Living now, naturally and sustainably via relocalizing

Contributed by Dave Ewoldt
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“It is not a sign of good health to be well-adjusted to a sick society.” -- J. Krishnamurti

Answering the question of how to live our lives right now, in the face of global crises that cause stress and depression in all those not living in outright denial, is the new global imperative. But to deal with this question we must come to terms with what has caused it to be asked in the first place if we truly desire to formulate an effective and satisfying answer.

Many thinkers in the physical and biological sciences are starting to agree with environmental and social justice activists who point out with increasing frequency that the root of our systemic global and personal crises lies in our disconnection from the natural world, and in the culture that creates. This culture is entirely dependent upon unhealthy, exploitive relationships based on this disconnection.

Our response is to create a sustainable future based on ecological wisdom and social justice. This goal carries with it a realization not pointed out often enough: that the culture we have now is not sustainable. Additionally, if lasting change is desired, it must be systemic. The problems require more than band-aids on symptoms. Applying single issue band-aids may alleviate immediate pain and suffering, but will not keep them from recurring. Further, as the root of global crises grows stronger, the symptoms will occur more frequently, in more places, and will be of increasingly greater destructive magnitude. It’s long past time to quit clipping branches and to put some concerted effort into digging out the diseased root from which industrial civilization has grown.

The systemic root of our disconnection from nature can be directly traced to the dominator paradigm which started conquering and subverting egalitarian cultures 6-8,000 years ago, and was firmly ensconced by 2,000 BC. As detailed by author Riane Eisler, this paradigm consists of force-based ranking hierarchies of control (humans over nature, men over women, one race over another) that are built on and maintained by fear. The individual is seen as more important than the group, and anything outside of the ego is seen as other. This other is automatically assumed to be inferior or lesser, and thus morally acceptable to exploit for personal benefit. We end up seeing ourselves as separate from and able to control the natural world, our own inner nature, and all the rest of our relationships. In fact, we assume we must exert this control in order to assure our prosperity and to further human progress.

The dominator paradigm has led to what I call the Triumvirate of Collapse. This consists of Peak Oil, which is the end of increasing supplies of cheap and abundant fossil fuels and the economy which depends on them to power the Industrial Growth Society; Catastrophic Climate Destabilization (commonly known as global warming), which is causing the collapse of global ecosystems and shifting habitation for

flora and fauna due to the abuse of the biosphere from burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and toxic pollution of the air, lands and oceans; and Corporatism, which is the loss of our sovereignty to a merger of state and corporate power. It is financed by the debt-based usury system of central banks and enforced by national militaries and police to control dwindling resources. The purpose seems to be to protect affluent lifestyles where overconsumption is taken as an entitlement.

It is also important in laying this groundwork for change to come to an agreement of what we mean by sustainability. This is important both to ensure we're heading in the right direction, and to ensure we have a way to measure our success. I derived the following definition of sustainability from what experts in the field of sustainability around the globe have been using for decades, and I boiled down the commonalities of the different definitions into three clauses. This comprehensive definition can then be used to evaluate decisions and policies for their adherence to the stated goal of a sustainable future; to see if proposals are merely (sometimes necessary) holding actions; or to see if they actually support the status quo that we must implement an alternative to.

Sustainability is: integrating our social and economic lives into the environment in ways that tend to enhance or maintain ecosystems rather than degrade or destroy them; a moral imperative to pass on our natural inheritance, not necessarily unchanged, but undiminished in its ability to meet the needs of future generations; finding, and staying within, the balance point amongst population, consumption, and waste assimilation where bioregions, watersheds and ecosystems maintain their ability to recharge and regenerate.

With the above foundation, if we’re willing to admit that the root of our systemic crises is our fundamental personal and cultural disconnection from nature, one common sense starting point in creating an effective antidote for global and personal ills would be to reconnect with nature. I must also explicitly point out here (since so many people seem to have forgotten) that humans are an aspect of the natural world. Our reconnection to nature, in order to be systemic, must be not only to the environment, but also be to each other, our communities, as well as reconnecting the culturally imposed split -- through both science and religion -- amongst body, mind, and spirit.

Fortunately, reconnecting to nature turns out to be rather easy to do for anyone who is open to experiencing the process. This process comes from the field of applied ecopsychology, called the Natural Systems Thinking Process (NSTP). It can be easily learned and taught. The NSTP was developed by environmental educator and psychologist, Dr. Michael J. Cohen, founder of the Audubon Society's Expedition Institute and Project NatureConnect. The latter is the graduate department in applied ecopsychology for the Institute of Global Education, a special NGO consultant to UNESCO.

The NSTP -- which leads to improved personal, social, and environmental health and well-being -- works by consciously and

sensuously reconnecting all 53 of our senses to their roots in the natural world. All of our senses have evolved with natural expectations for fulfillment, and this fulfillment can be met by learning to follow and trust our natural attractions in the moment. A short example of this is when our sense of thirst makes itself known, we are attracted to water. When we satisfy this sense, our life is supported and we are rewarded with good feelings. Our sense of thirst is just as real as the water itself. As a natural system with its own cycles, when our bodies are done with the water, our sense of excretion makes itself known, and satisfying this sense also makes us feel good. Our natural attractions are informing us of how we can gain support in the moment if we trust them. Other senses that we share with the natural world include our senses of community, love, color, form, motion, temperature, and acceptance.

Attractions that we might consider to be negative, such as physical or emotional pain or fear, are nature's way of informing us we don't have support in the moment, and we should be seeking more positive attractions elsewhere. Nature supplies an abundance to any species to meet their needs as long as they remain within the carrying capacity of their ecosystem. As a foretaste of where I'm heading with this line of reasoning, this is just the opposite of the scarcity model that orthodox growth economics relies upon.

Where industrialized humans get into trouble is when we allow ourselves to get dangerously out of balance by letting only one or two senses, such as our senses of rationality and language, assume they are the only ones that matter -- that our intuitive and emotional senses will lead us astray or make us appear foolish. Another common problem is finding and clinging to addictive substitutes for our natural senses, such as substituting television for our natural sense of creativity, trying to use materialism as a substitute for emotional and spiritual health and well-being, and relying on prescription or recreational drugs, or psychotherapy and self-help programs as a substitute for healthy, mutually-supportive relationships. As J. Krishnamurti said, "It is not a sign of good health to be well-adjusted to a sick society."

In the human built environment and in the social institutions we create, the process to become sustainable -- to holistically integrate our activities with the natural world -- is provided by a systemic concept known as relocalization. This is the antithesis as well as the antidote to corporate globalization. Relocalization includes the concepts that we must rebuild our local economies to be self-reliant; recapture our sense of place and belonging; reclaim our sovereignty; and restore our communities of mutual support.

Relocalization entails a return to local autonomy within bioregional networks of interdependence; the production and distribution of renewable and non-toxic food, goods, services, and energy as close to the point of consumption as possible; and provides an antidote to the economic cannibalism of global growth, through the creation of steady-state local living economies. What provides more than mere hope that this process can actually be effective is that at its very core relocalization is based on the way that nature works. Which means the way that we work when not being manipulated and exploited by nothing more than stories that benefit someone else.

Healthy ecosystems can be looked to for providing the models and metaphors humans require for becoming sustainable and creating mutually supportive relationships. All living organisms have the tendency to self-organize into mutually supportive attraction relationships. This can be said to be the prime activity of life; it creates the web of life which functions to create more life and diversity. Using the four core Natural Systems Principles -- mutual support and reciprocity, no waste, no greed, and increasing diversity -- to inform the process of relocalization, we can replace the dominator paradigm with a paradigm of partnership, and we can overcome and heal our disconnection and separation from the web of life. But as a quick side note, also explicit in maintaining adherence to these principles is the requirement to begin dealing honestly with the global overpopulation problem.

Reconnecting and relocalizing. These are effective strategies that we can implement right now that are not merely reshuffling deck chairs on the Titanic. These strategies require neither a new techno-miracle to appear nor an evolutionary shift in consciousness to occur. We can do this because these twin strategies are based on the same natural systems principles that ecosystems use to stay healthy, vibrant, and resilient.

Once we do more than rationally understand, but also sensuously experience our connection to the rest of the natural world, we begin to enjoy increased physical and mental well-being, improved social relationships, and benefit from the abundance of natural fulfillment. This is a natural and intimate aspect of who we really are, and can be used to blaze the path to a future where we all have the opportunities to realize our full potential for living now -- naturally and sustainably.

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