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A Letter to the Great Kids Who Are Rising Up

Friday, March 15, 2019 was one of the best days in my life.

I had ridden a bus from Oslo to Stockholm on Thursday so that I could watch—I hoped—a group of Swedish students who would be striking from school on Friday as they demanded a clean and peaceful world. Students would be striking from schools all around the world in a rapidly growing movement called Fridays for Future. I wanted to join the students where the movement began, only seven months ago, in Stockholm, Greta’s hometown.

I came as a pilgrim. With a battered heart.

When I was sixteen, sitting in chemistry class, we heard from the speaker in the ceiling of our classroom that President Kennedy had been shot and killed. Our young president, who had brought such energy and determination and hope to our nation, was suddenly dead. And then, the next day, the man who had killed him was also shot dead . . . so that we would never know who really killed our beloved president.

We lost our John Kennedy on November 22, 1963. Sweden lost her Olaf Palme on February 28, 1986. Our two nations share the devastating grief, and we share the eternal question, “Why?”

Vice President Lyndon Johnson became president. During the spring of 1965, when I was eighteen and about to graduate from high school, President Johnson began a massive bombing campaign—Operation Rolling Thunder—against a small country in Asia called Vietnam, a country which had never harmed, or even threatened to harm, the powerful United States of America. That criminal and barbaric war continued until the spring of 1975; America dropped more bombs on little Vietnam than had been dropped in all of World War Two.

I escaped from the bland, oblivious Midwestern town where I had grown up by becoming—I was thrilled—a student at a vibrant university in California. In the spring of 1968, during my junior year, the Vietnamese launched their Tet Offensive, a military campaign against the American invaders. The Vietnamese did not win the

war with their attacks on a multitude of American targets, but they showed my country that the Americans would never, never, never win the war.

Also in the spring of 1968, Martin Luther King, the man who had led his people for thirteen years toward racial justice, and who had demanded non-violence every step of the way, was assassinated. He was only thirty-nine years old.

Two months later, in June of 1968, Bobby Kennedy, campaigning to become our next president, was assassinated. He was only forty-two years old.

In the midst of this chaos, I learned—while sitting in a Renaissance Literature class—that one of my best friends from high school, the captain of our swimming team, the president of our student council, had just been killed in Vietnam. In deep shock, I wandered the streets of Stanford almost all night, my heart battered by wrenching grief and fierce outrage.

America never learns. America clings to its racism and violence decade after decade after decade. America always needs a war somewhere, in Nicaragua, in Afghanistan, in Iraq. America today is by far the leading weapons merchant to the world, as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute documents every year with detailed figures.

War and oil are evil twins. For over a century—since World War One—oil has been a major cause of war after war. One of the largest markets in the world today is the trade of oil for weapons, and weapons for oil. A SIPRI report published in March, 2019, documents that the United States, with a 36% share of global arms exports, sells most of its weapons, 22%, to Saudi Arabia. The oil is burned, causing the global warming which threatens our Earth today. And the weapons are used in the wars that never end.

The profits earned from this evil market have greatly restricted progress in the field of clean energy for the past forty years. Why should the peoples of the world benefit from the sun and the wind, when a small number of people can earn enormous fortunes from weapons and oil?

On June 20, 1979, President Jimmy Carter installed 32 solar panels—which heated water—on the roof of the White House. He wanted “the power of the sun to enrich our lives as we move away from our crippling dependence on foreign oil.” In

his State of the Union Address in 1979, President Carter hoped that America would receive 20% of its energy from renewable sources by the year 2000.

But Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in 1980 and soon began a Republican program which cut funding for clean energy, while it provided subsidies for coal and oil. That program has continued with every Republican administration to the Trump catastrophe today.

CO₂ levels in our global atmosphere are still climbing, year after year. The oceans grow warmer and warmer, year after year. The Arctic ice cap continues to melt, year after year. Now the permafrost in the tundra is thawing, and ancient methane—a greenhouse gas far more powerful than carbon dioxide—is bubbling up.

Greta is right, “Our house is burning”. Wildfires are blazing from California to Siberia. The nightmare has already begun.

The oceans have absorbed most of our carbon dioxide pollution, as if trying to clean up our mess. But CO₂ + H₂O combine to form H₂CO₃, carbonic acid, and thus the oceans around the world have become more acidic. The result: dying coral reefs and the devastation of marine habitats around the planet.

The California hippie who marched in huge demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, and who later marched in even larger demonstrations in New York and Washington against nuclear weapons, and who marched in the largest demonstration of all—the Climate March in New York City in September of 2014—kept hoping that one day, the peoples of the world would wake up from the unrelenting madness of war and oil, war and oil.

I graduated from Stanford University in 1974 with a doctorate in literature, which enabled me to teach above the Arctic Circle in northern Norway for ten years. I lived for two years in Kautokeino, where I taught at the Sami College, and where I learned from my students about climate change on the tundra. I lived in the village of Henningsvær in the Lofoten Islands, where I learned from the fishermen about climate change in the northern seas. The teacher became an author: I wove twenty years of extensive research on the twin themes of climate change and clean energy into a series of novels—stories—about young characters who confront the great challenges of the 21st century.

Thus, as a pilgrim with a battered heart, I took a bus from Oslo to Stockholm so that I could be—as I hoped—with a group of young people who were rising up to

do the job which older people had failed to do. On Friday morning, I wore layers of warm clothing on a day of cold gray drizzle; the battery in my camera was freshly charged. I got off the T-bana at Gamla Stan, found my way on cobblestone streets to Mynttorget . . . and smiled when I saw them: kids with signs, very *young* kids, who were not sitting at their desks in a classroom, but who were outside in the heart of Stockholm on a cold gray day, peacefully and energetically confronting the powerful forces which were destroying their future.

As I walked through the vibrant crowd, I would point at various posters, then at my camera, asking if I could take a picture. The young people always responded with a proud smile as they held up their statement for the world to see. Many of the posters were in English, rather than Swedish, clearly for television coverage in other countries.

Now I spotted a parade of students with banners marching along a street toward Mynttorget. At first I stood at the edge of the street, zooming with my telephoto on various clusters of students with their signs. Then I stepped into the middle of the street and let the river flow around me, washing away decades of grief and despair . . . and cleansing me with renewed energy and hope.

The old teacher was so immensely PROUD of these great students. And of the teachers and parents who were marching with them.

Young people of the world, you are the First Global Generation in Human History. You are capable of freeing yourselves from the shackles, from the chains, of the 20th century—the poverty, the pollution, the plunder, the racism, and the wars—so that you can build the Renaissance of the 21st Century.

That Renaissance has already begun, especially in the development of clean energy. On Sunday, March 17, according to WindEurope in Brussels, wind turbines provided 24.5% of Europe's electricity. Denmark produced 115% of the electricity which it needed; the surplus 15% was sold to its neighbors.

On Friday in Stockholm, surrounded by teenagers of every ethnic background, I often heard their vibrant voices chanting, "Keep it in the ground!" Yes, keep the oil in the ground, forever. Lift your faces to the sun, which blesses all of you, equally. Lift your faces to the wind, which blesses all of you, equally.

No one ever went to war over a wind turbine.

Thank you, Greta, for encouraging a growing number of young people to take the first step. You unlocked their courage and their energy, and their determination.

Cordially, John Slade

Tuesday, March 19, 2019. Oslo.