

Commencement Speech

Jeremy Jackson - Pace University Commencement 2006

You are graduating at the end of a remarkable era of unlimited faith in human progress.

And the record seems to support that confidence. Revolutions in the harnessing of energy, agriculture, transportation, and health have saved us every time.

But to achieve these great things we built a wall around ourselves called technology. Civilization is what's inside that wall along with all the good things we took from Nature to support our way of life.

Increasingly wounded Nature is outside the wall along with all the garbage of civilization that we threw away.

Economists call the garbage externalities - the consequences of all the progress that we never paid for but that now are coming home to roost.

We are indeed at a tipping point when Nature has little more to give and the externalities are crashing through the wall with a vengeance.

- Water supplies are drying up and droughts are increasing worldwide.
- Most of the big fish in the oceans are gone.
- Soils are disappearing.
- Mercury and all our other wastes increasingly poison our food.
- Increasing amounts of carbon dioxide are warming the Earth.
- Runoff of excess fertilizers and soils are creating vast Dead Zones in once fertile coastal oceans.
- Increasingly dangerous new diseases are on the rise.

The list goes on and on.

How were we caught so unawares?

No one noticed because of the problem of Shifting Baselines.

Each of us assumed that Nature had always been the way it was when we were young.

Degradation was everything that happened afterwards - which is why older people are more depressing than younger people.

But children rarely listen to their parents, so they make the same mistakes all over again.

And thus, bit by bit, and generation by generation, Nature declined unnoticed.

As we finally begin to pay attention we are tempted to focus on just one problem at a time because it seems more practical.

But we need to be much braver than that, and stand back to see the entire picture of degradation or we will fail to come to grips with the biggest problem of all.

That the scarcities, droughts, and dead zones are only the symptoms of the fundamental limits to our growth - unless we can somehow magically devise utterly new forms of clean energy and food production without killing ourselves in the process.

Such miracles are not impossible. Who could have imagined nuclear power plants or penicillin a century ago?

But do you want to stake your entire future on the promise of more miracles? More revolutions can surely happen. But when? And at what additional

cost?

You need to slam on the brakes to stop unbridled growth in order to confront the environmental problems that my generation dumped upon you, or your proud Pace motto *Opportunitas* will become a hollow dream.

It won't be easy, and each day you wait, the job will be much more difficult.

Many of the problems are technical, such as how to make the Green Revolution truly green while feeding more than 6 billion people with 2 or 3 billion more on the way.

But the biggest problems of all are about old-fashioned values and social responsibility.

We have become a nation of passive consumers instead of active citizens. So you will have to learn how to become citizens all over again and not leave all the problems to someone else.

And passive, poll-obsessed facilitators have taken the place of true political leaders in government. So some of you will have to learn to be active leaders again, and to make bold decisions and dare to be wrong.

It is a great honor that you have bestowed upon me today for raising environmental alarm and I thank you.

But the greatest award of all would be for the problems to begin to disappear by your efforts.

As graduates of Pace you are more than up to meeting these challenges and I wish you great success.

The future of the world depends on it.

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