Starting the Conversation on Our Survival

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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With species extinction now at the highest rate since the disappearance of the dinosaurs, one might assume this crisis is on everyone's mind and discussed widely. One would be wrong. No one knows if it's 100 species a day, many of which have not been named.
Massive species loss has been known for many years, but it is "old news" or "boring."

Neither are other critical topics discussed enough to match their import: melting of the ice caps and glaciers, nuclear weapons and nuclear waste, out of control arms sales, ongoing starvation or malnourishment of hundreds of millions of people, overpopulation, the greed of financiers openly stripping nations of wealth, etc.

In reality, they are all related. It comes down to compassion and taking action wisely. When people manage to discuss the most pressing issues, they can see past the immediate crisis possessing the power to distract. Then a whole-systems approach can serve to unite people into one movement.

In the 1960s there was "The Movement." People had many definitions for it, and some members were more interested in stopping the bombing over Indochina than securing all rights for the Afro-American population, for example. But The Movement included those concentrating on expanded consciousness, back-to-the-land agrarianism, communalism, armed revolution, women's liberation, environmental protection. It could all be seen as a whole: challenging "plastic society" and the false materialistic values of the flag-waving pro-war older generation.

We can blame the end of The Movement on its splintering into separate movements, or on the end of the Vietnam War draft, or the commercialization and corporatization of popular music, or assassinations of leaders in the 1960s -- or all of them combined. The biggest mistake was to stop having the conversation about society in general. Instead people began to take the easy way out and earn more money and stay out of trouble, Those who did not cease the conversation became known as activists, and it was no longer "the youth" or "the students" or "The Movement." Instead activists were on the fringes and mocked by "being stuck back in the 1960s." The federal COINTELPRO operations against organizations and leaders took a toll, and there were pleasant distractions such as disco music or take your pick.

Social change comes down to communication. Great efforts have resulted in fine books, stories for films and books, and there have been some wonderful speeches. But it must really start and end with the conversation wherein the top topic is the issues of the day approached honestly and without fear.

When people talk about a problem openly, then there is a chance of solving it. There may be no solution, but the attempt to converse about it may have other beneficial effects and lead to unexpected breakthroughs.

When people avoid talking about serious matters, much harm can be done by others who are intent on opportunism or worse. Distracting people with other issues is therefore the prime tool for those trying to maintain an advantage in the status quo. It can also be said that the main tool is enslavement through economic dominance -- a giant distraction from realizing a liberated life style. Many robotic or sheep-like people today have no concept of liberation except personal enrichment.

Talking about food security

We would not know it from the corporate media or our politicians, but we should be worrying big time that food supply will

fail untold millions of people. All one has to do is look at energy, topsoil, pressures of the market (such as rising demand for food), and mix in some catastrophic weather that is assured, and we have a huge disaster ahead. It is just a matter of time.

There is a movement to appreciate local food, slow food, organic food. But it has not reduced the average number of miles a piece of food travels via petroleum in the U.S.: 1,500. To produce industrial food -- probably 95% of what is eaten in the U.S. -- ten caloric units of fossil-fuels produce one caloric unit of food. Farm workers are among the lowest paid in the nation, which is strange when everyone wants to eat. Time in the hot sun, subjected to pesticides and possible immigration raids, make the profession all the less attractive. There is no longer a designation for farmer in the U.S. census when so few people live on their own farms anymore. It was no wonder that when Max Yasgur, who hosted the Woodstock Festival in 1969, began his welcome with "Now I'm a farmer..." at that he was drowned out by cheers and applause. That was The Movement expressing itself for nature. Get the record album and hear it.

Today I picked three pint-sized baskets of three kinds of berries. It took me about an hour, even when the season is just right. I still had to pay eight dollars for the fruit. It is not designated as organic, which would allow for a higher price, but it was unsprayed. If the value of my time is $20 an hour, my overall cost was $28. I spent no money on transportation because I bicycled. There's a problem we don't have a name for: a labor problem? We are not producing our own food locally because we "cannot afford to." Rather, we subsidize the food in unsustainable ways while upper classes of consumers can afford to pay others to grow, gather, process, truck and prepare the food. This system only works for a few people in a division-of-labor society geared toward surpluses for the elite: i.e., Western Civilization.

In the berry patch a father said bitterly to his daughter, "You guys dragged me here and I don't have time for all this work." She replied "It's fun!" I'm glad to report that he had no further retort. Perhaps he should have a conversation with his family and friends about what he thinks he can do with his time, what he is allowed to do, and how he may provide for his family as well as raise a child directly.

Inane conversation or prattling

More alarming than empty talk and avoiding critical issues is no talking at all, when some modern humans live in a computer-game world, or they communicate mostly in isolation using a cell phone or email. Of these, many don't have much in the way of friendships, and family is something to occasionally visit. Meanwhile, conversation is still key, especially if it can be elevated beyond the personal need to connect to another human being (even to just discuss clothes or beer). The art of conversation is getting harder to encounter. People don't seem to have time.

Before we can work toward starting the conversation on our survival, what is going on all around us that passes for discussion? My observation is that the quality of conversation is almost always and everywhere inane. Wars being fought in the name of the United States of America, in Iraq and Afganistan, are not prime topics of discussion or debate at any given time by "the average person." After all, there's endless celebrity news, the latest unemployment statistics, the latest iPhone technology, a fire in southern California, President Obama's latest pronouncement on medical care, and a lost doggy found in another city after a heart-rending odyssey.

Admittedly, there is also news in the background on climate change, assassinations, bankruptcies of iconic corporations, and other serious stories. But there's never a common thread in the corporate news media or in a politician's speech. On the street you're more likely to hear something real: "the system sucks." If it does, what do we do about it?

It should be no wonder that the quality of conversation -- whether in the living room of "the average person," in the employee lunch room, or at a bar or party -- is usually inane. Sports news or a review of a television show are favorites, along with gossip or tales of a weekend adventure. When the subjects of politics or ecology come up, these are treated with argument, jokes and derision as often are statements of concern. Rare is a vow of "I will bicycle to work and get rid

of my television." As for everyday banter with meaning, there can be comparisons of home gardening techniques.

Reviving the economy back to growth is the hottest topic in the serious realm, with climate change ranking at bottom. The latter is denied by some, or is too scary to tackle. The tendency is to let "the experts" or public officials deal with it -- as they're dealing with the economy and everything else.

They're not bringing us peace. They're not stopping species extinction. They're not redistributing the wealth or jailing the white collar criminals (Madoff is an exception, a sop). If the rulers should not rule, shouldn't this be a major topic of conversation?

What we need is the conversation that's not happening. In the 1960s and into the 1970s the politically minded street threater group The Yippies (Youth International Party) took matters into their own hands to bring attention to the issues. One method was disruption of business as usual. Stunts included burning dollar bills, sewing the American flag on to one's pants, or kissing during college lectures. A book by one of the main instigators, Jerry Rubin, was titled Do It. (The author became a stockbroker, a fate probably from losing his hippie support system.)

Who is "doing it" today? Bloggers? Internet activists? Artists? Obama? There's some good journalism and activism, but the masses of people are somehow left out of the conversation. They want to be left out, when they avoid discussing serious issues relating to their survival on an imperiled planet. The question is, can they be made to discuss it before things are totally out of control, when rational discussion may be impossible? No end of secret government subversion can overcome a big enough conversation.

We Are Many, They Are Few - Really?

If all the able-bodied homeless people in the greater New York City area decided to converge on Wall Street and seize some wealth or demand housing, they could do it. If the millions of minorities discriminated against by ruthless corporate employers staged sit ins and used economic boycotts, such action could earn large concessions. But instead, masses are herded like sheep by a small number of agents of the elite. The corporate state does have effective tools such as the military, prisons, police -- the "stick" -- to go with bribes and perks and promises of mild reform -- the "carrot." Yet, numerically, if enough people wanted to bring about a truly equitable society, or in particular end the unpopular wars, this could be done with little or no violence in a short amount of time.

The reason it does not happen is that the right conversations are not taking place except by the very few. Even with the huge and growing number of people on mood-control and psychiatric drugs, that sad population unwittingly enriching pharmaceutical companies rather than actually healing is in good enough condition to talk sensibly and stimulate some community action.

The greatest crowd control of all time may be happening right now when a popular U.S. president can give the idea that he is pursuing meaningful change. The sleight of hand includes the idea that he can make substantial change. Obama knows his limitations, as every top politician comes to know. In addition to promising improvements and the impossible return to a growth economy -- and the trickle-down prosperity that never really worked -- Obama and his allies have some key issues dear to many hearts. Unfortunately, they are bogus: the technological fix for climate mitigation, cleaner energy upon peak oil, and better cars. Obama is such a nice and eloquent guy that most people want to believe he will bring about more jobs, higher wages, peace, and an end to terrorism, the threat to polar bears, etc.

Smooth propaganda -- hard for most people to pick apart:

President Barack Obama: "These are some of the challenges that our generation has been called to meet. And yet, there are those who would have us try what has already failed; who would defend the status quo. They argue that our health care system is fine the way it is and that a clean energy economy can wait. They say we are trying to do too much, that we are moving too quickly, and that we all ought to just take a deep breath and scale back our goals. These naysayers have short memories. They forget that we, as a people, did not get here by standing pat in a time of change. We did not get here by doing what was easy. That is not how a cluster of 13 colonies became the United States of America." - Fourth of July Statement, 2009

Obama is a perfect maestro for keeping people from dealing directly with the global mix of crises. Above all, we should regard Obama as personifying the hierarchy which is seldom questioned. The hierarchy certainly sets the tone at all possible times. Obama is the current "one," and everyone else is many, but because of laws and convention he is given the right to be master and Pied Piper for a time. Then, in 2012, and only then, he can be re-elected or replaced by a Republicrat or Demopublican. Who the next president might be is NOT the conversation that needs to take place.

The fact that the U.S. can feel it has cleansed itself of racism by electing Obama is a perfect distraction from more serious issues of extinction. For if we consume enough plastic, are exposed to enough radiation, and cling to a lifestyle divorced from nature and health, our species can indeed go extinct -- even without the extinction of the Earth's climate as we know it. Our best hope to avoid waiting for the worst may well be collapse of the economic system. This may usher in a sustainable culture. Maybe people will talk about it and take action in anticipation.

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