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Our Modern Challenge: Exploring Alternatives Through Dialogue and Ecological Responsibility

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Who needs to hear another long list of the environmental problems facing us? It has almost become a cliche to mention the disappearing ozone or global warming in our daily conversations. Thank god people are finally starting to recognize the problems! But simply naming them without understanding the hidden reasons and implications of such imminent global disasters can be as dangerous as calling oneself an environmentalist because "I recycle now!" Many of these problems are known, yet most of us feel helpless at how to go about solving them effectively. Sure, I can drain my air conditioner, recycle the Freon, or send money to the Nature Conservancy, but is it fundamentally helping? There is an atmosphere of nervousness even among the most militant politically-correct eco-radicals. Is it enough? Is there any hope? How can we facilitate the necessary cultural changes to turn out direction towards a healthy future?

As ecologists, stewards, and concerned human beings, it is our responsibility to point out some broader solutions and help demonstrate a more fundamental type of positive change. As David Bohm, the eminent physicist and philosopher has pointed out,

> It is imperative that we give attention to how the current crisis is constantly sustained and exacerbated by a basic and pervasive disharmony between the intellect and emotions that has been increasing since very early times. This disharmony is mirrored in our personal relationships, in relationships between nations, and in our relationship with nature (Changing Consciousness, x).

The Importance Of Dialogue

In exploring the many challenges that face our humanity it seems quite evident that there are some basic problems that keep emerging: incoherent thinking, lack of communication, and outright miscommunication. We can witness miscommunication at all levels of our society. Within the environmental and social justice movements there are many disagreements and miscommunications about how to even approach a problem; whether it's how to help the starving in Somalia, or deforestation in the Amazon, or how to clean up a Superfund site in New

Jersey, there seems to be acute misunderstandings between cultures, within any given culture. within organizations, families, and even the very state of the individual is riddled with a mess of conflicting thoughts and feelings. So one of our primary tasks is to see how we as individuals are contributing to this global crisis, not only in our little outward actions such as using non- recyclable products, or driving our car instead of bicycling, but in how our very minds are functioning. It seems extremely important that we explore our thinking/feeling process and see how it affects our relationships. This exploration may, at first, simply reveal that we don't understand ourselves, and this may be very disturbing. But we can over-ride this fear of disturbance, if we have a deep intent to learn about our minds and see how their self-deceptive processes manifest disorder in our lives and in the world. Re-sensitizing ourselves to the fundamental system of thinking-feeling and to the basic ecological principles present in wild nature enables us to listen to one another and to the Earth in a deeper way. What I mean by listening is the ability to suspend our opinions and judgments to truly hear and understand what another person is communicating, or.to have insight into how a natural system functions. A major obstacle preventing healthy relationships and communication is our inability to listen without being distracted and overwhelmed by our own thoughts or feelings. It has been proposed that,

> A form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis which faces society, and indeed the whole of human nature and consciousness today. Moreover, it may turn out that such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture and freeing it of destructive misinformation, so that creativity can be liberated. (Bonn, Science, Order, & Creativity, 240)

Bohm illustrates how he uses the word "dialogue" by looking at its root meaning: dia meaning "through" not "two," and logos meaning "the word" or the meaning. So dialogue refers to a flow of meaning moving among and through the participants. I am extending Bohm's use of the word not only to mean a way of communicating more deeply with other humans, but to engage in a sort of "bio-logue" – a flow of meaning with other living beings: the plants and animals and natural processes of the earth. Dialogue implies a quality of listening that is rare in our competitive culture. But only by sensitive listening can we learn the needs and limits of the land and of other humans. I propose that it is out of this spirit of dialogue that we will find new ways to solve our environmental and social problems and learn how to properly steward the land and our relationships with one another.

One example of an innovative type of land stewardship comes from the Ecoforestry Institute and their approach to forestry, which they call Holistic Natural Selection Ecoforestry (HNSE). HNSE recognizes that a forest is a diverse and complex ecosystem with a vast spectrum of "resources" other than conifer

stems. In traditional forestry the focus is on particular tree stems as cash crops. But in Ecoforestry

> Forests are seen as having many income-producing products and that the products harvested are selected by Nature for removal. This is the only time-tested and proven method of sustainable forestry. This all-age. all-species management system could open the door to a much more complete and responsible forest management system by the entire industry. (Camp, The Forest Farmer's Handbook, 13)

The Cry for Simplicity

The type of ecoforestry described above illustrates a care for the land which is a form of reciprocity that naturally arises out of living more sensitively. When we realize that what we need (materially) to be happy is very small then we seek to satisfy what Arne Naess calls our "vital needs." Satisfying our vital needs evokes a great appreciation for the simplicity of life. One can live with integrity knowing that we are minimizing the demand for nature as a commodity to be exploited for our luxuries. Vital needs or "environmental nutrients" may vary between individuals. But the basics of clean air and water, organically-grown, fresh food, solid shelter and clothing, exercise, and leisure time for gardening, contemplation, recreation, etc., seems more than enough. It is practically unfathomable in this era, with all of our technological achievements, that it is so difficult to satisfy those basic needs without having to work long days for someone else, often doing mechanical, unsatisfying tasks. This observation brings up another deep issue to be addressed in looking at strategies for cultural evolution: economic sustainability. This cry for a more simple way of life, where people don't have to struggle so much to satisfy their vital needs, is the catalyst behind the co-housing/eco-village movement.

> The citizens are restless, and the battle has begun, That's the mood that comes through loud and clear. by letter and by phone, from among the broad mass of middle America – the 36 million people who read Better Homes and Gardens each month. A growing and vocal number of these hard-working wage earners are sounding the cry and digging in. In short. they're in the early stages of a mini rebellion. (David Haubert, Solar Age)

The questions of alternative economic systems, more direct ways of creating electricity, more ecologically benign ways to manage waste, less polluting forms of transportation, shared family duties, etc., are all extremely important. But until the problems of communication and relationship are addressed, other problems are bound to arise. The eco-village movement has already seen that the

most important things for a community are clear communication and the ability to see other people's points of view (Duane Fickeisen, "Skills for Living Together," In Context, # 29). Bohm illustrates why we need to look at the root causes of our global crisis with an interesting metaphor: Imagine a stream that is being polluted near the source. People downstream don't know about that. So they start removing bits of pollution, trying to purify their water, but perhaps introducing more pollution of another kind as they do so and no matter how much pollution they take out, even more keeps coming. Therefore, what we have to do is see this whole cultural stream, and get to the source of it, which Bohm suggests is a conglomeration of incoherent assumptions in the individual and collective thought process. These assumptions create a general fragmentation in consciousness that manifest into destructive beliefs and behaviors such as anthropocentrism, racism, sexism, nationalism, greed, and competition. These are some of the polluted rivulets of our stream and it is necessary that we examine this whole watershed if we seriously want to recover its basic integrity.

> "The next great step of mankind is into the nature of his own mind" (Gary Snyder, 116).

In The Structure of Scientific Revolutions Kuhn pointed out that the underlying assumptions of the status quo were not up for question until enough people started to recognize serious discrepancies with the old paradigm. And even then there was resistance. The reaction was not to deeply re-examine the assumptions, but to dismiss or suppress the problems by proposing to "do the old way harder." Robert Gilman points out that "it is only after the failure of a reactionary revitalization attempt that a culture is willing to risk fundamental innovation ("Stages of Change," In Context, #9)." It seems that our culture has been resisting change even against strong evidence that our current ways of living are not sustainable. The reaction of "technology will come up with solutions" does not have the same credibility any more: e.g., Chernobyl, the space shuttle blowing up, the fiasco of the Hubble space telescope, the impotence of our technology in dealing with the Valdez spill and other "accidents" that warranted technological fixes. Fritjof Capra calls this a "turning point" – a place where a culture begins to implement the vision of a new, more creative way of living. As we are seeing "mainstream Americans join the energy rebellion: 'we want to take charge!' (Solar Age)" let's rejoice that soon we may all be living with locally-produced energy and food. But let's also remember the whole watershed and know that,

> Only a profound inward revolution which alters all our values can create a different environment, an intelligent social structure, and such a revolution can be brought about only by you and me. No new order will arise until we individually break down our own psychological barriers and are free. (J. Krishnamurti, Freedom from the Known)

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