

I was 8 years old when I first heard about the end of the world. I was sitting on the school bus reading a book about space formatted in a question/answer style. One of the questions was about the age of our sun and the answer described a typical star's life cycle in detail. In this answer was a number that truly disturbed 8 year old me: In about 5 billion years our sun will enter a new stage of evolution. As it exhausts the hydrogen in its core it will expand, engulf our planet, and obliterate all life as we know it.

This bothered me for quite some time. A finite life expectancy had been placed on everything I knew. The number itself, 5 billion, meant little to me. To me 100 was still a "huge number" and while I could with great effort remember how to write a billion, and with very careful consideration maybe perform calculations using it, I could not comprehend its meaning. The number wasn't real to me.

Recently I have once again become preoccupied with thoughts of death. Not the grand dramatic death of entire civilizations, but the small, insignificant, and sad fact that I someday will die and be forgotten. These thoughts creep into my happiest moments and poison them with melancholy. They keep me up late at night imagining the manner of my impending death. And sometimes, they make me think once again of the impending death of our world.

But today I seem to be more concerned about my own death than the death of our planet. 5 billion is slightly more real to me now because I have learned of other things of approximately that magnitude. 5 billion is roughly 1/3 of the current age of the universe. 5 billion is roughly 2/3 the world's current population. 5 billion is 1/60 of the total number of stars in our milky way galaxy. 5 billion is very, very big. And it doesn't scare me so much anymore.

But you know what number does scare me? 80. Even people in good health die at 80. I'm 22. I'm one quarter of the way done. I'm standing 6 feet tall, but one and a half feet are already in the grave.

I would give anything to replace 80 with a bigger number. Give me 100 years! I promise I won't waste it! I want to live, I want to learn, I want to love! How much more I could do with 20 more years!

But then I think back to the little boy who was so scared about the end of earth. So petrified by the deaths of other people that he couldn't sleep. And look at what he became: a young man who forgot about the fate of all those people because he was too busy thinking about himself.

We're all human and at some point we all struggle with our mortality. But only our individual mortality. Why is it that we avoid the issue of our collective mortality? The death of our civilization, the death of our planet!

I suspect it is because the number is too big. At 22 I have a better intellectual conception of what 5 billion means, but it is still no emotionally relevant to me in the way that 80 is. The number is too big for me to seriously relate to. I take one look at all the zero's trailing that 5 and declare, "The end of earth isn't my problem. We have plenty of time to figure it out."

But it is our problem and our time is running out. If we want to get to space, if we want humanity to outlive our planet, we need to start today. We're exhausting our resources faster every day. For the first time in all of our history we have the global organizations required to leverage all of our planet's resources into the massive undertaking of colonizing space. But that same capability is what allows us to exhaust them so rapidly constructing disposable consumer goods.

In the same way the very rockets we need to get off the earth could be our destruction. We don't have spaceships ready, but we do have thousands of nuclear equipped missiles standing ready to obliterate our civilization on a moment's notice.

The problem of our planet's death is not a problem for tomorrow. It is a problem for today. In fact it is THE problem of today. Humanity finally has the societal organization and technological ability to get off this rock and spread across the stars. But our window is closing. Quickly. What are we going to do about it?

I know that there is no permanent solution; someday all of humanity will die. But we can certainly buy our species billions of extra years, even if I can't buy myself an extra 20. If we're willing to work so hard to slightly extend our own lives, shouldn't we work even harder to give trillions of people the chance to live at all?

But I don't think we will.

We don't care.

Because it is an intellectual problem, not an emotional one. I may understand 5 billion, but I can't emotionally relate to it like I could when I was a child. With greater understanding has come greater emotional distance. It doesn't scare me so much anymore and I don't care as much. I'm too busy thinking about me.

I mourn that loss of innocence; I can mourn that loss of selfishness.

But when I do I think to myself:

“Why can't I mourn the death of the world?”