



It's UP
to US

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LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Look at you, going door to door, pen at hand, little speech ready. You talk about the sea turtle threatened with extinction, and say that people can help by donating a little bit of money. You worry about the world. At such a young age. In your aunt's garden, you look for woodlice; in the woods, you examine toadstools; and with your friends, you set up clubs to protect nature. I remember a sultry summer morning. You are helping in your nan's backyard and the grown-ups are talking about global warming. You ask what that is, 'the greenhouse effect', and your mother points to the glass house where your nan grows her tomatoes. When the sun shines, it gets very hot in there, she explains, and something similar is happening to the world. You nod, but it will take a while before you really understand what she means.

You do what the world expects of you: switch the lights off when you go out, take the glass to the bottle bank and don't shower too long. That is your way of helping the environment, and if everyone just follows your example, it'll all be all right. You are proud of the certificates for fundraising from the World Wildlife Fund that hang above your bed and you dream of a career as a marine biologist. It is an unwritten promise that your life will be better than your parents', and they already have little to complain about. The end of history is in sight and you can look forward to the future.

You become an adult and sign up for that ubiquitous belief in progress. Concerns about the disappearance of nature, the sadness about the extinction of species, you dismiss as childish sentimentality. You know very well that forests are still being razed and that the greenhouse effect is only getting stronger, but you prefer not to think about it. The World Wildlife Fund? You don't renew your membership. And why must you set an example if no-one else follows? You believe that, in the end, people will devise clever solutions for our self-created problems. Isn't that what we have always done?

I'm sometimes nostalgic for that optimism I now know was naive. I sometimes wonder what I'll tell my children in the future. I often hear that we only have ten years to avoid climate catastrophe, so when my hypothetical offspring are as old as you then, we'll know if we succeeded. Probably not. I wonder if I want children anyway, if I truly believe that the web of life is unravelling, leaving civilisation hanging by a thread. But it's too fatalistic to answer that question with a 'no'. Who am I to decide that the future isn't worth the effort any more? Who says that there isn't any beauty or happiness to be found in a planet out of joint?

Besides, future generations may well be our best hope of salvation. The children of today aren't doing what the world expects of them, they are rising up to change that world. They are refusing to go to school, and to the adults who are ruining their future, they are raising their fists and shouting, "How dare you?" I'd like to advise you to follow their example, but my childhood is behind me. I'm a member of the last generation who can turn the tide, even if I don't always know how. I read, and despair. I write and try to combat that desperation. I still have my pen at hand and my little speech ready, but the message isn't getting any brighter. A journalist and environmental activist once said to me, "I always try to find new and more persuasive ways of saying the same thing." Yes, I thought, that's difficult enough in itself.

Written as a contribution to the Winternachten international literature festival The Hague by Jaap Tielbeke. Translated by Terry Ezra.