

Nature's Retirement Speech

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Congratulations!

You have done it. You have surpassed yourselves – and in some ways, surpassed me.

You are one of my weaker creations, but a simple and ingenious factor separates you from all else that surrounds us. That moves you from the product of the cosmos to keeper of the cosmos. You can think!

Thinking provides you with the potential to achieve incredible feats and horrific acts. It is with this in mind that I offer some advice on your, or should I say our, future.

If I were to share only one piece of advice with you, it is this – Don't Burn The Books!

As one of your number, John Lawton, remarked, “we are burning the books in our biological library faster than we are able to read them.”

You are only at the beginning of comprehending the power you now wield. To ever hope of understanding the nature of the possibilities before you, you need to study more. So please, stop burning the books.

Your future as a species is now in your hands. This is hugely important - though you may not think it breaking news. After all, several decades ago with the first understanding of the atom and the discovery of its destructive power, you caught a glimpse of your new role.

It was in a nanosecond in the Nevada desert that human beings accelerated a transformation from being merely a part of the natural order to a powerful force that has the potential to annihilate all life, everywhere.

However, the power to destroy is finite – you and all that surrounds you can only be destroyed once. A far more frightening prospect comes from the power to create.

This power is infinite and requires careful reflection and the utmost vigilance and responsibility.

But first, take a moment to pat yourselves on the back. Why? Because you have done it – you have cracked the code! Your ability to read the instructions of life, to understand them and, in so doing, to change the rules, means you've not just won promotion to a higher league – you are now playing a whole new ball game.

You've still a lot to learn. You need to be clearer about your power, your new responsibilities, the limits of that power and how best to manage and distribute that power.

This highlights a key difference between natural and human decision-making. I've always kept things simple – my only purpose has been life itself. Negative electrons attract positive protons, entities bond, new entities are created. There is no waste – energy is merely transformed, never destroyed. The natural world is ordered by a simple logic – life must go on.

But you get to choose! If you are serious about shouldering the responsibility of your species' survival, you need to be prepared to give votes to those you will never meet – your descendents. Your power to shape the futures they can experience is unprecedented. That is both your prize and your burden.

You will find planning for the survival of your species more difficult than I have. Your decision-making processes are more complex and contain more “noise” in the system than mine. I have cellular biology. You have politics.

You have always fought amongst yourselves over power. For all your triumphs, your evolution is some way from making that a thing of the past. So there will be battles aplenty this century over control of both genetic power and disappearing natural resources.

You already know many of the fault-lines - different genetic outcomes for the rich and the poor, conflict between the private and public for ownership of certain forms of life itself and deeper religious, political and ethical divisions between those with alternative visions of your future as a species.

However, politics does itself evolve. Powerful movements – great religions, democracy, feminism, civil rights and the contending forces of capitalism and socialism marked previous eras of human development.

This century is no different. It will be your first full century in charge of your evolutionary destiny. This will be the defining political challenge you face. For the first time you will have to make decisions as a species.

But this century, for the first time – you may be able to do just that! The globalised world is beginning to give you the institutions and communications capacity to do it.

But before you get too comfortable with this vision, think of your place in evolution: you are not as good as it gets! Just as your recent ancestors lived according to values that seem foolish, unjust and short-sighted to you now, you too have a lot of growing up to do.

So long as you remain so divided in the present, it will be hard to develop a common vision for your future. However, you still can and should build global consensual agreements, such as the Universal Declaration on the human genome.

On a practical level, you won't truly be able to make decisions as a species so long as poverty means that two thirds of humanity is denied adequate access to telecommunications. And whatever you do eventually agree upon will fail to have meaning without strong global institutions to enforce it. Treaties need to be kept. Only then can globalisation begin to mean acting globally as a species.

There is also a more general question about the nature of the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world.

Governments, corporations, religious institutions and civil society groups are all at some level in the happiness business – they exist to meet those unique needs that define your humanity.

Yet they sometimes lose sight of the central fact that you are (for the foreseeable future at least) biological beings. Each one of you is a vibrant part of the natural order, inherently designed to derive happiness from interacting with other biological entities.

Patting the neck of a horse, breathing the ocean air as dawn breaks or lying next to another human being – they are magical because you, like every life-force, are as a charged molecule, irresistibly drawn to others.

To earn one instant of truly perfect, peaceful beauty climb 20,000 feet up a dormant volcano. Such tranquillity was created in a fury of lava, pyroclastic clouds, sulphuric acid and the force of several hundred atom bombs. And it can only be enjoyed for a moment - you must quickly return down the mountain so as not to freeze to death. Feeling truly alive means experiencing nature in all its contradictions.

Yet, your lives are increasingly defined by contact with the synthetic. One recent poster campaign by a cosmetics company was of an otherwise attractive young woman, smiling broadly, evidently pleased with herself for coating her skin in a sickly orange film - "Who needs the sun?" she asked.

It is not all that surprising a question. Human ingenuity is producing alternatives and enhancements to natural processes at dizzying speed. This is consistent with a defining feature of civilisation - distancing from nature.

This has mostly made excellent sense – in its purest form the natural world can be a harsh and unforgiving place for a sensitive species like yours. You have succeeded precisely because of your capacity to modify and upgrade the raw materials the natural world provided you with. Grass under your feet may feel nice, but rubber soles and concrete are often more practical.

But just as within your own body, where your immune system depends upon balance, so too it is worth recognising that there is a tipping point when your modifications overwhelm those parts of the natural world that you simply cannot improve.

This relates to the most precious of all natural resources, the one you will never master – time itself. The past cannot “un-happen.” Some consequences of decisions you make now will be irreversible.

Furthermore, time is an arena in which I have a huge advantage over you. For the most part, I’ve made my changes to the natural world slowly. Yet even with your discoveries in science and medicine, each of you is only around for an eye-blink.

This denies you perspective. Up to two centuries ago there were less than a billion of you. Now you may soon reach eight billion. Your population has exploded – but none of you live long enough to understand the changes as they happen.

Action movie lovers will note one law of human nature: that humans will only act collectively and in solidarity as a species when they are imminently threatened with extinction – preferably by aliens, time travelling machines or large asteroids.

Unsustainable consumption amongst an exploding population is a real threat – but hope of global solidarity to tackle it with urgent purpose is lost because the timeframe is decades, not days.

So these are some of the issues I see as I hand over the reigns of power. Although there are many things to be nervous about, please don’t fear knowledge itself. Trying to halt your journey of discovery would be “binding your feet to prevent your own progress.”

If I am to leave you with one last piece of advice it is **be humble**. There are important decisions to be taken – best not made whilst intoxicated with the thrill of your own power.

Besides, you may overestimate that power. Although I’m stepping down as CEO of planet Earth, I’m remaining as chair – you still report to me and your stewardship is subject to performance.

But I have faith in you. The future is yours to make, so be excited by this amazing opportunity. Be proud of yourselves.

But don’t burn the books.