



“What could change the direction of today’s civilization? It is my deep conviction that the only option is a change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience.” – Václav Havel

Responsibilities within a Global Society

Humankind today is well aware of the spectrum of threats looming over its head. We know that the number of people living on our planet is growing at a soaring rate and that within a relatively short time we can expect it to total in the tens of billions. We know that the already-deep abyss separating the planet's poor and rich could deepen further, and more and more dangerously, because of this rapid population growth. We also know that we've been destroying the environment on which our existence depends and that we are headed for disaster by producing weapons of mass destruction and allowing them to proliferate.

And yet, even though we are aware of the dangers, we do almost nothing to avert them. It's fascinating to me how preoccupied people are today with catastrophic prognoses, how books containing evidence of impending crises become bestsellers, but how little account we take of these threats in our everyday activities. Doesn't every schoolchild know that the resources of this planet are limited and that if they are expended faster than they are recovered, we are doomed? And still we continue in our wasteful ways and don't even seem perturbed. Quite the contrary: Rising production is considered to be the main sign of national success, not only in poor states where such a position could be justified, but also in wealthy ones, which are cutting the branch on which they sit with their ideology of indefinitely prolonged and senseless growth.

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The most important thing we can do today is to study the reasons why humankind does little to address these threats and why it allows itself to be carried onward by some kind of perpetual motion, unaffected by self-awareness or a sense of future options. It would be unfair to ignore the existence of numerous projects for averting these dangers, or to deny that a lot already has been done. However, all attempts of this kind have one thing in common: They do not touch the seed from which the threats I'm speaking of sprout, but merely try to diminish their impact. (A typical example is the list of legal acts, ordinances, and international treaties stipulating how much toxic matter this or that plant may discharge into the environment.) I'm not criticizing these safeguards; I'm only saying that they are technical tricks that have no real effect on the substance of the matter.

What, then, is the substance of the matter? What could change the direction of today's civilization?

It is my deep conviction that the only option is a change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience. It's not enough to invent new machines, new regulations, new institutions. We must develop a new understanding of the true purpose of our existence on earth. Only by making such a fundamental shift will we be able to create new models of behavior and a new set of values for the planet. In short, it appears to me that it would be better to start from the head rather than the tail. Whenever I've gotten involved in a major global problem – the logging of rainforests, ethnic or religious intolerance, the brutal destruction of indigenous cultures – I've always discovered somewhere in the long chain of events that gave rise to it a basic lack of responsibility for the planet.

There are countless types of responsibility – more or less pressing, depending on who's involved. We feel responsible for our personal welfare, our families, our companies, our communities, our nations. And somewhere in the background there is, in every one of us, a small feeling of responsibility for the planet and its future. It seems to me that this last and deepest responsibility has become a very low priority – dangerously low, considering that the world today is more interlinked than ever before and that we are, for all intents and purposes, living one global destiny.

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