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CIVILIZATION
REAWAKENING AMERICAN VIRTUE AND PROSPERITY

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CHAPTER 9.

The Mindful Society

This chapter and the ones that follow propose some workable steps toward a new American economy, a healthier society, and a more ethical basis for the study and practice of economics itself. These steps start from a simple premise: that the problems of America begin at home, with the choices we are making as individuals. Through clearer thinking, we can become more effective both as individuals and as citizens, reclaiming power from the corporations. The American economy itself continues to be productive and technologically dynamic. The problem is not the breakdown of productivity but the way we are living with that productivity. The relentless drumbeat of consumerism into every corner of our lives has led to extreme shortsightedness, consumer addictions, and the shriveling of compassion. When we are distracted, we allow the lobbyists to run away with power that rightfully belongs to the citizenry. As individuals, we need to regain the balance of our own lives between work and leisure, saving and consumption, self-interest and compassion, individualism and citizenship. As a society, we need to establish the right relationship of markets, politics, and civil society to address the complex challenges of the twenty-first century.

The future belongs not to the Tea Party but to America's youth, who are the most progressive and diverse part of American society.
today. The change will start mainly with the so-called Millennial Generation, those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine in 2010, who are socially connected, Internet-savvy, and searching for a new mode of social involvement and political engagement. Obama was to be their man, but unless he dramatically alters course, he seems more likely to be a transitional figure than a transformative one.

We need deeper changes than those on offer today, changes that restore our personal balance and the foundations of our trust in society. We need a mindful society, in which we once again take seriously our own well-being, our relations with others, and the operation of our politics.

The Middle Path

Two of the greatest ethicists in human history, Buddha in the East and Aristotle in the West, hit upon a remarkably similar prescription for the long-term happiness of humanity. “The Middle Path,” said Buddha in the fifth century B.C., would keep humanity balanced between the false allure of asceticism on the one side and pleasure seeking on the other. Two centuries later and half a world away, Aristotle gave his fellow Greeks a similar message, that “moderation in all things” was the key to eudemonia, or human fulfillment. Aristotle, like Buddha, sought a path between two more extreme views of his day: the Stoics on one side and the Epicureans on the other.

The essential teaching of both Buddha and Aristotle is that the path of moderation is the key to fulfillment but is hard won and must be pursued through lifelong diligence, training, and reflection. There is nothing simple about moderation: the snares and distractions that lead us to extremes are everywhere. It is easy to become addicted to hyperconsumerism, the search for sensory pleasures, and the indulgence of self-interest, leading to a brief high but long-term unhappiness. It is easy to adopt a self-defeating philosophy of disregard for others. The escape path of asceticism or isolation from society is no more satisfying. The solution is a middle path, built on the hard work of self-knowledge. Neither Buddha nor Aristotle had illusions about the ease of this middle course. As Aristotle said, “I count him braver who overcomes his desires than he who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is over self.”

Ancient ethics, therefore, begins with a sense of fragility—of our psyches and our search for happiness. Each of us is thrust into a world of temptation, desire, and illusion, and we must find a lifelong path in the midst of these allure and traps. All of these insights were already necessary two millennia before TV and Mr. Bernays’s powerful methods of propaganda. How much more vital these messages are today, when much of the economy is organized precisely to set those traps.

The middle path of Buddha and Aristotle is currently challenged by the crude libertarianism of the free-market Right, which holds that the freedom of the individual is the only valid aim of ethics and government. In this crude view, individuals know what is best for themselves and should be left alone, untaxed by the state and unbothered by ethical responsibilities toward others, as long as they don’t cause direct harm to others. These ideas are expressed by the Tea Party movement and by many of America’s richest citizens, who would absolve themselves of any ethical responsibility toward the rest of society.

There are many errors in libertarian philosophy, but the biggest of all is its starting point: that individuals can truly find happiness by being left alone, unburdened by ethical or political responsibilities to others. Buddha and Aristotle knew better. Without accepting social and political responsibilities, the individual cannot actually find fulfillment. Happiness arises not only through the individual’s relationship with his wealth, as some economists simplistically assume, but through his relations with others. A society of compassion, mutual help, and collective decision making is not good just for the poor, who may receive help, but also for the rich, who may give it.
Politics provides an integral part of each individual's sense of purpose. Remove the role of government, and the individual loses his bearings. There can be no lasting happiness in anarchy. Take away an individual's moral responsibility, and he or she descends into loneliness and disorientation. Compassion, cooperation, and altruism are essential to human well-being. Being a responsible member of political society—by asking not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country—should therefore not be viewed as a coerced concession of the individual toward society, but as an essential way in which each individual finds personal fulfillment. Our well-being depends fundamentally on our recognizing and nurturing our basic duality: as individuals, with distinctive tastes and aspirations, and as members of a society, with responsibilities to and values shared with others.

America still has time to rescue itself, so great are its resources—human, technological, and natural. It has been running down its wealth, but the wealth remains very high, enough to sustain us with a very high quality of life as we prepare for the future, if we take care to look ahead collectively. For that, however, we will need to escape from the compulsions of the present. First, we will need to break free from the relentless and mindless propagandizing of the media, where the main message is that we should concentrate on shopping and our quest for higher personal income.

We will need, in short, to achieve a new mindfulness regarding our needs as individuals and as a society, to find a more solid path to well-being. Mindfulness, taught Buddha, is one of the eight steps on the way to self-awakening. It means an alertness and quiet contemplation of our circumstances, putting aside greed and distress. Through sustained effort, mindfulness leads to insight and to an escape from our useless cravings.

That mindfulness should start with each of us making the effort to regain control of our personal judgments as individuals who must balance consumption and saving, work and leisure, individualism and membership in society. Our mindfulness should then extend to a more considered understanding of our social relationships and responsibilities: as workers, citizens, and members of the community. Mindfulness, I would suggest, is crucial in eight dimensions of our lives:

- **Mindfulness of self**: personal moderation to escape mass consumerism
- **Mindfulness of work**: the balancing of work and leisure
- **Mindfulness of knowledge**: the cultivation of education
- **Mindfulness of others**: the exercise of compassion and cooperation
- **Mindfulness of nature**: the conservation of the world's ecosystems
- **Mindfulness of the future**: the responsibility to save for the future
- **Mindfulness of politics**: the cultivation of public deliberation and shared values for collective action through political institutions
- **Mindfulness of the world**: the acceptance of diversity as a path to peace

**Beyond the Craving for Wealth**

Mindfulness of self means that we once again take time to understand the sources of our own happiness. Americans today routinely assume that higher take-home pay and consumption of goods are the keys to happiness and therefore that tax cuts are the quintessence of well-being. Yet experience and reflection tell us something very different. The greatest benefits of higher income accrue to the poorest households, to enable them to meet their unmet basic needs. For the middle class and especially for the rich, many factors other than income are far more important for personal happiness. Good governance, more trust in the community, a happier married life,
more time for friends and colleagues, and meaningful and secure work all rank as far more important than another few percent of personal income. Yet many of these sources of long-term happiness can be achieved only through collective action, including politics, not through individual decision making in the marketplace. Even more telling, many of the uses of personal income today—for television viewing, fast foods, cigarettes, gambling, long commutes, and the like—are behaviors that often bring “buyer’s remorse” (a regret about the level of consumption and a desire to cut back) rather than true satisfaction.

There is also a huge difference between having more income (or wealth) and relentlessly craving more income. More income—if properly deployed—can be a source of personal happiness and security, but devoting one’s energies in a narrow-minded way to gaining it can be a source of endless frustration and unhappiness. The difference could not be more important. Having more income gives a mild, and mostly temporary, boost to satisfaction, holding other things constant. Aggressively orienting one’s life toward becoming rich, however, leads to prolonged and measurable unhappiness. Individuals with a high “materialist” orientation, for whom earning and spending money are a central aim of life, are systematically far less happy and secure than nonmaterialists.

The good news is that only a modest level of income is needed to meet basic needs. Once a society achieves that level of income across the society, there is the opportunity to refocus many of the society’s energies toward sources of well-being that can’t be reached by the market alone. Consider life expectancy, a key measure of well-being. By the time a society reaches a per capita income of around $3,000, life expectancy is generally 70 years or higher (compared with 78.3 years in the United States in 2009). Many countries much poorer than the United States either exceed or are very close to the U.S. life expectancy. Chile, for example, with a GDP per capita of $9,400 in 2009, roughly one-fifth of America’s at $46,400, has a life expectancy of 78.7 years, slightly higher than in the United States. Costa Rica, Greece, South Korea, and Portugal are considerably poorer than the United States in per capita GDP, but have life expectancies that are higher.5

Similarly, though the United States is one of the world’s richest economies by per capita income, it ranks only around seventeenth in reported life satisfaction. It is superseded not only by the likely candidates of Finland, Norway, and Sweden, which all rank above the United States (as we saw in chapter 2) but also by less likely candidates such as Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. Indeed, one might surmise that it is health and longevity rather than income that give the biggest boost to reported life satisfaction. Since good health and longevity can be achieved at per capita income levels well below those of the United States, so too can life satisfaction. One marketing expert put it this way, with only slight exaggeration:

Basic survival goods are cheap, whereas narcissistic self-stimulation and social-display products are expensive. Living doesn’t cost much, but showing off does.3

For affluent societies, therefore, our personal happiness depends not so much on our income as on our attitude toward income and how we use it, both as individuals and collectively. If our material desires are modest and realistic and our consumption behavior is attentive to our deeper needs, our happiness is raised. Yet, as we saw in the preceding chapter, we are only partly aware of our own cravings and desires. With patience and training, individuals can overcome their blind cravings and addictions and achieve long-term satisfaction. The challenge of beating these addictions, however, is greater than in the past. Not only must we control our inherent cravings, we must also resist the round-the-clock coaxing by advertisers and hucksters whose job is to promote still more temptations and desires.

There are three general approaches to restoring mindfulness of self in our confused and noisy times. The first can be called cogni-
tive: we need to study the sources of our own happiness and that of others. When we do, we learn that income plays a much less important role than we might imagine. We learn to enrich our lives far more by the quality of our personal and work relations and our generosity to others. Giving up some income through taxation in order to achieve shared social objectives, for example, makes ample sense when the limited role of personal wealth in happiness is kept in perspective. Through cognitive training, we can also cultivate the sense of a lifelong plan, one that depends on moderation in our consumer habits and consistency in saving for the future. Financial advisers and planning tools can help us balance consumption and saving over the life cycle, to ensure enough to support our children through school and ourselves into retirement years.

Research psychologists are also offering interesting cognitive guidance for those with adequate incomes but not adequate personal well-being. A recent “how-to-spend-it” guide by the Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert and his colleagues suggests eight specific principles to derive more happiness from income. First, buy experiences instead of things, since experiences (vacations, trips to the museum, concerts, dining out) offer long memories to savor. Second, and crucially, use our incomes to help others instead of ourselves, because as hypersocial animals, “almost anything we do to improve our connections with others tends to improve our happiness as well.” Third, buy many small pleasures instead of a few big ones, in essence slowing down to smell the roses. Fourth, buy less overpriced insurance (such as product warranties), because we adjust much better to adverse shocks than we suppose. Fifth, pay now and consume later, rather than buying now on the credit card and paying later. The anticipation of a future purchase will give us anticipatory joy, which the authors call a source of “free” happiness. Impatient purchases, on the other hand, give us fleeting benefits and long-term debt. Sixth, be attentive to the details of a purchase, since they may disproportionately affect the happiness of the experience. Seventh, beware of too much comparison shopping, since it can focus our attention on unimportant distinctions. Eighth, listen to others about what can bring happiness. They can add new and useful perspectives.

The second approach might be called reflective or meditative. We are swept along today by the pseudo-urgency contrived by PR and advertising. The advertisements scream at us to buy; the presidential press conferences scream at us to invade. The mechanisms are the same: propaganda is deployed to overcome our real interests by appeals to emotion, notably to fear or sensory pleasure. Buddhists have long developed and deployed a special tool for rebalancing needs and daily sensations: meditation. This kind of mind training aims to unplug the mind from the daily sensory overload to regain a balance with longer-term needs. A related step today should be to unplug from the TV, the mobile phone, and the Facebook page. Systematically unplugging to gain quiet time and composure is a necessary step toward breaking free of many of today’s most addictive compulsions.

The third approach is practice. As Aristotle rightly emphasized, we foster virtue by practicing virtue. Virtuous qualities are self-reinforcing, just as are harmful addictions. Acts of compassion awaken our desire to be even more compassionate. The cultivated practice of increased household saving, more leisure time, increased compassionate giving, and other acts of moderation build the courage, stamina, and pleasure of virtuous behavior.

**The Importance of Meaningful Work**

Nearly every study of happiness underscores the importance of meaningful work to personal well-being. Unemployment is the single largest factor in the public’s unhappiness and political restiveness. Yet America’s work environment has deteriorated notably over the past quarter century. Unemployment is high and stagnant; fear of job security is pervasive; corporate malfeasance is shockingly
high; and the mismatch of jobs and skills is becoming a national crisis and scandal. We need a new mindfulness of work to recover our bearings.

There are vast improvements possible in the quality of working life for average workers. American workers have little job security, no guaranteed vacation time, little flexibility regarding working hours, meager union protection, and no representation on the corporate boards regarding compensation, employment, work sharing, training, and other issues. Libertarians claim that any further worker representation in company decision making would destroy U.S. competitiveness. Yet throughout northern Europe, workers participate in corporate deliberations and often decision making, without a loss of productivity and with more creative solutions on job flexibility and vacation time.

Many European governments have also pioneered and demonstrated the efficacy of “active labor market policies,” which use government funding to match workers to jobs and to improve targeted job training for skills that are in demand. The U.S. labor market is increasingly mismatched. High-skilled workers find good jobs, while poorly skilled workers settle for poverty-level pay or fall out of the labor force altogether. The unemployment rate of college graduates is around 4 percent, but for workers with a high school education or less, the rate is three times that. Yet the United States is pushing more and more poorly trained young workers into the labor market and doing little to help them stay in school.

Knowledge in an Age of Complexity

Mindfulness of knowledge is an approach to life and science exemplified by the Dalai Lama. He has written and said on numerous occasions that his own belief system, Tibetan Buddhism, must always keep an open door to science and that all Buddhist doctrines are open to revision based on new scientific evidence. He has taken this pledge much further by sponsoring and attending many sessions of Buddhist monks and Western scientists, and these meetings are leading to new insights regarding the interface of neuroscience and human happiness. That kind of openness to science is urgently needed in America today.

Most Americans have little idea about the scientific underpinnings of their lives and of public debates. When they type on a computer and transmit an e-mail, they don’t realize that this seemingly straightforward action embodies some of the greatest scientific and technological discoveries of the twentieth century, including quantum mechanics, solid-state physics, optical physics, and computer science. Nor do they realize that the same laws of nature that underpin their e-mails underpin the science of climate change (e.g., the laws of quantum mechanics and optical physics that determine that carbon dioxide absorbs infrared radiation and thereby warms the planet). Nor do they realize that the basic physics of greenhouse gases, that carbon dioxide absorbs heat energy, predates the beginning of quantum mechanics by three-quarters of a century.

The fact is that technology is so effective and well packaged in our phones, computers, seed varieties, and elsewhere that Americans can remain scientifically illiterate, and sometimes even averse to science, while at the same time benefiting from the very advances in science and technology that they blithely deny. Perhaps if we had to understand our technologies in order to use them, we’d have a remarkable spurt in scientific knowledge. Short of that, we must convince our fellow citizens that knowledge of science, and expert knowledge more generally, is vital to our well-being and even survival. Fortunately, Americans overwhelmingly appreciate science even when they don’t cultivate their own knowledge of it. Eighty-four percent of Americans in a recent Pew survey “see science as having a mostly positive effect on society.”

The mindfulness of knowledge, therefore, properly begins with the recognition of the complexity of our economy and the need for scientific and technical expertise to help manage it. With 7 billion
people trying to gain or to maintain a foothold of prosperity on a crowded planet already under unprecedented ecological stress, only advanced technologies—such as high-yield food production, renewable energy sources, sophisticated recycling of industrial materials, and efficiency of resource use—can hope to cope. Perhaps with several billion fewer people on the planet, we could contemplate a reversion to simpler lives. Such hopes today, however appealing they are to some people, are anachronism. We will have to work hard and fast, and with the best technological tools, to achieve a planet that is prosperous, fair, and sustainable.

One well-meaning variant of antiscience is the illusion that we should revert to simpler ways: all-organic farming, local foods, and preindustrial knowledge. Yet these are illusions as great as denial of climate change. Preindustrial knowledge could support only around one in ten of the planet’s residents today. At this point in human history, we have no choice but to try to live effectively with advanced technologies and to understand them, govern them democratically, and try to ensure that they serve broad human purposes.

Mindfulness of knowledge assuredly does not mean leaving all matters to the experts. Experts do agree on many things, but they have no special talent to make critical choices for all of us when it comes to social values, risks, and priorities. They have their own biases and special interests, and certainly their own blind spots as well. Mindfulness of knowledge therefore requires not only respect for expertise but also respect for democratic governance. We need to identify new ways for the public to share in complex problem solving, advised by experts but with the citizenry given a central role in shaping its own future.

The federal government has done a notably poor job in recent years of encouraging an informed debate about complex policy options. The health care debate during 2009–2010, for example, was held largely behind closed doors. Aside from a few designated experts who participated in the backroom policy deliberations, America’s large and talented public health community mostly watched from the sidelines, as did the general public. Even for me, a professor in a major school of public health, the twists and turns of the deliberations were mostly baffling. So many powerful interests were at play that honest opinion was never spoken.

**Reviving Compassion**

The most difficult challenge in America today is mindfulness of others. The social safety net is frayed. The poor are suffering while the politicians discuss cutting the social safety net even further. Mindfulness of others is typically far stronger within an in-group than across racial or ethnic divides. Religious fundamentalists, for example, are more likely to harbor racist sentiments than are adherents to mainline religious denominations. Sociologists have long surmised that the greater racism among white evangelical Protestants reflects the stronger in-group bonds within fundamentalist religious families and communities. The problem has been exacerbated by the residential stratification of the society. As we have noted, the nation has increasingly sorted its communities according to race, class, and even political ideology. Any kind of realistic understanding of the lives of “different” others has suffered accordingly.

I have already discussed the American “poverty trap.” The result is a system of handouts, in which the poor are not helped enough to overcome poverty but just barely enough to survive in poverty. Thus, a society that disdains handouts ends up living by them rather than promoting true solutions with lasting value.

Instead of these endless meager handouts and ancillary high social costs (such as crime and punishment), a society truly mindful of others would address the needs of the poor in a way that attempts to end the poverty trap rather than simply to react to it. Yet in the short term that would require more public funding so that poor children of this generation could enjoy the benefits of a healthful diet, quality preschool and public school, and assured access to higher education.
enjoyed by the children of more affluent households. They would then be much more likely to grow up with higher skills and incomes, able to impart those same benefits to their own children. The vicious circle of intergenerational poverty could thereby be ended or at least greatly attenuated. The increased funding would prove to be temporary, mainly for this generation of poor children. Their children would not need the same degree of help. The long-term costs of ending poverty would almost surely be far lower than the status quo of simply “managing” poverty.

Mindfulness of others goes far beyond the question of alleviating poverty. Americans, we have seen, have retreated from the public square to the private space, often to watch TV for hours each day in individual bedrooms, not even as a family. We have become a country of strangers. And that estrangement is accompanied by falling trust. We are, in the words of the sociologist Bob Putnam, “hunkering down,” especially in the major cities, marked by ethnic groups that don’t know and don’t trust one another. Markets cannot overcome the distrust. Indeed, markets have facilitated the sorting. We need new social norms and more participatory political processes—such as greater democratic decision making within local communities—to get strangers talking and working together once again.

**Addressing the Ecological Overshoot**

Throughout human history, ethicists and gurus have appealed to humanity to respect nature as the irreplaceable font of life and indeed to understand human destiny as part of the web of life. When the vast majority of humanity lived as farmers, the vital role of nature was obvious. The harvesting of rainwater, the cleaning of irrigation canals, and the replenishment of soil nutrients all meant the difference between life and death. Natural climatic variations, such as prolonged droughts, often spelled the downfall of vast civiliza-

tions. Cities and entire regions had to be abandoned as life-giving waters dried up.

Our age is fundamentally different in two regards. First, today’s global society is much further removed from nature than in the past. More than half of humanity now lives in cities, cut off from the daily realities of nature. This is especially true of the world’s rich and powerful elites. Second, and even more dangerous, the human impacts on nature are for the first time in human history so great that they threaten the planet’s core biophysical functioning. We have reached, or will soon reach, dangerous thresholds of human activity that fundamentally threaten life on the planet.

Mindfulness of nature, therefore, is not a tree hugger’s plea but a practical imperative for twenty-first-century survival. Our peril is unprecedented, and human knowledge, values, and social institutions are far behind the curve. The global economy has suddenly become so large—$70 trillion a year and doubling in size roughly every twenty years—that the earth’s air, water, land, and climate are all under threat. Our global response to date has been so obtuse, so absurd, so shortsighted that it almost seems that humanity has a death wish. This ignorance and shortsightedness can lead us to disaster. Of course, more than a death wish has been at play; the greed of powerful vested interests has been far more consequential than public confusion and shortsightedness.

The American performance in the face of ecological dangers is especially sobering. Americans impose the highest per capita impact on the planet yet show the least regard for their actions. The UN climate change treaty was signed and ratified by the United States in 1992, but the U.S. Senate has refused to take even one small step since then in limiting America’s impact on climate. Many American senators are notoriously and aggressively ignorant or dismissive about the science, such as Oklahoma senator James Inhofe, who described human-induced climate change as the “greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.” Politicians may be knowledgeable but still deeply cynical, playing for campaign contributions
rather than the well-being of their grandchildren. They are ready to close their eyes to the looming disaster rather than earn their pay by explaining the tough realities and difficult policy choices to their constituents and to the Big Oil and Coal interests that fund their campaigns.

Unfortunately, the ecological threats continue to multiply, yet America is passive and resistant to action. Market forces, alas, will never solve these threats but only exacerbate them, until society, acting collectively at last, mindfully commits to creating a protective cordon around the threatened planet.

Responsibility Toward the Future

We can't address any of these problems if we can't think systematically about the future. And the future extends beyond the next election. The time horizon of public deliberation in America has shrunk to an unimaginably brief scale. When we need to build infrastructure, we aim for "shovel-ready" projects. Yet infrastructure worth building cannot be shovel-ready, a fact that Obama finally acknowledged in late 2010, after championing such projects in the 2009 stimulus package. Similarly, when we go to war, we aim for a short, brief "surge" to do the job. Repeatedly, and predictably, we fall woefully short of our objectives by choosing such short-term measures.

Mindfulness of the future therefore requires a special act of will: to take moral and practical ownership of the long-term consequences of our actions and to trace those consequences as carefully as possible into the far future. One great philosopher, Hans Jonas, has argued that we need a whole new ethic for the future, since never before has a human generation held in its hands the prosperity or ruin of the generations to come. We profess our commitment to "sustainability," that is, to ensuring that the future will be able to meet its needs with the knowledge, capital, and environment that we bequeath it. Yet we really don't know what sustainability entails as we continue to plunder the planet for resources and simply hope for the best.

Taking moral responsibility for the future, accepting the reality that our actions today will determine the fates of generations yet to live, is daunting enough. Taking practical responsibility is equally difficult. We are causing enormous disruptions to the planet, but we lack the ability to trace the implications of those disruptions with precision or high scientific confidence. "Futurology" was once mocked as pseudoscience. Yet now we must make it operational, at least within the boundaries of our understanding and capacity.

The sad truth about Washington today is that we lack serious institutions charged with carrying out systematic planning for the future. The Office of Management and Budget prepares federal budget proposals one year at a time. The U.S. Treasury has little capacity or mandate to undertake long-term economic strategy. There is no coordinating agency for public investments by the federal government, nor is there a planning agency, as in many other countries. Each department or agency manages the specific investment projects under its particular jurisdiction. Issues such as energy, climate, water, demographic change, and so forth are either neglected or chopped up into the work of several different parts of the government.

The United States has several important agencies that undertake high-quality analysis of global trends. The National Intelligence Council has prepared important studies about the global challenges that will face the United States to the year 2025, most notably Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World, in 2008. The findings were stark, suggesting that

- Climate change is likely to exacerbate resource scarcities.
- Demand is likely to outstrip easily available supplies (of strategic resources, including energy, food, and water) over the next decade or so.
- Lack of access to stable supplies of water is reaching critical proportions.
• The above trends suggest major discontinuities, shocks, and surprises.

What is most alarming, though, is that the government made such dire forecasts without recognizing the need for substantive policy responses. The alarm bells were sounded, but nobody responded and nobody seems to care.

This is an increasingly common pattern. Careful work is carried out by countless agencies and scientific academies, including the Institute of Medicine, the National Academy of Sciences, and the National Academy of Engineering, as well as leading research universities and think tanks. Yet the studies are ignored as soon as they are issued. Expertise is ignored, and the agenda in Washington remains dominated by what is convenient for politicians and the interest groups that support them. Difficult issues, such as climate change, water scarcity, and the transition of energy from fossil fuels, are kicked down the road to later years.

A new mindfulness of the future would take seriously the responsibility to link expert forecasts with appropriate policy actions. The government would be charged with regular reporting on the main future national challenges, with a time horizon of ten to twenty years. Such reports, by the National Intelligence Council or other agencies, would then be discussed and debated by the president and Congress. The White House would be required to issue a policy paper in response, and Congress would be charged with taking up that policy paper. A cycle of deliberation and policy design would ensue, and the future would be viewed with the moral and political seriousness that it requires.

**Politics as Moral Responsibility**

Mindfulness of politics is needed to provide an antidote to the dead end of corporatocracy. Americans must regain a proper understand-

ing of the complementary and balanced roles of government and the marketplace. Though we support the crucial role of private businesses in the market economy, we must also insist that powerful corporations stop their relentless lobbying and propagandizing so that society can address serious problems on the basis of evidence, ethics, and long-term plans.

Our politics will work again when we overcome three crises. The first is ideological, the mistaken belief that free markets alone can solve our economic problems. Only markets and government operating as complementary pillars of the economy can produce the prosperity and fairness that we seek.

The second is institutional, involving the political role of the large corporations. We must maintain a judicious view. Our major corporations are invaluable to society as highly sophisticated organizations that manage large-scale, technologically advanced operations all over the world. Yet they have become a threat to society by using their lobbying power to dictate the terms of legislation and regulations. The license to operate as a company does not include a license to pollute our politics.

The third is moral, concerning the nature of modern democracy itself. In America today, there is little systematic public deliberation, and the public's views are rarely taken seriously in the political process. One key policy decision after another is adopted behind the backs of the public, often in direct contradiction to public opinion. We need to return to a spirit of true deliberation at all levels of society, one that reconceives politics as honest group problem solving, grounded in mutual respect and shared values.

**Toward a Global Ethic**

The eighth step toward economic recovery is mindfulness of the world, and most importantly the recognition that today's world is deeply interconnected economically and socially, albeit with con-
siderable discord and confusion. No significant economic trend in any part of the world leaves the rest of the world untouched. The 2008 Wall Street crisis quickly percolated to all parts of the world economy. AIDS and the H1N1 flu virus similarly spread quickly around the world. An El Niño fluctuation in the Pacific climate causes weather disturbances worldwide, and these in turn trigger sharp movements in global food prices, such as the surge in grain prices in 2010.

Just as we’ve created a national economy riddled with advertising and propaganda that threaten our well-being, we’ve created a globalized economy that lacks the necessary cooperation to keep it stable and peaceful. The combination of unprecedented economic interconnectedness on the one hand, and the deep distrust across national and regional borders on the other, may be the defining paradox of the world economy today. Many of our major global problems—climate change, global population growth, mass migration, regional conflicts, and financial regulation—will require a much higher level of political cooperation among the world’s major powers than we have so far achieved. Without sufficient trust across national borders, the growing global competition over increasingly scarce resources could easily turn into great power confrontations. Without trust, there is little chance for the coordinated global actions needed to fight poverty, hunger, and disease. Without trust, governments will be at the mercy of footloose global corporations that move their money to tax havens around the planet and pressure governments to lower tax rates, labor standards, environmental controls, and financial regulations. Mindfulness of the world therefore really amounts to a new readiness to adopt global norms of good behavior that aim to protect poor countries as well as the rich, weak countries as well as the powerful.

The great theologian Hans Küng has undertaken a profound effort during the past quarter century to identify a global economic ethic based on the world’s leading religions. Küng found that diverse religious traditions share fundamental ethical standards regarding economic life and behavior, which can enable the world to identify and embrace a truly global economic ethic. According to Küng, the common thread of conviction is the Principle of Humanity: “Being human must be the ethical yardstick for all economic action.” The economy should fulfill the basic needs of human beings “so that they can live in dignity.” From this basic humanistic principle, Küng identified several ethical themes with universal standing: the importance of respect and tolerance for others; the right to life and its development; sustainable treatment of the natural environment; the rule of law; distributive justice and solidarity; the essential values of truthfulness, honesty, and reliability; and the core value of mutual esteem.

Küng’s findings, and their recent embrace by many other ethicists, are heartening. They show us the way to harness global diversity yet find common touchstones across what to some appear to be impenetrable divides. They give us the confidence to envision economics not only in technical terms but also as part of a global human framework guided by humane principles. The global market economy must remain guided by humane purposes and not be regarded as an end in itself.

Most important, the Principle of Humanity bids us to respect one another through a renewed and heightened appreciation of our common fate as human beings and our common hope for dignity, solidarity, and sustainability. Küng’s studies of the world’s religious traditions reaffirm the key point that what unites humanity is vastly more important than whatever might divide us. They also remind me of the eloquence of President John F. Kennedy in his remarkable search for peace in the year after the Cuban missile crisis, the final year of his life. Kennedy reminded us that

Across the gulfs and barriers that now divide us, we must remember that there are no permanent enemies. Hostility today
is a fact, but it is not a ruling law. The supreme reality of our
time is our indivisibility as children of God and our common
vulnerability on this planet.  

How, then, to find the path to peace? Kennedy was ever pragmatic
and idealistic at the same time:

So, let us not be blind to our differences—but let us also direct
attention to our common interests and to means by which those
differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end our differ-
ences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.
For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that
we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air.
We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.

Those words, and the powerful vision behind them, led to the
signing of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in the summer of
1963, which helped to pull the world from the nuclear abyss. Today’s
sources of tension—terrorism, instability, extreme poverty, climate
change, hunger, and shifting global power—may be different from
before, but the path to peace through mindfulness of the world,
built on common interests and mutual respect, remains the same as
in Kennedy’s time.

Personal and Civic Virtue as an Approach to Life

The mindful society is not a specific plan but rather an approach to
life and the economy. It calls on each of us to strive to be virtuous,
both in our personal behavior (regarding saving, thrift, and control
of our self-destructive cravings) and in our social behavior as citi-
zens and members of powerful organizations, whether universities
or businesses. Our current hyperconsumerism on a personal level
and corporatocracy on a social level have carried us into a danger
zone. We have become like the rats that press a lever for instant
pleasure, courting exhaustion and ultimately starvation. We have
created a nation of remarkable wealth and productivity, yet one that
leaves its impoverished citizens in degrading life conditions and al-
most completely ignores the suffering of the world’s poorest people.
We have created a kind of mass addiction to consumerism, relent-
less advertising, insidious lobbying, and national politics gutted of
serious public deliberation.

The mindful society, with its eight areas of mindfulness—toward
self, work, knowledge, others, nature, the future, politics, and the
world—aims to help us refashion our personal priorities as well as
our social institutions, so that the economy can once again serve
the ultimate purpose of human happiness. By itself, mindfulness
will not end our self-destructive consumer addictions or the politi-
cal bind of corporatocracy. But it will open the way to a reenergized,
virtuous citizenry, one that is ready to rebuild American democracy
and put it back into the hands of the people.