

A Hinge Moment For Planet Earth

Harry Flood

Near the end of Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, the hero finds himself standing in the gallows, about to be hanged. In one minute it'll all be over. It suddenly occurs to him what an enormous amount of time that is. A full minute. He takes ten seconds to think about his family, then allows his mind to roam over the play of light on the church steeple in the distance, the granular subtleties of his entire life. His impending demise – or so he thought – had smashed his last moment on earth like an atom.

You could say that's all of us now. We're standing on the gallows having an existential moment together. And performing in our heads what the writer Mitchell Jackson called "survival math" – a term he hatched after being held up at gunpoint and realizing his odds of living would swing wildly depending on what he said and did in the next thirty seconds.

Call it a hinge moment.

The world has been through these before. Robert Oppenheimer, crouched amid the tumbleweeds in the New Mexican desert, knew there was a nonzero chance that pushing the button on the Trinity test could end the world, even as he gave the okay to do it. Stanislav Petrov, a Soviet functionary kenneled in a missile silo watching a barrage of incoming American nukes on his radar display, chose not to pick up the phone to alert his bosses to launch a retaliatory strike – guessing, correctly, that it was a false alarm.

In those cases, most of us never knew how close we came to oblivion. What's different about this hinge moment is that we're *all* pretty much aware of what's going on. When a financial crisis wipes out Wall Street and a lot of people's savings – and then because no guardrails were really put in place another comes along and does it again – that's hard to miss. It sounds like the landlord knocking to tell you your rent cheque bounced.

And now you're driving on the highway and you notice you're not using your windshield fluid to get the bug splats off. At all. Wait, what? Where'd all the bugs go? In fact, insect populations have crashed just in our adult lifetimes. No bugs splatted; and no birds sang. At this rate end of the century, half of all species on earth will have disappeared.

In every dimension of our lives, the hard truth closes in. Human behavior has upset the ecological applecart to the point where the status quo will almost certainly kill us. Funny thing about the status quo, though. We feel no great urgency to change it. Because it's not hurting us – yet.

If you've ever visited Easter Island, the second question that probably occurred to you (after "Holy crap, how'd they get these giant heads here?") was "Where did everybody go? The Islanders once had booming little life going. They thrived by exploiting their natural resources. But they never figured out that they were eventually going to have to change their m.o. The island was finite: they were going to have to plan for the future or curb their appetites or both. They didn't. The wood ran out, they descended into cannibalism and just winked out.

And so. This is where we are. Everything depends on how we pivot, en masse, right now. All we know is that if we survive, the world on the other side will be transformed so fundamentally it, and we, might be almost unrecognizable.

Hinge moments are like levers. They present rare opportunities to get monumental things done. They demand two things of us: first, recognizing that we're in one. And second, seizing the disproportionate power super-optimal moment before it slips away and is gone forever.

It could be that the hinge moment we're teetering on now will require something new of us, a stretch we've never had to make. More than a pivot in technology or ecological or political strategy. Something more like ... an evolution of consciousness.

"The earth needs something from us right now," the philosopher Jacob Needleman said, toward the end of his life. "It needs us to become more fully human." We're far more developed intellectually than we are morally, Needleman said. We're basically children, swinging blunt instruments around without much regard for whose noggin or window they break. "When a civilization develops one side of itself like that, so lopsidedly, it's racing toward destruction."

In Needleman's view, we have *infected* the planet with our own "soul sickness." We treat the planet like shit because we treat one another like shit. Like it or not, we are the biggest change agents in the sandbox now, for good or ill. The earth's survival depends on us ... growing up. And not in the usual meander-y way that people and animals usually grow up, but lickety-split.

And we feel that spike of urgency to spread the message, to shake awake our fellow passengers who are still snoozing. We are a little crazy now with this desire to live, this desperation *for all of us to live*.

We are shouting now. Shouting through an open window between worlds.

The Ted K Archive

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