

# Finding Meaning at the End of Humanity

## Richard Curtis, PhD

You know if you woke me up at two in the morning, injected me with truth serum and said, “Do we really have a chance, here, to change anything?” I would probably have to tell you the truth that it’s a long shot. I admit that. But, you know, as my head would clear from the truth serum and I looked up and saw the picture of my two daughters up there, I’d say, “Sorry, we may be cooked, we may be completely fried, but as long as I’ve got kids I’m going to keep at this until the last dog dies.”

– Thomas Friedman, from the History Channel show, “Earth 2100”

In the early 1990’s an Anthropologist and Physician named Warren Hern published a paper entitled, “Is Human Culture Carcinogenic for Uncontrolled Population Growth and Ecological Destruction?” (Hern, Bioscience, Dec. 1993: 43.11)<sup>1</sup>. His conclusions were negative, in that he determined that we are a: “malignant epiecopathological process” (768). His *diagnosis*, and this word matters here, is that the human species is a cancer (that is what “malignant process” means in ordinary English).<sup>2</sup> There are some points to note about this that might confuse lay people. In modern medicine the diagnosis of a disease is the formal recognition of a process within an organic being that has a defined (perhaps not completely understood) behavior and outcome. Cancer is diagnosed by the situation meeting a few diagnostic criteria, and these are mostly to do with spreading out and making everything look like the cancer. Specifically, “. . . rapid, uncontrolled growth; invasion and destruction of adjacent tissues (ecosystems, in this case); metastasis (colonization and urbanization, in this case); and dedifferentiation (loss of distinctiveness in individual components)” (Hern). To diagnose cancer the situation does not have to meet all four criteria, only two, but most ominously we meet all four.

More recently scientists working across the globe have reached a consensus that human activity is causing climate change in a warming direction. Detailed projections have been made over the years, and quite disturbingly the predictions that sounded outrageously pessimistic a few years ago are now being offered as optimistic projections. For the sake of this discussion I would refer the reader to The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the US Global Climate Change Research Program and their reports, these are available on the web. I would quickly add that my point is that these documents are very consciously trying not to seem too alarmist. Yet, if you read through them it is clear that the combined consequences of what is described (and the reports compartmentalize findings so the reader has to do that work) are very dire, arguably fatal.

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<sup>1</sup> I feel that it is important to note here that I met Warren Hern in 1997 when I interviewed him for an hour long radio program on KGNU in Boulder, CO. Dr. Hern is the most principled and bravest individual I have ever met. He lives the difficult implications of the things he says, and does so facing death threats, assaults and regular intimidation in a practice done behind bomb-proof glass. He is an inspiration to our generation and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> In that 1997 interview Hern stressed the word *diagnosis*, which represents a consolidation of his thinking since writing the article I have quoted.

In remarks to Congress twenty years after he first testified about the dangers of climate change, climate scientist James Hansen said the following:

Now, as then, frank assessment of scientific data yields conclusions that are shocking to the body politic. Now, as then, I can assert that these conclusions have a certainty exceeding 99%. The difference is that now we have used up all slack in the schedule for actions needed to defuse the global warming time-bomb....

...the safe level of atmospheric carbon dioxide is no more than 350 ppm....

Such phenomena, including the instability of Arctic sea ice and the great ice sheets at today's carbon dioxide amount [385 ppm], show that we have already gone too far. We must draw down atmospheric carbon dioxide to preserve the planet we know. (Dr. James Hansen, "Global Warming Twenty Years Later: Tipping Points Near", June 23, 2008, [http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/2008/TwentyYearsLater\\_20080623.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/2008/TwentyYearsLater_20080623.pdf))

It appears, then, that Hern was right, and in the most dramatic of ways. Philosophically there are issues with his presentation (e.g. if our population was spiking but we did not depend on oil for energy would we be malignant? Is the analogy between a biological organism like a human being and the complex interconnections of the plant a good analogy?) but those are small points in the end. He was right, as it happens, but not in some larger teleological sense that some might read into his language. Hern himself notes that cancer cells cannot choose to behave differently where we can – his point is to prompt us to do so. We must choose to act differently so as not to be cancer.

We aren't doing that. Nothing like what the experts suggest has ever been seriously considered at the policy level. I, and many others, have become convinced that we have passed the most important of "tipping points" and the end is coming. The point is not how to survive, but now it is how to die – "how to bring the plane down" in current parlance. The documentary quoted above is a good example. It ends on a positive note but it is quite clear there is no basis for that optimism in the predictions they reviewed. We cannot save civilization at this point and it is now only a matter of time.

Let me review just a few news accounts from the last couple of years to illustrate this. In a 2010 interview one university researcher, Jon Foley of Minnesota, told *Scientific American*:

W[hat] we are finding though is that if we get to warming that is more than; right now, we warmed about, maybe six-tenths of a degree centigrade, about [one] degree Fahrenheit warmer than we would have been. Well, that is not that much; we are beginning to see the effects where we get to be 2 or 3 degrees warmer than we have been for the last 10,000 years. That is where we started to worry about irreversible damage.

(<http://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode.cfm?id=are-we-pushing-the-earths-environme-10-03-19>)

In a 2011 story about a conference in Paris, *Agence France-Press* reported:

Up to now, these and other impacts have been studied mainly in isolation. Only recently have scientists begun to understand how these forces interact.

"We have underestimated the overall risks, and that the whole of marine degradation is greater than the sum of its parts," [Alex] Rogers [of Oxford] said. "That degradation is now happening at a faster rate than predicted."

Indeed, the pace of change is tracking or has surpassed the worst-case scenarios laid out by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its landmark 2007 report, according to the new assessment.

The chain reaction leading to increased acidification of the oceans begins with a massive influx of carbon into Earth's climate system.  
(<http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2011/06/20-8>)

Also in 2011, MSNBC reported on new findings from the IPCC, NOAA, NASA and others looking at permafrost melting in the arctic.

The team predicted that by the mid-2020s the level of permafrost carbon emissions will mean that the Arctic will switch from being an overall "sink" that traps carbon to a "source."

Moreover, the experts wrote, that "source" impact "is strong enough to cancel 42–88 percent of the total global land sink" absorbing carbon.

([http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41625347/ns/us\\_news-environment/t/permafrost-name-only-thaw-adds-warming/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41625347/ns/us_news-environment/t/permafrost-name-only-thaw-adds-warming/))

The point here is that permafrost contains significant sources of both carbon dioxide and methane (which is much worse than carbon dioxide, in terms of its power to trap heat). That permafrost is melting and so those gases are being released into the atmosphere faster and faster. This report is saying that by 2029 the permafrost will itself become a significant source of additional carbon, thus speeding up other global warming processes. These are called feedback loops, where one problem feeds into and makes worse other problems.

Just to make this more obvious, in mid-February 2012, *Agence France-Press* reported: "French scientists unveiling new estimates for global warming said on Thursday the 2 C (3.6 F) goal enshrined by the United Nations was 'the most optimistic' scenario left for greenhouse-gas emissions" ([www.physorg.com/news/2012-02-2c-goal-optimistic-french.html](http://www.physorg.com/news/2012-02-2c-goal-optimistic-french.html)). To be clear, two degrees Centigrade is what most scientists had previously described as the disaster scenario, as in the news story from 2010 above. Now we are told this is actually very optimistic!

In a prescient article years ago George Monbiot (a journalist) wrote, "With a small, rational part of our brain, we recognize that our existence is governed by material realities, and that, as those realities change, so will our lives" ([www.monbiot.com/archives/2003/08/12/sleepwalking-to-extinction/](http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2003/08/12/sleepwalking-to-extinction/)). In that article he argues that we live mostly in a sort of dream world instead of the world that reason would reflect. As such we can very easily put ugly realities out of mind. To survive we would have to change the world, our social world. "This requires draconian regulation, rationing and prohibition: all the measures which our existing politics, informed by our dreaming, forbid" (Monbiot).

More scientifically: Our brains want to interpret the world in terms of an assumed consistency. “Shortly after our late teens, we become bound by tradition, anchored by the way things have always been, and entrenched in the belief that everything will remain the same even as the world changes around us” (David Perlmutter and Alberto Villoldo, *Power Up Your Brain: The Neuroscience of Enlightenment*, New York: Hay House, Inc., 2011, 47; the authors are a neurologist and a neuroscientist, both highly regarded in their fields).

A short analogy might help here. Imagine a single father (mom died in an accident two years ago) with a four year-old special needs daughter. Dad goes to the doctor and discovers that those odd pains he was feeling are cancer of the pancreas. He is told he has two years to live. One possibility is that he could work very hard at fighting the cancer and making himself well and beat the odds. However, it would be grievously irresponsible of that father not to prepare simultaneously for his predicted demise (for the sake of his child). I am saying it is now time for us to talk about what it means to prepare for civilization’s predicted demise. This way of thinking might be called, “Hospice Care for Humanity.”

Some will object that this view does not leave sufficient room open for human creativity and technological innovation. One could say that, but that claim is deeply irrational, and contradicted by daily experience. As of this writing there are political primaries occurring and the most relevant statement on this issue is that most if not all of the politicians in the race believe, or claim to believe, that anthropogenic climate change is a hoax. More recently someone got a hold of documents from something called “The Heartland Foundation” (of Chicago, there are a few with that name), which apparently exists to confuse people about climate change.

CHICAGO, Feb. 18 [2012] (UPI) -- Internal documents obtained surreptitiously from the Heartland Institute, a libertarian think tank in Chicago, have been made public. Heartland pushes for deregulation and is especially known for its opposition to scientists who have concluded human activity is causing global warming. The documents appear to show large donations from the liquor and tobacco industries, the General Motors Foundation and an anonymous donor who contributed \$14 million, *The Guardian* reports.  
([http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/US/2012/02/18/Heartland-Institute-documents-published/UPI-57751329549148/?spt=hs&or=tn](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2012/02/18/Heartland-Institute-documents-published/UPI-57751329549148/?spt=hs&or=tn))

From one of those leaked documents:

**Development of our "Global Warming Curriculum for K-12 Classrooms" project**

Principals and teachers are heavily biased toward the alarmist perspective. To counter this we are considering launching an effort to develop alternative materials for K-12 classrooms. We are pursuing a proposal from Dr. David Wojick to produce a global warming curriculum for K-12 schools. Dr. Wojick is a consultant with the Office of Scientific and Technical Information at the U.S. Department of Energy in the area of information and communication science. His effort will focus on providing curriculum that shows that the topic of climate

change is controversial and uncertain - two key points that are **effective at dissuading teachers from teaching science**. We tentatively plan to pay Dr. Wojick \$100,000 for 20 modules in 2012, with funding pledged by the Anonymous Donor.  
(<http://www.desmogblog.com/sites/beta.desmogblog.com/files/2012%20Climate%20Strategy%20%283%29.pdf>, emphasis added)

By the way, this Dr. Wojick is an “epistemologist” (Epistemology is the study of knowledge in Philosophy), not a scientist. His expertise apparently is doubt, which is cheap and easy (the Greeks knew this 2,500 years ago).<sup>3</sup> But as Hansen told us, over and over, there is no actual doubt left in the climate science community, any doubt is entirely non-scientific sophistry. I would add, a gross evil, as well. This organization takes in tens of millions of dollars from people who do not want any action taken on climate change, and they are attempting to indoctrinate school teachers and children to disregard science (might that be why tobacco corporations are funding them?). They pay people like Wojick very large sums of money to justify this for them with rationalizations about alleged (but actually non-existent) scientific uncertainty.

What reasonable person would expect people who do not understand science to act on it? That is why Heartland exists, to cause confusion and doubt about that which is not doubted. What reasonable person would expect a government to navigate this issue when it is itself paying people to cause confusion? This Wojick is a paid consultant in this area. What reasonable person would expect this political culture to respond to any serious but complicated issue? Therefore we can predict with great confidence that this political dimension to the problem will get worse, not better; even as the problem itself gets worse. And it is getting worse, very quickly.

In 2006 Hansen told a conference audience that he had become aware that official “policy” at NOAA (the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the government’s leading scientific research body) is that increased hurricane strength in the Atlantic is due to periodic warming of the Atlantic and not global warming. Hansen, it should be noted, works for NASA (the National Atmospheric and Space Administration). NOAA adopted this as policy rather than more responsibly adopt a scientific conclusion. Let me say that again: **NOAA has adopted a policy** conclusion about a scientific question that is **counter to the scientific conclusions** – and over the objections – of every relevant expert. Hansen refers to this “policy” as “irrational” (presentation at the New School, February 10, 2006; chart 25). He also goes on to note that scientists at NOAA understand that this “policy” is irrational, and they have been forbidden from saying so. “A NOAA scientist cannot speak with a reporter unless there is a ‘listener’ on the line with him or her” (Hansen, New School). At one point Hansen compared this situation with the social realities of Nazi Germany (to be clear that situation involved politicians silencing, and later murdering scientists). He later said that might be a bit extreme, but considering the consequences, is it?

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<sup>3</sup> That he would accept money to tell intricate lies for people who are willing to sacrifice billions of people’s lives for their profit tells us he is a person with no moral center. As I am also a philosopher and so he is one of my colleagues I am personally and professionally appalled and disgusted.

It appears the *de facto* policy of the US government is to deny climate science, forbid their own scientists from talking about this, and hire professional liars to cast irrational doubt on an issue that is not in doubt. And some people think this is a political culture that can make progress on this issue BEFORE it is too late? No, it is not going to happen, and we had better admit that to ourselves. Hansen is talking about the vital necessity of bringing carbon dioxide levels down and no politician is talking about even cutting the increasing amount we generate. To think we can survive is magical thinking and denial, nothing more.

We are all going to die. That is just the nature of life. It comes to an end. The French Existentialists tried to teach us how to think about this. People often get confused and think existentialism is about despair or hopelessness. Nothing could be further from the truth, although Albert Camus started with what he called, “The Absurd.”<sup>4</sup> Camus’ point was that our desire for meaning and the universe’s refusal to offer any is a giant absurdity. That is our life. OK, that can sound bad, but it is just the start. He said life is absurd, and it is. The point, however, is what one does with life. The great hope (or curse) in existentialism is that **we choose** how to live. We cannot change “the absurd” but we can, in fact must choose how to live. Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out this causes anxiety.<sup>5</sup> It is not easy to be free because being free is also to be responsible, so most people hide from the responsibility (thus our present predicament). Recall here Monbiot’s point about the Dream World, and the neuroscience point about fixed belief systems.

We face a different choice now. Friedman, quoted above, wants to hope in spite of the evidence, and that is normal. I fear it is not helpful. The Existentialists taught us to face reality. Even Camus and Sartre assumed that humanity would continue on for some vast time. We all have assumed that, but now we must think about our kind differently. Humanity is in question. Of course the species may well survive for some vast time, but humanity (that is our social worlds, civilization) will end sooner than expected. The irony is that from the absurdity of our present predicament comes the answer that Camus observed we so desperately want – we have an obvious purpose now.

Every generation alive today is touching the end. We have been given the sacred purpose of landing that plane. We must bring our social worlds to a planned end and not let the most horrible consequences of our prior ignorance cause unimaginable suffering. This is the meaning of life, now. Hospice Care for Humanity means that in spite of the lack of cosmic meaning we have accidentally created a most forceful meaning. We still must choose how to live but now we know what we must do -- land the plane.

What does it mean for humanity to end? How would we even think about that? One very active hospice organization includes the following in the FAQ on their web site:

**Is the decision for hospice care giving up hope or waiting to die?**

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower, New York: Vintage, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander, New York: New Directions, 2007.

No. Hospice is about living. Hospice strives to bring quality of life and comfort to a patient and their family. Our successes are in helping a patient and family live fully until the end. Often patients will feel better with good pain and symptom management. Hospice is an experience of care and support, different from any other type of care. (<http://www.hospice.org/hospice-care/what-is-hospice/>)

How are we to live? It is the same question Existentialism has always asked. How are we to live at the end of humanity? Well, it is a slightly different question. It is more complex but it has one most obvious answer. We must live in way that we minimize suffering as we die. How is that done? Most directly by limiting the number of people there are on the planet as the end comes to our kind. But if we actually did that we might solve the problem. This is an irony with which we simply must live. Much like the father in my analogy above, we must prepare for our demise even if we might save ourselves along the way.

How are we to live fully at the end of humanity? That is the question that matters. It is mostly an individual question, the existentialists taught. There are some things that must be social, but at the core we all have to choose for ourselves. Yet we all live together; that is humanity is a collective (if failing) enterprise. We choose alone but live together. And now it is clear we have to live with an awareness of our individual and collective end. We need Hospice Care for Humanity.

The one very concrete suggestion that I think Philosophy demands is this moral imperative of limiting suffering. One particularly effective and I grant dramatic way to do this is to perform a vasectomy on every single new-born baby boy in the world, regardless of status, location or any other details – every male human born. If done this would dramatically shrink the population in less than a generation. Ethics, it seems to me, demands this sort of response. We have destroyed the possibility for our survival but we still have to choose not to be cancer, or at least choose to be a less aggressive type. The reason I focus on boys is because this procedure is easily done and can be reversible. Some boys would go on to have the vasectomy reversed and could reproduce, most others would not.

Some might object that this is unfair to the poor, who would not be able to afford the reversal. I think that complaint is naïve, pathetically so, if not cruel. If parents do not have the resources to get a vasectomy reversed why would anyone assume they have the resources to raise a child and guide it through what will be the most destructive and dangerous period in our species' history? If rich people are foolish enough to reproduce under these circumstances then that is their failing. What moral person would bring a child into a world undergoing massive destruction? Those who choose to reproduce are only condemning their offspring to misery and an early death. I am therefore unmoved that poor people would be “deprived” of this experience. I am, frankly, offended by the abject amorality of this argument.

That this objection is so predictable is another indication of just how dire the situation is. People seem to think that ordinary life will always go on (as the scientists quoted above explained, this is rooted in how our brains develop), and raising the next generation is generally thought to be a regular part of life. People think there is value to raising children, to the experience of parenthood. In our world, ideally, people choose to become parents because they want to.

Parenthood is part of the human experience, not necessarily so but commonly so. We now must choose more carefully and come to see parenthood differently. Procreation is not the primary value (it hasn't been for centuries, it is just obvious now). We must remember that children are a profound obligation, not a right. Children are not the meaning of life – saving children from the most horrid forms of death is the meaning now, a sacred duty we now have.

Some might object that this plan is a gross intrusion into people's private lives. And it is, but justifiable so. The moral point is in the universality. What this suggestion really amounts to is changing the default setting on our reproduction. Instead of reproducing being an act that requires no intention, it becomes an act that requires great intention. And this intent is required of all, so in that way it is completely fair. It is an intrusion but needed for the sake of all, thus a reasonable imposition. It also strikes me as ridiculous to think that the minor intrusion of a medical procedure that will not be remembered is somehow a greater moral tragedy than billions of people dying from starvation and disease.

More practically, it seems highly unlikely that such a policy will actually be adopted as doing so would require full admission of the scale of the problem – and that is not likely, thus the problem. So in the end this becomes a suggestion that individuals might follow in their own lives to whatever degree possible. I cannot control how many people will foolishly choose to reproduce in the face of the reality (admitted or not) that those offspring will die a horrible death. I can condemn those people as immoral and I can act to not allow such suffering among those I know and love. We must all do this while we lobby for meaningful collective action, especially from governments.

There have also been objections lodged by my fellow Marxists (one journal refused to publish an earlier draft of this paper on the grounds it was too pessimistic for a Marxist Ecology journal that chooses to be optimistic – as if that is a rational response, and not just more evidence of the problem I am describing). They claim that this focus on individuals misses the point that these problems are social and structural and require systemic solutions. But I agree with all that. The point is in what one does in the face of these massive structural problems. I would argue that facing the moral demand of defining our lives in terms of Hospice Care for Humanity raises the stakes. The Revolution, in radical parlance, is demanded more urgently than ever.

Noticing that we have poisoned the planet and doomed ourselves does not change the necessity of creating just social structures; rather it makes the task more urgent than ever. But will people be moved by the moral demand and actually act radically differently? Probably not.<sup>6</sup> None-the-less one hopes some action will be motivated by this concern, since if there is to be any hope for survivors it will come from the organizing efforts of the present. Our best avenue for limiting suffering is by creating a more just and rational society that can discuss and decide how to proceed. But I want to insist that we cannot lose sight of the fact that our primary goal is to limit suffering because it is already too late to save humanity. We have only a short time left.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the same basic point Fredrick Engels made in his book, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, New York: International Publishers, 1972. Socialism will not come through moral impulses, he argued, only through history; and so Marx's "scientific" (in the old German sense of the word) theory of history explains how this change happens.



The same people often will object next that, again, my analysis fails to leave room for technological innovation. The Marxist literature is already familiar with this sort of debate. It occurred in arguments with supporters of Thomas Malthus. It turns out that Malthus was wrong and we did not face mass starvation from over-population. The actual reason for that was the discovery of the Haber - Bosch process to synthesis artificial fertilizers (and, we should note, explosives and the poison used to murder millions of people in the Holocaust; Fritz Haber's lab invented Zyklon-A which was later altered to create Zyklon-B). If it happened to be the case that it was not possible to synthesis ammonia then it is quite possible that Malthus would have been correct and we would have very different conversations today among fewer of us. But Malthus was wrong, not because his math was wrong but because science could step in with the relevant discovery.

Does my view similarly have a hole into which science can step and save the day? No! This part is vital. It is not that science cannot help or could not at some earlier point have saved us; the point is that it is already too late. We have passed the point of no return and climate change and destruction on a scale we cannot yet imagine is coming. Now, logically, is it possible that this analysis is still mistaken, that it only appears that we have passed the most relevant of "tipping points"? Yes, logically it is possible. Is that possibility sufficient to motivate us to think optimistically? Only if one is insane! Maybe it can happen, but to live in that delusion is only to invite more misery. There is no downside to following my and other suggestions, however radical. If we are wrong then everything will be OK, just for fewer of us; but if we are right then we will have mitigated the worst possibilities.

The most ominous thought to consider is not the contingent facts that led to my conclusion but the deeper argument Hern was making that it is human culture – and not just a few accidents of history that lead us to rely so heavily on fossil fuels – that is the problem. If he is right at that level then it was always only a matter of time. One need not go there since we are already done for, but it is a thought there to be considered.

When I present this material to my students the most common reaction is to be puzzled that this end bothers their professor so much. Many students report that they understand these consequences and expect that this end will make for "the greatest show on Earth." (Are they playing too many video games? That thought occurs because of the lack of connection in video games between action and consequence.) I don't know what to make of this response. Older teenagers (my primary student population) generally feel a sense of invulnerability that decreases with age. It is part of the developmental process. I worry that this population has the hardest time really grasping these ideas because of that sense of invulnerability. I feel that many do not really grasp my point about suffering as they do not seem as moved by the threat of billions dying horribly as (I think) they should. Perhaps they don't have a large enough sense of the world yet to really understand the thought: billions of people suddenly dying from starvation and disease. Do any of us?

We are all mortal; there is no hidden meaning to the universe, but as humans we feel the need to give our lives meaning, at least unconsciously, through what we do. Faced with impending catastrophe we can see that meaning has been thrust upon us. We must create a plan for Hospice

Care for Humanity. It will be difficult and the path will often be unclear. In the end, we should be like Camus thinks of Sisyphus.<sup>7</sup> We must turn around, go back down the hill, and roll that boulder right back up, no matter how many times we see it roll back down. The purpose of life resides in trying to make it better for ourselves, our fellow humans, and the rest of the species with whom we share the planet. Despite a very grim future, we must continually reaffirm that purpose, now moral duty. We must responsibly bring the plane down. We must wake up and choose to be responsible cancer, gently guiding our host and ourselves to our expected end.

The consequences of choosing to stay in the Dream World is suffering on a scale never imagined. That must not be our legacy!

(Seattle, May 2012)

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<sup>7</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, London: Penguin Books, 2000.