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From the Inside Out: Building A Sustainable Environmental Movement

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If the world is saved, it will be saved by people with changed minds, people with a new vision. It will not be saved by people who have a program but unchanged minds. It will not be saved by people with an old vision but a new program. (Daniel Quinn)

The environmental movement has long recognized its enemies: corporations, governments, military and other entities that regard Nature as either a resource to be exploited or a dump for the detritus of modern civilization. But in recent times, the movement has come in danger of making new enemies, potentially more dangerous, because they come from the ranks of those who ultimately drive the movement - the general population.

Much of the public campaign efforts of the environmental movement are driven by messages with a decidedly negative bent: the couple dressed head-to-toe in protective clothing, walking hand-in-hand along a beach: "There will be no jobs on a dead, scorched Earth, and no people either" (Greenpeace)... "the end of Nature" (McKibben)... "irreparable damage". Fear, despair, collective loss - these sibling emotions are at the heart of the movement's public and media relations. The focus upon what's wrong with the world, or what is going to go wrong in the future is understandable: bad news sells, and threat gets people's attention. However, campaigns of this sort may be undermining their primary goal - to motivate the public to act - and even worse, may be helping to foster an environmental backlash.

The environmental movement currently faces a crisis of vision. So much effort has been put into "fighting the enemies" of Nature, and warning the public of our imminent demise if these enemies win the war against her, that goals, visions, a clear picture of the world we want to create, have been left to the back-burner. Without taking a very different tack, one that attends to a vision of how the world could look, without awakening the desire in the public's hearts to want to see that world become reality, the movement could be losing the popular base which empowers it.

## Overloaded with Negativity

Opinion polls conducted since the early 1980's show a consistent rise in public concern for the environment. Here in the 1990's, a vast majority of people recognize that the planet's ecology is in danger, would like to see governments attend more closely to environmental problems, and say they are willing to bear tax increases in order to do so.<sup>1</sup> The environmental movement can take much of the credit for this awareness. It has been highly successful in capturing the public's attention on the declining health of the planet. However, while public support for environmentalism is high, active commitment to environmental improvement is low - participation in activism is limited to a small minority of people, change toward ecologically benign lifestyles has been generally minimal, and voting patterns show, at best, ambivalence for environmental platforms.

Why this discrepancy between word and action? One reason may implicate the tactics that the environmental movement uses to motivate people to change. On the one hand, the fear approach to consciousness-raising that environmentalism has employed has, to a degree, solid evidence to support its effectiveness. Psychology has studied the mechanics and effectiveness of persuasion for decades now and shown that messages of fear and threat do work to make people aware of risks and take steps to avoid danger. AIDS awareness and anti smoking campaigns, for example, have done good preventive work by scaring people. Unfortunately, persuasion through fear and threat is not nearly so effective when it asks people to question what they value.<sup>2</sup>

Problems like ozone depletion, air pollution, and rainforest destruction are all problems to be fearful of, but each is linked to a range of habits and lifestyle choices that many of us in the Western world are not so ready to give up, whether it be air conditioning, automobiles, meat, or materialism. In this sense, fear, that uncomfortable sense of threat or danger, is a double-edged emotion. While it can motivate us to act on behalf of what is at risk - and this, of course, is what fear-driven campaigns are designed to do - it can also pull us into "cognitive shutdown" mode, when what's up for questioning in our behavior cuts too close to the comfort zone. Such reaction is, in one sense, understandable. When overt or covert pressure is placed upon people to turn their backs on what they love or have grown accustomed to, they turn away<sup>3</sup>...or fight back, as the "green backlash" dramatically and violently attests.<sup>4</sup>

We live in what has been called "the age of anxiety," where threats to our well-being are everywhere: loss of job security and unemployment, relationship strain, family breakdown, crime and terrorism, not to mention the possibility of ecological collapse. These days, reports on the latest problems facing the planet are just more evidence to support our anxiety and gloominess about the world. Survey after survey has uncovered a pervasive feeling of pessimism, reflected in a belief that not only have environmental conditions declined in recent years, but will continue to decline in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Such beliefs may in fact be true, and may suggest opinion poll respondents carry about with them a clear-eyed realism. But they may also indicate a sense of despair or numbness when the threats we have all been made aware of seem too overwhelming, or too difficult to solve. While environmentalists have a painful awareness of the damage that humanity is doing to the Earth, and express that pain in public relations campaigns, most people, in the face of threatening environmental words and images, rely on denial and repression to continue their daily existence.<sup>5</sup> It is all too easy to change the channel, turn the page, or otherwise shut off what appears too "in-your-face". Such shutting down of awareness does not, of course, work to support the movement, or the Earth.

## Taking A Different Course

In holding the campaign tactics of the environmentalism up to the light, an important question that must be asked is: Will they sustain the movement? Emotions like fear and anger are largely reactive rather than creative in nature. To react against what doesn't work may not be as effective in the long run as to focus upon the creation of what does. As Ivan Havel, brother of the Czech president, observed, "Before the revolution, I never realized how much more difficult it is to create than to destroy. Our task as dissidents was to question authority, to disturb the peace, to attack the basis of totality's existing structures. Now that they're gone though, it's suddenly on our shoulders to create something workable in their place".<sup>6</sup> Fear, despair, anger - such emotional burdens can blunt creativity, reduce vision to the limits of the problem at hand, and block the joy that spontaneously arises out of compassionate action. They also counsel that the game is perhaps already over.<sup>7</sup> Burnout is the dark side of pain-driven activism, and is none too rare among environmentalists.

A primary component of a sustainable environmental movement, I contend, is a focus upon the formulation of positive visions for the world. It will not be the purpose of this article to paint a picture of what the world might look like. In certain quarters of the movement, this is being done. My purpose will simply be to make such visioning a conscious, active process, and to encourage its success.

Rather than asking "What's wrong with the world and how can we fix it?," vision asks the question, "What does the world we want to live in look like?" Problem-solving (how can we fix it?) is a reactive strategy, responding to what is wrong or being lost, and is useful when interest is in repairing or improving upon a mechanism or system that generally works satisfactorily. Arguably, however, the sociocultural systems in which we live in the late 20th century are in many ways fundamentally dysfunctional. For example, recycling is an excellent programmatic effort, but it does not challenge the high rate of material consumption in this society that makes recycling so urgent. Problem-solving, in

this respect, has a tendency to focus upon the treatment of symptoms without addressing the causes for our malaise.

Visioning, on the other hand, begins with no judgments or assumptions about symptoms or causes, problems or solutions. It begins with a clean mental page. Clear vision can emerge when we are free of "consensus mind". As James Thornton notes, whether we are critical of it or not, we all participate in this consensus mind: a structure of ideas, norms, and beliefs, often unconsciously held, that shape and help to constitute our experience and actions in society. The belief in unlimited economic growth, for example, is part of the consensus mind.<sup>7</sup> The consensual view of reality also has fallout in our behavior. Most of us, environmentalist or not, rely upon such commodities as paper, wood, electricity, and airplane travel, for example, and all are implicated in environmental degradation. Holding goals for the world in mind involves asking probing questions about our behavior: for example, "Does this action or habit serve my/our vision of the world I/we want to create?" And if it doesn't, "What alternative ways of acting are possible?" Questioning of this sort can be a powerful tool for change. Breaking open the hardened shells of "what is" in the present, it opens up options to be explored, images for transformation to be put into action.<sup>8</sup> Broken free of reactive, reflexive action, vision work of this kind seeks to create what works, not simply dismantle or "manage" what doesn't.

## Taking A Wide View

Vision work also means holding many individual issues and perspectives in mind at once, and judging how they fit together. It can hold contradictions, unify opposites, and can weave together what appear to be incompatible notions into new, more integrated realities.<sup>9</sup> That many different perspectives can interrelate should not be news to ecologists, who hold interconnection or interrelation as a fundamental tenet of nature's working order. It is likely that the acceptance of any model or vision for humanity's place in the natural order will be determined by the degree to which it is encompassing or worldcentric - inclusive of many different points of view, many different people, and all segments of society. Such inclusiveness is, in one way or another, about community, and the building of it. The formulation of positive visions can succeed to the extent to which it opens the door to building community by inviting others to share aspirations and goals. It is about banding together with like-minded others to create plans and structures that help to foster a world more in tune with natural rhythms.

Encompassing visions are multifaceted, able to speak to many representative groups in society: men and women, labor, rich and poor, people of various ethnic stripes, and are able to draw strength from the spectrum of disciplines that collectively represent the many ways in which humanity acts upon the natural world. The notion of community-building has meanings that run much deeper

than these ideas suggest, though. It entails re-visioning just who our community is. The development of encompassing visions forces us to emphasize wholeness rather than otherness, to see our neighbors as potential allies of our visions, rather than potential or actual enemies.<sup>9</sup> While many of us in the movement want, for example, old-growth forest to stand and fish to be bountiful, activist efforts often leave out, or actively battle against, those members of society who derive their livelihoods from such "resources". In an age of downsizing and high joblessness, it is easier to ask such people to seek other employment than it is to point to a supply of alternative work (or, as in the case of East Coast fishermen and Native peoples, an alternative way of life).

Ken Wilber suggests that "Gaia's primary problems are not pollution, industrialization, overcultivation, soil despoilation, overpopulation, ozone depletion or whatnot. Gaia's major problem is lack of mutual understanding and mutual agreement".<sup>10</sup> For many environmentalists, particularly supporters of the deep ecology movement, identification with all beings is a sign of maturation,<sup>11</sup> and is a wonderful experience too; but all beings is often interpreted as those beings living in the forest, the ocean, or on the mountain, not those living in the house next door, in multinational headquarters, or in the logging camps. Building community on a broad scale involves a willingness to hear what other people are saying, and a willingness to hear, and share, our own truths about why we do what we do in relation to the Earth. All players in the ongoing environmental battle, at whatever level it is fought, have observations, concerns, fears, and doubts, from the personal to the planetary, whether they are focused on the loss of old-growth forests or the loss of forestry livelihood. There is, perhaps, as Paul Hawkin suggests, "a mutuality and causality to those anxieties, as there is to all of our fears and doubts; they are not necessarily as opposed to each other as special interest groups would have us believe".<sup>12</sup> More so now than ever, a corporate polluter cares about the reputation of his or her company in the eyes of the world; a forestry executive can want a beautiful world for his or her children to grow up in. Openness to dialogue is not about giving in or becoming soft on our goals - it is about seeking common ground wherever we can find it, however challenging that may be. It is no longer merely idealistic to advocate holding all points of view on environmental matters. Non-exclusionary environmentalism is being successfully demonstrated today, wherein all parties - whether Nature extractors or Nature preservers - can win when common ground and goals, such as economic security and environmental well-being, are sought.<sup>13,14</sup>

## **Deep Ecology Movement Education As Deep Eco-Activism**

The development of visions for a future world does not ignore or sweep under the carpet what is happening to the planet here and now. Truth-telling is key

to any environmental effort, in that it keeps us awake to what we love, want to preserve, and want to create. And our hope in preserving the natural world and its glories, and building a society that honors it lies, above all else, in our capacity to love it. In a recent interview, David Attenborough, the noted cinematographer, justified the lack of any overt conservationist message in his nature films by saying that if people learn to see the natural world as beautiful, as thrilling, as wonderful, the desire to preserve and defend it is a very small further step.

Deep ecology movement education has a crucial role to play in the inculcation of this capacity to love the natural world and so to entice environmentally-sound visions into being. There are, perhaps, many ways that this role can take shape; here are several possibilities:

**Coming to our senses.**Our sensory capacities - taste, smell, sight, hearing, and touch - are the closest, most immediate avenues of connection between self and world. The practice of bringing people into natural beauty is, perhaps, the most important educational tool that the deep ecology movement has. James Hillman believes that if we are cut off from the ability to respond to beauty in a vigorous way, we have little desire to fight for its preservation.<sup>15</sup> Research by Finger has found that having information, knowledge, and awareness about the environment are poor predictors of environmentally-sound behavior compared to having direct sensory and emotional experiences in and with the natural world.<sup>16</sup>

”Coming to our senses”, Laura Sewall says, is an integral step toward renewing our bond with the Earth. Not only does such sensory experience create a bridge between ourselves, our students, and Nature, it also, over time, suffuses the images we carry, the subjective realities we create. Nature bleeds into our imaginations, and an expanded sense of self, one that includes the Earth, begins to grow. Our images inform us of our desires and priorities and serve as guides or templates for the decisions we make. In a world where we are constantly bombarded with imagery, allowing the imagination to be enriched with Nature can take patient practice: taking time to sit under a tree, lie on a forest floor, breathe cool mountain air. When imagination becomes enlivened, informed by the color, creativity, the provocativeness of nature, we can develop clearer visions, images for our children, and for the future in which we wish to live.<sup>17</sup>

**Positive disintegration.**Joanna Macy, activist, scholar, and co-founder of the Council of All Beings, has recognized that in building a better world, the way outward is also the way inward. As activists well know, when that which we love is threatened or sustaining injury, we experience pain, anger, fear, sorrow. But simply storing away more and more information about the plight of the world can only drive us deeper into despair, perhaps denial or a sense of futility, when such pain is not dealt with. We already know we are in danger. The question is: Can we free ourselves to respond? This requires processing the information, and acknowledging and honoring our own pain about it. Such psychological

and emotional processing is important in that it can free us to respond, to reconnect with the larger web of life, and it can empower us to act.<sup>3</sup> Work of this kind expands the definition of deep ecology movement education to include instruction and guidance in the inner natural world, that of peoples' hearts and minds.

**Restoration and re-creation.** Integral to a vision for the world for many is a recognition that parts of the Earth have been damaged that should be restored, permitted to recreate themselves - a vacant lot, a clearcut hillside, a polluted river. Environmental restoration work, as both an educational and activist experience, offers the dual opportunity to be witness to the immense regenerative powers of the natural world, and to provide a positive vision of a healthier, more sustainable world.<sup>18</sup> It is often inclusive work, involving people drawn from existing communities, and has the capacity to renew and knit them together as well.

Restoration work is one activity, and there are others, like Green City<sup>19</sup> and ecovillage projects, which are actively moving vision from the realm of the potential, the imagination, to the realm of manifest reality. Ultimately, of course, this is the goal of any visioning process: to bring the future into the present, to plant the seeds of dream in the tangible soil of the here and now.

## Conclusion

The environmental movement is, at its core, a healing profession bent on restoring eco-system, community, and ultimately, personal well-being. But its drive for a life-affirming sustainability is focused upon the world out there, while its collective, task-driven psyche is burdened with emotions that counsel life's end. We cannot implement a sustainable society unless we learn how to cultivate sustainable psyches; these are parallel healing processes.<sup>14</sup> Inner nature and outer nature, both are faces of the same Nature.

Articulation of a vision for a sustainable environmentalism and for a sustainable world cannot be accomplished by issuing a joint call to arms and a few apocalyptic press releases.<sup>20</sup> Transformation begins in the hearts and minds of those whose vision is clear enough to create what can be, not simply react against, and thus remain stuck to, what isn't. Vision-making is optimistic (though not unrealistic) and joyful work, embodying the vital energy needed to move forward with the myriad patient acts of creation.<sup>7</sup> The attracting potential of a desirable world is what human nature finds it easy to say yes to. And ultimately, as Wendell Berry wisely observes, pleasure is what gets the job done.

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