

A Summary of *Eaarth* by Bill McKibben

Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet, Bill McKibben, 2010

“Imagine we live on a planet.”

So begins Bill McKibben’s 2010 book, *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet*. Those few words powerfully contain the message of the book. We do live on a planet, a very small one, interdependent one; there is no other place – here is home, our only home. The point of the book is very clear: global warming is not something that is going to happen, it is here now. It is our reality, and we better start figuring out right now how we are going to respond to it. Doing nothing is only a short term option that will result in wars over the last drops of fossil fuels, and after they are gone, we’ll still have to figure out something else. So let’s do it now.

The book is divided into four chapters, each important to understanding global warming. The first, “A New World,” in an unabashed accounting of the conditions we find ourselves in today, “running Genesis backward, decreasing . . .” (25) the only world we’ve ever known. It is filled with startling information, such as the fact that the six of the 12 largest corporations in the world are fossil-fuel providers, and four others build cars. Or why we have more fires, and why fresh water resources are being depleting. If you wanted a summary in one place about the unintended consequences of our spree on fossil fuels, here it is.

The second chapter is called “High Tide” and confronts the most basic ideology of modernity: growth and progress. “On our new planet growth may be the one big habit we finally must break” (48). This section brings together science and politics, offering insight into the political economic situation in the world of rich and poor nations that will make any attempts to address climate change more challenging. Already wars are being fought over environmental conditions brought on or exacerbated by climate change. We in the U.S. have always imagined unlimited growth, and imaginations are powerful things. We have assumed that the future will resemble the past. This is now a fantasy that we must abandon and choose to decline gracefully, accepting the challenges of being the grownups, and deciding what we don’t need, we really, don’t need.

What does it mean to reimagine the future without growth? In the third chapter, called “Backing Off”, McKibben offers some ideas: think slower, smaller, dig in, become resilient, and that overused word, sustainable. The book recounts the trajectory that allowed us to believe that bigger and faster is better, but cautions us, “We’ve got a lot of work to do if we’re going to survive on this Eaarth, but most of it needs to be done close

to home. Small, not big: dispersed, not centralized.” (120) And we need to do it together.

One of the consequences of our energy power was the imagination that we are truly independent not only of the earth, but of each other. We’re going to need all of us, we’ll need community, and we’ll need a wise allocation of the limited resources we have directed toward life, not war and death.

So what do we do? Thankfully McKibben doesn’t leave us without a vision, instead he offers a glimpse into what life might be like. “Lightly, Carefully, Gracefully” goes through basic systems of survival such as water and especially agriculture and food systems. We’ll have to start thinking again of where our food is grown and how: in a real sense, all of us will need to be farmers again in our regional communities. Energy, as well, will need to be dispersed and local, hopefully powerful enough to keep us warm and to fuel the internet so that we’ll have a way of thinking globally while most of our living and actions are local. And we’ll need each other – for what we know and must learn.

This book is a powerful summary of where we are, why we are here, and what possible alternative ways we might imagine. “Eaarth represents the deepest of human failures.” (212) But we are a resilient and creative species, capable of extraordinary courage and community. So let’s get to work.

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