

The Decisive Decade of the 2040s

Humanity's Great Initiation in Suffering and Sorrow

Adapted from the book *Choosing Earth* by Duane Elgin

Summary

In the decade of the 2040s, most people recognize that we are losing the race with climate catastrophe. Runaway climate disruption is no longer only a looming possibility—it is an overwhelming and vividly present reality. As the consequences of climate chaos, financial breakdowns, civic anarchy, species extinction, mass migrations, and widespread famines continue to grow, the entire world moves toward unstoppable collapse. The need for a profound transformation is anchored in the raw experience of humanity. We recognize that we either pull together in common effort or face the functional extinction of our species. We understand that Earth will never go back to the climate patterns of the previous 10,000 years since the end of the last ice age. We accept feelings of shame, guilt, grief, and despair as a ruinous future grows around us.

The biosphere is increasingly impoverished, weakened, and barren. Profound climate disruption, falling agricultural productivity, extreme water scarcity, and great economic inequities create huge areas of devastating famine. This is also a time of “great burning,” as unrelenting droughts dry out the land and fire scorches vast regions of the Earth. And it is a time of “great dying,” too, as millions of people and countless species of animals and plants perish. Humanity confronts a two-fold tragedy of unimaginable proportions that shocks and awakens the soul of our species.

Broken supply chains lead to hoarding, looting, black markets, and hyperinflation. Adaptations are pushed down to the local level of neighborhood and community, and people search for others they can trust and work within rebuilding life from the ground up. Old sources of value (measured in cash, stocks, and bonds) have become nearly worthless. New sources of value reside in strong personal relationships and access to scarce

resources such as food, medicine, and fuel that have tangible importance. Despite its great value, an *Earth Voice* movement struggles to stay alive as the internet is constantly breaking down and being repaired.

The world descends into collective despair. Feeling we have failed to step up to our responsibilities as planetary citizens, many mourn for the lost Earth. The soul of humanity is grievously wounded with moral injury. We face a future of unending bleakness and despair—unless we rise collectively to this time of challenge.

Review of the Major Driving Trends of the 2040s

- **Global Warming and Climate Disruption:** In this decade, we move beyond 2°C (3.6°F) of warming toward a new benchmark of 3°C (5.4°F)—a critical climate-tipping point. Methane surges into the atmosphere, triggering runaway feed-back loops. The world moves beyond breakdowns, toward full collapse and climate catastrophe. An already turbulent and chaotic climate grows to catastrophic proportions. Climate extremes include both fire and water—large regions of the Earth experience unprecedented drought that brings fires to a scorched Earth, while other regions experience unprecedented storms, floods, and sea-level rise.
- **Water Scarcity:** Water shortages are critical for three billion (or more) people. In turn, water scarcity produces a dramatic increase in the number of climate refugees fleeing drought-stricken regions.
- **Food Scarcity:** Growing population pressures combined with climate disruption, falling agricultural productivity, water scarcity, and economic inequities to produce large areas of devastating famine.
- **Climate Refugees:** At least 200 million climate refugees are expected to be on the move, creating colossal, social, and economic disruptions, as communities in resource-favored areas try to cope with the influx of overwhelming numbers of people.
- **World Population:** In the 2040s, population continues to grow and runs up against increasingly severe limits created by water and food scarcity

and the breakdown of ecosystems. Tragically, it seems plausible that ten percent or more of the Earth's poorest and most vulnerable populations will be at great risk of dying during this period of great transition. With a global population of roughly nine billion people in the 2040s, this means that roughly 900 million people could perish. These millions will not die quietly and out of sight, but in our media-rich world, will die very publicly, painfully, and visibly. Their deaths will be caused by famine and disease, as well as by enormous levels of violence in conflicts over dwindling resources.

The die-off of hundreds of millions of people will produce unimaginable levels of moral and psychological trauma. The needless suffering and death of hundreds of millions awakens humanity to choose a path of greater equality and fairness in how we live together.

- **Species Extinction:** Decades of ecosystem destruction undermine the foundations for life globally. Countless species go extinct, leaving the Earth an ever-more barren world. The unyielding reality of ecological collapse confirms that we are an integral part of the global web of life and that the threat of extinction applies to humans, as well.
- **Economic Growth/Breakdown:** Economic breakdowns spread around the world, producing full-scale collapse of vulnerable economies. Although economic breakdowns slow greenhouse gas emissions, widespread efforts for survival have the unfortunate result of pushing people and communities to use whatever energy sources are readily available, including coal and oil, for short-term survival. A return to fossil fuels contributes to greenhouse gas emissions at the very time we must reduce them. Although efforts for deep reconfiguration of the local-to-global economy are underway, collapsing economies and ecosystems make these efforts exceptionally difficult.
- **Economic Inequities:** The immensely complex and difficult transition to a global economy operating on renewable energy reduces overall output, and civilization is more challenged than ever to meet the needs of the world's poor and to move toward much greater fairness. Global

tensions between the haves and have-nots accelerate past breaking points. The global crisis of fairness and social justice conflicts with cultures of consumer-ism, resulting in a fierce struggle for the future direction of our species.

People with the least access to resources face the greatest challenges in adapting to global warming—and this is true across race, gender, age, geography, and class differences. Widespread efforts grow for producing the essentials of life inexpensively and to restrain luxury lifestyles for the affluent. The redistribution of land is also a key factor in fairness and awakens titanic struggles over ownership and sharing.

Scenario: Imagining How the 2040s Unfold

In this decade, we move into a time of great suffering beyond anything humans have ever experienced. A global collapse is underway, generating all kinds of shortages—including vital medicines and medical care, basic foods, and clean water. Many major corporations go bankrupt as their consumer base disintegrates. Major cities also go bankrupt as their tax base dissolves. Key infrastructure is abandoned and falls into disrepair as nearly all maintenance is neglected—electrical and telephone utilities, internet services, roads, bridges, traffic lights, sewage systems, garbage removal, and water systems.

Confusion, chaos, and conflict grow. As lawlessness spreads, private protection forces replace traditional police and law enforcement. At a larger scale, collapse spreads beyond cities to states and even nations. As nations descend into bankruptcy and break apart, so do international organizations such as the United Nations, which endure as little more than symbolic entities. Global cohesion is sustained and shaped not by international institutions, but by a fast-growing, electronic commons emerging from grassroots movements around the world. These grassroots movements use the faltering global communications infrastructure to create a new global commons in our collective consciousness.

Neither the public nor private sector has the resources to mount large-scale projects that might offer a meaningful response to the magnitude of

collapse underway. Adaptations are pushed down to the local level of neighborhood and community, where people must rely on the people, skills, and resources available nearby.

In the 2040s, much of humanity's story can be told under two headings: the "Great Dying" and the "Great Burning." Although tens of millions of people perished in the previous decade, human die-off escalates, and a horrific period of "Great Dying" begins in the 2040s. The carrying capacity of the Earth is estimated to be roughly three-billion people living middle-class European life-styles. A global population approaching nine-billion is far beyond the Earth's estimated carrying capacity. Humans discover that we are no different from the rest of life on Earth facing extinction. A tidal wave of death sweeps across the planet, bringing unrelenting disease, famine, and violence that stain the soul of our species.

The mathematics of death are unrelenting. With roughly nine-billion people on the planet in the 2040s and, conservatively, with ten percent of the world's population (the poorest of the poor) at greatest risk of dying, it means that 900,000,000 people could die in this ten-year period. Basic arithmetic translates this figure into an astonishing 90,000,000 people dying *each year*—roughly the equivalent of seven holocausts for *each year* in this decade.

As waves of death sweep the Earth, the moral and psychological impact of these losses staggers the human psyche. This calamity unfolds in real time with high-definition media revealing the faces and passing lives of countless humans and other creatures. The immeasurable pain and suffering of the Great Dying tears apart the fabric of culture and consciousness. The loss, grief, and sorrow are incalculable. These wrenching years shred our connections with the past and leave our legacy in tatters.

***The magnitude of tragedy and suffering in the Great Dying
transforms the heart and soul of our species.***

The second area of great tragedy and suffering marking this decade is the "Great Burning." Although extreme fires have been burning in localized areas around the world since the 2020s, raging fires throughout the planet become

a dire emergency two decades later. As global warming intensifies, areas of severe drought and great burning also intensify.

- Much of the Amazon has dried out and is burning.
- Large swaths of California and the western United States are chronically on fire, transforming ancient forests into scrubland and brush.
- Large areas in the Los Angeles region burn, as do large regions in Texas and Colorado.
- Considerable portions of Mexico are aflame.
- Much of Australia is incinerated.
- Large regions of Europe—especially southern France, Portugal, and the rest of the Mediterranean region—are burning.
- Major portions of India, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan are on fire.
- Regions of northern and southwestern China are regularly in flames.
- Large areas in Africa are chronically ablaze—especially Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, and Eritrea.

Instead of labelling our age as the “Anthropocene,” in his book *Fire Age*, Professor Stephen Pyne defines it as the “Pyrocene”—a future with fire and upheavals so immense and unimaginable that “the arc of inherited knowledge that joins us to the past has broken” and we move into a future unlike anything we have known before.

The “Great Burning” and the “Great Dying” symbolize the functional disintegration and disconnection of human civilizations with the past. We are literally no longer able to function as we did before. Despite the great efforts of previous decades, humanity’s evolutionary experiment is failing. The last vestiges of trust in humanity’s historical path of material progress are drained from the world.

The powerful elites who dominated the globe in prior decades retreat into enclaves as the world falls apart around us all. The planetary eco-crisis accomplishes what nonviolent action and pro- test could not—the *awakening of humanity*. Above all, humanity needs a new and purposeful way forward, as well as a strong vision and voice for getting us there.

The human population collectively experiences CTPS (Chronic Traumatic Planetary Stress) an entirely new mindset encompassing the entire human family. The difference between PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and CTPS is that instead of a relatively brief and confined episode, the trauma becomes life-long and planetary in scope. There is no escape—the burden of collective trauma permeates the soul of humanity.

Even while absorbing this decade of immense suffering, people realize that our deteriorating biosphere will produce still greater suffering in the coming decades as people cope with being torn from their roots of land, culture, community, and livelihood. Although this has occurred in the past, it becomes a planetary-scale phenomenon in the 2040s. Consequences of CTPS include:

- Extremely high levels of social anxiety, fear, and protective responses,
- A narrowing focus of attention and difficulty concentrating on the big picture,
- Emotional numbing and widespread use of alcohol, drugs, and media for escapism
- Reactivity, violence, and mood disorders,
- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and depression leading to epidemics of suicide.

The incalculable suffering of this decade dissolves old identities and dogmas, leaving many deeply wounded, both psychologically and socially. Stress expert Hans Seyle wrote: “Every stress leaves an indelible scar, and the organism pays for its survival after a stressful situation by becoming a little older.” At the very time we need to pull together in cooperation as a species, CTPS makes it much more difficult.

The immense suffering of these times is not without merit. In the consumerist pursuit of ongoing happiness, many lost touch with the depths of life—with our souls. For more than two decades, psychotherapist Francis Weller has worked with groups, facilitating authentic encounters with grief. Weller writes:

“To traditional people, soul loss was, without doubt, the most dangerous condition a human being could face. It compromises our vital energy, decreases joy and passion, diminishes our aliveness and our capacity for wonder and awe, saps our voice and courage, and ultimately, erodes our desire to live. We become disenchanting and despondent.”

A great gift lies hidden in great grief—a passageway to reconnect with our soul. Carl Jung advised, “Embrace your grief, for there your soul will grow.” Unacknowledged sorrows limit contact with the collective soul of our species. As humanity encounters the darkness of our collective losses, we recover contact with our communal soul. Francis Weller writes:

“. . . without familiarity with sorrow, we do not mature as men and women. It is the broken heart, the part that knows sorrow, that is capable of genuine love. . . . Without this awareness . . . we remain caught in the adolescent strategies of avoidance and heroic striving.”

Grief challenges the unspoken agreement of consumer society to accept lives that are shallow and unfeeling. Grief is an entrance to the natural undomesticated aliveness of our soul. Welcoming grief is the secret to being fully alive—the doorway to the wild untamed vitality of the soul. Naomi Shihab Nye, in her poem “Kindness” writes:

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow,
You must speak it till your voice
Catches the thread of all sorrows,
And you see the size of the cloth.

The magnitude of the world’s sorrow is immense. We discover what the indigenous soul has always known: *We are not separate from the Earth—aliveness is everywhere and in all things*. When the Earth is impoverished, we are impoverished in equal proportion.

Humanity has so much to grieve because the losses are so great: In the Great Dying, we lose millions of precious fellow beings—sisters and brothers seeking their unique life on Earth, their potentials unrealized, relationships unfulfilled, talents unexpressed, gifts unreceived by others. We also lose so

much of the rest of life—the plants and animals that bring richness, resilience, and beauty into our lives.

In the 2040s, we not only lose countless lives, we also lose cities, cultures, languages, and wisdom. For example, with sea-level rise, we lose many of the world's oldest cities established on the seacoasts—Alexandria, Egypt; Shanghai and Hong Kong, China; Jakarta, Indonesia; Mumbai, India; Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; Osaka and Tokyo, Japan; London, England; New York and Washington, DC, USA . . . and many more.

Losses are so widespread and so foundational that they awaken people to the wisdom of *ubuntu*: “I am who I am because of who we are.” When the feeling of “we” is diminished, I am diminished in proportion to the richness of life that has been lost. When we are in contact with our essence, our soul, we are immersed in the larger ecology of aliveness. We share in the kinship of all beings and experience directly the subtle hum and song of all life on the planet.

In the grip of overwhelming sorrow for the immensity of our losses, we yearn to return to where we were before grief overtook us. Yet we know we can never go back; instead, we are challenged to accept our fate and discover how this wisdom can transform our path into the future. Collective grief burns through fabrications and facades, and we encounter our raw humanity. In the authenticity of that encounter, we move forward to build new worlds.

***In the sorrow of the Great Dying and Great Burning,
we are naked to evolution.***

Sorrow is no con game. This is the real world.

When sorrow claims us, we know this world is not make-believe. We face the honesty of life itself, to be honored and accepted for what it is. Jennifer Welwood, a teacher of spiritual psychology and a poet, speaks to these times:

My friends, let's grow up.

Let's stop pretending we don't know the deal here.

Or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice. Look: Everything

that can be lost, will be lost.

It's simple—how could we have missed it for so long? Let's grieve our losses fully, like ripe human beings, But please, let's not be so shocked by them.

Let's not act so betrayed,

As though life had broken her secret promise to us. Impermanence is life's only promise to us,

And she keeps it with ruthless impeccability. To a child she seems cruel, but she is only wild, And her compassion exquisitely precise:

Brilliantly penetrating, luminous with truth, She strips away the unreal to show us the real. This is the true ride—let's give ourselves to it! Let's stop making deals for a safe passage:

There isn't one anyway, and the cost is too high. We are not children anymore.

The true human adult gives everything for what cannot be lost. Let's dance the wild dance of no hope!

Grief takes us beyond hope to the raw truth of reality. In our collective grief, we are called to move beyond our species' adolescence, to acknowledge our actual situation, to show up for what is real and to respond as best we can.

The Great Dying cries out for our collective maturity

beyond hope or despair—

And summons us to step up and simply take responsibility

for doing the work called forth by our times of Great Transition.

Grief reveals the depths. In the encounter with death, we are ready to turn more fully to life. As we encounter what seems most unbearable, we discover what is most poignantly alive. Grief demolishes pretense and cuts through the superficial happy talk of consumer culture. We have reached a hinge-point in history where humanity must make choices with consequences cascading into the far future. This is evolution in the raw. The Great Dying calls us to a higher level of collective maturity—to reach beyond our species' adolescence to take charge of our future.

Collectively, we wonder whether we have the maturity to place the well-being of life above our personal interests. Can we engage these difficult times with humility and compassion? Can we talk less and listen more to the suffering of the world? Can we take charge of how we live and work to create a habitable biosphere, understanding that this requires a dramatic change in our manner of living?

Particularly in wealthier nations, a deep psychological crisis has developed as people feel enormous guilt and shame for the devastation of the planet and the diminished opportunities for future generations. Many are in mourning for the Earth and feel that humanity has failed in its grand experiment in evolution. After tens of thousands of years of slow development, many feel that within the span of a single generation we have ruined our chance at evolutionary success and grieve this lost opportunity. The human community recognizes that we face a bleak future of widening ruin and deepening despair unless we collectively rise to this time of challenge.

Suffering and sorrow are a cleansing fire that awakens the soul of our species. Waves of ecological calamity have reinforced periods of economic crisis, and both have been amplified by massive waves of civil unrest. Momentary reconciliation is followed by dis- integration and then new reconciliation. In giving birth to a more conscious, sustainable species-civilization, humanity moves back and forth through cycles of contraction and relaxation, until we utterly exhaust ourselves and burn through the remaining barriers that separate us from our wholeness as a human family.

Finally, we know with unyielding certainty:

We have a choice between extinction and transformation.

In the 2040s, many wonder whether humanity's demise would be a tragedy or a blessing. Are we such a precious contribution to the Earth that we deserve to live, while a million other species do not? A deep moral crisis pervades the Earth. Are we worthy of continued existence? Can we find a path and purpose that enables us to rise above these tragedies and be worthy of life?

Efforts at reconciliation begin with a sense of promise and hope, only to fall back in the face of climate chaos and systems breakdown. Is there truly a basis for living together on this small Earth with so many differences? We know that the sorrows and divisions of a broken world must be accepted before they can be healed—acknowledging our brokenness is the first step on a path toward wholeness.

Pushed by dire necessity, innovations in building new kinds of community appear. People retrofit old structures to create new expressions of community, ranging from pocket neighborhoods and co-housing to eco-villages of diverse designs. Life-boat communities proliferate as people recognize that smaller-scale constructions can adapt rapidly to changing circumstances. Realizing the importance of healthy communities, support for transition towns and sustainable cities grows, but injury to the earlier economy, society, and ecology is so great that this is immensely difficult. Simultaneously, tensions rise as waves of climate refugees search for security and survival and seek to move into healthy communities.

No longer is simplicity of living regarded as a regressive way of life. Low-carbon lifestyles and accompanying values bring a new regard for community, sufficiency, and kindness. Simplicity of living encourages strong communities of mutual support and survival. As people develop a range of skills that directly contribute to the well-being of their neighbors, they feel their true gifts are welcomed into everyday life.

Forces of uplift are present throughout the world, but they are so fragmented and disconnected from one another they cannot converge into powerful updrafts of mutually reinforcing feedback. The world is broken. Eco-collapse brings ego-collapse. The collective psyche of humanity is desperately wounded. Calls for maturity grow, only to be overwhelmed by forces of disintegration that push humanity down to primal levels of struggling to live. Small communities become the basic scale of security and survival.

Reflective- or witnessing-consciousness grows as humanity is driven to look deep beneath everyday life and to recognize the wounded existence we have created as the foundation for our future. We recognize these transitional

times will likely result in either a final descent into functional extinction or arising together in awakening and rebuilding.

Collective communication seems to offer the greatest potential for rapid renewal. Communicate or perish! As we confront the reality of profound ecosystems collapse, we know we cannot retreat from public dialogues and consensus building; yet, for many, local-to-global communication aimed at discovering a way forward seems fruitless and destined for failure.