

## Triage by Stephanie Mills

There, then, he sat, holding up that imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness. There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without hope, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Mortifying as it is for civilized people to admit, with respect to the planet and posterity, our moral agency has been palsied by comfy habits and unenlightened self-interest.

The fossil-fuel consumption that loads greenhouse gas into the atmosphere yields palpable comfort and convenience. Combustion of the one-time-only bonus of ancient sunshine—especially its deluxe form, petroleum—eliminates a lot of miserable toil. That the industries powered by these fuels and the companies promoting their consumption are immensely profitable, politically powerful, and essentially in control of the mass media and much of public opinion—nearly omnipotent—has perpetuated our suicidal addiction to the ease they afford.

As I write, the planetary struggle to persuade nation-states to limit greenhouse gas emissions and thus the severity of global climate change has yet to dent the problem. Citizen movements to prevent the worsening of climate change are working hard to bring the powers that be and their constituencies to their senses. Alas, neither all of the public nor all of the politicians in the world are as agitated about the problem as the world’s scientists and a handful of activists are. Given that climate change is a biospheric life-or-death proposition, it’s insane that this should be so.

If something like history is available to future generations, making it possible for them to indulge in hindsight, they may have cause to deplore us for having motored through a golden age and left the planet in an uncomfortable, inconvenient, and generally ransacked condition. What must we do to win the decent opinion of posterity?

Animals of our kind are supposed uniquely to be moral actors. Now’s the time to prove it. What could be more moral than the individual and collective self-sacrifice called for to arrest climate change, now the most prominent threat to planetary survival?

Confronting the carnage on the battlefield, medics have to practice triage. “Triage” means letting the moribund die, letting the walking wounded heal on their own, and directing resources limited by circumstance toward saving those who will survive only if given help. It entails making hard choices. With ecological calamity bearing down on us, we quickly must discern and tend what’s viable in our plural societies.

We must shed our moribund, fossil-fueled ways of life. Effective remedies to climate change and other threats to the biosphere will leave us with less mechanical energy and more labor—as in muscular exertion—to perform. “Hardship” is a tough sell, so let’s call it “pioneering.” If

we are willing to work more and consume less, the technics of a low-carbon lifeway is within reach. Its politics has yet to develop, though. For that to happen we must shed our passivity and respectability.

We need to feel viscerally the oneness of our species. The homelessness of Katrina's Ninth Ward flood victims; the exodus of Vanuatu's population, driven by rising sea levels to abandon their villages for higher ground; and the maiming of the Inupiaq lifeway by diminishing sea ice and melting permafrost befall our sisters and brothers, mothers, fathers, and children, all our relations.

Our clear obligation to present and future generations, therefore, must be to preserve what we can of humanity's attainments and of the planet's biodiversity. It will take relentless clamor to break industrial civilization's death grip on the planet. It would be good to be able to bequeath the vision that inspired the planet wide resolve and radical change that held the line on CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gas emissions, that effected a revolution on behalf of all life. An account worth passing down might go like this:

When we realized our oneness and the needless suffering of all our relations, we woke up and would stop at nothing to save the world for them. Suddenly we came alive. Collectively and severally, we reclaimed our power, our common decency, our strength, and our sanity. We locked arms, filled the streets, banged on pots, called a general strike, sat in our councils, and would not be moved until our leaders followed.

The exhilaration of finally acting for the good of all, in ways that made sense, met our basic needs, and helped our patchy new ecologies develop and evolve, carried us through the hard times. We built anew. We saw that another world was possible.

It will take more than reason and rhetoric to conjure another way of life. It will take more than skills and stamina to live it, or for the living of it to be worthwhile. Lockstep solidarity or survivalist triage could cost us our humanity.

In addition to doing our utmost to keep climate change and biodiversity loss within tolerable bounds—if this is still possible, *and we must act as though it is*—we have an obligation to our species to preserve and protect great works of art and master craft.

When the invitation to write this essay reached me, I had just finished my first, but I hope not my last, rereading of *Moby-Dick*. Along with its daily helpings of maddening news and dire portents and the absurdity of maintaining a quotidian existence on the brink of planetary catastrophe, my mind was enthralled by this surpassing sea tale.

World literature is vast, has raised a mansion of many rooms. By chance I was spending my late nights aboard the *Pequod* with Ishmael and Queequeg and the demoniac Ahab scouring the Pacific for the white whale, press-ganged by Melville's genius. In another season or for another person some other work of art might have been the aesthetic rejoinder to nihilism and despair.

Reading a great book did not numb the pain and urgency engendered by confronting the ruin of the world that we have known. Melville's masterwork did remind me that in the heart of a civilization inadvertently razing the planetary ecosystem, human beings were, by acts of creation, wrestling meaning out of the gnarly stuff of earthly existence. Art attests a constant quest for truth, even as it leads across the darkling plain.

Still possessing a phenomenal wealth of art—prodigious individual works and communal masterpieces like ceremonial cycles, song lines, and cathedrals, all begotten from a vanishing world, embodying its sensibilities—we must treasure it rightly and pass it on.

If our actions to bequeath a habitable planet prevail, perhaps our artistic heritage will inspire new works that fathom the meaning of what befell the Earth in the modern times of the human race, new works imagining whole new worlds of grave and constant beauty.