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Dear Fellow Citizen:

RESPECT is a word very much in fashion these days. Everyone, it seems, wants to be respected even more than to be loved. Failure to show respect can be fatal in inner cities where a stray glance, word or even unwelcome presence can lead to an impulsive shooting. Honor killings based on reputation in the community have long standing in societies with rigid codes of behavior. In some cultures, close relatives feel honor-bound to set you on fire or slit your throat lest their reputations be besmirched by exercise of personal freedom.

Why have we become so sensitive to affronts to dignity, but so oblivious to the lack of respect so many show to the fragile planet on which humankind depends for its existence? Will our advanced industrial societies establish a civilization at the expense of a thoroughly denatured planet? Eileen Crist raises the question in her book, *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation*. "What is deeply repugnant about such a civilization is not its potential for self-annihilation, but its totalitarian conversion of the natural world into a domain of resources to serve a human supremacist way of life, and the consequent destruction of all the intrinsic wealth of its natural places, beings, and elements."

Is this warning an overreach? An admittedly extreme confirmation of Crist's fear can be found in some statements by those who accept literally Old Testament language about mankind's rights on earth. "God gave us the earth," said conservative commentator Ann Coulter (*Hannity & Colmes*, 6/20/01). "We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" So outrageous was this outburst that many have questioned whether it is just an urban legend. Not so (you can Google it).

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Where is the respect, when air, water and soil are so compromised that human health and life itself are imperiled? When was the last time you saw TV coverage from China's big cities that did not show clouds of man-made smog so pervasive that millions of Chinese have their lives cut short every year? Who can look without revulsion at maps of the Gulf of Mexico showing a spreading dead zone at the mouth of the Mississippi River?

Religion and environmentalism should not be seen as incompatible. Some religious leaders now equate dominion with stewardship. Pope Francis, in a book written in 2010 when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires, said that mankind sometimes lost *respect* (emphasis added) for nature: "Then ecological problems arise, like global warming." (He has some persuading to do. Only 42 percent of Americans agree that global warming is mainly man-made; many others think it a hoax.) The consequences of poor stewardship were not lost on Bible Belt survivors of the Dust Bowl years in the nation's heartland. They saw the great black clouds of blowing dust as God's wrath over farmers' greedily plowing up native buffalo grass in order to plant ever bigger wheat harvests.

The close emotional link between nature and religion was movingly expressed by Diane Ackerman in *The Moon by Whale Light* (1991). "That label (nature writer) suggests that nature is somehow separate from our doings, that nature does not contain us, that it's possible to step

outside nature,” she wrote. “Still, the label is a dignified one, and implies a pastoral ethic that we share, a devotion to the keenly observed detail, and a sense of sacredness. There is a way of beholding nature that is itself a form of prayer.”

Nevertheless, religion and science remain estranged. The scientific consensus on global warming and projections of future rises in temperatures and sea levels are disputed at every turn. One senses a growing despair in the scientific community. “It’s human nature to deal only with what’s on our plate today,” says glacier expert Lonnie Thompson (*National Geographic*, Jan. 2013). “...When I go back to Quelccaya (glacier) in Peru, where I’ve been 26 times, it’s like visiting a patient dying of cancer. You know there’s no hope; you can only watch it shrink away. So my work has become a salvage operation—to capture history before it disappears forever.”

Our species’ high intelligence does not always welcome bad news. Almost no media coverage was given to a recent “call to action” signed by 520 scientists from 44 nations that addressed climate disruption, extinction of species, imperiled ecosystems, pollution, and population growth. Called the *Scientific Consensus on Maintaining Humanity’s Life Support Systems in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Information for Policy Makers*,” it warned that, “By the time today’s children reach middle age, it is extremely likely that Earth’s life-support systems, critical to human prosperity and existence, will be irretrievably damaged by the magnitude, global extent, and combination of these human-caused environmental stressors, unless we take concrete, immediate actions....”

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So where’s the respect? First, we have to accept the limitations of growth on a finite planet, one protected by a narrow band of atmosphere beneath which pulsates a wealth of animal and plant life that took eons to develop but can be compromised or destroyed in a few generations.

Our sophisticated space telescopes tell us how vast and unwelcoming the universe really is, and how unlikely it is that mankind can ever hope to populate any place but Earth. The planets we have discovered so far in our own or other galaxies are too hot, cold, dry or remote to populate. Cosmological optimism has taken hits as we learn how forbidding our Sun’s planets would be to human settlement, and how far it is to other worlds. One planet orbiting the star system Alpha Centauri B, is 4.4 light years from Earth, and even the planet’s existence recently was called into question. Human travel to other worlds awaits a new physics.

We will have to make do with the world we inhabit. Assuming we care at all about future generations, we will have to come to a new understanding of our planet and the short-term thinking that keeps our species from dealing with existential matters. We did just that as a nation in the 1970s when, following the first Earth Day, Congress passed in bipartisan fashion legislation to clean air and water, and protect endangered species. But Nicholas Lemann points out (“When the Earth Moved,” *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2013) that there has been no major environmental legislation since 1990, when President George H.W. Bush signed a bill aimed at reducing acid rain.

What if we continue to do nothing to show respect for our earthly home? Dennis Meadows, one of the authors of the Club of Rome’s “Limits to Growth” 40 years ago, recently described the matter in stark terms. “People always say: We need to save the planet. No, we do not. The planet is going to save itself already. It always has done. Sometimes it took millions of years, but it happened. We should not be worried about the planet, but about the human species.” That’s showing respect for Earth, all right, but not with the outcome most people would like.

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