

# How To Think About Our Children's Children

**Teresa Ghilarducci**

**Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis (SCEPA)**

Department of Economics

The New School for Social Research

6 East 16th Street, New York, NY 10003

[economicpolicyresearch.org](http://economicpolicyresearch.org)

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# “How To Think About Our Children’s Children”

***Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of Our World, Daniel Sherrell***

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The subject of *Warmth*, written by a 26-year-old as a letter to his unborn child, is the climate crisis. But the climate crisis is never referred to by name. Instead, it is called “The Problem.” And though The Problem animates the book, *Warmth* is also a memoir—a book about memory, justice, and the future.

In *Warmth* justice is no slouch; justice takes center stage, as it does in the Arena Chapel in Padua, painted in 1305 by the early Renaissance artist Giotto di Bondone. In Giotto’s fresco, Justice is placed in the center of six other virtues and seven vices. If you think it odd to mention Giotto, fourteenth-century Catholic theology, and global heating in the same paragraph, it is just this kind of literary and current affairs juxtaposition that you will find in Daniel Sherrell’s book, which was a bit of a sensation when it was first published in 2021. *Warmth* was widely praised and named a best book of the year by the *New Yorker* and *Publishers Weekly*.

Sherrell describes the villains of the climate crisis in Arendtian terms of the banality of evil. One of these villains is Scott Pruitt, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency under former President Donald Trump. By cutting prosecutions under the nation’s landmark environmental laws, the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972, by 50 percent and 70 percent, respectively, Pruitt is destroying the world with quotidian bureaucratic decisions. Pruitt is just one of *Warmth*’s cast of characters, which also includes several of Sherrell’s friends, his unborn baby (who may or may not ever be conceived), a salamander, and you—the reader.

As a child, Sherrell caught a salamander and kept it as a pet in a jar with rocks and grass. One day, according to Sherrell, the salamander disappeared under the rocks and was never found again. Sherrell’s salamander becomes a symbol for the things that will be lost in the course of the climate crisis. It becomes a metaphor, the kind that makes the point and sears into the parts of your brain that stores images and feelings. Every time I look at a squadron of brown pelicans or an otter, I remember Sherrell’s salamander and feel sad that they might disappear with it. Emily, Sherrell’s friend and fellow environmental activist, comments in *Warmth* that it is surreal that children cuddle with furry

cloth facsimiles of elephants and hippopotamuses but might not “ever encounter an elephant or hippo, whose dwindling wild population were increasingly dwarfed by their thriving numbers in cribs and kindergarten classrooms” (Sherrell 2021, 192).

Emily also points out that the English word “bear” comes from a Germanic word meaning the “brown one.” The Germanic tribes were so afraid of bears, calling them by their proper name was a taboo. So it is that Sherrell names the climate crisis simply “It” or “The Problem”; the proper name is both fearsome and inadequate. Sherrell fears that naming “The Problem” will disappear it behind a wall of graphs.

The Problem so overwhelmed civil rights lawyer David Buckel that he burned himself alive in protest in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park in 2018. In the opening pages of *Warmth*, Sherrell calls his mother after he learns of Buckel’s self-immolation, and you, the reader, share what must have been her alarm as Sherrell states that he can’t shake the image of the suicide or the consequences of “The Problem.”

The book pulls you in with its young author's meditation on time. Animals extinct in your great-grandchildren’s lifetime? One can imagine that. A planet utterly changed within a few generations after that? That is harder to imagine. But we are called to imagine just that when we are called to consider Sherrell’s question, “Why have a child?”

By using the second person voice, Sherrell’s address to his unborn child or grandchild, “you,” is also an address to “you” the reader. I am told by writers that the second person is rarely used because it is hard to do it well in a piece of writing longer than an essay. The point of the second person is to address the reader so directly that they become part of the story. Sherrell's narrative structure, a letter to an unborn, succeeds in this. He is an accomplished writer who was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for creative writing and has been selected for numerous prestigious writing retreats, including stays at the Mesa Refuge and J. M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, and knew what he was doing when he chose the second person voice.

But Sherrell is not mainly a writer; he is a community organizer, now working as Campaign Director for the Climate Jobs National Resource Center, which is part of the American labor movement that aims to solve the climate crisis by creating millions of well-paying and secure clean energy jobs.

Making the public, the person, the politician part of the story you are telling is exactly the job of a community organizer. When you read Sherrell’s book, he is speaking directly to you and you can’t distance yourself from the end of the world. Sherrell’s narrative device connects us to the future and conveys power and agency. How? Not by telling you things you don’t know but by making you realize things you DO know. Sherrell refers to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s distinction between “knowing” and “realizing” in her essay ““Reality and Realization,,” published after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He is impressed with her distinction between "knowing" and "realizing," a characteristic of any "spiritual struggle."

## **Realizing Code Red for Humanity**

Many of us are familiar with the report that the UN Secretary-General António Guterres called in his statement about their report a “code red for humanity.” The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) observed in a report published in August 2021 that significant changes to the Earth’s climate system—in the atmosphere, oceans, ice floes, and on land—are already “irreversible.” The internationally agreed upon threshold of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels of global heating was “perilously close.” Guterres warned, “The only way to prevent exceeding this threshold is by urgently stepping up our efforts, and pursuing the most ambitious path” (2021, 1)

Because government reports would be cruel without hope, the IPCC lifts us up by concluding: “[T]here is still time to limit climate change. Strong and sustained reductions in emissions of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and other greenhouse gases, could quickly make air quality better, and in 20 to 30 years global temperatures could stabilize” (2021, 1)

Sherrell’s book, a memoir that, because he is a young man, also addresses the future, takes uncertainty as its premise and the uncertainty about whether he will have a child as the metaphor about how much time we still have to address the climate crisis. Sharing our anxieties about the future is the beginning of reimagining it.

### **Connecting to the Future**

Ecological economics is a relatively new field, and central to it is the idea of the discount rate. The discount rate is used to value things in the future in terms of present values. When your personal discount rate is low, it means that you value the future as if it were the present. If the social discount rate is low, it means that society values things as if they were things we could lose now. It creates an urgency and justification for investing in climate crisis mitigations. A salamander tomorrow is brought forward as if it is a salamander today.

The discount rate connects us to the future. Getting the social discount rate right is important because policy makers use it as a guide to calculate future benefits against the current costs of mitigating the harms of the climate crisis in the future.

Here is an example: \$10,000 for a hippo in 10 years is worth \$7,442 now if the discount rate is 3 percent and only \$5,585 if it is 6 percent. If the social discount rate is low, you value that future hippopotamus more now. How much do you value clean air in 10 years? A lot more if the discount rate is low. A society with a low discount rate will spend a lot more now to clean the air and save the hippo in 10 years.

As researchers from the London School of Economics (Drupp, Freeman, Groom, Nesje. 2015. argue that the using a high discount rate implies that people put less weight on the future. That means that less investment is needed in the present to avoid future costs. They argue that people arguing against reduce greenhouse gasses use high discount rates to make their case.

To know the social discount rate is to know everything. Sherrell’s book serves the function in social policy vernacular to “bring the future forward” and

push our social discount rate lower. It makes his child and a hippo calf, whose parents live in Kruger National Park, South Africa, on the brink of extinction, real and present in your view. The letter to his child and the reader's search for the salamander under the rocks is Sherrell's trick to lower the discount rate, to bring the future forward.

What determines a society's discount rate? Two main elements: one, a prediction about how abundant people will be in the future; and two, society's ethical framework.<sup>1</sup> If you think future generations will be rich and the earth plentiful, current investments multiply robustly and future generations don't have to be spared; they can afford to pay the price of environmental erosion.

But realizing that the carbon dioxide we emit now will stay in the atmosphere for a very long time, heating up the earth and causing limitations on future generations, affects our predictions about how rich the future will be. Since we are beginning to realize that the emissions we produce now will impinge on economic growth centuries into the future, our discount rate is falling.

A low discount rate supports the view that we should act now to protect future generations from the impact of the climate crisis. A low discount rate implies a less rich future *and* that therefore the idea that future generations will not enjoy relatively large amounts of resources. A low discount rate implies that the wellbeing of our children and their children's children's is brought forward and given more importance in cost-benefit analyses. (Drupp, Freeman, Groom, Nesje. 2015.

Ethical considerations also determine the discount rate. What is just for future generations? It is great news for advocates of climate mitigation that in one recent survey most economists favored a low discount rate because of uncertainty and alternative ethical approaches. We, economists, are a conservative bunch. A survey of hedge fund managers or the very rich would yield a higher discount rate since they generally believe the economy will grow and grow so that future generations will have enough prosperity to pay for the costs we impose now.

### **Memory of the Past Informs the Future**

Since Sherrell's book is about remembering to not forget the future, I turned to psychologist Douwe Draaisma's book *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older*, purchased, appropriately, at the (Human) Origins Center Museum gift shop at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

How humans "remember" the future will shape climate crisis policy and the level of the discount rate—the quantification of "how we think about the future." If politicians bring the future forward, they can overcome the fossil fuel lobby and impose a carbon tax.

How we think about the future is rooted in memories of our past. The job of the environmental activist is to understand how humans lay down memories so they can bring the future forward, and Sherrell may have nailed it.

Memory provides a distorted record of past experiences by anchoring the experience in emotionally relevant events. By evoking memories of childhood romps in a creek and the image of a fellow activist reading a book while chewing

her hair, Sherrell tugs at our emotions and lays down the memory of what will happen to our children if the earth heats up as the bar charts predict.

Neuroscientists describe how the brain works in order to explain what is remembered and forgotten. Psychologists like Draaisma explain how individuals record their own memories and why time seems to whiz by faster and faster as we get older. It may explain why a 26-year-old can feel the future so acutely as if it were the present. A study in the early 1960s found that young people (18–20 years old) and older people (median age 71 years old) used different metaphors to describe the passage of time. The young chose static metaphors (“time is a quiet, motionless ocean”), while older folks chose swift metaphors (“time is a speeding train”).

The 26-year-old with plenty of evidence that the future won’t be abundant has a low discount rate and can more easily bring the future forward.

### **The Future Is Fantastic: John Maynard Keynes’s Letter to Our Grandchildren**

John Maynard Keynes, one of the world’s most important economists of the last 200 years, also philosophized about the future, though he was not young when he did so. Keynes was 47 when he wrote his version of Sherrell’s memoir in 1930, the essay “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren.” The Great Depression had not yet started, the world economy was thriving, and the Second World War was nowhere in sight.

Like Sherrell, Keynes in his essay issues a call to action, but in a very different way. He calls us to live in the present and for economists and policy makers to care deeply about present conditions. He is exceedingly optimistic about the future.

Had he known what we know today, Keynes probably would have changed his mind and called for public investments to stop the climate crisis. His optimistic view suffered from not having the benefit of current ecological environmental literature.

As a 47-year-old, Keynes writes an essay to his unborn grandchildren pleading politicians in democratic societies to invest in equity and growth and reject the short-term desires of the rich to engage in austerity that would supposedly nip inflation in the bud. The rich favor massive unemployment as more people become desperate to work and loans are paid back in noninflationary-eroded dollars.

Keynes goes after the rich for their disregard of workers’ conditions: “People with intense, unsatisfied purposiveness ... will blindly pursue wealth. But the rest of us will no longer be under any obligation to applaud and encourage them” ([1930] 1963, 370).

The tension between Keynes’s call to consume now and highly discount the future and Sherrell’s plea to cut consumption and save the future is the tension that must be solved in today’s politics.

Let me explain Keynes’s blithe quote, “in the long run we are all dead,” for it seems to fly in the face of the calls of environmental activists to highly value our future and progeny. The quote comes from his 1923 text on the Bank of

England's bias toward austerity. He warns against the government's cold-heartedness toward unemployment. If a factory closes, Keynes warns, you can say that its workers will find jobs elsewhere in the long run, but in the short term workers will suffer. Thus, the full quote is: "But this long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead. Economists set themselves too easy, too useless a task if in tempestuous seasons they can only tell us that when the storm is past the ocean is flat again. 1923; 80) " Keynes cared about the future but did not want to sacrifice the present.

And that is Sherrell's task when his therapist gives him the book *The Power of Now*. Sherrell's favorite example from the book about "how to live in the Now" involves two ducks

gliding along perpendicular paths in a pond. When the paths meet, and the ducks collide there ensues a momentary kerfuffle of honking and wing flapping. Then the ducks disengage and swim inscrutably onward, as if nothing happened at all. The anecdote was meant to demonstrate the serene bliss of the Now: a human mind might have spent time smarting over the spat or anticipating the next one, but the ducks gave it no more or less time than it took to elapse. (Sherrell 2021, 138)

Sherrell asks himself if he could "imitate the ducks and take each moment as it came hoping that then the Problem would loosen its grip." He admits to the reader that he can't.

Keynes, who wrote to our grandchildren—he had no children of his own—was a fierce advocate of the view that with a more equal distribution of production achievable in democracies that avoid war, in the future "there will be ever larger and larger classes and groups of people from whom problems of economic necessity have been practically removed (1930 (1963) p. 372 ."

In technical terms, Keynes wanted, like Sherrell, that we need to invest and hold back consumption now to make a better future. In the contemporary context, he would certainly back Sherrell's call to move away from the private consumption of swimming pools and toward a social investment in solar panels. Raising funds through a carbon tax on swimming pool owners to pay for retrofitted power generation is the policy to pursue.

Keynes advocated investment in the future and thought that future material betterment depended on politics and science. His plan for a better future involved population control, the avoidance of war and civil dissension, and investment in science. He believed scientific progress would allow our grandchildren more leisure-time filled with the ballet and hippopotamuses. He believed the economy was going to grow and grow, and our grandchildren would become much richer. With the benefits of 90 years of hindsight, we can fault him for not considering the drag of production caused by inequality and the climate crisis.

Keynes's discount rate may have been too high, but he, like Sherrell, had the same goal: to bring the future closer. "But, chiefly, do not let us overestimate the importance of the economic problem," he writes in the *Economic Possibilities*

to Our Grandchildren, “or sacrifice to its supposed necessities other matters of greater and more permanent significance.” (1930 (1963) p. 373

When Keynes wrote that it would be splendid if “economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble, competent people, on a level with dentists,” (1930 (1963) p. 373 he meant that economists should use their talents to “measure” the necessities that have permanent significance.

We economists should aim to improve our measures of the future, remember that growth depends on equity, and bring forward and more highly value our grandchildren's possible experience with the planet.

Sherrell points out that this won't happen without cultivating empathy toward the people who will live in that future. It is only just; and Sherrell—as did Giotto when he painted Justice as the highest of the seven virtues—puts fairness to our children at center stage.

## Notes

[COMP: Please insert appropriately numbered endnotes here.]

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<sup>1</sup> If it helps, in mathematical terms the social discount rate is composed of two parts: the rate of pure time preference (how you feel about future generations) and the expected real growth rate of per capita consumption, adjusted for the ability of consumers to find substitutes for scarce items (how you feel about the abundant future).

