

# How to Talk with Children about Global Warming

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Self-publishing

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## **Chapter 3**

*Near New York, 2015*

*Back the present moment, she thought. Must concentrate. Don't get lost in the past.* She thought it might be a sign of early-onset senile dementia. How many dream projects do you get to work on, never mind complete, in one lifetime? She was never going to get over the deprivation of not being able to bask in the glory of her inventions because they were all top-secret. Those who knew, knew, and they already knew her and perhaps had come to expect as much. Those who didn't know likely never would, aside from a few journalists. But her bosses didn't know the price it had exacted from her.

The Teletubby Gravedigger or whatever it was the Green Berets had dubbed her finest hour had been almost disappointingly successful (once her team had honed real-time synaptic mapping to a sharp analytic tool). It made people shoot better almost from the get-go because there was less junk between the thought and the realization. It was no different than shooting a normal gun, except that the point where the task of propelling a cylindrical piece of metal at 600 mph toward the place where the shooter was aiming had been transferred from flesh to machine

and had moved further up the arm, no longer residing in the trigger finger, nor certainly the wrist, elbow or shoulder; these would be changes of venue only, but not of the material conditions of “making the decision.” The task-transfer occurred not in the brain (way too unreliable) but within the CNS (Central Nervous System), in the spinal column. There was really nothing “telepathic” about the Telepathic Trigger. The technology had already been developed for parapalegics and was off-the-shelf. Still, developing the theoretical framework that made it possible to re-purpose it to improve accuracy and reduce training time for sharpshooters wasn’t bad. For a PhD thesis.

When Undello discovered the mathematics of what constitutes a “decision” in the human frontal cortex, she vomited. She didn’t decide to vomit. She just felt it coming, like a storm issuing forth from the dark green clouds on the horizon, a moist, mucousy feeling creeping up her esophagus like a blowjob in reverse.

Aiming for the porcelain altar — holy site of a denomination with whom which she had rarely worshipped since she was a wayward teen, compelled to go to Methodist Sunday school and rebelling by binge-drinking with her pickup-driving gunrack-sporting hick buddies, who tolerated her asexual tomboy nerdiness because she knew chemistry and could help them with their homework, knew how to brew molly, and gave a mean BJ — Undello stumbled across the carpeted floor of her home office, banging her hip hard against the sharp corner of the not-expensive-but-expensive-looking-Ikea-fake-oak desk that she had bought

in an attempt to appear professional in the eyes of venture capitalists, investors, journalists, and even academics who might come for a meeting there, the creative chaos of her otherwise orderly mind expressed in physical form via the stacks of books, newspaper and magazine clippings, notebooks, diagrams, and sketches literally on paper napkins even though she had made them at home where she had plenty of other stationery supplies but had been sitting in the kitchen and didn't even have a millisecond to search for the proper writing tools before the fragile effervescent thought bubbled away.

Undello would have been called a "broad" in an earlier era. Or a "blonde bombshell." She didn't much care which. Maybe "brainy blonde bombshell" would do.

The ephemera of her creative disarray was hidden behind doors, confined to the 'workshop,' because 'home laboratory' sounded way too pretentious. She had banged her hip hard and cursed loudly and had kicked over the wastepaper basket on the way to the toilet, heaves then coming as regularly as but faster than labor contractions (she had experienced them only in a VR giving-birth role-playing game in an attempt to placate an asshole boyfriend who thought she should try to connect with her feminine side), stumbled down onto her knees and let it go.

A few more dry heaves and a toothbrushing later, she returned to her desk. Dr. Undello wrote: "It's useless to do genetic engineering or geo-

engineering on a mass scale to save the planet if we don't also do psycho-engineering to a corresponding degree. It will get us nowhere. Fast." In a few years, she was to become the inventor of the Telepathic Empathy Gun (TEG), a subversive derivative of military technology originally designed to improve marksmen's and -women's aim. The original technology, the Telepathic Trigger (or "Teletubby Totaler" as some of the Green Berets had renamed it) was supposed to make it easier for less-than-exceptionally-talented marksmen and -women to hit the target more often by telepathically linking the trigger to their minds.

Undello had faced this problem at the shooting range when she was a young cadet. Her eyes were good when she took aim and her hand was adequately steady— until she started to pull the trigger. Somewhere in the gap between the knowledge that the target was in her crosshairs and the will to act on that knowledge, there was a distortion, a wiggle, a turbulence in the chain reaction of events, nerves firing, synapses sparking, neurotransmitters churning, muscles contracting, tensing and relaxing, electrical potential seething with ions transgressing membranes like wetbacks crossing the Rio Grande trying to propagate the Will of the Brain to the People of the Cells of the Muscles of the Trigger Finger.

She desperately wanted to get rid of that gap. That gap was what was preventing her from hitting the target. It was preventing her from being perfect. It was preventing her from sleeping with Truck.

“Truck” was what they called him. “Robert” didn’t fit. His muscles bulged out of the name like fistfulls of trading tickets thrust high in the air on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, back in the days when there were still traders on the floor of the NYSE. She knew in her mind that Truck was approachable and calculated that there was a high probability he would find her attractive. She wanted him. She was confident, and she wasn’t shy, or at least she had never had the experience of being shy in the past. But there was this gap. She had to solve it.

Many years after West Point, after Truck, after Afghanistan and after working for some-division-of-the-army-that-you’ve-never-heard-of-because-they-don’t-want-you-to-have-heard-of-it, on the fringes of the Private Sector and the Dark Web, Undello still wanted to salve it. “Lick your wounds till they aren’t wounds anymore,” her father had said. And she had, as best she could. But the gap still remained. The gap between thought and deed.

Triggering something as simple as a trigger with a mental “gesture,” as the technology’s development team— Undello, specifically— had termed it, turned out to be pretty simple, once Undello returned from a monestery in the Tanzawa region of Japan, where for three years she had been under the tutlage of a karate master who had been a trainer for the Japanese military police during World War II and was reputed to be able to knock down or even kill people with his voice alone.

The Telepathic Trigger had turned out to be adequately successful on paper and in prototype, but the need for it had not been perceived, and there were old-school types involved in the training of marksmen and - women for the military who felt threatened by the technology, threatened by the possibility that it would democratize the skill of killing in a way that would piss on the territory of elite training that they had carved out over the years, and threatened also because the inventor of the technology was a woman. The project had gotten shelved, dumped into the category of “researched, tested, successful but not to deployed at this time.” Not bad. For a PhD thesis.

Telepathic empathy, on the other hand, was a challenge of a different order of magnitude.

“Pain” is nearly as primitive as an on-off switch, and therefore accessible to being hacked by human at-this-point-in-time-likewise-relatively-primitive technology. And it turns out that there are regions of the brain that react exactly the same way to emotional pain as they do to physical pain. And bear in mind that when we say “regions of the brain,” the philosophical weirdness is that “we,” whoever “we” are, are the conscious experiencers at the receiving end of all these chemical reactions and complex structures. Our experience lives inside this externalized object, the brain, that, much like an appendage or member, we can both examine from the outside and experience from the inside. Undello had gained this insight by borrowing from Freud’s concept of penis envy, something she had personally experienced and had resolved to her satisfaction by

learning the art of pegging, and re-purposing it (the concept of penis envy, not the pegging) to the context of empathy. Hmm, maybe the pegging too.

Unlike the penis however, the part of the brain that we experience “from the inside” is absolutely every experience we will ever have in this lifetime.

This was the philosophical insight that made Undello plop down into her father’s armchair in his study on her fifteenth birthday and unannounced — in contrast to some of her other performative pranks, which were often accompanied by a fanfare of preperatory priming — refuse to move from that spot for the next 15 days. Not even to go to the toilet. *If this is all there is*, she thought deep in the center of her mind, far from the rustling noise of facial expressions, barricaded by her radiant blue eyes, *I’ve got to make sure it’s interesting.*

That’s just the way she thought about things, and to hell with you if you couldn’t make the leaps necessary to keep up with her flying train of thought. The phrase she used in her internal monologue was more vulgar than “to hell with you,” but since her brother had knocked out one of her teeth during an impromptu Muy Thai practice, the distinction between oral sex and the other kind was phonetically indistinct. So this part of her lexicon stayed internal.

Later as she matured, *interesting* was replaced with other words and phrases, such as *exciting*, *worth the trouble* (doubtful at times when she



was feeling suicidal), and *compassionate*. All of these had all turned out to be worth the trouble, but some had gotten her into more trouble than others. Especially *compassionate*, when it was as-yet undigested.

She had gotten the idea from Harold Garfinkel. She had never met Harold Garfinkel, nor had she seen a video or a photo of him. She imagined him as a lanky middle-aged Jewish professor with curly brown hair, slightly balding and with significant touches of grey around the temples and sideburns, ear- and nose-hair untrimmed, wearing glasses, a blazer with leather elbow-patches and a turtleneck in a vain and 20-years-too-late attempt to appear fashionable, whose arms flailed while he talked in a Borscht-belt accent about social norms and what is revealed when one violates them, unannounced.

Harold Garfinkel was only some of the things the young Undello had imagined, but he was the inventor of something called Ethnomethodology and Breaching Experiments. As far as she could tell, it was a way to act as weird as you wanted because you could say that you were doing “research” to find out how other people reacted when you acted like a weirdo.

Her family mostly ignored her for the first day, other than the occasional inevitable jab from her brother, but it got harder when she made it clear that somebody had to bring her a bucket or she’d have to relieve herself on dad’s prized ergonomic office chair. By Day 5, even her dad was bringing her food to The Chair.

Little did she know it at the time, but this was the best possible preparation she could do to prepare herself for achieving her life's dream.

Inventing the Telepathic Trigger was no walk in the park, but it didn't bring the sense of completion to Undello's restless soul that she had craved without even knowing it. Then she achieved the TT, and after that, rather than going away, the gnawing sense of urgency and angst was like the background sound of a refrigerator that you aren't consciously aware of until it stops, and then you suddenly have the "memory" of having heard something that you didn't hear while it was happening, and you can see your brain's wiring spread open for examination like a flower exploding into bloom, or a textbook incision on an embalmed frog with innards neatly displayed for view, or a woman spreading the lips of her dripping labia wide.

But the reprieve and wonder is brief, because then the refrigerator starts up again almost immediately, and now you hear it, this incessant hum of drive impelling you to do, to make, to go, so that you will be able to justify gorging on the nourishment within later. Undello was a mean bitch to girls in high school who had suffered with bullemlia. She watched them with a scornful eye, departing for the girls' room for a teeth-rotting bonding ritual that she would never be a part of. She thought they had no discipline.

The Telepathic Trigger was successful to a degree. She had asked her boss to place Truck on the elite team that would test the new technology. It had worked, in a Rube-Goldberg-device sort of way, and she felt she had served her country. But almost immediately the race was on between her and her inner refrigerator to find the next Big Thing. And somehow she would have to find a way to deal with that other very annoying part of her psyche, her conscience.

Would it be possible for Undello to modify the army's technology and make a gun that would cause the shooter to physically and emotionally experience the pain of the target, if the target was a living being with a complex carbon-based nervous system capable of experiencing pain, and cells with DNA in their nuclei? The Telepathic Empathy Gun. 'When you shoot it, you feel what they feel.' That was the original motto, rejected by the marketing people as too sinister, and replaced with 'The Telepathic Empathy Gun: feel before you shoot.' Undello wasn't against this version; she just thought hers was slightly better.

Dr. Undello modified the sentence she had written: "It's useless to do genetic engineering or geo-engineering on a mass scale to save the planet if we don't also do psycho-engineering to a corresponding degree. It will us get nowhere. ~~Fast~~."

Knowing the mathematics of the decision she had just made didn't really help her at that moment. But it might help a lot of people. It couldn't bring back the dead, but it might do something almost as good: make a

shooter pause, hesitate, become paralyzed with inaction because she, he, or they (usually he) suddenly felt the pain. 'I feel your pain' would become more than a slogan. It would become a principle of empathy functioning at a basic biological level. It would make it harder for people to harm each other because they would literally feel the pain they were about to inflict on another.

*Near New York, 2025*

There were several unexpected side-effects of the Telepathic Empathy Gun.

Dr Undello prayed at the porcelain altar again when she heard about the first masochist mass shooting. The first masochist mass shooting. Not the last. Not by a long shot.

She called her cousin.

"Paglia."

"Undello."

It was a habit they had kept since childhood, calling each other by their last names, a vestige of endless childhood games of Cops and Cops, or sometimes Robbers and Robbers, until they decided to call it what it was, Spy vs. Spy (and never, though the image hung in the background like a

portrait of a distant relative whose eyes followed your movements)  
Mafioso vs. Mafioso.

“Camille, I—”

“Uh-oh. Are you OK? You sound like you’re a woman on the verge of tears.”

“I’m not OK.” She did the usual mental calculations about how not-OK she could be on the phone, what she couldn’t or shouldn’t say, who might be listening. She took secret pride — not secret to herself, but not the kind of thing she could drop at a cocktail party, if she ever went to one, which she didn’t, and was proud of that too — in having actual people listen to her phone conversations, not just an A.I.

It was a sign that she must be doing Something Important. She had her own counter-measures of course. She didn’t know if they knew that she knew the names and work-shifts of her various minders. She might as well just call Camille and say “Hi Camille. Hi George. So, Camille—” but that would break the Fourth Wall of Deniability. Her karate sensei and acting teacher (one and the same) in Japan had told her “You can break the Fourth Wall. But there are consequences. Especially serious ones if it’s the Fourth Wall of Deniability. Then your opponent stops to having inhibitions. Your opponent’s inhibitions work to your favor, because they are a framework of predictability.” He liked pronouncing “especially,” “deniability,” and “predictability” because he knew that the effect of

almost getting them right was charming. Cute, even. Nothing like a cute hand-to-hand combat trainer for the military's secret police.

Undello continued. "Oh, it's nothing serious. When I'm on the rag—" This was their code for 'I'm facing an ethical dilemma at work' — "I get moody and kinda self-absorbed." 'Self-absorbed' was their code for *I want to f\*\*king strangle someone*. "And then I start to question my empathic abilities. Like, do I even really give a sh\*t about other people? Deep down? Or am I just an opportunist at heart, dressing my id in socially acceptable clothing, completely accessorized to boot?"

Beat. 'Empathic abilities' wasn't code for anything. "I'll be right over." Camille Paglia jumped in her Ferrari and hit the gas, sending gravel flying into the blooming petunias.

Undello had wanted to invent a technology that, given the apparent unstoppable of the gun lobby and the industry's desire to flood the market with firearms, with both police and civilians going postal on a regular basis in the context of a society gone ballistic, unable or unwilling to care for the basic material needs of its members and with no escape in sight, would significantly reduce the amount of gun violence by changing the calculus at the gut level, the level at which the source code of human consciousness is written. Undello was a closet pacifist. You have to be pretty much a closet everything if you work in the segments of the military-industrial-petroleum-digital-surveillance complex that she did.

Another unexpected side-effect was that they discovered the precise scale at which an intersecting pattern of brain waves becomes quantized into a “conscious decision.” It was an uncomplicated calculation based on the number of brain cells being monitored and some measurable mathematical features of their synchronization (based on fluid dynamics, one of the few ingenious contributions that was not Undello’s).

Franck, the manic-depressive French physicist who had brought the fluid dynamics concept to the table in the form of a nervously spilled cup of coffee at a meeting, dripping off the edge of the table onto his own lap, shirttails of his plaid flannel shirt untucked due to their incessant use as glasses-cleaning cloths, fat lips under mustache quivering— is he going to cry? Undello’s assessment of an individual’s character was cool and predictive, fortified by an unemotional realism— Franck had followed the coffee display with a brilliantly improvised lecture to the project team on applying the mathematics of fluid dynamics to neurology, and had left these thoughts in the hands of Undello’s team, and was now safely ensconced in a psychiatric ward in Paris where he could do no further harm, nor reveal any credible secrets. Undello had heard that he was trying to write a novel on the walls with his own blood, inspired by the Marquis de Sade. She didn’t want to know.

It was a fantastic step forward in analyzing the mathematics of what makes living beings “conscious” of their own existence and agency to varying degrees.

§ § §

*Near the New York archeological site, 2225*

“What is this?”

“We don’t know. All we know is that it was made by *homo sapiens* at a time when the majority of humans on the planet were right-handed. And the Earth’s magnetic field was reversed from how it is now.”

“Not a clue?”

“Not a clue.”

§ § §

*Near New York again, 2025*

Undello’s thinking had the power of simplicity:

IF: you point a gun at someone, and just when you make the decision to shoot — just an instant before you truly decide to pull the trigger, when you have made a detectable decision but the motor cortex has not yet sent irrevocable orders to the trigger finger — you feel what they are about to feel, the shock, the pain, the rending of flesh and shattering of bone, and you feel it within your body, this location that you feel you occupy on this earth (with the intensity of the signals kept down to a dull roar to avoid complete instant psychosis),



THEN: many fewer people will pull the trigger.

And this, in a nation that refused to give up its right to arm itself to the teeth, this in spite of the fact that the powers-that-be had long given up on bullets as a means of social control, and thus had no fear of citizen militias that might be formed according to models functioning in other lands, this seemed to Undello like the best she could hope for. The business of ballistics and its role in human evolution was going the same way as the world's oldest profession, that is, it was going nowhere, here to stay.

Thus she reasoned and thus she had acted, both in her professional life and her marriage, when her ex had refused her even so much as cunnilingus after years of sexlessness and confessions of other attractions (his), after her sister-in-law — sipping a gin fizz and asking her (for entertainment purposes only) if she could point to someone in the bar who was her 'type' (as if she had a 'type,' at least she was, as far as she knew, immune to having 'types') — said "Well, if you're not getting what you need, you just have to go out and get it somewhere." This advice had made her less afraid of the emotional collisions that were sure to come, that came, that went, that transformed into the physical collisions of glass and kitchen-floor tile when he (the ex) confessed that he didn't trust her anymore.

That's how certain she had been of the pacifist value of the Telepathic Empathy Gun™. As certain as the sound of glass smashing on the tile floor of a kitchen she had shared with a man she thought she had loved.

She heard Camille's car in the driveway. *Back the present moment*, she thought. *Must concentrate. Don't get lost in the past.*

§ § §

*End of Chapter 3*