

Upcoming: February 11 – When Hope Betrays Us

Conversations at the Edge of Hope

David R. Weiss – February 6, 2025

I've been so busy in other ways the past two months—holidays, family, navigating the maze of physical needs and bureaucratic red tape after my dad's fall and surgery to repair a broken neck, and orienting myself to a prostate cancer diagnosis with its own labyrinth of information, insurance, emotion, and care options—that I have not collected my thoughts on Hope ... as I had hoped to do.

But, as part of my own self-care—my deep desire and decision to live in the present and with purpose, I want to persevere in *this work*, even as I'm buffeted by other forces. So, we *will* discuss “hope” and its very ambiguous role in meeting Collapse in our upcoming Second Tuesday conversation.

I will have some thought collected by then. But as a way to “prime the pump” for you, here are a few short past pieces by me (each one is just 1-2 pages long) that offer glimpses of my wrestling with hope over the past few years. All five short essays are at the end of this announcement.

In “JPMorgan: Banking on an Apocalypse” (2020.02.21), I note that even investment firms are running scenarios with Collapse in them. And I ask what it would mean for us to face the inevitable ruin of our world ... and still pick up a cello.

In “Collapse ... and the Love of God” (2021.08.29), still writing in Christian god-language (though stretching it—*hard!*), I ask what the prospect of Collapse means for the notion of a loving God. Such a question, reframed, is very pertinent for UU's as well. What does it mean to place “Liberating Love” at the center of our values and our lives, if Collapse is inevitable, no matter we do?

In “Even Beauty Cannot Save Us” (2022.02.05), I reflect on my bittersweet reaction to an orchestra concert ... with Collapse on my mind. Such reactions have become commonplace for me—occasions where I am acutely aware of what gorgeous wonders *will be lost*. (I felt it most recently at the “Cosmology in Concert” event at First Universalist last month, which blended the science writing of JD Stillwater with the sacred music of Peter Mayer. I relished the awe even as I grieved the world in which such events would be only memories.)

In “Two Things True” (2022.07.15), I grapple with a kindred anguish, this time sparked by the joy of hiking with my grandchildren ... and the knowledge that they are so unprepared for the world they are going to inherit. I ask what it means to cultivate *a hope that is no longer hopeful*.

Finally, in “Family Secrets – More than a Matter of Degree” (2023.07.08), I continue this line of reflection trying to pierce the silence that is “enforced” by hope, “protecting” our children and grandchildren from the knowledge of what's coming until it is too late.

None of these pieces is “enough.” *I need to go further*. Exploring in greater depth and writing with more clarity about what hope has meant in white western colonial imperial civilization. Praised as a virtue, an essential component of pursuing the good, it has *functioned* as an opiate among the privileged, an invisible dampening of our will to act. It has often betrayed us, comprised our ideals, and abandoned the people and the planet we imagine we're trying to save.

So, in this next Conversation at the Edge of Hope, we will ask these discomfoting questions: What if hope is not an ally but a debilitating toxin in our present circumstances? What would it mean to set aside hope? And, between hope and despair, is there a third way we might pursue?

I lead “[Conversations at the Edge of Hope.](#)” which is hosted by Merging Waters Unitarian Universalist Congregation as part of their commitment to bring our values of mindful interdependence, authentic curiosity, and courageous love to the very challenging topic of climate crisis. **If this will be your first time coming, I strongly urge you to click through [this link to learn more about these conversations](#): <https://davidrweiss.com/2024/09/25/conversations-at-the-edge-of-hope-on-climate-collapse-and-care>.** (We welcome newcomers at any point! But you'll find it helpful to get a brief "orientation" in advance.)

We meet on second Tuesdays from 6:30-8pm in Room 7 (lower level) at our shared space with the United Church of Christ in New Brighton (1000 Long Lake Road, New Brighton, MN 55112 – right at the NW corner of I-694 and Long Lake Road). Each month we gather around a recent theme in my writing for conversations that promise to be provocative, insightful—and right at the edge of hope. Intrigued? You can join us on February 11—on site or online (through Merging Waters Zoom room, accessible from their [homepage](#): www.msuu.org). Contact me (drw59mn@gmail.com) with questions. RSVPs are welcome, but not required.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, “writing into the whirlwind” of contemporary challenges, joys, and sorrows around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, peace, and family. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” Support him in *Writing into the Whirlwind* at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith.

JPMorgan: Banking on an Apocalypse ...

David R. Weiss – February 21, 2020

It might be impossible to overstate the weight of JPMorgan Chase's recent report to its clients.

Last fall, an analysis by *The Guardian* revealed that—since the Paris Climate Agreement was reached in December 2015—JPMorgan has financed more new fossil fuel projects than any other bank in the world: \$75 billion from 2016 through the first half of 2019.¹ Facing a growing wave of protests over its ongoing investment in ecocidal industries, the firm responded with a statement that said in part “We work to advance environmental sustainability within our business activities and facilities. We recognize the complexity of climate change issues and actively engage with a diverse set of stakeholders to understand their views. We firmly believe that balancing environmental and social issues with financial considerations is fundamental to sound risk management.”

Yesterday we learned that engaging with their stakeholders involved admitting (in a January 14 report) that *climate change might well kill us all*.² That's *not* an easy admission for an investment firm to make, least of all one so heavily invested in the very industry most implicated in disrupting the climate. If scientists tend to be measured in their assessments (and they do—it's built into the scientific method), bankers are even more measured. So when JPMorgan Chase, after leading the way in fossil fuel investment over the past few years, writes to its clients, “We cannot rule out catastrophic outcomes where human life as we know it is threatened,” that's sort of a “Holy Shit!” moment.

The January report didn't sugarcoat anything. Noting the past failure of global markets to address the damage being done to our climate, it predicted that both lagging government policy and unchecked business competitiveness would foster *continued failure*, concluding that it is “likely the [climate] situation will continue to deteriorate, *possibly more so than in any of the IPCC's scenarios*” (emphasis mine). Have you read those worst case IPCC scenario's?! To suggest they *fall short* of laying out the stakes of climate breakdown is absolutely terrifying.

The report also shares, in the dispassionate prose of bank-talk, “Although precise predictions are not possible, it is clear that the Earth is on an unsustainable trajectory. Something will have to change at some point if the human race is going to survive.” So let me ask you, when was the last time you heard an investment firm use the word IF with reference to the survival of the human race? I'm betting: *NEVER*.

The is not the first time I've contemplated the notion that, not simply widespread societal collapse but *outright human extinction in the next two centuries is quite possibly the climate tab we've run up by now*. It's just the first time I've had an investment firm willing to back me up on that. ☹

So what now? I'll say three things.

First, you OUGHT to be scared shitless. I think there is no question that the prospects for *catastrophic* climate disruption are far worse than most of us realize. Not among the climate scientists whose psyches are increasingly anxious and depressed. And not among various agencies

¹ www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/13/top-investment-banks-lending-billions-extract-fossil-fuels

² www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/21/jp-morgan-economists-warn-climate-crisis-threat-human-race

where climate conversations are kept behind closed doors. But the words of our politicians and those of mainstream media are shaped more by money than by science. But now that even the big money is talking about human extinction, who knows where these others will take their cues from. (Some, no doubt, will escalate the rhetoric of othering, because fomenting fear is one proven way to consolidate power. We see that beginning already today.)

Second, NOTHING is certain. The details of our potential demise may prove to be over drawn ... or understated. In any event, investment firms always include a disclaimer lest you gamble too much of your stock on even their best advice. So don't throw up your hands just yet. *But you damn well better be on the edge of your seat by now.* Because even the realistically best case outcomes involve the unsettling of civilization from its moorings. *There is NO future that is not a rocky ride.* But there *might* be several potential tomorrows in which human extinction does not figure. If that relieves you, go back to my first point because we can't afford relief right now. We need pitched tension to harness the energy necessary in this uncertain moment.

Third, *pick up your cello.*

As I gathered my thoughts in silence after reading *The Guardian* piece tonight, my mind turned to Vedran Smailović. In 1992 he became known as “the cellist of Sarajevo” when he choose to play his cello for twenty-two days in the midst of a ruined town square after a mortar blast killed twenty-two people simply waiting in line for bread. Against the backdrop of a city undone by the worst impulses of a twisted humanity, Smailović choose beauty. His cello playing—an act of reckless courage—was at once a judgment against the madness that reduced the city to ruins and a testament to the unbowed beauty of the human soul.

It's time for each of us to pick up our cellos. The impulse will be to pick up our guns ... or devolve into despair. We must fight both of those impulses. Instead, bracing yourself for the inevitability of death, choose to make beauty, come what may.

For me, that choice means articulating the theology that can keep our humanity from fraying while fraying is exactly what our climate will be doing. It means writing directly about climate so that we can name, face, and fathom the peril that approaches. But it also means crafting an entire progressive theology—accessible to lay people—that anchors meaning in our daily lives: from birth to death and embracing all the tumult and transition in between. We will need that tune (rooted in God's grace!) faithfully serenading us in the midst of both real and metaphoric buildings that will be in ruins around us. It means using my gift of words to celebrate instances of transcendent joy that seem to have no justification—and yet *are*—as well as to plumb the depths of anguish that will be ours to own.

That's my cello. And I'm quietly, busily tuning it up.

Might I suggest that you look inward and outward—to your own gifts, passions, and skills—to ask yourself in full earnest what your cello will be. And then start tuning it up as well. With JPMorgan now banking on an apocalypse, it's time for a whole bunch of us to start banking on beauty and faith instead.

Collapse ... and the Love of God

David R. Weiss – August 29, 2021

Dark Hope: a hope that is *fully alongside us* in the unpredictable tumult ahead. Indeed, not a hope that “shines in the darkness,” but a hope that abides *as darkness itself*.

In my [Dark Hope series](#) earlier this month I allowed myself to stare into the abyss—the likelihood, the near certainty, that our civilization is heading toward a tumultuous collapse. The opening acts of climate breakdown are already with us in the forms of record heat and drought, hurricane and flood, ice melt and sea level rise, wildfires and species loss—from insects to mammals. And societal breakdown is also at the door in the dismissal of science, frenzied xenophobia, extremism, rising violent rhetoric—and outright violence. Moreover, the collective unwillingness of so many to respond to a pandemic with civility, common sense, or compassion, foreshadows a descent into barbarism when conditions worsen—which they will.

It’s a lot to carry. And never really set down. Margaret notices how I sigh—often and deeply—some days, as if I am winded and trying to catch my breath. It’s not physical weariness per se, although I certainly feel it in my body. Some days I’m just emotionally out of breath. All. Day. Long.

Recently one of my grandchildren recounted with dramatic dismay the lack of good cell phone reception at one place they stayed while visiting family in Mexico. In back-to-back sentences he described easy access to a cell signal as a “necessity” and “convenience”—as though the two terms meant the same thing. When I pointed out the gap between their meanings, he admitted that “convenience” was more accurate, but immediately claimed that—for his generation—it was a “necessary convenience.” I did not point out that “convenience” will go extinct for his generation.

One of my most faithful readers, after reading my Dark Hope essays, remarked about how deeply they challenged her understanding of God. “Do you really think God would allow things to so completely unravel?” she asked. It was not some naïve question. She is a wise woman, older than me, and has wrestled with theological questions that have carried her quite “outside the box” for plenty of years herself. But, like me, she is a parent and a grandparent, and to contemplate a future that goes so far sideways is a very different prospect when you feel so deeply connected through those you love to days you don’t expect to see yourself.

It is a *real* question. *What does the prospect of worldwide ecological and societal collapse say about God?*

The question is a version of many others. What does 9/11 ... or the Holocaust ... or slavery (say about God? Or any number of other instantaneous or generational calamities that inflict suffering on the innocent. All such questions challenge the righteousness or at least the omnipotence (the all-powerfulness) of God.

I remember reading Elie Wiesel’s *Night* sometime in college. There is a scene where he recounts the hanging of three prisoners, one of them a young boy. Mounted on chairs, with nooses around their necks, the other prisoners were ordered to attend the killing. One man cried out from the crowd, “Where is God?!” Then the chairs were kicked away. The two men died instantly, but the boy, too light, hung for thirty minutes, his life ebbing away in slow agony. Again, the voice from the crowd, “Where is God now?!” And Wiesel heard the answer, unspoken but fully formed, rise within him: “Where is God? Here God is—God is hanging here on this gallows ...” (*Night*, Bantam Books, 1960, pp. 61-62)

Wiesel’s witness runs along a razor’s edge. It might mean, God is as good as dead—helpless, abandoned, just like us. It might be a cry of abject despair. And he admits that this declaration, painful as it is, resonates. And yet, this is a razor’s edge: there is a second, quieter, even more challenging claim.

That claim, which Wiesel allows, even if he never fully embraces it himself, is that in some inscrutable way, here, at the very focal point of our suffering—our seeming abandonment to the forces of chaos and worse—*right here*, God somehow is alongside us.

This shadowy wisdom, kindred to Dark Hope, bears a daring, audacious, paradoxical witness to God's presence under conditions that appear to deny it. This is the same impulse behind Martin Luther's theology of the cross, Jürgen Moltman's crucified God, the seed of Central American Liberation Theology, and Sharon Welch's feminist liberatory vision. To be clear, these varied expressions are hardly identical with each other—or with Wiesel, but they express the apprehension of a common mystery: that *sacred presence is not limited to what we might count as "victory."*

It would take a book to unpack all of this. But I will suggest a couple core insights that are at once troubling and reassuring. I think it is fair to say that God is *not* omnipotent—at least not in the way we have measured power since the predominance of patriarchy. God is not omnipotent via power-over or having final control. That measure of omnipotence is the human reaction to the radical insecurity that marks our lives: it is the desire to foreclose any option not to our liking ... projected from us onto God.

Rather, God's commitment to offering-and-fostering-love is the defining feature of divinity. I say this in theological language, but I mean as much cosmically as supernaturally. God, which I think of as the energy that pervades and shapes the cosmos, is fundamentally focused on relating everything to everything else. At the sheer physical level, that's gravity: the cosmic force of mutual attraction. But as consciousness rises, that longing for relationship becomes *collaborative*: our wills participate in furthering—or twisting—God's longing for mutuality as the crowning pattern of creation. This is the mystery of agency in a cause-and-effect cosmos. (And the topic for a whole other essay!)

But this is the unexpected consequence of God's "choice" to prioritize love (the possibility of mutual relationship) over power (the assertion of control): it means there is always an exposed soft underbelly to the sacred. God is not all-powerful, but *all-vulnerable*. God's "super-power" is not the ability to protect us but the promise to accompany us no matter what. This is a whole different axis of power.

This is NOT an argument for a God who is infinitely weak (unless you are bound only to a notion of power as control—a notion that might appear compelling in the short-term, but which is ultimately a foolish affront to and at times an evil distortion of the soft sacred hum of the universe). But it is a truth we rarely encounter. God's power rests unequivocally in love and vulnerability—and the power these forces have to (potentially) effect transformation in the beings with whom God longs to collaborate.

Here is the holy mystery of God in its most terrifying truth. At every moment of cosmic history (for our concern here—at *every moment of human history*) God's longing for mutual relationship is *sufficient* to effect it ... but can *never* guarantee it. There is no moment in which hope is utterly lost, because so long as the universe is, God is willing mutuality into all that is. And God never stops.

But neither does God control the future. God invites and persists and accompanies and encourages and strengthens and holds us unendingly in love. Still, in our corner of the universe, the fate of life on this small blue planet rests on the *collaborative energy* between human beings and God—and on the host of biophysical systems that have evolved around us. Earth history is improvisation.

We are deep into a cacophonous improvisation right now, one that portends catastrophe and collapse. Even if it comes to that, *God's longing to foment love will go there with us*. Even in this maelstrom, God's presence will be sufficient to transform those of us who choose to collaborate into partners with God in caring for a shattered planet and a shattered society. Whether such work will carry the day—who knows. But that it will be holy work, of this I am sure. And that, my friends, is cause for joy.

Even Beauty Cannot Save Us

David R. Weiss - February 5, 2022

I am at the Minnesota Orchestra tonight for a concert of East Asian orchestral music to celebrate the Lunar New Year. And my eyes are moist with tears while my heart breaks wide open at the beauty of it all.

If you ask me, a concert like this carries the dream of global unity far better than the Olympics. This music, coming from Korea, China, Vietnam, and Singapore offers stirring evidence of universal themes in human existence. Life, love, longing. Captured in music that evokes teary-eyed awe.

Alas, it will not save us.

Still, this *is* one gleaming example of the best of who we are. Truly. In these moments, when the orchestra brings this music to life—and when we appreciatively receive this gift—we encounter something More, something so transcendent that we hover at the edge of Holy. Such beauty!

But it will not save us.

My tears are bittersweet. Supremely so. Sweet because this is what we were meant to be. Bitter because too much now I have caught wind of tomorrow. Our world *will* unravel. *Is* unraveling. Our future was fractured—our grandchildren's *forfeited*—in decades past.

And now even such beauty cannot save us.

This orchestra, this music, this concert, embodies the possible. That humanity is not destined to be inhuman. We are capable of beauty. Worthy of awe. Created for conviviality. Ennobled by compassion. We can be transfigured by joy.

But none of that will save us.

The world has turned. Past tense. And is still turning. Imperfect tense: damning tomorrow with today's inertia. We imagine it can *never* be too late. *Of course*, once we come to our senses, it will all be okay. We'll fix things. No. We have no idea what we have done.

We dare not gauge the damage. Nature may well love us (although the phrase rings anthropomorphic), *but she does not negotiate*. And our tab is well past due.

So, tonight in Orchestra Hall my eyes are wet with awe. And grief. Tinged with gratitude.

Even beauty cannot save us. But it might *salve* us yet. It might not only comfort our wakened, wizened souls, it might also enable us to affirm of our spirits: *this is who we are*. Not *were*. ARE.

A *salve*. In the ruins of what once was—but was perhaps never meant to be—beauty (and awe, compassion and conviviality, even joy) might yet be our last testament.

It is too late to save us. But it is not too late to sing.

Two Things True

David R. Weiss - July 15, 2022

Two things—opposite as it were—can be true at once.

There are things I wish I did not know ... that I am yet glad to know. Not happy, per se, but grateful amid regret. Things needful to know and so the knowing, though unwanted, is, at the same time, welcome.

Two things true at once.

Or again: I am learning that it is possible to write—and to act!—with love ... on the far side of hope. And it is possible, from that place, to sustain what might be called “counter hope.”

Not pessimism. Not at all. But *a hope that is no longer hopeful*. No longer the reflection of upbeat attitude or warm emotion. A hope so thin and gritty that it is “merely” *existential*—and nothing more. That is, it exists *only* as chosen action, however tiny, in the present moment. Such “counter-hope” is not something we hold onto, not something we “have”; it is something we *do*. Again and again and again.

Just back from a week of hiking up on the North Shore (of Lake Superior), my experience was one of persistent bittersweet awe. Many of the parks and trails and beaches bear witness to the irrepressible artistry of creation, the seeming longing of the world *simply to be* with unrestrained exuberance. Thus, an entire week of “oh my” followed by “and yet.”

Despite its pristine pretensions where I walked, this Earth is wounded. And deeply. We saw glimpses of that in the occasional mountains of logged trees or rail cars of mined ore. Fellow members of the Earth community, their citizenship revoked so they might be rendered resources for (globalized Western) human appetites that are fluent in one language only: More.

That’s not to say that no people or culture has shown a capacity for restraint or, better yet, a culture of humble harmony with the planet. Many have. But the lingua franc of the globalized industrial world is *accumulative consumption*. Our measure of worth, our sense of meaning, our very reason for being (from the individual to the whole economic system!) is oriented to a singular end: More.

Hence our wounded planet. And because no corner on Earth is separate from the whole, even the North Shore’s beauty is wholly entangled—in distant but undeniable kinship—with raging wildfires, receding lakes, ocean plastic, retreating glaciers, rising temperatures and more. The instinctive awe cannot be divorced from withering anguish.

Two things true at once.

Delighted to spend a week in daily relationship with three of my grandchildren. Yet every moment of joy is matched and more by the inescapable awareness that *they have no idea*. And they are wholly unprepared for the future that is coming for them.

How could anyone be prepared for a tomorrow that is not simply the day after today but the sum of decades of yesterdays that will now broker a complete break with every yesterday ... and rewrite every tomorrow we ever imagined?

And isn’t childhood—they are, after all, just 9, 11, and 13—supposed to be a long season of innocence; rambunctious, sometimes cantankerous growing, in which kids can be kids, delaying their ripening maturity until young adulthood finally claims them? But with the entire world readying to

shift—perhaps before they even have the chance to grow up—there is an impatient anxiety in me. They may not have the luxury of childhood.

Of course, many—*countless*—children across the globe—have already had their childhood forfeited to the More that fuels war and famine, political ambitions and environmental destruction. My grandchildren are simply going to find their lot abruptly joined to that of their peers around the world. A generation—a whole series of generations—consigned to live within the wounds of a planet that would've preferred to offer us its abundance.

Except that there was no abundance that could satisfy us. Enough? Was that even a word?

The same was true, by the way, of my brother's relationship with bourbon. What struck me as abundance beyond measure left him perpetually unsatiated ... until it left him permanently dead. A longer more complicated tale than that, but the cause-effect holds true. As it may for us as well.

I have every desire to be hopeful. I could name them if you like. Six children: each the apple of my eye. Nine grandchildren: together joys uncounted. A wife who still pitters the patters of my heart. And two or three decades of my own still unfolding. And those are only the desires that leap to mind. I have multitudes of wishes for a future that I know is no more.

Two things, painfully true at once.

“And yet ...” you will stammer. “If only ...” you will offer. “For surely ...” you will insist. I hear the sincerity in your voice. But sincerity cannot purchase what is no longer for sale.

It isn't just the math—although that's damning enough. Between rising CO₂, trespassed planetary boundaries, collapsing ecosystems—and social systems and political systems—there simply isn't any honest math that provides any solid basis for hope.

And whatever miniscule odds you might conjure up are exorcised (an ironic use of the word if there ever was one) by those determined to turn a profit right up to their last breath, those determined to wield assault weapons while uncertainty and anxiety peak (an incendiary combination), and those determined to undo democracy so that authoritarian homophobic misogynist white nationalism can be the flag flying over the future as it implodes. I could go on: pandemics, migrations, drought, famine, hunger, massive civil unrest, war, and nuclear disasters. But that would just be piling on.

Yes, there is an abundance of good to strive for—simpler living, greener energy, and the resolute protection or reclaiming of all manner of civil rights and human rights. But that good is *not* cause to be hopeful. The forces arrayed against us, some systemic, some personal, and some ecological are not going to negotiate. And some of them have inertia that simply no amount of good will or regret will moderate. *Our future is bleak—at best*. And I mean “at best”; there are possible futures worse than bleak.

Which is why I say the good is *not* cause to be hopeful. *The good is cause to do right*. Irrespective of the odds. Doing right on the far side of hope, that's “counter-hope.” It's the best we can do now. It won't make a dent in “bleak.” But it may open a passage to a tomorrow we never wished for, but which we will be damn grateful for if we make it there alive.

Two things true at once.

The world is overfull with beauty. And overwrought with wounds. So much to savor. So much to salve. Keep busy savoring and salving and you won't miss the hope at all.

Family Secrets – More than a Matter of Degree

David R. Weiss – July 8, 2023

I suppose all families harbor secrets in their distant or recent past. The family member whose attitudes or actions are cause for scandal. Poor (embarrassing, unethical, disastrous) choices we'd rather not be reminded of or let others know about. Facets of ourselves we haven't yet figured out how to be honest about with ourselves or others. Scattered vignettes or whole chapters of our familial past get covered over with silence. Skip that initial "I suppose." *All families harbor secrets.* It's just a matter of degree.

And the truth is, we negate our own potential wholeness so long as we allow the secrets to hold sway. (See my June post, "[Unsealing Family Secrets ... with Grace](#)," for some reflections on that.) But today I'm writing about family secrets of a different sort—an altogether different *tense*, in fact. There are also family secrets *in our future*. These secrets, too, are a matter of degree—but also, much more, as I will explain. And these secrets, too, negate our own wholeness so long as we allow them to hold sway.

Monday (July 3, 2023) brought the planet its hottest day on record since global air temperature record-keeping began in 1884. It lasted just one day, as if July 4 was already whispering, "Hold my beer," as the sun rose. And then July 5 did the same. We won't set a new global temperature record every day this month. But historically July is Earth's hottest month—and there's an El Niño in effect right now (a cyclical ocean-driven warming pattern)—which makes it *very likely* that July will become the hottest month since 1884. Except—

Except the past 75 years of industrial-driven warming have already made us such an outlier compared to the centuries before records were kept. And science has shown us the broad temperature ranges of earlier eras. Which is why, numerous atmospheric scientists have said that this year's July will likely be the hottest month ever—by a long stretch. Since the Eemian period. *About 125,000 years ago.*

How's *that* for a family secret? We have now so altered the chemistry of Earth's atmosphere that my kids and grandkids are heading into a future more like a past 120,000 years ago than anything in my childhood.

My son, Ben, just turned 36 years old to my 63. In the next 27 years, as he "flips" his age and reaches 63 for himself, *every single heat record for every single day, week, month, and year will have been broken multiple times.* By his 63rd birthday in 2050 (when my other kids will be: Susanna, 54; Meredith, 64; Megan, 66; Leah, 68; Laura, 69), if Ben is "fortunate," the planet will have inched its way upward to 1.7° C (3° F) above the pre-industrial era, effectively ushering him and all his siblings into a whole new world. If he's less fortunate, the planet will have stepped right past 1.7° C and moved on toward 2° C (3.6° F). A mere fraction of a degree, but with catastrophic effects rippling across ecosystems, economies, societies ... and, of course, across the lives of my kids (and yours.)

But, family secret—really? Well, how often have I discussed this "inheritance" with Ben (or my other children). Not never. But not often. And not at length. And not with anything close to the seriousness these few degrees will bear on their lives. No, this is truly a family secret hiding in their future. Surely not easy or comfortable to discuss. *But just as surely, their ability to find wholeness in that future rests on their ability to wrestle with this secret with honesty and wisdom.* If that isn't the business of family, I don't know what is.

And, of course, family secrets traverse generations—impacting more than just kids. I have nine grandkids. The youngest, also named Benjamin, will match my 63 in July 2080. By then the other grandkids will be: John (66), Eli (66), Gretchen (67), Nora (68), Landon (69), Waverly, Kaleb (71), Tomas (73). Hard to imagine these *children* older than me. Harder still to imagine their world in 2080. Painfully hard. These are children I've doted on. And by 2080 they will have grown into their adult years through decades more daunting than *any* I have lived.

Nothing can be said with exact certainty about that future. The details remain secret to all of us. But what we know is not encouraging. The Paris Agreement originally *hoped* to achieve a 1.5° C (2.7° F) limit in temperature rise but settled for aiming at anything less than 2.0° C (3.6° F). Yet the net effect of policies in place since the Paris Agreement have us on a trajectory to 2.7° C (4.9° F) by 2100. And the actual practices of fossil fuel corporations and government deals to build new pipelines and develop new projects continue to pretend like these targets don't really matter. While all the science tells us *they matter more than ever*.

But, as I indicate in the title, this family secret is *more than a matter of degree*. Because it isn't just about the numbers on a thermometer. Ultimately, this is about whole systems that teeter on the edge of collapse. Ecological systems. Economic systems. Political systems. Social systems. And they won't wait until 2080 or even 2050 to start teetering—they *already are*.

The smoke from Canadian wildfires that played havoc with your breathing recently? *That's the smell of collapse*. A symptom of a hotter planet (drier soil, more bark beetles, higher winds), but even as the wildfires burn, the carbon-laden smoke set up the atmosphere to trap yet more heat to drive the cycle further, harder, hotter, the next time. *And this dynamic plays out in a whole host of interconnected planetary systems*. So much so, that once whole systems begin to irreversibly tip (they are already teetering!) all those "degree" targets will become wistful projections for some *bygone world*—no longer *our* world at all.

Those stock market jitters that just won't go away? That's the rattle of a growth economy feeling the inexorable pressure of a finite world where finally there is *no such thing* as an externalized cost. Our economy, like OceanGate's Titan submersible, is held together by hubris (rampant pride). Within decades the pressure of our finite world will leave our economy looking like that submersible does today: twisted wreckage.

That nearly unimaginable rightward lurch of the Republican party and the Supreme Court? That's the instinctive human reaction to ecological and existential anxiety. This desperate political maneuvering, intimately tied to the preservation of white supremacy, is *also* a textbook scenario of how privilege responds to the mounting pressure of collapsing ecosystems and economies. And those polarized views, flavored by xenophobia and manifest in rampant violence and other wholesale fraying of our social fabric? That, too, is the evidence of ecologically-driven societal collapse—already well underway. It is what has *always* happened when civilizations outgrow their fit in the world.

We are on the cusp of a societal collapse never seen in the lifetime of anyone alive today. Not a downward turn in the economy. Not a conservative swing in politics. Not an era of social discontent. And least of all a brief interlude of warmer than usual temperatures. *Collapse*. And it is entirely inevitable at this point. There is no technological breakthrough or government regulation that can stop it. Because it is linked to an ecological collapse *the likes of which no human being has EVER experienced in all of human history*. Our future is *literally unthinkable*.

Well, not so much mine, which will run another 20-30 years or so. *That future is bleak*. Hard to imagine. But the future my children and grandchildren will face, *that future is unthinkable*. And that is a family secret—an uncomfortable truth kept in the shadows by consensual silence. And it threatens to leave them wholly unprepared for what is to come. There is nothing I can do to stave off collapse, but there are *a whole set* of insights, appetites, skills, habits, that I *might* bequeath to them ... that *might* better equip them for this inheritance. But to do so, I need to break the silence of this most hidden of family secrets about their future. Hidden not least by the desperate hope it might not be true. And the fearful knowledge that it is.
