

One New Book for the Preacher

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Bill McKibben *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself out?* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2019)

Last fall a friend who is a careful reader of *The New York Review of Books* called to my attention Alan Weisman's book review article entitled "Burning Down the House." It was a thoughtful analysis of both David Wallace-Wells's volume, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, and Bill McKibben's book that is the subject of this review. Two particular lines in "Burning Down the House" caught my attention and sent me straight out the door to get a copy of *Falter*.

The first was the summary account of the purpose of *The Uninhabitable Earth*, to-wit: "This book is meant to scare the hell out of us, because the alarm sounded by NASA's Jim Hansen in his electrifying 1988 congressional testimony on how we've trashed the atmospheres still hasn't sufficiently registered." The second was a quote from McKibben's book that Weisman takes to be its final, main point: "Let's assume we're capable of acting together to do remarkable things" (p. 202).

I had previously downloaded *The Uninhabitable Earth* to my Kindle app and dabbled in it. So, it had already scared the hell out of me. As one might imagine, a word about acting together to do remarkable things was a welcome ray of hope. That's what sent me straightway to a bricks and mortar bookstore so I could have it in my hands to ponder—and perhaps to hope.

The overarching metaphor of *Falter*, as its subtitle makes plain, is that of the "human game" and whether or not it has played itself out, whether or not it will continue to be played. McKibben's journalistic craft has taught him ways of effective communication that are artfully deployed through this metaphor and others. Thirty-five years ago, Robert Heilbroner wrote a book that posed a similar question, absent the metaphor, in a volume more aridly entitled *An Inquiry Into the Human Prospect*. In the language of 1974, Heilbroner put the question this way: "Is there hope for man?"

McKibben restates the matter adding to the metaphor of the "human game" that of "leverage." "Over our short career as a species, human history has risen and fallen, gotten stuck and raced ahead, stagnated and flourished. Only now, though, have we achieved enough leverage that we can bring it to an end, both by carelessness and by design." McKibben goes on from making this point to showing how the size of the board on which the human game is being played is shrinking—not shrinking in the absolute sense of the space earth occupies, but in the relative sense of the space of earth that is available for robust human habitation.

The leverage that works against the prospect of the human game continuing has to do with hyper individualism and a repudiation of altruism, both of which McKibben believes have found their way into the warp and woof of the modern U.S. economy through the influence of the novelist Ayn Rand, celebrating a view of humanity and society in which solidarity and community are negative values and in which altruism is "perhaps the dirtiest word in Rand's lexicon." Indeed Rand spoke of altruism as

“the poison of death in the blood of western civilization.”

Such a view of humans as “only individuals, that ‘there is no such thing as society,’ that we owe each other nothing” has gained pre-eminent leverage in contemporary American life through the outsized influence of politicians and of corporate leaders who frequently and explicitly have expressed their fealty to Rand’s vision. McKibben observes that men who gained power in the 1980s, ideologically dominated by Randian notions, were in control at precisely the moment when the most damage could be done to a shift in climate and when new forms of inequality could be made more or less permanent.

But it is not only that the political and traditional corporate sectors have been dominated by a view of humanity that is inadequate. The same influences are dominating the more recently emerged tech industries which, though they value their own forms of community, are “deeply attached to the idea that they should be left alone to do their thing: create value, build apps, change the world” without any interference of someone trying to stop (or regulate) them. This comes to focus for McKibben in emerging possibilities of genetic engineering that raises the prospect not simply of repairing defects in existing human beings, but more fundamentally of changing humans before they are born. Coupled with strong forms of Artificial Intelligence and the bizarre challenge to human mortality via cryogenics incubating in the brave new technology sector (a company named Alcor currently has 147 human beings on ice), McKibben suggests that “as climate change has shrunk the effective size of our planet, the creation of designer babies [and untrammelled AI and efforts to defeat death] shrink[s] the effective range of our souls.”

But how, then, is this a book about hope. The key is found in the last section of *Falter* that admittedly offers only a chastened hope. McKibben specifically speaks of “an outside chance” to “keep global warming and technological mania within some limits and, in the process, keep the human game recognizable, even robust.” To be sure, he has not only reiterated the challenge to nature via climate change that he has focused for many of us over three decades; he has also discerned the challenge to human nature that the technological mania presents. But his hopefulness is supported by two “technologies” that he has experienced richly in recent years: solar panels and the non-violent movement.

McKibben says that though he has long understood the benefits of solar panels, he didn’t really grasp the power they have to change lives until he recently journeyed to rural Africa on a reporting trip. There he discovered a rapid spread of renewable energy without the environmental dangers and huge expense of power plants and grids—for “in communities that had been unlit, uncooled, and uninformed by fossil fuel for two hundred years, solar panels were turning on the energy overnight.” And what has been good for Africa can be good for the rest of the world, he argues, citing a Stanford study that makes clear “that every major nation on earth could be supplying 80 percent of its power from renewables by 2030, at prices far cheaper than paying the damage for climate change.”

The other element of McKibben’s practical hope is nonviolence, by which he does “not mean only, or even mainly, the dramatic acts of civil disobedience that end in jail or a beating,” but rather “the full sweep of organizing aimed at building mass movements whose goal is to change the zeitgeist and hence, the course of history.” At this juncture McKibben’s theological commitments become more obvious as he

notes that though religion's relation to the nonviolence movement is complex, it has in fact been led in significant moments by religious figures and buoyed by spiritual insights about "turning the other cheek, of taking on unearned suffering, of engaging our sympathy for the weak instead of our truckling admiration for the strung."

The reference to how nonviolence can contribute to changing the zeitgeist points to the most pertinent elements of *Falter* for the preacher. Recall that the zeitgeist that has controlled much of politics and the corporate economy since the 1980s—and the technological industry more recently—is that of Ayn Rand's hyper individualism that abhors altruism, interconnectedness, and any limits on one's creative energy. And then remember core elements of the life of Christian discipleship that embrace the mind of Christ, by doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regarding others as better than yourselves; looking not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (cf. Philippians 2:3-5).

Preaching can contribute to the practical hope that McKibben describes by reviving the tradition of apologetic preaching, preaching that unmask the spiritual vacuity of convictions that have dominated our common life, leading us toward ecological destruction and technological hubris. Such apologetic preaching can proclaim Gospel convictions about God's embrace of the human family as an oikos, a household, built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Christ Jesus being himself the chief cornerstone. Gradually, but surely, such Gospel preaching will kindle hope rooted in a truer and deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Thus will a spirit of the times be built that can recognize with McKibben that though there's a time and place for growth, our time and place needs maturity, balance, and smaller scale that can protect, repair, and safeguard the good life God intends for all that God has made.