

# The Sky's the Limit

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## The Demanding Gifts of 2012

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As this wild year comes to an end, we return to the season of gifts. Here's the gift you're not going to get soon: any conventional version of Paradise. You know, the place where nothing much happens and nothing is demanded of you. The gifts you've already been given in 2012 include a struggle over the [fate of the Earth](#). This is probably not exactly what you asked for, and I wish it were otherwise -- but to do good work, to be necessary, to have something to give: these are the true gifts. And at least there's still a struggle ahead of us, not just doom and despair.

Think of 2013 as the Year Zero in the battle over climate change, one in which we are going to have to win big, or lose bigger. This is a terrible thing to say, but not as terrible as the reality that you can see in footage of glaciers vanishing, images of the [entire surface](#) of the Greenland Ice Shield [melting](#) this summer, [maps](#) of Europe's future in which just being in southern Europe when the heat hits will be catastrophic, let alone in more equatorial realms.

For millions of years, this world has been a great gift to nearly everything living on it, a planet whose atmosphere, temperature, air, water, seasons, and weather were precisely calibrated to allow us -- the big us, including forests and oceans, species large and small -- to flourish. (Or rather, it was we who were calibrated to its generous, even bounteous, terms.) And that gift is now being destroyed for the [benefit](#) of a few members of a single species.

The Earth we evolved to inhabit is turning into something more turbulent and unreliable at a pace too fast for most living things to adapt to. This means we are losing crucial aspects of our most irreplaceable, sublime gift, and some of us are suffering the loss now -- from sea snails whose shells are [dissolving](#) in acidified oceans to Hurricane Sandy survivors facing [black mold](#) and [bad bureaucracy](#) to horses [starving](#) nationwide because a devastating drought has pushed the cost of hay so high

to [Bolivian](#) farmers [failing](#) because the glaciers that watered their valleys have largely melted.

This is not just an issue for environmentalists who love rare species and remote places: if you care about [children](#), [health](#), [poverty](#), [farmers](#), [food](#), [hunger](#), or the [economy](#), you really have no choice but to care about climate change.

The reasons for acting may be somber, but the fight is a gift and an honor. What it will give you in return is meaning, purpose, hope, your best self, some really good company, and the satisfaction of being part of victories also to come. But what victory means needs to be imagined on a whole new scale as the news worsens.

### **Unwrapping the Victories**

“Unhappy is the land that needs a hero,” Galileo famously says in Bertold Brecht’s play about that renegade scientist, but at least, the hero has the possibility of doing something about that unhappiness, as, for instance, the [Sierra Club](#) has. It’s led the fight against big coal, helping prevent 168 coal-powered plants from opening and retiring 125 dirty coal plants. The aim of its Beyond Coal campaign is to retire all 522 such plants in the United States, which would be a colossal triumph.

Its victories also capture what a lot of our greenest gifts look like: nothing. The regions that [weren’t fracked](#), the coal plants that [didn’t open](#), the mountaintops that [weren’t blasted](#) by mining corporations, the children who didn’t get [asthma](#) or [mercury poisoning](#) from coal emissions, the carbon that [stayed](#) in the Earth and never made it into the atmosphere. The Keystone XL tar sands pipeline bringing the [dirtiest](#) of [dirty energy](#) from Canada to the Gulf Coast might have already opened without the activists who [ringed](#) the [White House](#) and committed themselves across the continent.

In eastern Texas, for instance, extraordinary acts of civil disobedience have been going on continuously since August, including three blockaders who this month [crawled inside](#) a length of the three-foot-in-diameter pipeline and refused to leave. People have been using their bodies, getting in the way of heavy equipment, and going to jail in an effort to prevent the pipeline from being built. A lot of them are the same kind of robust young people who kept the Occupy encampments going earlier in 2012, but [great-grandmothers](#), old men, and [middle-aged people](#) like me have been crucial players, too.

Meanwhile in British Columbia, where pipeline profiteers were looking into alternate routes to transport their climate-destroying products abroad, [members](#) of the Wet’suwet’en nation [evicted](#) surveyors and politely declared war on them. In Ohio and

New York, the fight against fracking is going strong. Across the Atlantic, France has [banned](#) fracking, while Germany has made [astounding progress](#) toward using carbon-neutral energy sources. If solar works there, we have no excuse. And as Ellen Cantarow [wrote](#) at TomDispatch of the anti-fracking movement in New York State, "Caroline, a small hamlet in Tompkins County (population 3,282), is the second town in the state to get 100% of its electricity through wind power and one of the most recent to pass a fracking ban."

Everywhere people are at work to build a better world in which we -- and some of the beauty of this world -- will be guaranteed to survive. Everywhere they are at war with the forces threatening us and the planet. I usually avoid war metaphors, but this time it's barely a metaphor. Our side isn't violent, but it is engaged in a battle, and people are putting their bodies on the line and their lives behind the cause. The other side is intent on maximizing its profit at the cost of nearly everything.

My father, a high-school student during the Second World War, followed the campaigns closely with pins on a wall map to represent troops and battles. You could map North America that way now and see, when you added up the struggles against [drilling in the Arctic](#), fracking, mountaintop removal, and the various other depredations of big coal and big oil, that remarkable things are already being done. In this war, resistance has been going on for a long time, so overlooked by the mainstream media it might as well be as underground as the French Resistance back then.

A lot of it is on a small scale, but if you connect the pieces you get a big picture of the possible, the hopeful, and the powerful. Think of each of those small acts of defending the Earth as a gift to you. And think of your own power, a gift always latent within you that demands you give back.

If you're reading this, you're already in the conversation. No matter who you are, or where, there is something for you to do: educate yourself and others, write letters, organize or join local groups, participate in blockades and demonstrations, work on [divestment](#) from oil corporations (if you're connected to a university), and make this issue central to the conversations and politics of our time.

I've started working directly on various projects with [350.org](#), whose global impact and reinvention of activist tactics I've long admired. Its creator [Bill McKibben](#) has evolved from a merely great writer to a pivotal climate organizer and a gift to all of us.

The world you live in is not a given; much of what is best in it has been built through the struggles of passionate activists over the last centuries. They won us many freedoms and protected many beauties. Count those gifts among your growing heap.

### **Drawing the Line**

Here's another gift you've already received: the lines in the battle to come are being ever more clearly drawn. Clarity is a huge asset. It helps when you know where you stand, who stands with you -- and who against you.

We have returned to class war in conflicts around the world -- including the [Chicago Teacher's Strike](#) of 2012 and the [Walmart protests](#) in this country (which led to 1,197 actions nationwide in support of that company's underpaid workers on [Black Friday](#)), as well as the great student uprisings in [Quebec](#) and [Mexico City](#).

There has, of course, been a war against working people and the poor for decades, only we didn't call it "class war" when just the rich were fighting hard. We called it corporate globalization, the race to the bottom, tax cuts and social-service cuts, privatization, neoliberalism, and a hundred other things. Now that the poor are fighting back, we can call it by its old name. Perhaps what the conservatives have forgotten is that if you return us to the grim divides and dire poverty of the nineteenth century, you might also be returning us to the revolutionary spirit of that century.

This time, though, it's not only about work and money. The twenty-first century class war is engulfing the natural world on which everything rests. We can see how clearly the great environmental battle of our time is about money, about who benefits from climate destruction (the very few) and who loses (everyone else for all time to come and nearly every living thing). This year, Hurricane Sandy and a crop-destroying, [Mississippi-River-withering](#) drought that had [more than 60%](#) of the nation in its grip made it clear that climate change is here and it's now and it hurts.

In 2012, many have come to see that climate change is an economic issue, and that economics is a moral and ecological issue. Why so little has been done about the state of the climate in the past three decades has everything to do with who profits. Not long ago, too many Americans were on the fence, swayed by the [oil company propaganda war](#) about whether climate change even exists.

However, this month, [according to](#) the Associated Press, "Four out of every five Americans said climate change will be a serious problem for the United States if nothing is done about it." That widespread belief suggests that potentially broad support now

exists and may be growing for a movement that makes climate change -- the broiling of the Earth -- central, urgent, and everybody's business.

Ten years ago too, many people thought the issue could be addressed, if at all, through renunciatory personal virtue in private life: buying Priuses, compact fluorescents, and the like. Now most people who care at all know that the necessary changes won't happen through consumer choice alone. What's required are pitched battles against the most powerful (and profitable) entities on Earth, the [oil and energy companies](#) and the [politicians](#) who [serve](#) them instead of us.

That clarity matters and those conflicts are already underway but need to grow. That's our world right now, clear as a cold winter day, sharp as broken glass.

### **Putting Aside Paradise**

When I remember the world I grew up in, I see the parts of it that were Paradise -- and I also see all the little hells. I was a kid in California when it had the [best public education system](#) in the world and universities were nearly free and the economy was not so hard on people and the rich paid a lot of taxes. The weather was predictable and we weren't thinking about it changing any time before the next ice age.

That was, however, the same California where domestic violence was not something the law took an interest in, where gays and lesbians were openly discriminated against, where almost all elected officials were white men, where people hadn't even learned to ask questions about exclusion and racism.

Which is to say, paradises are always partial and, when you look backward, it's worth trying to see the whole picture. The rights gained over the past 35 years were fought for, hard, while so much of what was neglected -- including public education, tuition, wages, banking regulation, corporate power, and working hours -- slid into hell.

When you fight, you sometimes win; when you don't, you always lose.

Here's another gift we have right now: the young. There are quite a lot of heroes among them, including the [Dreamers](#) or Dream Act activists standing up for immigrants; the [occupiers](#) who challenged Wall Street in its home and elsewhere around the country, became the [unofficial first responders](#) who [aided](#) the victims of Hurricane Sandy, and have camped out on the [doorstep](#) of Goldman Sachs's CEO these last few months; the young who blockaded that tar-sands pipeline, supplied the tremendous vitality of

350.org globally, and have just begun to organize to pressure universities to [divest from](#) fossil fuel companies on 192 campuses across the country.

In 2012, they rose up from Egypt and Russia to Canada and Chile. They are fighting for themselves and their future, but for us, too. They have remarkably few delusions about how little our world is prepared to offer most of them. They know that the only gifts they'll get are the ones they can wrestle free from the powers that be.

Paradise is overrated. We dream of the cessation of misery, but who really wants a world without difficulty? We learn through mistakes and suffering. These are the minerals that harden our bones and the milestones on the roads we travel. And we are made to travel, not to sit still.

Take pleasure in the route. There is terrible suffering of many kinds in many places, but solidarity consists of doing something about it, not being miserable. In this heroic age, survival is also going to require seeing what fragments of paradise are still around us, what still blooms, what's still unimaginably beautiful about rivers, oceans, and evening skies, what exhilaration there is in witnessing the stubbornness of small children and their discovery of a world we think we know. All these are gifts as well.

### **Ice Breaking Up**

As you gear up for 2013, don't forget that 2012 has been an extraordinary year. Who ever thought we'd see Aung San Suu Kyi elected to office in her native Burma and free to travel after so many years of house arrest? Who expected that the United Nations would suddenly vote to give Palestine observer state status? Who foresaw that the silly misinterpretations of Mayan prophecy would be overtaken by the Mayan Zapatistas, who [rose once again](#) last Friday? (Meanwhile, Canada's Native people started a [dynamic movement](#) around indigenous rights and the environment that has led to everything from [flash-mob dances](#) in an Edmonton Mall to demonstrations in Ottawa.)

Who thought that Occupy Wall Street, roundly dismissed by the mainstream on its one-year anniversary, would spawn two superhero projects, Occupy Sandy and [Strike Debt](#)? (Who among the police officers clubbing and tear-gassing the young Occupiers in 2011 thought that a year later these would be the people with the power and the generosity to come to their aid when a climate-fed storm wrecked their homes?) Keep it in mind: the future is not predictable. Sometimes, the world changes suddenly and in profound ways. Sometimes we make it do so.

Steven Spielberg's new film *Lincoln* is a reminder about what it means to fight for what matters most. Permanently freeing five million slaves and abolishing slavery forever meant renouncing a cheap power source in use for more than 200 years. Doing so was initially inconceivable and then a matter of indifference except to the slaves themselves and small groups of abolitionists. Next, it was daringly radical, then partisan, with the whole nation taking sides, the fuel for a terrible war. Finally, it was the law of the land. Today, we need to give up on, or at least radically reduce our reliance on, another set of power sources: oil, coal, and natural gas.

This is, among other things, a war of the imagination: the carbon profiteers and their politicians are hoping you don't connect the dots, or imagine the various futures we could make or they could destroy, or grasp the remarkably beautiful and complex ways the natural world has worked to our benefit and is now being sabotaged, or discover your conscience and voice, or ever picture how different it could all be, how different it will need to be.

They are already at war against the wellbeing of our Earth. Their greed has no limits, their imagination nothing but limits. Fight back. You have the power. It's one of your gifts.

*Rebecca Solnit has seen salmon migrate and polar bears nap, and she's seen blockaders defend foreclosed homes and shut down oil refineries: all of it was beautiful. She is the author of [A Paradise Built in Hell](#), among many other works. She has been writing [TomDispatch's](#) year-end essays since 2004 and she hopes to see you in the streets in 2013 and at the White House on February 18th.*