

The Toolbox



Strategies for
Crafting
Social Impact

Jacob Harold

$I = Q_N \times Q_L$

ethics \leftrightarrow poetry?

JUSTICE

\$

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[“Let’s check to see if the ground is okay.”](#)

[Notes](#)

[An Age of Flux](#)

[Life in a plastic hour](#)

[Notes](#)

[The Shape of Strategy](#)

[Finding a pathway](#)

[Notes](#)

[Ethics and Social Change](#)

[Do the right thing](#)

[Notes](#)

[Storytelling](#)

[All the world’s a stage](#)

[So, first, a story.](#)

[Notes](#)

[Mathematical Modeling](#)

[Counting what counts](#)

[Notes](#)

[Behavioral Economics](#)

[Reaping habits](#)

Notes

Design Thinking

Thou shalt not design for thyself

Notes

Community Organizing

I am because we are

Notes

Game Theory

Win-win

Notes

Markets

The visible hand

Notes

Complex Systems

A whole greater than the sum of its parts

Notes

Institutions

Patterns of people

Notes

Conclusion

Note

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

Sources and Permissions

Introduction

Chapter 1: An Age of Flux

Chapter 2: The Shape of Strategy

Chapter 3: Ethics and Social Change

[Chapter 4: Storytelling](#)
[Chapter 5: Mathematical Modeling](#)
[Chapter 6: Behavioral Economics](#)
[Chapter 7: Design Thinking](#)
[Chapter 8: Community Organizing](#)
[Chapter 9: Game Theory](#)
[Chapter 10: Markets](#)
[Chapter 11: Complex Systems](#)
[Chapter 12: Institutions](#)
[Concluding Materials](#)

[Index](#)

[About the Author](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

The Toolbox:

Strategies for Crafting Social Impact

Jacob Harold

WILEY

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To my father, David Harold, for giving me tools of the heart,
hand, and mind.

To my mother, Madeline Harold, for teaching me to ask if
the ground was okay.

למדו לטוב

Learn to do good.

Isaiah 1:17

Χαλεπά τα καλά

Good things are difficult.

Plato

万事开头难

All things are difficult before they are easy.

Chinese proverb

My beloved, let's get down to business.

Chuck D

Introduction



Ieshia Evans protesting the murder of Alton Sterling on July 9, 2016, in Baton Rouge, LA.

Photo by Jonathan Bachman

“Let’s check to see if the ground is okay.”

Kids tumble, knees scrape. As a toddler, when I’d trip and fall, my mother would scoop me up. She’d give me a kiss and a hug. Then she would turn our shared attention to the spot where I fell. My mother would kneel, place her hand upon the earth, and ask us to show compassion to a scrap of land: “Let’s check to see if the ground is okay.”

In part, this was a young parent’s practical trick to distract a crying child from passing pain. But it was more.

My mother’s strategy manifested a deeper belief: kindness is infinite. We have enough kindness for a world that has held us up, even enough for a world that has hurt us.

That kindness powers the greatest of human impulses: to serve, to build, to love, to witness.

It drives us to seek a better world—to multiply justice and joy.

But change is hard. The world does not easily yield to our visions of perfection.

How do we make change?

There are no easy answers.

Instead, there are tools.

The work of social good is spread throughout society. Its burden falls upon the shoulders of people with and without power. Its challenges fall to those with formal training and to those who simply dream of something better.

It starts within the radius of community. One neighbor picks up trash along the sidewalk; another takes food to the homebound. The circle grows as people patch up the gaps in society from within the walls of a clinic or a school.

Others build something fundamentally new, creating new products, new inventions, new art, and new institutions. Still others seek to change the systems that already exist—as executives on the inside or as activists on the outside.

Sometimes the change is part of a conscious vision; other times circumstances simply make it necessary. In a community hit by a natural disaster, people open their houses to neighbors who lost theirs. In a pandemic, fire chiefs transform fire stations into testing centers. In the midst of poverty, school administrators figure out how to feed a neighborhood so that they can educate it. A CEO looks out from a corner office window on a sea of demonstrators and realizes the time has come to confront the company's carbon footprint.

“You imagine a circle of compassion, and you imagine no one standing outside of it.”

Father Gregory Boyle¹

The path to something better is rocky, steep, and difficult. We quickly learn the limits of our understanding. There is no one single answer; there is no one technique; there is no silver bullet.

Let's all say it together: if all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail. **Narrow strategies invariably stumble against the complexity of the world.**

Alas, the work of social change is full of people with hammers. I have been as guilty as any. In my days as a grassroots organizer, I thought that bottom-up activism was the only way to make authentic change. In business school, I looked to markets for the possibility of scale. Working in philanthropy, I viewed decision-making through the lens of behavioral economics. When leading a technology platform,

I used the frame of complex systems science to formulate our strategy.

How might we judge my strategic promiscuity? We might say I was always naïve, distracted by the latest shining object. Or we may say I was—unknowingly, perhaps—partially right each time. In fact, each tool offered a unique perspective for understanding—and acting in—the world. The complexity of the world forced me to assemble a toolbox that worked for me.

I wrote this book because **agents of change need a toolbox strategy**. By “tools” I mean frameworks for thinking and acting. By “toolbox” I mean an individual’s collection of tools. And by “toolbox strategy” I mean an approach that brings multiple tools to complex problems.

In this book, we will—in a structured way—explore a set of nine tools that can help us build the better world we seek.

These tools have driven world-shaking social movements and billion-dollar businesses. But they are just as relevant for a neighborhood association or a farmers’ market.

The nine tools do not represent every possible perspective on strategy impact strategy. But, together, they offer a mosaic view, a toolbox strategy for change.

“We need a multitude of pictures about the world...
a gentle jeremiad against theoretical monism.”

Kwame Anthony Appiah²

Storytelling is the human impulse to understand the world through narrative.

Mathematical modeling is the essential practice of putting numbers to our assumptions.

Behavioral economics offers insights into human behavior as it is, not as we wish it to be.

Design thinking puts the user at the center of any process or challenge.

Community organizing is the art of building people power.

Game theory is a rigorous way to align our decisions with those of other people.

Markets represent the primary mechanism of resource allocation in our world.

Complex systems teaches how the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Institutions form the essential infrastructure of our society.

Signs of wear are signs of use

Signs of use are signs of necessity

Necessity and use are

Signs of love

Rūta Marija Kuzmickas

The structure of this book

The Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde famously said, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”³

She argued that attitudes and systems of oppression cannot simply be turned against the oppressor. We must apply new approaches to solve old problems, otherwise, “only the most narrow parameters of change are possible.” This is a warning that should echo in our minds.

Luckily, the tools in this book do not belong to the master.

These tools are the common heritage of humanity. The

question is, how do we choose to wield them? What purpose and what moral frameworks do we bring so that we may rebuild a house for everyone?

This book is meant to offer a hand to those on this fraught and thrilling journey. It is, admittedly, a hybrid: part textbook and part pep rally.

But mostly, it is meant to seed your intuition as you face the unknown ahead.

Throughout, I've included stories, poems, quotes, diagrams, photos, and equations that represent a range of possibilities for social change. Some will resonate with you, others may not. That is the point.

You can think of the first three chapters as the "box" and the next nine chapters as the "tools." In [Chapter One](#), we'll explore our early-21st-century context and why a toolbox strategy is necessary.

[Chapter Two](#) provides a basic language for thinking about strategy. [Chapter Three](#) explores a set of moral and ethical dynamics that complicate and enrich the work of social change.

Then, the nine tools. Each of the tool chapters will explore a tool in depth, laying out its basic presumptions, concepts, and vocabulary. In each case we will explore times when this tool is appropriate and when it is not. And, for those ready to go deeper, I'll suggest more resources.

There is no chapter with architectural drawings for the perfect society. The tools in this book are just that: tools. They do not provide boldness, vision, or moral clarity. These tools must be brought to life by the force of human action. When the book closes, the rest is up to you.

“For the vanguards of the present dreaming up new ways to fight global warming or Black Lives Matter activists seeking alternatives to policing as we know it, this is an essential point: that the shape and extent of the change they seek depends as much on what tools they use as it does on their own will and hunger.”

Gal Beckerman⁴

Commonalities and mindsets

The nine tools are not isolated or distinct; they overlap and intertwine. Throughout this book, you’ll find common themes like listening, risk, power, information, and interconnection. (To highlight some of these commonalities, you’ll find color-coded “hyperlinks” that show connections across chapters.)

A social change agent doesn’t have to pick one single tool to solve one problem.

Instead, the essence of toolbox strategy is multiplicity: there are many ways to understand and many ways to act. Our complex world asks us to go beyond our single hammer, and it is possible to do so.

Let me suggest four foundational mindsets to help you navigate the range of ways of thinking about social impact strategy.

The first is to **open yourself to a “both/and” mentality**. Toolbox strategy does not choose between qualitative or quantitative; it uses both the quantitative and the qualitative. Toolbox strategy is not limited to gradual change or to revolution; instead, it sees power in both the incremental and the disruptive. Toolbox strategy is not limited to radical outsiders or ambitious insiders; it recognizes the possibility of change both inside the system and outside the system.

Second, **recognize the power of clarity**. Clarity short-circuits confusion and enables collective action and learning. A clear hypothesis is more useful; direct communication is more effective. Clarity does not mean arrogance. Humility is itself a type of clarity. Sometimes the best way to equip ourselves for reality is to be honest about our own ignorance.

Third, **experiment with understanding**. We can explore which ways of thinking are most useful for a given problem. You can “try on” a given mindset or framework and see where it leads you. Then try another.

Draw lessons according to how useful they are.

Finally, and most importantly, **the right thing to do is the strategic thing to do**. Even as you experiment with understanding, hold fast to your values. Human virtue offers a stable foundation for strategic creativity. And it works. Honest, compassionate behavior ultimately builds trust. Trust builds connection. Connection builds power. The most important piece of news in this book is this: kindness can be strategic, and strategy can be kind.

“Service is the rent we pay for being.”

Marian Wright Edelman⁵

Language

The vocabulary of social good can be unsatisfying. We are stuck using words like “nonprofit” or “non-governmental” that are defined by a negative. Simple ideas end up conveyed through a complex stew of acronyms. (In the **Markets** chapter, we’ll go through ESG vs CSR vs PRI vs SRI.)

This linguistic reality reflects a changing society. People are trying to sort out a new, cross-sector vocabulary for social

good. This aspiration gives me hope, but it undoubtedly makes communication harder.

In this book, I've tried to use the words we have instead of making up new ones.

Where appropriate, I'll highlight important linguistic nuance. (For example, I will later discuss what I see as the difference between "social change" and "social impact.") Other times, my word choice reflects an expansive view: "changemakers" or "social change agents" are just people working for a better world.

This generality is on purpose. Millions of people are positioned to do good in the world—and to do so in different sectors and at different scales. We cannot confine these lessons to nonprofit staff, social entrepreneurs, and philanthropists. Our world needs strategic action from nurses and pharmaceutical executives, accountants and tax officials, prime ministers and community gardeners.

I acknowledge the awkwardness of the social good lexicon. But let's try to see this linguistic confusion as a reminder that millions of humans are in the middle of something important: they're trying to figure out how to do good, together.

The power and limitations of perspective

Before I close this introductory chapter, I should say a few words about myself—and the strengths and weaknesses of my own perspective.

First, the weaknesses. Most fundamentally: I am only one person. My life has offered one perch from which to understand our shared complexity.

Further, on almost every dimension of my identity—race (white), gender (male), sexual orientation (straight), citizenship (U.S. citizen)—I find myself in a privileged caste.

This privilege has given me access and opportunity that I have tried to use for a greater good. And it has surely blinded me to realities that are obvious to others.

While I've had deep engagement with business and government, most of my work has been in the nonprofit sector. I've worked in many countries but have lived most of my life in the United States. I try to be conscious of these limitations, and readers should, too.

The man pulling radishes pointed the way with a radish.

Kobayashi Issa

Now, the strengths. I've been blessed to spend two decades working for a better world. I've felt the sting of tear gas and the cut of handcuffs. I've sat in seats of power: in elite boardrooms and on the stages of august conferences. I count myself lucky that I've been able to work within some of the most influential, innovative, and impactful organizations in social change, from Greenpeace to Bridgespan to the Hewlett Foundation.

Over the past decade, I've had the privilege of serving as CEO of GuideStar and to lead its 2019 merger with Foundation Center to create Candid, which *Fast Company* called "the definitive nonprofit transparency organization."⁶

These roles have been a blessing, not least because they have given me access to the lessons of a *field*. Ultimately, what is most important are not the organizations I've worked for but those I have worked with. My one perspective has allowed me to bear witness to the perspectives of so many others. **Their tools—our tools—offer hope in an age of flux.**

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.

The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise—with the occasion.

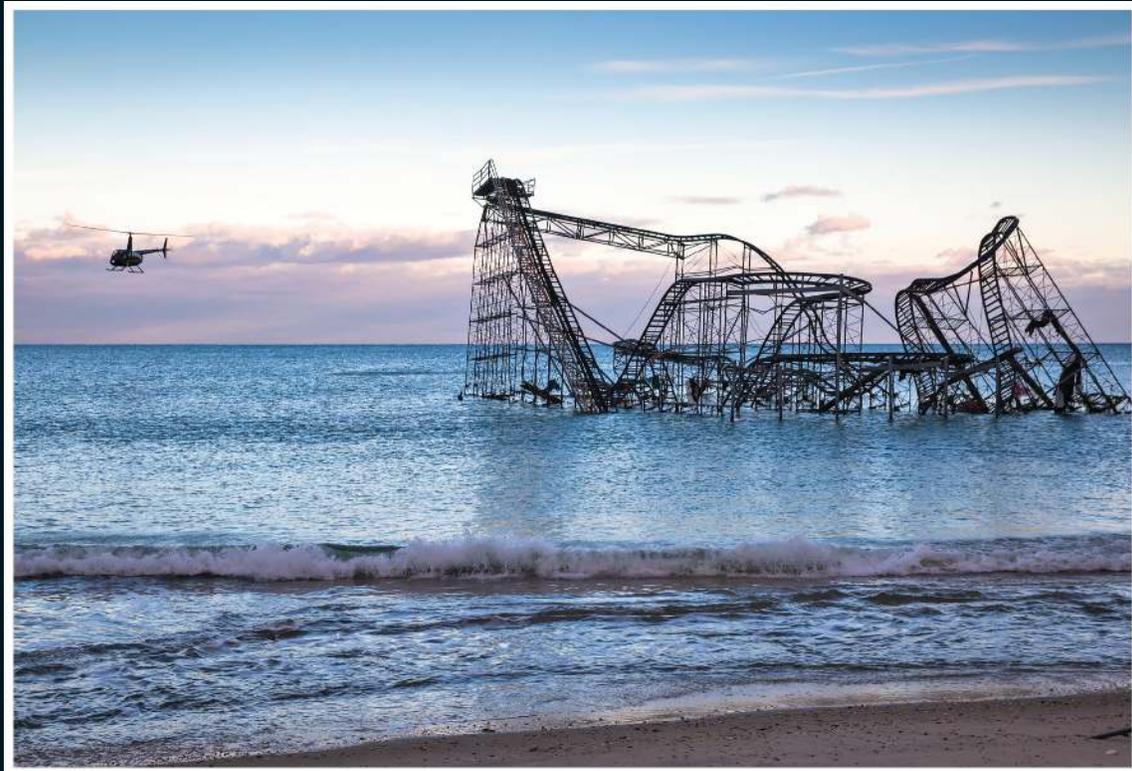
As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”

Abraham Lincoln
December 1, 1862
Annual Message to Congress

Notes

- [1](#) “The Calling of Delight: Gangs, Service, and Kinship.” Interview with Greg Boyle. *On Being*. February 26, 2013. (Fr. Boyle has offered various versions of this quote elsewhere.)
- [2](#) *As If: Idealization and Ideals*, pg. x. Harvard University Press, 2019.
- [3](#) Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, pg. 110–114. Crossing Press, 2007.
- [4](#) Beckerman, Gal. “Radical Ideas Need Quiet Spaces,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 2022.
- [5](#) See Wright Edelman (1992), section 1. She may have been referencing Muhammad Ali’s quote, “Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth,” which he wrote in a note to the staff of the Atlanta Hilton on April 19, 1978.
- [6](#) Ben Paynter, “GuideStar and the Foundation Center are merging to form the definitive nonprofit transparency organization.” *Fast Company*. February 5, 2019.

An Age of Flux



In 2012, the Atlantic Ocean swallowed the roller coaster at Casino Pier in Seaside Heights, NJ.

Photo by Julie Dermansky

“The real problem of humanity is the following: we have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology.”

E. O. Wilson¹

“We are relying on nineteenth century institutions using twentieth century tools to address twenty-first century problems.”

Ann Mei Chang²

Life in a plastic hour

In 1862, a Dutch ophthalmologist accidentally burdened the year 2020 with significance. Herman Snellen’s scale set “20/20” as “normal” sight. Over time, those four digits leaked into other realms of life. “2020” came to evoke a sense of visual—even strategic or moral—clarity. Countless executives sought to capitalize on that association by writing strategy documents with names like “Vision 2020.” (I was as guilty as any.)

In retrospect, 2020 now feels like a pivot moment away from clarity. The COVID-19 pandemic shook an already unstable world. Slowly building crises of climate, democracy, and inequality all seemed to explode at once.

Later in this chapter I will argue that we are in a “plastic hour” (perhaps even a plastic century), a time when change is more possible. But to change the world, you must first see it as it is. So, let us set our toolbox down on the ground of reality. Below is a whirlwind tour of our early-21st-century moment, through the good, the bad, and the fast.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here.

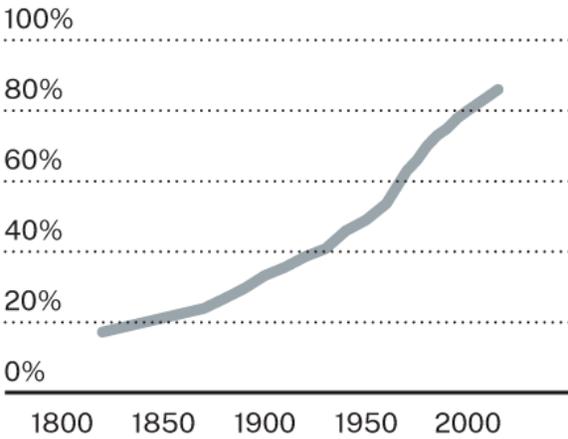
Elizabeth Alexander

The Good

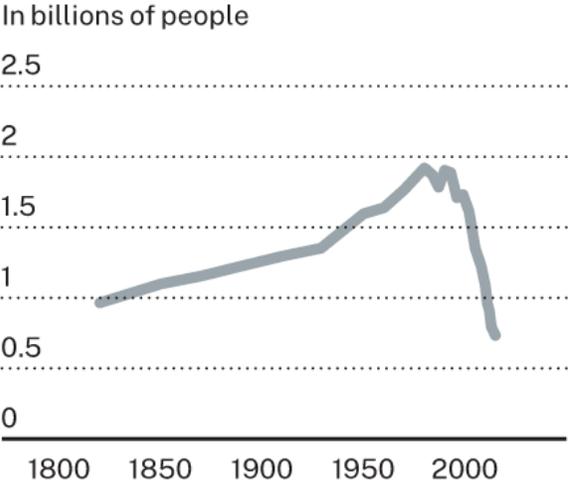
Billions have escaped extreme poverty. Infant mortality has plummeted, and lifespans and literacy have risen. Deaths from violence—still too high—have dropped since the

bloodbaths of past eras. And, inconsistently, in bursts and with setbacks, the full range of humanity is getting a chance to love whom they would love, to be who they are, and to recognize the immense diversity of the human experience. We, in fact, have much to celebrate.³

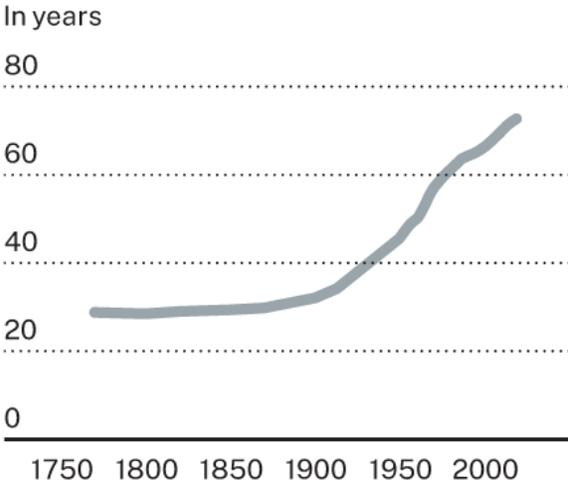
Basic education



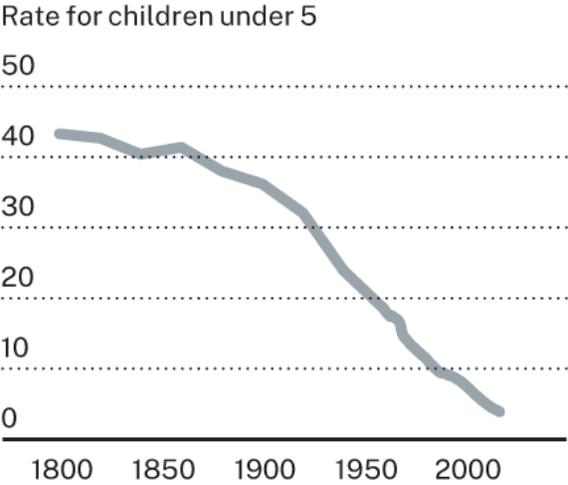
Extreme poverty



Life expectancy



Childhood mortality



Source: OurWorldinData.org

These are but some of the things we overcome But let us come to be more than their sum.

Amanda Gorman⁴

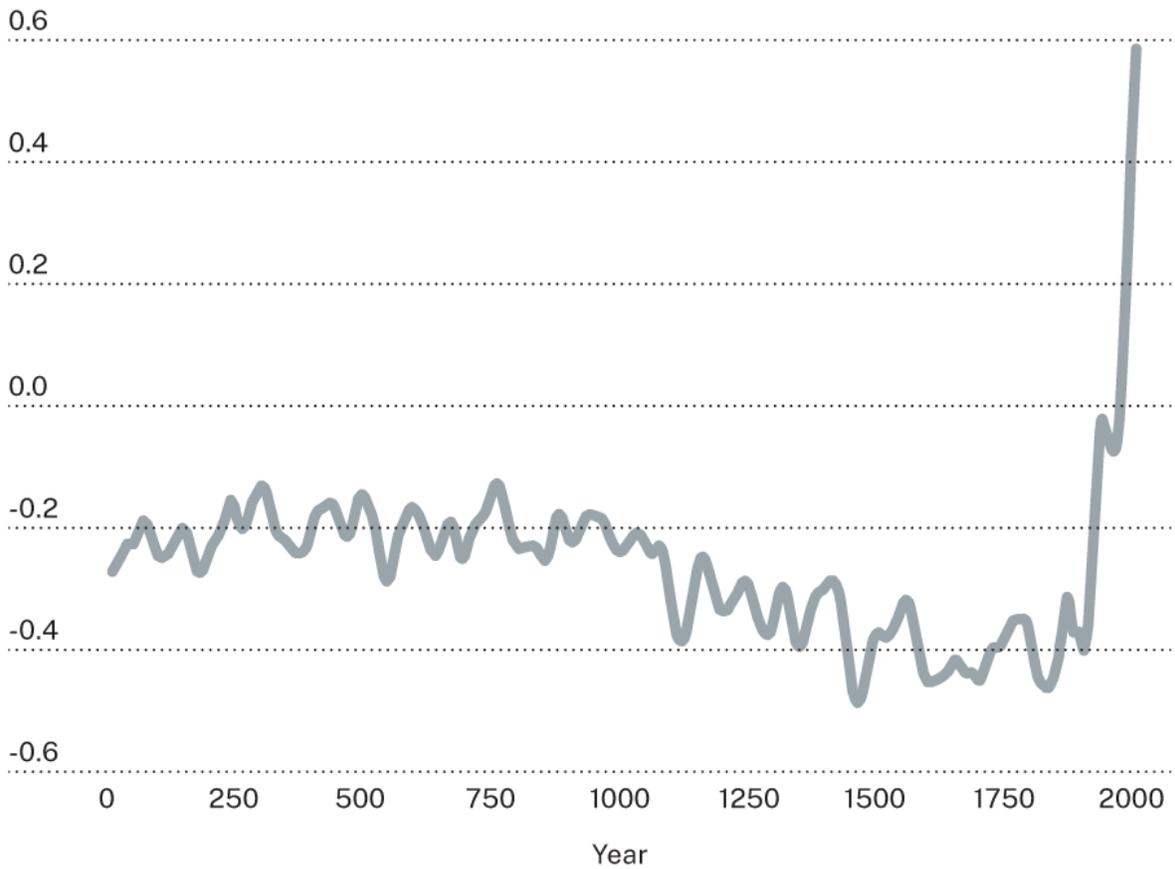
The Bad

And yet, we must confront the reality of raw injustice faced by billions and a struggling planet. 400 million people lack access to essential health services.⁵ 2.4 billion people do not have access to toilets.⁶ 860 million people are undernourished.⁷ 10 million tons of plastic are dumped into oceans annually.⁸ 3 million tons of toxic chemicals are released into the environment each year.⁹ 2 million people—disproportionately Black and Brown—are incarcerated in the United States.¹⁰ The list of injustice goes on and on and on.

As change agents, we face a paradox. The world has seen real progress. If we deny that progress, we insult those who fought for it. But if we ignore the challenges of the world, we betray ourselves and future generations.

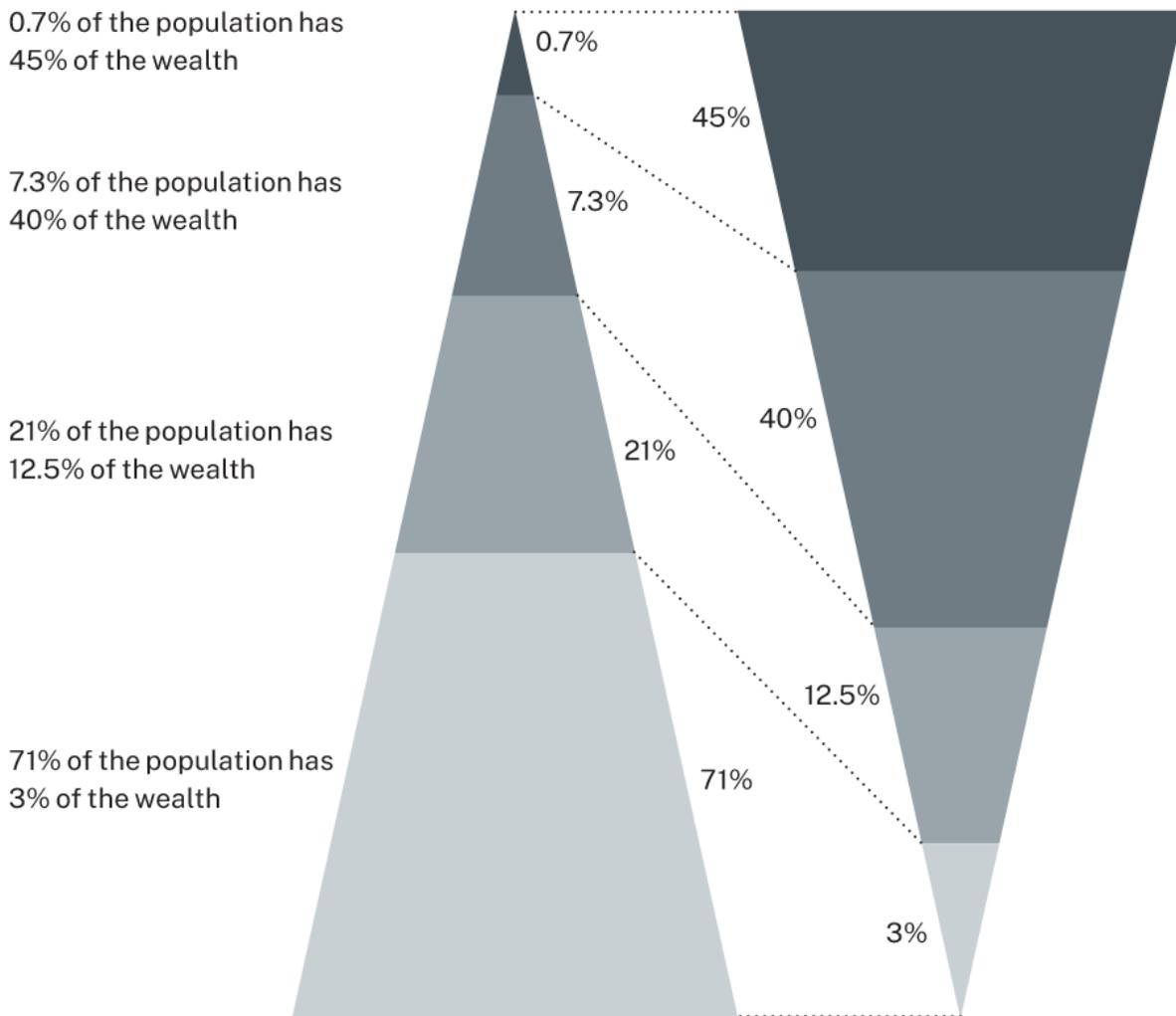
Global average temperature change

Difference from 1951–1980 average, in degrees Celsius



Source: Visualization by Femke Nijse based on data from PAGES2k consortium published in "Consistent multidecadal variability in global temperature reconstructions and simulations over the Common Era," *Nature Geosciences*, volume 12, pages 643–649 (2019)

Wealth distribution



Source: Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook

“Change is the one unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe.”

Octavia Butler¹¹

The Fast

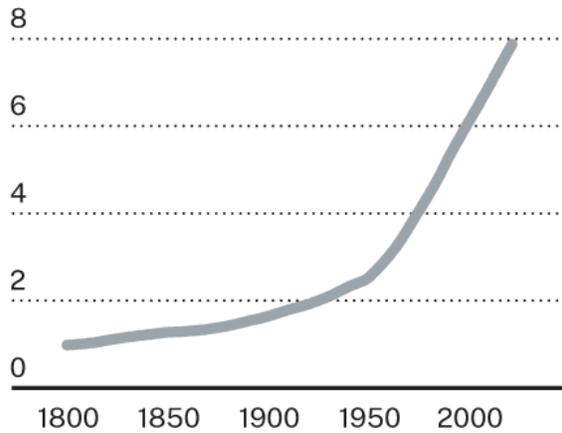
The metronome of history clicks faster. We find ourselves in the middle of what has been called “the great acceleration,” where we witness a change in the very pace of change. That is, we face not only the velocity (speed) of

ideas and events but also the acceleration (increase in speed). Information pours into our minds; culture is a blur; politics moves to a next phase before we understand the previous one.

Pope Francis called this phenomenon “rapidification” and highlighted that it is not just an external phenomenon but a psychological one. He saw humanity as being caught in a temporal vice: “Although change is part of the working of complex systems, the speed with which human activity has developed contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution.”¹² We are outpaced by the change we have wrought.

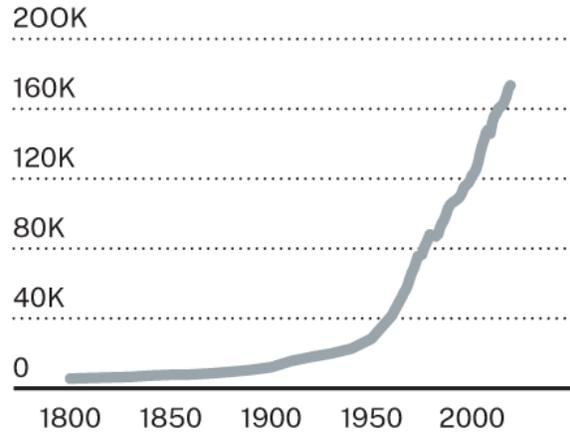
Global population

In billions



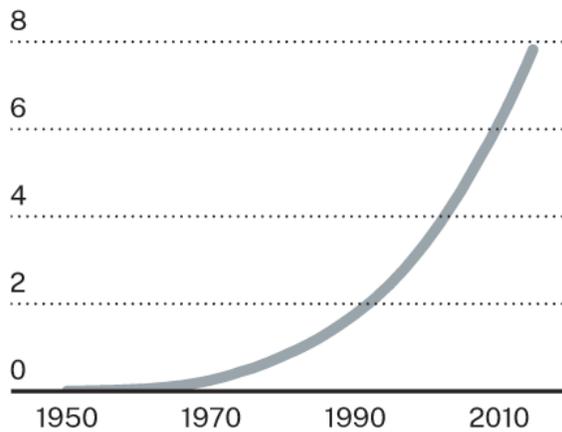
Energy consumption

Globally, in terawatt hours



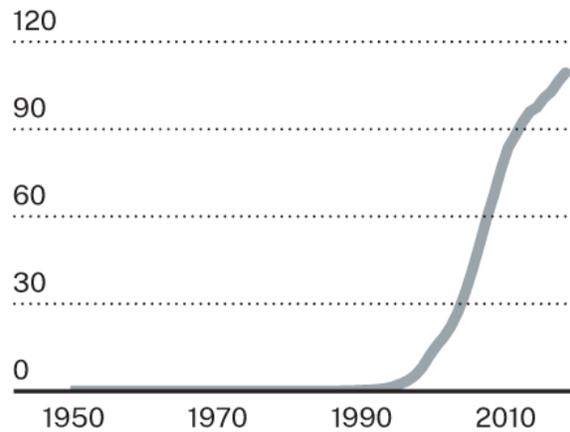
Plastics production

Globally, in millions of tons



Cellular subscriptions

Per 100 people



Source: OurWorldinData.org

But, I think, the future is also another thing: a verb tense in motion, in action, in combat, a searching movement toward life, keel of the ship that strikes the water and struggles to open between the waves the exact breach the rudder commands.

Ángel González

This acceleration has immediate implications for decision makers of all kinds. In 2017, Gen. Joe Dunford, then chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, considered the

effect on military affairs. He explained, “Decision space has collapsed” and the acceleration of time “makes the global security environment even more unpredictable, dangerous and unforgiving...Today, the ability to recover from early missteps is greatly reduced.”¹³ The compressed space for reaction is particularly acute in war, but just as relevant for social change.

There are many causes for the collapse of decision space. One core driver is “Moore’s Law,” Intel founder Gordon Moore’s observation that the power and cost-efficiency of microchips tends to double every 18-24 months. We have all witnessed the extraordinary acceleration of computing power that has followed. It is so fast that it is most appropriate to show the graph logarithmically (that is, 10, 100, 1000, etc.).

Innovation theorist Bhaskar Chakravorti has countered that societal change happens only half that fast—what he has jokingly called “demi-Moore’s law.”¹⁴ Technical innovation does not happen in a social vacuum. In an interconnected world populated by intertwined organizations, change requires the social and political wherewithal to align disparate efforts across multiple actors and organizations. This complexity is the brake pedal that balances the force of the accelerator.