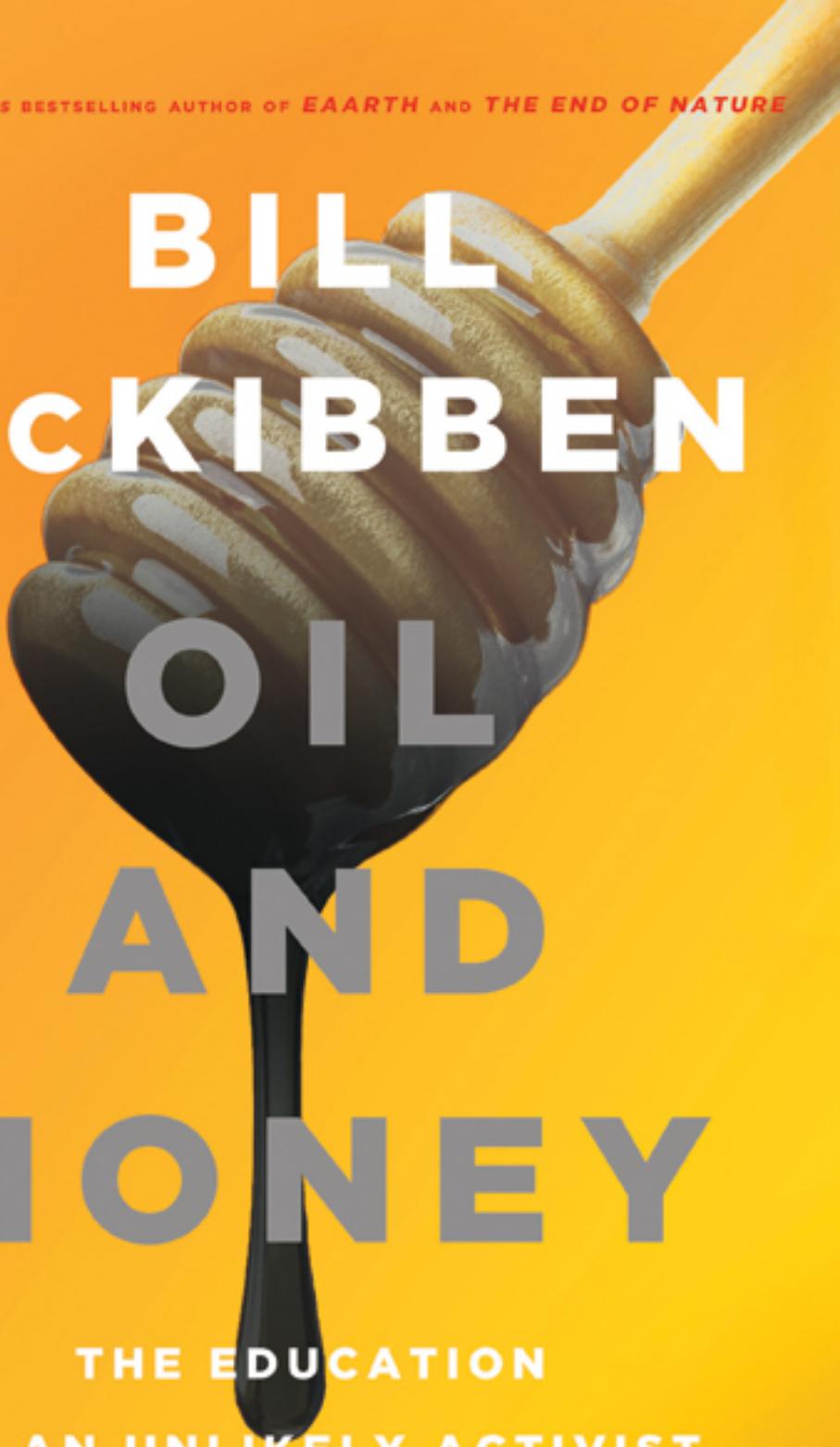


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *EAARTH* AND *THE END OF NATURE*



**BILL
MCKIBBEN**
OIL
AND
HONEY

THE EDUCATION
OF AN UNLIKELY ACTIVIST

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TWO LIVES

Here's a story of two lives lived in response to a crazy time—a time when the Arctic melted and the temperature soared, a time when the planet began to come apart, a time when bee populations suddenly dropped in half. Each story is extreme. They're not intended as suggestions for how others should live, and I hope the reader won't feel the need to choose, or reject, either one. Each story is mine, at least in part, for sometimes I think I've learned more in the past two years than in all the decades that came before. Some of that education came in the tumult and conflict of my own life, as I helped to build an active resistance to the fossil fuel industry. And some came in the beeyards of my home state, while I carefully watched a very different, very beautiful way of dealing with a malfunctioning modernity. These stories mesh together, I hope: awkwardly right now, but perhaps, with luck, more easily in the time to come.

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I first met Kirk Webster in the fall of 2001. Newly ensconced at Middlebury College in Vermont, I'd offered to teach a course on local food production. There were two problems. One, I can't really grow anything—my heart is green, but not my thumb. Two, this was long before Michael Pollan or Barbara Kingsolver had taken up local agriculture, and there wasn't really much to read. We could choose among the remarkable essays of Wendell Berry, the seductive novels of Wendell Berry, and the tough poems of Wendell Berry. Looking through back issues of a magazine called *Small Farmer's Journal*, however, I came across an essay by a beekeeper named Kirk Webster. I'm not sure I noticed, the first time I read it, that he was a neighbor. I was just taken by his confident prose and his descriptions of his life among the honeybees.

"Surely the best kept secret in the U.S. today is the wonderful way of life that's possible with full-time farming on a small place," he began. "If more people understood the opportunities for faith, freedom, responsibility, health and education that good farming can provide, our rural areas might be repopulated and the self-destructive course of our society reversed. This timeless activity is so much more than just a way of making a living—it is in fact the Middle Path described in the Buddha's teachings and the object of St. Thomas's words: 'The kingdom of heaven surrounds you, but you see it not.'"

He was, it turned out, living in the next town over, and easy to track down via the small-farmer grapevine; he agreed to come to class and talk. I don't recall everything he said that day, but I do remember my first impression: he was bearded, shy, and a little ill at ease, but we all took to him instantly. Even

the students who had no intention of becoming farmers—the ones bound for finance or medicine or the other high-powered careers you leave for from a place like Middlebury—were shaken a little by his quiet resolution, and by his story.

He'd grown up in suburban New Jersey (like many of them), in a family he described in his essay as “largely dysfunctional and aimless” (so, not unlike a lot of them). “I always liked to read, and I didn't have trouble getting good grades, so everyone assumed I would be able to get scholarships and somehow continue as far as possible with ‘education.’” By the age of fifteen, though, “it was clear that I was soon going to seek elsewhere for something to do in my life.” Nature and the outdoors world had become an “irresistible magnet,” and so in order that he earn some kind of diploma his parents sent him to the Mountain School in farm country Vermont, a rural outpost that grew its own food and cut its own firewood, and where he was all but adopted by one of the families whose parents taught at the school. Bill and Martha Treichler, and their boys and girls, taught him how to garden and to build and to do the hundreds of other jobs of rural self-sufficiency; he suddenly had a model that made sense—a joyful and tight farm family who were living outside the normal economy.

“One evening, just before dinner in the noisy school dining hall,” he wrote, “Bill told me that the year their fifth child was born, the family's gross income was \$600. I almost dropped the pitcher of milk I was holding. The sights and sounds in the room started to spin, and I felt like someone had just hit me right between the eyes with a stick of cordwood. Here were the most capable, healthiest, and best educated people I had ever met, who with five young children at home, had chosen a way of life with only \$600 of cash income (perhaps

equivalent to \$2,400 today). They certainly could have pursued any number of jobs or careers to make a normal income, but chose instead to be together as a family and pick and choose carefully which aspects of the larger society they would get involved with. Farming and healthy self-sufficient living in a debt-free situation allowed them to do this. In that moment in the dining hall, all of my developing notions of making a living, security, jobs and careers were shattered, and I knew I would have to start again in learning what these things really mean.”

That moment ramified. When he was wracked up in a toboggan accident that winter, someone gave him a book on beekeeping, and it captured his imagination; home on vacation in New Jersey he found an octogenarian Ukrainian immigrant who needed help with his hives. That man told him about another—Charlie Mraz, in Vermont’s Champlain Valley, and when Kirk returned to school he hitchhiked across the state to ask the veteran apiarist for a job. He worked there for two years after high school, eating meals with the family but sleeping in the honey house. And then, still a very young man, he struck off across the country, working on a variety of farms and doing carpentry to pay his bills. Everywhere he went he built up small apiaries, honing his skills, and in the fall of 1985 he returned to the Champlain Valley and began his life’s work, raising bees and selling colonies, queens, and honey. Slowly, patiently, and in the face of growing problems with mites that were decimating many apiaries, he built his business into a going concern, pioneering a number of new techniques and becoming one of the very few beekeepers in the country who made a living without using chemicals in his hives. It was a decent living, too—when he came to my class that day, he

bought his books with him, and showed us that Champlain Valley Bees and Queens, Inc., was grossing \$50,000 a year, of which about half netted out. “After living, and enjoying life, for so long with so little money, this frankly seems like an enormous fortune to me,” he said. “In terms of the American greedy lifestyle, it’s still not very much money. But I consider it to be a more than ample reward for the independence, the wonderful way of life, and the chance to live apart from a predatory society that beekeeping and farming provide.”

He was, in other words, leading a somewhat Amish life, with the obvious exception that he wasn’t surrounded by an Amish community where everyone else was living likewise. There are other small farmers in the valley, and they were his friends; nonetheless, he was, perhaps, a little lonely—more on that later. But the deeper problem went like this: he thought his farming wouldn’t truly matter until he could pass on what he’d learned. “If there are young people anymore, interested in beekeeping, I’d like to have a few of them come here to learn the trade,” he wrote. “This is still in the planning stage, but it should be possible to expand the apiary enough to support one or two apprentices, then spin off the excess bees as the young folks return home to start propagating bees and producing honey on their own. If even one or two full-time apiaries resulted from this process, I’d be able to at least approach my own definition of successful farming.”

As the decade wore on, I’d see Kirk now and again—have him over for dinner or meet him for a cross-country ski. And so I knew he was shepherding his apiary through the most difficult decade in beekeeping history, surviving everything from the colony collapse disorder that killed so many beehives to the flood of cheap (and adulterated) Chinese honey

that threatened to wreck the market. He'd continued to follow his unorthodox route. Instead of trucking his bees to California, like most apiarists, to cash in on the almond pollination season, he kept them close to home all year round, and worked diligently to rid his apiary of all trace of chemicals. And it had worked—but not well enough for him to take on the apprentices he'd wanted. He had no farm of his own, so he lived in a rented home on a small patch of land and had his shop nearby; his colonies were, as with most apiaries, spread out at a dozen locations around the valley. It all worked, but there was no room for young people to come, stay, and learn. And there was no land to make the apiary the hub of something even sweeter, a small farm with crops and animals. Had he lived some other place, he could have done it, but the cost of land in Vermont is unnaturally high—New York and Boston are within driving distance, and so prices get set less by what a farmer can earn than by what a stockbroker can afford.

It became clear to me that the moment was passing—Kirk is strong and healthy, but he's got another decade at his peak, I'd guess. If he was going to pass on what he knew, the time was ripe. And I, too, felt a strong urge to have a more-than-theoretical connection to the landscape and the emerging local economy that I was writing so much about. So I made him a proposal: What if I buy you a piece of land and grant you free lifetime tenure on it? In return, you build the farm buildings and get the land working, and pay the insurance and taxes. By any global standard, I'm a rich man. But I'm not in the class of people who buy farms willy-nilly. Still, I've always wanted something tangible to leave my daughter; since Kirk and I are about the same age, she should be the ultimate beneficiary, inheriting the operation when Kirk died. Given what

I knew about climate change, the gift of productive land seemed like the best thing I could hope to pass on to her, an insurance policy worth more than money in some account. In the meantime, Kirk could fulfill his farming destiny.

Kirk agreed, and I went looking for the money—as it turns out, the check for this book covered the down payment. And together we started the search for land, wandering one property after another. There was no shortage of possibilities—every month a few more dairy farms disappear, done in by the low price of commodity milk and the impossibility of competing with the giant ten-thousand-head megadairies of the West. We looked at many, but they were hard worn, their outbuildings crumbling after a few decades of cash-strapped deferred maintenance. We eventually checked in with the Vermont Land Trust, which has been conserving farmland around the state for decades. (It works like this: a farmer decides that instead of selling off his land in lots for vacation homes, he'll sell the development rights to VLT; he can keep farming, and the land will stay intact.) VLT connected us with a farmer who wanted to unload—after selling his development rights he'd gotten sick of the entire farming business altogether and moved on to California, and now his seventy-acre parcel outside the town of New Haven was just sitting there. There was a driveway and one double-wide trailer. The land was pretty near the geographic center of Kirk's various beeyards around the county, and when we tested the well the water flowed pretty well. With the great help of our lawyer friend Dick Foote we managed finally to settle the deal. The farm wasn't especially picturesque—the neighbor directly to the west ran a noisy excavating business, and the fields were rimmed with scrubby sumac. But some of the soil was rich loam, not the

standard Champlain Valley clay. And the woodlot was plenty large enough to keep Kirk in firewood forever. We both knew it was the place.

The double-wide would serve for the someday apprentices; the first order of business, in that spring of 2011, was to get a barn built, and then, if his money held out, a small farmhouse, where Kirk was pretty sure he'd spend the rest of his life. This new operation would not change the world, both of us knew that. But it would, you know, change the world. The sum total of a million of these kind of small shifts would be a different civilization, one you could just begin to sense emerging as farmer's markets spread across the nation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture had just announced a seismic demographic shift: For the first time in 150 years the number of farms in America was no longer falling. In fact, over the past half decade, it had begun inexorably to rise. All the growth was coming at the small end of the business, with people growing food for their neighbors. Vermont was a case in point: dairies continued to disappear, but we suddenly had neighbors growing wheat and barley—the kind of crops we hadn't seen for a century in this state. The number of farmers in the United States was still small—just 1 percent, or half the proportion of the population behind prison bars. But something had definitely begun to turn. Given enough time . . .

Time, of course, was the trouble. Offered a century's grace, I have no doubt we could subside into a workable, even beautiful, civilization. But 2011, when Kirk and I bought the farm, was shaping up to be one of the warmest years on record. As that summer wore on, we saw record heat in the Southwest

and a drought so deep it killed five hundred million trees in Texas. Meanwhile, there was record rainfall across the Mississippi Basin, and the river swelled so fast that the Army Corps of Engineers was blowing up levees and flooding farmland to try to save cities from inundation.

Those were the facts of my life, those and a million other such stories and statistics. For twenty-five years—almost my entire adulthood—I'd been working on what we first called the greenhouse effect, and then global warming, and then climate change. Back in 1989, when Kirk was building his first apiaries, I was writing my first book, which was also the first book on the topic for nonscientists. *The End of Nature* was a best seller, translated into a couple of dozen languages, and my initial theory (I was still in my twenties) was that people would read the book—and then change.

That's not quite how it happened, so I kept on writing, one book after another, about some aspect of this great crisis. I wrote articles, too, for just about every magazine you could name, and op-eds, and when blog posts became a thing I wrote those. I assumed, like most people, that reason would eventually prevail—that given the loud alarm sounded by scientists, governments would take care of the problem. And for a while that seemed, fitfully, to be happening. I was in Kyoto in 1998 when the world's nations signed the first accord to staunch the flow of carbon dioxide, and I remember thinking that we'd turned a corner. It was going to be close, I thought, but we were headed in the right direction.

That's not quite how it happened, either. As it turned out, the United States never ratified the Kyoto accord, and soon China was building a coal plant a week. Carbon emissions kept soaring, and donations from the fossil fuel industry managed

to turn one of our two political parties into climate deniers and the other party into cowards. Power, not reason, was ascendant, and writing yet another story about the latest scientific findings seemed less and less useful. By 2009, a decade after Kyoto, the U.S. Senate—then with sixty Democrats—was so scared of Big Oil that it wouldn't even take a vote on the most modest, tepid climate legislation imaginable. And six months later the world convened in Copenhagen for a failed climate summit that killed any hope of global progress.

Sometime in the course of the past decade I figured out that I needed to do more than write—if this fight was about power, then we who wanted change had to assemble some. Environmentalists clearly weren't going to outspend the fossil fuel industry, so we'd need to find other currencies: the currencies of movement. Instead of money, passion; instead of money, numbers; instead of money, creativity.

At first—this was 2006—I had no clue at all. I called a few Vermont writer friends of mine, and asked if they'd come to our main city, Burlington, and sit in on the steps of the federal building. We'd be arrested, there'd be a small story in the paper, we'd have done *something*. They agreed—but one of them called the police and asked what would happen to us. “Nothing,” was the reply. “Sit there as long as you want.” So instead I asked people to walk across Vermont—we left from Robert Frost's old summer writing cabin, which is near my house, and walked for five days, sleeping in farm fields along the way. By the time we got to Burlington there were a thousand people marching, which in Vermont is a lot—enough, as it turned out, to get all our candidates for federal office (even the Republicans) to sign a pledge that they'd work in Congress to cut carbon emissions dramatically.

The next day, though, a newspaper account called that protest the largest demonstration against climate change that had yet taken place in the United States, and suddenly I understood better why we were losing. We had the superstructure of a movement: scientists, economists, policy experts, Al Gore. In fact, all we were lacking for a real movement was the movement part, the surge of people that produces respect and maybe even a little fear in leaders. Activists on the front lines were doing superb work fighting individual power plants and coal mines, but they weren't getting the support they needed—it wasn't adding up fast enough. So we set out to build one.

When I say “we,” I mean me and a small team of undergraduates at Middlebury College, where I teach. We'd met one another in those long days of walking across Vermont, and I'd been deeply impressed by their budding talents and their good cheer. So that winter we launched a campaign called Step It Up, and in the course of three months created a springtime day of action that coordinated 1,400 protests across all fifty states. (The one in North Dakota was small.) We were successful in part because of beginner's luck and in part because my young colleagues knew more about the Internet than the rest of the environmental movement put together. Mostly, though, we were pushing on an open door—there were plenty of people who were deeply concerned about global warming but felt powerless in its face. When we finally offered them the chance to unite their voices, they took it eagerly. Both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, then running for president, took note of the rallies, and a few days later changed their platforms to reflect our goal: an 80 percent cut in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050. We were feeling . . . smug.

But a few weeks later, in the summer of 2007, the Arctic

began to melt, breaking all previous records. Clearly climate change was coming faster than even the most pessimistic scientists had thought, and 2050 was no longer all that relevant. We'd need to work faster, on a larger scale. NASA's James Hansen, the planet's premier climate scientist, provided us with a number: in January 2008, his team published a paper showing that if the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere rose above 350 parts per million, we couldn't have a planet "similar to the one on which civilization developed and to which life on earth is adapted." (Five years later we're closing in on 400 parts per million—that's why the Arctic is melting.) We took 350.org for our name, reasoning that we wanted to work all over the world (they don't call it global warming for nothing) and that Arabic numerals crossed linguistic boundaries. And then we took a leap of faith that in retrospect seems ludicrous—since there were seven continents, each of those seven young people working with me took a chunk of one and we set to work: Kelly Blynn on South America, Jeremy Osborn in Europe, Phil Aroneanu in Africa, Will Bates on the Indian subcontinent, Jamie Henn in the rest of Asia, May Boeve at home in North America, and Jon Warnow on the antipodes (he also got the Internet). Our success the year before meant that a couple of foundations (the Rockefellers, the Schumanns) were willing to help fund our work, and so the rest of the team was getting paid small salaries, and they had money to travel. But how do you just land in, say, Vietnam or Peru or Kazakhstan and start "organizing"? We found out.

The seven kids did endless work—literally endless, since going global meant there was always someone awake somewhere to e-mail. Mostly we found people like ourselves—there aren't "environmentalists" everywhere, but there's always someone

worried about public health or hunger or war and peace. (Worried, that is, about all the hopes that will be wrecked if the planet starts to fail.) Though most of them were poor, and hence living lives a world apart from that of New England college students, they were natural allies, quick to understand both the science and the politics. And so by the fall of 2009, we were ready to hold our first global day of action. It was beyond exciting watching the pictures pour in—there were 5,200 rallies in 181 countries, what CNN called “the most widespread day of action in the planet’s history.” We followed it up with three more big global extravaganzas—thousands of demonstrations everywhere, save North Korea. There are forty thousand images in the Flickr account—I can show you pictures from Mongolia and Mumbai and Mozambique, from Montreal and Mombasa and Mauritania. From almost everywhere. We did our part to educate the world about what was coming at it.

But if you’ve built a movement, you’ve eventually got to put it to work. And now “eventually” had come. Education needed to yield to action.

So while Kirk was starting to build his barn in that early summer of 2011, I was stepping off a small cliff into the next phase of my life. To this point I’d been able to pretend that I was mostly a writer who happened to be helping with some activism—that our global climate education project was a natural extension of the work I’d spent my life doing. But now I was getting ready to do something different: to pick a tough, visible fight with the strongest possible adversaries on the biggest political stage in the world. Global warming was accelerating—2010 had just set the new record for the hottest year ever recorded. It was time to pick up the pace and move from engagement to resistance.

And so, at least for the two years described here, I've made the transition, however reluctantly, from author-activist to activist. Except for a few blessed interludes in the beeyards, I've spent my time on the computer and the airplane and the phone, giving speeches and leading marches. I've willed myself to be someone other than who I had been. The strain has told; I've changed, and not always for the best. This is the story of that education.

I miss, sometimes desperately, the other me: the one who knew lots about reason and beauty and very little about the way power works; the one with time to think. But time, as I say, is what we're lacking.

As it happened, I'd spent the spring of 2011 teaching a course at Middlebury. "Social Movements, Theory and Practice," it was called—but since these were the opening months of the Arab Spring it was mostly practice. We watched YouTube videos of young Egyptians organizing epic marches, and brave Libyans standing up to their tyrant Muammar Gadhafi. And we read Taylor Branch's classic three-volume biography of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights years, which might as well be a handbook for organizers—it's so full of behind-the-scenes details that you could see exactly how Dr. King had dealt with every problem we'd face, from stubborn presidents to (far harder) stubborn colleagues from the large civil rights organizations.

By the time I was done with the semester, I'd decided that 350.org should organize the first major civil disobedience action for the climate movement. I sensed, from the speeches I was giving and the e-mail that flowed in hourly, that people were ready for a deeper challenge—it was time to stop changing lightbulbs

and start changing systems. If we were going to shake things up, we'd need to use the power King had tapped: the power of direct action and unearned suffering. We'd need to go to jail.

And at precisely that moment, an issue materialized out of thin, if dirty, air. In the spring of 2011 Jim Hansen published a small paper pointing out that “peak oil” was not, in fact, happening quite as expected—that though we were indeed running out of easy-to-tap sweet crude, the newly emerging category of “unconventional oil,” and in particular the tar sands of Canada, contained huge amounts of carbon. Those Albertan tar sands, he wrote, were so gigantic that if we burned them in addition to everything else we were burning, it would be “game over for the climate.”

His calculations put a sudden spotlight on a previously little-known pipeline proposal called Keystone XL that was designed to carry almost a million barrels a day of that tar sands oil south from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Native leaders in Canada had been fighting tar sands mining for years, because it had wrecked their lands—only 3 percent of the oil had been pumped out, but already the world's biggest bulldozers and dump trucks had moved more earth than was moved building the planet's ten biggest dams, the Great Wall of China, and the Suez Canal combined. And some ranchers in the United States had begun to rally along the planned route of the pipeline itself, particularly in Nebraska, where it was destined to run straight across the iconic Sandhills and atop the Ogallala Aquifer that irrigates the Great Plains. But these protests hadn't gained enough traction to stop the plan. Keystone XL awaited only a presidential permit.

That was the part that interested me. An old law, mainly used for things such as building a bridge between New

Brunswick and Maine, required presidents to declare that any infrastructure crossing our country's border was "in the national interest." Congress didn't need to act, which was good since I knew there was no possible way to even think about convincing the Republican-controlled House of Representatives to block the pipeline. But this decision would be made by Barack Obama, and Barack Obama was fifteen months away from an election. Maybe we had an opening to apply some pressure—an opening to see if we'd nurtured a climate movement strong enough to make a difference.

And so I called the native leaders, who'd been fighting the longest, and asked if it was okay if we joined in. They graciously refrained from pointing out we were late to the game, and promised to collaborate (a promise they would keep in spectacular fashion in the year ahead). And then I called the small but hardy band of environmental campaigners in Nebraska and in Washington, D.C., who had been trying to block the pipeline. If we demanded more dramatic action, I asked, would it somehow damage their efforts? "We're losing," they said. "We have no deal for you to damage. Going to jail can't hurt."

Our small crew at 350.org—still run by those seven young people, now fully grown and highly able organizers—talked it through. We knew it was a gamble, but when you're behind, you take risks. (The slow, easy, sensible trajectories for dealing with climate change were in the past now; sometimes I had to restrain myself from saying to some "moderate" politician, "If only you'd listened to me a quarter century ago. . . .") And when you're losing you take personal risks, too; I sensed I was stepping over a line. With no idea how it would all come out, I sat down and wrote a letter, which I circulated to a few of my friends to cosign. It went out into

the far reaches of the Web in June 2011, and it was as blunt as I could make it.

Dear Friends,

This will be a slightly longer letter than common for the Internet age—it's serious stuff.

The short version is we want you to consider doing something hard: coming to Washington in the hottest and stickiest weeks of the summer and engaging in civil disobedience that will quite possibly get you arrested.

The full version goes like this:

As you know, the planet is steadily warming: 2010 was the warmest year on record, and we've seen the resulting chaos in almost every corner of the earth.

And as you also know, our democracy is increasingly controlled by special interests interested only in their short-term profit.

These two trends collide this summer in Washington, where the State Department and the White House have to decide whether to grant a certificate of "national interest" to some of the biggest fossil fuel players on Earth. These corporations want to build the so-called Keystone XL pipeline from Canada's tar sands to Texas refineries.

To call this project a horror is serious understatement. The tar sands have wrecked huge parts of Alberta, disrupting ways of life in indigenous communities—First Nations communities in Canada and tribes along the pipeline route in the U.S. have demanded the destruction cease. The pipeline crosses crucial areas like the Ogallala Aquifer where a spill would be

disastrous—and though the pipeline companies insist they are using “state of the art” technologies that should leak only once every seven years, the precursor pipeline and its pumping stations have leaked a dozen times in the past year. These local impacts alone would be cause enough to block such a plan. But the Keystone pipeline would also be a fifteen hundred mile fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the continent, a way to make it easier and faster to trigger the final overheating of our planet, the one place to which we are all indigenous.

As the climatologist Jim Hansen (one of the signatories to this letter) explained, if we have any chance of getting back to a stable climate “the principal requirement is that coal emissions must be phased out by 2030 and unconventional fossil fuels, such as tar sands, must be left in the ground.” In other words, he added, “if the tar sands are thrown into the mix it is essentially game over.” The Keystone pipeline is an essential part of the game. “Unless we get increased market access, like with Keystone XL, we’re going to be stuck,” Ralph Glass, an economist and vice president at AJM Petroleum Consultants in Calgary, told a Canadian newspaper last week.

Given all that, you’d suspect that there’s no way the Obama administration would ever permit this pipeline. But in the last few months the administration has signed pieces of paper opening much of Alaska to oil drilling, and permitting coal mining on federal land in Wyoming that will produce as much CO₂ as three hundred power plants operating at full bore.

And Secretary of State Clinton has already said she’s “inclined” to recommend the pipeline go forward. Partly it’s because of the political commotion over high gas prices, though more tar sands oil would do nothing to change that picture. But it’s also because of intense pressure from industry.

So we're pretty sure that without serious pressure the Keystone pipeline will get its permit from Washington. A wonderful coalition of environmental groups has built a strong campaign across the continent—from Cree and Déné indigenous leaders to Nebraska farmers, they've spoken out strongly against the destruction of their land. We need to join them, and to say even if our own homes won't be crossed by this pipeline, our joint home—the earth—will be wrecked by the carbon that pours down it.

And we need to say something else, too: it's time to stop letting corporate power make the most important decisions our planet faces. We don't have the money to compete with those corporations, but we do have our bodies, and beginning in mid-August many of us will use them. We will, each day, march on the White House, risking arrest with our trespass. We will do it in dignified fashion, demonstrating that in this case we are the conservatives, and that our foes—who would change the composition of the atmosphere—are dangerous radicals. Come dressed as if for a business meeting—this is, in fact, serious business.

And another sartorial tip—if you wore an Obama button during the 2008 campaign, why not wear it again? We very much still want to believe in the promise of that young senator who told us that with his election the “rise of the oceans would begin to slow and the planet start to heal.” We don't understand what combination of bureaucratic obstinacy and insider dealing has derailed those efforts, but we remember his request that his supporters continue on after the election to pressure his government for change. We'll do what we can.

One more thing: we don't just want college kids to be the participants in this fight. They've led the way so far on climate change—ten thousand came to D.C. for the Power Shift

gathering earlier this spring. They've marched this month in West Virginia to protest mountaintop removal; a young man named Tim DeChristopher faces sentencing this summer in Utah for his creative protest.

Now it's time for people who've spent their lives pouring carbon into the atmosphere to step up, too, just as many of us did in earlier battles for civil rights or for peace. Most of us signing this letter are veterans of this work, and we think it's past time for elders to behave like elders. One thing we don't want is a smash up: if you can't control your passions, this action is not for you.

This won't be a one-shot day of action. We plan for it to continue for several weeks, till the administration understands we won't go away. Not all of us can actually get arrested—half the signatories to this letter live in Canada, and might well find our entry into the U.S. barred. But we will be making plans for sympathy demonstrations outside Canadian consulates in the U.S., and U.S. consulates in Canada—the decision makers need to know they're being watched.

Twenty years of patiently explaining the climate crisis to our leaders hasn't worked. Maybe moral witness will help. You have to start somewhere, and we choose here and now.

We know we're asking a lot. You should think long and hard on it, and pray if you're the praying type. But to us, it's as much privilege as burden to get to join this fight in the most serious possible way. We hope you'll join us.

Maude Barlow—Chair, Council of Canadians

Wendell Berry—Author and Farmer

Danny Glover—Actor

Tom Goldtooth—Director, Indigenous Environmental Network

James Hansen—Climate Scientist

Wes Jackson—Agronomist, President of the Land Institute

Naomi Klein—Author and Journalist

Bill McKibben—Writer and Environmentalist

George Poitras—Mikisew Cree First Nation

Gus Speth—Environmental Lawyer and Activist

David Suzuki—Scientist, Environmentalist, and Broadcaster

Joseph B. Uehlein—Labor Organizer and Environmentalist

It's the kind of letter where you sit there with your hand above the send button and just kind of wonder how much your life is going to change. As it turned out, a lot.

One reason I find it hard to ask people to come to D.C. and get arrested: part of me thinks, strongly, we should stay home. Or at least that I should.

Yes, because it takes energy to travel. Yes, it has, in fact, occurred to me that there's something remarkably ironic about my flying around the world to build a climate movement. I do it because I think the math works: if we can stop Keystone, that's nine hundred thousand barrels a day for the fifty-year life of the pipeline. But it always nags at me, that surge of power at the top of the runway as the jet engines guzzle fuel to get us aloft. I tell myself that we fight this fight in the world we live in, not the one we hope to build.

But we *do* need to build that world, and that's even more why we should stay home; it's why Kirk's project attracts me. It's clear to me that we can't have precisely the same economy that we've grown up with, not the globe-spanning anything-at-any-time consumerism, not the starter-castles-for-entry-level-monarchs housing stock, not the every-man-a-Denali/Tahoe/Escalade driveway. We're going to have to change our

patterns, our laws, our economies, our expectations. My last few books have focused on the possibilities for local food, local energy, local currency—and the appeal for me is not just or even mainly intellectual.

I found the mountains surrounding Lake Champlain as a fairly young man. I'd moved to the Adirondacks at the age of twenty-six, falling in love with the sheer wildness of the place, a bigger tract of protected land than Glacier, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Yosemite combined. A child of the suburbs, I was knocked over by the contact with hot, cold, wet; it was no different than any other incandescent young love, except that it has burned on for years. Hemlock bowing across the stream, red pine needles baking in the August sun high on the ridge, coyotes yipping in the night, sky so black the Milky Way stretches to each horizon; all of it was a revelation. (In fact, the dominant emotion of *The End of Nature* was not fear but sadness—a lament for the wildness that climate change threatened to leach away.) Just to say the names calms me down: Ampersand Mountain, Thirteenth Lake, Raquette River.

After fifteen years my wife and my daughter and I moved fifty miles across the lake to Vermont, sacrificing a little of the wildness for the strong sense of community that defines the Green Mountain State: the town meeting, the farmer's market, the microbrewery. These are places that might be made to work: the Adirondacks is the best example of a wilderness with people living in and among it; Vermont the best example of an earlier American state of mind, before the hyper-individualism of the TV age completely took over.

There's so much to be done here at home; you can sense the new world coming into embryonic form, with its own sources of everything from seeds to capital. And for me, even

more, it's the landscape that fits with jigsaw precision into the hole in my heart. I'm happy when I'm home, when I can see the sun shining through the winter-bare ridge at dusk, when I can swat the blackflies come June. My thirties were essentially an extended early retirement; I spent those years—the 1990s—writing and wandering, and watching my daughter grow. Her first word was “birch,” which pleased me more than I can say; by the time she was fifteen she'd climbed all forty-six of the high peaks in her native Adirondacks, which made me at least as proud as her college admissions letter did a few years later.

Which is why it's so odd that I've spent more nights away than home these past years. I've been to every continent since 2008, and once I hit four of them in six days. At 350.org we've organized, in the words of *Outside* magazine, “more rallies than Lenin and Gandhi and Martin Luther King combined.” It's been the most satisfying work of my life, endlessly difficult and endlessly interesting. But asleep in some Days Inn or Courtyard by Marriott, I dreamed of the Champlain Valley, with the Adirondacks towering to the west and its growing web of organic dairies and community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms; I woke up to eat at the breakfast bar (non-Vermont non-maple syrup) and do rhetorical battle with retrograde congressmen. But I did that battle in the name of my place, remembering what it felt like. I can try to imagine “unborn generations” and the “suffering poor” and the other huge reasons to fight climate change, but I never have the slightest trouble conjuring up the tang of the first frosty morning in the Adirondack fall, the evening breeze that stirs as the sun drops below the ridge.

And, of course, if I knew my place, Kirk *really* knew

it—felt its every change not only with his own senses but with the extended vision of the many million bees in his charge. Through them he knew each new development in the wider world; they were scouts, and he could read their dispatches with ease. I know no one more connected, which is why it has been a privilege just to follow him around.

So when I say activism didn't come naturally to me, it's not simply because I'm a writer; it's because the need to stay close to home was very nearly biological. If I missed a week wandering the woods, it meant not seeing those flowers that year—the trillium would have to wait till next spring. But I'd turned fifty, and the "next springs" were now fewer than the springs I'd known. At night, on the road, distracted by worry, I'd say those names: Camel's Hump, Breadloaf Mountain, Otter Creek. I'm a mediocre meditator, but the one mantra that could lull me to sleep in some lonely Hilton was the list of Lake Champlain's many tributaries, north to south along the Vermont shore, then back down on the New York side. It hurt, physically, to leave; flying back into Burlington airport, winging past Whiteface and Giant Mountain, wheeling over Missisquoi Bay, calmed me down like nothing else.

That the two sides of my life were so at odds bothered me no end, far more than the jet fuel my travels burned. I couldn't quite make them connect.

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