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Choosing Optimism in the Polycrisis Era

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“Hope and conviction may be the only strategy with collective action and innovation our currency.”

In the era of the so called polycrisis, there is a myriad of important issues to address. We see war, repression, modern slavery, inequality, climate disasters, pandemics.

Henry David Thoreau once remarked, “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.” I don’t want to be seen as a branch-hacker, but with such a tangled web of cause and effect, can we honestly identify the root causes of our greatest challenges?

As I travel the world, my experiences are of genuine positivity — a picture far from what is painted in today’s headlines. I see people working hard and being kind to one another. I see resilience after a global pandemic. I see passion and concern for the world and the people in it. I see . . . hope.

When speaking with business leaders, I’ve often heard (and sometimes repeated) that “hope isn’t a strategy.” This, of course, is... meant to be a warning against sloppy planning. But, as the famous explorer Robert Swan said, “The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.” What I’m advocating isn’t blind faith or an abdication of our responsibility. Quite the opposite. I think we must envision a future-focused strategy based on hope — proactive and positive, ambitious and rigorous, profitable and people-centric. When dealing with the problems humanity faces, hope and conviction may be the *only* strategy with collective action and innovation our currency.

We need to move in concert in three interconnected arenas for sustained progress to occur: policy, the economy and the individual. If we’re going to solve our challenges, we have to consider how to create the necessary mindset and behavioral shift to play a bigger game in each of these areas.

Policymakers

At the policy level, we need clear, robust pathways and support for long-term prosperity. This requires informed policymakers with a deep understanding of the world and the courage to lean into the dynamism of the market economy. Policymakers can’t do this alone; leaders from across the ecosystem must become allies, helping to educate and influence government and fostering policy decisions that drive outcomes aligned with shared goals.

Economic actors

In a world facing multiple challenges, economic actors have to build resilience and adaptability into their business models. While we can never forget that capitalism has been a key ingredient in "the Great Acceleration" that humanity has witnessed over the past century, we’re now experiencing a great transition brought on by the rise of stakeholder capitalism — and it carries huge potential as it matures. To operate in this new model, economic actors must be honest with themselves about their misalignments and commit to not just moving money but investing it — and more important, investing it over longer time horizons.



Individuals

In 1903, Hellen Keller wrote a book called *Optimism: An Essay*. If you haven't read it, you may be imagining a book about positivity in everyday moments. Instead, Keller, a woman who couldn't see or hear [She could speak, albeit with difficulty.], writes about exploring optimism across peoples, nations and leaders. The book is a reminder that optimism is a choice.

While it's easy to feel overwhelmed by humanity's greatest challenges, letting that feeling lead to despondency or despair is avoiding responsibility. For individuals to do their part, they must choose to work hard and trust more, choose to replace prejudice with curiosity, choose to get out of their comfort zone and act, choose optimism.

Each of us must reflect on what we can do to make a difference in the world as it is. Yes, democracy is in trouble, but it always has been. It's messy and complex, but also beautifully designed to evolve and improve and evolve again. My request of you is that you simply ask yourself, how you can play a bigger game to shape it. What's your gift to give?

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