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Humans are unique in their ability to comprehend “past” and “future,” that is, to think retrospectively and hypothetically. It gives us a great mental advantage over the other creatures of this earth, but it also forces us to take responsibility for our actions and think about what we do on a grander scale. The Native Americans understood this responsibility when they said “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.”

This statement evokes an environmental perspective at first. The world and its resources are not merely ours to exhaust and use to the point of destruction. Special care must be taken in evaluating how our actions today will have consequences for humanity ahead of us. Forests, coal, oil, fresh water, and life truly are limited, and we must remember to save some beauty and ease for our children.

But I believe that this statement goes farther than having only environmental repercussions. The use of the word “borrow” implies taking what belongs to another and then returning it, with interest. When we ask our children to “borrow their earth,” they expect us to treat it well and return it better than we had received it, as a friend asking another to borrow his car or the master handing out money in the parable of the talents.

In this sense, we are being given a hint of what the future is and are being asked to improve on it. “Borrowing the future” is being given a spirit of innovation and invention with a focus on long term benefit. When we borrow the earth of our children, we have the chance to see what it’s like to move forward as a society, and we are called to act on that vision, to strive to make the future society the best it can be. And though this certainly encapsulates environmental preservation, it also calls for progress in science, politics, education, economics, art, everything! If we are borrowing a bit of the future, if we are given the inspirational notion that there is something ahead that is greater than what we have today, we should bravely forge onward.

For the world we have borrowed is not merely physical, and we owe our children a world that is not merely physically beautiful. As parents, it is our responsibility to foster a world that encourages and provides opportunities for everyone, a world that believes in justice, freedom, and goodness, a world that strives to solve our greatest problems with careful and compassionate thought and science. When we pass our world back to our children, maybe they will be inspired to work toward a similar goal.