

bottled water instead of municipal water, and (in Southern California) paying to drive on toll roads competing with the jammed public freeways. Underlying such privatization is a misguided belief that the elite can remain unaffected by the problems of society around them: the attitude of those Greenland Norse chiefs who found that they had merely bought themselves the privilege of being the last to starve.

Throughout human history, most peoples have been connected to some other peoples, living together in small virtual polders. The Easter Islanders comprised a dozen clans, dividing their island polder into a dozen territories, and isolated from all other islands, but sharing among clans the Rano Raraku statue quarry, the Puna Pau pukao quarry, and a few obsidian quarries. As Easter Island society disintegrated, all the clans disintegrated together, but nobody else in the world knew about it, nor was anybody else affected. Southeast Polynesia's polder consisted of three interdependent islands, such that the decline of Mangareva's society was disastrous also for the Pitcairn and Henderson Islanders but for no one else. To the ancient Maya, their polder consisted at most of the Yucatan Peninsula and neighboring areas. When the Classic Maya cities collapsed in the southern Yucatan, refugees may have reached the northern Yucatan, but certainly not Florida. In contrast today our whole world has become one polder, such that events anywhere affect Americans. When distant Somalia collapsed, in went American troops; when the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union collapsed, out went streams of refugees over all of Europe and the rest of the world; and when changed conditions of society, settlement, and lifestyle spread new diseases in Africa and Asia, those diseases moved over the globe. The whole world today is a self-contained and isolated unit, as Tikopia Island and Tokugawa Japan used to be. We need to realize, as did the Tikopians and Japanese, that there is no other island/other planet to which we can turn for help, or to which we can export our problems. Instead, we need to learn, as they did, to live within our means.

I introduced this section by acknowledging that there are important differences between the ancient world and the modern world. The differences that I then went on to mention—today's larger population and more potent destructive technology, and today's interconnectedness posing the risk of a global rather than a local collapse—may seem to suggest a pessimistic outlook. If the Easter Islanders couldn't solve their milder local problems in the past, how can the modern world hope to solve its big global problems?

People who get depressed at such thoughts often then ask me, "Jared, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the world's future?" I answer, "I'm a cautious optimist." By that, I mean that, on the one hand, I acknowledge the seriousness of the problems facing us. If we don't make a determined effort to solve them, and if we don't succeed at that effort, the world as a whole within the next few decades will face a declining standard of living, or perhaps something worse. That's the reason why I decided to devote most of my career efforts at this stage of my life to convincing people that our problems have to be taken seriously and won't go away otherwise. On the other hand, we shall be able to solve our problems—if we choose to do so. That's why my wife and I did decide to have children 17 years ago: because we did see grounds for hope.

One basis for hope is that, realistically, we are not beset by insoluble problems. While we do face big risks, the most serious ones are not ones beyond our control, like a possible collision with an asteroid of a size that hits the Earth every hundred million years or so. Instead, they are ones that we are generating ourselves. Because we are the cause of our environmental problems, we are the ones in control of them, and we can choose or not choose to stop causing them and start solving them. The future is up for grabs, lying in our own hands. We don't need new technologies to solve our problems; while new technologies can make some contribution, for the most part we "just" need the political will to apply solutions already available. Of course, that's a big "just." But many societies did find the necessary political will in the past. Our modern societies have already found the will to solve some of our problems, and to achieve partial solutions to others.

Another basis for hope is the increasing diffusion of environmental thinking among the public around the world. While such thinking has been with us for a long time, its spread has accelerated, especially since the 1962 publication of *Silent Spring*. The environmental movement has been gaining adherents at an increasing rate, and they act through a growing diversity of increasingly effective organizations, not only in the United States and Europe but also in the Dominican Republic and other developing countries. At the same time as the environmental movement is gaining strength at an increasing rate, so too are the threats to our environment. That's why I referred earlier in this book to our situation as that of being in an exponentially accelerating horse race of unknown outcome. It's neither impossible, nor is it assured, that our preferred horse will win the race.