

Power Shift Western 2009 Conference

Rally Keynote

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This country has never seen a youth movement – a Power Shift -- with so much potential to change civilization. Your birth certificates don't give any clue of this, but you happen to be alive at the most pivotal moment in the history of Humanity. You have been drafted by Nature into an epoch struggle to literally remake our world. You inherited ecological bankruptcy, yet you'll build ecological wealth. You are one generation in Humanity that will get to say, "we saved this planet."

We are all part of a global uprising that is mind-blowing, heart-stirring, courage-testing and spirit-moving, all at once. Our compatriots are people of all ages and in all walks of life, in every corner of the globe, who are fighting in the factories and in the fields, in the schools and in the homes, in the hospitals and in the crisis centers, in the halls of Congress and in the courtrooms, to capture this last fleeting moment of opportunity to save our planet from catastrophic climate heating. Because the circumstances of our time have presented us with a heroic task, we have no choice but to be heroes. If there were a handbook for today's climate hero, I think it would have these five chapters: 1) Know your reality; 2) Understand your task; 3) Lead the politics; 4) Tell your story; and 5) Invoke your authority.

I. Know your reality

First, know your reality. The reality is that we have left a comfortable world behind. Climate change is leagues beyond what our civilization has ever faced. It's erasing the major fixtures from our planet. It's causing sea levels to rise. It's putting island nations underwater. It's burning the Amazon. It's disintegrating the polar ice caps. It's acidifying the oceans. It's melting the glaciers. It's killing the coral reefs. It's triggering the kind of mass extinction that has not occurred on Earth for 55 million years. If our carbon pollution continues, scientists say that we will have a "transformed planet."¹ We have no means of survival on a transformed planet.

Another part of our reality is that our planet is skidding towards a climate tripwire -- a point of no return that climate scientists call the tipping point.² The heating caused by our enormous carbon pollution has triggered dangerous feedbacks in Nature that are already working to unravel our climate system. If these feedbacks keep intensifying, they can cause runaway heating that could mean death for millions or even billions of Earth's citizens. Leading scientists now believe the planet faces disaster if CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere remain above 350 parts per million. We are already at 390 parts per million and climbing fast. As NASA climate scientist Jim Hansen said a year ago, "We are now on the hairy edge." We have to slash carbon *today* to stay on the safe side of the tipping point. We face almost unfathomable urgency. You wouldn't know this by listening to the politicians in Washington DC.

Here is the insidious thing about climate crisis. If we just keep on doing tomorrow what we did today, we will send this world over the edge. I wake up in the

¹ Jim Hansen, *The Threat to the Planet*, N.Y. REV., July 13, 2006, at 12.

² For general explanation, see Goddard Institute for Space Studies, *Research Finds that Earth's Climate is Approaching 'Dangerous' Point* (May 30, 2007), http://www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/news/topstory/2007/danger_point.html. See also Fred Pearce, WITH SPEED AND VIOLENCE: WHY SCIENTISTS FEAR TIPPING POINTS IN CLIMATE CHANGE 238-39 (2007).

middle of the night on most nights haunted by the knowledge that people across this country *will do* tomorrow exactly what they did today.

Another part of our reality is that there are about 2.6 degrees F. of heating in the pipeline. This is due to our past carbon pollution, which persists in the atmosphere from 100-1,000 years. We can't call that pollution back, and so we are stuck with this heating. No one has any idea what it will do to our civilization – what crops will fail, what water sources will dry up, what diseases will spread, what storms will hit us, what ecosystems will unravel, how much the seas will rise. All of the climate-caused damage so far has been caused by just one degree F. average temperature rise. Our government at all levels should be working overtime to prepare our communities for this by creating local food systems, renewable, local energy, and alternative transportation. And government needs to protect all of remaining Nature to sustain us into this shaky future – we need the forests, the rivers, the wetlands, the wildlife, the soils – we need all of it.

I think it does no one any good to sugar-coat this situation. Climate crisis is about a fight for survival. It is about tragedy. It is about incalculable loss. It is about genocide, eco-side, and extermination of our fellow species.

This can be overwhelming. But another part of our reality, the most important part, is that there is still hope. The vast majority of climate scientists believe that we can still avert the worst of the catastrophe. If we can stop dumping more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, then forests and oceans will slowly suck it out of the air and return us to safe levels -- eventually. Our atmosphere can be in safe balance again some day.

Hope is the strongest artillery in the most daunting of human endeavors. Hope takes root when we stare down the problem and act to prevent it from getting worse. The

untapped core of society today is hope, not despair. We have the human imagination, the resources, and the legal tools to tackle this challenge head-on. We always have. We created the pollution, so we can end it. But to do so, we have to understand the task, which brings me to my second piece of advice.

2. Understand your task

The task ahead is to mount a global atmospheric defense effort. There are charts produced by climate scientists that show that we can make a safe landing back to 350 parts per million. There is a trajectory of carbon emissions reduction that can accomplish it. It's about 11% emissions reduction a year, which would get us to zero emissions by about 2050. It doesn't have to be a straight line – this effort will have some lags and bumps and jumps as carbon free technology gets developed. The point is, it's do-able. But there is no time to waste, because our last window of opportunity is closing fast.

Make no mistake: this job is huge. Addressing climate crisis has to reach literally every dimension of human society from food production to transportation to energy, to consumption and waste. As Paul Hawken says, “There is nothing in society that doesn't have to be remade.” Let's be clear about one thing: our task is not to continue tinkering around the edges of the same Business as Usual that is driving the planet to catastrophe. “Faced with the need to reinvent the material basis of our civilization, we [should not be arguing] paper or plastic,” as Alex Steffen says.

We have to deconstruct Business as Usual and rebuild our infrastructure and systems around Nature's limits. We need truly game-changing solutions now like putting moratoria on new coal-fired plants and phasing out existing plants; making car-

free zones; creating urban farms throughout suburbia; revamping industrial processes so that they don't pollute our water, air and soil; and protecting all remaining forests and agricultural areas for carbon absorption and food production. Shutting down coal-fired plants is at the very top of the list. Jim Hansen, arguable the top climate scientist in the world, has said that even one more large coal fired plant could be the straw that breaks the camel's back. We are that close to the tipping point. Only when we stamp out coal will the planet be on the path to atmospheric recovery.

The first thing you'll hear is that this can't be done. When Al Gore announced the goal of America having 100% renewable energy within a decade, the captains of business mocked him. It's not realistic, they said. Well, I say, that is getting to be a tired old line, and it has no place in today's conversation. As Paul Hawken says, "The most unrealistic person in the world is the cynic, not the dreamer." In World War II, President Roosevelt spoke words to the nation that President Obama should echo today as we approach Copenhagen: "Let no man say it cannot be done Speed will save lives; speed will save this Nation which is in peril; speed will save . . . our civilization . . . slowness has never been an American characteristic."³ Lives all over the world are on the line today, and conversion to renewable energy is our only survival strategy.

The people who want you to go on thinking that 100% renewable energy is impossible today are the same people who would be delighted if you would all just all fall into despair. They are the executives and henchmen of the fossil fuel industry that got us into this lethal predicament in this first place. They know that despair breeds powerlessness. The truth is, we are on the way already to achieving Gore's 10-year goal.

³President Roosevelt, 1942 State of the Union Address, <http://janda.org/politxts/state%20of%20union%20addresses/1934-1945%20Roosevelt/FDR42.html>.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. gave a keynote speech last week to a solar industry conference in which he said:

We are in the process now of overthrowing incumbents that control about 3.5 trillion dollars of American resources and who in many ways have corrupted American democracy. We are going to democratize the energy system in this country and take it away from the incumbents. Over the next ten years. This is inevitable.

Part of defining our task is to see beyond the fossil fuel industry and recognize that we have to re-create our whole economic existence. The notion of unlimited growth that economists have fed us hand and spoon over the past few decades is a notable sham. We have run out of natural resources. It's as simple as that. There can be no unlimited growth if there are no unlimited resources. We need to remake our economy into one that is premised on stability and equity, not erratic growth and shocking inequity. Does this mean an end to capitalism? No, but it does mean an end to Industrial Polluter Capitalism. Right now, as Hawken says: “[We] are stealing the future, selling it in the present, and calling it gross domestic product. We can just as easily have an economy that is based on healing the future instead of stealing it. . . .” So, part of our task is remaking our economy.

Another is finding a new lifestyle to call the American dream. Our bloated consumption has made us both the laughing stock and despised fat cat of the world at once. Along with a power shift, we need a “power-down” on the energy scale in our individual lives. By consuming much less, we can have a simpler, healthier, and more relaxed lifestyle – a better American dream. There was a time not so long ago, in WWII,

that the nation transformed into a conservation society overnight to divert all resources to the troops. Driving was restricted, food was produced from home and school victory gardens, and nothing was wasted. It saved lives then and it will save lives now.

3. Lead the politics

My third point is this. In fulfilling your tasks, don't be led by the politics. Instead, lead the politics. When you lead the politics, rather than follow them, you draw others to truth and reason, and soon you have the power of the people behind you. Every great movement in this country has happened in spite of the politics of the day.

The politics of today are designed to support Business as Usual, which might as well be called the politics of death. There are coal lobbyists swarming the halls of Congress right now, as we speak, pushing the politics of death through cap and trade and carbon offsets, and carbon sequestration, and all of the excuses and schemes and frauds that the fossil fuel industry has put forth to avoid responsibility. You, on the other hand, can create the politics of survival, which tells your leaders and the American public, "my life is not for profit; my survival is non-negotiable."

Right now, Congress is deliberating on a cap and trade bill. You will have to make your own decision whether you support it or not. Two days ago the world's top climate scientist, Dr. James Hansen, sent an email around that said such legislation would "lock-in disastrous outcomes for young people" because it doesn't go far enough in slashing carbon pollution. Whether you support the bill on the basis that any step forward is better than nothing, or whether you oppose the bill on the basis that it doesn't go nearly far enough, either way, we need to repudiate the politics that allow our leaders

to sit idle in face of pollution that threatens to annihilate civilization on Earth. So, Power Shift: take survival politics to D.C.

4. Tell your story

Now to the fourth point. If you know your reality and you understand your task and you resolve to lead the politics, you have to tell your story to the public. Two weeks ago, on the 350 international day of climate action day, people worldwide told their climate stories -- by scuba diving to the bottom of the Great Barrier Reef, climbing to the summit of Mount Everest, biking 350 miles down the Coast of California, and literally in over 5,000 other ways. Stories and pictures move people like nothing else really can.

Two years ago, six ordinary people told their climate story to the world by shutting down the Kingsnorth coal-fired plant in England for one day, scaling its tall chimney, and painting the Prime Minister's name on down its side. This plant emitted 20,000 tons of carbon dioxide a day into the atmosphere, and a permit was pending to build a replacement for it. When these citizens came down, they were arrested and charged with criminal trespass. Now, surely the Kingsnorth Six, as they were called, had committed criminal trespass, but they told a story that changed the world.

NASA scientist Jim Hansen flew to England to testify in their defense and he told the jury about world-wide devastation from climate change caused in large part by these coal-fired plants. He said, "Somebody needs to step forward and say there has to be a moratorium, [against these coal fired plants]."⁴ The jury found the Kingsnorth Six not

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/sep/11/activists.kingsnorthclimatecamp>; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/cif-green/2009/may/31/kingsnorth-defence-lawyer>; <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/cleared-jury-decides-that-threat-of-global-warming-justifies-breaking-the-law-925561.html> see also

guilty, under the lawful excuse defense. Their crime of trespass and property damage to a coal fired plant was found legally excused, because their accomplishment in shutting down the power plant for even one day would spare the world a significant measure of climate damage. And after that, the company withdrew its permit for a new plant. Six ordinary citizens. They knew their reality. They understood their task. They led the politics by telling their story. Which brings me to the last point.

5. Invoke Your Authority

In fighting carbon pollution, invoke your authority. You have a moral authority called generational justice. It moves entire nations, and it can move this entire world.

It is premised on an endowment that has sustained human life through the ages. This endowment holds all of the natural assets that we need to survive, including the atmosphere. It's called Earth. Earth is like a huge trust account, but with assets much more valuable than money. You can think of Earth as your survival account. Every generation has an equal right to inherit this endowment. The right to survive is the most basic human right. The protection of crucial natural resources is a moral covenant that has bonded one generation to another throughout all of human time.

But, today, something is terribly wrong. Rather than protecting your natural inheritance, our elected leaders in Washington D.C. are handing off your survival account to the executives of fossil fuel corporations. Your survival account is going bankrupt. Your most basic human right has become a corporate handout.

The sheer moral authority of the youth to demand their rightful atmospheric inheritance, inheritance necessary for their survival, is the most powerful, yet untapped, human dynamic in the struggle for a planetary awakening. When youth of all ages

convey the reality of the ravaged Earth and dangerous climate that they are left with, people of all generations are jolted into action in a way that is almost instinctive, even primeval. The covenant between the generations is powerful beyond words. So, invoke your moral authority. Claim the atmosphere as your rightful inheritance.

Claiming Your Moment

To end now, know your reality, understand your task, create your politics, tell your story, and invoke your moral authority.

You are part of the biggest effort this world has ever seen -- a global atmospheric defense effort. Huge numbers of people in every single nation are rising up in defense of this planet just like we are – speaking in different languages but with one voice. As Paul Hawken says, *Humanity is coalescing*. You won't have to save this world alone. But know too, the world can't be saved without you. This is "all hands on deck time." To remake this world, we have to remake virtually all of its parts, large and small. Nature doesn't just need scientists and engineers and lawyers and journalists on her side. Nature needs mechanics, bureaucrats, musicians, restaurant owners, counselors, construction workers, nuns, pilots and real estate agents too. She needs each and every one of us. She needs us all. Whatever path you chose, you are part of the Power Shift and Power Down. Go forth, climate heroes, claim your moment on Earth and remake this world! And know this: I could not believe in your more.