

ORION

MAGAZINE

The Moral Climate

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Painting: Joy Garnett

What most distresses me is the thirty years we've wasted by asking people to live sustainably. In high school in the early 1970s, having grappled with terrible air pollution, oil embargoes, and the tyranny of Big Energy, we knew we needed more economical and efficient cars, we knew we were vulnerable to unsavory governments, and that real free enterprise in the form of energy competition would mean innovative, diverse, agile, and decentralized energy sources. From then to now, as a country, we've sat on our hands.

This, I believe, is our shame. Shame not only because we chose it. Shame because the unborn, who did not choose it, come saddled with all conceivable consequences. Shame because the poor, who likewise did not choose it, will be hit first and worst.

And because that is not merely "unsustainable" but unjust. It is wrong. And so it crosses a line and becomes no mere matter of "sustainability," but a matter

of morality. Dysfunctional values married to catastrophic leadership has led us to the place you go when you are made to believe solution is sacrifice, and that sacrifice for a just cause is not noble but, rather, out of the question. The moral density of this social climate is wafer thin.

This refusal to “sacrifice” is actually a pathological refusal to change for the better. That is the real sacrifice. That refusal is framed and abetted by the disinformation campaigns of companies that would shrink if we realized we would be better off with less of them. Think of ExxonMobil; it’s probably the best example. Those companies’ fear of us—specifically that we might accept the consequences of reality—compels them into a rather successful effort to retain power over us by distorting our understanding of what’s real.

Nearly every just cause is a struggle between the good of the many and the greed of a few. But because greed has the advertising dollars to make selfishness fashionable, it sustains itself by turning enough people against their own self-interest. Foremost, our interest in hanging on to our money. Second, our health. Third, the options of our unborn.

Of all the psychopathology in the climate issue, the most counterproductive thought is that solving the problem will require sacrifice. As though our wastefulness of energy and money is not sacrifice. As though war built around oil is not sacrifice. As though losing polar bears, ice-dependent penguins, coral reefs, and thousands of other living companions is not sacrifice. As though withered cropland is not a sacrifice, or letting the fresh water of cities dry up as glacier-fed rivers shrink. As though risking seawater inundation and the displacement of hundreds of millions of coastal people is not a sacrifice—and reckless risk. But don’t tell me to own a more efficient car; that would be a sacrifice! We think we don’t want to sacrifice, but sacrifice is exactly what we’re doing by perpetuating problems that only get worse; we’re sacrificing our money, and sacrificing what is big and permanent, to prolong what is small, temporary, and harmful. We’re sacrificing animals, peace, and children to retain wastefulness while enriching those who disdain us.

When we stop seeing our relationship with the whole living world as a matter of sustainability, and realize it is a matter of morality—of right and wrong—we might make the moment we need.