

Lesson 2: “Our world is Dying today!”

PURPOSE

Philosophers tell us that you cannot make change from a negative. You have to be positive to get people to pay attention. The example they cite most often is: “Imagine if Dr Martin Luther King had chosen, back in 1963, to tell America, instead of ‘I have a Dream!’ – ‘I have a nightmare!’” Would anyone have paid as much attention?!” We shall never know – but, for the purposes of writing and performing this musical, we think that it is worth spending one lesson to outline how bad things are – and how much worse they could get very quickly if we don’t change our behavior as a global family.

The purpose is to re-write the Polar Bear’s speech after the Wigwam Song – but hopefully, out of these discussions, some new verses to the wigwam song will emerge as well – and some other lines of dialogue. Parents, and teachers too, instinctively like to protect their students from the harsh realities of the world and, of course, the younger the students, the easier you should go on this lesson. But – for older students, it is short-changing their intelligence to try to gloss over the harsh facts that, perforce, they will have to address in their lifetimes.

BACKGROUND READING & VIEWING

1. Read this first:

The generation being educated today will have to do what all previous generations have been unable or unwilling to do: stabilize a world population which is growing at the rate of quarter of a million each day; stabilize and then reduce the emission of greenhouse gases which threaten to change the climate; protect biological diversity, now declining at an estimated rate of 100-200 species per day; reverse the destruction of rainforests now being lost at the rate of 116 square miles each day; and conserve soils now being eroded at the rate of 65,000,000 tons per day.

Future generations must also learn to use energy and materials with greater efficiency. They must learn to utilize solar energy in all its forms. They must rebuild the economy in order to eliminate waste and pollution. They must learn how to manage renewable resources for the long term. They must begin the great work of repairing the damage done to the Earth in the past 200 years of industrialisation. And they must do all of this while addressing worsening social and racial inequities.

No generation has faced a more daunting agenda.

Professor David Orr, Oberlin College, USA

Anything by one of the world’s greatest environmental educators is well worth reading. Amongst his most famous books are:

- ***Down to the Wire***: Confronting Climate Collapse (2012)
- ***Earth in Mind***: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect (2004)

2. ***An Inconvenient Truth***: Al Gore’s Oscar- and Nobel Prize-winning documentary on climate change. You can purchase a copy at Amazon – and you can take part in the producers’ follow-up conversation with scientific updates at: <http://www.takepart.com/an-inconvenient-truth>

3. ***The 11th Hour*** – good, but a little too heavy-handed in its criticism of industry which, in many cases, is far ahead of the politicians in implementing solutions;

4. ***The Silent Spring*** by Rachel Carson(1962) – the book which started the environmental movement;

5. ***The Limits to Growth*** – by Donella H. and Dennis L. Meadows(1972). The Club of Rome’s landmark report on the boundaries of human endeavor – and how close we are to crossing them.

6. ***Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse*** – by Donella H. Meadows, Jorgen Randers and Dennis L. Meadows(1993)

7. ***Heat*** by George Monbiot(2009); Anything and everything by George Monbiot, Britain’s leading writer on the imminent environmental catastrophe: www.monbiot.com

8. ***Six Degrees*** by Mark Lynas (2008) – the book that explains what will happen with every added degree of global warming. 1 degree is terrifying enough: by the time you get to six degrees, the end of the world has happened several times over. And current politicians seem happy to settle for 4 – 5 degrees. An amazing wake-up call of a book.

9. ***The God Species*** – by Mark Lynas (2011) – a further examination of the boundaries in relation to biodiversity, climate change, nitrogen, land use, toxins, ocean acidification etc.

10. PCI’s compendium of books, articles and histories about environment/sustainability issues. The images at the top of the home page outline most of the major issues: <http://rioplus20education.info/>

11. **Our Final Hour: A Scientist's Warning** - by Martin Rees (2003)
12. **GM Crops & Monsanto** – driving thousands of Indian farmers to suicide. See: <http://www.seattleorganicrestaurants.com/vegan-whole-foods/indian-farmers-committing-suicide-monsanto-gm-crops/>
13. **The Terrifying Math of Global Warming**: Bill McKibben's landmark article on climate change: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>
14. **Carbon Bubble** – financial crisis that will hit when governments tackle Climate Change: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/apr/19/carbon-bubble-financial-crash-crisis>
15. **War**: Read some of the grim exposés of what actually happens in war. Here are some ideas:
 - **Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege: 1942-1943** by Antony Beevor
 - **The Fall of Berlin -1945** by Antony Beevor
 - **Birdsong** by Sebastian Faulks (about the First World War)
 - **War Poets** Poems of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas and others
 - **The Cold and the Dark: The World after Nuclear War** by Carl Sagan (1984)
 - **Culloden** and **The War Game** – docu-drama films by Peter Watkins(1964 & 1965)
 - Saving Private Ryan, Schindlers List, Band of Brothers – Stephen Spielberg's war films
 - The Internet archive about the Auschwitz 2nd World War Concentration/Death camps: (<https://archive.org/movies/thumbnails.php?identifier=Auschwitz1946>) and Hiroshima - (https://archive.org/movies/thumbnails.php?identifier=1946-08-05_Jap_Films_of_Hiroshima)

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. How do you pitch the Protest Speech?

This scene shows 'Protest as usual': a bunch of students dress up, bang drums and march around campus collecting signatures for a petition. It's happened a million times: it will happen a million times again. Trouble is – as we have seen several times in the last few years, it has not worked. Even the most passionate, silver-tongued orators cannot penetrate the adamantine steel protecting politicians and their prejudices: as one reporter asked Prime Minister, Tony Blair, just before he started the illegal war on Iraq: "The Pope tells you not to do it, the Archbishop of Canterbury and a majority of the British People tell you not to do it: why do you continue to think that you are right to launch a war in Iraq?!" And – as everybody knows – even though the war was a disaster and killed close to a million people and did not solve Iraq's problems, he has never apologized. Many feel that he, and George W. Bush should be prosecuted for war crimes. But no amount of demonstrating will get him to court....

The speaker is trying to whip the crowd up into a frenzy – so that he can launch into the song, "WORLD" and carry the cast with him, working themselves up into a paroxysm of rage and frustration at the way that we are killing our world, and not really caring about it. So – before we start discussing the content of the speech, let's answer the following questions:

- Who is the speech aimed at – politicians or students? Or some one else?
- What is the result that the student speaker seeks from his speech? – more signatures to the petition?
- What emotion does the speaker seek to generate in his audience? Anger, fear, mindless passion? What?

We know, of course, that Luke and his friends are going to come along later and make fun of the speaker – but we want the speech to be as good as it can possibly be, as it is important exposition of the issues to the audience. And – of course – though it was done in Geneva by a boy, it can be done just as well by a young woman.

2. A: What are the problem issues?

Ask your cast: "What are the TOP FIVE most pressing global challenges that your generation is going to have to face?" Given the herd mentality of most young people, we urge you to make it a totally secret ballot of views: ask the young people to write their FIVE priorities on a piece of paper, fold it up and give it to you. Then read them out – write them up on a board, and add ticks to each priority as a second, third and/or fourth young person mentions them. When they are all up there, for every one to see, check them against this list, and see what they have missed out – and what they have included that we miss out below:

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| • Population Growth | • Resource Depletion (oil, minerals, coal) |
| • Uncontrolled Consumption | • Failure to build renewable energy generation |
| • Climate Change | • Extreme Weather |
| • Global Warming, Polar & Glacier ice melt | • Sea Level Rise & Coastal Flooding |
| • Poverty and hunger | • HIV-AIDS & other global disease pandemics |

- Fresh Water Shortages
- Depletion of Fish stocks
- Rain forest destruction
- The Rise of China
- War, conflict and a Weak UN
- War and instability in the Middle East
- Religious Conflict
- Crimes against humanity going unpunished
- GM Foods
- Pension Funds
- Desertification
- Ocean Acidification
- Biodiversity Loss and Species extinctions
- The Decline of the United States of America
- Nuclear weapons
- Terrorism
- Religious fundamentalism
- Widening injustice and Human Rights Abuse
- Youth Unemployment
- The power of the Advertising Industry

[These last two may not occur to any of your cast – but some experts consider them the two biggest obstacles to no-growth, sustainable economies. If you had a no-growth economy - with share value remaining static, and companies only growing by growing existing market share, Pension Funds would not grow – and no one would be able to afford a pension. Pension Funds require markets to grow unsustainably. Equally, the advertising industry requires people to buy more – more – more! Companies pay them over \$600 billion a year to get the public to consume unsustainably – and there is very little that the far less lavishly funded Green Parties and NGOs can do to combat them.]

2. B: How Many Issues? Discuss with them how many problems should be addressed in the speech – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4? And then decide which, from the feelings of the whole cast, should be the top priorities addressed. You should do this as a result of a second Ballot: Return the ballot papers to the young people. Ask them to write on them the top 2 – 4 – 6 – 8 issues that have emerged from the discussion (*depending on the number you have decided to include in the speech.*) Get them to vote. Count the Votes – and you have the issues that must be addressed in the speech.

2. C: Choose the Top Priority Issues: Keep the full list up in the rehearsal room and, as a homework task, invite the students to go home and write a verse of the wigwam song that expresses their feelings about one of the issues – any of them, even if they are not included in the Final Speech issues.

3. Does ‘Doom ‘n Gloom work’?

Look at the images of grief, destruction, pollution and inhumanity expressed in the images to be found on the “World Backgrounds” file: also analyse the deeply, passionately concerned tone of the lyrics of the World song – and the passion and the anger with which David Essex sang its first recording (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtAHUpdj1qY>) And ask yourself – and your cast: am I moved by this? Am I compelled to take action – to do something to change this.

Bob Geldof, famously, watched the horrific images of famine in Ethiopia in a BBC Newscast – and was moved to organize Live Aid – the 1985 global concert that raised \$300 million dollars for the victims of the famine. Is that proof positive that doom ‘n gloom reporting can work? Only your cast can decide. Mention the concept of psychic numbing: the human response of emotional shut-down, compassion fatigue and the natural: “*What on earth can I do about it anyway....?*” Also – the medical injunction to all doctors: “*First, do no harm....*” How can any of us be sure that, in our frantic desire to “DO SOMETHING!!!!” – we will not actually make these global problems and tragedies worse?

Get some agreement on the actual value – or not – of exploring these deeply distressing issues, and decide how much, or little of them you are going to refer back to during the play;

IMPROVISATIONS

A. The Prioritisation Game (*Do this BEFORE you do Discussion Point 2.C above*): Look at the final list of Global Challenges on the board and ask your cast each to select ONE of them, and make a list of the ten reasons WHY their problem is the GLOBAL PRIORITY that must be addressed first. (Cast members can choose the same issues – but it is good to try to get a spread!)

Usually a clear majority of cast members choose a single issue – with others choosing a handful of other issues. However this particular cookie crumbles, you need to set up a situation of a Presidential style debate – where each person lists the ten reasons why their problem *is* the TOP global priority to be addressed. Once the two ‘candidates’ have made their case, each argues why the other’s case is invalid – tearing their case apart, point-by-point. Then the other ‘candidate’ tears into his opponent’s case. Then another cast member who shares the top majority issue, takes the place of the first candidate, and makes their own case – refuting the other’s argument at the same time. Keep changing the candidates and hearing the arguments, until the cast – and you – are exhausted! Then you can take the vote described in 2. C above.

B. “Our World is Dying – today!” – Is it? Now your cast are getting to know the issues (*- and have done some research on the background reading / viewing suggested above*), get them to discuss the truth

of the famous line in David Gordon's "World" song: is the World dying today? Set up the improvisation with one cast member arguing that it IS – another arguing that it is NOT. Get them to argue fiercely for each side of the argument – and then get them to switch sides, and keep bringing in new cast members to add their voice to the argument, until the whole cast is involved in screaming at each other on different sides of the stage.

In contrast to improvisation "A" above, I see this as a bar room argument – with raised voices, fists thumping on tables, faces getting redder and redder – as anger and passion flows. Note carefully where the balance of the cast's feeling falls: we are often surprised by how apocalyptic young people feel about their future: if that is the case with your cast – and the majority seem to agree that the world IS dying – take note, and try to change that perception by the way you craft the script and resolve the issues in the play. The experience can then become a positive, life-affirming experience for them.

C. The Reality of War: Consider the following note written by a Peace Child member:

"You cannot ask a person to "forgive" their enemies until you have experienced the reality of war. I was happily playing a computer game at home in Zagreb when the phone rang. My mother burst into tears. My father came to me. I knew before he told me that my grandfather was dead. I wanted to know immediately how he died, and my father told me. A gang of young Serbs had come to his house and told him to get out. He was sitting quietly on his rocking chair and he said he would not go. They fired bullets into his knees. Still he did not move. They put bullets in his shoulders. The pain must have been horrible but still he did not move. Finally they put the gun to his eyes and blew his head apart, killed him - a sweet old man with a white beard. How can you ask me to forgive the people that did this. I cannot do it. Cannot do it ever in my life."
Maté, 17, Croatia

War and human conflict is perhaps the best reason to feel doom 'n gloom about the future of the planet: with the environment falling apart before our eyes, and resources draining away at an unsustainable rate, how do we have time to fight pointless battles against each other and build up vast nuclear and military arsenals which have no possible value – and if used would likely destroy all life on the planet for ever? Are we mad?

Consider your own capacity for violence? Look at your hand: a hand very similar to that one scribbled the notes of all Mozart's music and Shakespeare's plays. Equally a hand very similar to your's pulled the lever that released the poison gas into the death chambers of Auschwitz – and pulled the trigger that killed Maté's grandfather in Croatia.

Another young Peace Child member – from Serbia – told me at the height of the Balkan civil war, that all Serbs, Croatians and Bosnians were evil: "We have to clear all the people from this area, and get new people in – people who know how to love each other!" Not possible, of course – but get your cast to take a position: are human beings inherently Good? – or Evil? Sit round, shooting the breeze! – airing the different views – and see whether your cast can come to any kind of consensus.

D. "Can't you see the world is changing?.... People coming out from under, slowly rising to the thunder!" – Finding the evidence of change: Set up the chat show format – with a Cobra figure monitoring the discussion; three guests on chairs one side, and three guests on chairs the other side argue vehemently for why they think that people are – or are not – getting the message that we have a problem! Several Problems! – and ARE THEY DOING ANYTHING ABOUT IT???? Some are, of course – and some are not. But which is the larger group? Are we moving toward critical mass? And – crucially – are young people aware, and switched on to the dangers? Are youth coming out from under?

Again – there are no right answers, but it is useful for you to know what your cast feels about this. Also – this improvisation provides a useful link to Lesson THREE: Solutions Central!

DROP-IN TWO

Drop-in a New Speech for the headless Polar Bear – based on your cast discussions above: get several cast members to write it – including the boy or girl who is eventually going to deliver it.

DROP-IN IDEA

Think up some couplets for the Wigwam song: it's really easy – the tune lends itself to an infinite variety of messages. Here are some possible first lines: (- carry on and finish the verse!)

- I want to live on an Ice floe! (*as sung by a polar bear!*)
- I want to live in a Clean World
- I want to live in a Safe World
- I want my children to live free
- Please don't destroy all the fishes
- Please leave your car in the garage