

MY MOM'S DIAGNOSIS

by William Thomas

My mother's jaw-dropping beauty belies her middle-age, which is in turn informed by her majesty. Unafraid to experiment and evolve from the lessons she either arranges or is forced to confront, my mom moves with a sense of timeless wisdom. Whether peacefully reflective, wildly exuberant or scary angry, in her roles as nurturer and teacher she has always lived large, dispensing swift perfect justice without blame or regret. She is always direct and 100% real. Even gravely wounded, she remains as totally present as that eagle spiralling right now above my island shack.

Though my mother remained serene, I wasn't and didn't when she was called in for yet another "emergency" consultation. The international crowd of specialists that met us in that airy doom room inhabited the pinnacle of their respective fields. And in an era of marvels that make Star Trek look retro, their technology was the best available. That was the trouble. After decades of monitoring my mother's condition with increasingly sophisticated tests and instruments, their demeanour today resembled a triage ward. All were gravely polite. None was smiling.

"We've been going over your latest test results and, ah, they are not encouraging," said Dr. Arrhenius. "The toxic environment you've been living in for so long is cumulative and getting worse. Especially all that the second-hand smoke. And the poisoned water. And all those synergistically lethal chemicals, microwaves, geoengineering aerosols, GMOs and radionuclides you continue to be exposed to. The fever you've been running is starting to throw your entire circulation out of whack. Your heart is fibrillating and your lungs are compromised. I'm afraid it's going to get a whole lot worse. Very quickly. And very soon."

My mother was looking through the open window at a robin singing on a branch outside. So much joy coming from such a small creature! You should have seen the love in her eyes.

Unwilling to interrupt my mother's delight, Dr. Cynthia Rosenzweig faced me. She said, "These changes are happening now. And the impacts are being seen now."

"How much time does she have?" I said, sending the room into silence.

"The big question," somebody called out. She wasn't wearing a name tag.

"That is hard to say," responded Dr. Natalia Shakhova. "Your mother could continue to live a, how do you say, 'diminishing' life for another three or four decades. Perhaps even longer..."

"But..."

“But...” Dr. Arrhenius looked directly at my mom, “In your shaky state, our concern is that you could experience a series of destabilizing episodes that could greatly accelerate your already rapidly deteriorating condition. If you cross any one of a number of tipping points, no one will be able to save you.”

“I’ve survived worse.” Though my mother appeared determined as always, I sensed her diminishing resilience.

“Five major events, in fact,” agreed Dr. Arrhenius. “Your last big seizure was bad enough. But the one before that nearly killed you. Your recovery seemed to take eons.”

“And now my mother’s being squeezed by self-reinforcing, cascading impacts beyond her control,” I guessed aloud.

“We are probably closer to the punch than the squeeze,” Dr. Kump corrected.

“It’s not just the amount of abuse your mother’s endured, but the rapid rate of her multiplying exposures that’s so dangerous,” chimed in Dr. Bryan Lovell. “We’ve never seen this before.”

“Why are so many talking about me, but so few speaking *to* me,” mother said. “Even fewer are listening. I am so much more complex than all your models.”

Dr. Paul Beckwith turned to her. “You are presently undergoing preliminary stages of abrupt changes. If allowed to continue, you could experience a temperature increase of 5° to 6°C over the coming decades. If that happens, you won’t survive it.”

“You’re already experiencing escalating heat shocks accompanied by periodic drastic chills. Fever is already starting to destabilize your entire body,” Dr. Arrhenius took over. “You’re becoming dehydrated. And all that odourless gas you’re starting to pass – no need to be embarrassed – is making things worse. Much much worse.”

“If you further destabilize, the resulting complications would be significantly larger,” amplified Dr. Shakhova. “We cannot rule out sudden slippages. They could happen at any time. A single slip or slide could set off a Heinrich Event.”

“What’s that?” I demanded.

“I don’t want to say,” said Dr. Shakhova. “Please Google it.”

“Your condition is beginning to feedback on itself,” Dr. Wolfgang Knorr took over telling my mom. “This is good news for us because it shows our prognosis is correct. But it’s bad news for you.”

“We are losing control of our ability to get a handle on this,” added Dr. Andrew Weaver.

“So what can we do?” someone asked. By now, many of those present were crying.

“The answer to that implies a much more radical change than most people are willing to contemplate,” answered Dr. Ken Caldeira.

“Try me,” I said.

“People simply have to stop poisoning, irradiating, exploiting and raping your mother. They have to start treating her as their own mother, too,” said Dr. Arrhenius. “She needs everyone’s loving attention. Not more neglect or assault.”

“That’s certainly a direct answer,” I said. Rape is such an ugly word. Though it only hints at the lasting degradation and trauma that ensue from every mindlessly twisted attempt at coercion, corruption, power and control over – let’s finally face it, guys – the divine feminine.

“But most people aren’t prepared to back off even slightly.” Dr. Caldeira was getting angry. “How the hell do we reach people addicted to distractions and zombies glued to screens?”

“There must be something...” I started to say.

“There is!” exclaimed John Holdren. Everyone turned to face this influential government adviser. Even my mom. “The truth is,” he told her, “you’re burning up. Your condition is so dire, it’s time to discuss even more radical technologies to cool you down.”

“What sort of ‘radical tech’?” I wanted to know.

Or maybe I didn’t.

“We think the special aerosols we’ve been making your mother inhale are starting to help,” Mr. Holdren said. “We want to up the dosage. Significantly.”

I turned to my mother, hoping she would intervene on her own behalf. “But tests already show your blood stream is turning acidic. Further attempts to mask your deterioration with aerosol sprays will only provide an excuse to do nothing to stop it. We *have* seen this before. In the end, beneficial organisms will no longer live in the saltwater of which you (and the rest of us) are mostly composed.”

My mother smiled a sad smile. “Where did you learn to speak in parenthesis?” she said.

“It appears that we’ve thrown your mother and ourselves into the abyss,” said Professor Guy McPherson.”

“Let’s hear it for Dr. Doom,” someone said softly.

“What’s next is reminding people that their lives are short, and instead moving into the heart space, or what some people call the spiritual space of how do we deal with this,” McPherson went on as if he hadn’t heard that remark. Or maybe he didn’t consider that often-repeated appellation derogatory. Hadn’t he said a doctor’s duty is to tell their patients when their illness is terminal?

“What do we do now? How do I act as a human being? What kind of my humanity comes up as a reminder of the fact that our lives are short? Maybe we ought not focus on materialism at the expense of everything else. Maybe what we need is a grief recovery workshop. For anticipatory grief,” McPherson clarified.

“We're in a hospice situation,” he went on in a voice that strongly implied hope is not a plan. “We can't be stuck any more in what ‘should be’. We need to love what 'is'. Let's embrace that and love our mom. And experience and bring moments of joy to those around us. Maybe we could, for a change, make it not about us, for starters.”

Everyone fell silent again. Except for some quiet weeping.

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Earth,” said Dr. Jacob Smirnitskyi said for all of us. “As absurd and outrageous as this is sounding, aided by a few faceless bankers and their political lackeys, a handful of mega-corporations in the energy, extraction and casino business are currently running you – and just about everyone else – into the, er... ground.”

My mother laughed! “Just call me Gaia,” she said. “I like that name. Though I'm hardly the goddess the Greeks described, consider my spaces sacred and my self-regulation conscious.

A few of the doctors shuffled awkwardly. Those who'd read Lovelock stood fast.

“Few have the courage to conceive of better futures,” said George Monbiot. “The problem is now so big, and the scale and urgency of the solutions required so great, that it is impossible to talk about them within the current public policy frame. The business and political spheres have horizons too narrow and too limited in time to be able to deal with the challenges and complexities of your warming. There is no solution within the politics-as-usual frame, and there is no developed frame outside of it,” concluded the only other reporter in the room.

“It's time to prepare for war,” suggested Dr. Daniel Pauly. “A war on climate change. We are not dealing with it in terms of the danger that this represents. When there is a war, the industry and everyone else are put on a war footing. Really, the question of cost doesn't come up. Global warming now threatens all of civilization. But we are dealing with pennies. Pennies!”

“Good luck with that,” said Mr. Monbiot. “What needs to be done cannot be achieved in today's neoconservative capitalist economy, because a rapid transition will required a great deal of planning, coordination and allocation of labour and skills, investment, and materials and resources, that can't just be left to markets and pricing.”

“So what are our choices?” I asked.

“There is a choice between two dystopias: some very significant social and economic disruptions now while we make the transition quickly, or a state of permanent and escalating disruption as the planet's climate heads into territory where most people and most species will not survive,” George Monbiot replied.

“Our task now is to chart the ‘least-worst’ outcome. The population will need to actively understand and participate in some personally-disruptive measures, but they will do so because they have learned that the transition plans are both fair and necessary, and the other choice is unspeakable.”

“So let’s, how do you say, get on it,” urged Ms. Sakharov.

“That’s not going to be easy,” the British author and journalist reposted. “Humankind’s greatest crisis coincides with the rise of an ideology that makes it impossible to address. Preventing climate breakdown – the four, five or six degrees of warming now predicted for this century by green extremists like, er, the World Bank, the International Energy Agency and Price Waterhouse Coopers – means confronting the oil, gas and coal industry. It means forcing that industry to abandon the four-fifths or more of fossil fuel reserves that we cannot afford to burn. It means cancelling the prospecting and development of new reserves – what’s the point if we can’t use current stocks? – and reversing the expansion of any infrastructure – such as airports – that cannot be run without them.”

“And that’s not going to happen,” Guy McPherson said.

“Wrong answer!” I said. “Everyone who loves their mother, their children and their own life would benefit from noticing the choices they make every day.”

“What about you?” someone challenged.

“I just go where I’m told,” I responded. “I’ve marched on a dioxin-spewing pulp mill, exposed the herons and kids they were killing in a magazine read by government ministers, confronted the CEOs responsible in front of their shareholders and on prime-time Aotearoa TV. *Many were with me* in winning an extensive cleanup. Later I helped block the clearcutting of BC’s last temperate rainforests, push back smart meters, and avert a slaughter at Gustafsen Lake. *And I was not alone*. Still later, a tight support network allowed me to expose chemical-biological-radiation warfare in a distant desert, put my Eco War footage on the CBC and CNN, and help get all those oil fires put out. *Some of the best people you will ever meet are on the front-lines defending life.*”

“I read your books,” someone sang out.

“Call me fortunate to have been able to draw on the work of many other talented and committed persons – most of whom I’ve never met – in writing books on the origins and treatment of Gulf War Illness, the ecological costs of unchecked militarism, the sterilizing and lobotomizing effects of wireless devices, that ongoing geoengineering program dubbed ‘chemtrails’, and what really went down on 9/11,” I picked up. “There’s enough documented dirt in those page to send most high-level participants in the last four White House administrations straight to the slammer. Along with the heads of TEPCO and BP and every big bank hijacking this planet.”

“No wonder you had a heart attack,” interjected my kibitzer. I joined in the laughter.

“You got it,” I said, showing teeth. “And for some odd reason there doesn’t seem to be much money in protecting mom. Just putting food on the table and paying the rent are probably the biggest

stressors confronting anyone volunteering for this work.”

“So why go on doing it?” someone asked. “Nails that stick up are soon pounded flat. And like it or not, money is kind of handy.”

“Only kind of,” I said. “For those who choose to be protectors instead of predators, it’s a calling that cannot be denied. It simply must be done. Myself, I was told to protect and speak for the voiceless ones during a solo mountain vision quest in 1985. And I’ve been doing it ever since.”

“So what do you really hope to accomplish?” insisted my self-appointed critic.

“Absolutely nothing,” I said. “I have no expectations. Anyone grimly attempting to transform the full might of government-sponsored profit-driven psychosis into consciously life-affirming activities courts disillusion, despair, sickness and ultimately – as I’ve seen all too often – death.”

“Knowing what we know, how can we be happy?” another attendee wanted to know.

“I recommend having a heart attack,” I said. “When it’s over, you will be absolutely thrilled to be alive!” (More smiles. Did Guy McPherson wink at me?)

“Because every heartbeat and breath is a gift,” I continued. “And because this lonely blue marble of a planet is still so very beautiful. And there are no lifeboats. Plus, I am not attached to outcomes. That’s the big one. Engage in this work with your utmost commitment and passion. Just for the joy and satisfaction of doing it. And the company of like-hearted friends. After all, none of us gets out of here alive.”

“That’s a gloomy thought.” (This from someone who’d just come into the room.)

“Actually, it can be an inspiring and empowering notion,” I dared him. “If you let your own impending mortality inform each moment of your most precious and fleeting blessing: *your life!* Since none of us knows how much time we’ve got left, why not live as if we have none?”

“You sure sound like someone with a lot to say before they croak,” the newcomer said.

“Just for the record,” I said. “You never know.”

“Is truth,” another consultant – forgive me, the prettiest one – conceded in English much better than my Russian. “Throughout the history, all wise guys said, ‘Let death be your most trusted advisor.’ Is best before die, I am thinking. Yet you are duck your own question, *durak*. To repeating it: *What can we do?*”

“That’s me, the happy fool,” I cheerfully admitted. “An honoured role in every indigenous tradition. Do whatever moves you most. And do it without delay. I choose to ride an electric bike and sail my solar-powered outrigger canoe not because I think it will make the slightest difference to the impacts of one coal-fired power plant or a tree-toppling grapple-yarder operating for a single day...”

Several people nodded those “what’s the use” kind of nods.

“I do it first because going ‘lectric is fun! Whether afloat or ashore, there’s nothing like watching the land go by, while being firmly shoved in the back by some clean quiet torque force. Because it might inspire others to experience the liberation that comes from pulling the daily gasoline needle out of their arms, and the deeper peace that follows from knowing you’re not totally sabotaging succeeding generations. Because keeping day-to-day needs simple is not the road to hardship but happiness. Because doing something positive feels better than doing nothing. And mostly because I sense a deep moral obligation as a still-ambulatory crew onboard our shared space colony to unblinkingly witness what’s happening. And act! As Einstein said, to think and not act is a crime.”

Everyone was looking at me. *What could I say? That my favourite best grade-school report card came home with a single red checkmark in the conduct column through the box marked, ‘outspoken’? Or that my father did not support this view? With ‘normalcy’ as nuts as things are starting to get, while everyone’s telling each other everything’s fine someone has to be weird. Just to be normal.*

“I soloed a Cessna when I was 16,” I decided to say instead. “One thing I learned is that a pilot never gives up. The engines quit, both wings come off, the aircraft enters an inverted flat spin... you keep wrestling the controls all the way down. Because you just never know. Good things, even improbable things, happen to those who try. That’s the catch. *You have to do something.*”

“No giving up, yes!” (Was that Dr. Similetov?)

“Exactly. On my first parachute jump over Wisconsin, one of my control lines got tangled,” I exemplified. “I couldn’t steer my chute. I climbed one of the risers and dealt with it. Another time I was diving with a group in pitch-darkness when my main air tank and emergency reserve shut down. It felt like sucking on an empty Coke bottle. What I did *not* do was hold my breath and bolt for the surface and blow out my lungs. I later went through two hurricanes offshore before being attacked by desperate would-be pirates in the South China Sea. Lucky for me, the *mana* of my mate Thea and our little backyard-built trimaran was strong. And I had prepared contingency plans. But not for the five weeks I spent with my Earthtrust buddies in Kuwait trying to rescue oiled birds from those blazing minefields. For all you flag-wavers, that whole thing, especially the carnage along Highway to Hell, was insane. Yet, hey, *here I am.*”

“Your guardian angels must be toast,” now PhD doctor laughed out loud..

“I told them I’m retired,” I said. “But they don’t believe me.”

So much laughter from such frighteningly bright doom and gloomers! Could this really be about doom and *bloom*?

“Look, we can party down. Invoke the intercession of aliens or gods. Enter Guy’s hospice. Or, as someone else here said, get on with it,” I went on. “Buy some time for every creature that will follow us by starting to act as if we truly love mom and all her offspring – *of all species everywhere* – who are in our care. What else are you going to do while you’re waiting for whatever comes next?”

“Well, I for one could use a drink,” said my ally in the back.

Everyone laughed again. Who could figure such joviality from folks convinced the world has already ended? (Maybe because it hasn't?)

“One more thing, the biggest, before we join the rest of the revellers onboard *Titanic*,” I said. “The really crazy thing – the *crazy wisdom* – is once you commit to doing this work on behalf of your mother, lack of money's not that important. Everything is provided.”

“How so?” several people spoke up. They looked at each other with *gotcha* grins.

“Many good people are waiting for you to lend a hand,” I said, before attempting to distill nearly half-a-century's lessons on life's front lines. “Whatever you choose to do – whether you join 350 org or Greenpeace or even better, start your own local movement for common-sense change... whether you decide to chain your car to a tree, or hug a tree, get in some corporate faces, or decide to simply stop buying their riskiest toys and lies... *you will attract every guide, every ally, everything you need, including the power to accomplish your task*. That's how this works. Move with all your heart to cherish, protect and celebrate life and I promise you will be astonished at all the assistance you attract. Not all of it visible.”

“Woo, woo,” that now familiar voice said to more laughter.

“I'm not talking about angels, Allah or Jesus,” I finished. “This is not about invoking superstition, invisible friends, magical beliefs or fairy tales – though the lessons from our longest-running myths are far more profound when not taken literally. I'm talking about the power that animates all life and *flows through each of us*.”

“Tell it,” someone said as easily as tossing rocket fuel onto a fire.

“Remember who you are! Understand in your guts that you are an embodied immortal being of light. The scientists in this room know this is true. The photons strobing off human cells have been photographed. And Einstein also showed that energy and matter can never be destroyed but only transmuted one into the other for all eternity. So yes, get on with it. I would not be alive today if I hadn't connected with – and am constantly renewed by – the energy that flows from some unsayable source through all things.”

“He gets it.” This time it was my mother who spoke. “And so does everyone in this room and in my care,” she added. “Whether they awaken to it or not.”

Then, with a twinkle in her eyes that was heartening to see, she said, “It's not over till it's over. And even then... it's not.”

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Like those movies where fictional characters interact with contemporary historical figures speaking for themselves, this imaginary piece riffs off the printed quotes from many of the leading scientists and an award-winning British author and journalist spreading the word about Earth's Sixth Great Extinction - and what must be done. I've taken liberties in awarding a few honorary doctorates to the "doctors" in that room. Also in putting few references to "mom" in some important people's mouths. With apologies to Svante Arrhenius (1859-1927), who first warned us about all this, and whom I've resurrected in contemporary jargon, the details of his living successors remains intact. (*Jacob Smirnitskyi* is one of the Russian research ships tracking methane releases in the Arctic.

"This is not a climate model or a prediction but actual observations of weather events and temperatures that have happened." [[Think Progress Aug 4/12](#)]

"It's not the kind of thing where you can compromise."
[[Brainy Quotes](#)]

"Human-induced climate change is happening now, and the impacts are being seen now."
[[BBC Apr 6/07](#)]

"We are probably closer to the punch than the squeeze." [[Independent June 12/11](#)]

"Life is as sensitive to the rates of change as to the absolute amount of change."
[[Independent June 12/11](#)]

"Abrupt and unexpected change happens at a tipping point. Nonlinearity is kicking in!"
[[Arctic News 28/12](#)]

Atlantic waters decanting into the Beaufort Sea "are destabilizing shallow methane hydrates..."
[[NASA GISS Sept/04](#)]

... just a few degrees more ocean warming might release 2,000 billion tons of methane gas into the atmosphere, triggering a sudden "destabilization event". [[Baltimore Sun Dec 16/04](#)]

"We cannot rule out sudden major methane emissions. They could happen at any time."
[[Der Spiegel Apr 17/08](#)]

"We could be seeing the carbon cycle feedback kicking in, which is good news for scientists because it shows our models are correct. But it's bad news for everybody else."
[[Sydney Morning Herald May 12/07](#)]

"We are losing control of our ability to get a handle on the global warming problem."
[[Al Jazeera Dec 20/12](#)]

"Your blood is turning acidic." ("The rate of ocean acidification is the fastest in 65 million years.")

[[The Tyee Feb 18/10](#)]

"The answer implies a much more radical change to our energy system than people are thinking about."

[[Washington Post Mar 10/08](#)]

"... radical technologies..." [[AP; NY Daily News Apr 8/09](#)]

"What's next is reminding people that their lives are short, and instead moving into the heart space, or what some people call the spiritual space of how do we deal with this." [[Truthout Dec 1/14](#)]

"There is no solution within the politics-as-usual frame..." [[George Monbiot Dec 3/12](#)]

"It's time to prepare for war on climate change." [[Climate Code Red Dec7/12](#)]

The *qi (chi) (ki)* energy "that animates all things." [[Creative Systems Thinking](#)]

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