

Feature Article - Our Existential Threats – Do we take them seriously?

In this past year of Covid and an epic national election, we have heard much about existential threats? There is the pandemic threat to world health that has so far lead to more than 2 million deaths worldwide, along with wide depression of worldwide economic health, and with potential to be a continuing threat even beyond the establishment of effective vaccines. There is racial and economic injustice that continues to threaten societal stability in many democratic countries. There also is distrust in democratic processes, partially at least feed by skewed and often entirely erroneous views of politics, the media, science, and other societal pillars, that now threaten even the foundations of our democracy. And there is climate change, widely viewed to be an outcome of human industrial activity, and that is described by many as an existential threat to the environment and to the existence of humanity.

So what is existential and what is an existential threat. Reference to existential refers to being “concerned with existence, especially human existence”. Thus, these are actions, events, or trends that broadly threaten human health, societal structures, democratic societies and other systems of human governance and even peace, and in the case of climate change a threat to environmental and our earth eco-systems, and possibly human existence itself. Individually and collectively these represent some very serious concerns, at least for some. But do we really take them seriously? Do we view these threats as real, as existential?

Presidential elections offer a very definitive look at what at least the electorate considers to be important at a specific point in time. Exit polling clearly show the economy to be the dominate issue for most voters. Covid and health issues, along with racial inequities, also show in the top 5 issues. Climate change does not register among the top issues of concern for the electorate and nor did concerns about the stability of democracy, though recent events may change that, at least for a while. So are these really existential threats and if they are, why is there so little concern? And, if they really are, how do we begin to seriously step up to the threat they represent? How long can we wait?

With the possible exception of super volcanoes, severe pandemics and asteroid strikes, one of the key characteristics of threats that might impact major aspects of humanity, is that they generally take time to develop and unfold. It took several millennia for democracy to arrive as an alternative to the inequities of feudal and monarchical systems of governance, and several hundred years to end slavery in North America by means of a Civil War and even then racial and economic inequities continue to threaten society. Human caused climate change has now probably been active for more than a century, mostly without much concern until recent years. The arc of societal and environmental change, is often

that way, initially slow but then with acceleration towards a climax and a change that outpaces the ability of society or humanity to control the outcome.

A common human response to change, especially slow change, is to ignore it or rationalize it and to focus instead on the usual concerns of human existence. The next meal, paying the rent, staying healthy, building financial stability, having a say in one's life, these always will be the primary concerns of humanity, at least until a clear crisis becomes so critical it begins to threaten these very pillars of existence. This is just natural human existence and behavior. But does this mean we do not have existential threats or does it mean we just are not able to step up to them given everyday life concerns?

Given these everyday pressures of life, it is unlikely that society will step up to the threats that really are existential until they reach a critical crisis stage. While some may recognize the coming of the crises, the majority will generally not step up and recognize the threat, without leadership that provides clarity and urgency to the pending crises.

Yet another characteristic of any threat with the potential to be existential, is that it will be inherently complex. This complexity insures that the developing threat will impact different groups in different ways, having major negative impacts on some, but even representing opportunity for some groups, at least in early stages. Responding to the threat will also inevitably result in change on a large scale and some of that change will threaten the status quo for many. One need look no further than the role of the oil and gas industry in delaying more widespread focus on climate change as the threat became more widely researched and considered. Given all this inertia toward action, the everyday person may simply not comprehend the importance of the threat without effective leadership and until it may be too late to respond. Many are concerned this may already be the case for climate change.

So what do we do when faced with an existential threat that is not yet recognized broadly as being in or moving toward crisis stage? While not ignoring the several other possible existential threats of our time, involving pandemic threatened health and economic stability, racial and bias injustices, and threats to democratic systems, the threat that may be the first to actually be threatening to all of humanity, is climate change. There certainly are current outcomes that are concerning; sea level rise, growing intensity of storms and fires, economic system disruptions, species loss, but are these humanity threatening? They certainly already threaten certain local climates and ways of life. Alaskan native villages, Pacific islands, California living, all are under threat. But for some it is welcomed by warmer and more comfortable winters, new opportunities for crops and other businesses, so it is really existential? To most people it is not – yet. But more widely existential outcomes, such as ecosystem collapse, resource depletion, and food supply system collapse, are very likely future outcomes of climate change that may well change the entire course of humanity and the planet. Existential – very likely. Imminent, possibly not, but still reversible, maybe but not certainly.

So, is this depressing? Yes, but is there hope? Yes, with leadership that clarifies and leads. Will we be successful? With leadership, hopefully, without it, probably not. Are leaders amongst us? Advocates for Responsible Sustainability can be leaders to slow and eventually reverse climate change. Will we?

Respectfully submitted with hope,

John Gast

ARS News



This second issue of the ARS Newsletter has come several months delayed from the original intended schedule. Moving forward they are planned to be published through the ARS website quarterly. Watch for future additions to have news about growth in the number of advocates, stories about how advocates are promoting policy change, participating in meetings, and promoting and doing research to support Responsible Sustainability. The newsletter will offer a format generally as follows:

ARS Feature Story or Opinion by Guest Writer

Advocate Highlighted

Corporate Advocate Highlighted

ARS News

ARS Program Updates

ARS Statistics

ARS Program Updates

The ARS website was launched as of July 1, 2020. The journey is still in its infancy, delayed by Covid, elections, and some growing issues that prevented widespread introductions of the site. We are now with 3 Advocates. To date the website has not been advertised beyond a very small family circle. This quarter should see a broader introduction of the website. Where will the journey take us? Stay tuned.

ARS Statistics

A screenshot of a data table with multiple columns and rows, likely representing ARS statistics. The table is too small to read clearly but appears to contain numerical data.

The Ground Floor – ARS started July 1, 2020. As of January, 2021:

Advocates: 3

Corporate or Organizational Advocates: 0

R&D Grants: 0

R&D Project Areas Defined: 1