

# The Ecological Imperative

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After fifteen years of publication it seemed time to offer a selection of *ReVision* "classics." In reviewing past issues of *ReVision* it rapidly became apparent that an appropriate topic was ecology, both because it was a recurrent theme in the journal and because of the urgency of our ecological situation.

This situation is certainly better appreciated now than it was fifteen years ago. There is growing awareness of the scope and urgency of our crises and some mobilization of concerned citizens.

However, in many ways the state of our planet has deteriorated. During these fifteen years we have added more than a billion people: this in spite of the fact that some two hundred million people have died of starvation and malnutrition, a horrendous death rate equivalent to a Holocaust every four months. Our environment is under increasing ecological strain such that forests have shrunk, pollution has increased, untold thousands of species have become extinct, and ozone depletion, barely recognized fifteen years ago, now threatens wildlife, agriculture and health.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Yet during these fifteen years, the world spent some *ten trillion* dollars on weapons and war. The 1993 expenditure alone is expected to exceed one

trillion dollars. How much is a trillion dollars? If you spent a million dollars a day since the birth of Christ you would still not have spent it all. By contrast, the Presidential Commission on World Hunger (1977) estimated that it would take only six billion dollars a year to eradicate world starvation. In other words, a few days of the resources spent on weapons would be sufficient to feed the hundreds of millions of hungry around the world. As the president of the Nobel prize winning organization, Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, lamented, "[a] small fraction of these expenditures could provide the world with adequate food and sanitary water supply, housing, education, and modern health care."<sup>4</sup>

Although the day is late, it seems that the problems could still be solved; that we still have a small window of opportunity. For example, in its 1993 annual report on the state of the world, the Worldwatch Institute pointed out that we already have available technology adequate to deal with most of our problems. For example, the most effective means of reducing the population explosion is to allow Third World women access to education, so that they are no longer dependent for status and security on producing large numbers of children. Likewise, much of our energy needs

could be met by rapid conversion to solar energy, which is becoming cost efficient in addition to being nonpolluting and consuming minimal resources. These are win-win solutions from which all of us stand to gain.

The fundamental problem is not so much technology as it is psychology and the reordering of our priorities. It is becoming apparent that the changes required of us are far more profound, wide ranging, and radical than was anticipated. Whereas it was originally thought that a few isolated responses might be adequate, such as controlling some pollutants or preserving wildlife areas, it is now clear that changes will be required in practically every aspect of our lives: for example, in our thinking, world view, lifestyles, and spiritual life, as well as in our social, economic, and educational institutions and political systems.<sup>5,6</sup>

Our thinking and world view will need to become less parochial and more global, less anthropocentric and more biocentric, less egocentric and more ecocentric. The unit of our concern must now be the entire biosphere rather than solely ourselves, our families, our nation, or even our species. Increasing evidence suggests that the Earth's biosphere functions as an integrated, interdependent whole, so much so that the idea of the Earth as a living system— "Gaia"—is more and more en-

terted by serious scientists.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, humans are cells in the Gaian body, cells that increasingly resemble a fast-growing cancer which could well kill itself and its host.

Enlightened self-interest now dictates that our circle of identification, allegiance, and service extend to encompass the Earth as a whole. Henceforth, the context for our thinking, the touchstone for our values, the circle of our concern, and the sense of our self must include the entire Earth. From this ecological perspective, as also from a spiritual perspective, the crucial human task is, as Erich Fromm put it, "how to overcome separateness, how to transcend one's individual life and find at onement."<sup>8</sup> Albert Einstein evoked the pathos of our situation as powerfully and succinctly as only a genius could.

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.<sup>9</sup>

This expansion of our concern may serve us not only ecologically but also morally and developmentally, because moral maturity seems to be correlated with the scope of one's circle of allegiance and concern. The moral infant cares only for self; today's average adult for family and tribe; today's sage, and hopefully tomorrow's adult, for all life. In the words of a Tibetan sage,

Fools think only of their own interest,  
While the sage is concerned with  
the benefit of others.  
What a world of difference between  
them.<sup>10</sup>

And what a different world they will bequeath to others!

An expanded, ecologically grounded world view calls us to align our lifestyles with it. In our increasingly interconnected world, our lifestyle choices reverberate through the economic-

cial-political-ecological system. North American hamburgers from South American cattle deplete Amazon rain forests and alter surrounding climate; gas-guzzling cars in the West fuel conflicts in the Middle East. The positive side of this situation is such that, as Duane Elgin points out,

Opportunities for meaningful and important action are everywhere: the food that we choose to eat, the work that we choose to do, the transportation we choose to use, the manner in which we choose to relate to others, the clothing that we choose to wear, the learning that we choose to acquire, the compassionate causes that we choose to support, the level of attention that we choose to give to our moment-to-moment passage through life, and on and on. This list is endless since the stuff of social transformation is identical with the stuff from which our daily lives are made.<sup>11</sup>

With greater awareness, we become increasingly sensitive to both our deepest desires and the world's needs and discover that they are aligned as parts of a larger harmony, traditionally called by names such as the Tao of China or the dharma of India. From this deeper sensitivity and perspective, ecologically sensitive lifestyles are experienced not as a sacrifice, but as deeply satisfying.<sup>12</sup>

Such insights also touch our spiritual lives. Traditionally, many religious and spiritual traditions have devalued the world and all that it contains, seeing it as a trap or snare necessarily opposed to spirit and, therefore, to be denigrated and transcended. Such an attitude confuses the craving for things of the world with the world itself. That obsessively lusting after material things is spiritually disastrous—as well as psychologically, physically, and ecologically disastrous—is clear and was enunciated formally in the Buddha's Second Noble Truth, which states that "the cause of suffering is craving." However, religious traditions often jumped to the conclusion that the world itself, and not just obsessive craving for its pleasures, is necessarily dangerous and destructive.

But the world need not be seen in such a negative light. Rather it can be perceived as an expression of the divine—"a visible, sensible God"—as

Plato put it. Or in the words of the American Indian sage Black Elk, "the Earth is your Grandmother and Mother, and She is sacred. Every step that is taken upon her should be a prayer."<sup>13</sup>

When the earth is equated with the totality of the divine, one gets forms of pantheism; where it is seen as but one expression or manifestation of the divine, panentheism. In the latter case, the world is the finite expression of an infinite source. The spiritual task is then to both transcend the world and manifest optimally in it, not to denigrate the world but to relinquish attachments to it, while also enjoying and serving it.

This perspective also provides an "engaged spirituality" in which one's spiritual life finds its substance and expression in engaging and serving the world.<sup>14,15</sup> This engagement may certainly include periods of solitude and contemplation, but these periods of withdrawal are balanced by periods of return. The historian Arnold Toynbee found this "cycle of withdrawal and return" to be characteristic of individuals who contributed most significantly to humankind.

Our economic system will require major reform because it is largely blind to ecological and social concerns. Measures of national economic activity such as the gross national product take no account of the medical, social, or ecological costs of economic activity such as pollution or resource depletion. Likewise, businesses are able to externalize medical, ecological, and social costs of their activities while internalizing benefits. That is, the social cost of their business byproducts—such as pollution, waste disposal, and resource depletion—are paid by society and the planet, while their profits are largely retained. In short, economics will need to develop a variety of more socially and ecologically sensitive measures of economic activity to explicitly include these dimensions in future economic assessments and to reward ecologically sensitive activities through means such as differential taxation.<sup>16,17</sup>

Education obviously has a crucial role to play. As H.G. Wells put it,

"Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Although ecologically oriented courses are now available in some schools and campuses, their relative number remains small, especially in contrast to the urgency of our problems and of the need to enlist our brightest minds in the preservation of our planet. For as Jerome Frank argued, "For the long pull, main reliance must be placed on the education and training of upcoming generations."<sup>18</sup>

Politically, there are enormous opportunities and difficulties. It is heartening to see the amount of environmentally sensitive legislation in many Western countries during recent decades and to see that East European countries are now acknowledging the extent of their environmental problems. It is disheartening to see how much remains to be done and how powerful and entrenched are ecologically destructive special interest groups and archaic ways of thinking. With notable exceptions—such as Gro Brundtland, Norway's first woman Prime Minister, and Albert Gore, the United States' Vice President—politicians have been ecological followers rather than leaders, and grassroots advocacy will continue to be essential for transforming public concern into political reality.

With so many needs, so much to be done, and so many arenas requiring help, where do we start? To quote Aldous Huxley, "We start everywhere

at once."<sup>19</sup> While each of us must choose our own unique form of contribution and the arena in which we make it, the hope is that we can inspire others so as to build a critical mass of concerned citizens dedicated to the awakening and welfare of our planet, and work in diverse and complementary ways to preserve it.

Truly we are in a race between consciousness and catastrophe. The articles reprinted in this issue of *ReVision*, as well as the books and journals reviewed, represent the thoughtful reflections of some of the growing number of people who have committed their lives to helping us win that race.

#### NOTES

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4. C. Paine, "The Aftermath of Nuclear War," *Science* 220 (1983), 812-814.
5. R. Walsh, *Staying Alive: The Psychology of Human Survival* (Boston: New Science Library).
6. R. Walsh and F. Vaughan, *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1993).
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8. E. Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New

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  11. D. Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity* (New York: William Morrow, 1981).
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  15. D. Rothberg (ed.), "Toward a Socially Engaged Spirituality," *ReVision* 15(3):98.
  16. H. Henderson, *The Politics of the Solar Age: Alternatives to Economics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981).
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