

## ESSAY

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### Making a pledge to future generations

Allen Tough

**Because global issues and potential futures can feel overwhelming to an individual, some people can benefit from developing a personal pledge. This list of principles and commitments can reduce the individual's confusion in the face of competing demands and options. Pledges can foster the changes in individual behaviour that are necessary for a positive future. Futurists can distribute copies of a sample pledge, such as the one reproduced here, and can lead pledge-writing workshops.**

Many people who want to make a positive contribution to humanity's future have difficulty knowing just how to do that. They can gain useful guidance and inspiration from a short list of clear principles and commitments. By returning to this list whenever they feel overwhelmed or confused by all the conflicting demands and options, they can re-focus their efforts. They can keep in front of them an answer to the perennial question: 'What can I do?'. In September 1991 I had the idea of drafting a set of principles or a pledge to which individuals might feel committed. One purpose was to bring the whole array of global issues down to what each individual can do to contribute positively. The other purpose was to spell out just what changes will be required in individuals around the world in order for humanity to sustain or improve its present level of well-being.

A few months later, *Time's* article on

their 'Man of the Year', Ted Turner, mentioned that he had developed a set of 10 voluntary initiatives printed on a wallet-sized card. Also, to encourage the use of professional skills with 'the utmost respect for the well-being of humanity' and with a 'duty to present and future generations', a Hippocratic Oath for Scientists, Engineers, and Technologists has been published in London by the Institute for Social Inventions. In New York, Global Education Associates has sponsored an Earth Covenant: those individuals who sign it commit themselves to 'act and live in a way that preserves the natural life processes of the Earth and respects all species and their habitats' and to 'work for the enactment of laws that protect the environment and promote their observance through educational, political, and legal action'. At their 1991 conference in Uruguay, members of the Club of Rome developed A Declaration of Human Responsibilities that emphasizes individual responsibilities toward children, the disabled, the natural environment and knowledge dissemination.

Each of these documents has been developed to guide *individuals*. In addition, of course, a wide variety of declara-

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A SAMPLE PLEDGE TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

Although humanity is far from perfect, it is definitely worthy of my respect, affection, compassion, and nurturance. I am fully aware of the pain, suffering, ignorance, selfishness, and greed in the world, but I do not condemn human civilization nor write it off as hopeless. I believe that a satisfactory future is possible if enough people care about future generations, understand today's options, and make appropriate choices.

For me, it is very important that humanity and other life on our planet continue to evolve in positive directions. Nothing is more important than the continued flourishing of human culture and society over the next few decades and beyond. Because I care deeply about humanity and its future, I do my best to live up to the following principles.

(1) I care about the well-being of future generations. Their needs are just as important as those of today. When I am making a major choice in my own life, when I am facing a significant ethical or moral question, and when I am involved in policy making or decision making, I take into account the needs of the next two or three generations. No short-term or narrow goals should be allowed to jeopardize our long-term future. My choices support the principle of equal opportunity for each future generation: their opportunities and well-being should not be less than ours.

(2) I choose paid work or volunteer work that makes a positive contribution to humanity's flourishing. I do my work with conscience—and with respect for the well-being of future generations and our planet.

(3) Because the institution of war causes so much harm over the years, I speak up against all wars, terrorism, organized violence, and arms manufacturing. Better ways exist for handling conflicts, greed, anger, and the urge for revenge. Because I believe the world's storehouse of weapons should be kept below the level capable of ending civilization as we know it, I support campaigns for a huge reduction in nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

(4) I play my part in halting the deterioration of our environment and I support efforts to achieve a sustainable relationship with our planet. I try particularly hard to avoid actions that might reduce the ozone layer or increase global warming. I understand that people who own and consume more than they really need do even more harm to the environment than the desperate efforts of the poorest one-fifth of the world's population to survive.

(5) I understand and support humanity's urgent need to halt population growth in all countries. In my own personal decisions, I am strongly influenced by this. I take highly effective steps to avoid pregnancy except when I have made a careful and thoughtful decision to have a child.

(6) Through words and actions, I support some of the additional goals and directions that will help our civilization to survive and flourish over the next few decades. These positive goals and directions include the following:

- the health and well-being of children;
- understanding and cooperation among diverse cultures;
- a deeper understanding of the universe and our place in it;
- a more profound body of knowledge related to world problems and our future;
- widespread learning and change;
- widespread human rights, civil liberties, and political participation;
- a designated spokesperson for future generations in all political and military decision making;
- experiments with innovative policy making and governance.

(7) I support local organizations, political parties, government policies, and international organizations that foster these six principles. I oppose those that do not take seriously our responsibilities to future generations.

(8) When deciding how to spend my money and time, I seek an appropriate balance between my own needs and those of humanity. Instead of choosing luxuries and activities that harm the environment, I focus on my most significant underlying needs, such as relationships, learning, giving, contributing, vigorous health, a spiritual connectedness to nature, and other simple joys in life. I do not use material goods to meet my psychological and social needs.

(9) I continue learning about the world's problems in some depth, and about our various potential futures ranging from highly positive to extinction. I face my feelings about these problems and possibilities, and avoid becoming stuck in hopelessness and paralysis. I speak up to counter misinformation and untruths, but I also keep an open mind to new ideas and perspectives.

(10) I live in a decade during which some of the most important choices in the history of human civilization will be made. I happily accept the heroic challenges of this decade: turning away from the paths that probably lead to worldwide catastrophes, and switching to a path that dramatically improves humanity's prospects for a flourishing and positive future.

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tions, charters, and resolutions suggest principles and goals for governments and organizations.

Futurists and environmentalists could usefully lead workshops for people interested in creating their own personal pledge for humanity's future. Many people who are concerned about global issues but feel puzzled about their best actions towards a positive future will welcome a chance to list their key priorities, goals and principles to guide their work and life.

Participants in such a workshop might move through three stages. First, after a brief introduction, the group could discuss various possible components of an individual pledge; these components

could include environment, war, future generations, work, family, politics, lifestyle and volunteer activities. After discussing each component, participants could decide individually whether to include that component in their own pledge, and how. Second, volunteers read their pledge aloud to stimulate and encourage others. Third, participants discuss how to facilitate groups that are already engaged in pledge-writing and how to encourage others to try it.

Futurists might also want to distribute copies of a sample pledge in hopes that people will adopt it or be stimulated to develop their own. Consequently, a sample pledge is reproduced here.