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## Point #3: Don't Be A Dick

You'd think this would be a pretty short chapter, right? As a general rule, "don't be a dick" is up there with wash your hands after you poop. No matter who you are or where you're from, you just know it instinctively. Don't be a dick is what helps societies function (although, yes, its opposite—be the biggest dick—has caused more than its fair share of problems).

But, alas! Even in the bastion that should be saving the planet, we have had folks breaking this simplest of tenets for years. You might be asking yourself, "how could someone be a dick if they're trying to do something good?" That's because, like the heart of a Shakespearean drama, not everyone's intentions are true.

To start, let me draw back the curtain on a seldom-seen world. This is the world of the altruist, namely those working in the non-governmental sector. These are the NGO do-gooders, the seeming face of the environmental campaign. If you live in any big city around the world, you'll probably know them best as those people in blue shirts you try to avoid while walking down the sidewalk. Sure, you'd love to help them save the children or restore the forests, but you've got to get to work! They wander around Fifth Avenue or Oxford Circus with their clipboards, asking if you have just one minute of your time to help save the Earth. Like the best Olympic bobsledder, you duck and weave to keep out of earshot. Surely, the person behind you will donate, right? Yeah... you're probably right because, as history has shown, there's a sucker born every minute.

What? These people are hustling every day to make the world a better place. How could you say they're doing anything but good? Yeah, I'm sure these kids got up and put on their very brightest smiles to change the world. Their purposes were pure. Unfortunately, non-governmental organizations are businesses like any other. And like any business, the higher you go up the food chain the less altruistic things become. No matter what business someone is running, there is always KPI #1: keep the business alive.

For the world's large NGOs, things are the same. The mission of the organization might be different from your typical Fortune 500, but the purpose is similar. To stay in business, NGOs have developed to become just as cutthroat as their private-sector siblings. In fact, out

of all the people, businesses, and organizations doing their part to make the world a better place, NGOs are probably the worst of the bunch. Those of us in the sustainability space have known for years just how much they are wolves dressed in sheep's' clothing.

To show you how, let's go back to that example of the campaigners on the streets. When I first moved to New York City in the winter of 2004 for grad school, I had all intentions of changing the world and making my mark on the City. Like just about every young person who moves there, though, I was wholly and entirely unprepared. I had my acceptance letter to the City University of New York (CUNY) Grad Center and an e-mail from someone on Craigslist saying they had a room ready for me in Queens. School started in about a week, so in the meantime, I roamed the City looking for a part-time job. Coming from sunny Southern California, it was quite a shock to the system wandering up and down the streets, in and out of high rises, in the middle of one of New York's coldest winters. I wasn't fashionable enough to work retail, but too arrogant to wait tables. Trawling through Craigslist (hey, it was 2004!) on a particularly bone-chilling afternoon, I came across an ad that immediately struck me as pure job-search gold. It went something like this:

Want to make the world a better place?  
Do you care deeply about the environment?  
Work with New York's largest environmental group!

**CLIMATE EMERGENCY! ACTIVISTS NEEDED!**

Climate change is the most urgent issue of our time. With climate deniers firmly in control of national policies, it will be up to the states to hold corporate polluters accountable. New York must lead the way.

XXX (although I'd love to name and shame, the last thing I want is a lawsuit on my hands. Therefore, dear reader, you'll have to look up the names of these organizations yourself) is looking for motivated students seeking full-time, part-time, and permanent positions.

Our training program is the best around. You'll learn from experts who have dozens of years of experience. We'll give you all the skills you need to succeed!

We provide medical, dental, vision, paid vacation, sick days, holidays, and leave. Advancement and travel opportunities are available, too.

Build your resume, make friends, earn up to \$700 per week, and help build a movement to stop climate change and win a renewable energy future.

Wow! This was exactly the type of job I was looking for. I could really put my skills and passions to good use. Plus... look at all the benefits. Screw working at Nordstrom, I was going to start making a real difference for the future (and my wallet).

I should have started suspecting something when a recruiter called me within 20 minutes of submitting my CV. The recruiter seemed almost too happy to have me come on board. I thought to myself this was just enthusiasm. It turned out to be something more sinister. Before she hung up, I was reminded to bring a coat and report to work the next day.

The following afternoon, I ended up in some small suite at the Hotel Pennsylvania across from Madison Square Garden. There, I met up with a ragtag group of mostly younger college students. Our dear leader, the person in charge, couldn't have been more than 22 years old. As I came to quickly learn, seniority mattered. This guy just seemed to have outlasted all the others before him.

A quick tour of the 300 square foot office and a couple of signatures later, we were ready to begin our shift. Without a lick of training, the next thing I knew I was on the New Jersey

Transit train headed for the upmarket communities of Orange and Montclair. You might recognize these picturesque towns as they featured prominently in the Emmy-award winning documentary series, *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*. That's right. We were headed straight for the belly of the money-laden beast.

Three days into my New York experience, though, I didn't know any of this. I was just excited to be seeing something different, with new friends, earning what I thought would be a steady paycheck.

The 45-minute train ride served as the scene of my induction. Hardly the best training program around, I thought to myself. But this was New York City, center of the proverbial universe. These people must know what they're doing. This must just be how things are done in the big city.

On that short trip, I was given a script from which to read and a clipboard for signatures. My buddy told me how a typical shift worked and reassured me most learning would be done on the job. They regaled me with tales of their first day and how it all seemed a bit weird to them too. Nothing to worry about! This was going to be an amazing, impactful way to put my mark on the world. We were really at the forefront of change and rah, rah, rah.

Awrrange!!! (There was still a novelty to the brash New Jersey accent). Stepping off the train onto the platform, wind and sleet immediately slapped me in the face. It was a rude awakening, but I assumed we'd be back in an office campaigning soon enough. I was so wrong. We exited the station and walked about a half-mile to a row of exquisite stone mansions. The streets were covered in snow. Trees were bare. Wind was whistling. To my surprise, this was our office for the day. It was here my buddy (now a term not so endearing) told me about the organization's commission structure. I'd earn a portion of every check I collected that afternoon. That's right. We weren't collecting signatures from concerned citizens. No, we had to convince them to hand over their (I assume) legitimate, hard-earned money for a cause they couldn't be more removed from.

To make things just that much more stressful, I had a target. After a full 45 minutes of training and an October surprise, I was now going to be penalized if I couldn't do a good job.

And yet, I had convinced myself this was all part of doing my bit for the planet. If Buddhist monks could set themselves on fire for what they believed in, what was a little frostbite?

Almost every door I knocked on did open and, to their credit, most people welcomed me in. Can you imagine? Bringing a total stranger in off the streets in this day and age? Maybe I was lucky enough to find a street full of Jersey's best Christians. For this, I was thankful.

Shaking and nervous, I tried my best to ad-lib off the script I had been given. My passion for the environment certainly showed through. As with anything, the more passionate you are about something the more people tend to believe in you and your cause. Low and behold, people actually listened, signed my petition, and opened their wallets. Again, I was a total stranger. Checks for hundreds of dollars, bills in twenties and fifties, and plenty of hot chocolate started to flow my way. This organization seemed to know *The Secret* before it was a thing.

Meeting back up with my buddy later on that afternoon, he asked how everything had gone. I was so excited to report back my success and he seemed to echo this in his performance for the day. Frozen and tired, we made our way back to the train station for the journey home. I remember being over the moon with everything, unable to nod off. Crossing Eighth Avenue back to the Hotel Pennsylvania suite, we must have been the last group to return for the evening. With a perturbed look on his face, since we were clearly cutting into his evening routine, our dear leader greedily took the envelopes of checks and cash from us. He shoo-ed us away, letting us know we did a great job for the world. One of the most memorable things about him was his strange habit of encouraging us to go out and celebrate

with a warm shawarma. This was the first time I heard him utter that ridiculous statement, but it wouldn't be the last.

Over the next several months, I continued to give my time and effort to the cause. Whether it was going door-to-door in upmarket areas of Jersey or Long Island or canvassing the streets of Soho and the Upper East Side, I felt like a warrior for the Earth. What I didn't feel was a sense of remuneration for my service in her majesty's army. While my first day on the job certainly was a windfall, most days weren't so great. Sometimes, we'd struggle to get a single donation. It was then I truly understood the meaning of the term "up to" when talking about salary. I could certainly earn "up to" \$1,000 a week. I could also certainly earn "less than" anywhere close to that much. If memory serves, I was bringing in just a couple hundred dollars per week consistently. According to *Independent Sector*, though, the estimated value of a volunteer is US\$25.43 an hour.<sup>1</sup> That means I should have been making close to \$1,000 a week as the advertisement promised. Maybe that's how they were fudging their numbers.

On days where we would miss our target, the dear leader would go into a tirade about how the Earth needed us more than ever and we had let her down. He didn't seem to fancy shawarma on these days. I came to discover his outward care for the Earth had a more intrinsic motivation. His salary was directly correlated to how much each of us brought in. Ponder that for a second. For every check a concerned citizen wrote, thinking the money was going to save the trees or the polar bears, most of it was spent on overheads like salaries, train reimbursements, and middle eastern cuisine. That's right. Your money was going to fund the organization itself, not to save the world as you thought.

And this is how most, if not all, NGOs work. They are money-hungry animals, ever on the search for their next feed. NGOs can only be successful if they have the funding to "make a difference." It has probably been this way from the beginning of time. That prehistoric canvasser with a stone tablet, the ancient Egyptian trying to get signatures on their papyrus scroll, or the Mandarin eliciting cowrie donations for a new protective wall would have experienced the same issues with funding. There is so much to do, but not enough money to go around.

Take Africa, as an example. A heartland of donated time and money, Sub-Saharan Africa receives approximately US\$56 billion in official development assistance each year, down from a 2014 peak of US\$135 billion annually in loans, foreign investment, and development aid.<sup>2</sup> How far has that money gone to help the region "lift itself out of poverty" as I'm sure many slick campaign brochures advertise? While the money might make it to bank accounts of aid organizations, it probably doesn't go much further.

That makes even the best of us greedy and tribal. There are more non-profit groups today than you can shake a stick at. According to the US State Department, there are approximately 1.5 million registered NGOs in the United States alone. Non-Profit Action places this number at 10 million worldwide.<sup>3</sup> These don't even count governmental, intergovernmental, and private-sector agencies trying to do their part as well. Since we're on a roll, why don't we look at a few other interesting stats about NGOs?

- In India, there is one NGO for every 400 people.
- Individuals donate over US\$1.5 billion to charities every year.
- Three out of four employees in the NGO sector are female, but the majority of leadership positions are held by men.
- The average Canadian donates close to US\$500 per year to charities.
- 80 percent of citizens worldwide believe NGOs are an easy way to get involved.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, for some reason budgets seem to constantly run thin. That means every time some donor opens up their coffers, all hell breaks loose. Clamoring and clawing for this new round of funding, NGOs become as cutthroat as a hooker working the piers. In this struggle for survival, there's no room for feelings.

They've become dicks to each other. These groups find any little fault to undercut reputations of competitors when they should be supporting the great work each says they do. I mean, these folks are all supposed to be on the same team, right? Why, then, do they need to operate in little fiefdoms? What benefit is there in dividing up pieces of a puzzle by starting another organization that's just going to have to fight for funding? What's worse, there are real impacts on non-financial areas like, you know, actual people. Stephen Browne, founder of the Future United National Development System, often recalls an anecdote of what happens when there are too many cooks and not enough chefs. The story comes from Kenya, where "...18 different types of water pump had been provided by 18 different donors. Each required a different instruction manual and set of spare parts."<sup>5</sup> Way to go NGOs! That's real change in the making.

In a perfect world, people with shared interests would come together to form a singular organization. This would not only help alleviate some of the funding issues we see in the space, but also create a stronger force for change. Instead of hundreds of five-person NGOs vying for limited airtime, you'd have smaller numbers of groups with exponentially larger numbers of people starting conversations with the powers that be. There is power in numbers. Unfortunately, this fact is something the NGO world still seems to not understand.

And that's why they put such a preference on bringing in the young and altruistic. In Kenya, for example, 80 percent of NGO workers are under the age of 24.<sup>6</sup> These segments not only have the energy, drive, and resilience required in non-profit jobs, but also the naiveté to work long hours for little (or no) pay. It's a win-win situation, at least for the organization. You have people who can be the loudest, but who might feel inauthentic asking to be compensated fairly for their voices. There will always be a new group of students ready to do their part when the current group ages out, gets tired, or starts to catch on to the game.

That's exactly what happens, too. For me, it took about three months before I finally gave in. Maybe I would have lasted a bit longer if I had joined in the warmer months of spring. As it was, there weren't enough layers of clothing to stand outside in the cold for hours on end without starting to resent your choices in life. This was New York City and I was spending it bundled up like that kid in *A Christmas Story*, trying to convince jaded people to part with their cash. It was thankless but enlightening.

## **Life in the Ivory Tower**

In the Netflix show, *Altered Carbon* (2018),<sup>7</sup> a very Asian-looking, dystopian future is split (unsurprisingly) between the haves and the have nots. Nearly 400 years from now, humanity has finally been able to conquer death using technology. We have developed cortical stacks; small devices placed in the vertebrae to collect and store our consciousness. When the outmoded physical body—the sleeve—dies, one can have their stack removed and placed inside a new sleeve. Billed as the ultimate solution over death, mankind quickly found a way to commodify. It's amazing that even in such an advanced future, we still refuse to embrace equality. However, I digress.

On one side of the spectrum, you have the everyday plebs going about their business pretty much the same way we do today. They have the same problems, concerns, and dramas as us, except they're getting around in flying cars and have a lot more digital advertising to contend with. Sure, the thought of everlasting life is appealing. The execution, however,

leaves a lot to be desired. Although sleeves are available for most of the rank and file given bodies still die in the future, there's no guarantee you're going to want the body you're given. Options are pretty much left up to chance. A petite grandmother in this life? You may very well end up in a 300-pound man's body in the next. Olympian today. Bedridden tomorrow.

Quite literally sitting over this side of humanity are the Meths. No, this isn't a reference to the copious amounts of drugs they'd invariably do given that they don't have to worry about money or physical decay. It's a nod to the Biblical Methuselah from the Book of Genesis. Contrary to all manner of scientific evidence or common sense, people believe the old Methuselah lived to be 969 years old.<sup>8</sup> That would make him (at least up until the future invention of stacks) the oldest human to have ever lived. The Meths in *Altered Carbon* are the upper class, able to afford the best sleeves on the market. They can also have their memories and consciousness uploaded to the cloud, or whatever they're calling it in this futuristic depiction. This final point is important. Although mankind has been able to overcome physical death, the destruction of one's stack cannot be reversed. One is only considered totally deceased once their stack is gone. They even call it "real death."

As with vampires, Meths are able to accumulate quite a bit of wealth given their retirement age is, well, non-existent. And, like the rich and famous today, the first thing most Meths decide to do with all that money is get the hell out of dodge. Except for Meths, it's not a home in the suburbs, a condo near the sea, or a villa in the mountains they're after. In this futuristic world, Meths head to the sky. They build homes which float miles above the fray of normal life. Sun pours through floor-to-ceiling windows, perfectly manicured lawns allow for plenty of space to play, and you're always just a stone's throw from the best schools Bay City has to offer. Clad in blinding white and gold, Meths have managed to build for themselves ivory towers.

Why talk about a futuristic world which, in all likelihood as things stand today, we're not on a trajectory to even reach? Because it relates quite well to the next group of dicks I want to talk about: academics. Like the Meths, modern-day academics sit in their figurative ivory towers. From this vantage point, they can pass down judgment on others while remaining at an arm's length from the problems they purport to solve. This has the added benefit of ensuring they don't get the oversized sleeves of their academic robes dirty.

To be clear, I'm not talking about all academics. There are plenty of academics all over the world who have done amazing things at furthering the cause of a sustainable future. I'm talking more about the quintessential form of academic thinking. That means we shouldn't just be looking for culprits hidden amongst co-eds in the quad. We can find these people in all manner of places, from the halls of power to the board room and everywhere in between. They certainly like to talk a lot, and this is likely the only exercise they get. That's because with all the jaw flapping there's very little time left to get out and take action.

These people, somewhere along the line, have lost their heart.

Of course, many of us begin to take a different approach as we get older. We might replace a Greenpeace-type attack on whaling ships with talking our way to a brighter future. Whether it's a gray-bearded intellectual or a smartly dressed diplomat, people seem to think these are the folks making a difference.

They're not.

How can you make a difference if you really don't know what's going on?

How can you make a difference if you're not really making anything at all?

Academics and their ilk sit around air-conditioned conference rooms talking about the state of the world. Many take private jets to get to such destitute places as Aspen or Davos. Like the Meths, they sup on sumptuous meals and drink only the finest wines. Sitting on panels and giving keynote presentations to audiences more concerned with business deals

than mass extinction, these imposters may have the money to solve our issues but lack the guts to do anything about it. How do I know this? Well... I used to be one.

My professional career started at the United Nations. It had been my dream to work at this rarified organization, something I had wanted all through high school, university, and grad school. Luckily, I was able to be at the proverbial right place at the right time and landed a job at the Secretariat. Over time I was promoted, eventually landing in the non-descript Department of General Assembly and Conference Management. My role was to work with other UN staff, ambassadors, and delegates to set agendas, work on resolutions, and represent the interests of the UN. My favorite job, though, was passing notes between delegations. It was like high school, except there was no teacher to call you out.

Late one summer, my boss called me into his office to chat. He was sending me to Istanbul to work with the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, part of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (you know, the same meetings which passed the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement). It would be my first overseas posting and I couldn't be more excited. I had grown tired of my day-to-day work with the delegates in New York. Their continuous squabbling over the same issues, year in and year out without resolution, was starting to wear me down. Istanbul seemed like the perfect place to shake this up.

I imagined a room full of scientists, politicians, and civil society actors working in tandem towards a common goal. Hurricane Katrina, Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*, and air pollution concerns from the Beijing Olympics were still fresh in the minds of people everywhere. Surely, coming together to do our part to change things would be easy.

Day one of the week-long conference was packed to the brim with all the people I had imagined. Heads of state, cabinet officials, and other high-level policymakers were everywhere. There was even a good mix of scientists floating around. Activists from concerned NGOs mixed with ambassadors. The conversations were lively. Speeches inspired.

Then came day two. The roar of the previous day began to die down as the reality of the work ahead set in. How would we get 192 countries to agree on a common goal around desertification? Never mind that. How could you get 192 countries to agree on the color of the sky? Irrefutable scientific evidence, given by scientists present at the conference, was refuted. Pleas for aid from impassioned civilians, some with their societies on the brink of extinction, largely ignored. I swore there were even people asleep when case studies of success were shown on the big screen.

The issue, as with all academic exercises regardless of the form they take, was one of proximity. Those people sitting in front of me fell into one of two camps—either they were being impacted by desertification, or they weren't. For those in the latter camp, there was no real impetus for them to do anything. Those experiencing desertification in their countries had the imperative. In a cruel twist of cosmic irony, they also lacked the funding to do anything. Getting the two sides to meet in the middle—where one would have to recognize an intangible threat while the other would have to compromise on a life-or-death issue—wouldn't be easy. Luckily, these were the days where politics were still somewhat civil. By the end of the week, everyone had played nice and passed our resolution. What became of it, and the impact the resolution had, is anyone's guess.

For academics, their world has to be on fire before they'll move faster than a glacier (the jury's still out on whether this is a result of complacency or over thinking). Modern events are not much different from Istanbul. I attend a lot (a lot!) of conferences on sustainability. Most are in some five-star hotel conference facility, freezing but with bright lights. Rows of tables stretched out as far as the eye can see, the fortunate will snag a seat close to the front (but never, ever, the front row as these are reserved for speakers). Sitting on top of the white tablecloth is your standard-issue embossed hotel stationery, plastic bottle of water, and a box

of mints. With the boom of some ridiculously peppy song (my all-time favorite is the Olympic theme), your emcees command attention. The conference is ready to start.

Most conferences follow the same format: high-level speaker; keynote presenter; networking break; a panel discussion; lunch; another panel discussion; networking break; final address; drinks. You can pretty much guarantee the high-level speaker will give a glowing report of what their government or organization is doing to further whatever topic the conference is about. I can imagine a template with spaces for [conference name], [conference theme], and [generalized examples of how we're helping address the conference theme]. Someone just fills in the blanks and hands the speech to the official. It's then the official's job to present it, likely in the most mind-numbing way possible.

The keynote speaker is usually a little better, but they often play things safe. You've heard of writing at an eighth-grade reading level. These speakers present the same way. They fall back on basics, facts, and stats folks in the audience would probably already know. A conference on climate change? They'll explain what the two-degree threshold is. Human rights? Twenty minutes explaining every international convention on the subject. Maritime law? Well, you get the picture.

The real impact of the conference comes down to this next moment: the panel discussion. It's the first time that audience will be able to hear from true experts on the subject at hand. Many delegates will come armed with burning questions that, if answered, could change the world. Others are ready with their notebooks to write down pages and pages of new information. Microphones on, the panelists take their seats. Invariably, the moderator first asks them to introduce themselves. What happens? They each spend what seems like an eternity spouting their CV.

I could have read that in the conference packet.

Now, a quarter of the way through a one-hour panel, we finally get to what will hopefully be the meat-and-potatoes of the conversation. If you're lucky, questions from the moderator will be thoughtful and engaging. Some may even hit at the heart of critical issues that need to be solved or confrontational matters to be addressed. Most of the time, though, panelists are asked to recall outdated case studies or come up with solutions to hypotheticals. You'll usually have someone who doesn't understand the concept of time and decides to suck in all the airplay. Before you know it, there are five minutes left. These "ample" 300 seconds are given to the audience for Q&A.

What could we possibly accomplish in this short amount of time? In a room of 100, 200, 500 people, how is anyone going to solve anything? Your brilliant question is relegated to the pile of lost opportunities as you, frustrated, pack up to leave for lunch.

The problem here, just as it was in Istanbul, is proximity. You'll rarely see a panel with anything but educated (typically white) professionals. These types of panels even have a nickname: "pale, male, and stale." Sure, some run successful businesses. Others have a high rank. Academics, subject-matter experts, and PR hounds round out the list. What you don't often find are people directly impacted by whatever your conference is about. And that's what defines these conferences as academic exercises.

In the past, this may have been fine. But people it's time to wake up! After decades of conferences on every subject known to man, our world is still burning. In fact, it's worse than ever before. This shows just how little a panel of experts are actually accomplishing and why the conference-industrial complex is simply a way to take your money and waste your time.

Here's a question for you: Who is most disproportionately impacted by climate change?

If it was the make-up of conferences on the subject of climate change as our indicator, you'd think the educated elite living in first-world cities were most at risk. As we've seen,

however, the countries with the least ability for resilience are being impacted the most. These are also the ones least represented at these conferences. While cities like Shanghai, New York, and Rio may be inundated with rising sea levels over the next hundred years, so too are places like Dhaka. The former, given their access to infrastructure and capital, will likely be able to rebuild. Even though this is, of course, an unfortunate scenario, these places will survive. Dhaka, on the other hand, won't be so lucky.

The capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka proper is one of the most densely populated places on Earth. The greater metro area, low-lying and awash with river systems, houses over 21 million people.<sup>9</sup> Relatively poor, and with a lax regulatory environment, it has grown in recent years as a popular source of cheap labor, particularly for the fast-fashion industry. Bangladeshis from all over the country are streaming into the capital looking for employment opportunities. This is placing strain on systems already stretched thin.

One of these weak systems is the aqueduct network, which helps to alleviate the annual flooding of the city's rivers. In the rainy season, it's not uncommon for one-fifth of the country to flood. Climate change is dramatically changing weather patterns at the exact time the country can least handle them. Nearly one million people in Bangladesh have been displaced every year over the past decade due to climate-related catastrophes. Experts estimate this will rise to 13 million annually by 2050. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to these, and other changes.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, when's the last time you saw a female factory worker from Bangladesh take the mainstage at Davos? Or better yet, a high-level conference of "experts" meeting in Dhaka? The so-called solutions for these parts of the world are being made in and developed by other countries. Never mind the fact these developed countries are a principle cause of the problems under discussion. Those with an academic mindset can hide behind this academic exercise to pass blame and shun doing the heavy lifting. And believe me, they are passing blame. They may not say it outright, but there is a sense of superiority often coming off the panelists. How come people in the developing world still live in such conditions? Why won't their governments do anything about the issues at hand? Where is the push for better working conditions and living standards? The algorithm says it should be a simple fix. Our trajectories show change should have happened by now.

I'd bet if you had someone from the developing country in question on that same panel, the discussion would be very different.

Unfortunately, the fight for a better future has become a blame game pitting us versus them. Some have forgotten, or never knew in the first place, that we're all in this together. You can blame the Government of Bangladesh all you want, but what about the influencer in Las Vegas who needs that pair of cheap jeans for their video? Both are to blame because both are part of the problem. There is no us and them.

Nothing demonstrates both the "us-versus-them" mentality and holistic nature of sustainability better than the state of recycling today. Growing up in Southern California, I knew very early on about separating all my trash. Cans in one bucket. Plastic in another. Paper in another still. Then the trash man would come and collect the waste. Did I ever question where it went? Of course not! I assumed it was going down the road to my local trash yard, where machines would keep holy the separation job I had done at home. Little did I know, it was being shipped much further away than my local junkyard. In fact, most of our trash ends up finding its way to Asia.

Fellow Shanghai ex-pat, Adam Minter, has done a great job at summarizing just how much trash ends up this side of the Pacific. His book, *Junkyard Planet*, is part exposé, part environmental call to action.<sup>11</sup> Published in 2013, Minter makes his way across Asia, following the trash trade to see where it goes. He starts with the humble Coca-Cola can, but

eventually finds his way into everything from electronics, to cars, to all manner of scrap metal.

Most of the stuff you throw away, recycling or not, is probably loaded up onto a cargo ship and sent across to Chinese cities you've never even heard of. Experts estimate in "...the U.S. alone, nearly 4,000 shipping containers full of plastic recyclables a day had been shipped to Chinese recycling plants."<sup>12</sup> A full 70 percent of the world's plastic waste ended up somewhere in China as of 2017.<sup>13</sup> We're talking millions of tons a year. The Chinese were more than happy to buy these recyclables as they could cheaply take them apart and reuse the materials.

This approach to recycling has had an adverse impact on both the environment and the people living within trash sorting hot spots. The stuff you so diligently (or, maybe, not so diligently) separate in your suburban model home will eventually get separated further by the hands of a scrap sorter somewhere in Asia. Minter recalls his first trip to Foshan, one of China's centers for the scrap trade.

Meanwhile, over in the farthest corner of the yard, the flicker of flames might send black smoke into the not-quite-as-dark night. The smell would be noxious (and, depending on the wire, dioxin-laced), but the goal would be anything but: profit. Wires too small to run through the stripping machines were a favorite item to burn, but anything would do if copper demand was strong; in the morning, the copper could be swept out of the ashes. One night, I recall clearly, I saw a row of a half dozen electrical transformers—the big cylinders that hang on power lines and regulate the power—smoking into the night. When I realized what they were, I backed off: older transformers contain highly toxic PCBs. But nobody seemed to mention that to the workers who, through the evening, poked at the flames. I didn't like it, but there's not much to be said when you're standing in the middle of a scrapyards in a village you've never heard of in a province you've just barely heard of, as the guest of somebody you've just met.<sup>14</sup>

This was the status quo for many years, a US\$200 billion boat that nobody would dream of rocking. China produces stuff the west thinks it needs. People in the west consume these goods, usually disposing of them well before their use-by date. Then, the bits and bobs of these goods were loaded up and sent back to China on the same ships which brought them over. Far out of sight, people at the bottom of the economic pyramid would take your trash, risk their lives handling it, in the hopes of making enough to buy dinner. Yet, most people scrolling comfortably through their iPhone would have no idea any of this was going on.

Well, China certainly did, and it finally felt it was time to rock that boat.

In 2018, the Government put into effect a national ban on the import of foreign trash including recyclables. That meant, overnight, all the trash usually shipped out of places like the United States had nowhere to go. Many communities then turned to other, less developed, countries in the region like Malaysia. Following China's lead, Malaysia then closed the door. Now, all of a sudden, this us-versus-them mentality really started to bare its teeth. Headlines around the developed world vilified China for daring to do such a thing. Commentaries lamented the collapse of recycling programs throughout the US. The University of Georgia went as far as putting a number to China's dastardly deed. By 2030, 111 million metric tons of trash from around the world would have nowhere to go, all thanks to China.<sup>15</sup>

But wait. I thought we wanted China to clean up its act. Wasn't the global west of the view that the world's biggest polluter wasn't doing its fair share for the planet? Now that China finally put its hand up to be a better global citizen, in one of the biggest ways possible, why were we raking them over the coals?

Oh, I get it. It's all very well and good when someone else is cleaning up our messes. But when we're forced to take a hard look in the mirror, we don't actually like what we see. From

our us-versus-them mentality, we're finally made to see, as I said before, it's really just us. This big planet of ours is pretty small when you think about it. Everything exists in an ecosystem of cause and effect, balance and imbalance. Not knowing what's going on on the other side of the world doesn't excuse you from repercussions to your actions. Eventually, the scales will even out.

And that brings us back to the Meths from *Altered Carbon*. For what must have been generations, these futuristic people quite literally lived the high life. Their sky-high mansions and access to infinite sources of sleeves, as well as not having to worry about the destruction of their stacks, gave them an abject sense of superiority over the rabble below. Politicians and the well-heeled of this society made laws reflecting their reality, but ultimately impacting the rest of humanity. The disconnect between the haves and have nots is as glaring as Marie Antoinette's infamous declaration centuries ago.

Spoiler alert! Eventually, the Meths push their luck just a little too far. As could be expected by anyone watching (except the people in the show, of course), the citizenry rose and declared war on their overlords. I'll spare you the details in case you want to watch the show yourself. Suffice to say things don't end well.

This is the same path we now find ourselves on. Those on one side of society sit about and elicit truths that don't apply to the other side. Except in this world, the real world, we're all living on the same rock. Unless some alien species comes down tomorrow and give us the cure for what ails us, we've got to get off our pedestals and work together.

The more we turn to academics and intellectuals to handle the issues surrounding sustainability, the more we will become embedded in our own echo chambers. This isn't to say academic solutions aren't good solutions: they certainly are. But they have their place. When it comes to the negative impact of things like climate change on real people, it's going to take a lot more than a UN resolution, talking head, or another conference to help them.

## **Vilified or Vaulted?**

There's one more group of dicks I want to talk about, and this shouldn't really come as a shocker. For years, the environmental do-gooders have campaigned hard to get us to hate this group. Many have grown to become poster children for all that's wrong in the world. That's right, we're talking about the evil, polluting, greedy businesses in the corporate sector whose only desire is to turn the world into a shriveled mess. They've certainly done a hell of a lot to make things a lot worse for all of us. You have colossal disasters like the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill which continues to negatively impact life in the Gulf of Mexico a decade after it occurred. Then there's the tobacco industry which accounts for one in five deaths in the United States each year, not to mention over 7 million annual deaths worldwide. Goldman Sachs, The Gap, Nestle, Koch Industries, Wellpoint, and others all find the ire of many an environmental organization for their mistreatment of our natural resources, human labor, and humanity.<sup>16</sup>

Up until recently, these private-sector corporations had been given carte blanche to do pretty much whatever they wanted in the name of progress. Yet, over the past decade or so there have been much stronger regulations in place to foster an environment of transparency. Sustainability reports, some the size of the Bible itself, are the new way to show you're a good corporate citizen. Never mind most of these are full of confusing statistics that don't add up to too much. You'll drown in data before you're ever able to decipher what the hell it all means. This is what we call greenwashing—making it look like you're doing your part for the Earth when, in reality, you're probably not as good as you say you are. This free reign is

still alive and well in the developing world where old habits die hard. Corporations in places like India, China, and Brazil are likely not doing as much as they could to be good citizens.

What might really create some cognitive dissonance for you, though, is something I've essentially banked my entire career on. For all the bad apples out there (and, believe me, they're a dime a dozen), there are an equal number of companies we should look to as exemplars of good. Instead of vilifying all these corporate actors, we should instead be saluting and working with these good ones to make the world a better place. Rather than putting them on watch lists, we need to come together, hand-in-hand, towards a brighter tomorrow. I can already hear the groans now. But, wait! Before you throw this book across the room and start yelling at me for wasting your time and money, hear me out.

On the surface, those in the private sector have seemingly done a terrible job of being stewards of the environment and humanity. It seems like we've never evolved out of the Industrial Revolution. You'd imagine the inside of a factory at, say, Walmart to look like something from a Jacob Riis novel.<sup>17</sup> And I wouldn't blame you. The only side of the story most people have ever been exposed to is the bad one. Terrible treatment of workers—to the point of suicide—happening at Foxconn factories across China. The 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, where a garment factory used by such high fashion labels such as The Gap, Gucci, and Mango collapsed in Dhaka and killed over 1,110 workers. Drill baby drill would be a more appropriate slogan for the Adani corporation, which is currently digging the largest coal mine in Australia's history. The Carmichael Mine will, among a host of other things, annually allow 520 more coal ships to travel through the Great Barrier Reef, gain access to 270 billion liters of groundwater in the country's arid north, and add 4.7 billion tons of carbon pollution to the atmosphere.<sup>18</sup> Of course, I'm not trying to excuse any of these terrible truths. They've happened, and continue to happen, all over the globe.

There are thousands of corporations, though, making up for what these other companies lack. According to the 2010 US Census data, 18,500 American companies were operating with 500 or more people.<sup>19</sup> In other words, companies large enough to have an impact one way or the other at scale. Surely all of these companies can't be bad. On a scale from reforesting the Amazon to clubbing baby seals, I'd guess most fall somewhere towards the Brazilian side of the spectrum.

What I am advocating for is a deeper understanding of not just the operations of the private sector, but the depth and scope of what they can bring to the conversation. That's because the private sector, more than any other group of actors, has the capacity, resources, and economies-of-scale to tackle some of our most pressing issues. When used for bad they can do serious damage. But when put in the right hands and for the right purposes, amazing things can happen.

One of my favorite examples comes from the company most people, at least in the United States, pretend to hate the most. That company? Walmart. For years, do-gooders have fought against Walmart and its hegemonic family for their treatment of workers both Stateside and overseas. They cite Walmart's propensity to purposely squash mom-and-pop stores worldwide in their quest for dominance. The company also has a track record of employing people who are undereducated and therefore supposedly only entitled to extremely low wages, no healthcare, and certainly no job security. This is all meant to keep prices low and profits high. I'm sure you know, though, making cheap products doesn't come cheap at all.

If you want those rock-bottom prices you've got to watch your bottom line. While grinding down wages of American employees might do a bit to keep their costs low, it's really on the production side where things happen. Although Walmart has long prided itself on American-made goods, it's an open secret most of their products are produced outside the United States. A lot of this happens in China, where factories buzz along at breakneck speed

to produce those products you think you need to have. Nobody in Omaha or Dallas wants to question how Walmart's able to produce so much, so cheaply. They just go about their daily business as if it all makes perfect economic sense.

Again, there is plenty of blame to pass around. Walmart, as a corporate operator and top of the Fortune rankings, certainly doesn't have its hands clean. We already mentioned their use of the Rana garment factory, underpayment of wages, and piss-poor store working conditions. But, let's take a trip to the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, just across the border with Hong Kong. It's here that Walmart's China headquarters is based, and where most of the operations for its nearly 100 China mainland factories happens. It's quite the operation, too. There are thousands of staff making sure things are streamlined, but more importantly there are no hiccoughs. If something goes wrong with operations here, you might not get that treasured Barbie Doll in time for Christmas.

This isn't a story about how good Walmart's operations are. Obviously, they know what they're doing or they wouldn't be the largest company in the world. This is a story about the conditions their factory workers live under, in their tens of thousands. Take a minute and close your eyes. When I mention factory conditions in China, what do you imagine? Tired workers huddled in cold rooms, at risk of a missing hand if they doze off next to a machine? Dormitories with no air conditioning in the middle of summer, disease rampant, and food inedible? Automated machines buzzing quietly while specialized technicians keep things rolling along in near hospital-like conditions?

Wait, what?

One of these things is certainly not like the other. If you had to guess which the correct scenario is, you'd best place your money on option three. The level of automation going on in China is astounding. Each time I go into a factory I'm always amazed at how safe and technologically advanced the conditions are. Most of the time people are only used to program instructions into machines. Of course, there are still plenty of things done by hand but these are hardly the black market labor conditions you'd be likely to think of. Factories are safe, clean, and monitored or audited ad nauseam.

A big, evil company like Walmart would probably just lay off thousands of factory workers and put machines in their place, right? Wrong. Companies like Walmart are taking this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not to replace workers with machines but to upskill workers for future employment opportunities. They are looking far into the future where China is no longer the world's factory, but instead the world's premier service provider. To get a sense of the scale of this undertaking, let's look at one of Walmart China's signature programs—the Women in Factories Program. As a consultant with BSR, I had the opportunity to work on this project, one which had great impact on workers.

The basic premise of the program was to help upskill female workers across Walmart's China-based factories. It would cover topics such as on-the-job training, business and management skills, communications, and the like. The program would also cover more of the soft skills needed to be a good worker: family planning; personal finance; health, and wellness. These were all areas most women in China just didn't learn in school. Over the eight or nine years of compulsory education in China, there is little time to teach things like personal hygiene. In a country where abortion is still considered a legitimate form of birth control, teachers don't help students understand why this is a bad idea. Touchy cultural taboo subjects such as these are hardly ever talked about by people, much less by the government.

And, that's where Walmart and other corporations fit in. They aren't under the guise of the government so have much more leeway when it comes to defining what business skills employees need. That keeps the government off their backs and the programs rolling along.

From a business perspective, what's the rationale for all of this? How can a company justify helping out their workers, especially when it seems on the surface to be a huge

expenditure? Sure, it might make Walmart executives feel (and look) good to be helping out. As with anything related to sustainability and business, though, there has to be an economic imperative for change to happen. In short, how can we still make money?

Take the abortion topic, for example. When workers get abortions, they are often out sick for several days afterward. If a worker comes to realize there are other forms of contraception, and in turn get fewer abortions, then they are going to show up to work more often. This leads to lower absenteeism, especially when calculated across an entire factory. Not only that, but these women are likely to be happier psychologically and thus less stressed. When you're happier, you're more productive. Lower absenteeism, higher productivity, and the bonus of greater appreciation for the company mean you are going to get more work out of each worker. This means more money for the factory and Walmart. A true win-win scenario. How much of a win-win?

If you're thinking it was small potatoes, think again. Over three-years, nearly 100,000 women across 60 major Chinese factories participated in the program. That's 100,000 lives changed directly and countless hundreds of thousands more indirectly. This is the type of scale most governments, and certainly most NGOs, just can't muster. That's the power of the private sector when used as a force for good. The impact on the participants is so much more than just learning hard skills. More than 70 percent of employees said the program helped them adapt better to, and solve problems in, their personal lives and at work. A full 80 percent of factory trainers said their self-confidence and communication skills improved.<sup>20</sup> That's real impact from a company that is supposed to be Satan incarnate.

It's not just Walmart, either. There are far more prolific programs in the fast-moving consumer goods sector positively impacting the lives of workers around the world. The Gap's P.A.C.E. program, The HER Project sponsored by corporations like Disney, HP, and Levi's, and Plan W from Diageo are all making a difference for millions of workers in the developing world. Some have been going on for a decade or more, operating seemingly under the radar from consumers where these products are sold. Few outside the circle of those impacted would even know such programs exist. Imagine how much more impactful these programs can be if more people knew about, and supported them? What would happen if you were able to make your purchase decision based on having this new information? How could things change? Nobody is asking you to spend more at the register to fund this stuff. It's already happening. But as long as certain groups keep vilifying the corporations doing good, how is the average consumer supposed to know any better? Even worse, how are we supposed to keep these impactful programs going if people are being put off by shopping at these places?

To bring all this together, let's think back through our three lacrosse-bro groups. We've talked about those in the non-governmental space who are as cutthroat as anyone in trying to survive, particularly when it comes to finances, regardless of the adverse impact this is having. Then, we have those who live life through an academic lens. Gray-bearded, holier-than-thou scholars, diplomats, and talking heads do a disservice to any cause because most of them are far removed from the causes themselves. Lastly, we looked at the corporate sector who are fighting a never-ending image battle between being the good guys but looking like the most despicable group of the bunch.

What these segments all have in common is they have created little fiefdoms from which they operate. We saw this a bit when we discussed the NGO world and how they've carved out nooks and crannies they work from. Greenies, especially the more militant of the group, gather in cliques and shun outsiders. They make the idea of saving the world a near-impossible task, only open to those who would reject modern life and live on a kibbutz.

The academics, too, do this by choice. They'd rather stay in their ivory tower than get their hands dirty doing the hard yards. Academics keep pushing their white papers, panel discussions, and recommendations in our face, even though most of us have stopped listening. We've stopped listening because very few of their so-called expert conclusions make any sense or are having much impact.

Corporations, on the other hand, operate in fiefdoms because they've been forced to by external parties, such as environmentalists. These are controlled operations that we're exposed to every day but have become blind to as well. While many are still colossal dicks, there's a campaign amongst a not-so-insignificant number to change this image. So, who's the bigger dick here: them for not doing more, or us for not paying attention?

It's not only these groups walking around in their own little siloed worlds. There are probably dozens of other groups out there as well. The reason it's easy to sparse them out is that they've done it to themselves. This process of self-ostracization immediately pits one group against another. It's become so rash some have even taken to guilt-tripping those on the outside. I'm sorry, but your viewpoint doesn't mean you get to be a dick to others.

For the sake of brevity, I'll introduce just a few examples. How about the vegans, organic mommies, and non-GMO campaigners who have turned eating into a balancing act from Cirque du Soleil? Have you ever actually tried to go out to dinner with them? What's worse is they want everything else to bend to their will, not a very inclusive mindset if you ask me. Oh... you don't want to live off the grid? Then you're just a corporate pawn and sell out. Ew... you drive an F150 and not a Prius? You can't sit with us. Instead of taking the time to explain, educate, and encourage, some would rather pit them-versus-us.

I'd like to remind you all: stop being dicks to each other. All this does is put a bad taste in peoples' mouths about the good work you're doing day in and day out. Instead, work together with inclusiveness. If someone doesn't understand what it means to be a vegan, the last thing you should do is roll your eyes. When they don't get why you refuse to wash your hair with shampoo or brush your teeth with toothpaste, explain why (from a distance). Work at a corporation and tired of having tomatoes thrown at you? Take a second to talk to the person through open and honest dialogue. Until we all come to the table as one, we're not going to do much more than what we've already accomplished.

It's not like I'm asking for the world here. History is full of examples where working together, even in the strangest or most dire of situations, led to results no one could have imagined. Think about the brave warriors during the ancient Battle of Thermopylae.<sup>21</sup> Glorified in the 2006 movie *300*,<sup>22</sup> this is a battle all students of military strategy or politics have to learn. In essence, Thermopylae is one of history's greatest last stands. The ancient Spartans, under King Leonidas, were waging battle against King Xerxes of Persia. If the historical accounts are to be believed, the Spartans were outnumbered 508 to 1. Not the best odds in the world. Still, they pulled a rabbit out of their little Greek hats harnessing ingenuity over brute strength. Thermopylae (in Greek, the Hot Gates) was a narrow coastal pass critical for the Persians to access and move through. Acting like a funnel, the pass essentially limited the number of Persians on the front lines at any one time. This gave the Spartans much better odds, balancing out the forces on both sides. We're not sure if the plan would have been entirely successful because a Greek traitor decided to tell the Persians what was up. As it stands, we do know the Spartans were able to hold off the pass for a good three days against one of the largest armies the ancient world had ever known. Sure, they lost. But they did an impressive job decimating what they could on the way out.

Okay, how about a more positive example? Consider the group of courageous soldiers during the siege at Dunkirk.<sup>23</sup> One of the first salvos of World War Two, Dunkirk is a good example of collaboration and humanity amid the hell of war. To make a long story short, we have the Germans advancing throughout France, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Allied forces

are being pushed back to the sea as the Nazis use a spearhead-type formation relentlessly. Germany was able to easily overtake much of the region and ended up flanking the Allied troops. This is probably the worst position to be in militarily because it's just a hop, skip, and a jump away from being crushed. Retreating to the seaside town of Dunkirk, the British army became separated from the other Allied troops, setting up their defenses on the beaches of the English Channel. With German U-boats in the water, planes flying low overhead, and the docks destroyed, there was little chance the British could feasibly evacuate. They were stranded, sitting ducks waiting for German annihilation. Then, a miracle. Over ten days, a ragtag flotilla of 800 ships comprised of all manner of merchant and private vessel was used to ferry 338,226 soldiers across the Channel to Britain. While the city fell to the Germans, the incident inspired what came to be known as the Dunkirk Spirit. This Spirit would help galvanize the support, patriotism, and resolve which would eventually lead to Allied victory.

There are plenty of more recent examples too. The biggest one that pops immediately to mind is how humankind came together in the 1980s to fix the ozone layer.<sup>24</sup> In 1985, a group of British scientists began to notice a large "hole" in the Earth's ozone layer over the Antarctic. The ozone layer acts as a protective screen over the Earth, keeping out radiation from the sun. Without it, we'd burn up like toast as the sun's rays scorched everything on the planet. A massive hole opening up wasn't a good thing. Scientists soon linked the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) to ozone depletion. CFCs were found in most aerosol products at the time. As a shock to every global consumer, the cans of hairspray and shaving cream they so readily used were destroying the planet. The media immediately began to push the story, scaring the hell out of everyone, everywhere. In one *Newsweek* interview (which probably was a little on the nose at the time, as it certainly still is today) a terrified environmentalist said the threat was like "...AIDS from the sky."<sup>25</sup> The terror reached such a fever pitch the international community banded together to sign the Montreal Protocol, effectively banning the use of CFCs. In what is probably the biggest environmental victory of our time, we have been able to claw back and fill in the ozone hole in the Antarctic. While it still ebbs and flows with the seasons, scientists believe we will have entirely healed the ozone layer hole by 2050.

This is the power of collaboration. This is the power of working together, as one, to overcome our challenges. As the sage African proverb says, "if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

Let's go far, together.