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ABOUT ECOLOGY, DEEP ECOLOGY, AND THE MEAN-
ING OF LIFE: A TALK TO TEENS

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About the author: *Victor Prochaska* spent most of his working life in the service of the forest industry, moving up and down the hierarchy until he says he could stand it no longer. He is retired into voluntary poverty and has lived happily ever after since doing so.

I'm here talking to you because I love this beautiful planet, and love life in all its forms, and feel that you, the coming generation, deserve a choice. So please hear me out and decide for yourself whether to live for a sustainable future, or follow in prior generations' ignorant footsteps and waste the planet. This talk is about ecology, Deep Ecology, and the meaning of our lives. Then, I'd like to hear what you want to say on this subject and your questions.

What is ecology? According to *Webster's Dictionary* it is: "A branch of science concerned with the inter-relationship of organisms and their environment." Not many people seem to understand the degree and importance of that interrelationship. Everything we do, or fail to do, is an interrelationship. When we talk to our friends, or do not talk to our friends, we interrelate with our environment. When we go for a ride, when we buy something, or throw something away, we interrelate with our environment. As a matter of fact, someone said, "You cannot throw anything away, you can only throw it somewhere else." So that wrapper, that can, that old shirt, that styrofoam cup that we "throw away" has not really gone away. It is still in our environment, and is still interrelating with us from the garbage dump. Whether we realize it or not, we are an important and constantly interacting part of the universe; just as every cell, every organ in our bodies is an important and constantly interacting part of us.

Not only is the heart, the liver, etc. important, they are equally important. And so are all inter-actors on Earth and in the universe. There are no superior or inferior things. Minerals, people, plants, animals, everything has an equal right to exist, and needs to exist. Without plants, the plankton in the sea, the trees, there would be no oxygen for us to breathe. Without minerals, the carbon dioxide we exhale, the water, plants could not grow. Everything has an inter-relating function, a purpose of equal importance. Some call this understanding Deep Ecology.

I like the principles of Deep Ecology, and not only because it makes me care for the environment and the future of the planet. It also gives *meaning* to my life. For some, meaning is not a problem. Mothers often live for their kids. Corporation types live for their companies, patriots live, and often die for their countries. But for many, finding the meaning of their existence is difficult. It is easy for us to see the purpose of other things; the air is here to breathe, the water to drink, the bread to eat. But what about me, me, we ask; and the harder our life is, the more important the question and the answer becomes.

Deep Ecology and the Material Environment

A good way to show the interconnectedness of all things in our environment is through the *Gaia hypothesis*. When the U.S. space program prepared its Mars probe, one of its objectives was to find whether there is life on Mars. They hired a British scientist named Lovelock to design a detection system. Lovelock started by asking himself what the Earth's atmosphere would be like — without life. He found that the carbon dioxide to oxygen ratio would be different on a dead planet and went from there. But I don't want to talk about his work with NASA. After he went back to Britain, he developed the theory that the planet Earth is an organism, and he named his theory the Gaia hypothesis. (Gaia was the name of the Greek Earth goddess.) According to Lovelock, Gaia is like a person's body, with individual plants or animals the equi-valents of cells, who in turn form organs. And just as organs in our bodies, they interact and form a self — regulating system, that keeps the Earth well and happily alive. Unless, of course, through some abuse or other, an organ gets sick and then makes the whole body sick.

Looking at Gaia from this perspective immediately changes one's outlook. Let us look at water as the planet's blood. Wouldn't we treat water differently? Since nobody but a nut or an idiot would put dirt or poison in his or her blood; nobody but a nut or idiot would pollute water, since it would harm the organism whose part we are. Sickening or abusing Nature is the same as sickening or abusing ourselves, who are but cells in Gaia's body.

Our interrelationship with other lifeforms looks different too. Trees and other plants are no longer just trees and plants to be exploited at our whims. They are another organ in Gaia's body and with a specific function, that has to be interrelated harmoniously with all other functions. Plants are relations, our green blooded cousins, without whose work we could not exist. It is the same with all lifeforms, whether in the water or on land, all relations, all of equal importance within Gaia's body. The inorganic materials, so-called "dead matter", have their functions as well and deserve the same respect. Rocks and minerals are the "patient ones". They may not be part of life today, but they may have been, or will be. Our bodies are full of minerals that plants have taken up through their roots, and we have taken in when we ate the plants. Everything is environment, everything an equal part of Gaia, and maybe Gaia is in turn a cell in the body of the universe.

Deep Ecological Understanding and the Social Environment

This subject brings us closer to home again. As we learned, "Ecology is a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environment". But environment is not only fishes and trees, air, water and soil; it is people, too. Our families, friends and neighbors, all people on Earth form our social environment. It is not only the unbalanced exploitation of natural resources and the pollution of natural resources that is harmful to Heaven and Earth, but also the exploitation and pollution of our fellow global citizens.

Again, if we look at other people, even those living on other continents, as brothers and sisters with equal rights, we couldn't possibly tolerate the conditions that prevail today. The discrepancies in income and wealth are enormous. There are people in Vancouver living on \$500.00 a month or less, and there are people a few blocks away, living on \$5,000.00 even \$50,000.00 a month and more. And there are people in Third World countries living on \$500.00 *per year* and even less. Still, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. The consequences of these inequities are all around us: hate, intolerance, crime, drug abuse, and violence on the local level, with revolutions and wars and the accompanying hunger, deprivation and refugee problems on the global level.

Social peace and harmony, whether within a country or globally, is impossible to achieve unless we learn to interrelate with each other on the basis of equal rights and responsibilities; this is to follow the Deep Ecological way.

Deep Ecology and Ethics

That brings us to the question of good and evil. That is what ethics, a branch of philosophy, is all about, and also, of course, religion. But I'm not getting into either, although there are some beautiful concepts, some very sophisticated arguments around. For me, good is harmony, a mysterious dynamic balance. Take an atom, shoot the nucleus out of the atom and what have you got? A nuclear explosion, a catastrophe. It is the same with a solar system. Take the sun out and what will happen? With its gravitational field gone, the Earth and her sister planets would fly off into icy space and that is the end of us. Everything, consequently, exists through a harmonious interaction; and since I love the Earth, and the sun and the stars, and life, I call this harmonious interaction — good.

In contrast, I call everything that opposes a harmonious interaction — bad. In these times, life on our planet is unbalanced, and unless we check that trend it will destroy us. All our ills, political, social, economic, environmental, etc. are

the result of inequalities, of disharmonies, of discrimination, of intolerance, of hate, of people being too rich and too poor through unfair wealth distribution and greed, of consuming too much, polluting too much, and wasting too much, while being ignorant of the consequences. Yet, if we study history we find that civilizations, dynasties, nations, and societies, came and perished; and always because of disharmonies, either between them and their environment, or between them and their neighbors, or between their own social classes. The powerful never stay powerful, the rich do not stay wealthy forever. Change is the only constant.

How the change comes about, whether gradually and relatively painlessly through reform and evolution or violently through revolution, war and destruction, that is what makes the difference between good and bad.

One who supports Deep Ecological ethics agrees with religious ethics and the categorical imperatives of the great philosophers. It all boils down to this. "What is hateful to you, do not do to anybody else." Or, more specifically, if I don't want to be lied to, I shouldn't lie; if I don't want to be robbed, I shouldn't rob, if I don't want to be harmed, I shouldn't harm.

Deep Ecology and the Meaning of Life

So where do we go from here and how? Do you think that saving the life of the planet is a worthy cause, one that would give meaning to our lives? Considering the mess we are in this is not an easy task and there are no quick fixes. It will take sacrifices. Kermit the frog once said, "It is hard to be green." With the reluctance for organized change on the grass-roots and institutional levels, it will probably take a lot of time and a nudge or two in the form of catastrophes to get us moving. Even then it may be too late for effective action and in spite of some forms of environmental dictatorships.

But there is a saner alternative. A solution that starts with the individual, with you and me, and right now. It is the adoption of a globally sustainable lifestyle. What does that mean? It means in Schumacher's words, "To live simply, so all may simply live." That is, reducing the consumption of the affluent and raising the living standard of the poor until an equilibrium is reached. It means balancing resource use with resource reserves. It means stopping pollution; it means recycling *all* waste. It means accepting the planet's limits to growth.

How can you and I, the little people, participate effectively in such a gigantic task? For the people in the Third World it is by reducing their numbers, for us in the urban-industrialized world, it is also reducing our levels of consumption. Consumption is the deadly disease that ravages our planet. So, more specifically, what can I do for a greener planet?

WHAT CAN I DO FOR A GREENER PLANET?

I can learn to understand a few basic facts:

Our world is an interacting whole. Everything is related and relating to everything. So, whether we know it or not — there is purpose and order. From the grain of sand on the bottom of the sea, to the bird in the air, to people — all are part of a great balancing act — life.

Disturbing the balance of nature threatens life. And that is what happens these days. Our urban-industrial way of life destroys the ozone layer, pollutes the air, the water, the soil that grows our food. It wastes our non-renewable resources, eliminates our forests and deprives wildlife of its habitat. It is true that Mother Earth is very forgiving, but she has her limits too.

We, the people of the industrialized parts of the planet and our lifestyle are the problem, because we consume too much and waste too much. Remember: **EVERYTHING I USE IS A RESOURCE THAT ENERGY HAS TRANSFORMED INTO A PRODUCT THAT WILL BE GARBAGE ONCE I'M THROUGH WITH IT.**

So what can I do for a greener planet? It's obvious I can use less. I can apply the 3 Rs of environmentally friendly living: Refuse, Reuse, Recycle.

- I can refuse anything I do not really need.
- I can refuse throw-away products.
- I can refuse fashion and other planned obsolescence items.
- I can refuse shoddy goods that wear out fast. Quality products are often more economical in the long run.
- I can ask the reference librarian for product information. (*Consumer Reports* Magazines)
- I can refuse products that contain poisons, like most household cleaners, pesticides, herbicides, etc.
- I can refuse unnecessary packaging. The more layers of wrappers the more wasteful of raw materials, energy and money it is. It also worsens the garbage problems.
- I can refuse canned drinks and food.
- I can take my own shopping bags to the store.
- I can refuse pressurized spray cans that harm the ozone.

- I can refuse furniture made from tropical woods.
- I can refuse products made from wild animals.
- I can repair things and make them re-usable again.
- And if I can't use them, I think of someone who can. (Salvation Army, church bazaars, garage sales, etc.).
- I can share things like newspapers, magazines, tools, or appliances, etc. with friends and neighbors. I can rent things I only use occasionally. Renting is a form of sharing.
- I can walk, ride a bike, or use public transport. The car is a major polluter and extremely wasteful of energy.
- I can ask my family and friends to use smaller cars. I can turn the shower off while I soap and scrub.
- I can turn the lights off when I leave a room.
- I can close the fridge door quickly to keep the cold and the house door to keep the cold out.
- I can promote and help insulating.
- I can put a sweater on instead of turning the thermostat.
- I can live in a smaller house, apartment or room.
- I can eat mostly locally grown organic food. It is healthier, helps the neighboring producer, is non-polluting, and doesn't waste fuel getting here.
- I can recycle. But if I followed all the above "I cans", and turned the kitchen waste into compost there won't be much left.

Finally, I can support and join environmental and nature preservation groups. I can tell my family and friends, the people at the store, in school, etc. and write to politicians and business leaders about the many things I do for a greener planet. Nothing is more meaningful and rewarding than that. After all, our future depends on it.

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