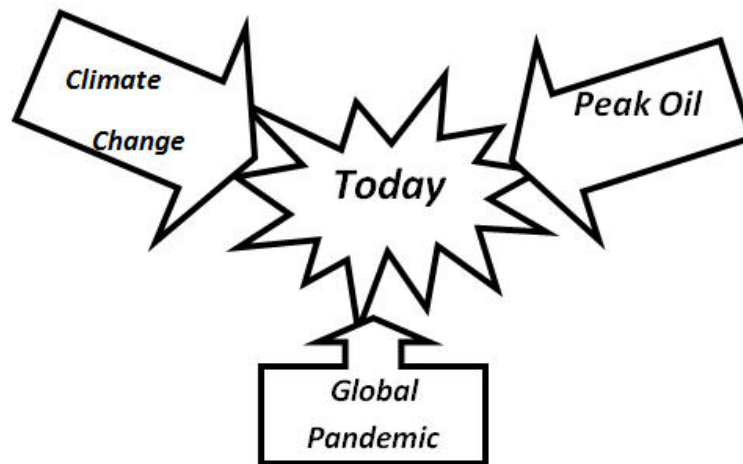


Saving the World

One Clothespin at a Time

I start each of my classes by leading the students in a “centering breath.” The purpose of this exercise (which most students appreciate) is to invite our mind, body and spirit into the room. Many of us “*do space and time travel*” with our minds. We are distracted and rarely available to our present experience. While we bring our bodies into the classroom, our minds are busy thinking about something we did or said yesterday, or perhaps worrying about something that might happen tomorrow. And forget about bringing our spirit, soul or heart to class or to work. That is something we reserve for more private moments, that is if we connect with our spirit at all. So I begin class with a centering breath because we are more likely to be receptive to learning if we bring all of ourselves to the experience.

I believe this same holistic approach is necessary if we are to address the many challenges associated with the “*perfect storm*” of climate change, peak oil, and the threat of global pandemic. Each of these problems is created by humans and must be faced by humans.



The Perfect Storm we have Created Ourselves

Climate change and oil depletion are caused by our selfish use and misuse of a limited natural resources without regard for future generations. And the threat of global pandemic is aggravated by the way in which we manufacture animal food products (concentrated animal feeding operations provide the perfect ecological conditions for mutations of virus and emergence of antibiotic resistant bacteria). We created this mess though our own individual and collective behavior. But if we rely upon our intelligence alone to solve these problems, it is unlikely that we will find either the creativity or the motivation to do what is needed. We must approach these challenges with mind, body and spirit – we must use our heads, guided by our hearts, and go to work with our hands to address this “perfect storm.”

Intelligence, facts, rational thought will not be enough to solve the problems we have created. After all, it was thinking and human cleverness that got us into this mess in the first place. To solve the problems of humanity, we must go beyond thinking, beyond reason, beyond rational thought. Thought is necessary but not enough. Today we need both knowledge AND wisdom, where wisdom is defined as the awareness of what has value in life. Learning for wisdom will require the integration of thinking and feeling, mind and body, science and spirit, knowledge and values, head and heart, yin and yang. Learning for wisdom will require praxis..... that is thought (head-work) - but thought guided by spirit (heart-work) put into action (hand-work). If human intelligence was enough, we would have begun to solve these problems when they first were recognized. But we did not.

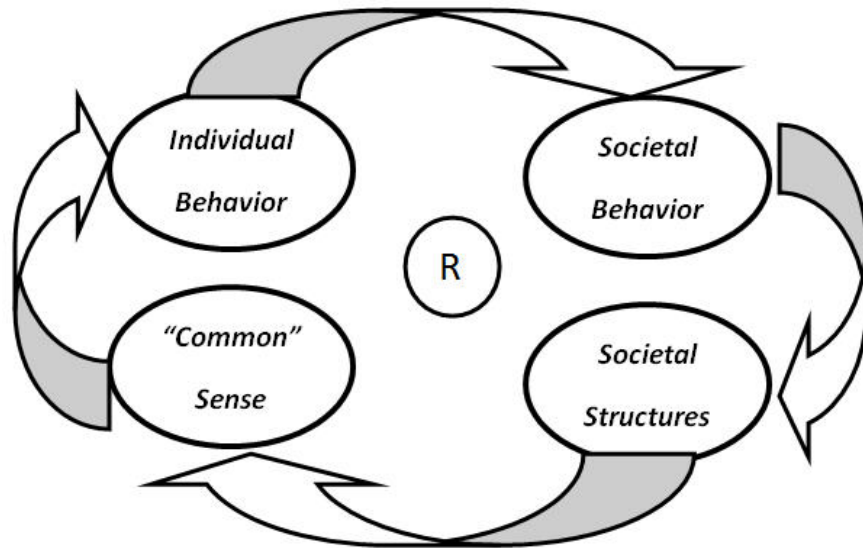
The motivation for personal behavioral change won't come from our "big brains" alone. Perhaps as we allow our hearts to feel the pain caused by our "normal" behavior, pain inflicted on those less powerful and those yet to be born, perhaps then we will begin to take responsibility for our behavior. There was a time in America when parents sacrificed for their children and grandchildren. Today we live in a time when parents seem willing to sacrifice their children's and grandchildren's opportunities. This selfish behavior can only be explained by a hardening of the heart, by a denial of the truth, or by rationalization – that is using our minds to "outsmart" our hearts. This is accomplished at the expense of not only our children's opportunities but our own sanity. We "say" that we care about our children, yet our behavior makes a lie of this statement. And when our daily behavior is inconsistent with our core values, we are no longer sane, happy and healthy.

So how do we respond to the pain of awareness? One path is addictive consumption to help us forget – we use drugs (legal and illegal), alcohol, recreational sex, video games, mindless television, and the number one American leisure activity – shopping - to numb the pain. This seems to be "normal" today. There is another path however. It is the path of finding meaning and purpose through service to something greater than ourselves. This path begins with small actions.

In Michael Pollan's April 2008, New York Times Magazine article titled "Why Bother?" he wrote *"....for me the most upsetting moment in the movie 'An Inconvenient Truth' came long after Al Gore scared the hell out of me, constructing an utterly convincing case that the very survival of life on earth as we know it is threatened by climate change, when we are asked to take action.... and what are we asked to do ?"* Do you remember?

The answer at the end of the movie was that we are asked to change a light bulb! We are asked to change our inefficient incandescent bulbs to the new compact florescent bulbs. That's it? Yup, that and to bike to work, to plant a tree, to grow a garden, to pray. How in the world is that supposed to help solve these life threatening problems? Don't we need major shifts in government policy? Don't we need regulations, restrictions, tax incentives? Sure, we need all of that , but where do we begin. How do we get there? Well the former Vice-president of the United States suggests that we begin by changing a light bulb.

How can this help? Here is how.....



A Self-reinforcing Feedback Loop of Human Behavior

Small changes in our individual behavior matter because they are part of a system that can become “self-reinforcing,” just as our normal destructive behavior is part of a self-reinforcing system. Let’s think about a common, well-accepted “normal” behavior, like driving to a city on a weekend to meet friends and see a concert. Nothing wrong with that – right? Of course the very small amount of fossil fuel that is burned does put a bit of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and contributes to both global climate change and the continued depletion of oil – but not much, really. The problem is that this individual behavior is part of “normal” accepted pattern of social behavior that includes jumping into an automobile whenever we need something at the store, or want to visit a friend, or need to get to work or school – repeated over and over by millions of people every day. This is normal behavior.

And this normal behavior is supported by societal structures that we have created to support this behavior – things like roads, and gas stations, and traffic lights, and automobile franchises, and oil rigs, and petroleum manufacturing facilities, and oil tankers, and a military machine needed to support all of this normal human behavior. And it all becomes “common sense” – except that in this case common sense is killing the planet and robbing our own children and grand children of opportunity.

When common sense is to jump in your automobile and drive at high rates of speed (because you are always running late), anything that interferes with your normal behavior is an inconvenience. So when President Carter lowered the speed limit on all national highways to 55 mph to save fuel, our social structures (government policy) and our behavior changed for four years. But since our collective worldview (common sense) didn’t change, as soon as President Reagan came to office (we elected him) those social structures were changed back to “normal.” It is difficult to change patterns of social behavior and social structures without changing how we think about the world. And most of us are happy to believe in a dream world of cheap fossil fuels and stable climate that no longer exists. Faced with reality, we rely on denial, rationalization, and by hardening our hearts - to survive.

But this plan isn't working. But neither is political action working - at least not fast enough. So maybe it is time to change a light bulb..... Or bike to work or school..... Or plant a small garden.....

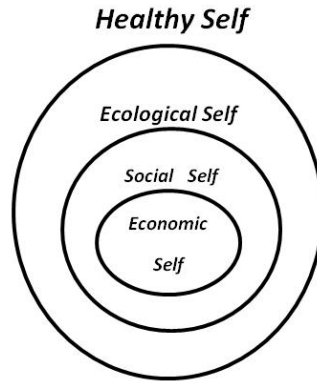
If we return to the same self-reinforcing system diagram (called in System Dynamics jargon a "causal loop diagram" because each component causes all of the others) we might find a reason to hope. You see when I change a light bulb and share that experience with others, things start to change - if not right away for the whole world, then at least for my whole world. Taking action in service to something larger than myself can be pretty seductive. It can become a habit. Slowly over time, my small efforts like changing a light bulb become part of a larger pattern of behavior for me and perhaps for others - small things like bike riding and gardening. Maybe over time I begin to invest my time, energy and money into larger things - like insulating my home or installing solar hot water. And maybe others notice. Maybe by planting a few tomatoes I get interested in making some raspberry jam when berries are in season, or building a small hoop house to capture solar energy and extend the growing season for my garden, or joining a local farm. And maybe others notice.

Over time, honest changes in individual behavior begins to create new societal patterns of behavior, and then the sort of shifts in social structure that formerly were laughed at (President Carter asked us to turn down the thermostat in our homes and put on a sweater - he did himself, and was laughed at), maybe then these ideas don't sound so crazy. When enough of us change our individual behavior, common sense begins to shift. One of the fastest growing leisure activities in urban and suburban areas today is raising a few egg-laying hens in our yards and gardens. This is crazy - yet it is happening. It is news today because it hasn't yet become "common sense." But I can see a day when this will be "normal".

So what else? One of my "*light bulb type activities*" is to hang wet clothes to dry in the sun during the summer months. Many condominium associations and apartment complexes make this simple activity illegal. The worldview (or common sense) of the world we have created says that clothes hanging on a line are ugly. So we create social structures making the simple act of drying clothes in the sun "a crime." Common sense? Maybe a little non-violent protest is in order here. This needs to change!

For me the act of hanging clothes on a line in the sun is much more than a way of drying wet clothing. It is a symbolic representation of the world I want to create. You see, as I am hanging the clothes I am not contributing to the industrial system that has created the "perfect storm." And with a smile, I sometimes think of myself as "stealing" from the oil companies. Okay, so that's a stretch. But I also find the simple act of hanging clothes on a line to be quite meditative. It is difficult to do in a hurry. It allows me to slow down, to breathe, and to feel the sun on my face. And of course it makes me part of the natural cycle of the seasons (it's a summer activity - in the winter the clothes are hung near our woodstove in the basement). And hanging the clothes in the sun requires that I pay attention to the weather before we wash the clothes. Most of us can disregard the weather and wash clothes whenever it is convenient. When you participate in a natural process, you have to interact with the natural world at least to the extent that you know if it is going to rain that day. This is a small act of love and joy, and brings me just a brief moment of awareness of the sacred, but this connection with the natural world (with Mother Nature) can become quite meaningful over time. It can grow into a process of healing.

So let's look at health and healing from a holistic perspective.



I don't believe it is possible for individuals to remain healthy in a sick society. I don't believe it is possible for a society to remain healthy in a sick environment. As individuals today we focus most of our time and energy on our "economic health," that is we spend more time "at work" than any other activity. And when our work feeds our souls, this might not be a bad thing. But many people today are engaged in unsatisfying, mind and soul numbing work to maintain an elusive standard of living that continues to cost more and more. To be economically successful, we exploit other people – either at our own workplace or in countries where "labor is cheap." Every time we buy an appliance or article of clothing we make the world a little less socially healthy. And of course, in order to manufacture cheap "things" we exploit the environment, either by using and misusing non-renewable resources or by creating pollutants. A system that maximizes the economic health of those with political power or money by exploiting either people (society) or the land (environment), cannot be sustainable. Yet that is the system we have created. Healing this system is necessary.

Now, let's return to changing a light bulb. By this simple yet revolutionary act, we begin the healing process. Using compact florescent light bulbs will save us money, will create business opportunities for others, and will reduce the demand of our collective behavior on the natural world. This simple act is a beginning of healing. And it "makes sense" in the context of an "expanded sense of self."



Expanded Self-Interest

By seeing myself as part of something larger than my body, I can find my purpose for being and motivation to change “normal” behavior. I know that I don’t end at my fingertips. When my children are hurt, I can feel pain. The small “myself” is part of a larger sense of self we’ll call a “family self.” And this self is part of a yet larger sense of “community self” which is part of an “ecological self”, which for some of us is part of a yet more expansive sense of “cosmic or divine self.” When I hang the laundry out to dry or work in my garden, I experience this connection with Mother Nature as part of my ecological self. At these times I may experience the sacred. This relationship between the smaller “myself” and an expanded sense of self helps me to understand where I fit in the larger world. System Dynamics helps us see that each of these sub-systems “*look down for function and up for purpose.*” An example is the human heart. As a subsystem of my body, the heart looks “down” to smaller subsystems like a heart valve or heart cells for function. And the heart looks “up” for purpose - that is, it serves my body. This is how living systems work. In the same way, families (or sub-groups of community) may look to individuals for function, and individuals can find meaning and purpose in service to these “larger selves” of family, community, natural ecosystems and perhaps even the divine.

When I see my purpose in service to a larger self that includes other people, animals, the natural world and perhaps even the divine, I can no longer justify my behavior as a selfish individual and I can find motivation for changing my behavior. I can get up in the morning and let my head be guided by my heart to do work through my hands. And in doing so, I participate in a healing process. When I see myself as “*a part of – rather than apart from*” Mother Nature, I may begin to play by Mother Nature’s rules. And what are these rules. There are three:

1. Rely on current solar income for energy
2. Cycle everything material (waste = food)
3. Enhance biodiversity

That’s it! These are the rules that Mother Nature plays by. These are the rules that have evolved over the past 4.5 billion years on this planet. And whether they evolved by simply trial and error over a long period of time - or by divine guidance doesn’t matter much. These are the rules, and when I choose to play by these rules, I am honoring the sacred. I know who I am. I belong. When I violate these rules, I contribute to the perfect storm. It is a choice.

Since “common sense” today tells me that I’m fooling myself by thinking in this way, I need reminders from time to time to keep me focused on my true self and my true purpose. So I carry around clothespins - to give away. These are simple examples of appropriate technology that will “*save the world.*” Much like former Vice-president Gore’s suggestion that in the face of environmental devastation, we change a light bulb – my invitation to you is that we use a clothespin.

Don’t believe it? Well, why not take a deep breath – and try it?

Of course, hanging our clothes in the sun by itself won't change the world. But I believe we must begin with small acts of love. This one is mine. You need to find your own. And when we begin to take responsibility for our personal behavior and act in accordance to the Earth Mother's rules out of love with joy, rather than out of fear with blame, we will attract others on this path. Over time we will create a parade of people marching to a different drummer. And soon the politicians and the business leaders will jump in the front of our parade (because that is what they do) and claim it was their idea all along. At that point, we will find the political will to make the radical changes in social structures (like tax incentives and regulations etc.) necessary for a huge societal shift – and we will save the world.

Political action is indeed necessary. But unless we change our personal behavior first, the politicians will be correct when they claim that we are not ready to accept the changes needed. I believe it can start with a clothespin, or a light bulb, or by planting a tree, if these acts are done with love and joy.

So we begin.....

And on those days when we feel despair (because we will), we can be reminded of a quote from the great African American tennis player and activist for social justice, Arthur Ashe, who when asked “*how do you keep going when nothing seems to change*” advised us to:

- *Start where you're at*
- *Use what you've got*
- *Do what you can*

Namaste.....



This is a slightly revised version of a talk presented by John Gerber as part of a Climate Action Panel at the University of Massachusetts on October 19, 2009. Comments are welcome and should be sent to:

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