

Preface:

The Night I Went Drinking and the World Fell Apart

“Why are there ads for professional-grade respirators and hand sanitizer all over our Amazon account?”

I was barely awake when my wife walked into our bedroom. She was puzzled at what seemed to her to be a change in Amazon’s algorithms.

This was February 25, 2020. I had been out to Dain’s Place (my local dive bar) the night before with two friends of mine. In passing, I had mentioned the unprecedented lockdown that was currently underway in Wuhan, China. A novel coronavirus had recently been identified, and hospitals were swamped with patients reporting respiratory issues. I pondered aloud whether the world might be overreacting to what, some were saying, could just be a bad case of the flu.

My friends—both more scientifically literate than myself—raised their eyebrows. This, they told me, was an extremely dangerous situation. One of my drinking companions was building a tech startup focused on scientific research data. He explained to me that we should fully expect to see the infection rate skyrocket as the virus began to spread. He pointed me to credible sources suggesting that without effective mitigation efforts, as much as 40–70 percent of the world’s population could get infected. In a scenario like this, he said, the deaths would likely be in the millions.

Then the conversation moved on.

We drank some more beer. We talked about politics and bad movies. Then we drank even more beer. Eventually, we said our good-byes. (My friend looked at me like I was insane when I went

to shake his hand.) Meandering home from the bar, pleasantly drunk, I began to reflect on their warnings. Then, slowly, I started to freak out.

And that's the story of how I came to be sitting up at midnight, searching for face masks and respirators on my wife's Amazon account.

A Gradual Social Reckoning

Of course, we now know that this was the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a catastrophic global event which, at the time of writing, is still ongoing. And I believe it offers some lessons for us about how we—as individual citizens—can engage with a dangerous crisis that is more complex than any single one of us can tackle alone.

Much like with the topic of climate change, in the US at least, not everyone was listening to the science during the early part of the crisis. It was almost as if there was an invisible split between those of us who had been clued in to the impending disaster, and everyone else. Thanks to nothing more than a chance conversation with a couple of friends, I now found myself on the side of the forewarned. Writing on Twitter, *Atlantic* staff writer Amanda Mull opined on the strange social dynamic that many people found themselves in:

[I] feel like every social circle right now has someone who has read all the coronavirus news out of China and Korea and Italy and knows what's coming and they're in charge of gently explaining things to all their friends who heard "a bad flu" three weeks ago and checked out.

Gradually, however, reality caught up.

News from Italy was particularly grim. Hospitals were overwhelmed, the death rate was spiking, and eventually the whole of the country, and many neighboring countries too, had to go into complete lockdown. Serious epidemiologists began appearing in the media, suggesting that the US was only a few weeks behind.

Action Is Contagious Too

In the absence of federal leadership, local, regional, and civic entities stepped up. The NBA announced that it was canceling all games on March 11. In the days that followed, cruise lines and sports leagues, museums and concert halls, school systems and conference centers made similar announcements. And the number of companies sending employees to work from home snowballed into the thousands.

Individuals began canceling events too. One friend of mine went into self-quarantine with her family due to pre-existing health issues that made them high risk. Within a matter of days, states like California and New York began issuing orders for partial or complete lockdowns and shelter-in-place advisories. Before long, the vast majority of the country was in some form of state-mandated social distancing, including my adopted home state of North Carolina.

In other words, steps that had seemed extreme began to feel normal. What had felt like fear mongering began to feel like an expression of our civic duty. And each action by one entity made the next, more ambitious action by another significantly more socially and politically acceptable.

Individuals and institutions started by doing what they could—often imperfectly, and often alone. But it took hold because through their actions, however incremental, those individuals were able to bring others along with them. Once momentum reached a critical mass, it all happened incredibly quickly. Urgent, sustained, and diverse pressure from within the system was able to change conversations and build something that—temporarily at least—approximated a consensus. (Sadly, that consensus didn't last. But that's another story...)

The parallels with the climate movement are painfully obvious. We too have found ourselves warning of a dire threat that the system is not taking seriously enough. We too have been asking ourselves where and how we can take action on a crisis that is bigger than any one of us. And we too must accept that whatever we do,

however far we go in our own lives, it will mean next to nothing unless we can bring others—meaning entire societies—along for the ride.

And that means keeping our eye on the big picture.

Getting to the Point

It's customary for any book on the climate crisis to spend at least one chapter laying out the dire nature of the science. I'm going to skip that formality.

It's not that the science doesn't matter. (It does.) And it's not that the situation isn't serious. (It absolutely bloody is.) It's just that I assume that anyone reading this book is—to borrow a phrase from my earlier coronavirus analogy—already on the side of the forewarned. If you are, for whatever reason, new to the topic and would like to learn more, or if you simply enjoy reading books about terrifying planetary emergencies, then please take a look at the resource list at the end of this book. It includes both overviews of the crisis itself, as well as more detailed resources on what we, as a society and as individuals, can and should be doing about it.

But for now, for this book, the topic is not the crisis itself—that's the water we are swimming in. Instead, it's an attempt at asking ourselves what it looks like to live within that crisis, and to play a productive part in moving us toward solutions, even as we accept that we are also part of the problem.

It's partly a recounting of my own experiences. I've been aware of the climate crisis, and active in trying to help solve it, since my teens. Yet I now, miraculously, find myself in my forties with very little progress to show for my efforts, and with many of the trappings of a comfortable, middle-class, Western existence, not to mention the carbon footprint to go with it.

The rest of this book is the result of countless conversations with activists, academics, writers, and engaged citizens from many walks of life, who are each trying to find their own place within this complex, confounding fight for survival. To all of them, I owe an immense debt of gratitude. Some of the voices you'll hear are avid

champions of transforming our own lives and leading by example. Others are dismissive of individual carbon footprints, and more focused on holding the powerful to account. But all of them share a similar end goal—the complete transformation of our society.

Ultimately, they have more in common than they have that divides them. My hope is that we can all move forward. Together.

We're All Climate Hypocrites Now

"You can't be an environmentalist and eat meat,"
says the vegan as he steps onto the plane.

"You can't possibly live sustainably and drive a car,"
says the cyclist as she tucks into a burger.

"You can't be green and not compost,"
says the gardener as they plan an extension to their house.

Anyone who has been involved with modern, mainstream environmentalism will be familiar with the selectively applied purity test. Sometimes the gatekeeping is explicit, and sometimes it's implied. Sometimes we even imagine it as coming from people who have no intention of judging us at all, but who are simply doing a better job than we are at reducing their own environmental impact. Whatever the delivery mechanism, it's become so pervasive that it has shaped the conscience of those who don't really consider themselves environmentalists at all. Given the market demographics of folks who read books like this, you are most likely familiar with the predicament that such framing can cause.

On the one hand, you know that we are in the midst of perhaps the worst crisis humanity has ever faced, and you are rightly concerned. On the other hand, you are likely spewing significant amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every single day.

Indeed, while my fantastic publisher does what they can, production and distribution of this book itself—whether you are reading it in electronic or print form—is only made possible by the consumption of fossil fuels and other natural resources.

So what's a concerned global citizen supposed to do?

For all the great work being done around the world, there is a basic assumption pushed by the dominant culture that a person's contribution to the climate fight is largely, if not exclusively, measured by their personal carbon footprint. Say one word about the climate crisis, or the need to divest from fossil fuels, and you'll soon be met with a question about how you traveled to work today, or where the electricity powering your computer comes from. Even if you are just beginning to learn about the issue, there's a good likelihood that you've received more advice on changing your diet, refusing straws, or abandoning consumerism than you have on activism, advocacy, or organizing. In other words, you've been told how *not to contribute* so much to the problem, but not necessarily how you can be *most effective in actually fixing it*.

In many ways, the problem stems from a logical reading of the crisis we are in. Whether through driving or flying, eating a burger or streaming movies, we—meaning those of us enjoying at least a moderate level of material comfort—are all contributing to the climate crisis. And if it's our daily lifestyle choices that make us a part of the problem, then maybe we just need to make better choices. After all, if we don't put our own house in order first, aren't we basically just climate hypocrites if we start pointing the finger at the Koch Brothers or Exxon Mobil?

Well, it all depends on what you mean by “hypocrite.”

What Does ‘Hypocrite’ Even Mean?

In a fascinating paper published in the journal *Frontiers in Communication*, a team led by Shane Gunster of Simon Fraser University in Canada looked at how terms such as “hypocrite” and “hypocrisy” show up in coverage of the climate crisis. Analyzing op-eds from

both conservative and liberal newspapers around the world, what they found was a remarkable diversity of uses. On the one hand, opponents of climate action would often use allegations of hypocrisy as a cudgel to undermine celebrity activists and “elite” environmentalists whose ideas they opposed. Over time, such arguments have created a tricky dilemma for the climate movement:

This one-dimensional but compelling equation of environmentalism with sacrifice leaves climate advocates in a proverbial no-win situation when it comes to reconciling behavior with beliefs. As author Lynas (2007) wryly observed in a Guardian op-ed, “climate activists I know who do walk the walk (eschewing all flights, for example) look prim and obsessive, as if they are out of touch with the concerns and pressures faced by ordinary people.” Yet the views of those who do resemble “ordinary people,” and therefore fail to pay adequate behavioral homage to the gravity of the crisis, are likewise subject to ridicule and dismissal.

However, opponents of climate action aren’t the only ones engaging with the topic of hypocrisy. Gunster and his team also found plenty of articles from pro-environment voices too, many of them exploring the all-too-familiar gap between activists’ professed values and their everyday behaviors:

The most interesting and provocative explorations of climate hypocrisy were those which simultaneously accepted the claim that individuals do bear (some) responsibility for their carbon-intensive behavior (rather than simply deflect such claims to structures and institutions) but then challenged the assumption that such responsibility is best (and solely) discharged through consumer action.¹

It is these, more nuanced discussions of hypocrisy that I believe offer us a path forward. And they do so by pointing to one of the biggest fallacies of our culture.

Rational Choice Is No Choice At All

Economists and politicians have been mythologizing the “will of the market” as a mysterious, all-knowing force for years. Yet the supposedly rational choices we make are heavily influenced—if not quite predetermined—by factors that are way outside of our own individual control. As my friend David Monje, a teaching associate professor of Media and Technology at the University of North Carolina, put it to me when we were discussing an early draft of this book, “Rational choice theory is really, really stupid.”

From taxes to planning laws, and from government subsidies to cultural norms, our society makes certain behaviors easy, cheap, and socially acceptable. Meanwhile, it makes other behaviors so expensive and onerously difficult that only the hardest of the hardcore among us can even hope to stay on the straight and narrow. Sure, each of us plays a role in setting these systems and norms. It's undeniable, however, that some forces—and some entities—play a larger role than others.

Unless we acknowledge and seek to change the hidden ways that society shapes our decisions, then focusing the discussion primarily on the choices that each of us make in our daily lives is not just ineffective, it's potentially downright counterproductive.

Undermining the Messenger

Perhaps nobody has had their work more fundamentally undermined by our culture's limited, individualistic framing of environmentalism than former Vice President Al Gore. When his documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, premiered in 2006, it dramatically raised awareness of the climate crisis and brought in \$49.8 million at the box office. Using little more than a PowerPoint presentation, the film introduced climate science to a mainstream audience. Yet rather than grapple with the complex, terrifying facts presented in the film, critics were quick to change the subject.

One free-market think tank, for example, released a report claiming that Mr. Gore's house used 20 times more energy than the average American family home. And while Al Gore's spokespeople responded with statistics about his carbon offsets and

energy-efficient renovations, the distraction campaign had already worked. Discussion had shifted from the systemic underpinnings of our reliance on fossil fuels and was instead now focused on the personal choices of one specific individual.

"Al Gore's Inconvenient Truth: a \$30,000 Energy Bill," cried one particularly snarky headline from Jake Tapper over at ABC News.²

Shaming activists for what they are not doing has proven to be devastatingly effective. Not only does it undermine the credibility of the immediate target, but it simultaneously redirects the focus away from the societal-level solutions that could bring about change at the scale and pace that's necessary.

It also sets the bar almost impossibly high for others who would like to join the movement. How can I, as an individual, demand an end to fossil fuels if I still rely on them to get me to and from work? Who am I to question subsidies for airlines, if I'm still flying to see the family at Christmas? Yet if we pause for a moment to consider how we talk about other societal problems, it becomes easier to see that the basic premise of such supposed hypocrisy is self-defeating bullshit.

If a citizen were to advocate for higher taxes on cigarettes, for example, it would hardly undermine their argument to reveal that they themselves were addicted to nicotine. In fact, it would be one more proof point among many that we can't rely on voluntary abstinence in the face of a socially harmful and manipulative industry.

To cite another example, if a billionaire were to campaign for higher taxes on the rich—as some enlightened "One Percenters" have actually begun to do—then their case is strengthened, not weakened, by the fact that they can't fix poverty through their own individual acts of philanthropy. The fact that they find it necessary to advocate for structural changes—changes that would directly harm their own narrow financial interests—demonstrates the systemic nature of the problem they are seeking to fix.

I'm not going so far as to suggest that it makes you a *better* advocate for climate justice to fly or own a big house. Neither am I arguing *against* lower carbon lifestyle choices as one strategy among

many we can deploy. I am, however, saying that a high personal carbon footprint shouldn't preclude you from doing your part. And I'm urging you to focus your energies on where you—personally—can have the biggest impact on the structures and society around you. Not only will adopting a more systemic perspective help you to prioritize your efforts. It will also, I believe, undermine a key strategy of those who would hold back progress.

A Convenient Mistruth

In 2007, the publishers of the Oxford English Dictionary chose “carbon footprint” as their UK Word of the Year. (In the US, the honor went to the not entirely unrelated term “locavore.”) Since then, the concept has embedded itself so integrally in the climate debate that it can actually be hard to remember just how new it is, or who helped to elevate it in our popular consciousness in the first place: namely none other than your friendly, planet-warming oil conglomerate BP.

While the term itself had been floating around in academia for some time,³ one of the first publicly available online carbon footprint calculators was promoted and popularized as part of BP's highly problematic “Beyond Petroleum” rebranding campaign that it attempted in the mid 2000s. Not long after, the world watched in horror as the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig went up in flames, pouring 4.9 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico in the process.

As Mark Kaufman of *Mashable* has documented, BP's championing of carbon footprints should be viewed not simply as a naïve or imperfect effort at corporate responsibility, but rather as a direct and calculated attempt to shape discussion of the problem in BP's favor:

One of the creators of BP's ad campaign who approached Londoners on the street, the PR professional John Kenney, later acknowledged it was all a marketing scheme, not a sincere effort to promote BP's low-carbon or renewable energy transformation.

"I guess, looking at it now, 'beyond petroleum' is just advertising," Kenney wrote in a New York Times Op-Ed in 2006.

"It's become mere marketing—perhaps it always was—instead of a genuine attempt to engage the public in the debate or a corporate rallying cry to change the paradigm." BP, powerful and wealthy, signaled it would wean itself from oil. "Only they didn't go beyond petroleum," wrote Kenney. "They are petroleum."⁴

Contrary to popular opinion, oil companies have demonstrated time and again that they are actually all too happy to talk about the climate crisis. They just want you to know that it's mostly your fault.

Yet fossil fuel interests aren't the only people playing into this narrative.

Eco-Moralism Runs Deep

George Monbiot, a British environmentalist and writer, has become a household name for his unflinching writing about the climate emergency. While much of his focus has been on the structural underpinnings of the problem, Monbiot has also directed his rhetorical fire at his eco-minded peers.

From meat eating to outdoor patio heaters, many trappings of the modern, middle-class existence have fallen afoul of Monbiot's criticism. But his willingness to call out double standards is perhaps best demonstrated by a 2006 article for *Alternet*, in which he made the moral case for curbing aviation:

If we want to stop the planet from cooking, we will simply have to stop traveling at the kind of speeds that planes permit. This is now broadly understood by almost everyone I meet. But it has had no impact whatever on their behavior. When I challenge my friends about their planned weekend in Rome or their holiday in Florida, they respond with a strange, distant smile and avert their eyes. They just want

to enjoy themselves. Who am I to spoil their fun? The moral dissonance is deafening.⁵

To be fair, the core point that Monbiot is making is hard to refute. If we really are in an existential climate crisis (we are), if we really need to cut carbon emissions as quickly as possible (we do), and if millions of people will die if we fail (they will), then taking a vacation closer to home would seem like a small price to pay for safeguarding civilization from catastrophe.

Yet it never seems that simple when it's us making that choice. I know this from personal experience.

Nothing's Ever Easy

In the Spring of 2005, I made the decision to give up flying.

I was 27 years old, living in my native South West England, and working as director of sustainability for an independent academic publishing house that my parents had founded several decades before. I had used that position to advance my green agenda, including enacting company policies that restricted corporate flying and encouraged train travel instead. However, I had recently taken part in an experiment to calculate my own carbon footprint, which back then was a relatively novel idea. In doing so, I had been profoundly shocked by the impact of my conference travel. Despite all my best efforts to car pool to work, eat a mostly vegetarian diet, compost, buy second hand, and generally behave like a good green activist, the job that I had chosen to do (and/or the family I had been born into) meant that I was causing nearly two times as much damage to our atmosphere each year than the average British citizen.

After much soul searching, I decided that I could no longer justify flying so much. I tendered my resignation from the family business, and started making plans for a career move into environmental education. First, however, I had to take one last flight across the Atlantic. (Ironically enough, this was for a conference on "sustainable" tourism.) While there, I visited Edward, my old college roommate who was now living in Carrboro, North Carolina. And

because he was busy, I ended up going out for drinks with Jenni—a friend of his whom I had met a few times before.

A few hours and several beers later, we—or at least I—promptly fell in love. And thus began a long-distance relationship that changed my plans forever. Within the space of a year we were engaged, I was applying for US residency, and resigning myself to a lifetime of transatlantic flights to see my family, and to recharge on the real cask ales of my homeland.

I don't share this story to make excuses, nor to seek pity. (There is an almost laughable amount of privilege involved in claiming this as a personal problem.) Nor am I arguing that flying less is pointless. In fact, I greatly admire those who have given up flying. But I do share this story to simply make the case that any attempt to promote greener lifestyle choices can and must accept that we are all starting from different places. What's easy or rewarding for one person may be difficult or repulsive for another. What's exciting and aspirational for one demographic might be too expensive or elitist for another. Choosing not to fly may actually mean fantastic rail travel adventures, or more time at home, for some. For others, however, it may mean compromising your career, disappointing family and loved ones or, as in my case, never visiting your parents or drinking proper beer again.

To be fair, even the most adamant “No Fly” advocates are aware of this challenge. In another particularly moving article for *The Guardian*, George Monbiot—whom I quoted earlier pointing fingers—acknowledged the challenge for international families, referring to a concept that he describes as “love miles”:

If your sister-in-law is getting married in Buenos Aires, it is both immoral to travel there, because of climate change, and immoral not to, because of the offence it causes. In that decision we find two valid moral codes in irreconcilable antagonism.⁶

According to Monbiot, the logical conclusion of this “irreconcilable antagonism” would be to curtail all non-essential (i.e., non-love

related) air travel. That would mean an end to weekends in Ibiza, or Brits shopping in New York. It would mean conducting business meetings via video conference, and making transcontinental journeys by train. And it would mean that journeys around the world would be reserved for visiting people we hold dear. Even then, he predicted, it would involve “both slow travel and the saving up of carbon rations.”

Whether or not aviation will need to be curtailed to exactly that degree, or through those specific methods, is not for me to say. Monbiot’s proposed solution does, however, point to *how* the issue will be solved. And that’s systemically.

The Limits of Personal Responsibility

Here’s the uncomfortable *and* inconvenient truth: the vast majority of environmentalists, myself included, *are* doing more than most of our peers. I’ve gone to great effort to install insulation in our 1936 home, for example. I drive an old, used electric car. I often ride an e-bike around town. And I’ve cut back on my meat eating considerably. Yet an unfortunate mix of societal influences, the car-centric sprawl of the region I now call home, my socioeconomic status, and my own all-too-consumerist failings mean that I am doing only a fair-to-middling job at actually cutting my emissions. The last time I calculated, my footprint was only some 25–30 percent lower than the US average. (Meaning it’s also several orders of magnitude higher than your average global citizen.) I would hazard a guess that many of my eco-minded peers are experiencing similarly mediocre results.

On a related note, environmental justice advocates will rightly point out that there are huge inequities in carbon footprints depending on wealth and income, and that curtailing the impact of high emissions lifestyles is clearly a moral imperative. Yet in high wealth countries, even folks who are living in poverty or on low incomes will still have outsized carbon footprints when compared on a global scale.

And these carbon footprints exist because of factors well outside of any individual citizen’s control.

When this book asserts that 'we' are all climate hypocrites, I do not intend it as an attack on any one of us. Nor do I mean that either 'blame' or 'responsibility' is equally shared. I simply make the case that living sustainably in our current system is nearly impossible. We may therefore want to be careful about pushing for purity, or feeding an individualistic narrative that ultimately perpetuates the status quo. Instead, I suggest, we should identify paths for effective, mass mobilization that makes better, more equitable, and more rewarding low carbon living an attainable reality for all of us.

Why Individual Action Still Matters

When I first started working on this book, I intended to debunk the idea that individual action was central to creating change at all. I made a note to myself about what I thought was a useful analogy: the transatlantic slave trade didn't end because people stopped eating sugar. Yet it turns out that this is only half true.

In fact, sugar and rum boycotts were a key strategy of abolitionist groups. At one point, some 400,000 people in Britain alone were said to be boycotting slave-grown sugar. As part of that effort, James Wright, a merchant from Suffolk, took out an advertisement in the newspaper:

...I take this method of informing my customer that I mean to discontinue selling the article of sugar when I have disposed of the stock I have on hand, till I can procure it through channels less contaminated, more unconnected with slavery, less polluted with human blood....⁷

Contrary to my ill-informed assumptions, boycotts were actually pivotal in shifting the political dynamics of slavery. They helped make the moral case for abolition, they gave individual citizens a tangible way to live their values in their daily lives, and they exerted a direct economic pressure on the powerful forces that were profiting from business-as-usual.

Yet the abolitionists promoting boycotts weren't suggesting that nationwide abstinence from sugar was the ultimate solution to ending slavery. Instead, they were *tactically* pulling the lever of

abstinence with a *specific* end goal in mind, and they were doing so as part of a *broader set of strategies*. Boycotts, by themselves, were never going to be enough to bring this murderous industry to its knees. They were, however, an accessible entry point for would-be abolitionists to flex their muscles. (This was especially true for women, who didn't yet have the vote, but who did have a say in their personal household purchases.)

The lesson for those of us trying to mobilize on climate is not to ignore questions about what we should or shouldn't be doing in our personal lives. Rather, it's to rethink *why* those actions matter. In his book *There Is No Planet B*, author and environmental activist Mike Berners-Lee defines the challenge like this:

We need to think beyond the immediate and direct effect of our actions and ask more about the ripples they send out...⁸

I couldn't agree more. First, however, we need to talk about breakfast.