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BEYOND EARTH DAY: ECOLOGY AND COMMU-
NITY

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Now that Earth Day is over, what next? The celebration of Earth Day reflected the growing concern for restoring and protecting our environment. After the speeches and festivities, how do we carry out our good intentions? One popular approach has been to make lists of things to do for the sake of the environment. There are many such lists and even several books, offering 50 or 100 or 1001 things to do.

I want to suggest a different approach. The problem goes deeper than specific harmful actions with specific remedies. Our basic outlook on life is misleading, resulting in a careless and destructive way of life. If we can see our basic misunderstanding, the many specific mistakes and their remedies will become much clearer.

Our present way of life is largely based on a "soap opera" view. We see life as the effort to find individual happiness through struggling to overcome obstacles and opponents. The central reality is the individual, each one of us, with our particular desires and circumstances. We tend to see everybody and everything else from our personal viewpoints - How do I feel about this person? Is this thing good for me or bad for me?

Soap opera attitudes are dualistic and make divisions, both inner and outer. Differences are often seen as opposition: individual vs. society, male vs. female, Us against Them. We turn this attitude inward and disown aspects of ourselves that we don't like, leading to endless inner conflict.

Opposition and struggle play a very large part in the soap opera view. Competition is seen as natural and inevitable. The struggle for survival and the survival of the fittest are seen as laws of nature. The effort to dominate and control, to outshine others, to be Number One, is seen as a natural and even noble goal.

Soap opera thinking tends to be fragmented, looking at small parts of the total picture. When difficulty arises, blame is fixed on a single cause and a single remedy is sought, often involving elimination of the supposed cause. Solve the drug problem by eliminating dealers. If insects attack your crop, use pesticides. When you get sick, ask the doctor or the druggist for some pills. These remedies always have other effects besides the intended ones, sometimes making things worse, but we tend to ignore these or regard them as minor "side effects."

The soap opera view is not all wrong, but it's one-sided and misleading. There's much more to life than individualistic struggle. Self-centeredness is not inevitable; it's very much influenced by our training, experience, and social pres-

tures. The individualistic pursuit of happiness is not a very good way to find happiness; it is more likely to be destructive than joyful.

An alternative to soap opera is an ecological understanding, which stresses *interdependence*. We are intimately connected with other people and other creatures. We can think of this as a community, the Community of All Beings. We provide for one another and need one another. We humans breathe in oxygen and breathe out water vapor and carbon dioxide. Green plants do just the reverse; they take in water vapor and carbon dioxide, which they use to make starch, and they give off oxygen. We depend on many plants and animals for our food, clothing, shelter, medicine, etc. Plants and animals are at our mercy, but if we destroy them we impoverish ourselves and threaten our own survival. We cannot just choose the creatures we want and eliminate the rest; interdependence really is a fact of life.

An ecological view recognizes that community is essential to life. In its fullest sense, community is the practice of interdependence, providing one another with the necessities and joys of life and taking care of the common environment. We need a supportive human community and a healthy biological community in order to live well, and there is some necessary minimum of community we must have in order to live at all. In the past we may have taken community for granted, but now that human and biological communities are severely damaged we need to restore and sustain them. Recognizing that community is essential and needs to be consciously cared for is one essential way that ecological thinking differs from soap opera thinking.

Another important difference lies in the conception of a happy and worthwhile life. In the soap opera view, what's important is personal gratification, whatever gives us pleasure: food, sex, being admired, feeling powerful, feeling successful, overcoming a rival, having lots of money, etc. An ecological or holistic view doesn't deny pleasure, but sees it differently. Relationship and involvement are crucial; we enjoy friendship and love, the success and joy of others, the wonders and beauty of nature.

When we are completely self-centered, completely caught up in our personal soap operas, it's as though we have a film around us which keeps us from fully experiencing anything outside of ourselves. Sometimes that film falls away, through grace, mediation, surprise, or whatever, and we suddenly become more open to whatever is in front of us. Colors seem brighter; everything feels more real and more alive. This gives us a taste of what we lose when we are self-preoccupied and shut up within ourselves.

I believe that self-centeredness is not our natural and necessary state but is a result of our lack of community. If I don't feel closely involved with others, caring for them and being cared for by them, trusting them, sharing their joys and sorrows, then I have to take care of myself, worry about my own welfare and security, ignore others or compete with them. Of course, acting this way

further weakens and destroys community. This process has been going on for a long time now, so that the sense of community has grown very dim for most of us, even though we still use the word.

Our social institutions are based on and reinforce soap opera attitudes. Individualistic competition is stressed in our schools and in our economic system. Our political and legal structures follow adversarial patterns; antagonism is expected and encouraged. We make extensive use of threats, coercion, and punishment. In this social context, acting in soap opera ways seems natural; it's hard even to conceive of alternatives. Even when we want to change our society we tend to think in terms of opposition, combat, trying to defeat our enemies. This isn't totally wrong, but very limited. What's missing from this view and what we especially need is *healing*. We need to develop practices, groups, a whole way of life that promotes healing and sustains wholeness.

Developing an alternative way of life needs to begin on a very small scale. Groups of a few friends and neighbors can get together to work on healing and change. In such groups we can support and learn from one another, explore possibilities, and undertake practical projects. Needs and circumstances can suggest what to do; one possibility would be simple forms of sharing, such as tool sharing and ride sharing, which can gradually be expanded to more extensive cooperation. In this way a process of change can develop, leading to larger changes, carryovers to jobs and neighborhoods, cooperation with other groups, and so on. Such groups can be building blocks in the redevelopment of community.

A crucial aspect of this work is dealing with barriers between us and healing our relationships. In the course of working together disagreements and conflicts will arise. This is an opportunity to learn more about listening and conflict resolution. Different points of view can be enriching if we can listen receptively to each other, find what is valuable in each viewpoint, and discover how to create a combined approach or synthesis. Appreciating diversity and being able to develop unity in diversity is an essential skill of community building.

Thinking in terms of relationships and wholes doesn't require highly technical training. We all do some holistic thinking already. When you enter a familiar room in which something has been changed, you can usually spot the difference readily, without examining every item one by one. This awareness of the whole as a pattern, not just a collection of separate parts, is very useful for dealing with complex situations. This is a skill that can be further developed. Asking ourselves questions, such as where the things we use come from and where they go after we're finished with them, can increase our understanding of connections. There is also much useful information we need to learn by reading or listening to experts. This includes knowledge of connective processes, such as food chains, the cycling of nutrients, the role of energy and energy transfers in ecosystems and in technology.

I have tried to suggest, briefly and sketchily, an alternative approach to understanding and dealing with our ecological problems. I don't claim that this is the "right" answer, if there is any such thing, but I hope to stimulate thinking and provoke discussion. I do believe that thinking in terms of wholes and acting in terms of community are essential parts of any real answer. And I believe that moving away from soap opera individualism toward community can be joyful as well as healing.

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