

ORION
AN ORION READER

Change Everything Now

A Selection of Essays from Orion Magazine

Teacher's Guide

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CHANGE EVERYTHING NOW

An interview with James Gustave Speth

JEFF GOODELL

1. Speth argues that we need a “fundamental challenge to our dominant values,” and he notes that “until we reconnect in a more profound way with ourselves and our communities and the natural world, it seems unlikely that we will deal successfully with our problems” (7). Reflect on this idea of “reconnection.” Based on this interview with Speth and the rest of the essays in this book, what might such a reconnection actually look like? What forms might it take?
2. Examine the ways that Speth uses metaphor, simile, personification, and other types of figurative language—for instance, “Capitalism is a growth machine” (4) and the “engine of progress” (5). What effects do these language choices have on his argument? What effects do they have on readers?
3. Speth suggests that in a time of crisis “we can construct a new narrative” (7). Do you agree that this is what is needed? What is the power of narrative? What might such a narrative look like?
4. Similarly, he later calls for a “grassroots citizens’ movement that shakes up people’s consciousness and forces us to rethink what’s really important, and what our role in the world and in nature really is” (11). How does one do this “shaking up”? In what ways is this claim connected to his earlier call for a “new narrative”?
5. Speth claims that the “scale of the impact” on the environment is a result of “the phenomenal amount of economic growth in rich countries, not from the phenomenal population growth” (9). How is this the case? Do some library research to explore the accuracy of Speth’s claim.

Selected Books by James Gustave Speth

- *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy* (2012)
- *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (2008)

Selected Books by Jeff Goodell

- *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America’s Energy Future* (2006)
- *How to Cool the Planet: Geoengineering and the Audacious Quest to Fix Earth’s Climate* (2011)

Jeff Goodell’s website: <http://www.jeff-goodell.com>

THE GOSPEL OF CONSUMPTION

JEFFREY KAPLAN

1. The title of Kaplan's essay points to a metaphor that runs throughout the piece: the "gospel" of consumerism. In what other ways does religious language and rhetoric appear in the essay? What effect does this language and rhetoric have in advancing Kaplan's argument and ideas? What other metaphors might he have used instead?
2. One of the important subtexts in Kaplan's essay is that an understanding of history reveals that changes within a culture have often been choices and not inevitable evolutions. How is this concept reinforced by other essays in this volume? What is lost when we lose sight of history and the past?
3. Kaplan makes an interesting distinction when he writes that "Unlike our great-grandparents who passed the time, we spend it" (18). What are some of the implications of this distinction? Think about the ways that you "pass" or "spend" time in your own life; what does each look like?
4. How is the gospel of consumption tied to "sav[ing] the earth," as Kaplan indicates in the essay's closing lines? In what ways do other essays in this collection address this question?

FORGET SHORTER SHOWERS

DERRICK JENSEN

1. Examine the structural and stylistic choices that Jensen makes as a writer. In what ways does his organizational strategy contribute to the essay's effect? What effects do the comparisons in the opening paragraph have? What do these choices say about Jensen's assumptions about his audience?
2. Jensen makes the provocative claim that "Personal change doesn't equal social change" (28). Do you agree? Why or why not? What evidence is there to support or challenge such a statement (either in this essay, in this book, or in your own reading, research, and experience)?
3. To allow for escape from the "double bind" of having to choose between the losing options of participating in the industrial economy or choosing to "live more simply" (28), Jensen points toward a "third" option. What might such an option look like when it's actually carried out? Can you imagine other possible options in addition to this third one?

Selected Books by Derrick Jensen

- *The Derrick Jensen Reader: Writings on Environmental Revolution* (2012)
- *Walking on Water: Reading, Writing, and Revolution* (2004)
- *The Culture of Make Believe* (2002)
- *Listening to the Land: Conversations about Nature, Culture, and Eros* (2002)
- *A Language Older than Words* (2000)

Derrick Jensen's website: <http://www.derrickjensen.org/>

ALTAR CALL FOR TRUE BELIEVERS

JANISSE RAY

1. Like Jeffrey Kaplan, Janisse Ray employs religious rhetoric throughout this essay, most notably in her use of the phrase “preaching to the choir.” In what ways does her use of this language compare to Kaplan’s? After looking carefully at the religious language and imagery that permeates the essay, consider what effects this choice of rhetoric has on her argument.
2. Ray uses a significant portion of the essay to describe her own experiences and the specific choices that she has made in her own life. How do these sections contribute to the main point of her essay? How would the essay change if it included less personal information?
3. Toward the end of the essay, Ray contends that “we have to accept the solutions to our environmental problems as personal and start applying them personally, and then all around us” (38). Compare this stance to the one Derrick Jensen describes in his essay. Are the two authors’ ideas compatible? Why or why not? Based on these essays, imagine a dialogue between Ray and Jensen. How might they respond to one another’s work?
4. Ray argues that the “conundrum we all should be facing” is this: “Every day we should be weighing even the minutest decision and asking ourselves, which action causes the least harm?” (36). What would doing this actually look like in your life? What types of knowledge would you need to make such decisions?

Selected Books by Janisse Ray

- *Drifting Into Darien: A Personal and Natural History of the Altamaha River* (2011)
- *Wild Card Quilt: The Ecology of Home* (2004)
- *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (2000)

Janisse Ray’s website: <http://janisseray.weebly.com/>

MAKING OTHER ARRANGEMENTS

JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER

1. In the conclusion to his essay, Kunstler writes, “Hope is not a consumer product. You have to generate your own hope” (53). What does he mean by this, and what are the implications? What role does hope play as you consider the ideas presented in *Change Everything Now*?
2. Kunstler declares that one of the problems the U.S. faces is an overabundance of information: “the more information that bombards us, the less we seem to understand” (48). Indeed, a recurring quandary of environmental and activist writing and communication is how to get the message across. In an age marked by a “deluge of information,” how does one tell a story so that people will listen? In what ways do the essays in this book tackle this problem?
3. Kunstler claims that the “key to understanding the challenge we face is admitting that we have to comprehensively make other arrangements for all the normal activities of everyday life” (46). Based on your careful reading of this essay, to what extent do you agree with Kunstler’s assertion? What do you think are some of the reasons that we have been unable or unwilling to admit that we must make these “other arrangements”?

Selected Books by James Howard Kunstler

- *Too Much Magic: Wishful Thinking, Technology, and the Fate of the Nation* (2012)
- *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (2006)
- *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the 21st Century* (1998)
- *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (1994)

James Howard Kunstler’s website: <http://www.kunstler.com>

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBSWOOL CARDIGANS

REBECCA SOLNIT

1. Rebecca Solnit's essay is in part a critique of contemporary consumer culture, much like other essays in this volume. In what ways does her critique align with the ideas presented by other writers in *Change Everything Now*? What does Solnit do in this essay that is different?
2. Early in the essay Solnit asks: "who among us can picture precisely where their sweater or their sugar comes from?" (55). Think about some of the everyday objects that you interact with in your own life, and choose one to investigate more fully. Where does that object come from? Who made it? What stories does it contain? Just as important, what are the challenges you face in trying to uncover the stories of that object?
3. What are the implications of the title of Solnit's essay, "The Silence of the Lambswool Cardigans"?
4. Part of Solnit's essay emphasizes "the crimes behind the production of everyday things," and that "objects are pretty; their stories are hideous" (56, 57). However, not all objects are markers of crime or trauma, as she points out. Based on your knowledge, what are some objects with good stories? What is your relationship to those objects?

Selected Books by Rebecca Solnit

- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (2010)
- *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (2007)
- *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2001)
- *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West* (2000)

Rebecca Solnit's website: <http://www.rebeccasolnit.com/>

THE BARBARIC HEART

CURTIS WHITE

1. White passionately claims that what “we want is the beautiful,” yet he admits that “we seem almost embarrassed to say that what convinces us is the argument of the beautiful” (69). What is the source of this embarrassment?
2. Arguing that “environmentalism should be about a return to the aesthetic,” White advocates “a daily insistence on the Beautiful within individual lives, within communities, and in our relation to the natural world” (70). What might this “daily insistence on the Beautiful” look like for you—in your own life and community? Share your ideas with others in the class and compare them.
3. At several points in the early pages of his essay, White describes what “environmentalism” thinks, does, and asks. Why do you think he uses such loosely defined and generalized language? What are the potential problems with speaking so generally about “environmentalism” as if it is a character itself?
4. White notes that environmentalists tend to overlook the fact that the “problem may not be of modern origin but something as old as humanity itself” (60). Contrast such a statement with the one that Kunstler makes: “I would argue against the notion . . . that civilization itself is our enemy and should not be continued” (50). Are these two authors discussing the same concerns? Why or why not?
5. In several places, White invokes the language of theater, including such phrases as “an environmentalist melodrama of evildoers” (60) and the concept of “tragic fate” in ancient Greece (65). What are the benefits and/or drawbacks of interpreting the world through the lens of literary convention?

Selected Books by Curtis White

- *The Barbaric Heart: Faith, Money, and the Crisis of Nature* (2009)
- *The Spirit of Disobedience: Resisting the Charms of Fake Politics, Mindless Consumption, and the Culture of Total Work* (2006)
- *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves* (2003)
- *Monstrous Possibility: An Invitation to Literary Politics* (1998)

Oxford Magazine interview with Curtis White:
<http://community.muohio.edu/oxmag/node/25>

PIE IN THE SKY

BILL MCKIBBEN

1. How would you describe McKibben's tone in this essay? What choices does he make as a writer to create that tone? Is it consistent throughout the essay? What effect does his tone have on you as a reader?
2. McKibben writes that "If there's any piece of writing that defines our culture, I submit it's the *SkyMall* catalogue" (73). If we assume his argument to be true, what does it suggest are the defining characteristics of U.S. culture? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What other pieces of writing—aside from *SkyMall*—might be used to "define our culture"? Look at the objects that surround you in your everyday life, and imagine what someone from a completely foreign culture (or another planet!) might surmise about you and your life based on these objects. Do these objects represent the "real" you? Why or why not?
4. In what ways does McKibben's argument overlap with what Rebecca Solnit discusses in her essay?

Selected Books by Bill McKibben

- *The Global Warming Reader: A Century of Writing About Climate Change* (2011)
- *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (2007)
- *Hope, Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth* (1995)
- *The Age of Missing Information* (1992)
- *The End of Nature* (1989)

Bill McKibben's website: <http://www.billmckibben.com/>

SkyMall magazine: www.skymall.com

RICEKEEPERS

WINONA LADUKE

1. The tone and content of LaDuke's essay differ from many of the others in *Change Everything Now*. What common ground does her essay share with others in this collection? In what ways is it different?
2. LaDuke begins and ends her essay by setting a scene based on personal experience. What effect does this strategy have on establishing her argument? In what other ways does the structure of her essay contribute to its meaning and effect?
3. One of the central conflicts that LaDuke presents is one between centuries-old tradition and contemporary change (and the extraordinarily complex ethical issues involved). Because she argues for the continuance of "age-old tradition," in what ways does LaDuke's essay belong in a collection titled *Change Everything Now* (89)? What are the strengths and merits of following an established tradition? What are its potential pitfalls? How can one navigate the ethical terrain between adhering to tradition and embracing change?

Selected Books by Winona LaDuke

- *Recovering the Sacred: the Power of Naming and Claiming* (2005)
- *All our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999)
- *Last Standing Woman* (1997)

Honor the Earth website: <http://honorearth.org/>

White Earth Land Recovery Project website: <http://nativeharvest.com/>

3 BETS

SANDRA STEINGRABER

1. When discussing the potential causes of bladder cancer, Steingraber points to a medical profession that emphasizes family history over environmental history—but she implies that they may actually be one and the same. Why do you think doctors have tended to prioritize genetic history over environmental conditions?
2. When you read Steingraber’s explanation of the exercise to “imagine that ecological metrics were as familiar to us as economic ones” (93-95), how do you respond? Why? What might be some reasons that our culture has focused so much attention on economy and so little on ecology? What does such a disproportionate emphasis say about our culture?
3. Steingraber claims that “chemical toxicants can sabotage the story of child development” (98). What does she mean by this? What are the implications of her choice of words here (i.e. *sabotage*, and *story*)?
4. Near the end of her essay, Steingraber makes a strong comparison between slavery and chemical toxicants (98-99). How do you respond to such a rhetorical claim, and why? Do you think such a comparison is justified? Why or why not?

Selected Books by Sandra Steingraber

- *Raising Elijah: Protecting Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis* (2011)
- *Having Faith: An Ecologist’s Journey to Motherhood* (2001)
- *Living Downstream: An Ecologist’s Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (1997)
- *Post-Diagnosis* (1995)

Sandra Steingraber’s website: <http://steingraber.com/>