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An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency Of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It
Al Gore (Rodale Books, Emmaus, PA: 2006)

The Beautiful and the Dangerous

a book report: searching for truth beyond comfort

Al Gore opens his book (also the companion for his Nobel-Prize winning film), An Inconvenient Truth, by pointing out the two-sided nature of the word “crisis,” particularly its Chinese depiction – which consists of two symbols, arranged side-by-side. One symbol means “danger”, while the next means “opportunity.” (p.10) The title of this book review has a similar dual nature, for similar reasons (which I will explain later.) As a future spiritual leader, I know that for just about any sermon, I can hardly avoid putting a percentage of myself into its composition, and its delivery. For Al Gore, a different type of “preacher,” this axiom certainly holds true. The side-by-side nature of his book makes this point of duality in part by its dubious structure, possessing no table of contents. Instead, we must rely only on nine small sections Gore’s book that contain what I would call “markers” in his life and work, and thus co-create our own chapter titles. I have done this (in italics) within each review section and found this active process of reading to be very engaging. In essence, the book’s structure (or lack of it) speaks to as Gore himself, as if he still walks through this book in discovery…along with us.
Synopsis

I. Introduction:

Gore begins with a foreshadowing told in greater detail later: his son’s nearly tragic brush with death when a car hit him some 20 years ago. “Some experiences are so intense while they are happening that time seems to stop altogether...[and] those experiences remain vivid, refusing to stay in the past, remaining always and forever with us.” (p.8) Gore’s son, Albert, later recovered fully (after over a year), and “it was during that traumatic period that I made at least two enduring changes: I vowed always to put my family first, and I also vowed to make the climate crisis the top priority of my professional life.” (p.8) Gore makes known his frustrations with the current state of affairs: the crunch of time; the U.S. tendency to ignore environmental problems and generally skew news toward entertainment and not information; failures of the Bush administration to make good its 2000 campaign promise to regulate CO2 emissions; a myriad of geo-political/environmental issues we always face (poverty, disease, hunger, war, erosion, and “refuedalization of the public forum”); and so on. (p.11) Amid the dangers of a human population causing life-threatening conditions for the planet, Gore offers this hopeful set of opportunities: (1) “a generational mission”; (2) “the exhilaration of a compelling moral purpose; (3) “a shared and unifying cause; (4) “the thrill of being forced by circumstances to put aside the pettiness and conflict that so often stifle the restless human need for transcendence”; and (5) “the opportunity to rise”. (p.11) Many times in his book Gore states what our other textbooks and lectures have this semester: that the environment is a moral issue. Here is the beginning of hope.

The Beauty of Earth, and the Duplicity of Carbon Dioxide: While this title is mine, the first section of the book is quite clear on our planet’s splendor. Gore shows the first-ever pictures of our planet taken from the moon in 1968, quoting Archibald MacLeish: “To see the Earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together, brothers [and sisters] on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold.” (p.12) That image and one taken by Apollo 17 in 1972 are the most famous pictures of our planet ever taken. Yet earth in all its beauty has an atmosphere in unquestionable danger. Gore summarizes the greenhouse effect, and that excesses in carbon dioxide, methane, sulfur hexafluoride, PFCs and HFCs are all caused by human actions: fossil-fuel burning, landfills, livestock farming, wastewater treatment, smelting and other processes. (p.28) Ironically, while CO2 is the biggest cause of global warming (by humans),
plants
need carbon dioxide; one thing I did not realize is that most of the Earth’s vegetation is north of the equator. Thus, when the Northern Hemisphere is tilted toward the Sun during the spring and summer months, plant leaves breathing in CO2 decrease CO2 worldwide; likewise, during fall and winter, when the leaves fall and the Northern hemisphere is tilted away from the Sun, atmospheric CO2 levels go back up again. “It’s as if the entire Earth takes a big breath in and out once each year,” says Gore (p.32)

II. A Scientific Hero: Roger Revelle

Meet Roger Revelle: the late, former instructor and mentor of Al Gore and “the first person to propose measuring CO2 in the earth’s atmosphere.” (p.38) Revelle was a highly respected scientist with a “prophetic insight” into the dangers of increasing CO2 levels. (p.38) When Gore entered public office in 1979, his old professor testified in front of Congress on global warming, and (to Gore’s dismay), “I really believed that my congressional colleagues on the committee would experience the same epiphany I had when they heard this great scientist’s clear analysis. I couldn’t have been more wrong…I’d seriously underestimated the resistance – and disinterest – this alarming prognosis of global warming would meet.” (p.41)

Glaciers: The next 20 pages show back-to-back images of places all over the world which once had glaciers and/or snow up until 10-30 years ago, many of which are now barren or possess merely fragments of snow or ice coverage. One example, the Himalayan Glaciers, is noteworthy for very practical reasons: they contain 100 times as much ice as the Alps, provide more than half of the drinking water for 40% of the world’s population via seven of Asia’s rivers – all of which form from Himalayan ice on the same plateau. (p.58) If that ice completely melts (i.e. is not continually replenished, as normal), billions of people will face significant water shortage. Scientists like Revelle discovered trends in global “warming periods” from as far back as 650,000 years. Even the three small warming periods between 1000 and 1400 A.D. pale in comparison to the present day, and will be dwarfed in the next 40 years if trends continue. (pp.63-67) The message is simple. As CO2 goes up, temperatures follow suit. Ice melts, globally.

III. A Turning Point

Here we meet young Albert, Gore’s son, and experience the terror of a father whose child long
ago broke away from his father’s grip – literally – at a busy intersection to chase a young friend across the street…only to be hit by a car so hard that he flew 30 feet before hitting the ground. Luckily, two off-duty nurses were present and an ambulance quickly responded. “I have come to believe that we were literally in the company of angels that day…[yet] I have never felt so desperate or so helpless.” (pp.68-69) I suspect this story makes it into the book because of its life-changing nature. “Suddenly, the events that packed my schedule – once so seemingly urgent – were revealed as truly insignificant…I began looking at my whole life through the same new lens. I asked myself how did I really want to spend my time on Earth? What really matters?” (p.70) Gore’s epiphany, like those of many others, helped make his family center stage. A strong secondary epiphany was that of his calling, and the energy he dedicated to the environment. Hence Gore began his first book, *Earth in the Balance*, for many reasons, foremost that his children would also benefit from “God’s beautiful Earth.” (p.71)

**More than Stormy Weather:** This section begins with a graph of global temperature since 1860, showing a definite upward trend since around 1980, with 20 of the 21 hottest years (ever recorded) occurring within the last 25 years. (p.73) The hottest year, 2005, brought heat on land that was noticeable world-wide, but the heat on the ocean surface – often unnoticed – caused so many hurricanes that the World Meteorological Organization literally ran out of letters in our standard English alphabet to name them all, so they started over, with the Greek alphabet…and got all the way to Zeta. (p.105) This was also the year of Katrina. An interesting blurb on page 102 addresses the reality of global warming through one corporate entity that clearly acknowledges natural disaster trends: the insurance industry. Over the last three decades, says Gore, insurance companies have seen a 15-fold increase in payouts to victims of extreme weather. (p.102) Heat and excessive storms bring other ironies: record drought in some areas, record flooding in others – often nearby. Harrowing examples of huge bodies of water like the once-sixth-largest lake in the world, Lake Chad in Africa, disappearing, are haunting and cry out for smarter irrigation rationing secondarily, and larger global focus on the larger, primary issue: global warming. (p.117)

**IV. Concrete and Countryside**

Gore paints a picture of growing up spending eight months of every year in an urban apartment in Washington, D.C. (during his father’s Congressional sessions) and the other four (summer) months on the Gore family farm in Carthage, Tennessee. “My father taught me the moral necessity of caring for the land,” says Gore. Additionally, his mother instilled “the basic lessons
of stewardship” in him and his siblings by reading aloud books about the environment – especially texts like *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. This dual-setting upbringing, what I would call a “dual citizenship” between rural and urban settings, helped keep Gore from “taking nature for granted” so that he could appreciate its “incomparable grace.” (p.126)

**Thawing:** I named this “chapter” *thawing* (and not “melting,” for example) because even talking about the ice in remote areas like Antarctica and Greenland gets us ahead of ourselves. There are less remote areas just south of the North Pole we should talk about, where the soil is held together by “permafrost.” Permafrost keeps otherwise muddy ground hard enough to plant trees on, drive heavy trucks on, even build houses on…unless it thaws. Now, in places like Siberia and Alaska where permafrost has remained solid for hundreds of years is thawing, buildings are sinking, roads are inoperable, and landslides are imminent. (p.133) In essence, the ground just is not as cold and stable as it once was.

**V. From Pole to Shining Pole**

Gore’s work has brought him literally from the North Pole to the South, and many places in-between. “One can read field studies, talk to scientists, and scrutinize charts, but there’s nothing like seeing things for yourself.” (p.138) Perhaps the most telling aspect of this part of his story is the 1998 trip he made underneath the Arctic ice cap in a nuclear submarine. Gore eventually convinced the U.S. Navy to release once-secret study data on ice thickness in the Arctic circle. The results showed a “comprehensive picture” of the North Polar ice cap’s “rapid retreat” beginning in the mid-1970s. (p.141)

**New Seasons:** Pages 150-151 show the most telling part of this chapter, the most “fragile component of the global climate system” that rests in the North Atlantic, where the (warm) Gulf Stream encounters the cold winds coming from the Arctic and across Greenland, driving what scientists call “The Global Ocean Conveyor Belt.” (p.150) 10,000 years ago, this belt was disturbed by thawing in the territory of northern Canada, where much of the continent’s ice thawed and formed a huge lake over the eastern half of modern-day Canada and dammed up near present-day Maine. When that dam broke, all the cold water from the glacier lake stopped the global ocean current cycle and formed an ice age in Europe for 900 to 1,000 years. (p.151) If Greenland thaws, this process could happen again, and new – unpredictable – seasons would prevail indefinitely.
VI. Across the Wilderness

Gore’s ties to the wilderness are strong. So are his wife, Tipper’s. “I am fortunate to marry a woman who, among her many endearing qualities, appreciates nature as much as I do.” (p.160) Such mutual appreciation has allowed them to make many trips across the wilderness of America, and is a continual font [my baptismal emphasis] for the “palpable shift” that occurs when they return to nature after a long hiatus; “Oh yeah,” they sigh, “I remember this.” (p.160) “Our civilization has come perilously close to forgetting what we’ve lost and then forgetting that we’ve lost it.” (p.160) Gore uses Creation language, heralds the need for communal experience with one’s environment, and laments a creation that may one day have wounds that “no longer simply heal themselves.” (p.161)

Species in High Water: This section talks about the effects of higher ocean temperatures on water species (e.g. coral bleaching), effects of higher atmospheric temperatures on land habitats (e.g. more viruses like malaria in higher altitude cities in Kenya once off-limits to mosquitoes), and finally higher water levels caused by the massive ice shelves now breaking off of Antarctica. One such shelf, Larsen-B, is precariously located in a spot where another shelf the size of Rhode Island broke up in less than two months duration. Larsen-B is in danger of breaking off and melting right behind it (p.180) In sum, large pieces of ice at both poles are estimated to disappear in the next 30-40 years, which – at the minimum – could raise total oceansea levels 20 feet.(p.190) As if that’s not enough, scientists are now discovering that ice shelves are melting from the interior, with pools of water called “moulins” growing outward and downward – gushing fresh waterfalls that burrow down to bedrock, where experts fear the water will lubricate the ice underneath the shelves and cause land-based ice mass to break off and melt at sea. (p.192) Like the glacier chapter, Gore shows several pages (pp.198-209) of before-and-after computer simulations of land masses around the world, whose coastlines will be permanently altered by global sea level increases. “Is it possible,” Gore asks, “that we should prepare for other serious threats in addition to terrorism?” (p.209)

VII. Serving for the Public Good

Gore starts this section with a portrait of his father, “Al Senior,” who spent 32 in the U.S. House and Senate combined. Al Junior then recounts his disillusionment with politics after he returned from his army duty in Vietnam, and the slow return he made into faith again in the political process. “The spirit of freedom…is always present, just waiting for the right spark to ignite it.” (p.213) That spark is now his cause, which he pursues without running for office, and I wonder…is it now easier for him to be dedicated, single-minded, energized?
**Population!**: Gore describes the time window of his lifetime as nothing less than “population explosion.” He has good reason to think that if these progressions are accurate: (1) in the first 160,000 years of human existence, the population grew to only 250,000; (2) from the time of Christ until roughly 1776, it grew to 1 billion; (3) by the baby boom generation (i.e. 1945) it grew to 2.3 billion; (4) by 2005 world population has risen to 6.5 billion; and (5) scientists estimate we will reach 9 billion by 2050. (p.216) This earth can only sustain so many humans, and that is if we are using our resources optimally!

**VIII. My Sister**

Gore’s sister Nancy was a protective friend, a “ferocious” political supporter, and a strong woman who “possessed a special grace.” (p.256) She was also a chronic smoker, hooked since age 13 to nicotine, and a victim of lung cancer who tragically died in early adulthood. While her brother Al was clearly inspired by her, Gore mentions her plight for other reasons: the Gore family made their livelihood on tobacco farming until shortly after Nancy’s death (which he laments); and Gore remembers something the tobacco industry had in common with the many politicians (and handful of scientists) who still deny global warming’s existence: misinformation.

**Misinformation**: “Doubt is our product...It is also the means of establishing a controversy.” (p.264) These were the words of key tobacco executives (the above from a Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company memo) in the 1960s. Compare that phrase to those found in memos circulated by some of today’s oil companies in the last two decades, whose stated objective was to “reposition global warming as theory, rather than fact.” (p.264) This is while 100% of scientific journal articles agreed that global warming was real and absolutely caused by humans. Somehow, 53% of articles in the popular press, however, have sowed seeds of doubt. (p.263) Gore’s implication is that mainstream media is more susceptible to doubt campaigns by big oil think-tanks. On the surface, that appears plausible.

**IX. The Politicization of Global Warming**

“The truth about the climate crisis is an inconvenient one that means we are going to have to change the way we live our lives.” (p.284) This might as well be the only sentence in this last anecdote, because the rest is just the many ways Gore’s opponents have devised to not realize this statement. The theories go from global warming not existing, to it being caused by “natural
causes,” to it being “good for us,” to finally our being helpless to stop it. None of these are helpful, and all of them cause us to live fatalistically. “This isn’t [or shouldn’t be] an ideological debate with two sides, pro and con. There is only one Earth, and all of us who live on it share a common future.” (p.287)

**Leading the Way?** Earlier in his book, Gore states that American’s most renewal resources is their political will. He even harkens to all of our achievements: democracy, emancipation (after the gross sin of slavery), space travel, and so on. Essentially, this section shows real concrete achievements – like U.S. cities that have signed onto the Kyoto agreement (despite our nation’s collective failure to do so), and so on. Gore ends with hope, but makes no pretense of ease for the task ahead.

**Concluding Commentary**

Gore says on page 138, “The story I have tried to tell about global warming is a story that involves a double journey: one metaphorical and one real.” (p.138)

I have found that to be true.

My metaphorical journey of reading this book, and searching for meaning in its pages and beyond has been a dual journey of metaphors pregnant with bodacious reality. I remember having a conversation many years ago with a friend about beauty and danger. We talked about the most beautiful things in life, and in the world. Most of these things were also the most dangerous to the totality of the human being: the Sun, the ocean, mountains, relationship, and love…to name a precious few. Things that offer awe – both aweful in power and awesome in strength.

And then it struck me: the ecological crisis is about preserving the beauty and essence of life, and that task is necessarily a dangerous and risky one. Before the crisis is solved, old habits, beliefs and lifestyles will not be given up by many without a fight. That scares me. But the payoff is not just huge, it is everything. Gore attempts to tap into another core belief I share with many others: that love is stronger than fear. I take that one step further and say that adventure is stronger than stagnation. To tackle this crisis we must adopt a sense of adventure and opportunity, looking the danger and fear head-on as if to say, we were destined to figure this
out, together. The

crisis
is only a door to something beautiful. Danger ahead, but not forever.