1 THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

There are many ways of framing the challenge we face and the systemic reset that we need. Before going further, it is worth looking at this challenge from a few different angles.

Breaking a Habit

There are many, many people like me who are trying to help the world get to grips with impending environmental breakdown. But we have been stuck in a routine. We keep on working in our own different ways. We keep complaining at the failure of the world to listen properly and to act in a commensurate way. *The Limits to Growth* was first published in 1972 and *Silent Spring* even before that in 1962.[1] The basic, simple, indisputable messages behind these two seminal books have been screamed out by countless people and largely ignored for decade after decade. People like me, along with others who are bolder and more articulate, and those attempting more politically diplomatic language, make warnings. We point out that thresholds are being breached. We say the time to act is *now*. Then no action happens, and we complain again, saying that the time to act is *right NOW*. And we try to find a different way of describing the urgency that is even more emphatic than the words we used the last time around.

Although there are many different styles of approach, for all of us, it is time to admit that our efforts, our failures, our fruitless calls to arms and our renewed efforts, are

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a habit. Many of us have mental models of our whole lives playing out this way and imagine ourselves frustrated, angry and still complaining on our deathbeds as humanity spirals downwards. Maybe some of us half imagine a sour satisfaction in being able to say: 'I told you so.'

I don't want that life trajectory for myself. If it came to it, I'd rather have holidays in the sun while I can than waste my life fruitlessly complaining. But that isn't what I really want either. What I really want is to see the change we so badly and urgently need *actually starting to happen*. So that means spotting the dysfunctional cycles of failure and changing them.

If what you are doing is consistently not working, it is time to do something different.

Learning and Growing from Failure

Since nothing so far has delivered the change we need, many approaches are being tried out in the search for something that will cut through. That is good. Everyone has a different understanding of how the world works and what will be effective. People have written books, articles, academic papers, made films, become environmental consultants, personally modelled sustainable living, tried to set up exemplary sustainable businesses or become delegates at COP climate conferences. Many have taken to the streets or blocked roads, and some have even gone to prison. Some people say we have to work within today's economic mindset and framework because that's just the way the world has to work or because there isn't time to change it, while others say we can't get anywhere until we build a brand-new economics from first principles.

None of these things has so far delivered the change we need. Almost everyone trying to enable it thinks that some of the others working for the same ends are doing more

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harm than good. Nobody can really claim their approach is working, since *nothing* has worked.

Those pushing for a more sustainable world now need to stand back and learn from our failures so that they are not wasted experiences. We need them to become the building blocks by which we come to understand what it will take to actually make progress. We need to honour these heroic failures, and somehow stand on their shoulders.

To do this, we have to also peer under the surface of our failure to understand it. Firstly, of course, we do have to understand the most obvious and superficial reasons for failure. But then we need to dig deeper into the reasons behind the reasons. And then we need to dig still further to see the reasons behind the reasons behind the reasons. We have to get to the core of the problem. Only then will we be able to treat the causes of our failure, rather than the symptoms.

An Evolution in Wisdom to Balance Our Technology

Another way of looking at it is that we face an urgent *evolutionary* challenge to develop the governance skills that will allow us to survive alongside ever-rising power and technology within the confines of a finite physical space: our still mainly beautiful Planet A.

We often describe ourselves as a high-achieving species with plenty to be proud of. Tech-giant companies and tech billionaires describe their purpose as being to power humanity on to its next stage of achievement. An alternative perspective is that we are negative achievers, that technology without sufficient wisdom has made us the most destructive species on Earth. Our net contribution to the ecosystem has been worse than any other species. We have the most to be ashamed of and the greatest reason to humbly beg the ecosystem's forgiveness for our ineptitude.

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Through our ingenuity and our technical brilliance, we have inadvertently brought a new era on ourselves. I'll use the word Anthropocene very simply to mean the era in which suddenly it is humans that are the biggest factor influencing the Earth's ecosystem. It represents a brand-new context in which to live, and it requires a new way of carrying ourselves. We haven't yet worked out what that new way is exactly, still less how to implement it, but we don't have any time to lose.

In the old context – the one in which we learned almost everything we know about how to do life – the world was a robust place. If we needed more of something, we could just expand. The level of our pollution was enough to affect small areas but not the whole world. We were unable to annihilate fish stocks, contaminate every corner of the ecosystem, change the atmosphere to mess up the climate, or poison or irradiate the entire world. Now we can do all those things and then some. We restrain ourselves from a few, but most we are doing at ever-faster rates. The change in context is that we can no longer get away with expanding our physical impacts.

After exploring what this Anthropocene is like, examining the consequences of not living well in it, and peeling back the layers of the problem, we'll be exploring what it will take for humans to be making the kinds of decisions that *can* allow us to thrive in this Anthropocene, how we can put that in place, and what each of us can do to help.

Just a Temporary Pause in Expansion?

Yet another way of framing the challenge is that we have to manage what might only need to be a temporary pause in the journey of human expansion. I titled my last book *There Is No Planet B* because for the next few generations, there won't be one – a 'Planet B', that is. I showed in that book with some very simple physics how utterly unfeasible it is,

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with the technologies that we currently know about, to bridge the gap to the nearest planet that could be any good to live on. We all hear about multi-billionaires who claim to be pushing at the frontiers of humankind's next great chapter of achievement – life in space. This may indeed one day be possible and even be an appropriate focus of attention. But right now it is so far away in any meaningful sense, and the crises we face are so pressing, that the space tourism hobbies of the over-rich have to be seen as an extreme dereliction of the responsibilities that come with wealth. The spare billions should be going into humanity's practical survival needs. We need to concentrate on making life work on our beautiful Planet A for the next century or two if Planet B is ever going to be an option in the distant future.

Gaining Agency at the Global System Level

We talk about the human trajectory of innovation and growth as if it is something that we control, but as we will see in the next chapter, if we stand back far enough, it is clear that so far it follows a predictable trajectory, over which humans have failed to exert much influence at all. We haven't needed to before, but we do now. For those of us who think in terms of free will, or live as if there is such a thing, the question is whether we will remain slaves to this trajectory, which ends in inevitable collapse, or whether we are capable of breaking free and exerting our agency. And if so, how?

Truth

As we look at each of the above ways of framing this challenge, a critical issue – perhaps *the* most critical – will come up again and again as we dig into the components of the Polycrisis. Whether your focus is on day-to-day practical

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politics or the crises facing our species, we can't get anywhere without higher standards of honesty.

How can we trust our politicians to act if they are dishonest about their vested interests in fossil fuel companies?

How can we weigh the potential and limitations of technology if companies fudge the figures to turn an ever-greater profit?

How can we cure ourselves of the Polycrisis if we won't even admit we're ill?

Can we even get by at all in the Anthropocene if our view is obscured by deceit?

We need radically more *honesty*, more reliably, in our politics, media and businesses, placing this issue at the very core of the Polycrisis. I want you to view everything you look at within this book through the lens of honesty, so that when we return to this topic in depth, you're aware of the stakes behind the 'mistruths' that plague our everyday.

One lesson we specifically need to learn from is the failure to uphold standards in public life. For many, the eruption of lying among many of our most senior politicians in the UK, US and many other countries was almost entertaining in the short term, but the consequences are already biting hard for some. Recently, we seem to have been experimenting in depriving ourselves of the qualities we need more than ever from our politicians, our media and our businesses. Although deceit has been a feature of these domains to some extent throughout history, the context in which we now find ourselves requires us to make an evolutionary step change. We can no longer afford to put up with it. That is why truth is one of the most critical leverage issues – or perhaps the most critical – for anyone who cares about the future. By pulling the truth lever hard, instead of loosening our grip as we have been doing, we can radically improve our chances of thriving in

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the Anthropocene. We will go on to look at how that can be done, but first we need to get a better perspective on the challenge by standing right back from the problem to look, in important but relatively unusual ways, at the physical dynamics of the crises we face.

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