

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

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We are not equally blameworthy

With all the devastation and despair on the planet right now, everyone seems to be pointing the finger at someone or something. And while the damages continue to mount, there is virtually no one who is being held accountable for any wrong doing. How can this be? Something has to give, doesn't it?

First, let me be clear about what I mean by "devastation." Here are some startling facts that bear repeating. Nearly ten million children (under the age of 5) die of preventable diseases (UNICEF). In the United States, arguably the richest country in the world, alarmingly high numbers of children live in extreme poverty; on the world scene, nearly one in three children fits this description. And while humans are suffering, other species are going extinct at an alarming rate. According to Daniel Simberloff, director of the Institute for Biological Invasions at the University of Tennessee, "we are surely in the midst of a mass extinction.... For example, for birds, of about 10,000 species worldwide, at least 128 have disappeared in the last 500 years, about 1,200 are currently seriously threatened with extinction. . . . there is a real prospect of the loss of 500 bird species within this century (PBS interview)." Additionally, not only is the ocean being polluted with oil and excess Ag-related nutrients, it will soon be dealing with higher acidity levels (from the absorption of excess atmospheric carbon dioxide) than have been seen on Earth since the Dinosaur Age some 65+ million years ago. What this will mean for the world's marine life is very unpredictable. And if this weren't enough, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

So, who is to blame for these things? I contend that most of us are to some extent but the true perpetrators and perpetrators go unnoticed, uncorrected, and unpunished. Until we rectify this situation, we are undoubtedly going to continue to move down an increasingly slippery and dangerous slope.

So are you to blame? Most likely, yes. We are all hypocrites to some extent. If you eat, use motorized transport, or turn on switches (doesn't this just about cover everyone?), then you have contributed to our current problems in some way. In fact, given the type of consumeristic culture that now dominates our landscape, it is impossible not to have one's hand in the society's hardship. And while there are many ways to reduce one's impact (e.g., drive less, eat local, use natural light) or bring peace to the world, most simply feel that their contribution is negligible. To a small degree they are correct but this attitude won't help us much. Our attention must be turned elsewhere.

The decision-makers in society, that is, the people and corporations that wield immense power and influence on economic and social policy, must take credit for the bulk of the problems that exist. Clearly, many of the challenges we face have been around for much longer than current leaders have been influential (or even alive). This does reduce their culpability a little. However, they still remain responsible for moving us in a more humane, hospitable, equitable, and sustainable direction. Not only do they have the responsibility but they are firmly

in a position to do so. If they fail us in this way, they must be held accountable. Since this all sounds abstract, let me provide a few examples of what I am talking about.

When segments of the banking industry create a financial time bomb (through predatory lending to economically-challenged individuals and families), they shouldn't be "bailed out." Rather, they should be replaced with financial entities that act responsibly. Government officials must be willing to act against reckless profiteers and make future banking/lending more stable and fair.

When chemical companies knowingly allow workers to be exposed to highly toxic (and even lethal) chemicals (as documented in *Trade Secrets* <www.pbs.org/tradesecrets>), high ranking members of these companies should serve jail time commensurate with their crimes.

When corporations engage in dangerous activities (like drilling for oil off a coastline), they should be fully responsible for all the financial damages associated with an "accident." And why shouldn't they? They aren't sharing all their billions of profits with all of us, are they? And if members of these corporations are found guilty of negligence, they should serve jail time in a real penal institutions, not in some cushy "Club Med" facility.

When leaders of a country (or company) violate international law by inflicting torture or directing the use of chemical weapons on human subjects, or by establishing secret prisons, they need to be held accountable as well.

Ultimately, all this boils down to who has the power to make change on a large scale. There is such an imbalance of power on the world stage. Just consider how few of the 200+ nations of the world are nuclear powers (9) and how the U.S. owns about half of the global arsenal of nuclear weapons. Also consider that of the top 100 economies in the world, over half of them are now corporations (not nations). In this environment, all of us are not equally responsible for the problems that we face. It is imperative that we hold the "power brokers" accountable. It is time we stopped blaming ourselves and started putting the blame where it belongs. If our elected officials do not understand this, perhaps because they are increasingly dependent on monetary support from corporations, then they should be removed from office. "That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." Does this sound familiar? It is from our Declaration of Independence.

If all of the world's leaders (governmental or corporate) are not held up to the highest standards of ethical conduct and humanitarian decision-making then we will not have justice or peace. It is up to us to decide. It won't be easy since the current imbalance is so great, but I am confident that we can bring about the necessary change if we work together.