

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#727 - The Importance Of Vision -- Part I

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In recent decades, the natural environment has deteriorated and human poverty has increased, worldwide.[1] As a result, huge numbers of people have concluded that "business as usual" is not sustainable. People everywhere are devoting time and energy to questions of sustainability, but we still lack consensus on alternatives to the limitless growth of material consumption.

With its high per-person use of energy and materials and its relentless commitment to growth, the U.S. is probably among the least sustainable of human societies. Many people in the U.S. sense this, and they worry about the future for their children and their children's children. But so far we have not been able to focus our efforts and work together toward a different future. What we are missing is a shared vision of what "sustainability" entails for the U.S. Without a coherent, relatively detailed, shared vision of what a sustainable society would look like, we cannot generate the political will or united effort to carry us from here to there.

As Donella Meadows has written, "Vision is necessary to the policy process. If we have not specified where we want to go, it is hard to set our compass, to muster enthusiasm, or to measure progress. But vision is not only generally missing from policy discussions; it is missing from our culture. We talk easily and endlessly about our frustrations, doubts, and complaints, but we speak only rarely and with difficulty about our dreams and values." [2]

Robert Costanza of the Institute for Ecological Economics (University of Maryland) has emphasized the central importance of a shared vision: "The most critical task facing humanity today is the creation of a shared vision of a sustainable and desirable society, one that can provide permanent prosperity within the biophysical constraints of the real world in a way that is fair and equitable to all of humanity, to other species, and to future generations. Recent work with businesses and communities indicates that creating a shared vision is the most effective engine for change in the desired direction...." [3]

At the urging of Costanza and others, in January, 2001, a group of 45 individuals met in Oberlin, Ohio to begin to create a shared vision of a sustainable U.S. in the year 2100 -- 100 years in the future. [4] The meeting was facilitated by a technique called Future Search, which is a structured way of creating cooperative projects across the boundaries of geography, organization, culture, class, race, age, and gender. [5] After three intense days of work and some follow-up work by E-mail the Oberlin participants pulled together a consensus statement, agreed to stay in touch and to invite others to offer opinions and ideas about what life might be like in a sustainable U.S. We urge Rachel's readers to take this invitation seriously; see <http://iee.umces.edu/ESDA/>. (At the last minute, the Oberlin participants tentatively identified themselves as the ESDA Network -- ESDA being short for Envisioning a Sustainable and Desirable America -- but this name seems likely to change because the group is focused only on the U.S. and not on other parts of North, Central or South America. What do YOU think the name should be?)

Here and in the next few issues of RACHEL'S, we offer the first draft of the vision statement that emerged from the Oberlin future search conference; this draft was written mainly by Josh Farley of the Institute for Ecological Economics at University of Maryland, with some help from other participants. We emphasize that it is a first draft needing your critique:

THE VISION SO FAR

The most important outcome of the first ESDA future search conference was the creation of a shared vision of a sustainable and desirable America in the year 2100. Creating such a vision is an enormous undertaking, and what we produced is really only a rough sketch. An important part of our work will be to flesh out this vision, and make sure that it is a desirable vision to a representative majority of Americans. We hope you can take the time to read our

vision, and offer us your comments. Would you like to live in this world? Are there elements of our vision with which you disagree? Are important pieces missing? When you are done, please send your feedback to farley@cbl.umces.edu.

We have organized our vision into five separate components: Worldviews, Built Capital, Natural Capital, Human Capital and Social Capital.

WORLDVIEWS

Worldview plays a very important role in creating a sustainable and desirable America. What is worldview? Worldview is a belief system held by an individual, community or society that explains the world around us and our experiences and role in that world. Our worldview tells us who we are and what is the purpose of our existence. It tells us where we are: what kind of world and environment do we live in? It also tells us what is right and wrong about the world, and how to preserve what is right and fix what is wrong. Worldview is determined largely by the culture in which we are raised.

A worldview that is appropriate under one set of conditions may not be under another. This only makes sense. Worldview tells us what kind of world we live in, and the kind of world we live in is continually changing. Worldview is also intimately linked to culture and circumstance. Two hundred years ago, European Americans lived in a sparsely populated world of vast frontiers and untamed wilderness. Natural resources were limitless and humans, civilization, machinery and basic consumer goods were scarce. The rest of the world was far away and unimportant. Native Americans lived in a full world, surrounded by neighbors, both enemies and friends. Humans were part of a harmonious natural system that provided all of their needs under careful stewardship. African Americans lived under cruel bondage in a grossly unfair world. Different cultures viewed the same world in dramatically different ways. Over time American culture has converged somewhat, as has our worldview. Enormous differences still remain, but perhaps none as great as divided us in the 18th century. Now however, our world is dramatically different. Natural resources have become scarce, and humans and their accoutrements are now super-abundant. In today's age of rapid technological advance, population growth and resource consumption, the world appears to be changing faster than our worldview. Many components of our worldview are no longer in harmony with today's physically different world. In many cases, what was once reasonably viewed as a solution to our problems has now become a part of the problem.

The America we envision in 2100 is based on a very different way of viewing the world than is common today, one that is more in harmony with the physical constraints imposed by a finite planet.

Humans will re-establish a spiritual connection to nature. Our worldview will no longer divide the planet into humans vs. nature. People will recognize that humans are part of nature, one species among many, and must obey the laws imposed by nature. We will recognize that nature is not something to be subjugated, but instead is something we depend upon absolutely to meet both physical and spiritual needs. We will recognize that natural resources are scarce and must be invested in. Our goal will be to create conditions conducive to life in the broadest sense.

For centuries the worldview of mechanistic physics dominated Western society. Within this worldview, each action has an equal and opposite reaction, and only by studying systems at smaller and smaller scales, can we come to fully understand these reactions. As more and more people come to understand the inherent complexity of ecosystems and human systems, we will come to realize that results cannot always be predicted, and that irreducible uncertainty dominates the provision of life support services by healthy ecosystems. An ecological worldview of complexity and indeterminacy, inspired by nature as mentor --holistic, integrated

and flexible -- will replace the worldview of mechanical physics.

Individualism is appropriate and perhaps even necessary in a world of vast frontiers and unlimited elbowroom. Individualism will still be extremely important in 2100, but will be far more tempered by a concern for the common good. This will lead to a system where communities promote total individual liberty as long as individual actions do not have a negative impact on the community. Individuals in return will accept that they are a part of society, and it is unfair to impose costs on society for private gain. This attitude will be necessary if we are to wean ourselves of our dependence on heavily polluting single occupancy vehicles, for example.

Further, ever increasing consumption will no longer be considered an integral component of human needs as it is today. People will pay attention to their other needs and desires, such as joy, beauty, affection, participation, creativity, freedom, and understanding. Building strong community can help us meet these needs, while working ever harder to pay for more consumption deprives us of the time and energy required to fulfill them.

Thus, status will not be conferred by high incomes and high consumption (individual ends) but rather by contribution to civil society and community ends.

With the recognition that consumption beyond limit is not only physically unsustainable but also does little to improve our quality of life, we will understand that a steady state economy is our goal. A steady state economy does not mean an end to development, it simply means that we limit the input of raw materials into our economic system and their inevitable return to the ecosystem as waste to a level compatible with the ecological constraints imposed by a finite planet with finite resources. We must live within the carrying capacity of our planet. We do not know the carrying capacity, and the carrying capacity is subject to change. Therefore, adaptive management must be a guiding principle. The economy will be solar powered. Economic production will focus on quality, not quantity. Rather than focus on the production of goods, we will focus on the production of the services provided by goods. We do not need cars, we need transportation. We do not need televisions, we need entertainment. Goods are only a means to an end, and by recognizing this our economy can develop as never before without growing in physical terms.

[To be continued.]

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] Lester R. Brown and others, *STATE OF THE WORLD 2001* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). ISBN 0-393-32082-0.

[2] Donella Meadows, "Envisioning a Sustainable World," in Robert Costanza and others, editors, *GETTING DOWN TO EARTH* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996), pgs. 117-128. ISBN 1-55963-503-7.

[3] Robert Costanza, "Visions of Alternative (Unpredictable) Futures and Their Use in Policy Analysis," *CONSERVATION ECOLOGY* Vol. 4, No. 1 (February 28, 2000), pgs. 5 and following pages. Available at http://www.consecol.org/Journal/vol4/iss1/art5/inl_ine.html.

[4] Conference facilitators: Sandra Janoff, co-director, Future Search Network (<http://www.futuresearch.net/>) and Ralph Copleman, consultant (<http://www.earthdreams.net/>). Conference participants: Audra Abt, senior, environmental studies, Oberlin College; Gar Alperovitz, professor of political economy, University of Maryland;

Mary Barber, executive director, Sustainable Biosphere Initiative, Ecological Society of America; Seaton Baxter, professor, University of Dundee, Scotland; Janine Benyus, writer; Paul W. Bierman-Lytle, environmental architect and planner; Grace Boggs, activist, scholar, writer, community organizer and speaker; William Browning, senior consultant, Rocky Mountain Institute; Diana Bustamante, executive director, Colonias Development Council; Warren W. Byrne, managing director, Foresight Energy Company; Mark Clevey, vice-president, Small Business Association of Michigan (SBAM); Jane Ellen Clougherty, research analyst, Center for Neighborhood Technology; Robert Costanza, director, University of Maryland Institute for Ecological Economics; Tanya Dawkins, senior vice-president, United Way; James Embry, board president, Boggs Center for Nurturing Community Leadership (Detroit); Jon Farley, President and CEO, Zarn Enterprises; Josh Farley, Executive Director, University of Maryland Institute for Ecological Economics; Harold Glasser, assistant professor (environmental studies), Western Michigan University; Becky Grella, executive director and president, Aiza Biby; Elaine Gross, executive director, Sustainable America; Gerald Hairston, urban gardener; Sarah Karpanty, co-director and secretary, Aiza Biby; Carol Kuhre, executive director, Rural Action; George McQuitty, professor (law/environmental education), University of St. Andrews (Scotland); Peter Montague, director, Environmental Research Foundation; Dondohn Namesling, Aiza Biby; David Orr, professor (environmental studies and politics), Oberlin College; John Petersen, assistant professor (environmental studies and biology) Oberlin College; William Prindle, Alliance to Save Energy; Tom Prugh, writer, consultant to Energy Information Administration; Jack Santa-Barbara, M.D.; Claudine Schneider, co-chair, U.S. Committee for the United Nations Development Program; Ben Shepherd, Rocky Mountain Institute; Megan Snedden, economic development coordinator, Colonias Development Council; Karl Steyaert, The Center for a New American Dream; Theodore Steck, M.D., professor (biochemistry and molecular biology), University of Chicago; Harvey Stone, vice president of marketing, BizBots; Paul Templet, professor (environmental studies), Louisiana State University; Mary Evelyn Tucker, professor, the Center for the Study of the World's Religions, Bucknell University; Sarah van Gelder, executive editor, YES! magazine; Rafael Vargas, Aiza Biby; Verlene Wilder, King County (Washington) Labor Council.

[5] Sandra Janoff and Marvin Weisbord, *FUTURE SEARCH: AN ACTION GUIDE TO FINDING COMMON GROUND IN ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, revised edition, 2000; ISBN 1-57675-081-7) See <http://www.futuresearch.net>.