

On board the SS Planet Titanic



WORLD Environment Day (June 5) was a good time to reflect on the existential threat of climate change. After five of the hottest years in living history, there is little doubt that climate change is moving centre stage in the global agenda. The UN has warned that a million species are in danger of becoming extinct, with climate scientists claiming that we may have less than 10 to 15 years to correct our carbon emission trajectory. It is no longer “if” climate disaster will happen; it’s about “when” and how bad. The rich and famous billionaires like Elon Musk can finance space travel projects on the hope that they can migrate to outer space when earth implodes. But most of the poor living in the tropics who are facing the rising heat, worsening drought and lack of food and jobs can choose to migrate northwards to cooler and richer places. The Middle East and North Africa heat belt has six percent of the world’s population and one percent of drinkable water resources, but the highest population birth rate. The desert area in the Sahara and Middle East is expanding under the growing heat. By 2050 the Middle East and Africa will have 3.4 billion people, more than the populations of China and India combined. Small wonder that populists in Britain, US and Europe are terrified of being overwhelmed by migrants. How did we not see all this coming? Sustainable investors (those who think they can make money out of investing in green projects) have a cute phrase: “We are long on short and short on long.” What this means simply is that under the philosophy of creating shareholder value, corporate captains basically focus on short-term business models driven by quarterly profit reporting, thereby completely losing the plot on creating long-term value. All the corporate mistakes of Volkswagen on diesel emission, Boeing on aircraft safety, and Facebook on data usage smell of corporate governance failures to address long-term trust and reputation issues.



224 companies alone produced 72 percent of annual global industrial greenhouse gas emissions in 2015.

Most climate scientists think that governments must do more to stop climate change. But actually, both the culprits and possible saviours of global warming are our corporate captains. If the corporate captains are not convinced that they need to change the course from short-term profit to long-term survival, then we are all on the SS Planet Titanic. After all, the shareholders of the original Titanic thought the ship was unsinkable. The 2,000 leading global companies listed by *Forbes* account for USD 40 trillion in annual revenue (just under half of global GDP) and USD 186 trillion in global assets—larger than any single nation. The CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017 estimated that 100 fossil fuel producers (including some no longer in existence) account for 52 percent of global industrial greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions since the Industrial Revolution.

Two hundred twenty-four companies produced 72 percent of annual global industrial GHG emissions in 2015. Collectively, these multinationals run the global supply change and also shape the demand for consumer goods through their control over advertising, social media and product design. If they truly care about climate change and social inclusivity, they (more than governments) can make a real difference. So far, many pay lip service to climate change and do so glibly in their annual reports plus a bit for corporate charity. But most have not acted seriously in changing their own controls on carbon emissions and helping to educate their customers in why changing consumption behaviour is in everyone’s best interest. The latest CDP report suggested that the top companies are increasingly aware that

USD 1 trillion of their assets is at risk from climate impacts within the next five years, whilst as much as USD 250 billion may have to be written off in losses. On the other hand, just the conversion of production to green products and services may bring as much as USD 1.2 trillion in revenue—seven times the conversion costs. Climate scientists have warned about climate disaster for quite some time, but it took them over 30 years to realise that the problem was not the science. What they needed to do most was to convince the economists and the policymakers (who are mostly economists or lawyers) that the issue is deadly serious. Unfortunately, many mainstream macro-economists remain convinced that carbon emissions are a “big externality” (market anomaly outside their main models), because growth and technology will somehow find the right solution.

The simple arithmetic is often ignored. Human population was two billion in 1900, now it’s 7.6 billion, and will perhaps grow to 11 billion by the end of the century. If every Chinese and Indian achieves the income level of the average American and consumes resources like them per capita, we will need another earth. Economists are particularly blind to the impact of global warming and scarce resources because the originators of mainstream economics—Anglo-Saxons—never lived under serious resource constraints. The British and then the Americans discovered coal and fossil fuels to power the Industrial Revolution. After all, globalisation meant that labour, land and oil and gas resources could be taken from colonies and then imported from the rest of the non-Caucasian world. You can always pay for these non-renewable resources by printing money. Since technology discovered fossil fuels—coal and then oil, gas—economists treat mother earth as a cost which does not need to be factored into GDP—the metric that measures “progress”. The GDP number does not include the irreplaceable cost of the tree that you cut down or the damage to the environment; it only includes the cost of capital and labour to cut down the tree! Planet and people are sacrificed in the name of profit. World Environment Day is a reminder that we live collectively in a planet that is quickly heating up. The only problem is that we ourselves are providing the carbon emission that is fuelling the heating. Asians understand that the right analogy of this surreal situation is the case of the Boiling Frog—comfortable in warm water until it gets boiled completely, even though it can jump out if it really wants to. The Steve Bannons of this world think the solution to the current situation is to fight other frogs. Can someone switch off the White House Reality Show channel and get on with the serious job of turning around SS Planet Titanic?

Andrew Sheng writes on global issues from an Asian perspective.
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The value of writing letters in a digital society

A letter expresses more than just words



IN OTHER WORDS
SOCIAL media, texting and emailing have revolutionised the way we communicate. These technologies have enabled us to be more efficient and stay in touch more easily. But they have also altered the dynamics of some of our most important relationships. Within this new digital revolution, have we lost something? We are becoming lonelier by the gigabyte. Apps connect us before we can actually meet. Google completes our sentences. We go on Facebook while we are in a meeting. We text while there is a person sitting in front of us. The more “connected” we are, the less we get to know one another. Sherry Turkle, professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, says that we are ending up hiding from one another. We forget—in between texts and e-mails and Facebook posts—to listen to one another. But it is often in unedited, dull moments, moments in which we falter and stutter and occasionally go silent, that we reveal our true selves to one another. We have sacrificed real communication for mere connection. We have chosen the quantity of relationships rather than the quality of relationships. We have embraced a new “reality” that accepts the simulation of compassion as sufficient. Does the bear-hug on Skype or the sad face on text carry the same appeal as the well-written condolence letter? The role of writing letters has become an almost extinct practice in our lives. The envelope in the mail is just another bill.

People used to write letters. They used to write their letters by hand. We were able to see the writer’s redactions and second thoughts. We were privy to his or her flaws, celebrations and conflicts. A letter from our parents or friends was a familiar voice in a foreign country, a favourite song replayed in a new city. In a letter, we tended to one another with all our messiness. Now we clean all that up with technology. When we text, Facebook or WhatsApp, we present a simulated version of ourselves. We edit and delete. We unfriend with a click. Over time we stop caring. Letters are among the most significant memorials one can leave behind. In a series of letters written between 1930 and 1933, from Her Majesty’s prisons, Jawaharlal Nehru depicted a panoramic view of the history of mankind. These letters he addressed to his young daughter Indira, hoping to introduce her to world history seen from a non-Eurocentric angle. It all started with a birthday note. He could not afford to send a material gift from prison. So he gave her something from his heart. Later, they were published as a book named *Glimpses of World*



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History. The *New York Times* described it as “one of the most remarkable books ever written.” The *Prison Letters of Nelson Mandela*, a collection of 255 letters written over his 27 years in prison, provides us with a new lens to view his personal and political growth. They help explain how Mandela survived his gruelling incarceration with courage and integrity intact. From the day he was arrested in 1962, he took pen to pad and in cramped cursive wrote heart-rending missives to his wife, five children and later

several grandchildren, rebellious letters to authorities, anguished condolences to families of fallen comrades, and even a pensive letter about *amasi*, a traditional kind of fermented milk that he missed. Underlying them all was his unyielding optimism in the inevitability and righteousness of his cause—the end of white supremacy and democratic self-rule for the black majority. Not once did he express self-pity or regret about his suffering. “For 13 years I have slept naked on a cement floor that becomes damp and cold during the rainy season,” Mandela wrote in

a 1976 letter requesting pajamas routinely given to white prisoners. In 1927, the 10-year-old John F Kennedy became a boy scout. His weekly allowance of 40 cents was not enough to cover the costs of basic survival gear. So he asked his father, Joseph Kennedy Sr, for a raise of 30 cents. Keen to teach his son a quick lesson in monetary matters, Kennedy Sr, a noted businessman and politician, immediately told him that unless his request was in writing, it would not be heard. So the future president wrote his father a letter requesting a raise which he gave the title “A plea for a raise.” I remember being taught how to write such letters in school. At that time, I thought it was just silly. But later I saw that even rich kids in the States are taught to sell lemonade or wash neighbours’ cars to earn extra cash during the summer vacation. The lesson is that one has to actually work for his money. We don’t have to pore over the letters of personages like Mandela and Kennedy for the insights letters offer into our lives. Letter-writing is among our most human acts. Sending a letter at a time of loss is a sign of civility that binds us together. Social media have their places, in commerce, romance, and politics. But they can never substitute for something like a letter. Because handwriting opens a window into the soul that cyber communication can never do. Remember pen friendship? So, write a letter. Surprise a friend. Send a message—a message crafted by hand rather than bits of binary code. A letter that carries emotions rather than emoticons. Tell a story. And maybe, in that process, if not storytellers, we become human again.

Amitava Kar is a mechanical engineer.

We have sacrificed real communication for mere connection. We have chosen the quantity of relationships rather than the quality of relationships.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

JUNE 9, 2011
THE WORLD'S FIRST ARTIFICIAL ORGAN TRANSPLANT WAS PERFORMED

A 36-year-old man with tracheal cancer received a new lab-made windpipe seeded with his own stem cells in a procedure in Sweden which was the first successful attempt of its kind

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Copper alloy

6 Plant life

11 Circle spokes

12 Classical language

13 Dessert-eater's confession

15 Ring feature

16 Inverted nine

17 Take in

18 Dice, essentially

20 Make lumber out of

23 Blockheads

27 Resting on

28 Word on a nickel

29 Jeans material

31 Rubber source

32 Senegal's capital

34 Central

37 Set afire

38 Drill part

41 Huckster's pitch

44 Suit material

45 Some nobles

46 "Roots" writer

47 Like most desserts

DOWN

1 Sailor's lockup

2 Track event

3 Genesis name

4 Confessional topic

5 Takes notice

6 Bent

7 - Vegas

8 Singer Redding

9 Stand

10 Poker price

14 Umbrella part

18 Amorous archer

19 Up to now

20 Feeling down

21 Had brunch

22 Took the title

24 Peach center

25 Abel's mother

26 Censor's target

30 Ailment

31 Coffee bar orders

33 Relatives

34 Bit of lore

35 Corn Belt state

36 "Hamilton" event

38 Tedious fellow

39 Cruise stop

40 Final, for one

42 Horseshoe shape

43 Congress creation

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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