

A Call to Writers

As the true fury of global warming begins to kick in—forests flash to ashes, storms tear away coastal villages, cities swelter in record-breaking heat, drought singes the Southwest, the Arctic melts—we come face to face with the full meaning of the environmental emergency: If climate change continues unchecked, scientists tell us, the world’s life-support systems will be irretrievably damaged by the time our children reach middle-age.¹ The need for action is urgent and unprecedented.

We here issue a call to writers, who have been given the gift of powerful voices that can change the world. For the sake of all the plants and animals on the planet, for the sake of intergenerational justice, for the sake of the children, we call on writers to set aside their ordinary work and step up to do the work of the moment, which is to stop the reckless and profligate fossil fuel economy that is causing climate chaos.

That work may be outside the academy, in the streets, in the halls of politics and power, in the new street theaters of creative disruption, all aimed at stopping industry from continuing to make huge profits by bringing down the systems that sustain life on Earth. These activist efforts need the voices of writers, the genius of thought-leaders, the power of words.

But there is essential work to be done also in our roles as academics and writers, empowered by creative imagination, moral clarity, and the strength of true witness. Write as if your reader were dying, Annie Dillard advised. “What would you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?” Now we must write as if the planet were dying. What would you say to a planet in a spasm of extinction?² What would you say to those who are paying the costs of climate change in the currency of death? Surely in a world dangerously slipping away, we need courageously and honestly to ask again the questions every author asks, Who is my audience—now, today, in this world? What is my purpose?

Some kinds of writing are morally impossible in a state of emergency: Anything written solely for tenure. Anything written solely for promotion. Any solipsistic project. Anything, in short, that isn’t the most significant use of a writer’s life and talents. Otherwise, how could it ever be forgiven by the ones who follow us, who will expect us finally to have escaped the narrow self-interest of our economy and our age?

Some kinds of writing will be essential. We here invite creative thought about new or renewed forms our writing can take. Perhaps some of these:

The drum-head pamphlet. Like Thomas Paine, writing on the head of a Revolutionary War drum, lay it out. Lay out the reasons why extractive cultures must change their ways. Lay out the reasons that inspire the activists. Lay out the reasons that shame the politicians. Lay out the reasons that are a template for decision-makers.

¹ Anthony D. Barnosky and 500 scientists. “Scientific Consensus on Maintaining Humanity’s Life Support Systems in the 21st Century: Information for Policy Makers.” Mahb.stanford.edu/consensus-statement-from-global-scientists. Accessed 8/18/13.

² David Wake and Vance Vredenburg. “Are we in the midst of the sixth mass extinction?” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105:08/12/08. Accessed 8/18/13. Among mammals, 22% are globally threatened or extinct.

The “broken-hearted hallelujah.” Like Leonard Cohen, singing of loss and love, make clear the beauty of what we stand to lose or what we have already destroyed. Celebrate the microscopic sea-angels. Celebrate the children who live in the cold doorways and shanty camps. Celebrate the swamp at the end of the road. Leave no doubt of the magnitude of their value and the enormity of the crime, to let them pass away unnoticed. These are elegies, these are praise songs, these are love stories.

The witness. Like Cassandra howling at the gates of Troy, bear witness to what you know to be true. Tell the truths that have been bent by skilled advertising. Tell the truths that have been concealed by adroit regulations. Tell the truths that have been denied by fear or complacency. Go to the tarfields, go to the broken pipelines. Tell that story. Be the noisy gong and clanging cymbals, and be the love.

The narrative of the moral imagination. With stories and novels and poems, take the reader inside the minds and hearts of those who live the consequences of global warming. Who are they? How do they live? What consoles them? Powerful stories teach empathy, build the power to imagine oneself into another’s place, to feel others’ sorrow, and so take readers outside the self-absorption that allows the destruction to continue.

The radical imaginary. Re-imagine the world. Push out the boundaries of the human imagination, too long hog-tied by mass media, to create the open space where new ideas can flourish. Maybe it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism or fossil fuels or terminal selfishness. But this is the work that calls us—to imagine new life-ways into existence. Writers may not be able to save the old world, but they can help create the new one.

The indictment. Like Jefferson listing the repeated injuries and usurpations, let facts be submitted to a candid world. This is the literature of outrage. How did we come to embrace an economic system that would wreck the world? What iniquity allows it to continue?

The apologia. Finally this: Write to the future. Try to explain how we could allow the devastation of the world, how we could leave those who follow us only an impoverished, stripped, and dangerously unstable time. Ask their forgiveness. This is the literature of prayer. Is it possible to write on your knees, weeping?