

## Chapter 3

# Why Do We Act in Ways That Hurt Our Future?

The previous chapter emphasized the supreme importance of the continued flourishing of human civilization over the next few decades and far beyond. As a society, though, we are in fact choosing priorities and actions that reduce our chances for a reasonably positive future. Why?

What factors, forces, and characteristics often cause us, individually and as a society, to ignore or underemphasize the importance of humanity's future? In human minds, hearts, behavior, habits, and arrangements, what encourages short-term perspectives and choices? What often prevents us from taking the future of our civilization seriously enough to act promptly, vigorously, and successfully?

This chapter outlines the various factors, forces, attitudes, and beliefs that cause us to act in ways that hurt our future. The cumulative effect of this list can be sobering and unsettling. The aim of this chapter, though, is not to discourage or paralyze anyone. On the contrary, it is often useful to know and understand your enemies accurately and fully. We can probably achieve a safer and better future by courageously facing and counteracting the forces and beliefs in the following list. In addition, of course, we can support and enhance the forces and beliefs outlined in the previous chapter.

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### The Opposing Forces and Factors

We turn now to some of the major factors and forces in the world today that undercut the importance of humanity's future, at least through their unintended consequences. It is because of these factors that we act in ways that disregard and even harm our prospects for a satisfactory future.

1. Most people are very busy and preoccupied with today's concerns and tasks, such as family, work, money, commuting, friends, food, home maintenance, health, appearance, entertainment, and recreation. The busyness and activities of our daily lives distract us from deeper concerns, according to Roger Walsh (1984, p. xvi): "contemporary cultures function to distract, trivialize, and deny...as vast conspiracies against contemplative living," even contemplation on the state of the world. Individuals have a very short time horizon, even in planning their own lives. I am amazed at the number of people I know who decide to "have a baby" without thinking ahead to the fact that they are also deciding to have a toddler, youngster, teenager, and young adult. "A time horizon of 20 years hence appears too distant for many people to invoke a meaningful concern leading to a concrete behavioral commitment," concluded Boniecki (1980, p. 174) after an Australian survey. Public opinion surveys often ask people what they consider the most important problem: people rarely mention long-term global problems rather than short-term local or personal problems (Schuman, Ludwig, and Krosnick, 1986). Our society today is characterized by a pervasive emphasis on the here and now, on the pleasures of the moment, on "the prizing of immediate sensibilities so powerfully supported by everyday commerce and culture" (Care, 1982, p. 212).
2. Many people feel much less allegiance to human civilization than they do to their own culture, language group, or religion-Chinese, Palestinian, African, British, Jewish, Latino, Communist, Hindu, American, Japanese, Christian, Russian, Moslem, French, Western, or whatever. As a result, many people do not care much whether groups other than their own flourish *now*, let alone in the future! Love and concern often apply only to particular people whom we can easily picture and therefore will not motivate us to sacrifice or change for the sake of faceless future generations. Community bonding is insufficiently motivating for the future because it

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depends on reciprocation between persons. Many adolescents and adults care very little about giving people around them an even break, let alone people who are remote in time or place. Just last week, after attending her first political campaign meeting, my wife was amazed that the main issue for most people in the candidate's middle-class district was how to keep traffic off their own street. Most people are very reluctant to give up any of their comforts or privileges for the sake of people in remote nations, decades, or even suburbs.

3. Future generations, especially beyond the generation of our own children and grandchildren, seem very remote and unreal. We have never seen true pictures of them on TV nor read a factual account of them in our newspapers. We psychologically discount people and events that are remote from us in time or space (Walsh, 1986, pp. 26-28). The long-term future of human civilization seems so unreal, so nebulous, so ineffable, so hard to imagine or grasp. It is not easy to care deeply about what will happen to civilization several decades after one's own death. Nor is it easy to see much connection between that distant outcome and one's own daily life today. Our mortality, our concern with our own death, may provide an ultimate limit to our concern for the long-term future, according to Boniecki (1978).
4. Today's needs feel very urgent, compelling, pressing, and overwhelming. The altruistic urge to ameliorate today's suffering can make us forget about the future well-being of people who will be born a few years from now. Most of us would not like the task of defending the importance of humanity's future before an audience of poor, homeless, hungry people who must meet immediate basic needs.
5. Even in our own personal lives, many of us experience internal conflicts between today's desirable pleasures and tomorrow's resulting costs, between high income and high contribution when choosing a job, between wanting to conserve the environment and being in too much of a hurry to bother recycling or walking. All of us sometimes fail to act on our knowledge, principles, and ideals.
6. Many of us have an inherent (but perhaps unfounded) optimism. Unless we think deeply about the long-term future, it is easy to assume casually that things will sort themselves out eventually, we

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will somehow get by without drastically changing or sacrificing, our vast oceans and atmosphere will successfully absorb all our pollution, and solutions will be created in time to avoid terrible catastrophes. Perhaps posterity does not need our efforts and care. Partridge (1981, p. 10) has pointed out that some people ask, “Can't future generations take care of themselves so long as we turn over our scientific and technological knowledge and techniques? Won't they find adequate resources and solutions on their own?” Perhaps it is a common human tendency to ignore certain risks with a low probability, no matter how catastrophic they would be. If a person drives too fast, the chances of a severe accident on this particular day are quite low, so why worry? The chances of a nuclear holocaust this particular month are also quite low, so why worry? (Unfortunately, as the months and years go past, the cumulative odds eventually turn against us.)

7. Undue pessimism, too, can paralyze people into inaction. It is going to be extremely difficult to ameliorate today's massive interconnected world problems, let alone solve them. The scale and complexity of these problems are unprecedented in human history. Success in achieving a satisfactory future feels elusive and even impossible at times. In order to achieve a reasonably positive future, some very large and difficult changes and sacrifices will be required. Some deeply entrenched thinking, goals, attitudes, and decision-making mechanisms stand in the way to these changes and sacrifices. In the United States, Senator Albert Gore (1989) pointed out that “many of the ultimate solutions are almost unimaginably difficult.... The solutions require international cooperation on a scale that is totally unprecedented in history.” Consequently, if they think about the long-term future at all, many people feel helpless and powerless. “I can't make any difference. I can't affect the future, no matter what I do.” Especially if one considers the magnitude and strength of the various forces that will influence the future of civilization, it is hard to see how any one person can make much difference. (We will return to this theme in the final chapter.)
8. Some of the grave possibilities are so new that history does not provide us with any examples of their actual occurrence. This fact makes it more difficult to take seriously such possibilities as a worldwide nuclear holocaust, a nuclear winter, the global collapse of food availability, the end of fossil fuels, a thin ozone layer, or a

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greenhouse effect. Senator Gore (1989) has referred to “an unwillingness to believe that something so far outside the bounds of historical experience can, in fact, be occurring. To put it another way, this set of problems sounds like the plot of a bad science-fiction movie. People automatically assume it can't be real.” On the day-to-day level, many of us (including virtually all of the world's political leaders) live and work in surroundings that contain few reminders of such dreadful possibilities as nuclear war and societal breakdown. When I look out my window at sunny green trees and colorful flowers, worrying about humanity's grave dangers and problems feels unnecessary. If things are going well for them at present, people are reluctant to think about how things might deteriorate in the future.

9. We may sacrifice now for the benefit of some repressive worldwide dictatorship 40 years from now! Widespread vandalism and plundering in the future may squander and destroy the resources, knowledge, and arts that we leave for future generations. No matter how hard we try, we cannot guarantee any particular sort of world 40 years from now. Even if our heritage and contributions remain reasonably intact, future generations may neither treasure them nor feel any gratitude for them. Our knowledge of all these future possibilities can affect our behavior today.
10. Each of us can gain meaning and purpose from various aspects of reality, as we will see in chapter 8. Only one of these sources emphasizes striving to contribute to humanity's future. People who gain almost all of their meaning and purpose from other sources may have little motivation to care or even think about humanity's next four decades, let alone make sacrifices or contributions in order to enhance our future prospects. The same may be true, of course, for people who do not gain much meaning and purpose from any source at all.
11. In today's world, the long-term future of human civilization has few advocates who speak up vigorously on its behalf. Many business leaders feel a stronger pressure to show successful results this month than to avoid harming people in the future. Market economies and capitalism may emphasize immediate benefits and thus work against the long-term future; in fact, many economists explicitly discount the future. Very few organizations speak up for

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the future of humanity. (Fortunately, though, many are now speaking up for the long-term future of our planet and its wildlife.) Even parents rarely speak out on behalf of the world in which their children will live when they reach their forties. The United Nations and its agencies are operating at a fraction of their capacity for supporting and defending future generations. Jim Dator has pointed out that future generations do not elect today's politicians nor contribute to their campaign funds: the future "has no constituency, no votes, no lobbyists, no voice.... Indeed, if some brave legislator *does* try to act for the future in some responsible way, you may be sure that he or she will not be a legislator long; that they will be removed from office at the next election by the only voters who count: the pressures of the present" (1988, p. 7). A *Time* essay expressed it in an extreme manner: "It is unthinkable for an ambitious U.S. politician to call on the citizenry-or any sizable subset of it-to make the slightest sacrifice for the good of society or its own future prosperity" (Kinsley, 1989).

12. We are being pushed toward risky and unfair paths by certain beliefs that are widespread, deeply ingrained, but false. Here are a few illustrative examples of these false beliefs: warfare is a freak aberration rather than a deeply entrenched institution; nuclear weapons provide security; having any desired number of children is a basic and absolute right for adults; certain forms of birth control are immoral; it is neither appropriate nor possible to reduce gender bias, homophobia, and family violence. Richardson (1987, p. 18) adds the following false beliefs that will probably hurt our future enormously: the future is predetermined by forces that are beyond the control of individuals; there is not enough to go around and therefore each group should keep and protect what it has; the most important priority for any nation is to protect itself from potential adversaries by building up its military power.
13. Many people are certain that the future of human civilization will be decided by God. For instance, God will make sure that humanity's future is positive, God will take care of the devout, God will soon win the final apocalyptic battle with the powers of evil, Armageddon will cleanse the earth and lead to a better civilization, or God will punish all of humanity for its errors and sins. And there is nothing we can do to make any difference except to worship and live according to God's commands; there is no need to

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strive for a positive future for all of humanity. Some people believe that obedience to their own religion and its rules takes precedence over our civilization's future. They believe their religion is correct in promoting large families and in discouraging birth control, for instance, or in subjugating women, or in promoting warfare and violence against certain groups. Some people believe that life on earth is unimportant and even unreal compared to the existence they will experience after they die. Such a belief in life after death may discourage efforts and sacrifices for the long-term flourishing of human civilization.

14. The overwhelming majority of people in the world today may not support an orientation toward the future. The leaders, futurists, policy experts, planners, and citizens with a broad, global, long-term perspective and with a strong commitment to civilization's future are vastly outnumbered by the rest of humanity. In India, as one example, Seth (1987) calculated that only 1000 people are consciously and actively engaged in redesigning the future (as research and development scientists, planners, strategic thinkers in industry, futurists, analysts, and ideologues). In contrast, Seth calculates that about 790,000,000 live wholly or primarily in the past.

## Conclusion

Now we see what we are up against. Formidable forces are arrayed against placing adequate weight on humanity's continued flourishing. Many powerful factors, both individual and societal, cause us to act in ways that hurt our future. Fortunately, the influence of many of these factors can be reduced or offset by the increasing awareness and understanding that are leading to enhanced concern, caring, and action for the continued well-being of culture and society. We have good reason to retain our hope for a satisfactory future: opposing factors need not deter us but instead can spur us to more vigorous and effective efforts.

We have now seen the depth and power of the conflict between an emphasis on humanity's long-continuing flourishing, discussed in chapter 2, and the opposing forces outlined in this chapter. Given this deep conflict, how much should civilization today sacrifice, donate, and act for the sake of a generation yet unborn? The answer can be found in the concept of

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equal opportunities for future generations, discussed at the end of chapter 2. Overall, we need not bequeath more to the next generation or two than we ourselves inherited, though it would be a fine gift to them if we could manage to do so. What we must adopt as our absolutely inviolable principle, though, is that we not bequeath less. We should try to play fair with future generations and give them opportunities and resources approximately equal to our own. Surely no argument can successfully challenge that principle.

We have now become familiar with two sets of forces that are today engaged in a titanic struggle on the world stage (and perhaps inside each of us, too). We have examined various strong reasons supporting the importance of our long-term flourishing. We have also faced a sobering list of opposing forces, beliefs, and human characteristics. We turn next to a fundamental question: What will be the outcome of this titanic struggle?