

Prologue

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was like the present period...”

—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

This book was born on a sunny summer day in 2006 when I stepped out of a movie theater with my wife into the warm embrace of a lazy afternoon. Gen and I had finally found a convenient time to see former vice-president Al Gore’s inconvenient documentary on global warming with its dire warnings of environmental and social turmoil ahead if we maintained the Status Quo. Like millions of others, we were unnerved by what we saw. I was especially disturbed by the graphic images of rising sea water snaking through the streets of Manhattan, Shanghai and other low-lying cities around the globe. As we stepped off the curb into the parking lot, blinking in the bright sunlight after the movie, I quipped to Gen “We’d better see Venice, quick.”

The film’s message wasn’t exactly news to us. My work as a conservationist, first with the New Mexico chapter of the Sierra Club then as a cofounder of the Quivira Coalition, a nonprofit dedicated to building bridges between ranchers, environmentalists and others around practices that improved land health, had taught me a great deal about the precarious state of our planet. I knew challenges abounded, but Mr. Gore managed to raise my anxiety to a new level. The core issue, I realized, was that sooner or later Business-As-Usual meant serious trouble for every living thing on the planet. Watching the documentary, an image popped into my mind of a bright warning light—in the shape of a thermometer—shining in the dashboard of a speeding vehicle called Civilization, accompanied by an insistent and annoying buzzing sound. And like all warning lights, I knew we ignored it at our peril.

As I sat in the dark theater, listening to the former vice-president lecture us about our responsibilities and watching the charts and maps of our discontents, I suspected we were seeing only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It wasn’t just global warming—a great deal more lurked unseen, below the rising water line. So when Mr. Gore quoted Winston Churchill as describing the run-up to World War II as an “era of consequences”—because Hitler’s rise was a pickle of our own making—I immediately thought of the phrase, the Age of Consequences, to describe our current period.

I mentioned my idea to Gen as we approached the car after the movie. As an archaeologist, I knew she would understand its appeal. History is replete with Eras, Ages, Periods and Revolutions—Agricultural, Industrial, Technological. Consider all the monikers that have been attached to the current epoch, including the now infamous “Information Age”—infamous because it feels like we’re drowning in information while the world unravels. Why not the Age of Consequences? Gen agreed. I filed the thought

away.

We climbed into the car and drove home.

The idea to start a chronicle happened a year later, sparked by two events. The first took place over breakfast one morning when our eight-year old twins, Sterling and Olivia, heard a story on public radio about the possibility of all polar bears dying out as a result of global warming. After a minute or two, the kids froze as they listened, their faces ashen as the disembodied voice of a biologist explained that disappearing sea ice at the North Pole likely spelled doom for the bears. They turned their faces to us, their expressions saying it all: *the polar bears are going to die?*

My heart sank. What could we say? We tried to explain to them that no one really knows if the polar bears are doomed or not. The biologist might be wrong. After all, polar bears have been around for a very long time and have survived a variety of adverse conditions before, including other episodes of severe climate change. Maybe they'll pull through again. This mollified them and they trooped off to school with their spirits restored.

It didn't mollify me, however.

I turned the incident over in my mind after their departure. What if the polar bears *did* die off? What if Sterling and Olivia never got to see one in the wild, *ever*? Worse, how do you explain to your children what we've done to the planet—to *their planet*—over the past sixty years or so as a consequence of our hard partying? How do you explain to them not only our actions but our inaction as well? It's not enough simply to say that adults behave in complex, confusing, and often contradictory ways because children today can see the warning light in Civilization's dash-board for themselves. When they point, what do we say?

I didn't know, but finding some way to answer these anguished questions suddenly became a priority.

The second event happened a few months later, while lunching with Wes Jackson and his wife at their home near Salina, Kansas. Wes is founder and director of the Land Institute, which is dedicated to the important business of reinventing the nation's agriculture along regenerative and sustainable lines, so when he said, "we live at the most important moment in human history" I paused between bites of my ham sandwich. That's because a similar thought had occurred to me recently. I asked him what he meant. Wes said that we live at a decisive moment of *action*. The various challenges confronting humanity now require, like a long line of airplanes waiting to land at a busy airport, attention—*immediate attention*. Time is short. Hurry up.

"What sort of action do you recommend?" I asked.

"It means we have to practice restraint," he replied. "That's not something humans do very well, of course. But it's something we've got to learn or things will get much worse."

Was it possible? I knew that two generations ago, during an era of privation and global conflict, restraint was not only possible but widely-practiced. Gas rationing. Victory Gardens. Meat twice a week. Prudence and frugality ruled. But everything changed after World War II. The arrow of Progress tipped upward dramatically. We were encouraged at every level to be unrestrained in all that we did—how far we traveled, how much we ate, what we built, or where we sprawled. “Just Do It” became the unofficial motto of my generation, courtesy of a shoe company and an ad agency. Progress, we were told, had no limits and no consequences. Viva la Fiesta! Enjoy the party, there won’t be a Hangover.

They were wrong.

I thought about Sterling and Olivia again. It wasn’t anguish I felt this time, however, but indignation. What sort of world will they be inheriting from us? One more bountiful and secure than the one I inherited from my parents, or one more diminished and dangerous? Reports already said that Sterling and Olivia’s generation would be less healthy than my generation was at their age—a first in American history, unhappily. Dread began to mix with indignation. As a parent, there is perhaps no greater fear than the sense that your children’s lives may be worse off than yours. And that’s a real worry today, especially knowing it was up to us to handle this important moment in history properly. So far, we weren’t doing such a bang-up job.

I know what Wes thinks about it.

Shortly after my visit, I read an essay he wrote based on a commencement address he gave a month earlier at Washington College in Maryland, in which he told the students they were “the children of depletion” and warned them of the inevitable contraction of American society up-coming. Not surprisingly, the President of the college came rushing up to him after his speech sputtering: “You can’t say those things!”

Indeed. That’s the trouble with calls to action these days—they can’t avoid the umbra of doom-and-gloom. I’ve been there myself. In fact, I’ve heard the mantra of Trouble Coming so often that I began to suffer from the early signs of what I call “Future Fatigue.” It’s a dispiriting affliction that often results in listlessness and apathy. If not caught quickly (usually by sticking one’s fingers in one’s ears), it can spread quickly, sometimes disabling friends and loved ones. However, when I read Wes’ commencement address, I realized that his call to action needed to be heard and shared.

“In painting you this bleak picture, I hope you understand that I am honoring you as adults,” he told the students. “You were born on the up slope of energy and economic growth, but much of your life is likely to be on the down slope in the use of nonrenewable energy.”

That’s because we’re depleting the five pools of carbon—soil, wood, coal, oil, and natural gas—at an unsustainable rate, he said. We’ve burned up, for instance, half the planet’s known reserves of oil—one *trillion* barrels—in less than a century. Technology is not likely to ride to the rescue either. Energy, after all, cannot be created or destroyed, according to the First Law of Thermodynamics, just transformed. So, when sources of

energy-rich carbon go into decline, as they will, we either find a suitable replacement or society goes into decline too.

That's when a second warning light in Civilization's dashboard flickered on in my mind—in the shape of a 'low oil' pressure gauge. Urgent action was required here too. Then a third warning light appeared, blinking rapidly. It was the engine warning light, indicating it was time for an overhaul of the main economic means of Civilization's propulsion down the path of Progress.

As a parent and as a writer, the anguish embedded in both of these events created a strong desire to do something beyond my day job with the Quivira Coalition. At the very least, I wanted to document what I was witnessing so that Sterling and Olivia and their cohort could get a sense of why we did what we did—or didn't do—as a society. Hopefully, I would be documenting how we managed to turn off those warning lights in the dashboard. If we failed, however, I was certain that future generations would be asking anguished (and angry) questions of their own. As someone living through this important moment in time, I felt an obligation to chronicle the flow of current events in case it might be useful, now or later. At the same time, I felt compelled to recount my own journey. So, on Earth Day, 2008, I began to write, blending headlines with narrative and observation, travel and research into chronological installments, which I posted in an online publication I called, *A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences*.

The essays of *concern* in the first half of this book are culled from this project.

Meanwhile, the distress I felt about the world reminded me of a situation a dozen years earlier when I set out to find answers to a different anguished question that loomed large at the time: was peace possible between ranchers and environmentalists? By the mid-1990s, a bitter feud between ranchers and anti-grazing activists was in full bloom across the American West. Accusing cattle of widespread environmental degradation, activists wanted the cows (and ranchers) gone, pronto, while the ranchers, asserting tradition and legal rights, were equally determined to stay. Their respective hard-headed positions were exemplified by two popular bumper stickers: "Cattle-free by '93!" shouted one. "Cattle galore by '94!" retorted the other. Lawsuits, counter-suits, public denunciations, angry letters-to-the-editors, and general vitriol ruled. It wasn't just the West—the hard-headedness of this particular fight reflected other divides in the nation at the time, including the "red" and "blue" split that would soon engulf our national politics.

I felt a great deal of anguish because I suspected that ranchers and conservationists had more in common than in difference when you stripped away the anger and the politics. Both loved the West's wide open spaces, wildlife, grass and water. Both were opposed to the rampant subdivision of private land for housing developments, which had reached a crisis level by the mid-1990s. Nobody won when a ranch was sold and busted up into 35-acre housing tracts, destroying wildlife habitat and a historical way-of-life simultaneously. While ranchers and environmentalists choked each other to death, real estate developers laughed all the way to the bank.

There had to be another way.

I found it one day when I walked into a statewide meeting of the Sierra Club and saw a cowboy hat sitting on a table. It belonged to Jim Winder, who ranched near Nutt, in southern New Mexico. Jim had joined the Club to find common ground with his purported “enemies,” as he put it. Not coincidentally, Jim was the only rancher in the state who publicly supported the reintroduction of the endangered Mexican wolf—another white-hot issue of contention at the time. I quickly learned that Jim sincerely sought a resolution to these conflicts. How? It was all about the ecologically friendly style of ranching he used, he told me. Jim bunched his cattle together into one herd and kept them on the move so that any particular patch of ground would be grazed only once a year, mimicking the manner in which bison worked the land. He didn’t kill coyotes and didn’t mind wolves because bunched-up cows can protect themselves. There was more: because he ranched for rangeland health, Jim got along great with government employees, he had more water in his streams, and most importantly, he was making money. *Wow*.

Jim’s methods worked, as I discovered. It wasn’t just Jim either, other ranchers were employing this new style of land management. I decided to label what they did, The New Ranch. I wrote a definition: “The New Ranch describes an emerging progressive ranching movement that operates on the principle that the natural processes that sustain wildlife habitat, biological diversity and functioning watersheds are the same processes that make land productive for livestock. They are ranches where grass- lands are productive and diverse, where erosion has diminished, where streams and springs, once dry, now flow, where wildlife is more abundant, and where landowners are more profitable as a result.”

The New Ranch was part of a burgeoning movement in the American West called the *radical center*—a field “beyond rightdoing and wrongdoing,” to quote the poet Rumi. Radical centrist nonprofits and collaborative watershed groups of all sizes grew and spread across the West like wild- fire, culminating in a vastly changed political, economic and ecological landscape in only a few years. I had the honor of engaging with this new movement as a co-founder of the Quivira Coalition. On Spanish colonial maps of the Southwest from the 1600s “Quivira” designated unexplored territory, which is exactly what we were doing at the time. Following the lead of other ‘common ground’ efforts, we vowed to avoid lawsuits and legislation, sticking instead to the grassroots. It was our belief that the grazing debate needed to start over at the place it mattered most—on the ground.

Beginning in 2002, I energetically explored this new territory, often with my family, and tried to capture what I discovered in a series of essays and profiles, many of which were published in my first book *Revolution on the Range* (2008). It was an exciting period of time, especially as the radical center took root across the region. The bumper stickers faded and the vitriol was replaced with a genuine effort to find common ground and move forward. It was very encouraging. In the Prologue to *Revolution*, I wrote “In the years that followed, as the grazing debate faded in the region and as hope and trust began to grow alongside the wildflowers and bunch grasses, an answer to my anguished question began to reveal itself. Ranchers and environmentalists *could* get along, and in places *did*—especially where the dialogue started with soil, grass, and water. Peace, in other words, was possible—and as a result, progress was possible as well.”

It's the same with other challenges, including issues associated with climate change. Answers exist if we're willing to work together and try new ideas (and some old ones). The Quivira Coalition responded to some of these new challenges itself by expanding our work to embrace creek restoration, grassfed beef production, local food systems, a ranch apprenticeship program, and carbon sequestration in soils. We saw it all as connected—cattle, soil, grass, water, food, people—all working in nature's image of health and regeneration. It was possible, we learned, to balance anguished concerns with hopeful solutions, including many 'low-tech' ones involving sunlight, grass, dirt, creeks and animals. Too often, however, these solutions are overlooked by members of the media, probably because they are considered too drab to capture the public's imagination. This is unfortunate because they can directly and effectively address the various challenges at work today. Their stories needed to be told, I realized, and if no one else would tell them, I would.

That's why I kept writing.

Eventually, I saw the anguished questions posed by the Age of Consequences and hopeful answers I found through my work with Quivira to be two sides of the same coin. I decided to pull both into this book. While there's much to worry about these days, I know from experience there's also a lot that we can do together, beginning at the grassroots—literally the grass and the roots. On that point, I'll start with a poem that Wes Jackson used to close his commencement address. It captures this moment in time perfectly—as Wes no doubt had in mind:

*For the Children, by Gary Snyder
(from his collection Turtle Island):*

*The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
The steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.*

*In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.*

*To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:*

*stay together
learn the flowers
go light*