

A Q&A with Auden Schendler, author of *Terrible Beauty...*

1. *You've had a colorful career in sustainability, can you share a bit about your resume? When did you start working at Aspen One and what has some of that work has looked like?*

After college, my priority was living in Colorado, so I did all the jobs one does to do that. Burger cook, trailer insulator, Outward Bound Instructor, high school teacher. I ended up at RMI, a sustainability think tank doing corporate sustainability work, and from there it was an obvious move to Aspen One. I pride myself in having had a lot of weird jobs: goose nest Island builder in Alaska; street medic; auction junk sorter. Those roles were a PhD in the real world and have informed my sustainability work later on.

2. *Much of your book isn't about climate change, it's about family, turtles, tightrope walkers, philosophy, backpacking, and so much more. Kurt Vonnegut shows up. So does Cormac McCarthy and Philip Petit. You write about people building boats and sailing off to nowhere. What's going on there?*

The book asks the question: "Why do we say we love and care about our communities, our children, the natural world, and then when faced with a threat to all of it, we do almost nothing, or take only token action?" And part of my thesis is that this profound love can be the thing that motivates us to do real work that drives meaningful change. The weird stories are really about people searching for meaning, and I argue that we can find that in a life partly built around tackling climate change.

3. *After 26 years at Aspen One, what's your assessment of the limitations of traditional corporate environmentalism? How has it evolved and what needs to change?*

The problem with the modern environmental movement, and corporate sustainability specifically, is a major theme of the book. In short, I argue that both are complicit with a status quo fossil fuel economy. Modern environmentalism never disrupts the fossil fuel industry's hegemony over society. It makes it appear we're working diligently, but we don't make progress. And when we fail, we're told to rinse and repeat. Most of corporate sustainability has been a sham, and we have to rethink it.

4. *Your new book Terrible Beauty: Reckoning with Climate Complicity and Rediscovering Our Soul weaves together stories of outdoor adventure with environmental advocacy and climate science. How does your identity as a*

"dirtbag," "ski bum," "outdoorsman," etc. inform your approach to the climate crisis?

The thing that I, and really all of us at Aspen One, have done differently than many in the environmental movement is that we tried to solve problems on the ground, and we've been honest when we've failed so that we and others can learn, iterate, course correct, but keep going. I'm not interested in appearing to fix a problem but in reality, failing. And I'm a realist. Those are all dirtbag traits.

5. *Part of your argument is that efforts like carbon emissions and footprints or "greening" operations are not true climate solutions. What would real look like?*

I argue that those actions are fine, but they are inadequate to the problem, and they often displace the more difficult work of moving whole systems. That work includes building social movements, moving political systems, using corporate voice to drive big scale change. Those latter things are very scary, very uncomfortable, and they can get you in trouble. But that's how change happens.

6. *You suggest that businesses need to be more proactive in transforming the entire fossil fuel economy. What would that actually look like in practice?*

Instead of saying, we're going to change our light bulbs and boilers and cut our carbon footprint 30% by X date, businesses need to think about what role they can play in changing systems. So, for example: can you change the board of your utility, so they go to 100% clean power, eliminating the carbon footprint of the whole region? If the presidential election is the most important issue facing the climate, well, then—intervene in the election. If the way to get climate policy through is to create a social movement to create political will, then create a social movement.

7. *Aspen One has released a sustainability report one of the first of its kind—every couple of years—for the past quarter century. How has this report evolved and what should corporations be considering when releasing reports like these?*

You'll notice [these reports](#) don't get bogged down in analysis paralysis. Instead, they focus on action, attempting to meet the scale of the climate problem, and helping people understand our philosophy versus buying into a status quo sustainability movement that has failed over 30 years. Our philosophy is to ask the question: "is this enough?" And the answer is always: "not nearly." So we try harder, think bigger, do more.

8. *Technical solutions and politics have failed us in the climate fight. Why do you believe reaching people's hearts is the key to creating real change? How does it weave into this concept of Terrible Beauty?*

Well, the weird thing is that we have the technology and the policy tools on the shelf today to reduce the climate problem. So, it's really the deployment that has failed. And that's going to take society realizing that we stand to lose all the things we care about if we don't act now, and act very aggressively, almost painfully, to solve this problem. That's why the book is full of stories of family and parenting and the outdoors, stories about love and beauty and nature. The idea is that we'll never address climate if our hearts and souls aren't in it--and that our love and joy is what's required to lessen the impact of the warming we'll see.

9. *You compare climate action to historical social movements. What specific lessons should climate activists take from successful revolutions of the past?*

Change happens when people undertake revolutions, which start with social movements. We are very good at it. There's every reason to think we can have a peaceful revolution around climate that does the same things, but at larger scale, similar to what movements around gay marriage, or marijuana legalization, or even civil rights have done.

10. *In your book, you talk about how being a father has shaped your perspective on climate action. How has it changed the urgency or nature of how you approach this work?*

I always worry about people who suddenly care about a cause because it happened to them—like, my kid got measles so now I care about measles. Or “I had kids, and it made me care about stuff.” I don't buy that: you don't have to have kids to care about children, or the world, or the future. I think as humans we're capable of empathy, and so being a parent wasn't an epiphany for me, but rather, in the book, a way to talk about deep love we humans have for others. And I use a lot of stories of that almost painful, borderline crippling caring, to help us understand all that we have to lose, and gain.

11. *Given your experience in both grassroots work and corporate sustainability, what gives you hope for the future of climate action?*

I wouldn't say I'm optimistic as much as happy to be engaged in a cause greater than myself, which I see as a practice, a way of living a right life, versus trying to "win" or get to a finish line. I'm not a fan of that distinct piece of American culture, the winning thing, because as the humanitarian Paul Farmer points out, if there are winners, then there are losers. And we can't have winners and losers in a stable and sustainable society. My friend Drew Jones, who is a climate modeler, likes to say: "We're making things better. We're not solving climate change. We're making things better."

About Auden Schendler:

Auden Schendler is Senior Vice President of Sustainability at Aspen Skiing Company, where he works on scale solutions to climate change, including clean-energy development, policy, advocacy and activism. He helped develop the only coal-mine-methane to electricity project in the United States and other pioneering clean-energy projects in solar and hydroelectricity. Along with Protect Our Winters, where he serves on the board, he is working to mobilize the outdoor industry as a political force like the NRA. Previously a research associate at Rocky Mountain Institute, Auden's work has been covered in Businessweek, Men's Journal, Fast Company and Outside, and he is author of the book "Getting Green Done," which climatologist James Hansen called "an antidote to greenwash."

He publishes widely on climate change, parenting, and the outdoors. Named a "climate innovator" by TIME magazine and a "climate saver" by the EPA, he has testified to Congress and spoken at Starbucks, Google, and business schools at Harvard, MIT, Yale and Dartmouth, as well as to fourth graders and Chilean kayakers. Auden has served on several Governor-appointed boards in Colorado, including the Air Quality Control Commission and the Pollution Prevention Advisory board.

Between 2016 and 2020, he was elected to Basalt, Colorado's town council, and served until 2020. He lives in Basalt with his wife and two children.