

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission

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Summary:

In the face of great crises, great action is required. The current food and energy crises have been caused by the actions of our entire society and, thus, can only be solved when our entire society works together. It is time now to stop looking for heroes that will save us and time to save ourselves, as ordinary people, in an ordinary way, working together to do extraordinary things. This will be accomplished through the daily, individual economic decisions that each of us make, which produce pressure on businesses, infrastructure, government, and the system responsible for the problems at hand.

Essay:

Mankind is in the midst of one of the greatest crises it has ever known. But unlike the great crises of the past – the Ice Age, the Great Depression, the Cold War, to name just a few – this solution cannot be fled. There is no room to migrate to warmer areas, as in the Ice Age; there will be no economic boom that ends our problems like during the Great Depression. The hostilities between our society and the forces threatening it will not vanish, as was the case after the Cold War. The causes of this crisis are neither economic, nor political, nor do they have anything to do with natural climate change. The only thing that today's food and energy crisis has in common with the great crises of the past is that it cannot be ignored. Like the Ice Age, this crisis is the result of a process that will not stop on its own. Those who refuse to see it shall have to face the consequences of a rapidly changing economic, ecological and cultural landscape and their own inability to fit into it.

It is a well known fact that the necessities of life are growing ever scarcer. Oftentimes, the rapidly expanding global population is blamed for bad living conditions in most of the world; simply said, there's less food and more mouths to feed. The plain reality is that there are many places where people are starving to death and even more places where they simply don't have the resources they need in order to enjoy a high quality of life.

How can we change this? Should we forbid the less developed areas of the world to increase their energy consumption? Should we take radical measures to restrict population growth in nations with high birth rates?

Even if the above mentioned ideas were ethically acceptable, they still wouldn't be effective, simply due to the fact that they couldn't be enforced. And although it's perhaps easier to blame the developing world for the crisis at hand, we are forced by the magnitude and scope of this problem to examine our own behavior and search for answers that produce action and not finger pointing.

Despite increasing food scarcity, the global trend of increasing agricultural productivity isn't changing. Despite concerns with energy availability, the number of renewable energy sources grows, as does the effectiveness of existing technologies. Nonetheless, there are other statistics that aren't as encouraging; we see that in the

developed world increasing amounts of food are thrown away and more and more energy is wasted. The problem that we face isn't one of scarcity, but of extravagance.

In the developed world it's possible to buy fruits from other hemispheres, even though the same fruits are produced in the region they're shipped to. Energy costs caused by product production and transport are ignored, as long as the price they're offered for is low enough. Simultaneously, it has been and remains a problem that the runaway consumerism of the wealthy west, combined with predatory capitalism in the developing countries, makes products available that are ethically unacceptable, as much because of their effects on the environment as because of the sociopolitical damage they cause. It is clear that, although many people live in a state of poverty, the problem is not a lack of resources but a lack of effective resource management.

This knowledge is sadly not enough to change the situation. The strategies of the past aren't enough to solve a problem that's caused by millions of individual decisions made every day by everyday people. Neither a New Deal nor a Marshall Plan can change a runaway capitalistic society fundamentally enough to fix it; that would be like trying to waterproof a sieve by placing a plate beneath it.

The solution is in our hands. The potential heroes of the future are very ordinary people doing slightly extraordinary things that, with time, change the extraordinary to ordinary. This is possible. We can, as consumers, choose to buy products that were ethically produced, choose to eat foods that were produced in an environmentally friendly way in the region that we live in. We can choose to buy energy from renewable sources and use it more conservatively. Now we are in the position to do so; now we have the resources to pay a little bit more.

If we fail to act, however, we'll have to watch the precious few resources we have grow increasingly scarce. Inactivity will, in the end, cost much more than proactivity now. We, potential heroes of the future, consumers and decision makers, leaders of companies and nations, housewives and children, brokers and beggars, can all sacrifice a little bit of the well-being, that we've gained in the past by subtracting from the well-being of others, in order to improve the future. This paradigm shift – the knowledge that it's time to invest in sustainable development on all levels, as individuals, households, regions, states, as a world working together – is our only hope for a future where our children have the same quality of life as we do. Our sacrifices of today can be investments in the future rather than withdrawals from its resource pool.

Knowledge of the true costs of our consumption, whether in production, transportation, or disposal, combined with hope in a future that's every bit as good as our present or perhaps even better, and the courage and willingness to work for it, are the medicine that will save our world from excessive consumption, production, and bad resource distribution. How many people can the world support? Everyone, if everyone supports themselves and each other. Let us shift our thinking to realize what our food and energy costs; let us use this thinking to make better decisions; let us have the hope to carry these lessons to our children and to our future.

How can our society increase its well-being in the face of these great crises? With hope. And with the participation of every member.