

Dear Great-Great-Grandchildren,

I've been worried about you for a long time. For years it's seemed like all I could say to you was, "Sorry, we torched the planet and now you have to live like saints." Not a happy message. But recently I've seen signs that we might give you a better result. At this moment the issue is still in doubt. But a good path leading from me to you can be discerned.

It was crucial that we recognized the problem, because otherwise we wouldn't have acted as we did. A stupendous effort by the global scientific community alerted us to the fact that our civilization, by dumping carbon into the air, and disrupting biosphere processes in many other ways, we were creating a toxic combination that was going to wreak havoc on all Earth's living creatures, including us. When we learned that, we tried to change.

Our damaging impact was caused by a combination of the sheer number of people, the types of technologies we used, and how much we consumed. We had to change in each area, and we did. We invented cleaner technologies to replace dirtier ones; this turned out to be the easiest part. When it came to population growth, we saw that wherever women had full education and strong legal rights, population growth stopped and the number of humans stabilized; thus justice was both good in itself and good for the planet.

The third aspect of the problem, our consumption levels, depended on our values, which are always encoded in our economic system. Capitalism was wrecking the biosphere and people's lives to the perceived benefit of very few; so we changed it. We charged ourselves the proper price for burning carbon; we enacted a progressive tax on all capital assets as well as incomes. With that money newly released to positive work, we paid ourselves a living wage to do ecological restoration, to feed ourselves, and to maintain the biosphere we knew you were going to need.

Those changes taken all together mean you live in a post-capitalist world: congratulations. I'm sure you are happier for it. Creating that new economic system was how we managed to dodge disaster and give you a healthy Earth. It was our best achievement, and because of it, we can look you in the eye and say, "Enjoy it, care for it, pass it on."

Mars (Kim Stanley Robinson)