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The Significance of Care in Dark Times

Caring for others is a fundamental part of our own humanity. It is a constitutive element of any mature morality. The importance of care is gaining considerable significance in the harsh reality of the Anthropocene, when climate collapse, ecological degradation, and social disruption are a non-distant possibility.

Even for avowed optimists, the future looks bleaker than ever. The free world is less free and is much less “one world” than it has been since World War II. Climate collapse is looming. Winter is coming.

We are doomed. Or are we?

According to the Atomic Doomsday Clock, we are now at “two minutes to midnight” (Bulletin of Atomic Scientists 2018). The Doomsday Clock was founded in 1947 by University of Chicago scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project, and is globally recognized as an indicator of how close the world could be to apocalypse. Moved forward 30 seconds in 2018, the hands are now closer to midnight than they have been at almost any time since its existence.

As consumption and the human population have increased in the last few decades, humankind has ushered in a new era called the “Anthropocene” (Crutzen 2002; Steffen et al. 2011) in which we are altering the biogeochemistry of the planet itself, destabilizing the climate, and influencing co-evolution at the planetary level. The Anthropocene appears to be a regrettable departure from the Holocene – a relatively placid period of climate stability over the past ten thousand years in which “civilization” arose (Brown 2015).

Important indicators show that the *state* of the *Earth* (the sum of our planet's interacting physical, chemical, biological, and human processes) has *drastically worsened* over the last 50-60 years. A set of global indicators studied by the Stockholm Resilience Center shows that socioeconomic trends (such as population, real GDP, foreign direct investment, the urban population, primary energy use, fertilizer consumption, water use, paper production, transportation, telecommunications, and international tourism) have caused a deterioration in Earth System indicators since the 1950s (such as the level of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, and methane in the atmosphere, surface temperature, ocean acidification, marine fish capture, tropical forest loss, domesticated land and degradation of terrestrial biosphere) (IGBP 2015).

Recent climate research has revealed the self-reinforcing feedback mechanisms of Earth's system that may result in a "Hothouse Earth" characterized by "much higher global average temperature than any interglacial in the past 1.2 million years," and "sea levels significantly higher than at any time in the Holocene" (Steffen et al. 2018, 8252).

Actually, we are now on track for more than 4°C of warming. This the temperature difference between the last Ice Age and world temperature as it is now. It is thus reasonable to expect the world in the near future to be as different from today as today is from the Ice Age. This level of change might render the planet uninhabitable for human beings (McKibben 2012).

Climate collapse may increase war and ethnic conflict, increase the frequency of environmental disasters, cause a return to a subsistence economy – even in "first world" countries, along with the collapse of governmental institutions. It may also promote the rise of charismatic authoritarian strongmen and drastically reduce the human population anywhere from 70% (from 7.5 billion to 2 billion, which would bring the population to a sustainable level), to complete extinction (Greer 2016).

Facing these prospects, we recall an illustrative case of heroic care that occurred during the Holocaust (Wikipedia 2018).

Janusz Korczak, born in 1878 or 1879, was a Polish-Jewish educator, author of children's books and pedagogue who for many years worked as the director of an orphanage in Warsaw. On August 5, 1942, German soldiers came to collect the 192 orphans and about one dozen staff members for transportation to the Treblinka extermination camp during the *Grossaktion Warsaw*. Korczak repeatedly refused sanctuary and stayed with his orphans, saying that he could not abandon them. The children were dressed in their best clothes, and each carried a

blue knapsack and a favorite book or toy. An eyewitness described the procession of Korczak and the children through the Ghetto to the *Umschlagplatz* (deportation point to the death camps) as follows: “Janusz Korczak was marching, his head bent forward, holding the hand of a child, without a hat, a leather belt around his waist, and wearing high boots. A few nurses were followed by two hundred children, dressed in clean and meticulously cared for clothes, as if they were being carried to the altar” (Shepley 2015: 55).

When the group of orphans finally reached the *Umschlagplatz*, an SS officer recognized Korczak and offered him a way to escape. Korczak once again refused, and boarded the trains with the children. He and most of the children, toddlers of two or three years of age among them, while the oldest ones were perhaps thirteen, were killed in a gas chamber upon their arrival at Treblinka.

The heroic and compassionate story of Korczak’s own death and the death of his children is an example of dignity and love in the face of an inevitable end.

We, however, still have some time to act. Will we wake up and put an end to climate collapse? Do we care enough and have enough responsibility to do this? Will there be enough people, enough leaders, to actually reverse what seems like a lost cause?

Indeed, 1.5 million children, the future of Europe, the future of the world, were senselessly and brutally murdered during World War II, most of them Jewish.

Very few children survived. Some by their own gumption, and others through the care of adults – Jews and non-Jews – who cared enough to risk their own lives to save them. One of those children was Israel Meir Lau (Wikipedia 2018b).

As a seven-year-old, Lau was first imprisoned in a Nazi slave labor camp and later in Buchenwald extermination camp. He attributed his unlikely survival to the heroic efforts of his older brother Naphtali, who concealed him at constant risk and enlisted other prisoners in this effort. After being found by U.S. Army chaplain Rabbi Herschel Schacter, who discovered him hiding behind a heap of corpses when the camp was liberated in 1945, he was freed and became a poster child for the possibility of miraculous survival and a living symbol of the inhumanity of the Nazi regime. Lau credited a teen Russian prisoner with protecting him in the camp.

Israel Meir Lau later became Chief Rabbi of Israel and as a great orator and humanitarian inspired many people around the world, giving their life meaning and hope.

Some children, usually twins, were used in Auschwitz as guinea pigs for atrocious medical experiments by Josef Mengele. These experiments included the unnecessary amputation of limbs, intentionally infecting one twin with typhus or other diseases, and transfusing the blood of one twin into the other. Many victims died while undergoing these procedures. After the experiments were over, the twins were sometimes killed and their bodies dissected.

One young Hungarian man, Zvi Spiegel, was picked out by Mengele with his twin sister, Magda, to become a translator for Mengele, and through his courage saved a large number of children: he was later nicknamed the “father of the twins.” After the war, he took 37 survivors to Israel, and lived there until his death. His daughter Judith, together with her husband, revolutionized the treatment of cardiovascular disease with the stents they invented and produced, which are now installed in the hearts and bodies of more than two million people: an invention that has saved many people around the world from an untimely death (Holocaust Museum 2018).

In the darkest moments of the darkest hour of humanity some lights still shone, and the care, love and courage of some saved a few others, who later saved many. There are thousands of stories like this: of first-, second-, and third-generation survivors of the Holocaust who, with their humanity, love and compassion, their inspiration, entrepreneurship and science, are changing the world for the better.

Perhaps there is still hope. Two minutes of hope.

We call for responsibility and action that is aimed at making significant changes in the world of affairs at this dark time.

Caring for others is basically a non-consequentialist form of behaviour which may have cosmic significance. Helping human and non-human beings, especially in emergency situations like the Holocaust or climate collapse, is the final test of our own humanity. Business and management are no exception to this.

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