been struck, even if we live in knowledge instead of ignorance, we find ourselves having to live on as if nothing has changed: that knowledge, it seems, does not alter the basic challenges of everyday life, the ordinary tasks of doing our work, taking care of our loved ones, and planning for the future. The contradiction is stark, unconquerable.

Our orientation to the future inevitably remains, but for us it is directed toward what is no longer entirely there. We are caught between two imperatives: we must lead our lives, but we must also recognize that our life narratives are no longer credible. Neither renunciation nor stubbornness, neither reckless grief nor furious assertion, can finally erase the eerie quality of persisting within a narrative whose conclusion is slowly being erased. No plausible course of action is open to us. The ruined future forces us to endure in a broken present.

Is it even possible to live in full awareness of this contradiction? Can we at once perform our ordinary activities and be conscious that the narrative they imply may be in ruins? Our first option is to do everything we can to prevent entering this contradiction at all: the prospect of life in these terms should be enough to motivate our unreserved participation in a movement to change our societies and to change them *now*. But as I have been suggesting, the time available for action is so short it has virtually disappeared. We may have little choice, then, but to live in a mode that might seem impossible for us, to endure a life that will go on, even though it has been damaged fundamentally. We who are alive at this strange moment may end up having to reckon with its strangeness by enduring in this impossibility. If the Earth passes the turning point and we still endure, we will discover that the ruins of the future have thrown us off the track of our personal narratives and disjoined us from who we think we are. In that moment, if we are sane and aware, we will be off-kilter, out of balance.

The ruins of the future inevitably undo any coherent way to live. If events force us to construct new strategies for surviving in an altered world, we will also have to face this more intimate challenge: how to endure this incoherence, how to live on in the ruins of the lives we thought we would lead, in the ruins of who we thought we might be. All our basic emotions will be up for grabs, for none will remain unchanged: desire and grief, joy and sorrow, hope and despair. Living in the physical ruins of the Earth will be tough. But doing so will also symbolize living in the ruins of another sort, the broken language of the heart.

Notes

105. For an exemplary discussion of this point, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 204–225.
106. For a related argument on how we might respond to the possibility that terrible things may happen to others *after* we die, see Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
107. Robert Jensen, “Hope is for the Lazy: The Challenge of Our Dead World,” *Counterpunch*, July 9, 2012, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/07/09/hope-is-for-the-lazy/>.
108. Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (New York: Nation Books, 2004).