

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#570 - Some Guiding Principles -- WW III, Pt. 4

October 29, 1997

Here is our situation. We are all passengers (or crew) on a long rickety train heading south at 40 miles per hour, not rushing toward doom but steadily chugging southward toward general environmental and social destruction. Many of us are alert to the dangers and for several years we have been earnestly walking north inside the train.

As we plod from train car to train car we stop to congratulate ourselves on our progress. We slap each other on the back or we hug, and we recount the many train-cars we have managed to pass through, thanks to our stubborn persistence.

But if we would only pause to look out the window, we could all plainly see that we are now further south than we were when we last stopped to congratulate ourselves on our progress. Despite our best efforts, we have been unable to reverse the direction of travel. We are all being carried southward against our will, deeply violating our sense of justice.

Maybe this is happening to us because we have spent our time engaging the conductor in conversation. This seems like the natural thing to do. After all, it is the conductor who sets and enforces the rules inside the train --that's what conductors do. Furthermore, the conductor seems pleasant and intelligent, and he also seems genuinely interested in helping us make our way north through the train. He keeps emphasizing how well we are doing, and, when we become discouraged, he urges us on, reminding us that walking northward is a noble journey, and that eventually we will get to the promised place.

Unfortunately, it has been many years since we asked ourselves the fundamental questions: what fuels the locomotive? Who is the engineer with his hand on the throttle? And what will it take to make him change direction?

* * *

The time is long overdue when we must ask ourselves what it would take to change our trajectory, to permanently alter our direction of travel. Even if the means for actually changing direction are not visible at the moment, we know that change is needed and has to come.

We also know that things can change quickly, unexpectedly. But if, today, we were offered the opportunity to set civilization on a new path, most of us would not have a clear idea what to do. We need to think this through. We need a vision of a workable alternative to the present, a clear set of goals (and benchmarks) and some principles to guide us, if we are to make the shift whenever the opportunity presents itself.

(We know of only one organization that is gearing up to tackle this difficult, all-encompassing task, and to do it from the ground up starting with economic redevelopment of local communities: Sustainable America in New York City --telephone Elaine Gross at (212) 239-4221 or E-mail: sustamer@sanetwork.org or <http://www.sanetwork.org>.)

* * *

Some things we know. For example:

Define Big Technical Enterprises

** Small IS beautiful, but in the coming world we will always need some large aggregations of capital. We will always need large technical enterprises like a telephone system, energy systems, broadcast media, and large reuse/recycling parks to meet our needs for materials, for example. How can we be sure that those aggregations will remain responsive to the needs of humans and communities and not merely to wealthy elites? How can large enterprises be DEFINED so that they cannot become tyrants in the

communities they are set up to serve? This is perhaps our most compelling problem and one we must think through and solve. (In the U.S., our predecessors discussed these questions continuously from at least 1770 to at least 1920 but found no workable, lasting solutions --the large corporations decisively defeated those who favored democratic controls in the election of 1896 and our democracy has simply never recovered.[1])

Now that the survival of the human species (along with many nonhuman species) is endangered by mountainous aggregations of private wealth and power, it is essential that our democracy be given a new life. As we contemplate the nature of the transnational corporation, we must ask ourselves, if we could replace it, what would we replace it with? How would we avoid merely creating another Monsanto or another Union Carbide thus replacing one set of deadly forms with another?

Learn to Measure Well-being

** Many of our problems are worsening --wages are declining, inequalities of income and wealth are rising, chronic disease is increasing, our central cities are crumbling, vast numbers of our children are poorly cared for, poorly educated, and undisciplined. Yet the government insists that the economy and American life have never been better. This can only happen because our official measures of well-being are counting the wrong things.

Nationally, our main measure of well-being is Gross Domestic Product (GDP) --the amount of money spent by households to purchase goods and services, plus the amount spent by businesses on investment, plus the amount spent by federal, state and local governments on goods and services.

GDP counts everything as positive growth. It works like a calculator without a minus sign. The costs of emergency room services, prisons, toxic waste cleanups, homeless shelters, lawsuits, and cancer treatments are all counted as positive additions to GDP. No wonder people feel disconnected and out of touch --the President keeps telling us the economy has never performed better (measured by GDP), but people know from their own experience that something is not right.

As a result of this faulty accounting system, we take remedial measures that aren't helpful --measures intended to increase GDP. As economist Herman Daly has pointed out,[2] when we work to maximize GDP, we are really working to maximize depletion of our natural resources, and we are working to maximize pollution. (As we saw in REHW #516 and #518, better measures of well-being are available, and they indicate that the U.S. hasn't been making progress for about 20 years.) Meanwhile, people feel the powerful "bads" in their lives and know things aren't right.

As Herman Daly[2] and Paul Hawken[3] have pointed out, the reason we need new indicators of well-being is that our situation has changed drastically. Two hundred years ago, when the industrial revolution was getting cranked up, natural resources were abundant and humans were relatively scarce. Now the reverse holds true --natural resources have been badly depleted and there is no shortage of humans. Therefore, ancient policies aimed at substituting energy and natural resources for human labor no longer make sense. We need to count the depletion of natural resources among the "bads" and we need to devise ways to use more human labor (not less) to build a better world. This means --at the very least --redefining the "productivity" of labor.

We can begin these changes at the local level, where we live. Happily, smart people are developing "cookbooks" that can guide us as we develop local measures of well-being. For example, the organization called Redefining Progress in San Francisco has published an excellent "how to" manual called THE COMMUNITY INDICATORS HANDBOOK.[4] Such local measures can tell us where we are, where we are going (including where we are going

wrong), and can focus our political attention and our public investments on making real improvements.

If we don't measure where we've been and where we are, we can't know where we are going. This seems fundamental --yet relatively few communities today are taking such measurements. Jacksonville (Florida), Seattle (Washington), and Pasadena (California) are leading a new movement that has started measuring quality of life and using the measurements to guide investment and effort.[4]

Tax Bads, Not Goods

Herman Daly[2] and Paul Hawken³ also agree that we should tax the things we don't like --depletion, pollution, and waste --and we should avoid taxing the things we DO like, such as investment and labor. (We would still have to tax the highest incomes to reduce inequalities of opportunity and power, for the purpose of preserving democracy.)

As Paul Hawken says, the goal of the tax system should be to close the gap between prices (which individuals pay) and costs (which society pays). Individuals pay the price of gasoline, but society pays the costs of hurricanes, droughts, and floods caused by the global warming which results from gasoline-powered automobiles. If taxes caused prices to reflect full costs, then alternatives to gasoline-powered cars (such as light-weight hybrid hydrogen-and-electric vehicles) could be competitive today --good for the economy and good for the environment.

A tax on toxic dumping would discourage this antisocial practice. Even better: a tax on toxic raw materials would induce users to seek less-toxic alternatives, thus eliminating the possibility of problems rather than merely reducing the likelihood of problems.

Search for Least-Damaging Alternatives

We must insist that all reasonable alternatives be examined before decisions are made, and that the least-damaging alternative be given greatest weight. We could certainly embed this decision-making principle in our public institutions, starting at the local level --and eventually we will have to embed this guiding principle in private decision-making as well.

As biologist Mary O'Brien says, "Our society proceeds on the assumption that toxic substances WILL be used and the only question is how much. Under the current system, toxic chemicals are used, discharged, incinerated, and buried without ever requiring a finding that these activities are necessary." [6] We need to institutionalize the search for least-damaging alternatives and give priority to the least-damaging alternative once it has been identified. (How do we measure least-damaging? This goes back to measuring well-being, discussed above.)

Catalog What Works

We need an ongoing catalog of "what works." What innovations at the local level are working? We need a place where we can all go to find out. One effort in this direction is the magazine called YES! A JOURNAL OF POSITIVE FUTURES⁷ but we also need a much more ambitious, cumulative database of "what works" for sustainable development.

[There are other principles that should guide us, but we will suspend this series for a time and return to it later.]

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

=====

[1] See Lawrence Goodwyn, *THE POPULIST MOMENT* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), and Gabriel Kolko, *THE TRIUMPH OF CONSERVATISM* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

[2] Herman E. Daly, *BEYOND GROWTH* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

[3] Paul Hawken, "Natural Capitalism," *MOTHER JONES* (March/April, 1997), pgs. 40-53.

[4] Alan AtKisson, Kate Besleme and others, *THE COMMUNITY INDICATORS HANDBOOK* (San Francisco: Redefining Progress, 1997). \$19.95 plus \$3.00 shipping and a bargain at the price. Telephone: (800) 896-2100. This publication describes most of the "measurement" projects going on now in the U.S.

[5] See M. Jeff Hamond, *TAX WASTE, NOT WORK* (San Francisco: Redefining Progress, April, 1997). Available for \$10.95 plus \$3.00 shipping. Telephone 1-800-896-2100.

[6] O'Brien quoted in Sandra Steingraber, *LIVING DOWNSTREAM* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997), pg. 271.

[7] YES! A JOURNAL OF POSITIVE FUTURES, P.O. Box 10818, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110; telephone (206) 842-0216; fax: (206) 842-5208. E-mail: yes@futurenet.org; web: <http://www.futurenet.org>. Subscriptions: \$24/year --phone 1-800-937-4451.

Descriptor terms: world war iii; what works; yes! a journal of positive futures; measuring progress; redefining progress; measuring well-being; taxation; taxes; green taxes; sustainable america; democracy; control of capital; gdp; gross domestic product; community indicators handbook; herman daly; paul hawken; mary o'brien;