

Project „Silence“

The Dark Century

It was a day of horror. On February 28, 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), headquartered in Geneva, published its gloomiest report yet. “We are sleepwalking to climate catastrophe,” said United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. According to the report, “half of humanity is in the danger zone for climate breakdown.” But in the media noise of that day, the message had no chance against the threat that came from Russia: Their president told the world that he had ordered his nation’s nuclear forces to a higher state of readiness.

The dangers of a nuclear or chemical war emerged into the collective consciousness in no time, while the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis disappeared from the radar screen overnight.

The Doomsday Clock, set by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, measures the level of risk facing humanity. At the beginning of 2022, the clock stood at 100 seconds to midnight—the closest it has been to Armageddon since its introduction after World War II. The Bulletin has declared four dangers that currently influence the Clock: nuclear risk, climate change, biological threat, and disruptive technologies. Responsible for all four risks are humans. What happens right now is not fate or destiny but the result of arrogance and apathy—there are still too many leaders affected by the strongman virus.

We are driving at full speed into a dark century.

Lifequake

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of us, at least in the Western part of the world, considered the world we live in to be “normal.” But the world is anything but normal. We know from history what has led to the rise and fall of empires, religions, and cultures. With that knowledge in mind, why didn’t we change the blueprint of human behavior decades ago by eliminating the burning of fossil fuels, for example? And what exactly has humanity learned from times of war?

Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister of the United Kingdom at the beginning of World War II, said, “In war, whichever side may call itself the victor, there are no winners, but all are losers.”

A “lifequake,” which references the word “earthquake,” refers to a massive life disruption. A lifequake consists of three phases: first, the “crisis” (which can be thought of as falling over a waterfall), followed by the “chaotic middle” (the struggle to survive in the cold water of a lake below the waterfall), and finally, the “new beginning” (reaching safe ground on the shore).

These three phases are the experiences of a person who, for example, is affected by a stroke. The same goes for someone who loses everything in a war or becomes a climate refugee. After a lifequake, nothing in that person’s life is the same as it was before. When it comes to all the problems we face today as a society, do we need a quake to realize that making adjustments in most aspects of our lives is the only solution?

Silence

Snow reduces sound because snowflakes consist of tiny, branched ice crystals with cavities, at least until the snow freezes. This is not only a human perception but a proven effect. Acousticians have measured the effects of falling snowflakes.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) saw another component: “Winter tames man, woman and beast,” he wrote in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Centuries later, between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, philosopher Max Picard wrote, “Nothing has changed the nature of man as much as the loss of silence.” This is debatable, of course.

Here is a belief without any scientific justification, based on what Shakespeare wrote about taming and Picard about silence: Slowing down our voices and our lives’ rhythms would protect the planet from us. I am not alone with that opinion. Dahr Jamail, for example, the author of *The End of Ice*, wrote, “The frenetic pace of contemporary life is having a devastating impact on the planet.”

What would happen if humanity began to follow the advice of Shakespeare and Picard? What would happen if we all started to rein in our egos and thus lower our voices, if we tried to slow down our pace? Would that be so bad?

Energy Innovation is a nonpartisan energy and climate policy think tank based in San Francisco. Its CEO, Hal Harvey, said in an interview with the *New York Times*, “Respect science, respect nature, respect each other.” Solving the most significant issues, such as the climate crisis, requires a global “Yes We Can.” Instead, we are still confronted with an attitude of “me first.”

Against all odds, I still believe in the good of people and, therefore, in democracy, and I believe in Article 1 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

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