

Beyond Sustainability

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CHANGE

We live in an ever-changing world. In fact, change is said to be “the only constant in life.” There always a host of new technologies, for example, to keep life interesting. So, change is normal and usual. However, some changes are not normal or usual. Some changes are truly revolutionary. In fact, every two hundred years or so throughout human history, society has gone through great transformations that changed our understanding of how the world works and our place within it, and eventually changed virtually every aspect of life. I believe we are currently living such a time of change. I believe the changes we are experiencing now are at least as important as those of the Industrial Revolution, of the late 1700s, and perhaps as important as the beginning of science in the early 1600s. I'm an old man and I have seen many changes during my 70-plus years. But, the changes I've experienced are not even remotely comparable to the changes I believe today's young people will see during their lives. People who are born in the mid-21st Century won't even be able to imagine the world of today.

Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that we don't make these “really big” changes such as these unless three conditions exist. First, we have to become convinced that what we are doing now isn't working and isn't going to work in the future. Change at best is uncomfortable, so we have to have a good reason to change. But, that's not enough. We also must have a clear concept or vision of what we could do instead that would be fundamentally better than what we are doing now. Change is difficult, so without a clear vision of something better to change to, most people just keep on doing what they have been doing. Finally, we must believe that the something better is possible, even if not quick and easy. Most people do not pursue impossible dreams. We must have hope. Change is always uncomfortable, usually difficult, and often risky. Lacking any one of the three pre-conditions for change, most people just keep on doing what they are doing.

SUSTAINABILITY

Today's great transformation is being driven by questions of sustainability. Sustainability asks: how can we meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future? It asks the essential question of change: It asks whether we can keep doing what we are doing? When we ask the question of sustainability earnestly and honestly; we come to the inevitable conclusion: what we are doing now isn't even meeting the needs of most of people today, and most certainly isn't leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. We can't keep doing what we have been doing. Our current way of life is not sustainable.

This is not just a personal opinion. Ultimately sustainability is a matter of energy. Our houses, clothes, cars, our food, require energy to make and energy to use. In fact all material things are simply concentrated forms of energy. Human imagination, creativity, and labor also require energy - the brain uses something like 20% of the energy used by the human body. In addition, we are not born as productive individuals; we are born and helpless babies. We must be

nurtured, cared for, socialized, civilized, and educated by society before we become useful to society. All of this requires human energy, specifically, biological energy.

The economic growth of the past 200-years, the industrial era, was made possible by an abundance of cheap energy - first the old growth forests, then surface mining of coal, and for the past 100-years, by shallow reservoirs of oil and natural gas. But the old growth forests are gone, we are blowing the tops off mountains to get the remaining coal, the remaining oil and natural gas is deep beneath the ocean floors often in most remote corners of the world. We are not out of fossil energy, at least not yet, but we are quickly running out of abundant and cheap energy. The remaining sources of fossil energy, mostly coal, are major contributors to greenhouse gasses and other pollutants which are threatening the ability of the earth's natural ecosystems to support human life. The industrial era is over.

The only sustainable source of energy is solar energy. Energy from all the sustainable sources combined - wind, water, solar panels, biofuels - in total, will be less plentiful and far more costly than fossil energy. The days of cheap, abundant energy are over. The industrial era was an aberration in human history that is not likely to be repeated. We can't continue doing what we are doing. It is not sustainable. Change is no longer an option; it is an absolute necessity. That said, we will not make the changes we need until we have a clear concept of a better life that we can change to. We need to create a new vision of a better future - a future beyond sustainability.

ENOUGH

The new vision must begin with the realization that we don't need more economic growth; that we already have enough "stuff." Ironically, the most prominent economist of the 20th century, John Maynard Keynes, anticipated the current time of change back in the 1920s. He thought the *economic problem* would be solved within a hundred years, which would be about now. He understood the economy as just means of meeting our basic material or tangible needs. He didn't consider the economic problem to be *the permanent problem of humanity*, but only a temporary problem that eventually would be solved.²¹ To him, the permanent problem was to learn the "true art of living," to use our freedom from economic deprivation to "live wisely and agreeably and well."

As it turned out, Keynes was actually too conservative. The "economic problem" in America was solved as early as the 1960s. Various surveys and studies indicate there has been no increase in overall well-being or happiness in the U.S. or the rest of the so called developed world since the 1950s, in spite of continued growth in wealth and the consumption of "stuff." The challenge for Americans today is not to try to restore unsustainable economic growth, but instead to learn to live "wisely, agreeably, and well." We already have enough "stuff."

Admittedly, many so-called "lesser-developed" countries of the world still need to work on the temporary problem of economic growth. However, they need not consume all of the earth's remaining natural resources in the process. First, the developing nations don't need to expand their economies to match the American lifestyle. The research indicates that beyond about \$10,000-\$15,000 GDP per person - there has been no relationship between further economic

growth and happiness or overall quality of life.ⁱⁱ In nations that are more equitable, where there is less disparity between the rich and poor, people tend to be happier, regardless of their absolute level of income.ⁱⁱⁱ Even unsustainable population growth is much more a consequence of insecurity and inequity than of poverty or economic deprivation. Developing countries can balance their modest needs for economic growth with the need to build more equitable and just societies, without compromising their future.

Sustainable development may be slower and more difficult than industrial development, but in a world running out of fossil energy, sustainable development is the only logical alternative for the future. There are more than enough resources on earth to meet the basic needs of people in both developed and developing countries of the world, just not enough to sustain the levels of economic growth we have come to expect. It's time for people in developed and developing nations alike to turn our attention to the true art of living - to live wisely, agreeably, and well.

HAPPINESS

It's time to return to the historic purpose of human life; to the pursuit of happiness. People through human history have known that beyond some fairly modest level of material well-being there is no relationship between further increases in income or wealth and increases in happiness or overall quality of life.^{iv} Once our basic material needs are met - food, clothing, shelter, health care, - the quality of our life depends far more on the quality of our relationships - friends, family, community, society - than on the quantity of income or wealth. We are social beings; we need to love and be loved. We are also moral beings. Our happiness depends on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. We need feel in our heart that what we are doing is significant; that it's right and good. A multitude of social science studies related to wealth and happiness confirm our common sense. Once our individual, tangible needs are met, the pursuit of happiness is about developing the social and spiritual dimensions of our lives, rather than striving to acquire more income or wealth.

This is a vision of new and better world that is worth the risks of revolutionary change. This is not some New Age utopian vision that is unattainable. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that happiness was a natural consequence of “right relationships” among friends and within families and communities. Alex Des Tocqueville, in writing about democracy in America in the early 1800s, termed concern for the well being of others as “self-interest rightly understood.” The Dali Lama calls it being “wisely selfish” - understanding that our well-being is dependent on the well being of the other living and nonliving things of the earth. All we need to do is return to those things people have always known to be right and true. We need only return to the pursuit of happiness.

HOPE

The change we need may not be quick or easy but it most certainly is possible; and in this, there is hope. Keynes warned that humanity has become so accustomed to striving that it would be difficult to stop striving when we finally had “enough.” However, fifty years ago, Americans had begun to confront the ecological and social challenges to sustainability. The environmental movement and civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s represented an awakening of

America to the necessity for fundamental change. In response, Americans set an aggressive public policy agenda for the 1970s to confront these challenges. But such changes are never easy. Unfortunately, during the 1980s, many Americans retreated from their commitment to ecological and social change and returned to striving for greater income and wealth.

The world we see today is largely a consequence of 30-years of denial and retreat. For young people, thirty years seems a lifetime. But, thirty years is not long in American history and certainly not in human history. We need not allow this 30-year aberration in history define the future of humanity. We were once a better people so we know it is possible to be a better people again. In this possibility, there is hope.

QUOTE

We have the final requisite that we need for the change. We may not be optimistic, but we have reason for hope. In the words of Vaclav Havel - philosopher, reformer, and former president of the Czech Republic: *Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that [to others] seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.*^v

TOO PRECIOUS

I am an old may and don't expect to see the great transformation completed in my lifetime. My hope today is in the millions of young people, all across this nation and around the world, like many of you here tonight. You know that what we are doing is not sustainable, do you are helping to create a new vision of a better world -beyond sustainability. We know that creating this new world will not be quick or easy, but we know it's the only thing that makes sense; in this there is hope. And even if in the end we fail, while daring greatly, always remember: life is simply too precious... to live without hope.

ⁱ John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, (Miami, FL: BN Publishing - no copyright date) pp. 366-368.

ⁱⁱ For a bibliography of happiness research, visit *the Positive Psychology Center*, University of Pennsylvania, <<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/positivepsychologyresearch.htm> >

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level; Why Greater Equality Makes Stronger Societies*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press), 2009.

^{iv} Ed Diener and Martin EP. Seligman, "Beyond Money, Toward an Economy of Well-Being," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5 (1), 2004, 1-31.

^v Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House inc.), 1990, Chapter 5.