

Back to Our Future

Four years ago this November I stood up here and gave back-to-back Sunday morning talks on climate change. I had no great desire to do that but I felt I had no choice. No one was discussing the issue. It had never surfaced in any manner during the 2012 Presidential campaign. I was exasperated, I was indignant, and I was fearful. Fearful in part because I knew my 15 year old granddaughter would be here and I was quite sure she “would get it.” She was here and she did get it. She was upset and tearful. I can’t imagine any grandfather taking pleasure at reducing his granddaughter to tears.

Two months ago I had no intention of writing this talk. Those who know me well know that I typically prepare my UU talks well in advance then edit and rewrite them multiple times. This morning I was intending to share some thoughts entitled “Are You Awake?” I now plan to give that talk next April.

As we near another Presidential election I again feel I have no choice. Yes, there are some optimistic signs of meaningful change. But clearly we are not out of the woods yet. We are not home free. Our future as human beings living on a human-friendly planet is not assured. In the words of James Hoggan, “we need to change the way we see the world and the way we interact with nature.” That’s the message I wish to emphasize this morning. Hoggan also reminds us that “we also need to shift not only our attention but also our intention.” In other words, are we committed or are we just paying lip service toward changing the way we see the world and interact with it. I am not ordinarily a pessimist but we simply cannot ignore the persistent toll of alarm bells and we cannot “allow ourselves to get bogged down in denial and debate.” We have serious problems and “they won’t go away on their own.”

I just quoted James Hoggan who, I suspect, is unknown to most of us. Among other responsibilities he is Chair of the David Suzuki Foundation and is also the author of “Climate Cover-UP, Do the Right Thing.” I am tempted to suggest that all you really need to know about him is the title of his most recent book, “I’m Right and You’re an Idiot.” In any case, I owe the impetus for this talk to his insights. I have used some of his words and a few of his examples.

We need to keep in mind that many civilizations have prospered and then collapsed, as Hoggan notes, “when the very technologies that created prosperity and success in the first place became liabilities. Take for example, irrigation. People ran canals into the desert to grow more food. That, in turn, led to more people, more houses and other concerns. After many centuries the ancient Sumerians found their fields were turning white because salts were building up when water evaporated.” Here’s the point. “They didn’t deal with the problem because they had expanded to the point where it was beyond their ability to change. They were locked into the system and ignored the warning” signs. “In a matter of 1,000 years, start to finish, they ended up producing only a quarter of the food that the fields had produced in the beginning and of course large parts of southern Iraq had to be abandoned. The land” has not yet “recovered even after thousands of years,” end quote.

Does any of this trigger alarm bells with us? Do any of us not understand how we are exhausting ground water reservoirs the world over? Once we exhaust them...these aquifers will also not recharge for thousands of years - if they ever do.

Let's consider a very different scenario, another example of peoples' seeming inability to change. Thirty years ago, according to Hoggan, "the ratio of income between the CEO of a major American corporation and shop floor worker in the same corporation was about 40 to 1. Today it's more than 1,000 to 1." One thousand to one. Does anyone believe that discrepancy is justified? Is anyone concerned?

We just might learn something from the ancient Mayans. "They fell into a similar progress trap when their rulers followed a similarly self-serving and shortsighted path. The Maya built bigger and bigger temples at the end, just as our civilization is creating taller and taller skyscrapers." A theologian might suggest we recall the example of the Tower of Babel as recorded in Genesis. "Evidence from Maya skeletons shows that while members of the ruling class became fatter and taller, peasants became shorter and thinner. There was a transfer of resources upwards over time, as we see in our society today."

Today we see fabulous wealth in a few hands and almost a third of the human race living in poverty. One out of six humans have an inadequate diet. One out of six! Again, here's the point. Civilizations that have prospered in the past "got into trouble because they were unable to change their ways of thinking and operating, and the very things that created their initial prosperity and success became liabilities." And we seem committed to fall into precisely the same trap both as a nation and for many of us as individuals.

Why don't we learn from history? Even before the Mayans the Greek historian Plutarch warned that "an imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of a Republic."

Why is it so difficult for us to understand and admit to the fact that there are limits? To quote Ronald Wright, Canadian author of the best-seller, "A Short History of Progress," It seems to "go against the cultural grain of North Americans who are used to having endless plenty, used to the idea that the future will always be bigger and better....One of the absolutely clear (lessons of history) is that a healthy economy depends on a healthy environment and once you start eating into the environment to grow your so-called economy you are on a path to ruin....Our rapid technological advances have made it possible to suck more and more out of the environment and have made it seem as though human prosperity is detached from natural systems." That is utter nonsense. "Of course the exact "reverse is true. What we've been doing by these very sophisticated means of extracting things is actually taking out stuff that can never be replaced."

My chief concern this morning is that we simply must, individually and as a nation, determine to do whatever is necessary to develop a new relationship with planet Earth. David Suzuki, the Canadian geneticist, science broadcaster, and environmental activist puts it this way. "The problems we face are not technological, political, or economic - they are psychological. Thus the way forward lies in learning to see the world differently." Then he makes a startling statement.

"The environmental movement has failed." As he explains it, it has failed because "although we now have laws that protect clean air, clean water, endangered species and millions of hectares of land - we have not changed the way people think. The failure was, in winning these battles, we didn't change the way we see the world...We didn't get across the idea that the reason we wanted to stop logging here" or dam building there or offshore drilling somewhere else "is that we're a part of the biosphere and we've got to begin to behave in a way that protects the most

fundamental things in our lives - air, water, soil and other species.” That’s what is most important. “That’s the lesson of environmentalism and we have failed to inculcate that in society.”

Then Suzuki continues, “Humanity has grown so powerfully that we’ve become a geological force. There have never been so many people with the ability to affect the chemistry, the physics, and the biology of the planet. A crunch is coming because the biosphere has been so altered that there are going to be collapses and an inability to sustain the number of people on the planet.”

“We keep hearing about the bottom line and the economy, but the bottom line is actually the air” we breathe, the water we drink and the soil on which we depend to nourish most of our food. “If we continue see the world only through economic eyes, the things that matter most to us are worthless.” That view of life is beyond tragic. It is life-threatening.

Suzuki moved into television in 1962 thinking that people needed more information and that having more information would enable people to make better decisions. He no longer believes that. Nor do I. As he puts it, “People today have unprecedented access to information, but we’re going backward and science itself is being discredited.” I would agree that we certainly do have access to much more and better information. We may indeed be up to date on our 125 closest Facebook friends but I don’t believe that most of us are any better informed about our relationship with the natural world.

A few years ago 15,000 people in Chicago died one summer from heat. Another 35,000 died in Europe. New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Massive wildfires in California and unprecedented flooding in Louisiana two months ago. What did we learn from these tragedies? Billions of pine trees in our Rocky Mountain West and British Columbia have been killed by the mountain pine beetle. And thousands of trees continue to die. And what is the best sequester of carbon? Trees, of course. The boreal forest of Canada has “the largest intact forest on the planet” and we are watching its destruction from pine beetles whose activity is enhanced by the warming of our planet. And many of us still don’t believe? Are not concerned?

Why did I title this talk Back to the Future? Here’s why. I can’t say it any better than Wade Davis, a Canadian anthropologist and ethno-botanist has stated it. As Davis puts it, “Most traditional cultures and indigenous people have a reciprocal relationship with the world. They don’t see it as just a stage upon which the human drama unfolds. They see it literally as a series of reciprocal exchanges in which the Earth has absolute obligations to humanity, and humanity has obligations to the Earth.”

He continues, “We in the western world were raised to believe the mountains are there to be mined, which is completely different from a child of the Andes raised to believe that that mountain above (her) community was an Apu spirit, a deity, that would direct (her) destiny for the rest of (her) life... we grow up believing forests exist to be cut. That makes us very different from a First Nations elder raised to believe those forests are the domain of spirits”

“The interesting thing isn’t who’s right or wrong,” Davis stresses, “it’s how the belief system mediates human interaction with the environment. It reveals two profoundly different belief systems: One with a relatively benign ecological footprint for thousands of years, another which has razed the forests in three generations.” Now, please understand, when I just mentioned

razing the forests, I was talking about razed not raised. In other words I was talking about destroying the forests.

You may have trouble believing the next two comments but please keep in mind my plea that we must learn how to view our world in a different manner. First, here is Wade Davis again. "When the British first arrived in Australia, they saw people who looked strange, and had a very primitive technology. But what really offended the British was that the aboriginal people had no interest in self-improvement, in progress, in changing their life....As recently as 1902, it was debated in parliament in Australia as to whether aboriginal people were human or not. As recently as the 1960s, (I repeat, the 1960s) a school book called A Treasury of Fauna of Australia, included the aboriginal people amongst the interesting wildlife of the country." Can any of us believe that? "The entire purpose of life in Australia, for the civilization of the aboriginal people, was the antithesis of progress. The whole purpose of (their) life was to not change anything." Might there be a lesson there for us?

My second probably hard to believe comment is a brief personal story. A few years before I retired I joined a few other Forest Service scientists who were invited to spend three weeks as guests of the Australian government. We were invited to see and discuss a number of environmental issues facing the Aussies and to begin plans for a reciprocal visit to our country. At one point I had a long conversation with a superb Australian ornithologist who shared with me a story of his first years as an employee of the Australian government. He ended our conversation with an invitation to visit him so that he could introduce me both to the wonderful avian fauna of Australia and also to some of his aboriginal friends. I deeply regret I did not take advantage of this wonderfully kind offer.

Here, in brief, is what he told me of his first day on the job. His boss called him into his office. After a few necessary procedures and details, his boss looked him squarely in the eye and told him he did not want to see him in his office for an entire year. He was told to spend one full year with the aboriginal people and others to acquire at least a beginning understanding of, and relationship with the native birds and animals. In other words, how did Australia's native people view their world? What had they learned from 40,000 years of close association with and observations of their natural world? Can you imagine such an opportunity? Such a boss? I would love to know both how the ornithologist and his boss' careers unfolded in the next several years.

Twenty-eight years ago, in 1988, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a prescient letter addressed to the Earth's planetary citizens. In part he said this, "For me, the most paralyzing news was that Nature was no conservationist. It (has) needed no help from us in taking the planet apart and putting it back together some different way." Nature is (obviously) constantly rearranging our planet with lightning-set forest fires, volcanic eruptions, dust storms, earthquakes, tidal waves etc. He also pointed out that "Nature is ruthless when it comes to matching the quantity of life in any given place at any given time to the quantity of nourishment available." In short, Nature or if you will the environment, is not going to adapt to us, We had better learn how to adapt to it.

Does any of this mean I am suggesting that we live as the Australian aborigines once did? Of course not. I am suggesting, however, that we need to develop a new relationship with our world. I am also reminded, as Otto Scharmer of the MIT Sloan School of Management has stated, that if we are to affect change and deal with the problems we face that we need to

change, in his words, “the inner condition of the intervener.” In other words, we need to believe, we need to be committed or else we are whistling into the wind.

Vonnegut included in his 1988 letter what he referred to as “...what appears to be Nature’s stern but reasonable surrender terms.” He listed seven. Number six was “Stop thinking your grandchildren will be OK no matter how wasteful or destructive you may be, since they can go to a nice new planet on a spaceship. That is really mean, and stupid.” Here is his number four. “Teach your kids, and yourselves, too, while you’re at it, how to inhabit a small planet without helping to kill it.” We desperately need to do this. Elementary and secondary teachers and college professors need to be encouraged to discuss how to live sustainably on a finite planet. We need to ask ourselves whether our investments are encouraging the destruction of our planet. We need to encourage newspaper editors, family, friends, and colleagues, village and city officials, business owners, radio and television commentators, and politicians to support sustainable living. And don’t buy the excuse that “we can’t afford it.” We have no choice. We must promote a sustainable life-style or our descendants will have no life at all.

Is our situation hopeless? No, it is not! Davis states it beautifully. “In our lifetimes, we’ve seen Black people go from the woodshed to the White House; women go from the kitchen to the board room; gay people from the closet to the altar. Through space exploration we’ve reconfigured our entire notion of what the world is, and now we are being asked to re-think our integration into the natural world.” We can adapt. We can change. We must understand that it’s not really a question of how we will get along with our environment. We are a part of the world’s environment and part of our planet’s environment. Do we really understand that? But having said that I would remind us that we are not a necessary part of our planet’s environment. Planet Earth and many of its life forms would get along very nicely without us. Many would get along much better without us. Our planet doesn’t need us but we desperately need it. Our survival is entirely up to us.

It’s our world, now. Before long the world will belong to our children and our grandchildren. I fervently hope their verdict will be, “They got it. It wasn’t easy. But, they changed.”