What is to be done? To that question there can be no simple or definitive answer, but I do think there are some obvious places to begin. The first step requires that we take back public words such as conservative and patriot, which have been coopted and put to no good or accurate use. How is it, for example, that the word conservative came to describe those willing to run irreversible risks with the Earth? Intending to conserve nothing, they are not conservatives but vandals now working at a global scale. How have those driving their sport utility vehicles to the mall, sporting two American flags and a "God bless America" bumper sticker come to regard themselves as patriots? They are not moved by authentic patriotism at all, but by self indulgence. For that matter how has the great and noble word liberal been demeaned and slandered as the height of political and intellectual folly? Unable to defend the integrity of words, we cannot defend the earth or anything else.

The integrity of our common language, however, depends a great deal on the cultivation of discerning intelligence among the public, and that requires better education than we now offer. But education has been whittled down to smaller purposes of passing tests and ensuring large "lifetime earnings" in some part of the global economy. What passes for education has become highly technical and specialized, little of which is aimed to draw out the full human stature of young people. We've become a nation of specialists and technicians, not broadly educated and discerning people. Scholars have been too intent on developing "professional knowledge," arcane theories, and complicated methodologies, instead of broad knowledge useful to the wider public. Consequently, fewer and fewer people know history, how the world works as a physical system, or the rudiments of the constitution, and fewer have a respectable political philosophy. We are a people ripe for the plucking.

This leads to a third point. We do not have an environmental crisis so much as a political crisis. A great majority of people still wish a decent and habitable world for their descendants, but those desires are thwarted by the machinery that ought to connect the popular will to public decisions but no longer does so. We will have to repair and perhaps reinvent the institutions of democratic governance for a global world, and that means dealing with issues that the founders of this republic did not and could not have anticipated. The process of political engagement at all levels has become increasingly Byzantine, confusing, and inaccessible. And in the mass-consumption society we have all become better consumers than citizens, which is to say willing participants in our own undoing. The solution, however difficult, is to reconnect people with the political process and government at all levels.

Fourth, it is necessary to expose the mythology that surrounds what Marjorie Kelly calls "the divine rights of capital" and place democratic controls on corporations and the movement of capital.[1]

We once fought a revolutionary war to establish political democracy in western societies, but have yet to democratize the workplace and the ownership of capital. These are still governed by the same illogic of unquestioned divine right by which monarchies once ruled. The assumption that corporations are legal persons and thereby beyond effective public scrutiny, control, or law is foolishness and worse. The latest corporate scandals are only that, the latest in a recurring pattern of illegality, self dealing, and political corruption surpassing even that of the robber baron era. The solution is to enforce corporate charters as public license to do business on behalf of the public that are revocable if and when the terms of the charter are violated. If private ownership is a good thing, it should be widely extended, not restricted to the superwealthy. By the same logic, we must remove the corrupting influence of money from politics, beginning with corporate campaign contributions and the hundreds of billions of dollars of public subsidies for cars, highways, fossil fuels, and nuclear power that corrupt the democratic process and public policy. Fifth, political reform requires an active, engaged, and sometimes enraged citizenry. An example is the Illinois farmer-citizens who stood for hours to hear Lincoln and Douglas debate issues of slavery and sectionalism in 1858. Those debates were full of careful argument, eloquence, and wit. Those citizens applauded, laughed, and jeered, which is to say that they followed the flow of argument and heard what was being said. Later, some died for and because of those same arguments. They were citizens and were willing to sacrifice a great deal for that privilege. In our time, while the issues have grown to global scale with consequences that extend as far into the future as the mind dares to imagine, political argument is whittled down to sound bites fitted in between advertisements. The means whereby citizens are informed have been increasingly monopolized and manipulated. Only half or fewer of citizens bother to vote. Some believe public apathy and political incompetence to be good or at least tolerable. I do not. Unless we reverse course, apathy and incompetence will prove to be the undoing of democratic government and all that depends on a healthy democracy. The nature of what will replace it is already evident: an unconstrained and well-armed managerial plutocracy intent on global plunder.

Sixth, we need a positive strategy that fires the public imagination. The public, I believe, knows what we are against but not what we are for. And there are many things that should be stopped, but what should be started? The answer to that question lies in a more coherent agenda formed around what is being called ecological design as it applies to land
use, buildings, energy systems, transportation, materials, water, agriculture, forestry, and urban planning. For three decades and longer we have been developing the ideas, science, and technological wherewithal to build a sustainable society. The public knows of these things only in fragments, but not as a coherent and practical agenda – indeed the only practical course available. That is the fault of those in the field of conservation, and we should start now to put a positive agenda before the public that includes the human and economic advantages of better technology, integrated planning, coherent purposes, and foresight.

Finally, we should expect far more of our leaders than we presently do. Never has the need for genuine leadership been greater, and seldom has it been less evident. We cannot be ruled by ignorant, malicious, greedy, incompetent, and shortsighted people and expect things to turn out well. If we are to navigate the challenges of the decades ahead, what E. O. Wilson calls "the bottleneck," we will need leaders of great stature, clarity of mind, spiritual depth, courage, and vision. We need leaders who see patterns that connect us across the divisions of culture, religion, geography, and time. We need leadership that draws us together to resolve conflicts, move quickly from fossil fuels to solar power, reverse global environmental deterioration, and empower us to provide shelter, food, medical care, decent livelihood, and education for everyone. We need leadership that is capable of energizing genuine commitment to old and venerable traditions as well as new visions for a global civilization that preserves and honors local cultures, economies, and knowledge.

Imagine a world in which those who purport to lead us must first make a pilgrimage to ground zero at Hiroshima and publicly pledge "never again." Imagine a world in which those who purport to lead us must go to Auschwitz and the Killing Fields and pledge publicly "never again." Imagine a world in which leaders must go to Bhopal and say to the victims "We are truly sorry. This will never happen again, anywhere." Imagine, too, those pilgrim leaders going to hundreds of places where love, kindness, forgiveness, sacrifice, compassion, wisdom, ecological ingenuity, and foresight have been evident.

Imagine a world in which those who purport to lead us must help identify places around the world degraded by human actions and help initiate their restoration. Some areas might take as long as 1000 years to restore, such as the Aral Sea, the Harrapan region in India, the forests of Lebanon, soil fertility in the Middle East, Chesapeake Bay, and the North Atlantic cod fishery. Imagine a world in which those who intend to lead help lift our sights above the daily crisis to the far horizon of what could be.

Imagine, too, leaders with the kind of humility demonstrated by Czech President, Vaclav Havel[2]: "In time I have become a good deal less sure of myself, a good deal more humble... every day I suffer more and more from stage fright; every day I am more afraid that I won't be up to the job... more and more often, I am afraid that I will fall woefully short of expectations, that I will somehow reveal my own lack of qualifications for the job, that despite my good faith I will make even greater mistakes, that I will cease to be trustworthy and therefore lose the right to do what I do."

Self-described realists will dismiss the idea of better leadership as muddle-headed. Some will see in it some global conspiracy or another. Prospective leaders will profess sympathy but say they do not have the time to improve themselves further. And those least qualified to lead will pay no attention at all. But it is not up to any of them to prescribe for us. We are now citizens of the earth joined in a common enterprise with many variations. We have every right to insist that those who purport to lead us be worthy of the task. Imagine such a time! Imagine a time, not far off, when we might all be on board a train heading north!


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