

November 16, 2017



Image courtesy of Jake Marble

## Reflections on an Extraordinary Time: Perspectives from a 21st-Century College Student

Jake Marble

*I'm sitting cross-legged, yogi-like, meditating next to a small pond in an endless forest under an endless sky, bathing in the brilliant light of the moon and a smattering of stars, letting my brain, mind, and soul wander in and out of conscious thought, body chilled, but stilled, by the night's crisp breeze. The hour is unknown, the date forgotten, all responsibilities of my daily life nothing but a wrinkle in a seemingly long ago time. As I slowly, slowly, lift my gaze across the fallen night, I begin to have what can only be described as a spiritual, organic, out-of-body experience; taking in tree, grass, earth, water, feeling every pore and molecule of my body pulsing to the rhythm of nature, my eyes fix straight across the moonlit twilight, and, as if by forces of magic, or perhaps just the totality of inner serenity, I see a face. An ancient, chillingly familiar, yet*

*unknown visage, that I immediately, without thinking, or comprehending, perhaps from the deepest nodes of my mammalian mind, connect as my hominid ancestor. I know this without knowing, believe it without reasoning, and sense that really, it, and I, are looking deeply into myself. We regard each other attentively... wistfully. A few seconds pass... or perhaps a span of eons. A shiver is sent down my spine. The wind blows its soft breath. I close my eyes. It disappears. I feel changed. Bettered. At peace.*

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jake Marble, I hail from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I am a freshman at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, likely on track to pursue a major in Global Studies, with minors in French Studies and Environmental Sciences, Policy & Management. As one can probably infer from this opening paragraph, as well as from my academic passions, I feel a deep, *deep*, connection to, and love of, the natural world— one that, as I just described, has taken hold of me during my recent outdoor travels, but which also surely, I have been told, can be traced back to my earliest days.

Often, after heavy rainstorms, I would take my young self toddling out into our small, compact backyard in search of “lost” worms on the puddled concrete, carefully picking them up one at a time, then setting each gently onto its own promising, green leaf in the garden. Why? Because, as I explained succinctly, “They want to go home.” Whether the renegade invertebrates actually appreciated their deportations will forever be unknown, but to say that not much has changed with my mindset in the sixteen-plus years since is not an overstatement. Instead of finding worms, I now focus on finding pieces of litter to pick up, in parks, on sidewalks, along trails— everywhere I go. Instead of making the long voyage to the backyard, I make the trip to China last summer, for an environmental service study abroad program, and all around the Milwaukee River Watershed, for the capstone camping trip of a semester-long, ecology-based, extracurricular class. And, I decide to attend the University of Minnesota. To study, to muse on, to write about, to learn from, and to form a life out of, the passions that have so long been a part of, well... my life.

So, when chubby-cheeked, wobbly-legged, two-year-old me yelled out joyfully, “I want to save the world!” while stomping through puddles in unbridled joy, it was not a superficial declaration

from a wannabe superhero, nor was it an overly far-fetched pipedream. It was simply an expression... an expression of unfettered happiness at being amidst that exact world around me, one that continues to reign supreme in my soul today, albeit in slightly, but not overly different, forms.

It is, has been, and always will be, harder to care than to be apathetic. Life can be difficult when, as an environmentalist, you truly care about the current and future well-beings of the diversity around you. When recently participating in an early morning, Mississippi River clean-up, and finding what reckoned to be the seventh Coke can in a single hour seeping its chemically-infused liquid into the water, floating like a bobber marking the location of a toxic waste site, I simultaneously wanted to curse, cry, and shake some goddamn sense into mankind's often ecologically-unburdened shoulders. And this here is exactly the root of our problem. Without a reason to change, without a reason to care, without a reason to get your bleary-eyed ass out of bed to go clean a river (or any other cause beyond the scope of this metaphor), the environmental/energy/resource mess that we ALL are a part of will never be remedied for the long-term future. Problems are inextricably linked to causes, and our human behavior problem, recklessly endangering, depleting, and destroying the only home we will ever know, during these supposedly destined and blessed modern days, is quite possibly the most critical of the latter that we will ever be forced to face. To boil down into one central question: how can we possibly break this cycle of ignorant irresponsibility? When over  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the world's population, still in the various levels of pre-industrial, emissions-heavy development, aspires simply to have access to a washing machine, or basic sanitary services, or running water, our American-ized standard of careless luxury and consumption not even a fanciful illusion, how do we react justly, what do we do in the present, and, most importantly, where do we go in the future?

I'm oft-reminded of a simple lyric from the songwriter Macklemore: *"With a veil over our eyes, we turn our back on the cause..."*

But, humanity is a huge issue to tackle. To achieve any progress globally, systemically, culturally, before one can enlighten others to follow a more sapient path, one must enlighten themselves. To put in the simplest terms, my goal, my conquest, is to channel those feelings into words, those

rooted, passionate, worm-caring feelings, the feelings that have first bubbled in my life, then simmered, then brewed, and now have reached a boiling cacophony I cannot, do not, and will never hope to ignore. The ones that send me a pang of guilt whenever I zoom through the sky on a carbon-spewing hunk of human advancement, ill-feelings remedied only slightly by my careful saving of every throw-away plastic, airline-branded cup and utensil for future recycling. The ones that lead me to introduce composting at home, and to fight for its expansion at school, to bike, as often as possible, the 20 miles round-trip to my job with the Milwaukee Brewers Baseball Club, and to question, requestion, and question again, the lifestyle choices of my friends, family, and self, from unnecessary purchasing to over-showering. Again, apathy would be easy; changing minds, and changing lives, is not.

However, the future does not have to be bleak. Despite the many tendrils of our modern, globalized society that pull us apart, I still maintain a rooted belief that it remains the positive power of nature in connection with our shared humanity that unites us. Personally, in my humble contemplation, whether meditating under the tranquil, milky light of the moon in the Superior National Forest, or hiking and biking, laughing and crying, reflecting and learning all around the Milwaukee Watershed, or sitting on the Great Wall of China at sunrise, feet dangling off the platform, looking out over the endless, timeless landscape, and wondering simply about my place in the world, I cannot imagine a life I live not spent fighting for the creatures, ecosystems, and beauty of this little blue marble suspended in time. That is what I hope to convey by spilling my thoughts on these pages. Let me be the absolute first to admit that I do not know everything, nor will I ever pretend to. Who does? What is the solution? Through the sum of my beliefs and experiences, it is the biggest problem our communities, our generations, and our people will ever face. But we can start by learning, listening, reading... then writing, then speaking, and traveling, helping, advocating, acting... perhaps above all, *fighting*, fighting to forever channel our inner spirit of the two-year-old catching worms, for whom saving the world meant nothing more than lending a helping hand.

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Jake Marble is an eighteen-year-old freshman at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, pursuing degrees in Global Studies and Environmental Sciences, Policy and Management. When

not thinking, writing, speaking, and learning about the multitude of socio-ecological issues facing our beautiful, but fragile world, he can most likely be found climbing a tree, or generally enjoying nature with the people he loves.

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