

SUMMARY

WE ARE THE

WEATHER

Jonathan Safran Foer



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Summary of «We Are The Weather» by Jonathan Safran Foer

Written by Lea Schullery

An informational guide on how harmful the animal industry is to the environment, and that saving the planet begins at breakfast.



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Introduction

97% of scientists believe and argue about the detrimental effects human activity has on our planet. Our planet is warming at an alarming rate and it's because of us. Whether you acknowledge global warming or not, it's difficult to see the harm that we are causing because we have never seen anything like this in the history of the Earth. It's hard to know what to do or how you can help reverse the damage that has already been done. We know the basics: reduce your use of plastic, recycle, and drive a hybrid car. The burning of fossil fuels certainly makes up a large portion of the harmful gases that are emitted into the air, but the animal farming industry is right behind. You might be imagining cute cows grazing in peaceful rolling hills and green fields mindlessly eating away, but that picture is far from reality. In fact, these farms are responsible for the deforestation of our earth, they are taking away our resource that absorbs harmful gases, and they are continuously emitting even more of these harmful gases that warm our planet.

Societies have come together in the past and sacrificed luxury for the greater good, and it's time we step up again. We need to change the way we think and start a movement that will incite real change. By changing our diet and lessening our dependence on animal products, we can reduce our carbon footprint significantly.

Pieces of a Puzzle

Solving the problem of climate change is similar to solving a puzzle, small pieces that seem insignificant become critical when looking at the bigger picture. In a world of billions of people, one country, one family, one person seems too small to make a big difference; however, when you look at our history, big changes begin small. Take Rosa Parks, for instance, a woman who did something seemingly small by not giving up her seat on a bus sparked the Civil Rights Movement. One small act led to a big change.

The moment Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, the world began to incite change. People came together to form a movement that revolutionized history. Each piece of the puzzle came together to create a solution, but the story of Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement isn't the first time in history that we have seen people come together for the greater good.

During World War II, Americans came together in a time of fear and uncertainty. On the evening of April 28, 1942, five months after the events of Pearl Harbor, millions of people gathered around their radios to listen to President Roosevelt address the status of the war and the challenges ahead. Throughout his chat with the people, Roosevelt stated "Not all of us have the privilege of fighting our enemies in distant parts of the world...But there is one front and one battle where everyone in the United States - every man, woman, and child - is in action, and will be privileged to remain in action throughout the war. That front is right here at home, in our daily lives and in our daily tasks...This will require, of course, the abandonment not only of luxuries but of other creature comforts."

Throughout the war, Americans found themselves taking action in their daily lives to help the greater good of their country. They turned their lights off at dusk, creating mass blackouts to help their country better identify imminent threats. Companies that once manufactured cars, refrigerators, and washing machines now found themselves manufacturing military

products. Lingerie companies began building camouflage netting. Americans drove no more than 35 miles per hour to save on gas and rubber consumption, they limited their meat intake to 2 pounds per week, and they sacrificed on staples like sugar, butter, and coffee to help save supplies to feed their troops. Each American was a piece of a larger puzzle, and each person and family did their small part to help their country.

Similar to the Civil Rights Movement and the efforts of World War II, reversing and stalling climate change will take the effort of each piece of the puzzle. As a whole, the world relies on everyone doing their small part. Small acts can make big changes. Author, Jonathan Safran Foer, has a small solution that he believes will make a significant difference. But before we discuss that small action, let's first discuss why climate change is such a difficult topic and why it's so hard to incite big change.

Who Are The Victims?

Historical moments like the Civil Rights Movement and World War II showed how everyone can do their part, how Americans can come together for the greater good, but why can't we do the same with climate change? The science is there, people are aware of the imminent threat, but still, it's confusing and we continue to frivolously harm the environment by driving cars, flying to far-off destinations, and contributing to the growing plastic and trash that fill our oceans and kill some of the most important ecosystems of the world.

But there is one clear reason why we as a society are likely to contribute to the Civil Rights Movement and World War II. Each had clear victims. People witnessed people like Rosa Parks and others peacefully protest and experience discrimination simply for being a different color. They saw groups get beaten, bruised, and threatened for merely sitting at establishments they weren't welcome at. They were victims. During World War II, people experienced loved ones dying overseas, they heard stories of battles, of civilian casualties, and they even experienced a threat on American soil in Pearl Harbor. There were clear victims.

But who are the victims of climate change? As a parent, if you witness your child become a victim of bullying or a victim of violence, what do you do? You immediately take action, you do everything in your power to help your child and ensure that your child is safe. However, when it comes to climate change, there's no clear victim, so we either acknowledge the threat and feel helpless or we completely disregard it. We can't immediately take action to protect our children because there's no clearly defined way to do that. It's not just approaching your child's bully or aggressor and trying to solve the issue, it's vague and it's scary.

In fact, we as humans are massively unprepared to think about how future events can affect us personally. In a recent study, the UCLA psychologist Hal Hershfield found that when subjects were asked to describe their future

selves, even a mere ten years from now, their brain activity on fMRI scans showed their brain activity was similar to when speaking about strangers. We struggle to visualize our futures, especially a future on an Earth that can no longer thrive, partly because we have never seen anything like this before. We cannot connect to a victim.

When people can see and connect with something, they are more willing to take action. As Foer puts it, emotional responses are heightened by vividness. Named by researchers as sympathy biases, there are a number of situations that generate concern: the identifiable-victim effect (the ability to visualize the details of the suffering), the in-group effect (the suggestion of social proximity to the suffering), and the reference-dependent sympathy effect (the presentation of the victim's condition as not merely dreadful but worsening).

For instance, when conducting a direct-mail fundraising experiment with about two hundred thousand potential donors, those mailings that featured a named individual as opposed to an unnamed group saw an increase in donations by 110 percent. When there is a clear victim, we are more likely to take action.

But we hear that climate change will eventually affect us, our loved ones, our children and we don't take action. In fact, when we hear that climate change will threaten millions of people, we find that statistic to be unbelievable. However, this isn't the first time we've had to acknowledge an unbelievable truth. Remember the Holocaust?

Adapting to Change

In 1942, 28-year-old Jan Karski from Poland embarked on a mission to travel from Nazi-occupied Poland to London and, ultimately, America to inform world leaders of the horrors the Germans were perpetrating. To prepare himself for the journey, he equipped himself with testimonies and stories to make the information both plausible and believable. Finally, in June 1943, Karski met with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, a great legal mind and himself a Jew, who listened as Karski detailed the liquidations of the Warsaw ghettos and the extermination of Jews in concentration camps.

Frankfurter listened intently and eventually stated that he could not believe what Karski was saying. While Karski's colleague pleaded for Frankfurter to accept what Karski was telling him, Frankfurter then replied, "I didn't say this man is lying. I said I am unable to believe him. My mind, my heart, they are made in such a way that I cannot accept it." While Frankfurter didn't question Karski's account of the Nazis systematically killing the Jews, he simply acknowledged that he could not believe it and became aware of that inability.

Much like today, we are unable to believe and acknowledge the future that we are heading towards because we adapt so quickly to change. Without adapting, we would have never been able to survive for the past thousands of years. We have simply become used to our way of living, we have accepted that the coasts of America continuously get pounded by category 4 and 5 hurricanes each year and that Europe experiences record heat waves each summer. Much like Frankfurter, we are unable to comprehend the consequences of what we are doing to our planet.

So if we want to make changes, we must know what to do. Sure, we recycle, buy organic foods, and drive hybrid cars, but why is that not enough?

The Effects of Animal Agriculture

Sure, we know about the effects of fossil fuels. Companies such as Exxon have known about the dangers of fossil fuels and global warming as early as the 1950s. So what do those companies do? They create campaigns and publish false information in an attempt to protect their money-making business. Now that information is more widely available, environmentalists today solely focus on the effects of fossil fuels on our environment. And while this is all good and true, drilling for oil is certainly largely responsible for global warming, this information is often misleading and doesn't acknowledge other major factors that contribute to the slow killing of our planet.

What if I told you that animal agriculture is just as detrimental as fossil fuels? While fossil fuels account for 25% of harmful emissions, animal agriculture accounts for 24%. Equally as harmful, why don't environmentalists focus on the emissions of industrial animal farming? Environmentalists have largely ignored the effects of the world's tremendous demand for meat. In fact, former Vice President Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* doesn't mention it at all. Simply put, suggesting that people adopt vegan diets and avoid meat and dairy products is incredibly radical. Those of you that are self-proclaimed "meat lovers" probably scoff at the thought of giving up a major portion of your diet. In fact, suggesting such a thing might become even more harmful for environmentalists by alienating a large number of people, so they don't talk about it.

So while you may be recycling your goods, driving a hybrid car, planting trees, and eating organic food, your actions are ultimately improving the environment at a very low and slow rate. Society has ingrained these actions into our brains and making us believe that we are doing our part, and while we are slowly putting the pieces of the puzzle together, we need to make bigger changes to see a quicker, more significant difference.

We Need Larger Pieces

One night in 2006, eighteen-year-old Kyle Holtrus was riding his bicycle when all of a sudden a Chevy Camaro struck him and dragged him beneath it for thirty feet. Thomas Boyle Jr., a nearby witness, quickly ran over to help. Flooded with adrenaline, he gripped the frame of the Camaro and lifted it for an entire 45 seconds while Holtrus was pulled free. When asked why he intervened, Boyle said “I would be such a horrible human being to watch someone suffer like that and not even try to help...All I could think is, what if that was my son?” Boyle felt he had to do something.

While one person amazingly lifted a 3,500-pound car, many others did their part in helping Holtrus survive his ordeal as well. Something we do quite often when we see those flashing red lights behind us on the road, we simply pull over. The cars that allowed the ambulance to get to Holtrus on time helped make all the difference in saving his life. Every piece of the puzzle, no matter how small, was essential and his life depended on each one. So while we can all do our small part, we also require bigger pieces to help take action and enact change. In other words, changing the climate depends on the most one can do as well as the least one can do.

As individuals, we might feel helpless when it comes to climate change. I mean, we are one person up against giant corporations who hold an immeasurable amount of power and wealth. And aren't these corporations the ones responsible for the fall of the Earth anyway? While they certainly play a large role, it's important to remember these corporations are also made up of individuals, and we as consumers control the corporations we support and which ones we don't. Individual action can incite action. We've already discussed the importance of Rosa Park's single action, so let's look at a more recent example.

When confronted with sexual abuse allegations, Google largely ignored the problem. So, the employees took action and over 20,000 all across the world participated in strike actions. Just a week later, Google conceded and

had agreed to the protestor's demands. Following the actions of Google, other major companies like Facebook, Airbnb, and eBay changed their policies as well. "Grassroots" protest action was enough to influence the actions of several major corporations.

Of course, climate change will require more than just grassroots protests. To create bigger changes, policy changes will need to be put into place. "Top-down" policy changes like the implementation of a carbon tax and government funding for global warming research are large pieces of a puzzle that will enact change at a quicker and more significant rate. And while climate change may seem out of our control, and funding might not seem to be an effective way to enact change, we have seen the success of funding in the past.

Let's take polio for example. In the decades following the first polio outbreak, America saw the disease as a horrible part of life that paralyzed the youth of the nation. Each summer, more and more children suffered the effects of the horrible disease; however, in 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt decided to take action and provided funding for research. With those funds, Jonas Salk was able to develop a vaccine in 1955. However, before it could be implemented, it needed to be tested. Two million people volunteered to receive the vaccine, and through a sample provided, researchers discovered a cure for polio.

Each piece of the puzzle was important, and each did their part. Beginning with a large piece of providing funding, to the two million smaller pieces that volunteered to receive the vaccine, polio couldn't have been eradicated without both. Solving climate change is similar, and we need everyone large and small to do their part to eradicate the threat of global warming.

Change Your Breakfast, Change The World

What if I told you that cows were killing us? Okay, cows aren't actually killing us, but factory farming is! The animal farming industry is one of the biggest industries responsible for releasing harmful greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Foer explains that since the origin of factory farming in the 1960s, large amounts of animals have been concentrated into plots of land that have detrimental effects on the environment.

For instance, to provide enough space for all of these animals, farmers are forced to cut down trees to make room for them. Simply put, this type of farming leads to deforestation in which trees are burned down in large quantities releasing large amounts of carbon dioxide into the air. The amount of carbon dioxide released into the air from deforestation is equal to the carbon dioxide released by all of the cars and trucks in the world. However, since all of these trees are burning to the ground, there's nothing available to absorb all this carbon dioxide!

But carbon dioxide isn't the worst part of animal farming. Other gases are released that are even more harmful to the environment through the gases released from the animal's urine and manure. With the number of animals needed on these factory farms, the amount of nitrous oxide that is released from these animals also increases significantly. Additionally, methane is released through the animal's belches and flatulence. Methane has 34 times the "global warming potential" of carbon dioxide! From the 1960s to the late 1990s, when factory farms became more prominent, the amount of methane and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere has increased more than it ever has in history.

So how can we combat this increase in harmful gases being released into the atmosphere? Remember every piece of the puzzle is important, no matter how small. So Foer has a solution that is both achievable and can make a big difference. Eat less meat and fewer animal products like milk and eggs. Of course, fossil fuels are important but even if we were to stop

using fossil fuels today, it would still take over 20 years to use alternative energy. So, let's focus on the animal industry for now as we can implement this change more quickly and with less sacrifice.

You can immediately change the amount of dairy and meat that you consume, and with an increase in vegan options, it's much easier to implement a vegan diet nowadays. But is going completely vegan a viable option for everyone? Critics believe it's not. Some critics argue that it is elitist to promote veganism and assume that everyone can afford this particular diet as vegan options are typically more expensive. However, Foer recognizes the value of meat that people place in their diets. People rely on animal protein and would scoff at having to give up their favorite steak or burger, let's not forget the bacon! So, the solution Foer introduces is only consuming meat products at dinnertime. This allows people to still do their part in helping the environment while still indulging in their favorite meaty meals.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future have proven that those who stop eating animal products for lunch and breakfast actually have a smaller carbon footprint than people implementing an average vegetarian diet. This is due to the amount of egg, cheese, and milk products that many vegetarians consume throughout the day.

Never Give Up

Over the decades, humans have been stripping the Earth of its natural resources quicker than we can replenish them. Much like borrowing more money than we can pay back, we are rapidly entering into a phase called “runaway climate change” in which we will be unable to repay our debts. Through deforestation, we have been leaving the Earth with fewer resources to absorb the harmful gases that we continue to emit into the atmosphere and soon the effects will become irreversible.

For example, the ice caps are melting. We hear this all the time, but what does it mean? Ice cools the Earth in many ways, one of which is by reflecting the sun. Their bright white color reflects the sun while the dark sea absorbs that heat. So, if the ice caps are melting then the dark sea continues to absorb the heat and warm the Earth. The more ice melts, the hotter our Earth becomes, thus creating a vicious cycle that seems never-ending.

We are already seeing the effects of global warming through the increase of powerful hurricanes and devastating floods, and Foer argues that these natural disasters will only worsen. So what can we do? It’s easy to give up, to allow the Earth to continue to suffer by the hands of humans. But we must fight the war, we must solve the puzzle, and we must continue on our quest to heal our Earth. We have an obligation to save our future generations, to save the poorer generations who suffer the most. We are humans, we can think rationally and make ethical changes. What we do now will be written down in history books, or at least on the internet, and we will be judged for our actions. We need every piece of the puzzle, both big and small, and by consuming fewer animal products, you can do your part in healing our Earth.

Final Summary

Climate change is vague and scary. We hear about global warming and about the ice caps melting, so we try and do our part. We stop using plastic straws, we drive hybrid cars, we buy organic, and we recycle, all in an attempt to reduce our carbon footprint. And while all of these practices are great, they are small pieces of a larger puzzle. We need to implement habits and practices that become bigger pieces. However, many people don't realize the harmful effects of industrial farming which make up a large portion of harmful gases that release into the atmosphere. By reducing your animal product consumption, you can lessen your carbon footprint significantly. When we consume meat, milk, eggs, cheese, and other animal products, we contribute to the industrial farming practices that make up 25% of the world's pollution of greenhouse gases. And while large corporations play a significant role in global warming, you as a consumer have the power to support or not support large corporations. Reduce your animal product consumption, force the large corporations to cut back on their harmful emissions, and begin to heal the planet.



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