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Can civilization rise from its ashes?

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Thomas Homer-Dixon grew up in Victoria and was influenced by both our inspiring natural environment and by the insanity of the nuclear arms race that troubled the Cold War world of his childhood. He knew early on where he wanted to put his professional energies, and he focused his studies on the boundary between the political and natural sciences. This led to a PhD from MIT, but the study is ongoing. Homer-Dixon, a magpie of knowledge, both consults and advises experts and policy makers wherever in the world he can find them.

"I have taken it on as my personal job to answer those who deny the energy and climate change crisis," he told me. *The Upside of Down* brings together a mass of essential information from disparate sources for concerned lay readers who might not have the time or expertise to gather it for themselves.

"This could be the most exciting time in the history of our species," says Homer-Dixon. But maybe not in a good way: that will depend on whether "non-extremists" in the global community can "build community, lay plans and build trust" as they strive to cope with overpopulation, resource depletion and social unrest.

"How much damage will we tolerate?" he asks.

One of the delusions many policy makers (and environmentalists) cling to is that because birth rates are now slowing in many areas, overpopulation has been dealt with. In fact, as *The Upside of Down* demonstrates with figures, populations will swell even further before they subside, and the rich-poor income gap will continue for generations.

So what hope is there for avoiding crisis, I ask?

Climate change will be the "deal breaker" for global laissez-faire capitalism, Homer-Dixon replies, and the intervention this necessitates will stimulate some sort of global governance.

We will need a "moral commonwealth," a shared understanding of values. Communication will have to be both top-down and bottom-up -- and that is where all of the ordinary people come in.

Geo-political and environmental disintegration will enable more "crazy people" (extremists) to get into positions of power (that, we're seeing already), but Homer-Dixon is encouraged by the fact that "human beings are a lot stupider collectively than individually." Collectively we appear to be heading for disaster (and taking down fully half the world's species with us). Yet, "not all business and conservative political leaders are in denial," and lots of the world's wealth is going in good directions: Homer-Dixon points at Bill Gates, Ted Turner and other caring billionaires with the resources to be effective.

Apparently, Chinese coal mines and massive Russian peat bogs each create almost twice the global warming that North American transportation emissions do, so what can we here in Victoria do to change anything?

It's the cumulative effect of what everyone does that counts, replies Homer-Dixon, and in the future we want to be able to look our grandchildren in the eye knowing that we personally aligned our lives with ecological values and common sense.

So, I ask, should I obediently stop watering my garden in the summer, letting my shrubs die so that municipal governments in denial can continue to grant development permits, and strain nature's water flow beyond capacity? No, says Homer-Dixon: electing preservationist, growth-limiting local councillors is an example of one thing we can do now in the place where we are.

We used to say "think global, act local," but convergence of systems has made us realize that global is local.

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