

"We Live Downstream From You in Time"

A Message From Future Generations

by Allen Tough

In the long term, what topic could be more important than a declaration on the responsibilities of the present generations towards future generations? There is good reason to be pleased and grateful. If future generations themselves were able to speak to us, I am sure they too would be delighted by this remarkable progress.

This leads me to wonder just what future generations would say to us, if they could. What follows is a message to us in their own words.

"Thank you for listening to this message from future generations -- those of us who will inhabit this lovely planet for many decades to come. Our voices are usually overlooked by your generations, so we are very appreciative of your willingness to listen to our perspective.

You are alive at a pivotal moment in humanity's development. You are making some of the most important choices in human history. Your era is marked by positive and negative potentials of such newness and magnitude that you can hardly understand them. We strongly care about your choices, of course, since we benefit or suffer from them quite directly. We live downstream from you in time; whatever you put into the stream flows on to our era.

In order to give us equal opportunities, your individual behavior, social structures, economic assumptions, paradigms, and worldviews must change. We know that these changes are not shallow or easy. But if you continue your shortsighted selfishness, we will be much worse off than you are; the consequences will be catastrophic, perhaps even beyond your imagination. From our long-term perspective, we see how foolish and unfair you will be if you fail to make the required changes soon. How would you react to a bus driver who knew the brakes would give out soon, but did not bother to get them fixed promptly?

We will be very grateful if you devote your best efforts to four particular priorities:

1. A Long-Term Perspective

In all your major decisions and actions, please consider our perspective and well-being along with your own. Our needs and rights are not inferior to yours. Please regard your generation and ours as equals: this is the principle of intergenerational equity.

Reflect on your unique place in human history. You face the historic challenge of making the shift from a narrow, self-centered, short-term focus to a long-term global focus taking into account our needs as well as your own. If you succeed, your era will be remembered for saving human civilization and its planet from catastrophe, and building the foundation for a more positive world.

As members of future generations, we are particularly eager for you to designate a spokesperson for our needs in your various policy-making forums, planning processes, legislatures, parliaments, and so on.

Because we are not yet alive in your era, we are unable to lobby or vote. We have no voice. We seem unreal and unimportant to many of your politicians because we have not yet been born. Our perspective and interests are rarely noted in any depth. This is why we are enthusiastic about your era's diverse proposals for incorporating our views and needs into legislative and policy-making processes. We now urge you to move on to practical, innovative experiments. Our ultimate hope is that all participants in public and corporate decision-making will eventually adopt the perspective of future generations, and serve as spokespersons and guardians for our interests.

The overriding importance of avoiding the worst catastrophes of all will become obvious to you as you make progress in adopting a long-term perspective. Please begin now. Study the entire range of potential trends that could eliminate or severely harm human civilization. Avoid losing the foundation that the previous hundred generations have built up for you -- and us. Take particularly creative steps to avoid a severe world war -- perhaps even to eliminate warfare entirely. Equally important, take action to stabilize the size of the human population and end the rapid deterioration of the planet. These two potential catastrophes, warfare and environment, are so probable and have such far-reaching consequences that they are clearly central in any list of priorities.

2. Future-Relevant Research

In order to achieve a satisfactory future, you need to expand rapidly your efforts to develop future-oriented knowledge. You need to know far more about world problems, social and individual change, potential futures, the effectiveness of various possible paths, and other future-relevant topics. The amount of effort going into creating knowledge significant to the long-term future is only about one-third of what it should be; your aim should be to multiply your future-oriented inquiry threefold over the next years. The long-term benefits will far outweigh the costs.

At present, world problems are outstripping your knowledge of how to deal with them. You are going to have to run much faster simply to catch up; you may find the negative forces becoming more and more challenging. You certainly have the potential to win the race, but not by coasting along at your present level of future-oriented research.

3. Future-Relevant Education

Learning and teaching about the future provide an essential foundation for building a better world. You cannot achieve a positive future without far-reaching learning and changes by individuals around the world, including all of you -- not just leaders, officials, or experts. You no doubt recall the prescient words of H.G. Wells: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." You can successfully navigate through the next few decades only if much of the world's population understands global problems and potential futures, cares about future generations, accepts the need for change, and takes a cooperative and constructive approach to dealing with hard choices. Once enough people care about future generations, implementing these four key priorities will become much easier.

From early childhood to late adulthood, educational institutions should provide courses in futures studies with some emphasis on the perspective of future generations, using approaches that affect the head, heart, soul, and hands. In every city on Earth, schools, colleges, adult education programs, libraries, television,

electronic sources, and printed materials should help people understand global issues, think skeptically and critically when appropriate, treasure all life on Earth, feel concern for other people, grasp the importance of caring about us future generations, grasp our perspective, feel committed to necessary changes, tolerate diverse cultures and views, cooperate for the common good, and pursue meaningful non-material goals. In addition, we urge you to consider a worldwide campaign to increase caring for future generations.

4. Learning, Caring, and Meaningfulness

The final societal priority that we recommend for your era is very important to us, so we hope it will soon become important to you, too. It involves three closely interrelated areas that focus on the deeper and softer aspects of individual lives.

(a) Your society could do much more toward widespread individual learning about the most important questions of all. You should encourage and help each individual to learn the accumulated knowledge on these questions, and also to think through their own best answers. Obviously they will be more successful if your society has fostered their ability to think clearly, creatively, and skeptically about difficult and controversial questions. Here are some of the big questions that thoughtful individuals face: the origin, evolution and ultimate destination of the universe, and humans' place in it; the history and long-term future of humankind and human culture; our appropriate relationship with the planet and its diverse forms of life; core values; finding a path to a positive human future, and ways for each individual to contribute to achieving it.

(b) Your society should do much more to help people feel a deep bonding or connectedness with all humankind, the planet and its diverse life forms, and future generations. As more and more people experience a bond with something ageless, transcendent, and much larger than their own life, they will act on that deep love and caring, eager to make a positive difference for humanity and the planet. Creating inspirational groups dedicated to future generations could be particularly useful and provide people with a transcendent purpose in life.

(c) Your society should also focus much more attention and support on the individual's desire for a sense of meaning and purpose in life. This sense can easily pervade a society in which people share a sense of connectedness with the cosmos, its diverse life, and the continuous procession of generations.

We agree with you that the above four changes are startlingly large, deep, and far-reaching. But the alternative is for your grandchildren's generation to spend most of their adult lives in a social and physical environment that is bleak and nasty. If you choose the tempting path that lies right in front of you, squandering time and energy on consumption, luxury, competition, quarrels, violence, and the faddish projects and causes of the moment, think of the pain and suffering you will cause us. We cry when we think of what might come to pass; perhaps you too will feel some tears as you think about this.

Of the four changes, the most important of all is the worldwide shift toward caring deeply about the well-being of all the people who will be alive over the next few decades, and the well-being of the planet. This paradigm shift is necessary for citizens, policy-makers, business leaders, and key people throughout governments. As more and more of you change your inner perspective, there is an excellent chance that

the necessary outer changes will also occur. Thank you for your deep and serious attention to our suggestions.