Bill McKibben: “We Don't Require Great Leaders” **[1]**

April 20, 2015 Featured Interview [2]
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TW Interview by David Biddle

A Bestselling Author Moves from Writing to Activism

I read Bill McKibben's 1989 book *The End of Nature* (Random House) in the early '90s. As an environmental professional, I knew about the science of global warming and the cultural problems it entailed. But I’d never read such an all-encompassing or moving call to action. I remember finishing the book in bed, late on a winter night. I woke my wife up to tell her that McKibben wasn't just talking about how out of control our world was; he was trying to get us to understand—*really* understand—how our children and grandchildren's world would be destroyed.

McKibben has been a prodigious environmental journalist and independent thinker for more than 25 years. His most recent book is *Oil and Honey: The Education of an Unlikely Activist* (Times Books, 2013). He's written about training for cross-country ski competitions with very little athletic background (*Long Distance,* Simon & Schuster, 2000). His 1992 book *The Age of Missing Information* (Random House) compares the effect of watching 24 hours of TV to spending a day on top of a mountain.

And yet, despite his lofty perch as an author and a commentator, by the late ‘90s, the alarm McKibben sounded with *The End of Nature* was obviously not being heeded by politicians, corporations, or most consumers. McKibben has since moved from the "quintessential solitary act" of writing, as he calls it in this interview, to the highly public, globetrotting life of environmental activism.

You’ll still find his essays in *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Review of Books*, and *TomDispatch*. But these days, after cofounding the 350.org movement in 2007—which the website describes as a “global network active in over 188 countries”—McKibben spends much more time at the front of climate change demonstrations and in public-speaking engagements about how to stem the growth of the fossil fuel industry. At Middlebury College in Vermont, he's been a scholar in residence of environmental studies since 2001 and was appointed the Schumann Distinguished Scholar in 2010.

This interview took place in February 2015, with McKibben responding by email to questions I sent him. It's been slightly condensed and edited for *Talking Writing*.

***TW*: I know you've talked some in the past about the distinction between nature writing and environmental writing. Can you elaborate for TW readers?**

BM: I think environmental writing is more about the effect we've had on the natural world than on its beauty per se. But of course the same people often do both: Rachel Carson writing beautifully about the ocean and then producing *Silent Spring*; John Muir in so many of his essays; Thoreau, Leopold, Berry, Tempest Williams—you name it. It's just emphasis.

***TW:* Can you name some of the writers-turned-activists who have influenced you and say a bit about why their work inspired you?**

BM: Sure, it's a long tradition of people who do both. Historically, of course, Thoreau was an American pioneer of civil disobedience and John Muir the founder of what became the prototypical campaigning NGO [the Sierra Club]. In our time, it’s everyone from Terry Tempest Williams to Rick Bass to Wendell Berry—the kind of people I can call and know they will show up, bail money in hand.

***TW:* Getting people to pay attention—especially the media and politicians—must be quite frustrating at times. Climate change is far more than an environmental problem, but how do you break it out of the “environmental” box and reframe it as something that impacts everyone all the time?**

BM: I've had a lot of time to think of various strategies over the years and written about it from many angles. But in general, it gets easier and easier, because Mother Nature—that fine educator—keeps hitting us upside the head with a 2 x 4. At this point, you have to try pretty hard not to pay attention to climate change, though of course that doesn't stop a fair number of people from trying.

***TW:* In some ways, it seems like environmental journalism is very good at identifying and defining problems but not so good at delineating solutions. Is this one reason a journalist and author would move from writing books to becoming an activist and organizer?**

BM: Activism isn't always about solutions, either, though we work hard on renewable energy. But to a large degree, the work of our movement is to shut down the option to keep moving forward with fossil fuel. If we can do it, I have some faith that the engineers will keep doing their thing: The price of solar panels, after all, has fallen 95 percent in the last few decades. That's beginning to redefine the debate, too.

***TW:* For a good thirty years, the crux of the climate change debate came down to whether the science was correct. That's not really an issue anymore. But the politics of climate change still seem stymied. President Obama has figured out how to broker a possible climate deal with China; at the same time, he’s supported one of the largest expansions of American oil production in history. Why do politicians still argue for things that fly in the face of scientific evidence?**

BM: Because the fossil fuel industry is the richest enterprise in human history. And in most political systems, money buys you more power than your arguments deserve. So, the rest of us need to find our own currency to work in. I think the currency of movements—passion, spirit, creativity, sometimes the willingness to spend our bodies and go to jail—is

the only alternative.

TW: **Why do we only hear small peeps about a global carbon fuels tax and other policy solutions? Is it all about politics, or do ideas about how we can make changes still confuse even those in the renewable energy world?**

BM: Because at the moment, they're politically impossible. One reason we do things like relentlessly campaign for divestment or against new pipelines is to break the political power of the fossil fuel industry so reason stands a chance. We've won the argument years ago, even on things like carbon taxes. There's not an economist—left, right, or center—who will defend the status quo. But we've lost the fight, because fights are mostly about power.

TW: **Meanwhile, virtually every responsible American adult in 2015 now thinks he or she understands global warming and climate change—and has an opinion about it. Is your communication work changing to deal with that?**

BM: Our job is to get concerned people to become active people. If we can get them politically engaged—in the streets, as it were—then we stand a chance.

TW: **How do you maintain stamina and a positive mindset in your work? Are there lessons you learned in the daunting and somewhat frustrating process of writing books that help you deal with your activist work?**

BM: I hadn't thought of it that way, but there may be. I try to think about this fight episodically and not get fixated on the final outcome. That's probably the right way to produce books as well.

TW: **Writing of all kinds (fiction and nonfiction) tends to be rational and defining. Almost by necessity, writers have to limit the scope of their efforts. But in a very real sense, activism isn't limited in the same way. Can you talk about this distinction? Is activism easier than writing books?**

BM: It's different. It's a group process—especially now. We're happily in an era where we don't require great leaders. There is no Dr. King of the climate movement. We're a spread-out fossil fuel resistance, and so there's no need to impose one's own will on things the way there is when you're writing a book—the quintessential solitary act.

TW**: In *Do the Math*, the 2013 documentary by Kelly Nyks and Jared Scott about the climate change movement, you say near the beginning, "My theory of change was I'll write my book, people will read it, and then they'll change. But that's not how change happens. So, I've been kind of forced to go against my sense of who I'm most comfortable being." The thing is, *The End of Nature* really did seem to push a number of people to address global warming. What’s changed since then?**

BM: Books are very important, don't get me wrong. If we hadn't had good science and good books, we wouldn't be where we are now. But they don't get you over the finish line, any more than James Baldwin and Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois were able by themselves to get us where we needed to go on race. It takes movements.

TW: **What do other environmental journalists think about the question of activism? Do you talk to any of them about the schism between journalist and activist? Do you feel lonely at times?**

BM: Well, there are beat journalists—newspaper folks, say—who clearly can't become activists. They shouldn't; they have an important role to play, and the best of them do it well. But writers? They're usually happy to get involved.

TW: **What resources about climate change are the most up-to-date and useful for interested TW readers? Do you have a book coming out in the near future?**

BM: I don't have a book coming out soon—for the moment, the activism is the key. There are endless resources, but at this point, you probably don't need to spend huge amounts of time reading science. You do need to get involved, so websites like 350.org are the real key.

For more information, go to 350.org *[4] and* Bill McKibben’s website *[5].*

> By the end of nature I do not mean the end of the world. The rain will still fall and the sun shine, though differently than before. When I say ‘nature,” I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it. But the death of those ideas begins with certain concrete changes in the reality around us—changes that scientists can measure and enumerate. More and more frequently, these changes will clash with our perceptions, until, finally, our sense of nature as eternal and separate is washed away, and we will see all too clearly what we have done.
>
> —from *The End of Nature* by Bill McKibben

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