Educational Temptations at the End of the World

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I'm waking up at the start of the end of the world,

But its feeling just like every other morning before,

Now I wonder what my life is going to mean when it's gone.
–Matchbox Twenty "How Far We've Come"

Although we rarely let ourselves acknowledge it, our planet is dying. The world our students and children will inherit will likely be quite different from what has been known in human history. The Earth's ecosystems are on the verge of systemic collapse and the political will to do anything about it is almost nonexistent. For all the talk about educating for a dynamic, ever-changing world, however, most educational thought is based on a metaphysic of stasis, an assumption that the existing physical and social order will largely persist. What happens to education, I want to ask, if we give up this assumption, and turn away from this unjustified staticity, and take the threat of global collapse seriously? What does education look like at the end of the world?

Maybe you do not believe that things are this bad. If so, you can stop reading this paper, I suppose, and go back to the happy expectations of relative normality. Or, alternatively, maybe you can consider this paper a sort of curious thought experiment about what education looks like at the end of the world. For myself, I find it difficult to be anything but pessimistic. We are advancing into a climate crisis even faster than the previous models seemed to anticipate.[1] The effects of climate change are everywhere, from the unprecedented reports of wildfires, floods, droughts, and heat waves to the disappearance of glaciers and arctic ice, to the rising levels of acidity in the oceans, to the quickly melting permafrost.[2] This is probably something human beings as a species can survive (*probably*), but the disruption is likely going to be massive. If you thought wars over oil were bad, just wait until you see the coming wars over water.[3] Global food supplies will be massively disrupted, with widespread crop failure and

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hunger.[4] Climate refugees will swarm over borders, overwhelming government institutions, and deadly new pathogens—until now frozen and inert in permafrost—will probably be unleashed.[5] It is difficult to see how all of this will not lead to widespread social disorder or even collapse. Our institutions and patterns of life are more fragile than we have let ourselves imagine. The world as we know it could very well be turned upside down, and, given how fast things are progressing, this will probably start reaching critical moments within the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren, and the students we are teaching. Meanwhile, the global response has been pathetic: greenhouse emissions are still set to increase by around 10 percent by 2030.[6]

Are there reasons for hope? Certainly. The development of clean energy alternatives is accelerating and could quickly replace fossil fuels—if there were the political will to do so. But we now see renewed political action against clean energy and shady political organizations, using lies and exaggerations, seek to ban wind and solar farming in a growing number of local communities.[7] The unified and massive collective action that is necessary seems less and less likely. Moreover, a significant degree of climate change is already built into the system, given just past and present greenhouse emissions, and the dominoes and feedback mechanisms this unleashes have already started falling.[8] This is not sensationalism; this is a realistic assessment.

Unfortunately, global climate change is a problem that hits human beings at their weakest points, cognitively and politically.[9] The problem is slow moving, with dispersed responsibility, and it will require sustained global cooperation for decades. It will require global actors to take the long view rather than the short one, focusing on the greater good for all. There is no evidence in the history of humanity for such a sustained, cooperative task focused on the long-term global good. It all seems to lie beyond our reach. Of course, this global climate solution, which I will call the *Unprecedented Solution*, is still worth striving for, even though we might have little idea of what the solution looks like or how we can attain it. In fact, we must desperately drive ourselves toward it. While we strive for the Unprecedented Solution, however, we still need to be realistic about the prospects for our children. There is a significant chance that

the future world will be one of widespread suffering, turmoil, and chaos. How can we prepare children for such a future of social and environmental collapse?

It is true that, in progressive education circles, at least since Rousseau, there has been a reluctance in philosophy of education to think that education should be a preparation for the future. There are good reasons for this reluctance, but it is, I believe, a luxury of the metaphysics of statis. If there is a significant chance that our children are going to face a difficult problem in the future, it is highly irresponsible to fail to acknowledge it and to fail to educate them in preparation for this possible future.

I will not present a final answer to this question of apocalyptic education, but I do offer some conditions for what an adequate response will look like. First adequacy condition: whatever education children are given to help them cope with the difficult days ahead, it cannot serve to undermine the conditions necessary for the Unprecedented Solution. That is, we cannot increase the possibility of social and environmental collapse by focusing on anything that would make that collapse more likely. Second condition: education must still acknowledge the real possibility that a climate solution will elude us, and that global disaster awaits. Focusing only on achieving the climate solution does a disservice to individual children, in other words, who will probably need to live in a world where such solutions fail. An adequate answer to the question of education at the end of the world must walk this line between benefitting individuals caught in turmoil and maintaining social hope. Below, I sketch four possible educational responses to the possibility of the end of the world. I call these "temptations" because they are emotional responses as much as rational strategies, and because they are all problematic and limited in some sense given these two adequacy conditions.

THE SURVIVALIST TEMPTATION AND SELF-RELIANCE

I grew up in a religious tradition that often thought about end-of-the-world scenarios. The apocalypse, we were told, was just around the corner. Our religious leaders told us to be prepared for large-scale disasters, having a two-year supply of food on hand. The church itself stocked large stores of food

DOI: 10.47925/79.2.001

and disaster relief supplies and tucked its most sacred family records in vaults deep within the earth. This was in preparation for a period of turmoil in The Last Days, the period before the earth would be redeemed and reborn. Partly in preparation for the end of the world, I was taught to build fires, plant gardens, and preserve food. I was eventually able to understand this apocalyptic talk as a particular brand of dispensational premillennialism and dismiss its literalism as a vivid construction of the religious imagination. And, frankly, it all seemed embarrassingly close to the "Doomsday Prepper" movement and wild-eyed survivalist mentalities.

Now, however, teaching these skills seems newly relevant. The Preppers assume that, in the future, "no one is not going to take care of you."[10] You are going to have to feed yourself, to clothe yourself, to heal yourself, and to shelter yourself. You are going to have to be comfortable being uncomfortable. This is not bad advice, given the possibility of large-scale institutional collapse. When you imagine a world of overwhelmed or collapsed governments, it is easy to see how such skills and temperaments could be an important asset. Still, there is a tone of paranoia and an almost romantic anticipation of violence that seems to come with doomsday preppers, which should be resisted.

A gentler and perhaps more attractive manifestation of this same impulse would be the "homesteading" movement. Rather than focusing on surviving the apocalypse, modern homesteading focuses on the delight of doing things for oneself, even while the desire to live independently remains. As one advocate states, "The world can seem so out of control and while we can't change that taking care of your own basic needs can give you a strong sense of competence that's not easy to come by these days."[11] Homesteading involves developing some of the same skills as survivalism—gardening, raising animals, preserving food, using natural medicines. These skills would prove just as practical in times of social breakdown, but it comes without the anxiety, fear, and anticipatory violence that sometimes comes with prepperism and survivalism.

The educational temptation, then, is to raise children with an eye toward these homesteading skills, preparing them to be less dependent on functioning economies and institutions. One can imagine a revival of the *Emile*, read in a

particular way, where young people have experiences directly engaging with nature, guided by Rousseau's "principle of utility," perhaps even with a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* in hand. Children would learn how to survive without technological convenience. Part of this might be helping children (particularly more pampered middle class and wealthy children) to know that they can endure moments of physical discomfort, that they can sleep on hard surfaces, that they can be cold, or wet, or even a little hungry, and still be okay.

The problem with fostering any sort of survival skills, however, or even more gentle homesteading skills, is precisely this focus on being independent and self-reliant. In privileging independence, the teacher necessarily diminishes our dependence on others, shrinking the importance of social connection. A focus on independent survival comes at the expense of a tightly connected, interdependent worldview that seems necessary for the Unprecedented Solution. Thus, an unrelenting focus on imbuing these sorts of individual survival skills might actually hasten the sort of social collapse that we fear.

THE TEMPTATION TO *APATHEIA*

Another option is to turn to the historical record, looking to see how the intellectual world responds to social upheaval and disintegration. Perhaps there might be some ideas about living peacefully in a world of chaos and decline. One example might be the philosophy developed during the Hellenistic era. In this era, the Greek city-states collapsed, and, after Alexander the Great, the Greek-speaking world erupted into a post-Alexander power struggle.[12] Perhaps it was not an era of social collapse *per se*, but it was one of profound social change. "The history of the Hellenistic civilization was marked by economic developments," one source contends, "second only in magnitude to the Commercial and Industrial Revolutions of the modern era."[13] During this particular time of social upheaval, there was a move away from the metaphysical concerns and natural philosophy that had previously been the focus of the Greek intellectual world toward a concern for human wellbeing. This can be seen in the development of the practical philosophy of the so-called Greco-Roman moralists. It can be seen in the "hedonism" of the Epicureans, for example, where the suggestion was to focus on simple, moderate pleasures. It can also be seen in the search for

DOI: 10.47925/79.2.001

ataraxia of the ancient Skeptics, who thought that fear and anger exist because we think we know things (for example, about the future) that we simply do not know. And, of course, there is the philosophy of Stoicism.[14]

The Stoics wanted to find a way to seal off the wellbeing of human beings from the shifting fortunes of an uncertain world. The wise person, the sage, is able to achieve a state of *apatheia* (a–"without," pathos—"passions"). This is not a state of apathy as we know it, with its associated negative connotations of indifference to important things; rather, it is better described as a state of equanimity, a state of mental stability where one is undisturbed by the events of the world. The Stoics argued that individuals cannot control what happens to them. Employing reason, however, individuals can control how they react to those experiences. After all, negative emotions, like pain and fear, are not simply things we passively experience; rather, they are at least partly the result of our judgments.[15] Pain is not only the result of the physiological response, but also includes judgments about the pain being wrong or unfair—it is not *fair* that we suffer, it is *wrong* that we suffer. These irrational judgments only serve to compound our suffering. Attentive readers have long noted similarities between the Stoics and certain Eastern philosophies, like Buddhism.[16] Suffering, for the Buddhist comes from desire, from clinging to things in life that will always be temporary. We can control our suffering, then, by controlling our desires. Together, this all constitutes a sort of apocalyptic wellness program. The temptation, then, is to help students develop this apatheia, which could be a powerful tool for finding peace in a collapsing world. As the world ends, perhaps we should teach children to say with the Stoics, "be it so."

What might be wrong with such an approach? Besides the fact this seems akin to teaching a sort of religion, the major problem, again, is that apatheia might lead to a disengagement with political communities, and thereby make the Unprecedented Solution less viable. The Stoics, of course, did not think public disengagement was a consequence of their philosophy. Unlike the Epicureans, who thought that we should withdraw from politics to be happy, the Stoics believed in an active public life. It was part of the natural work of humanity to be engaged. Still, whatever their claims, there is surely an element

of passivity in the notion of apatheia. The Unprecedented Solution does not benefit from detached perspectives, but from frantic, maybe even irrational, urgency. By giving students the ability to detach from anxiety and fear, we might be heading off the emotions that are most likely to change the course of events.

THE TEMPTATION OF LIVING FOR THE MOMENT

Another temptation is to eliminate concern about the future and to focus intensely on appreciating the present moment. For wisdom here, we might turn to Fyodor Dostoevsky, who knew what it was to face imminent demise. Sentenced to death for his revolutionary sentiments, Dostoevsky once found himself standing before a firing squad. Unexpectedly, a messenger from the Czar came at the last minute, granting his reprieve. This moment of facing death gave Dostoevsky a new perspective on life and the scene was reproduced in his writings. In *The Idiot*, for example, the character Prince Myshkin tells the story of a man who was about to be shot for his political offenses. Myshkin was curious about what the man was thinking in the moment seemingly before death. He reports what the man said:

> He said that those five minutes seemed to him to be a most interminable period, an enormous wealth of time; he seemed to be living, in these minutes, so many lives that there was no need as yet to think of that last moment, so that he made several arrangements, dividing up the time into portions . . . While saying good-bye to his friends he recollected asking one of them some very usual everyday question, and being much interested in the answer. Then . . . A little way off there stood a church, and its gilded spire glittered in the sun. He remembered staring stubbornly at this spire, and at the rays of light sparkling from it. He could not tear his eyes from these rays of light; he got the idea that these rays were his new nature, and that in three minutes he would become one of them, amalgamated somehow with them.[17]

Facing the end, the condemned man allots time judiciously. Minutes become

doi: 10.47925/79.2.001

lifetimes, everything appears in a new light, and the man finds that he listens in a new way: he talks to his friends, caring deeply about what is said. Everyday moments become transcendent: staring at the distant church spire, the sun sparkles and dances, and he becomes lost in its beauty. Still, later on, Dostoevsky writes that the recognition of approaching death reinserts itself, and this awareness leads to new questions for the man. He begins to ask himself how it was he had failed to "count up every minute" of life "so as to waste not a single instant."[18] The new appreciation of human relationships and of the transcendent miracles of sparkling sunlight does not lead to joy, in this man's case, but to regret. He bemoans all the moments passed by unnoticed and all the opportunities for appreciation wasted. Dostoevsky's point seems to be to live such that, when the end comes, we can avoid such regrets.

Perhaps we can draw a parallel to our own situation: as a species, we stand in front of the firing squad of climate change, facing down our demise, with little reason to believe that a reprieve is coming. The educational temptation is to help students to embrace the heightened awareness of the moment, to allow the possibility of imminent demise to trigger a new appreciation for the booming, buzzing experience of the world. The coming apocalypse should encourage new perceptions, new ways of being aware, and provide the impetus to both cherish human relationships and enjoy the wonders of the planet—at least before the coming waves of mass extinction. Such an awareness might also allow for some experience of joy, even as institutions and ecologies collapse, and human life becomes more desperate and perhaps more brutal. The temptation here is to prepare students for the future by teaching them to embrace the present moment.

What is the problem with this temptation? It may assume privileges that some children currently do not have, and it may ignore ugly parts even of our present moment. It also shares problems with the other temptations. The independence of survivalism and self-reliance, we have seen, pulls the individual away from communal action. The sense of perspective of apatheia seems to diminish the urgency to act. The temptation of the present moment also has a negative side. To focus on the present is, in some sense, to bracket out the

future. Taking time to quietly enjoy relationships and to cherish the beauty of the moment will be time not dedicated to a last-ditch attempt to save the planet, undermining the Unprecedented Solution.

THE TEMPTATION TOWARDS ALL-OUT CLIMATE ACTIVISM

The next temptation, then, is to put our educational efforts into climate activism. There are many ways this activism could be enacted. Educators could invest their educational energies into focusing on the STEM fields that deal with the development of clean energy, carbon recapture, and so forth. Educators could also push to develop sensibilities in students that are climate responsible. There has, in fact, been a robust discussion in philosophy of education about what these sensibilities should be. It has been suggested that we could cultivate a feeling of ecological vulnerability, or promote a science education that discloses the earth in new ways, or find ways to change student attitudes toward meat consumption, or explore our "limits" and reshape our desires.[19] There are countless other ways that educators could be informed by deep ecologies, place-based education, and posthumanist perspectives. If this is the route we take, though, the urgency of the situation demands that our actions have a political edge. It cannot just be about shopping at local farmer's markets, or taking outdoor retreats, or even limiting our own private climate footprints, but pushing for systemic change. Instilling this sort of political climate responsibility could be put forward as a primary aim of education. The benefits of this are compelling: it could save the world.

We should be honest with ourselves, however, and recognize that the odds are low that baptizing students into deep ecologies will be effective in saving the world. Students are often resistant to efforts to be shaped in the ways we might want. Schools, for their part, are becoming more averse to the appearance of endorsing progressive social causes as they face backlash from conservatives. The larger culture, furthermore, is not fully supportive of climate activism and perhaps growing less so. Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center show that climate change was only the eleventh most important issue to voters in 2020.[20] Two years later, even after all the heat waves, floods, droughts, and wildfires of the past two years, the importance of climate change dropped

DOI: 10.47925/79.2.001

to fourteenth.[21] As public urgency declines, the likely futility of last-ditch climate action becomes ever more troublesome. If we educate our newly post-humanist students to unrelentingly work to change a trajectory that quite possibly cannot be changed, we are miseducating them for the actual world that they will inherit. This leads us back to the other three temptations, suggesting that they might have a place in any final answer.

Still, futility does not mean the life of activism is worthless. It might be worthwhile for other reasons, even if it fails. Children, for example, will have every right to blame preceding generations who have blithely let the world slide into ruin. The recent film, *Don't Look Up*, captures both the dangers and rewards of unrelenting activism. In that film, a scientist named Kate and her colleagues try to alert the world to the dangers of a looming comet impact. Their efforts are unsuccessful, and it causes them a great deal of frustration, unhappiness, and distress. As the comet approaches, though, and the end looms, they gather around a table one last time and offer grace. As part of that, Kate says, haltingly, "I'm grateful." She pauses. "I'm grateful that we tried." There is another pause, and her friend and colleague then responds, "Man, oh man, did we try."

In their failure, they took some satisfaction, it seems, in the effort alone. Perhaps, then, in this last-ditch attempt to stave off global warming, through education or any other means, we will find the one thing that will allow us to look our children in the eye. We can face them with a certain dignity and say, "Man, oh man, did we try." Perhaps, if we can say this, it will be a sort of salvation from generational resentment and bitterness. As much as anything, this possibility attracts me to this temptation as much as its slim chance of success, and it should give us an additional reason for its ultimate inclusion in any sort of educational answer.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay has been pessimistic, born out of a despair that I have allowed myself to feel. I cannot escape the worry that the world as we know it is headed for disaster, a disaster that will involve many people I care deeply about. I have let myself face up to this despair for the purposes of asking a

question that may become increasingly acute: What does education look like at the end of the world? As I ask this question, my thoughts turn to our duties and responsibilities toward our children. Surely, we owe them our best efforts to continue to press for the Unprecedented Solution. These efforts should include helping children to continue the political and scientific struggle against climate disaster. If nothing else, perhaps in those activist efforts can be found a form of generational *rapprochement*. At the same time, given the significant chance of failure, I believe we also owe them tools and perspectives that might be useful as they live under difficult circumstances: skills to endure a harder life, perspectives allowing for equanimity in the face of difficulties, a sense of having fully appreciated the planet as it died. As we encourage activism in a last-ditch attempt to stave off global climate disaster, these things also have a place in what we owe to children. We have likely sabotaged their future, after all; we at least owe them the chance to find some peace amidst the ruins.

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DOI: 10.47925/79.2.001