

choose more waste, dependence on fossil fuels, and environmental degradation. Having no chance of convincing people that these outcomes are desirable, perhaps, they reason, we can be persuaded that we have no choice in the matter.

But inevitably we do have choices to make. Failing to make them consciously isn't failing to make them at all: It's just falling for the inevitability trap. It's just giving ourselves an excuse for allowing the wrong choices to be made, and a feeble excuse at that. Among all the reasons for making the wrong choice, I think the least satisfying, the least noble, the hardest one to forgive ourselves for is: "It wasn't up to me."

Well, it is up to somebody. Who's it gonna be?

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K. C. Golden is policy director of Climate Solutions ([www.climate-solutions.org](http://www.climate-solutions.org)), which promotes clean and efficient energy sources. He's the former director of energy policy for the state of Washington.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

# The Inevitability Trap

K. C. Golden

It's time to rally around an embattled concept: free will.

Having aligned myself against a battalion of irresistible forces over the years, I've become a student of inevitability. How do environmentally destructive choices become inevitable? Near as I can tell, it starts when the people who will benefit from these choices simply begin to assert their inevitability. People seem especially receptive to inevitability right now. We're comforted by the notion that amid all the uncertainty and confusion—the restructuring and rightsizing and layoffs and insecurity—some larger forces are at work toward a predetermined outcome. We're sort of relieved to hear that something's inevitable, even if it's not necessarily something we like. It clarifies things. It's more pragmatic to be resigned to the inevitable than to chart a new course through the chaos. So the myth of inevitability spreads and the prophecy fulfills itself. If the proponents of a particular course can get a critical mass of folks to believe that it's a foregone conclusion, pretty soon it will be.

Those who assert that conservation, renewables, and environmental protection are at their inevitable end are using the only strategy available to them. They propound the myth of inevitability because they know that few of us would actually

FROM NATURAL RESOURCES

Adrienne Rich

. . . My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.

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Excerpted from "Natural Resources," in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950–2001* by Adrienne Rich (W. W. Norton, 2002).

HOW HAVE YOU SPENT YOUR LIFE?

Jalaluddin Rumi

On Resurrection Day God will ask,  
"During this reprieve I gave you,  
what have you produced for Me?  
Through what work have you reached your  
life's end?  
For what end have your food  
and your strength been consumed?  
Where have you dimmed the luster of your eye?  
Where have you dissipated your five senses?  
You have spent your seeing, hearing,  
intelligence  
and the pure celestial substances;  
what have you purchased from the earth?  
I gave you hands and feet as spade and mattock  
for tilling the soil of good works;  
when did they by themselves become existent?"

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Jalaluddin Rumi was a thirteenth-century Sufi poet. From *The Pocket Rumi Reader*, translated and edited by Kabir Helminski (Shambhala Press, 2001). The poem originally appeared in Rumi's great work, the six-volume *Mathnawi*. Other books by Rumi include *The Rumi Collection*, translated and edited by Kabir Helminski (Shambhala Press, 2000).

Jews from the Holocaust. The rescuers say that they were faced with someone at the door, and simply did what had to be done. Viktor Frankl also writes that finding meaning in life is independent of hope or freedom, as he describes life in a Nazi concentration camp, where daily tasks of living often represent a refusal to acquiesce.

Joanna Macy writes of visiting a group of monks in Tibet. The monks were reconstructing their ancient monastery, which had been reduced to rubble by the Chinese. Her heart fell at the magnitude of the task and its almost foolhardy nature. When the monks were asked about Chinese policies and the likelihood of another period of repression, Macy saw that such calculations were conjecture to the monks. Since you cannot see into the future, you simply proceed to put one stone on top of another, and another on top of that. If the stones get knocked down, you begin again, because if you don't nothing will get built.

The planetary crises raise existential and spiritual questions we are usually able to avoid in our affluent society. I find that the question of how to face hopelessness is one I cannot answer with consistency and intellectual rigor. On the one hand, optimism probably represents denial of the facts: The scientific research offers little evidence that nature can recover from the man-made destruction wrought in this century. I know, therefore, that I cannot rationally base my decisions on the hope that we will turn things around. On the other hand, I find that I cherish the small signs that people are taking action to promote change, and when I see them, I feel a tiny surge of optimism that I am unwilling to repress. My compromise is to work without depending on hope that it will make a difference, while at the same time treasuring the signs that I am one of many.

In spite of my despair after hearing the radio series, I found myself continuing my efforts in disarmament, not because it seemed to be the most urgent problem, or the most terrifying,

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

# Staying the Course

Mary-Wynne Ashford

I once borrowed five hours of tapes from a popular radio series about current environmental crises, and listened to them one after another over a weekend. By Monday, I was paralyzed with despair. Onto the weight of the nuclear arms race, I had now cemented overpopulation, ozone depletion, drift-net fishing, destruction of the rain forests, the Great Lakes dying.

How do you find hope when there is no rational reason for optimism? How do you deal with evidence that the situation is worsening despite your best efforts? Does your life make any difference? How do you continue in the face of despair?

Albert Camus, in his 1947 novel *The Plague*, explores the same questions, using an epidemic of bubonic plague to represent evil and suffering, specifically the Nazi occupation of France and the collusion of the Vichy regime. The protagonist, Dr. Rieux, fights against suffering and death, not as a hero, but as a weary, somewhat detached man, who through his struggle gives his life meaning. His friend, Jarrou, speaks of having had the plague when he discovered as a child that his father's role as a judge was to sentence and preside over death.

In choosing how to respond to the plague, Camus's characters are motivated not by hope, but by an inner imperative similar to that often described by those who chose to risk their lives saving

but because there were things to be done in disarmament that were clear to me. Whether or not I could really make a difference, leaving them undone was a resignation to despair. At the very least, the individual can challenge the silence of assumed consensus. By breaking the silence, by refusing to collude with evil and insanity, one resists the darkness.

Breaking the silence is, I think, the most significant thing we do as individuals. Sometimes even without speaking, one can challenge the silence, as did the women in Argentina during the military regime. These women, *Las Madres de la Plaza*, refused to be intimidated by death squads. They kept their regular vigil, their presence alone a blatant accusation of murder and brutality. They also showed that the power of one is acted out in community, not in solitude. We sustain each other in dark times, sometimes simply by being present together.

The result of "speaking truth to power," as the Quakers put it, is often subtle and unpredictable. Men who left their jobs in U.S. military industries as a result of a crisis of conscience describe individuals who forced them to confront the meaning of their work on nuclear weapons. One senior official told of the impact of passing a solitary man who stood every day outside the entrance to the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, holding a placard opposing nuclear weapons. The anonymous protester played a significant role in the official's eventual decision to resign his job.

Sometimes, we look to great individuals like Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela to see that one person can effect change. I find it more inspiring to see the impact of ordinary people who did what they saw had to be done without becoming great symbols of resistance. I think, for example, of hearing the executive director of the Manila YWCA speaking at a peace meeting in Honolulu. She was asked whether the YWCA had had any part in the overthrow of dictator Ferdinand Marcos and the election of Corazón Aquino.

Well, yes," she admitted, "we did."

"What did you do?" the audience demanded.

"Well, I lay on the road to keep the tanks from coming into the downtown, and the other women brought food and water."

Whether or not we succeed in pushing the rock up the hill, there is meaning in the journey, not in the hope that one time we'll be able to shed the rock forever and live in a perfect world. In the end, we stay the course in our everyday actions—shouldering the burden, working in community, speaking truth to power, and refusing to join forces with the pestilence.

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Mary-Wynne Ashford, M.D., is the former president of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organization International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and teaches at the University of Victoria. An earlier version of this article appeared in Canada's *Peace* magazine.