

2016 Greenfield Peace Writing Scholarship Honorable Mention

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The Assembly Line

India's Ganges River took in a few outsiders in the 1980s: 25,000 snapping turtles. In Hindu culture, the deceased are cremated and the ashes scattered in the Ganges. It is a holy river, and although its ebbs and flows carry spiritual value for the people of India, it also serves as a drinking and bathing source. Like the elusive fountain of youth, everyone flocks to the river.

But in India's population of 1.2 billion, poverty runs rampant. There are families that cannot afford to buy wood to fully cremate the deceased, resulting in partially burned bodies. Enter the thousands of snapping turtles. Faced with a growing water pollution problem, as the incomplete cremations were still sent to the Ganges, the Indian government began releasing snapping turtles to devour the leftover corpses.

The poverty of many Indians led not only to their inability to fulfill cultural traditions but also an environmental disaster that required expensive action from the government. As with air pollution and accelerated climate change, prevention of pollution is simpler and cheaper. If we do not learn how to treat our current climate situation while preventing future crises, we may end up with rivers full of snapping turtles and oceans weighed down by the trash of products past. Where there is poverty, there are fields ravaged by slash-and-burn farming and undrinkable rivers filled with the faces of the past. Where there is war, there first was a population fighting for water amidst a drought. Where there is a society plagued by affluenza and cutthroat consumerism, there is an ocean quietly filling up with the side effects of the disease.

The rise of industry ingrained our notorious habits of production and consumption, production and consumption, and we forgot about the third step of the life cycle: disposal. As Jeffrey Eugenides wrote in his novel Middlesex,

"People stopped being people in 1913. That was the year Henry Ford put his cars on rollers and made his workers adopt the speed of the assembly line... The adaptation has been passed down: we've all inherited it to some degree, so that we plug right into joy-sticks and remotes, to repetitive motions of a hundred kinds."

Humans have been unable to adapt to the exponential population growth, to the demands of the environment, to the religious radicalism that Anderson Cooper covers every night. We are living on an assembly line, content with placing one screw in one hole, with filling the Ganges River with more snapping turtles every year.

All problems are knit together, and I am convinced that their solutions are as well. When sustainable farming practices are introduced, not only will there be more abundant harvests across the globe, but soil degradation and cultural eutrophication of rivers and lakes will gradually phase out. When the United States and China switch over to alternative energy sources, it will create an influx of much needed jobs while reducing carbon emissions. Those in developing countries know that climate and environment dictate what, if anything, is on the table at dinner time. But the global wealth gap creates an oblivious attitude in those of the western world, while the impoverished face the consequences of our production-consumption attitude.

We have been riding the assembly line of unsustainable living for too long, causing increasing poverty and international conflict. If we want to restore populations, reduce the displacement of “climate refugees,” and make clean water available to all, then we must jump off the belt of mindless movement. Each action, rather than being one of dutiful repetition, must be one of intent and ingenuity.