



UNA–SA Membership Meeting Keynote Address:

40 Years after Earth Day, Now What? *New Approaches for Healing a Damaged Planet*

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Good afternoon. Thank you Bill and thanks to everyone – Board, staff, volunteers, and members – everyone who helps make the United Nations Association of Southern Arizona such an important asset in our community and for the world.

I've followed your work from the periphery when I lived outside the state and even more since I've returned home. Thanks for all that you do and all that you are.

With that said, we're in some tough times these days. The earth is hurting, its people are hurting. These are days of hope and they are days of heartbreak.

The horror still unfolding in the Gulf is just the latest and most blunt expression to date of what whole system failure looks like when we mess with Mother Nature. We're moving quickly from a world in which we push nature around to one where nature pushes back, and with far more power.

I often wonder how we got to this place. It was just 40 years ago that the United States celebrated the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. Wasn't the environmental movement that began that day supposed to change everything? Clean rivers and air, safe drinking water, lead-free gasoline, no more DDT, protection for endangered species.

That original Earth Day idea sprung from events and images too hard to ignore – a river in Ohio catching fire, urban skies black with uncontrolled industrial emissions, and a gushing slick of crude oil along the Santa Barbara coast. Those first images of spaceship earth from the Gemini cameras combined with television footage of environmental trouble spots to help us see the need for new ways of conducting business.

So on that first Earth Day, marches took place, teach-ins were held, trees were planted, roadsides and beaches cleaned of litter.

Within months, President Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency to begin regulating the activities responsible for dying rivers and lakes and poisoned skies. In the heyday of that moment, and I'm not sure how many remember this, leaders of the two major political parties – President Nixon and Senator Ed Muskie - actually tried to out-duel the other in producing the most stringent clean air legislation they could. Today's equivalent would be Sen. Mitch McConnell proposing a tougher climate law than the White House.

In the next couple of decades, the U.S. Congress passed at least 28 major pieces of environmental legislation. States began creating their own "EPAs" and new environmental advocacy groups began fighting to ensure that laws were followed by businesses and that government agencies complied with the intent of Congress.

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Today, our skies are much cleaner, industrial discharges to rivers have been controlled, and trillions of dollars have been spent on wastewater and drinking water treatment plants and hazardous waste cleanups. Small victories really, in a much larger war.

Yet I am probably not alone in believing that our environmental circumstances now are far worse than in those days before 1970.

If we are paying attention at all we see just how incomplete our small victories have been. Today's threats are more complex, harder to perceive, and they permeate every dimension of our industrial society and modern life style.

These are the consequences of how we currently do business:

- All of our natural systems are in decline (estuaries, grasslands, forests, aquifers, tundra, etc.) and the rate of decline is increasing
- We have 80,000 chemicals in commerce for which we have no health effects data (something like having fleets of school buses that haven't been safety tested). Many of these chemicals find their way into our bodies [In a study of several prominent people a few years ago, the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine found 84 distinct chemicals in Bill Moyers' blood and urine; I'm guessing he doesn't exactly live next to an industrial waste site. What about the rest of us?]
- Species loss is accelerating (How many is too many? Like popping rivets on a plane, it's hard to say until you have catastrophic failure. How long do we want to wait?)
- Loss of one-half to an inch of our best topsoil year to erosion; left to its own devices a prairie will build an inch of topsoil every thousand years. Hard to catch up that way....
- Upsurge in environmentally related diseases (asthma, breast cancer)
- Untested genetically engineered products are coming to dominate our food supply with really huge risks
- We've learned that when energy was cheap, we wasted everything else. To keep the addiction going, we turn close to half of our corn crop into motor fuel, and then seem surprised when food riots break out in 37 cities as happened in 2008.
- And most alarming of all, we've turned up the thermostat on the planet and climate destabilization is well underway, some of it irreversible. While we are

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only 95% certain that climate disruption is underway, getting worse, and predominantly human-caused, if we wait for the other 5% certainty to become apparent – a climatological 9/11 as it were – there would be no time left to change the worst possible outcome.

None of these was on our radar screen on that first Earth Day. We worried about symptoms really, rather than the fundamental and inter-connected nature of our resource-wasting industrial society.

When EPA clamped down on dirty industries some simply moved, giving us the appearance of progress as our own backyards became less dirty.

But then we learned that it only takes a week for hazardous air pollutants emitted in Asia to reach the west coast of the US. We can even fingerprint the factories responsible based on the unique chemistry of industrial process emissions. So we get the pollution back anyway, with no ability to clean any of it up as it filters down slowly from our skies.

We've been writing laws to address single-issue problems – water, air, drinking water, radiation, noise, solid waste, pesticides, and on. So to deal with power plant emissions, we used powerful filters on the tall stacks. We ended up collecting lots of powdery ash. Because ash has historically not been regulated, it went into landfills, where it could leach into groundwater.

So we swapped an air pollution problem for a solid waste problem as well as a groundwater problem. The air pollution folks are happy, but the problem just gets shifted. We've been doing this in industry after industry for four decades. We are good at connecting TWO dots – but aren't very good at seeing and connecting multiple dots.

Some new thinking is required. Thinking about systems, not just pieces of systems.

Studies show that between a half and three-quarters of the materials used in our industrial economies are generated and treated as waste before ever entering those economies.

We have been literally wasting away since that first Earth Day. The challenge ahead is to become far more productive in our use of resources.

Take this piece of coal - by the time it is burned and ultimately becomes usable light on our desktop we're getting only 3% of its original energy content. The rest is lost, wasted, along the way. It's as if you found a dollar on the street and by the time you got to the

store all you had was three cents. But since the dollar was free – hey, three cents is three cents. Especially if you get the lump of coal for almost free.

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It's the same everywhere we look. When we make a so-called green detergent from palm oil, we use only 5% of the plant material and the rest is treated as waste. When we ferment barley to make beer (and I'm glad we do!), we use perhaps 8% of the sugars. The rest is a waste product. Where else can we get away with such foolishness?

As a friend of mine asks, "Imagine being a dancer and told you could only use 10% of the stage?"

We've designed our system to react to environmental threats and only most recently has attention gone into avoiding threats in the first place. This is beginning to change as we design and put into use new products and services that create less waste while saving business money.

Governments and a few enlightened industries have recently championed the idea of going beyond environmental compliance, doing more than required to under the law. They've learned at least some of the truth of what Bill Coors said in the 1980s – "All waste is lost profit."

Some industries reduce their emissions 10, 20, 30% below what the law requires. From bad to "less bad." But even this isn't enough when the emissions contain known carcinogens and other deadly chemicals, some of those 80,000 out there with no health effects data known.

Just because something is legal, doesn't mean its safe. Yet in settling for "less bad" we reduce the pressure to produce more convincing victories.

Like the story of the young boy who is a bit of a thief yet finally gets before his priest for confession. "I steal every day Father. I just can't help myself. It's the way I am."

The priest says, "Why that's terrible; stealing is a sin and you need to stop immediately." The boy goes away and returns a few months later. He tells the priest proudly – "Father, I stopped stealing during the week and only steal on the weekends now."

The priest repeated his earlier statement and added that if the boy didn't stop stealing completely he would go straight to hell when he died.

"Well," the boy said, "then my father will be there with me." "What do you mean," said the priest, "your father is an upstanding member of the business community in this town. He employs a lot of people and last year he even won an award from the EPA for cutting his toxic chemical pollution 10% below what was required."

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The boy said, “You see, how come it’s OK for my father to cut his pollution by 10% and it’s not OK for me to just steal on weekends?”

The boy was on to something. We need to find a way to get the bad stuff completely out of our system. This is the only place where we settle for less bad. Imagine a shop foreman going to management and say that his goal is reduce workplace deaths by 10% next year?

Of course the goal should always zero. Zero accidents, zero defects; we’ve even found a way to work with zero inventory. We need business to take the business-like step of embracing zero-waste.

The basic idea of zero emissions is to build an economic society that generates no waste, through the collaboration of different industries and companies. It models itself on the natural ecosystem in which all living things are interconnected with each other through the food chain. The aim of this concept is to establish a new industrial chain to utilize waste and by-products from one industry as resources for another, until all outputs have become inputs somewhere and zero emissions result. The model is nature – where there is no waste and, by the way, no unemployment.

Another problem comes in how we measure success. We’ve never really mastered this business of measuring economic health and well being by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – the value of all goods and services transactions in our economy. Large GDPs are “good,” Low GDP’s are “bad.”

The Deepwater Horizon explodes like a roman candle and the GDP goes up (cleanup crews get paid, expensive secondary wells have to be drilled, extra ships leased). People happen to die? The GDP goes up even more. Liability claims, lawyers’ fees, increased debt insurance? GDP skyrockets like the blown-out rig itself.

Every exchange has a plus sign for the GDP. Our calculator needs a minus sign too.

We should be putting a minus sign on all of nature’s services that are being trashed by how we build, use and dispose of things. The value of wetlands destroyed by offshore energy extraction; the value of agriculturally productive land paved for tract homes and strip malls; the value of pollinators declining due to climate disruption and chemical use; the value of the carbon breathed in by forests that are being cut for palm oil or cattle production.

In every case, we put little to no value on the services of nature being lost and so whatever it is we buy – cheap hamburgers, cheap laundry detergents, inexpensive homes, continued dependence on low-cost oil and gas – comes to us, well, cheaply.

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We've postponed the moment of payback for the economic values in nature that we are destroying. We have put the payback on our children's balance sheets.

If this is not to be how it ends, we need a different script, a different story. It is clear that the past 40 years, no matter how nobly begun, do not provide a roadmap for going forward.

So what do the next steps look like?

My friends know I am an optimist, someone radically hopeful in the face of every reason to despair. A colleague Alex Steffen, with a group called World Changing, wrote recently: "Optimism is a political act. Those who benefit from the status quo [*and we all know who they are*] are perfectly happy for us to think that nothing is going to get any better. In fact, these days, cynicism is obedience."

The time for disobedience – in the form of optimism and action – is upon us.

I met a disobedient young woman last weekend. She was serving us lunch at a restaurant in Flagstaff. I asked about how she liked working there. She replied that she used to work for another restaurant operation in the city but that she was happier now as this particular restaurant was "a better corporation morally." Not that it paid more, or had better hours, or was more convenient to her apartment, but that it was better "morally."

More decision filters like this are going to be necessary.

It is perhaps too soon to know if the Deepwater Horizon blowout – or the unfolding climate catastrophe - will trigger the next wave of environmental anger and disobedience as happened after Santa Barbara 41 years ago. But it should.

This much we do know. The Santa Barbara release was a puddle compared to what will eventually come out of the Gulf.

After the extent of the Santa Barbara release became known, all 3 million gallons of it – just a Deepwater day's worth if we're keeping score – then-Interior Secretary Stuart Udall called it "conservation's Bay of Pigs." We'll need a different metaphor of course, but Deepwater Horizon is certainly a game changing disaster.

Will the outrage take the form of concrete change in the way we use and waste energy in this country? That would be a start and we need to be getting on with it. In the context of a different kind of war Churchill said, "Let our advanced worrying become advanced thinking and planning."

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On a larger scale then, we need to build durable and graceful ways to inhabit the planet. And we're not going to recognize a lot of it just yet. Writer and entrepreneur Paul Hawken has often catalogued the set of challenges we face only to say immediately afterward that this will be an exciting time nonetheless as we get to rethink and remake everything – our mobility system, how and where we live, what we eat, and how we get along with our billions of neighbors.

As Hawken puts it – “If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But if you meet people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse.”

While we are at it we also need to recast the environmental movement as a human rights movement.

Our current economic system – the one that has made it easy for us all to create the mess we now have - is a system where 3 billion people in the developing world live on \$1/day or less. Here in Tucson 30% of the population lives at or below the poverty level. Given all this, it is difficult to argue that our economic system is working.

And what do they think about us? What if we had to get a letter of reference from the poor? How would it read?

It is clear that when people think only about living one more day, desperation trumps everything. Reefs get dynamited, forests slashed, fisheries depleted, and wars started. As the only species without full employment, we can't afford to have millions of 18-24 year old males standing around on the street corners of the world unemployed.

For starters, they tend to get into mischief.

The environmental movement must have as its goal the meeting of everyone's basic needs (food, shelter, water, energy, health and wellness, and mobility) while preserving the ability of the planet to keep societies intact and economies whole. If not, we risk creating a perpetual underclass of desperate humanity ready to engage in whatever it takes to survive. No matter how much money the rest of us have, life gets pretty scary when a large segment of society decides they are no longer going to play by the rules.

Not only will the ecosystems of the earth suffer even more, but human populations will also go down with them. The environmental movement at its core must become a human rights movement. This is what true Homeland Security depends on.

So, we have some decisions to make.

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If we know that we are pushing the planet toward extinction then we need to stop doing what we're doing and begin on a different course.

And if we cannot stop ourselves or allow government to make us stop or even slow down then I suppose we should enjoy the ride. What's the expression? - "The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast."

Francis Moore and Anna Lappé wrote in their book "Hope's Edge," that "To question ideas that have long given our lives coherence and meaning is just about the scariest thing that any human can do."

And another writer, English journalist Walter Bagehot, once said, "One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea."

Yet we need lots of new ideas, no matter how scary or painful they first appear.

How many saw the Time Magazine story on Thomas Edison a few weeks ago? One page stood out to me. It was a copy of the first page of a 5-page "to-do" list, dated 1881, in Edison's own handwriting. Some of the things to do or being done at the time included: cotton picker, new standard phonograph, electrical piano, artificial cable, grid battery for telephone, new expansion pyromagnetic dynamo, and ink for the blind.

That was page one.

I think we need a "to-do" list for the planet.

But we need big ideas and big imagination behind such a "to-do" list. No more of these "50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Planet." We've been writing these for 40 years and they haven't helped. Time has come for a small book (and I've just started one) with a title like "50 Hard Things You Must Do to Save the Planet."

So it's time this afternoon for a breath of really fresh air. I want to highlight over the next few minutes what others are doing to help us avoid a complete unraveling of the planet. These are just samples of the kinds of best practices that I've been trying to collect over the past decade. They keep getting better and they are the foundation for that radical hope I mentioned earlier.

- Beginning this year in Hawaii, a building permit cannot be issued for a new home if it does not include a solar hot water heater. It is the first U.S. State with such a requirement; and is expected to lower individual electric bills by 30-40%.

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- In deference to public outcry, India has vetoed the first genetically modified food crop proposed for introduction in the country. Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh said, “It is my duty to adopt a cautious, precautionary, and principle-based approach.” What a concept!

[Recent research has shown that hamsters fed genetically engineered soy, like what is sold in the US, became sterile after three generations; so the folks in India are being very reasonable until more is known about these engineered crops.]

- Toshiba, which has been making incandescent light bulbs for 120 years, up to 40 million/year, is halting all incandescent bulb manufacture by the end of this year in favor of more efficient lighting technology.
- The U.K.’s National Health Service has taken meat off the menus of British hospitals as part of a its carbon reduction strategy that aims to cut the high carbon emissions from rearing animals and, by the way, improve patient health.
- Hundreds of cities in Canada as well as the provinces of Quebec and Ontario have banned the sale and use of residential chemical pesticides. The bans apply to all major toxic chemicals used in lawn and garden formulations. The Canadian Supreme Court has unanimously upheld these local laws. Oh Canada!
- Here is the U.S. a Pentagon Board working with the Center for Naval Analyses has cited oil dependence and our central electrical grid as significant national security threats. They urge the Administration to “clearly and fully integrate energy security and climate change into national security and military planning.”
- A small company, MOM’s organic markets in the metro DC area, has banned the sale of water in plastic bottles in its six regional stores. However, it allows customers to bring in their own one-gallon jugs and fill up at water filtration stations in the stores at no charge.
- An innovative company on the Olympic peninsula started by Paul Stamets is reinventing the cardboard box. It is called a “Life Box.” Within the corrugations are hundreds of tree seeds and thousands of spores of mycorrhizal fungi. Empty the box, plant it and watch reforestation appear. The plant mix is USDA approved; seed mixes by region are coming soon (so we don’t have to try to grow Redwoods in the Catalinas.) The boxes will initially be used to ship relief supplies to disaster victims, refugee camps, burn areas, etc.

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- Last year, Mitsubishi achieved a 99+% recovery rate for the three dominant types of plastics pulled from recycled appliances and uses them to remanufacture new products.

I want to conclude with two more stories, slightly longer, that illustrate what success will need to look like as we move forward.

- Mike Potter, father of six, grandfather of four, is the founder and president of Eden Foods. In 1997, Potter learned that new research was raising questions about the safety of the chemical bisphenol A (BPA for short) and that one of BPA's many applications was in the linings of cans. "Being a canner, it got my attention," said Potter.

He asked his can suppliers -- three of them at the time -- if bisphenol A was in the cans they were selling to Eden Foods. "I made hundreds of phone calls to these three manufacturers," he said. "Remarkably, I couldn't find out if it was in the cans I was using or not." The can companies didn't have to disclose what chemicals they were using as long as they claimed it was a trade secret.

"I was flabbergasted that legally, it was none of my business. I had no right to know, as a consumer, a food manufacturer, a parent or grandparent."

One can supplier, Ball Corp., "ascertained that I wasn't going to go away. They weren't going to disclose specifically what was in the linings of their cans, but they did help me understand the complex chemistry that goes on to make the linings and how that process leads to bisphenol A."

So Potter asked what he describes as the "high-school question." What did Ball Corp. use before the days of the formulation that results in bisphenol A leaching into canned food?

"They told me they used an enamel made from vegetable resins. So I asked: Can I get my cans with that on it, please?"

The answer was yes, if Eden Foods paid 14 percent more for the BPA-free cans. "That's hundred of thousands of dollars a year for us, " which is a big deal for a small company in a very competitive canned food business.

Potter felt he had no choice but to switch to BPA-free cans. "It was the right thing to do. I didn't want BPA in food I was serving to my kids, my grandkids, or my customers."

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His company began using BPA-free cans in 1999. But Eden Foods did not promote its switch to BPA-free cans 11 years ago. "At the time, consumers hadn't heard about bisphenol A. The name itself was like Swahili."

Though with growing awareness about BPA's laboratory links to recent trends in human diseases -- a chilling list including breast and prostate cancers, increases in urogenital abnormalities in male babies, early onset of puberty in girls, metabolic disorders including Type 2 diabetes and obesity, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder -- Eden Foods recently began labeling its bean cans "BPA-free."

Eden Foods is now beginning its second decade of bisphenol A-free cans – the first and perhaps still the only company doing so.

- A few weeks ago, after the Deepwater horizon explosion, the Southern Baptist Convention called for corporate responsibility for damages, clean up, and restoration.

As NPR reported: "Dr. Russell Moore, dean of the School of Theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, helped pass the resolution. He says even though evangelicals are more typically aligned with Republicans politically, there's no reason they shouldn't take up the cause of protecting the environment.

"There's really nothing conservative — and certainly nothing evangelical — about a laissez-faire view of a lack of government regulation," Moore told NPR. "Simply trusting corporations to go about their business without polluting the water streams and without destroying ecosystems is really a naive and Utopian view of human nature. It's not a Christian view of human nature."

So there we have it. Eleven images of what the new world needs to look like. None of these actions was incremental and none was easy. But each is part of the new narrative we need to create.

What else will "What Next" look like?

A price on carbon will be commonplace within the decade and we will find lots of incentive to become more energy efficient (200,000 homes in Tucson built before there were meaningful energy codes in place are ripe for weatherization upgrades; we can put a lot of unemployed 18-24 year olds to work with guns -- caulking guns). As the desert SW gets hotter and the demand for home cooling grows, this becomes a form of "climate insurance."

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We will turn more and more to local sources for what we buy; imports have huge carbon footprints that will get pricey – EPA analysis has estimated that 1/3 of China’s greenhouse gas emissions are due to exports made and shipped to North America. The good news as carbon gets priced - jobs will be coming home!

Finding food security closer to home (a Missouri County requires all food served at County-sponsored events to be sourced organically and from within 65 miles of the County courthouse). We spend less on food than any developed nation but more on health care than any developed nation. Might there be a connection?

Offsetting the carbon that we do produce. When we can’t avoid using electricity from coal or avoid burning gasoline or natural gas, we can pay a small amount to offset that carbon via projects that remove an equivalent amount of CO₂ from the air, ideally locally. (Here in Tucson there is The Local Trust that is partnering with Tucson Audubon to plant carbon-sequestering trees as well as with Habitat for Humanity Tucson to put solar hot water systems on Habitat houses instead of natural gas or electric systems)

Getting toxics out of kitchens, bathrooms, and garages, one-by-one if we have to, until there are no more

Be careful in demanding “solutions” if by solutions we mean a means by which we can keep living exactly the way we’ve been living – which isn’t going to happen.

All of this is what “Next” will look like.

Paul Hawken wrote an inspiring book not too long ago titled “Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came Into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming.” Hawken describes the one and possibly two million organizations worldwide working on issues such as climate change, peace, water, human rights, deforestation, poverty, green banking, child labor, and dozens more.

Blessed Unrest is a story of what is going right in the world. No one saw these groups coming because they share no orthodoxy or unifying ideology and they follow no charismatic leader – certainly no charismatic white male leader.

Hawken describes this movement as a reflection of society’s immune system, arising to fight the endless injustices endured by the earth and its peoples, attaching themselves, he writes “like social antibodies to the pathologies of power.”

Hawken continues: “Healing the wounds of the earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party. It is not a liberal or a conservative activity. It is a sacred act.”

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We must not become paralyzed by what challenges confront us, just sticking to the safety of our known ways. A local example illustrates how paralyzed we can become: Recently a Tucson homebuilder was asked why his group could not build homes with crawl spaces as Habitat for Humanity does – allowing easier installation and operation of grey water systems so important in a region that is dry and getting drier.

The reply was something on the order of “wanting to stay with what we know.”

That’s not a good answer.

Didn’t the Church once tell Galileo something like that?

Will Rogers had a quote that applies in the homebuilding example and many other places where we ask why – WHY – can’t these businesses or individuals or governments change their ways or we change ours. Rogers stated simply “It is difficult to get a man to understand when his salary depends on him not understanding.”

So in a lot of ways that explains the last 40 years. There has been a lot of “not understanding” going on for some very human reasons. But if we care at all about keeping this boat afloat we need to start understanding – in a hurry.

We’ve come today to celebrate another year of accomplishment by the United Nations Association of Southern Arizona. You are one of those two million organizations creating blessed unrest in the world. You are part of our immune system response to human injustice and environmental decay. You understand.

The first Earth Day got a generation fired up, but today’s problems were scarcely known then. An age of cynicism seemed to follow. Now, as we mobilize against the tough, game changing problems we face, we will need new institutions, new economic frameworks, new technologies, new behaviors, new practices, and new role models like Russell Moore, Paul Stamets and Anna Lappe, Mike Potter, Jairam Ramesh, and that young woman in Flagstaff. Most of all we need radical hope in the face of cynical obedience.

We also need to write a new narrative that honors nature at every step, as it is the underpinning of everything we cherish about life. If we can do this, and I believe we can, we will finally fulfill the hope and expectations of that first Earth Day.

Thank You.