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PEBBLES IN AN AVALANCHE OF CHANGE

Finding Your Own Path Toward Changing the World

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. . . . Human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian

> future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.
>
> —HOWARD ZINN, *YOU CAN'T BE NEUTRAL ON A MOVING TRAIN*, 1994

> One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.
>
> —NEIL ARMSTRONG

What will a reimagined capitalism look like? It's impossible to know, of course, but at the risk of seeming utopian, let me paint a picture of how the world might look very different twenty years from now.

In a world that has reimagined capitalism, if you're in business, you work for a high-commitment firm that is deeply rooted in shared values, provides great jobs, and takes for granted the idea that while it is essential to be profitable, the firm's primary goal should be to create value, not to make money at any price. Everyone shares a common understanding of the need to balance short-term returns with the public good and the long-term potential of the business. Firms that deny the reality of climate change, treat their employees badly, or actively support corrupt or oppressive political regimes are shunned by their peers and punished by their investors.

Flexible, collaborative agreements across your industry ensure that every organization is held to common standards, so that there are strong incentives for everyone to race to the top. Consumers refuse to buy from firms that cut corners. Prospective employees routinely check out the environmental and social rankings of the firms they are considering joining, and since your firm is at the leading edge of solving several important problems, it has become a magnet for talent. You and your fellow employees have been able to develop new mechanisms through which to express

a strong, collective voice not just within your firm but across the entire industry. This voice is welcomed as an important contributor to the long-term health of the society and the free market.

Wherever it can, your firm works closely with government, cooperating in open, public forums to design flexible policies that maximize economic growth while controlling pollution and reinforcing the health of the broader society and of its institutions. Your firm has done its part to support institutional reform, supporting higher taxes, the suppression of corruption, and full democratic access wherever and whenever possible.

There has been a revival of democratic participation: schools everywhere consider "civics" one of their most important subjects, voter participation rates have skyrocketed, and the public conversation is respectful, fact-based, and extraordinarily lively. Governments everywhere control environmental degradation with market-based policies where possible and with direct regulation where it is not, and invest in the public goods that keep societies strong and markets genuinely free and fair. As more and more firms respond to these incentives and focus on transforming their business models to create great jobs, minimize environmental damage, and create the products and services needed to support a sustainable and equitable world, climate change is slowing, inequality is falling, and economic growth continues to be strong.

Once the business community made a commitment to moving to carbon-free energy, progress has been much faster than anyone expected—the OECD countries are on track to decarbonizing their grids by 2050, and the new capacity being built in Africa, China, India, and Brazil is overwhelmingly carbon free. Agricultural practices have been transformed. A strong commitment to ensuring that the cost of these changes should be equitably shared has led to very large investments in retraining and relocation for those who were most affected. These investments have helped to spread prosperity and to blunt the appeal of authoritarian populism.

The shared recognition that the peace and security of the world depends on giving everyone the ability to participate in the free market has led not only to significant investments in education and health but also to a massive expansion in public/private partnerships designed to spur entrepreneurship and new business development in the context of strong social support. Both public and private investment is increasingly focused on the 85 percent of humanity that lives on less than $8 a day,[1] and on the challenging—but exciting and profitable—opportunities inherent in increasing their standard of living without destroying the biosphere.

By now you're probably thinking that I've drunk too much of that purpose-flavored Kool-Aid. But if we decided to reimagine capitalism, we could. Those of us who are doing well under the current system are probably the least well-positioned to see how rapidly change could come. In the early sixties, for example, when a South African psychologist asked a group of students to predict how politics in South Africa would unfold, roughly 65 percent of the black Africans in the group and 80 percent of those of Indian descent predicted the end of apartheid. But only 4 percent of white Afrikaners made the same prediction.[2]

I think it's entirely possible that we will bring everything down upon our heads. But as you may recall from the prologue, I am hopeful. I think it's also entirely possible that we will turn things around. We have the brains, the technology, and the resources to build a just and sustainable world—and in doing so to create enormous economic growth.

The human race has already accomplished far more difficult things. In 1800, 85 percent of humanity lived in extreme poverty. In 2018, only 9 percent did.[3] In 1800 more than 40 percent of all children died before reaching their fifth birthday. Now only one in twenty-six die so young.[4] My father was born in 1935. In his lifetime the world's population more than tripled—from roughly 2.3 billion to about 7.7 billion. But over the same period, world GDP

increased fifteen-fold, and GPD per capita has increased from approximately $3,000 to nearly $15,000.[5] That's enough money to permit every man, woman, and child on the planet to meet the core requirements for human happiness: to have enough to eat, decent shelter, and physical security.

We are more peaceful and inclusive than our ancestors would have believed possible. In 1800 slavery was legal almost everywhere, and women did not have the right to vote. Now forced labor is only legal in three countries, and women can vote everywhere there is voting. Almost no one lived in a democracy in 1800. Now more than half of humanity does so; nearly every child receives some form of primary education; and 86 percent of the world's population can read and write. The young are much more likely to believe that climate change is an immediate threat, to support interracial and gay marriage and the rights of women—and much less likely than their parents to support populist leaders.[6] We did not blow ourselves up during the Cold War. We have eradicated smallpox; flown to the moon; and invented the internet, AI, and the cell phone. We have built hearts in petri dishes and reduced the average price of photovoltaic modules a hundred-fold.[7]

The $12 Trillion Opportunity

Most importantly, there's a great business case for saving the world. Meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is a $12 trillion opportunity.[8] Renewable energy is now a more than $1.5 trillion business[9] and in 2017 generated 26.5 percent of global electricity and accounted for 70 percent of all new power generation capacity.[10] Numbers like this make renewables a job creation machine. More than three million Americans now have jobs in the clean energy sector, more than three times the number employed in the fossil fuel industry.[11] Increasing the efficiency with which energy is used could create thousands of new firms and

millions of new jobs and cut the world's energy demands by as much as 50 percent.[12]

Switching from beef to "white meat" such as pork or chicken could cut health costs by $1 trillion a year, significantly lower GHG emissions, and greatly reduce the pressure to find new agricultural land.[13] Plant-based food is now a $4.5 billion business[14] and could be an $85 billion industry by 2030.[15] Wheat farmers in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom reap more than four times the harvest from the same area of land as farmers in Russia, Spain, and Romania.[16] Yields in much of Africa are even lower. Quadrupling food production is probably an unrealistic goal, but a number of pilot projects suggest that doubling yields—even in the face of climate stress—is eminently possible.[17] About a third of all the food that is produced globally is lost—to pests or spoilage in the supply chain or as consumer waste. Preventing just a quarter of this loss could feed nearly a billion people a year, save nearly a quarter of a trillion dollars, and significantly reduce global GHG emissions.[18]

These are big numbers. On the ground they look like enormous economic opportunity: hundreds of efforts that could create millions of new jobs. All we need to do is reimagine capitalism. All you need to do is help.

Pebbles in an Avalanche of Change

"What can I do?" is the question I am asked most often and certainly the most important one. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that only heroes (and heroines!) can change the world. When we tell the story of the civil rights movement, we talk about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. When we talk about the New Deal, we talk about Franklin D. Roosevelt. When historians fifty years from now write the history of how we solved global warming, drastically reduced inequality, and remade our institutions, they will focus on a few key events—perhaps in the winter that three

superstorms hit the East Coast of the United States, making fixing global warming a completely bipartisan priority, or in the summer that the harvests failed across Africa, sending millions of people north to Europe, making it clear that everyone on the planet had to be given the tools they need to feed themselves. Perhaps they will tell the story of the CEO who led the coalition that helped negotiate a global labor agreement, or of the Chinese and US presidents who sat down together to make a global wealth tax feasible, or of the leaders of the social movement that made it politically impossible not to solve climate change.

But this focus reflects the structure of our minds and the nature of modern communication, not the way in which change actually happens. We use stories to make sense of the noisy, messy, complicated reality of the world, and stories need central characters—single individuals we can identify with and root for.

The real world doesn't actually work that way. Effective leaders ride the wave of change they find bubbling up around them. Martin Luther King did not create the civil rights movement. It grew from decades of work by thousands of African Americans and their allies, each doing the dangerous and difficult work of standing up for change. Rosa Parks was not a lone heroine who simply decided to stay in her seat one evening. She was a deeply committed civil rights worker whose decision that night was taken in close collaboration with a network of experienced female activists. Nelson Mandela did not single-handedly end apartheid in South Africa. He built on fifty years of struggle in which thousands of people participated and hundreds died.

Remember Erik Osmundsen, the CEO who took a corrupt waste collection company and made it a leader in recycling? Whenever he visits my class, he begins by saying that it's not about him. Instead, he insists, it's about the team of people he works with, the people willing to do the actual work—the often dull, day-to-day work—of cleaning up the waste industry. The media tell us that change

is dramatic, driven by individuals, and accomplished in minutes. But real change happens one meeting at a time. Remember Michael Leijnse—a relatively low-level employee whose name rarely surfaced in the press—but who, by spearheading sustainable tea at Lipton, showed that it was both possible and profitable, and in doing so, gave his CEO a reason to believe that he could halve Unilever's environmental footprint while increasing its sales.

When Sophia Mendelsohn started at JetBlue, her job was to design a recycling program. But she took the trouble to meet with everyone she could, seeking to understand how focusing on sustainability could help the company as a whole and trying to ensure that everything she did solved a problem for one of her colleagues. Within a few years she was able to spearhead a major shift in how the company measured and managed itself. Greta Thunberg was a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl when she began protesting climate change outside the Swedish Parliament. If it's really a climate emergency, she said, why aren't we doing anything? A year later an estimated 1.6 million students from 125 countries left school to join a global climate strike. I know of one multinational company that completely transformed its sustainability strategy because its employees were finding it too embarrassing to defend the company's actions to their children.

You are vital, and there is lots that you can do. Let me be precise.

Six Steps to Making a Difference[19]

Discover your own purpose. What is it you hold dear? What are you willing to fight for? What do you value above everything else? Whatever you choose to do, make sure that it aligns with the deepest part of who you are. I'm surprised by how often the purpose-driven leaders I meet are deeply rooted in a faith tradition or in a spiritual practice.

Another route to purpose is to reflect on the ways in which the problems of our current age have echoed through your own life. Perhaps there's a place that you loved that you have lost or that has been destroyed. Perhaps you grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, and you saw some of your friends hurt or killed. Perhaps your family has dealt with illness or discrimination or anger. A lot of us are broken, and in the profound brokenness of the world, we see echoes of our own hurts and losses. We become healers to address both our own wounds and those of others.

Some people fight for their children. Some are motivated simply by a burning sense of what's right. If you don't already have a clear sense of what you want to strive for and why, take time to work on yourself—either alone or with others—to learn more. Driving change is hard work. You'll need to be connected to the fire within if you're not to burn out.

Do something now. Decide to fly or drive less, or make the effort to buy only from companies that treat their employees well. Insulate your house and, if you can, put solar panels on the roof or buy your power from a green energy provider. Calculate your carbon footprint, estimate the amount of damage you're doing, and if you can afford it, commit to offsetting that damage. Taking a first step will lead to more. Doing something that's even a little bit outside your comfort zone will change the way you think about yourself. Making even a small sacrifice will help you persuade yourself that you can make some difference and that your voice counts. Something as simple as eating less meat can help you decide to get more active at work—which in turn often opens the door to signing petitions or protesting.[20]

Since we are social primates, your actions will help persuade others to change their own behavior. In one survey, for example, half of the people who responded who knew someone who had given up flying because of climate change said they flew less as a result.[21]

People eating in a café who were told that 30 percent of Americans had recently decided to eat less meat were twice as likely to order a meatless lunch.[22] The odds of someone buying solar panels go up for each home in the neighborhood that already has them.[23]

Find others who share your goals and hang out with them. You cannot save the world alone. I can't even persuade my husband to turn out the lights every time he leaves a room. (He's working on it.) We all need allies—both because there is strength in numbers and because there is no better antidote to despair than working together with others to drive change. It's not a coincidence that people are far more likely to lose weight if they join a support group like Weight Watchers, or far much likely to stay sober if they join Alcoholics Anonymous.[24] Start a book club. Host a series of dinners. Join a nonprofit whose goals you believe in and work you actively support. Every major political and social movement has been fueled by people who were willing to do the hard work of coming together to support each other in demanding change.

Bring your values to work. Start a new company with a different vision. I've been in many meetings in which the threat from a passionate start-up working on a shoestring is the clinching argument that persuades a much larger firm to embrace the need to change. Robin Chase's tiny start-up, Zipcar, transformed how we think about car ownership. Start-ups like First Solar and Bloom Energy convinced thousands of people that it was possible to make money in renewables and energy conservation, helping to start entirely new industries.

You don't have to be the CEO to drive change. If you work at a large organization, you can be a values-driven "intrapreneur"—someone who sees the opportunity for change and builds a team around it. Pick a problem: Changing the light bulbs? Reducing the risk in the supply chain? Improving productivity by reorganizing work and making the company's purpose more salient? Then find some friends, and work on it. Every successful change comes from

a demonstration project. Be the demonstration. Sometime soon someone is going to walk into your office and ask you whether it makes sense to clean up the supply chain, to pay people more, or to give everyone the day off to vote. Ask the questions or do the analysis that pushes the company in the right direction. It's nearly always the people on the ground who know what can be done, not the people in the corner office.

If you're a consultant, push your clients to think about the risks and opportunities that the big problems represent. Be the catalyst for change in how they think about the world. If you're an accountant, do the same thing.

Help rewire the capital markets. Work for an impact investor or a family office or a venture capitalist or a private equity firm that understands that there's lots of money to be made in saving the world. Ray Rothrock, an old friend who works at Venrock Ventures, helped raise hundreds of millions of dollars to fund a company called Tri Alpha Energy that is developing a fusion-based technology that could deliver commercially competitive baseload electric power.[25]

Work for an NGO and shame firms into changing—as Greenpeace does, or help them understand how to go about doing it—as organizations like Proforest or Leaders' Quest do.[26] Michael Peck founded 1worker1vote to support worker-owned cooperatives all over the country. Sara Horowitz founded the Freelancers Union, raising $17 million to start an insurance program for her more than four hundred thousand members, and fighting for better pay and conditions. Nigel Topping runs We Mean Business, a coalition of seven international nonprofits that are working together to catalyze business action against climate change.

Work in government. We won't get far without rebuilding trust in government at every level. Smart, capable people who understand that business can be part of the solution, but that externalities need to be properly priced and that the power of business needs to

be balanced by the power of the democracy if the whole society is to thrive will be absolutely central to making this happen.

Get political. I know, the idea can be daunting. But it is absolutely essential. Take courage from the examples of others. Remember what Daniella Ballou-Aares has been able to accomplish in just a few years. Some time ago I had tea with Kelsey Wirth, an old friend who is passionate about global warming. We ranted about how slowly politicians were moving to address it and agreed that finding a way to ratchet up public pressure was absolutely critical. Kelsey speculated that mobilizing mothers might be key, since mothers are willing to do almost anything to take care of their children. I left the tea having had a pleasant grumble. But Kelsey—together with a small group of fellow moms—founded Mothers Out Front—a group that now includes more than nineteen thousand mothers and has teams on the ground in nine states. The group engages mothers—deeply and personally—through individual meetings, house parties, and community meetings, and supports them in becoming politically active in effective ways.

In Massachusetts, for example, there are currently more than twenty-three thousand gas leaks.[27] Natural gas is actually methane—a greenhouse gas that traps eighty-six times more heat than CO_2. Of Massachusetts's greenhouse gas emissions, 10 percent is due to methane and—to add insult to injury—the lost gas costs consumers at least $90 million a year. A group of mothers from Mothers Out Front determined to get these leaks fixed. Members of the group have met with activists, city councilors, and state legislators, pushing for legislation to fix the problem. They persuaded a key member of the Boston City Council to schedule a hearing on whether the council should support action—and filled the hearing with committed mothers demanding change. They threatened one of the state's major utilities with a social media "superstorm." By the end of 2016, thirty-seven Massachusetts cities and towns had passed resolutions in favor of new legislation, and the Massachusetts state

legislature recently passed an energy bill that includes many of the key provisions Mothers Out Front has been fighting for.

Politicians tell Kelsey that they never hear from the vast majority of their constituents—and that they are surprisingly open to persuasion when twenty highly committed, articulate people come not only to the first hearing for a bill but to the hearing after that, and to the one after that. The women I've met who work with the group tell me that it is one of the best things in their lives. They enjoy getting to know other mothers. They relish the sense of making a difference. Most of all, they value knowing that they are doing something to make sure that their children inherit a sustainable world.

Find a group that is politically active in a way that makes sense to you, and join them. Push for voter registration, or for a climate tax, or a living wage. Working in a community teaches us that organizing is the founding principle of any kind of social change. We need to learn how to take a goal, break it into its component parts, give the right people ownership of each part, and fight until we see a resolution. People will tell you that it's too late, or that it will never work, or that things will never change. But it's never too late. Things can always get worse. A world that warms by six degrees rather than two will be catastrophically worse off. Change is slow until it is fast. The avalanche looks like nothing but a few pebbles moving until the whole hillside goes.

Take care of yourself and remember to find joy. Don't judge your success by whether you save the world. None of us can. There are nearly eight billion wonderful, amazing, occasionally crazy-making human beings on this planet. Each of us can only do what we can do.

Do you know the story about the young woman who saw a beach covered with thousands of stranded starfish and began to throw them, one by one, back into the sea? They say that her friend laughed at her, saying, "What are you doing? Look at this beach: you can't save all these starfish. You can't even begin to make a

difference!" The young woman stopped for a moment, thought, and then leaned down to pick up another starfish. "I don't know about that," she replied, "but I know that I'm making a difference to this one."[28]

You don't need to transform the structure of the modern corporation single-handedly to make a difference. If you can make even a small part of a single firm a better place to work, you will change lives.[29]

I know it's hard. I know the temptation to despair. I read bad news for a living, and sometimes it can be hard to get out of bed. But most of the time this work fills me with joy. I'm married to the love of my life, which helps enormously, but I've also had the opportunity to develop a way of thinking about my own role in the world that keeps me going when I'm tempted to simply lie down.

My first husband was a man called John Huchra, who was born in New Jersey on the wrong side of the tracks. His father was a railroad conductor and his mother was a homemaker. Through raw smarts and drivingly hard work, he became an astronomy professor at Harvard, spending as many as two hundred nights a year observing on the world's great telescopes. He was good at what he did. There's a galaxy called "Huchra's lens" in his honor. Together with two collaborators, he drew a map of the nearby universe that revealed a "Great Wall" of galaxies 600 million light-years long and 250 million light-years wide. It was one of the largest cosmic structures ever discovered, and it changed the face of astronomy. Astronomers had always assumed that if they looked out beyond the Milky Way, galaxies would be spread more or less evenly across the universe. But John's map suggested that the galaxies were instead confined to great sheets arcing around enormous voids millions of light-years across. The discovery made the front page of the *New York Times* and helped lay the foundation for the current dark matter–based view of the universe.[30] John became one of the most highly cited astronomers of the twentieth century.

In 1991, when we had our first date, I was entirely ignorant of all this. He was just some guy that I'd been introduced to. Since we were both academics, I asked him how many papers he had published. He hesitated and guessed that it was something over three hundred. Since I had roughly six published papers at the time, I had to suppress a strong urge to leap to my feet and bolt, but we were married a year later, when he was forty-four. He loved the outdoors—particularly hiking and kayaking—and three years after we were married, our son Harry was born. John hadn't thought he would ever marry, let alone have a son, and he loved Harry with a passion. Some fathers feel ambivalence toward their children. As far as I can tell, John never did. Together we watched movies every Friday night. We bribed Harry with small Lego figures to climb the mountains of New Hampshire. Together we made chocolate cookies and cheesecake and laughed and sat around doing nothing at all.

John became the president of the American Astronomical Association, and in 2006 led the delegation to Prague that formally moved the motion to delist Pluto as a planet. Harry was in the room. In 2009 John was a member of a group that went to Rome to meet the Pope—the Catholic hierarchy being keen to demonstrate its support for astronomy ever since the tricky business with Galileo. John had been born Polish Catholic, and he was tickled pink to have the chance to address the Pope. In October 2010 we went to the twenty-fifth reunion of my Harvard Business School class. I can still remember how happy I was that night. I had just moved from MIT to the Harvard Business School and was enjoying it enormously, our son had just entered high school and was thriving, and I was in love. This is it, I remember thinking. This is what we have both worked so hard for, for so many years. I thought we had mastered life.

Five days later, three weeks before my fiftieth birthday, I came home from a business trip to find John lying on the floor. I thought he was playing with the cats. When he wouldn't move, I called 911,

screaming at the people who answered to send an ambulance now, right now—so that they could fix him, wake him, something. . . . When I found him at the hospital—after a nightmare drive more surreal than any dream—he was quite dead. I held his hand. We buried him three days later. Harry was only fourteen.

Losing John is one of the hardest things that has ever happened to me. Ordinary life felt like a betrayal. How could one do things like go to the grocery store when John was dead? The warm, tight circle of our family had been blown open. I felt as though I had gone from living in a beautiful house full of family and friends to camping out in a lean-to on an open plain in the midst of driving rain. Great waves of grief swept over me—I cried nearly every day for at least a year. I envied those who still had their partners, still had their families intact.

But I learned. I learned that I had not paid nearly enough attention. A passionate, funny, kind man had shared his life with me, and I had spent far too much time worrying about whether he would take out the garbage. All that laughter and love was gone, and I hadn't treasured every single moment. I learned that people are far more loving and caring than I had given them credit for. People I hardly knew drove across town to give me lasagna at a time when I could barely speak. It felt as if the world had given way beneath me and as if hundreds of hands had reached out to catch me.

I learned that many worse things happen, all the time. One woman I knew—the mother of one of Harry's school friends—stopped me in the parking lot a few weeks after his funeral and expressed her sympathy for my loss. Then she told me that she was leaving her husband because he'd been beating her for more than fifteen years. A colleague told me he had lost his father when he was six. Another mentioned losing a child.

I learned that it is not death that is the tragedy. It is failing to live that is the tragedy. Everybody dies. But not everybody lives. John threw himself into life. He once flew to California to try to persuade

a high school class to take more science courses. He once flew to Mexico the week before Christmas to help a graduate student finish her thesis. In a world in which many people hoard, John gave away his data (and his time) to everyone who asked. He loved our son with a fierce passion that stays with Harry today—Harry has often said that he had a father in a way that many of his friends did not. He did world-class science but never made a fuss about who he was or what he'd done. He immersed himself in the beauty of the world. He would go anywhere and do anything, particularly when it meant hauling fifty pounds of gear uphill in the rain. As far as I could tell, he never cared about money or status. He wanted to do great science, support his students—and anyone who needed his help—and to love the natural world and his family. He gave and gave of himself. The day before his funeral I saw him—I still don't know if it was a dream or a waking vision—walking down a road toward distant mountains. He looked over his shoulder toward me and laughed. "Look for me in the trees and the rain," he said, and set off toward the horizon.

When people ask me what keeps me going, I tell them I'm a Buddhist, and that Buddhism comes with both good news and bad news. The good news is that we're not going to die. The bad news is that this is because we don't exist. I believe—and you should feel free to interpret this as a metaphysical belief, although I believe that it is also a physical fact—that we are not "real" in the way we think we are. We are bundles of very small particles temporarily patterned into structures of swirling energy. We think we are separate. We think we exist. But we are songs the universe is singing—glorious songs—but songs that will end. All we can do is try to sing as best we can.

The roots of our current predicament are fear and separateness. We fear we will never have enough. We feel that we are separate and alone. But we are not. I can't tell you that trying to solve the great problems of our time will make you either rich or famous—although

it might. I can tell you that you will have wonderful companions for the journey, that you will feel both more hope and more despair than you expect, and that in the end you will die knowing that you have lived life to the full.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "Most men [and women] lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them." But you don't have to. Really.

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