

Imagine a brighter 21st century

In our short time on Earth, we humans have emerged from a chaotic world, imposing order and meaning in myriad ways, imagining the world into being. That was our great gift. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, will we prove ourselves to be imaginative beings capable of creating a better world?

Our challenge is to imagine a world where our wealth is in human relations and where we learn to live in balance with the rest of nature. By imagining a future, we can make it happen — as we always have.

If we continue, though, to set human borders and the economy as our highest priorities, we will never come to grips with the destructiveness of our activities and institutions.

In imagining a better future, we must open ourselves to the idea of change. And we'd do well to remember that people with vision have been overturning outmoded ways of thinking and acting throughout our brief history on this Earth — often in the face of great resistance. It wasn't long ago that people in countries such as the U.S. believed slavery was an economic necessity and that abolishing it would destroy the economy and way of life of its "free" citizens.

As far as the cost and the speed of acting in our own best interests, consider how quickly the U.S. was able to build its space program after the Russians launched Sputnik I in 1957. In putting tremendous energy, thought, and resources into getting people onto the moon, the U.S. also sparked innovations such as 24-hour television news channels, cellphones, and GPS navigation.

On the environmental front, world leaders came together in Montreal in 1987 to confront the effect humans were having on the ozone layer with our use of chlorofluorocarbons. The international treaty they signed used trade sanctions and incentives to get countries to phase out the use of chemicals that were contributing to the depletion of the ozone layer. And that agreement allowed developing countries to take longer to phase out CFCs because the industrialized world had disproportionately contributed to the problem.

We really do have to think big - to imagine what a future that offers the most good to the most people and to all life on this planet would look like. Obviously, reducing poverty, conflict, and human-rights abuses is paramount. Environmental problems exacerbate those issues and so must also be dealt with. Part of the problem is that many of our political leaders are stuck in the mindset that constant economic growth is essential.

For example, consider what Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in a speech to South Korea's National Assembly in late 2009: "Without the wealth that comes from growth, the environmental threats, the developmental challenges and the peace and security issues facing the world will be exponentially more difficult to deal with."

But with constant growth comes depletion of and increasing competition for scarce resources, as well as more waste; in other words, increased environmental threats, developmental challenges, and peace and security issues.

Constant growth is just not possible in a finite world with finite resources. Our focus on constant economic growth also leads to some bizarre anomalies. War and natural disasters, for example, can contribute to economic growth by creating employment and resource-use activity.

In thinking beyond these artificial parameters that humans have set (and remember, they were only set during the middle of the 20th century), we can imagine a more sustainable way of living, as York University economist Peter Victor has done in his excellent book *Managing Without Growth: Slower by Design, Not Disaster*. As Dr. Victor points out, we can't change overnight, but by imagining a future in which humans live within the Earth's capacity to provide for our ongoing needs, we can steer ourselves in the right direction.

Once we have imagined this better future, we can get serious about solving the challenges we have created with our now outmoded ways of thinking. Issues such as climate change, mass extinctions of plant and animal species, pollution and toxic chemicals in the environment, water shortages, and more require scientific and political solutions — along with the efforts and support of citizens throughout the world.

We're well into the 21st century. It's time we started thinking and acting like responsible 21st century citizens. It's time to imagine what we really can be.

Source: David Suzuki *Science Matters*. Jan 8th, 2010