**It’s not too late to stem climate change. But we have no more time to waste.**

By Meara Sharma

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*Meara Sharma writes about culture and the environment.*

There’s a Hasidic story I often think of in relation to climate change. It describes how, in the world to come, “everything will be as it is now, just a little different.” It’s tempting to take comfort in the idea that although things are a little different — fires burning harder, floods reaching deeper, seasons bleeding over — they are also, mostly, the same. In the grand scheme of life, incremental variations seem to dissolve into the norm.

The problem is, as author and environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote 30 years ago, this is a grand delusion. His book “The End of Nature” — among the first to alert the public to climate change — tried to dispel the persistent notion that time is lumberingly vast, that the future will be “just a little different.” Scale the Earth’s billions of years of life to a 24-hour day, and human civilization represents about one-fifth of a second. And yet, we’ve managed to fundamentally remake the planet. “The End of Nature” was a brooding tangle of science and philosophy, lamenting the loss of something sacred: that nature is a force independent from use, greater than us. Not anymore, McKibben argued — we’d put our fingers all over it. We were “decreating” nature, and in so doing, stripping our lives of meaning.

Since then, McKibben has become one of the nation’s foremost environmental chroniclers, founded the grass-roots climate movement [350.org](https://350.org/) and seen nearly all his worst fears about climate change come true. So his latest book, “Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?,” wastes no time. It’s a direct, attention-grabbing sprint through what we’ve done to the planet and ourselves, why we haven’t stopped it and what we can do about it. Determined to keep the words “climate change” from fading into our “mental furniture,” he has gathered the most vivid statistics, distilled history to its juiciest turns, and made the case as urgently and clearly as can be: The whole breadth of our existence — the “human game” — is in jeopardy.

Climate change “should fill us with awe; it’s by far the biggest thing humans have done,” he writes, and the book evinces that. The heat we’ve trapped equals four Hiroshima-size bombs dropped every second. We’ve sparked fires that, according to an Australian researcher, “cannot be controlled by any suppression resources that we have available anywhere in the world.” Seas will rise several meters in the next 50 to 150 years, rendering coastal cities “practically ungovernable.” Reading this accrual of effects is like stepping back from a painting’s abstract swirl and seeing a fully formed world. As a California fire victim said, “No one will be spared.”

After instilling sufficient terror, McKibben cycles briskly through the intersecting forces that lie behind decades of inaction. Among them: Exxon’s deliberate efforts to mislead the public about fossil fuel emissions, and Ayn Rand’s pervasive influence on the most powerful people of the past several decades, including President Ronald Reagan and the Koch brothers. Randian ideology, which McKibben sums up as “Government is bad. Selfishness is good. . . . *You’re not the boss of me*.” precludes the possibility of tackling climate change, because that would require the government to flex its strength. In the words of a Koch-funded economist: “The best policy regarding global warming is to neglect it.”

Then, the book takes a sharp turn toward other threats to the human game: artificial intelligence with the power to usurp us, and gene editing to customize our offspring. “When we engineer and design, we turn people into a form of technology, and obsolescence is an utterly predictable feature of every technology we’ve ever seen,” McKibben warns. His engagement with these technologies is somewhat panicky; indeed, their risks are so obvious that a regulation debate is emerging alongside them. But there’s a twisted poetry to the concept that rather than safeguarding our future, we’re pursuing innovations that will hasten our demise. Meanwhile, where climate change and artificial intelligence and gene editing converge is inequality — all three will exacerbate it, rendering most of us increasingly vulnerable and ill-equipped to cope.

A recent New Yorker cartoon depicts an interviewer asking his guest, “And finally, where do you see yourself in five years?” In a thought bubble, the interviewee imagines himself paddling through a flooded Manhattan on a scrap of wood, the Empire State Building peeking up above the waterline. It’s grimly funny, but it also seems to capture a new kind of resignation. Among the environmentally aware, a sense of engagement — even if driven by frustration, not optimism — seems to be shifting toward cynical despair. The numbers only stoke this: The International Energy Agency reported a record high for global greenhouse gas emissions in 2018, with energy efficiency increasingly ignored. The “we’re doomed, the end” mind-set even touches purported solutions. McKibben describes Oxford bioethicist Julian Savulescu’s depressingly absurd conclusion that humans are too morally stunted to fix climate change. So: “The only way to solve global warming before it destroys our planet is to genetically alter human beings so that they become more altruistic and willing to make more sacrifice for the common good.”

McKibben has no patience for this. “Knowing cynicism is no threat to the Exxons of the world — it’s a gift,” he writes. Having harnessed “usefully naive outrage” to help divest trillions of dollars from fossil fuels, he believes we’re not “grossly defective,” but rather, “capable of acting together to do remarkable things.” So in the final, and most illuminating, section of “Falter,” he narrows those remarkable things down to two elements.

The first is the solar panel — a “technology of *repair*” to heal the atmosphere and mitigate inequality heightened by profit-hungry energy companies. McKibben visits social entrepreneurs in rural Africa who are leapfrogging communities from powerlessness to solar, reportage that feels a bit too credulous for such a sober book. You can’t help but cringe at the imbalance — village grids against the Koch brothers’ billions? To replace fossil fuels, the United States would have to build about a dozen wind and solar plants per state, which sounds daunting. But such mobilization has happened before, McKibben says: During World War II, bombers, tanks, guns, cannons and engines were cranked out from factories nationwide in mere months. “If . . . we did something like that again, in the name of stopping climate change instead of fascism,” he writes, “we wouldn’t have to kill a soul.”

McKibben’s second tool is nonviolence. “If we are to build the political will to deploy renewable energy fast enough, we’ll need a bulldozer for reshaping the zeitgeist. That’s the job of movements.” Cue the cynics, but again, he reminds us that we’ve done it before: In 1970, a 10th of the population demonstrated against smog-choked cities and burning rivers, forcing President Richard Nixon to act. And today, millions of students striking against climate change, and proposals such as the Green New Deal — a comprehensive plan to reorient the economy around clean energy — are bold indications that we aren’t done yet.

Despite the book’s bleakness, its most stirring takeaway is perhaps McKibben’s soulful insistence that choices remain. We are the only creatures, he asserts, who can impose limits on themselves. “We can wreck the Earth as we’ve known it, killing vast numbers of ourselves and wiping out entire swaths of other life. . . . But we can also *not* do that.”

It recalls a fable frequently invoked to explain inaction on climate change. Drop a frog into a pot of boiling water, and it will immediately hop out. But place it in slowly warming water, and it will be cooked to death.

However, this is a myth. The frog would actually jump out and save itself. Maybe we can, too.