

INTRODUCTION



YOU AND I MAY NOT KNOW EACH OTHER, BUT I SUSPECT THERE ARE SOME PROBLEMS that we share. Perhaps we can do better at solving those problems if we work together.

We live in an era of impending mutual destruction. In 1946, following the first explosion of an atom bomb, Albert Einstein warned, “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.”¹ The rapid acceleration of global warming and other environmental threats in the early twenty-first century—aggravated by ruinous global economic war of all against all—intensified fears for human survival. Sixty years after Einstein’s prophesy, the astrophysicist Stephen Hawking warned, “Life on Earth is at the ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster,” such as “sudden global warming” and “nuclear war.”² Yet the drift Einstein warned of continues unabated. The Doomsday Clock marking the approach of human self-destruction continues to hover close to midnight, now driven not only by the threat of nuclear holocaust but also by human-induced climate change and the unknown unknowns of new technologies.³

A quarter of a century ago, when “Save the Whales!” was a popular slogan, a *New Yorker* cartoon showed one whale asking another, “But can they save themselves?” In the early twenty-first century, with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the burgeoning consequences of climate change, experts and ordinary people alike are asking each other whether we humans can save ourselves from the threats we have created.

I doubt there is any way we can save ourselves for long as individuals or as separate social groups. Today, self-preservation depends on common preservation—cooperation in service of our mutual well-being. For any of us to survive, we must preserve the conditions of each other’s existence.

Our impending doom is often met with denial or despair. It seems to be driven by forces beyond human control, and there appears little we can do to avert it. Common preservation seems little more than a distant and impossible dream.

This book is the story of a lifelong search for the means of common preservation. It traces my attempt, over the course of half a century, to discover how to understand, and how to nourish, common preservation. It recounts my own experience, but it does so to illuminate how we might be better able to act in common to address the problems we share in common.

As a child I discovered that the world was full of problems that affected my life. In my family's pantry there hung a poster headed "What to Do in the Event of Nuclear Attack," and I became aware at an early age that I and the rest of the world might be destroyed in a nuclear conflagration. Some members of my family were victims of Nazi anti-Semitism and others were subject to anti-Semitism in the United States. Growing up in the McCarthy era I experienced the fear generated by political repression. In the communities in which I lived I discovered, hidden away from public view, the realities of poverty and racial discrimination. I saw that many people around me lived lives of quiet desperation; in order to survive, they were forced to spend most of their waking hours in work they found oppressive, that sickened them physically and mentally, and from which they had little chance of escape. I saw, smelled, and breathed the degradation of the natural environment, and I heard warnings that human beings were threatening the basic environmental conditions on which human life depends.

Initially I felt powerless in the face of these problems. They seemed like a cruel fate that I could do nothing to change. But I gradually realized that, just as I experienced these problems, so did many other people. Maybe if we acted together to deal with them we could make changes that we couldn't make alone.

People are often passive and isolated in the face of problems they can't solve. But at times, sometimes quite unexpectedly, they develop new ways to act in concert to advance shared interests. The emergence of a movement for global economic justice—exemplified by the "Battle of Seattle" that shut down the 1999 global extravaganza of the World Trade Organization (WTO)—provides a widely noted example of such a development. So does the 2011 "Arab Spring." So do the massive strikes, general strikes, and demonstrations in Greece, Poland, Italy, Latvia, Ireland, Britain, Spain, and nearly every other European nation, as well as transnational demonstrations at European Union headquarters in Brussels, protesting layoffs, benefits cuts, rising student fees, and other austerity measures.

The emergence of a multifaceted worldwide movement to protect the earth's climate from global warming represents a new form of concerted action for common preservation. While its extent and success remain to be seen, it has already produced a global day of action with fifty-two hundred rallies from Mt. Everest to the Great Barrier Reef in what CNN called "the most widespread day of political action on the planet."⁴

People turn to new strategies such as these when the problems they face prove difficult to solve either through individual action or through the patterns prescribed by established institutions. Those new strategies often take the form of social movements.

Sometimes people who appear powerless and stymied have used social movements to transform the problems they face—and history and society as well. The US sit-down strikes of the 1930s forced US corporations to recognize and negotiate with the representatives of their employees. The civil disobedience campaigns led by Gandhi won Indians independence from Britain. The civil rights movement of the 1960s gained the abolition of legalized racial segregation in the American South. The Solidarity movement and its general strikes led to the fall of Communism in Poland and helped bring about its demise throughout Eastern Europe and the USSR. The Arab Spring overthrew dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt and reshaped the power configuration of the Middle East.

For half a century I have been a participant in social movements; for forty years I have been studying and writing about their history and prospects. This book, which I've been working on since the early 1970s, tries to extract from what I've experienced and studied something useful for people trying to solve problems through new common preservations. It takes the form of a personal narrative: the story of my track through the history and experience of such movements. My hope is to produce something that is useful for countering the threat of mutual destruction today.

Common Preservation

While common preservation is as old as or older than our species, it is acquiring a new significance at a time when we are creating the conditions for our own self-extinction, whether through the bang of a nuclear holocaust or the whimper of an expiring ecosphere.

No individual or restricted group can solve such collective problems alone. None of us can count on survival, let alone well-being, for ourselves and those we care about, unless we act together to transform the current patterns of human life. Self-preservation for individuals and groups can now only be ensured through common preservation of our species and its environment as a whole.

I use the phrase common preservation to denote a strategy in which people try to solve their problems by meeting each others' needs rather than exclusively their own. I borrowed the phrase from the seventeenth century English Digger Gerrard Winstanley.

In the midst of the English revolution the impoverished Diggers had formed self-governing work teams, occupied uncultivated lands, and begun producing

food for their communities. Winstanley justified this action on the principle of common preservation, the “principle in every one to seek the good of others, as himself.”

Winstanley contrasted common preservation to self-preservation, in which those in power “seek their own Preservation, Ease, Honor, Riches, and Freedom in the Earth.” Such self-preservation was “the root of the Tree Tyranny, and the Law of Unrighteousness, and all particular Kingly Laws found out by covetous Policy to enslave one brother to another, whereby bondage, tears, sorrows and poverty are brought upon many men.” This tyranny is “the cause of all wars and troubles.”⁵

Winstanley interpreted common preservation in the religious idiom of his time. But, as he himself asserted, the need for common preservation, and the means for establishing it, don’t require religious revelation; they can be found out “by experience.” Adam and his family followed the principle of common preservation out of the “the law of necessity”: that “the Earth should be planted for the common preservation and peace of his household.” Indeed, such necessity was the root of “all particular Laws found out by experience” that provide for common preservation. Today, whatever our differing beliefs, our own experience is teaching us the necessity for common preservation.

Common preservation is more than coordination, cooperation, or collaboration. Such forms of joint action involve working together, but the result may be to the benefit of some and to the detriment of others. Slaves may cooperate to produce their own fetters; scientists and workers may collaborate to produce the nuclear weapons that threaten to destroy their civilization; corporations may hire workers whose joint labor produces the greenhouse gases that are destroying their biosphere. Common preservation is more than the biological phenomenon of symbiosis, which can take the form of a parasitism that harms one of its partners. Common preservation is not just action in concert, but action in concert for mutual benefit.

Common preservation and self-preservation represent alternative strategies. I don’t advocate, or expect, that common preservation will entirely supplant self-preservation—indeed, both in biology and in human society they are often intertwined and even complementary. But when self-preservation generates mutual destruction it is futile and indefensible; it leads to the annihilation rather than the self-preservation of those who pursue it.

Common preservation—often intermingled with more antagonistic relationships—is ubiquitous in human life. From the loving interchanges of parent and child to the international treaties limiting nuclear testing, people use common preservation at many different scales to meet their needs and realize their ends.

Throughout this book I investigate how common preservations come about and why they can make a difference. They often seem to be related to what I

call an “ecological shift”—like the shift in worldview from isolated to interdependent organisms introduced by the science of ecology—in which people come to recognize apparently separate, independent entities as part of larger wholes. It often involves the self-organization of people who have been isolated or even antagonistic. And it often overcomes powerlessness by making use of various forms of “people power” based on a refusal to obey those currently in charge.

In an era of mutual destruction, common preservation is not just desirable; it is the condition of our survival.

A Human Preservation Movement?

If common preservation is today the necessary condition for our self-preservation, how do we make it happen? How can we change from a world of mutual destruction to one based on common preservation?

The obstacles to such a transformation are surely sufficient to evoke despair—and sufficient to have until now prevented us from taking the obvious steps to eliminate the threats to our existence. People rarely exercise effective control of their own governments; international institutions are a fragile and often ineffective barrier to actions that threaten survival; superpowers dominate others at will; and corporations pollute the environment and dominate governments with little restraint. Powerful interests oppose effective protections for human survival at local, national, and transnational levels. Different social groups who share an interest in mutual survival are also divided by conflicting interests. People fear that collective action will end up generating disorder and domination.

This book explores the possibility that such obstacles might be overcome through a human preservation movement specifically targeted against the threats to human survival. Such a movement could be powerful because it would represent the most profound common interests of individuals and groups. Addressing the apparently disparate issues of nuclear proliferation, global warming, economic devastation, social injustice, and other threats as part of the broader problem of ensuring human survival could provide a basis for the daunting transformations needed to end such threats. Many of the personal and historical experiences I present in the book were chosen to provide background for how such a movement might arise and how it might do its work.

My Story

In this book I tell what I’ve learned about creating new common preservations by telling my own story.

Part 1, “Discovering Social Problems,” starts the story off with my childhood in the United States in the 1950s. My awareness of social problems was no doubt influenced by the fact that my parents were concerned with peace, racial justice, and other social issues. But it also reflected the real world I saw around me—the black slums I discovered in my pleasant middle-class hometown, for example, and my father’s bouts of depression and migraine headaches that we all associated with work-related stress.

In early adolescence I became active first in the then-burgeoning nuclear disarmament movement, then in the civil rights, student, and other movements. Much of my late adolescence was devoted to the radical student movement and the movement against the Vietnam War. Part 2, “Discovering Social Movements,” tells what I learned from what are often called the movements of the 1960s.

I found in social movements an alternative to the experience of individual powerlessness in the face of social problems. But I did not feel that the programs and practices of the movements in which I participated were adequate. So I began a still-continuing exploration of the history of social movements and of various ideas about how they do, or should, go about making change.

I spent much of the 1970s and 1980s studying working-class movements. I wrote or cowrote several books including *Strike!*, *Common Sense for Hard Times*, *Root & Branch: The Rise of the Workers’ Movements*, and *Brass Valley: The Story of Working People’s Lives and Struggles in an American Industrial Region*. Part 3, “Discovering Workers Power,” tells what I learned from the history of working-class movements.

Starting in the 1980s I became increasingly preoccupied with what is now known as economic globalization and the movements that developed to counter it. I collaborated on three books on the subject: *Global Visions*, *Global Village or Global Pillage*, and *Globalization from Below*. Part 4, “Discovering Globalization from Below,” shows how I used the ways of thinking about common preservation I was developing to grapple with the emerging phenomenon of economic globalization and the countering movements I called globalization from below.

In Part 5, “Human Preservation,” I use my experience and study of social movements and social change to sketch what a human survival movement to counter today’s threats of mutual destruction might be like, how it might emerge, and what it might try to do.

A brief conclusion sums up what I think this story means.

Many of the materials discussed throughout the book are available on my website, www.jeremybrecher.org.

I am currently completing a companion volume that recounts my effort to develop a fuller conceptualization of how to understand and nourish common preservation. While the application of that method is illustrated throughout *Save the Humans?*, the companion volume will provide an in-depth look at its

development, codify it, and show more explicitly how it can be used to interpret and encourage the emergence of common preservation.

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There are few human experiences more satisfying than to participate with others who have been divided and oppressed when they break out into action to change their conditions of life. There are few things more exciting than to see people rise up and liberate themselves from outrageous oppression. There are few things more joyous than overcoming that which divides you from other people and forging new bonds of mutual support. There can be few things as sustaining as a life of participation with others in the effort to make a better world.

I have had the privilege of experiencing all of these. Together they gave rise to another passion, one that has driven and sustained me all of my life. That is a passion to find, improve, and share ways of thinking that people can use to act in concert to improve the world for themselves and each other. While I hope anyone who is curious about social movements and social change will find this book of interest, it is written especially for those who share that passion. For those who hunger and thirst after alternatives to human self-destruction, this book aims to provide food and drink.