Greta Thunberg's Moment

PETER SINGER

Project Syndicate, Oct 7, 2019

No one could have predicted that a then-15-year-old Swedish girl would start a movement supported by millions of young people and gain a platform from which to address the world's leaders. To avert an environmental catastrophe, we need many more like her.

PRINCETON – "This is all wrong!" These words begin the most powerful four-minute speech I have ever heard. They were spoken by Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenage climate activist, at the United Nations Climate Action Summit last month, and followed a week of climate strikes and marches attended by an estimated six million people.

The marchers were predominantly the young people who will have to cope with more of the costs of climate change than the world leaders Thunberg was addressing. Her tone of moral outrage was therefore apt, as was the leitmotif of her speech: "How dare you?" She accused the world's leaders of stealing the dreams of the young with empty words. How dare they say that they are doing enough? How dare they pretend that "business as usual," coupled with yet-to-be-discovered technological solutions, will solve the problem?1

Thunberg justified her outrage by pointing out that the science of climate change has been known for 30 years. World leaders have looked away while the opportunities for a timely transition to a net-zero greenhouse-gas economy slipped by. Now even the heroic effort of halving emissions over the next ten years would, Thunberg pointed out, give us only a 50% chance of keeping global warming below 1.5º Celsius.

Passing that limit risks setting off uncontrollable feedback loops leading to further warming, more feedback loops, and yet more warming. Thunberg referred to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report indicating that to reduce the risk of exceeding 1.5ºC to one in three, we will need to limit global carbon dioxide emissions from now until 2050 to 350 gigatons. At the current rate, we will exceed this limit in 2028.

According to the Climate Change Performance Index, no government in the world has yet achieved a "very good" performance in protecting the world's climate. Sweden, Morocco, and Lithuania are currently doing the best, with Latvia and the United Kingdom not far behind. The United States is in the bottom five, along with Saudi Arabia, Iran, South Korea, and Taiwan.

The ethical issue is not difficult to adjudicate. For affluent countries, which are responsible for most of the CO_2 that is now in the atmosphere, there can be no ethical justification for continuing to emit greenhouse gases at far higher *per capita* levels than the people in low-income countries who will suffer most from climate change. To impose on them a one in three chance of warming beyond 1.5ºC is playing a kind of Russian roulette, as if we had put a revolver against the heads of tens or perhaps hundreds of millions of people in low-income countries – except that we have loaded our six-chambered revolver with two bullets rather than one. For affluent countries, on the other hand, the required transition to a clean economy would bring some transitional costs, but in the long run would save lives and benefit everyone.3

How will we get there? Thunberg ended on a positive note: “We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.”

Can young people really wake the world to the urgency of changing direction? Can they convince their parents? School strikes will trouble parents, especially parents who then need to arrange child care, but will they influence political leaders? What can be done to keep climate on the agenda until governments get serious about reducing the risk of catastrophe?

“Extinction Rebellion,” an international movement that began last year with a Declaration of Rebellion in London, advocates civil disobedience. Extinction Rebellion calls for thousands of activists to block roads and shut down transport systems in major cities around the world, not just for one day, but for long enough to impose real economic costs on governments and business elites, all the while maintaining strictly nonviolent discipline even in the face of government repression.1

Civil disobedience was first used as part of a mass movement by Mahatma Gandhi (born 150 years ago this month) in South Africa and subsequently in India. In the United States, its most famous proponent was Martin Luther King, Jr., in the struggle against racial segregation. Civil disobedience played a role, along with other forms of protest, in ending the Vietnam War. In each of these examples, resorting to civil disobedience is now widely regarded as courageous and right. There are statues to Gandhi around the world, and in the US, King’s birthday is a national holiday.

The failure of governments to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions is no less wrong than British rule in India, the denial of equal rights to African-Americans, or the war in Vietnam – and it is likely to cause harm on a far larger scale. So, civil disobedience also would be right if it can persuade governments to follow the science and do what is necessary to avert catastrophic climate change.

There may be other effective forms of nonviolent protest that no one has yet tried. Thunberg first became known for standing alone outside Sweden’s parliament holding a sign saying, in Swedish, “School Strike for Climate.” No one could have predicted that this then-15-year-old girl would start a movement supported by millions of young people and gain a platform from which to address the world’s leaders. We need more innovative ideas about how best to convey the urgency of the situation and the need for a sharp change of course.