

Reinhard Illner

To The Class of 2030



A Letter and Apology

*“We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors;
we borrow it from our children.”*

Chief Seattle

Chapter 1

Prologue

As I started writing this in the spring of 2012, you were about to be born, or an infant, and blissfully unaware of the problems your society and planet faces. Your presence in 2030 is our future, and to a large extent it is ours to shape. Few people now care or worry about this fact, although we read things like “...the accumulated debt of the United States (about 16 trillion dollars, at this point, and growing rapidly) is a liability for future generations.” True enough, it is. But it isn’t our problem. Or is there some moral reason why we should be concerned? And should we take action of some kind to address the issue? And what can we do anyway?

The example of accumulating debt is only one of a number of big issues which will impact your life. I am writing this letter because I do worry and care, and my main purpose is a gathering of a list of such issues, discuss them in detail, and explore avenues of resolution which are or, mostly, are not being taken. There is a fair amount of variation in these problems as you compare different countries or societies; much of what will be discussed applies transparently to the United States, and, to a lesser degree, to Canada and the United Kingdom. However, troubling symptoms of political, sociological and environmental collapse are visible all over the world.

It is my firm conviction that in many serious cases the steps taken by those in power are either inadequate or lead completely in the wrong direction, with dire consequences for you. There are many like myself who see the problems presented in this book as urgent and serious, and

who push for action. Sadly, their voices are barely listened to, and their efforts are largely obstructed by inertia or even active resistance. Current political developments in many countries, in particular the United States, Canada and some European countries, often logically entail poor fiscal and environmental choices, and lead simultaneously to erosion of democratic structures and values. Side effects are appalling inequity in distribution of wealth, environmental degradation, and growing levels of illiteracy. At the core of these developments are beliefs that are contrary to what I would call “community spirit” and “generational contracts”; it will become clear as you read on that these beliefs foster an atmosphere in which governments are either deprived of the power to meet their mandate, namely, serving the community by providing infrastructure, education, health services and so on, or, worse, are made accomplices to powers which are effectively controlling the economy of whole countries. The banking sector of the U.S. is a prominent example, and not the only one.

This development is a nightmarish return to 19th century standards in society organization and structure, and it is being accepted without much resistance. Unless the society of this second decade of the 21st century realizes the slippery slope on which it finds itself and takes action to move off it, you, the class of 2030, are likely to find yourself in a world in which resources are scarce, the environment is severely damaged, democratic structures are compromised, quality education and health care are only available to the rich, and good jobs are few and far between. The implications for your future are bleak. In contrast, 60 years ago, less than a decade after the greatest war the world had ever seen, most countries that are now known as “first world” were poorer than now, but there were a lot of professional options, and social systems assuring free or inexpensive high level education and affordable health care for all were universal. Environmental problems existed but were far less recognized than today, and they did not pose such large-scale threats to the planetary equilibrium and its human guests as they do today.

Let us go through a quick review of what happened in these 60 years, and how it led to the state of the world you have grown up in. In the 1950s and 1960s favourable economic conditions and the social contracts between manufacturers, governments and employees generated an unprecedented economic expansion. First signs of trouble emerged in the 1970s with two subsequent oil crises. The rapid growth of energy consumption in the

west had led to a dependency on oil imports from the Middle East and other countries (Venezuela, Nigeria, Indonesia, and a few others) which left western countries subject to political and economic pressures by the suppliers. The logical consequence would have been to try and mitigate these dependencies, and efforts to this end were first made in the United States under the Carter administration. Sadly, these efforts were abandoned when Reagan became president; there can be no doubt that the U.S. oil industry used their new-found clout to protect their financial interests by ensuring that the U.S. would remain as dependent on fossil fuels, especially oil, as it had become during the previous decades.

In the 1980s the neoconservative revolution went further- it was openly asserted (by Ronald Reagan and his admirers) that too much government was bad, that the markets would sort out problems by themselves, and that the most important step towards a blissful state of prosperity and freedom would be tax cuts, less government, and reduced social services. In fact, the Reagan administration cut taxes mostly for the rich, and compensated with tax increases for the middle class¹. Growing deficits during this period were largely due to dramatic increases in defence spending; the accumulated debt of the U.S. tripled during the Reagan administration, to a total of 2 trillion dollars.

These developments were paralleled or followed by a deregulation of the financial industry. Laws in place since the 1930s (and, like the Glass-Steagall act, created to prevent a repeat of the crash of 1929) were gradually revoked and allowed the emergence of waves of speculation not seen since the 1920s. Within a few short years the markets lost stability, and market crashes or economic/ financial crises occurred with disturbing frequency, often piggy-backing each other. The most prominent examples, still haunting the world as I write this, were the evil twins: the housing bubble which collapsed in 2007-2008, leading to the financial crisis of 2008. Now, in 2013, as you are an infant, the world has still not recovered from the recession this caused. Your parents and grandparents had to shoulder losses of trillions of dollars, money ultimately coming out of your inheritance. Your parents' generation is directly and indirectly indebted on many levels: For example, federal, provincial (or state) and municipal deficits are piling up and will have to be paid off in some way (the traditional tool to do this is inflation). Then there are the individual

¹see TEFRA: Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982

debts—mortgages, lines of credit, loans, credit card debts. The total debt load of the United States of America, counting all these levels of debt, is in excess of 50 trillion dollars as I write these lines.

There are other ugly legacies you are left with from our generation. The environment has changed—our casual use of fossil fuels has raised the CO_2 level in the atmosphere to above 430 ppm, 30% more than in the middle of the 20th century. You are living with the consequences—melted permafrost in the Arctic, diminishing glaciers in the high mountain ranges, shrinking ice sheets in Greenland and the Arctic. It appears that there are more violent storms with flooding, stronger hurricanes and tornadoes, and there seem to be more and stronger heat waves and droughts. Global food production is already adversely affected. The upper water levels in the oceans suffer from acidification due to the increased carbon dioxide levels, and plankton, coral reefs, shellfish and the attached food chain are all under stress. The oceans are rising.

All of this is already happening now, but there is obstruction and denial by industrial players, notably the fossil fuel industries, whose balance sheets are endangered (or so they think) by climate actions. As a consequence, they have launched huge public relations campaigns and are making massive efforts to influence government policies to keep the status quo. This is short-sighted and potentially disastrous, but it works for the time being. It works against YOUR interests.

You have likely grown up in suburbia, and the world you have known consists of endless rows of homes, some of them individual houses, many others townhouses, apartments or high-rises. The monotony is interrupted by strip malls, in which retail stores (many of them mega-stores) compete for the dollars you have to spend. Much of your city is not accessible to you, because it is hidden behind the walls of gated communities, private industry or government facilities. My generation used to have fairly easy access to what we called “nature”—we had the option to leave the city (by car, bicycle, bus or train) and go hiking in the woods, explore wild rivers, or walk between fields where wheat was grown or cows grazed. These choices are greatly reduced: private interests have developed much of the land to such a degree that your recreational options are reduced to mostly organized activities, many in artificial environments, others in outdoor but controlled environments like golf courses or theme parks.

In short, your freedoms, be it the freedom for intellectual or economical

development, or the freedom to just explore your world, have been greatly compromised by the choices of my generation, and, perversely, the quest for freedom was frequently quoted by decision makers when these choices were made.

Granted, the vast majority of this generation did not see it this way. Yet the facts speak for themselves, and the purpose of my writing is to lay them out. Maybe it will be a factor in the formation of critical public awareness needed to address the problems. However, truth be told, I have little hope that my writing can make a difference, but at least it will show that I cared. You may also take it as an apology for my generation, a generation that knew Chief Seattle's words but paid no heed.

To read further, you may purchase the full text on Amazon. Or contact me.

Victoria, British Columbia
Summer 2013