This article accurately reflects my views at the time—four years out of college and at a time of enormous turmoil as our country tried to wind down the Vietnam War and also deal with conflicts of class, inequality, and race. But I am more humble now.

Berea taught me more than I was capable of acknowledging at the time. A good education is the most viable path we have out of poverty and oppression. We can use a college education as a tool to change society or we can use it selfishly to advance our individual careers. This is a choice that each of us faces each day that we have left.

Looking back now, after 45 years, I can see that the arc of my adult life was set by the time I spent at Berea. The big issues that define how a modern democracy functions: how do we deal with the past? How do we deal with inequity?

How do we deal with the legacy of slavery and race? How do we deal with war? These questions still dominate our public life, and they have not been resolved. Indeed, they have not been much improved. For example, the United States has one of the highest rates of poverty of any industrialized society. And the trend has worsened during my lifetime. The current Black Lives Matter movement illustrates how the terrible legacy of slavery still dominates our national policing system. Today, your generation faces a new and even more momentous question: how do we deal with the reality of rapid climate change brought about by fundamental changes in the planet’s atmosphere?

Unlike 45 years ago when I wrote the article, I now have no easy answers. For much of our nation’s life, activists like myself believed that with enough time we could make progress and we could resolve some of these fundamental questions that dominate human life on the planet. I now understand, after years of struggle, that most of these issues cannot be resolved in a lifetime of work. At best, we can learn how to better manage some of these forces.

We can push society to reorganize its governmental functions. We can demand that government intervene in the market to create a more level playing field. We can pass new laws that limit the negative impacts of an out-of-control consumer society on our environment. But my experience tells me that the best choices we face now revolve around our ability to reform ourselves one step at a time in our home communities. Big government does not have the ability to reform itself. Corporate reforms are unlikely to occur at a rate that will fundamentally alter global markets and halt our head-long fling into running a lab experiment that destroys the ability of mammals to exist on the planet.

If we have options, they now revolve around our capacity to turn our home communities into exemplars of thoughtful and modest interactions with our neighbors and with the astounding diversity of species that live with us.

I share this conclusion with some reluctance. I’ve spent 45 years trying to bring pain to corporations, trying to work with big government agencies that should do better than what they do. I have now run nine different social change NGOs such as Highlander Center, Friends of the Earth, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and Greenpeace. Reformers all. And I would do it again. But our choices now, your choices, must be seen within a limited amount of time in which we can fundamentally change our society so that it is less destructive to the environment and to the lifeforms that now inhabit the planet.

Berea can help lead the way. Its history of social change, its community of rural people, its vast network of graduates spread across Appalachia and the South, and its capacity to learn from our joint experience—these factors still offer a path of hope. Whatever choices you make, push hard.

I wish you well.

-Mike