

Destroy Our Home... Or Restore It?

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Whenever I give a speech, I think back to the wise words of my good mother...when I was nervously getting ready to give my very first public speech. She placed her hand on my shoulder, looked me right in the eye, and said: “*Don’t even try to sound intelligent or articulate or wise. Just...be yourself.*”

Will we destroy our home planet, or restore it? That is the big question for this conference – and it’s the ultimate question for our species in these troubled times. The answer will decide our fate...and whether we deserve the name *Sapiens*.

The litany of those troubles is long and growing longer. Every year, we burn enough fossil fuels to dump into the atmosphere over 100 times as much CO₂ as volcanoes...and the pace is accelerating. Meanwhile, across the globe, we are dealing with the poisoned fruits of climate change: terrible storms, hurricanes, droughts, food shortages, wildfires, and “thousand year floods” that seem to happen annually. Polar ice shelves disintegrate, water shortages worsen, climate refugees multiply, and the oceans grow hotter and more acidic.

Meanwhile, we are putting relentless pressure on our world’s complex ecosystems – rain forests, grasslands, coral reefs, wetlands, fisheries – as well as the atmosphere. Ominously, the recent United Nations report on Biodiversity concluded that the accelerating impacts of human activities have pushed over *one million species* to the brink of extinction. And these trends are only worsened by industrial greed, irresponsible media, and corrupt politicians who deny the science and evade the ethics.

All this has happened in the past century and a half – barely an instant on the clock of geologic time. In the face of this onslaught...it’s difficult to feel hopeful. But we absolutely need to maintain hope if we are going to have any chance to prevail. By Hope I don’t mean a simplistic ideal that understates the true scale of our problems. Rather, I mean a full and nuanced understanding of the wondrous complexity of our living, breathing planet – and how we can live with it in lasting balance. Achieving that vision will be our greatest challenge as humans, our defining moment as a species.

I’m reminded of the ancient Greek myth of Pandora’s box (written down long ago by the poet Hesiod).

When the box was finally opened, out poured all the world's worst troubles – sickness, war, greed, arrogance (and, I'm tempted to add, the 2016 election). But in the end, one final quality emerged – and instead of a trouble, it was a powerful source of good, the one thing that could help humanity combat all those problems: Hope.

So where, in all this, can we find *authentic reasons for hope*?

Right here in this room.

This gala event is the highly evolved result of a small meeting in 1992 at the president's office in Nassau Hall. Harold Shapiro had called a few people together – professors Henry Horn and Rob Sokolow were there, as well as (for reasons only Harold could fathom) myself. Harold wanted to discuss *a bold, visionary idea* – a whole new initiative at this great university, focused on the environment. Several months later, the Princeton Environmental Institute was founded.

That was 25 years ago – and those years have overflowed with impressive achievements. With world class scholarship, teaching, and research. With excellent work by people who are as diverse as our world is diverse, and who represent a wide array of disciplines. In sum – with authentic reasons for hope – all in service of saving our home planet.

Now, looking forward, we are blessed to have the equally bold, equally visionary leadership of Chris Eisgruber. With his guidance, PEI has begun to raise its goals as well as its capabilities to address the Earth's most daunting challenges. All this is very exciting, very important...and very Princeton.

Ultimately, the source of our greatest hope is the same as that of our greatest danger – ourselves. In the forest of human qualities, the ones that can ultimately save us rise above all the rest, like towering redwood trees: Ingenuity. Creativity. Courage. Compassion. Perseverance. As well as the high ideals of young people (and young-thinking elders). Plus...Humility – which helps us to rise above the human-centric thinking that is the root cause of our environmental crises. And finally, I would add one more quality – one that might, at first, seem surprising: *Our ability to tell stories*.

The best way I can explain why our stories matter – is to tell you one. It's a true story, something that happened to me far away from the campus of Princeton University...in a place called San Ignacio Lagoon off the west coast of Mexico's Baja California.

Having camped the night before on the shore, I awoke before sunrise and pushed my kayak out into the

lagoon. Darkness surrounded me; I was completely alone. Ocean smells filled the briny breeze. Even as the first delicate rays of dawn started to light the sky, making golden sparks on the waves, I found myself listening – to the gentle slap of waves against the bow of my kayak, to the drip-drip from the ends of my paddle, to the swelling calls of water birds.

All alone, I kept paddling farther into the lagoon. Suddenly, a huge wave rose just off the bow! A great flipper burst out of the water, and then crashed down on the surface, soaking me with spray. An enormous creature lifted higher – and before I knew it, I was staring into the deepest, darkest eye that I'd ever seen. The eye of a great gray whale.

For a timeless moment, we looked into each other's eyes. I knew that this whale belonged to a species that every year makes an extraordinary migration, one of the world's longest, spanning thousands of miles of open ocean. I also knew that another species, my own, had hunted these whales to the very brink of extinction only decades before. And yet...I also knew something else: That this whale and I were fellow living creatures, fellow mammals, *fellow migrators* on planet Earth as we make our annual voyage around the Sun.

Peering into that deep, dark eye, all the millions of years of evolutionary time that separated us – simply *fell away*. We were closely connected, this whale and I.

And I couldn't help but feel: This whale was asking me something – a question. *But what?* What was that question?

I will return to that in a moment. But first, it's worth noting that our human ability to tell stories is much more than just entertainment. Stories can carry great power – to take us instantly to a faraway lagoon at dawn; to convey the importance of changing our environmentally destructive behavior; or to find the unity between ourselves and other people, other creatures, other passengers on this voyage.

Plus something more: Stories have the power to carry ideas – big, meaningful ideas that can shape minds and change lives. Consider, for example, the well-known story of Noah's Ark. For centuries, it's been told primarily as a story about faith. Which it is. But it is *also* a story about the environment – a parable about our responsibility to be wise stewards of our planet's wondrous biodiversity. After all, if God asked Noah to go through so much trouble to protect two of every species...*how can we do anything less?*

Which is why I'm delighted that, over the past 25 years, Princeton's environmental education has expanded to fully embrace the Humanities and Social Sciences. And to include valuable new fields like environmental

justice. *Now* Princeton's work encompasses the full array of disciplines that we absolutely need if we are going to protect the grand biosphere that is our home: *The sciences* – for the facts, the truths we must understand. *Engineering* – for the solutions we require. *Government and diplomacy* – for the policies we need. And *the Humanities* – for our stories...which help us see the world in context...and through other eyes.

Including the deep, dark, intelligent eyes of a whale.

What, then, was the question that whale was asking? I've often thought back to that moment, that surprising connection between two living creatures, on San Ignacio Lagoon. And I believe the question was something like this:

Will humans really rise to this challenge?

There is no higher calling than saving the Earth and all the life it sustains, including ourselves. So I am deeply proud of Princeton – and all of you who are so dedicated to excellence and truth and inspiration.

The challenges we face are enormous, the stakes are extremely high. We must succeed! For the world. For the future. And also...for the gratitude we will surely see in the deep, dark eyes of a whale.