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Afzaal, A. (2023). *Teaching at twilight: The meaning of education in the age of collapse.* Cascade Books.

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Teaching at Twilight is unlike any other education book that I have ever read in my 42 years in education. The author, Ahmed Afzaal, explains that college professors suffer from a crisis of meaning because they are not preparing graduates for “the ongoing and unstoppable unraveling of our global civilization due to ecological breakdowns” (p. 1), but instead are preparing them to perpetuate the same kind of civilization that is causing ecosystems and thus societies to unravel. The book ends with an urgent message: “The responsibility for leading humanity through the twilight of civilization now rests with educators, simply because of the nature of their vocation and the moral authority that comes with it” (p. 216).



The book has two main themes. First, the systems and habits of modern civilization are unsustainable—and therefore inevitably cause ecological and societal collapse. Second, to make teaching a meaningful vocation in the age of worsening breakdown, we must teach students about collapse and how humanity can achieve the softest landing possible.

To the first point, the author is on solid scientific ground in asserting that worsening ecological and societal breakdown is inevitable in the coming decades. Decades of research and warnings from scientists have repeatedly documented the dangerous and steadily-worsening nature of man-made global warming and climate disruption (e.g., IPCC, 2023), chemical and plastic pollution (e.g., Morrison et al., 2022; Naidu et al., 2021), deteriorating health of ecosystems (e.g., IPBES, 2019), depletion of groundwater (e.g., Jasechko, 2024) and rapid loss of biodiversity (e.g., Finn et al., 2023; also see Fletcher et al., 2024; Ripple et al. 2017). Each aspect of this multifaceted ecological crisis poses existential threats to humanity.

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Teaching at Twilight repeatedly and correctly splashes cold water on false hopes of silver-bullet solutions. For example, even if we solved the climate crisis, we would still experience worsening ecological and societal collapse until we solve humanity's vast ecological overshoot. Similarly, for those hoping capitalism will save us, Afzaal explains why capitalism is geared to pursue the perpetual growth that makes overshoot and destruction of nature much worse, not better. For techno-optimists dreaming that whiz-bang technologies will save us, *Teaching at Twilight* emphasizes that technologies always set in motion two causal chains—a short-term causal chain with pleasurable benefits for humans and a long-term causal chain that creates serious and often-unsustainable ecological harms. Thus, creating more man-made stuff—no matter how clever those gadgets may be—steadily increases the total degree of entropy or disorder on the planet, thus pushing us closer to catastrophic collapse.

Afzaal argues that the cosmology of western civilization led us toward collapse because it falsely taught us that we were separate from “nature” and had the right to dominate it, and because it is dominated by practical rationality and left-brain forms of attention. Citing the work of psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, *Teaching at Twilight* concludes that modern civilization was doomed to self-destruct by destroying Earth's ecosystems because we put the myopic forms of attention characteristic of the left brain in the driver's seat for society. That way of thinking notices the short-term benefits of our so-called “solutions” but lacks the big-picture perspective needed to notice the long-term harms those actions also cause. Modern civilization's wrong-way tendencies were then reinforced in schools and universities that privileged academic disciplines that emphasize left-brain forms of attention (e.g., STEM, business, marketing, engineering) while often denigrating disciplines that reflect the strengths of right-brain forms of attention (e.g., ecology, philosophy, religion, Indigenous studies). Such a narrow-minded education sustains and expands a doomed form of civilization while leaving graduates blind to the fact that this industrialized capitalist civilization is inherently unsustainable and self-terminating.

Unlike most books on these issues, *Teaching at Twilight* is not focused on solving the global metacrisis. Rather, the key point is, “In the twilight of civilization, what can be done to ensure that the Collapse proceeds in a peaceful, humane, and equitable manner (p. 215)?” The author concludes that to accomplish this task, we must privilege the big-picture thinking characteristic of right-brain forms of attention over left-brain forms of attention. Although this book doesn't attempt to explain how such a monumental undertaking might work, changing education not just in college but at every grade level would be essential to create such a transformation of our worldviews and mental habits. If achieved, this would turn modern civilization on its head, making us think, feel, and live in the lower-tech but more sustainable and equitable ways that have long been characteristic of many Indigenous tribes.

Regarding the book's second theme—making teaching a meaningful vocation in the age of worsening breakdown, Afzaal emphasizes that the proper purpose of education is “to promote the welfare and wellbeing of the younger generation” (p. 74), and that the value underlying that purpose is love. However, he notes, we can't

possibly promote the wellbeing of the younger generation unless we teach them about the unraveling that is underway and the most constructive responses to it. This is the very heart of the book: As much as we may wish these crises were not occurring or wish we didn't have to teach about them, education can no longer be a meaningful profession unless we teach younger generations about the crises that will dominate the future. Thus, despite acknowledging many obstacles to teaching about humanity's predicament, *Teaching at Twilight* argues that "the college curriculum should reflect the best available understanding of the challenges that the current generation of students is most likely to face" (p. 123). Given the powerful, formative effects of early learning, it would be difficult to argue that the same statement doesn't apply to all education, beginning with the youngest of children.

But why are educators in general and university professors in particular so important in teaching about the crises we face? As Afzaal explains, only educators and independent journalists have societal roles that are well-suited to teaching others about the coming collapse and best possible responses. However, regarding the prospect of educators fulfilling that duty, he warns that "No significant change is going to happen unless a significant number of educators undergo a profound shift in consciousness (p. 177)." Critically, because of their short-term self-interests in business-as-usual, we can't count on business or political leaders to either inform the public about the true nature of our predicament or to promote the needed changes in society. The author also dismisses educational administrators as likely leaders in this effort, noting that their primary role is maintaining the stability of the current but crisis-blind educational system. Thus, society needs educators, albeit newly-enlightened ones, to spread the truth about the nature of humanity's predicament and the best paths forward. Ultimately, *Teaching at Twilight* calls upon teachers to reshape their teaching and the whole vocation of education to reflect the tough realities our graduates will face.

A few additions would have strengthened this important and profound book. First, given that most people don't yet realize that modern civilization itself is what's unsustainable, it would have helped if Afzaal provided more examples of the how the features of modern civilization that we enjoy in the short run (e.g., pesticides, high-beef diets) inevitably cause unsustainable long-term harms to the climate and ecosystems that sustain us. Second, while skillfully addressing the ecological harms that industrialized capitalism and consumerist lifestyles cause, Afzaal didn't explain the ecologically harmful growth imperative built into competitive nation states. Finally, upon contacting Dr. Afzaal, he indicated wishing that he included more information on the skills we should be teaching our students given humanity's predicament. He is currently in the process of planning a sequel book to explain how educational goals should change given these crises.

Beyond the excellent content and thoughtful structure, three features of *Teaching at Twilight* worked well for me. First, Afzaal's calm tone, informal "I-you" writing, and non-technical language made complex and sensitive topics easier to process. Second, he included short, bulleted summaries at the end of each chapter. Given the book's breadth and challenging ideas, those summaries helped me remember the book's key points. Third, Afzaal liberally sprinkled reflection breaks

throughout, asking readers to reflect on their thoughts and process their feelings about the painful truths that *Teaching at Twilight* covers. This was a welcome touch given that our emotional reactions to this information are likely the biggest barriers to accepting the true nature of humanity's predicament.

Ultimately, Afzaal warns that this is the human "Predicament": Within industrialized societies, most of the things that improve our standards of living in the short run simultaneously make the Earth less hospitable to life in the long run. This is a critical contribution of the book: Instead of spreading false hopes that we can continue with "business-as-usual" if we just switch to "green energy," Afzaal explains why modern civilization will start unraveling in the coming decades whether we like it or not, so educators must prepare students for what is coming and how to manage it.

Although mostly targeted at college professors, the existential threats Afzaal discusses could and should be shaping education from preschool through adulthood. In fact, I have substantially revised all of my P-5 teacher courses to better inform future and practicing teachers about the issues he raises.

Teaching at Twilight is a well-crafted and desperately needed book that asks educators to finally address the biggest challenge in human history. In my view, we need to heed the message of the book for two reasons. First, as the author notes, "All past civilizations have collapsed and so will our current global civilization" (p. 222). Second, a survey of 10,000 youth ages 16-25 in 10 countries (Hickman et al., 2021) found that 75% of them reported that the future is frightening, 45% reported that their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily lives, and 56% reported believing that humanity is doomed. I cannot imagine how education would seem meaningful to our students if we are not addressing the existential crises that most know are unfolding, and it's impossible for teaching to be meaningful to educators if it's not meaningful to our students.

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