

“Tis the Gift to be Simple

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*“Tis the gift to be simple,
‘Tis the gift to be free,
‘Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
It will in the valley of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed.
To turn, turn will be our delight,
“Tis by turning, turning we come round right.
“Tis the gift to be loved and that love to return,
“Tis the gift to be taught and a richer gift to learn,
And when we expect of others what we try to live each day,
Then we’ll all live together and we’ll all learn to say,*

*“Tis the gift to have friends and a true friend to be,
“Tis the gift to think of others not to only think of “me,”
And when we hear what others really think and really feel,
Then we’ll all live together with a love that is real.*

Elder Joseph Brackett
Shaker community, Alfred, Main, 1848

For a decade, numerous discussions have centered on anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions that are changing the world’s climates. However, little or no remediate action has occurred. Humankind already knows several facts.

- (1) Much carbon was sequestered and stored safely underground in the form of fossil fuels.
- (2) Climate problems became severe when the stored carbon was brought to the surface and burned.
- (3) Climate changes are irreversible.
- (4) Anthropogenic carbon emissions will remain in the atmosphere for well over 100 years.
- (5) The natural laws of physics, chemistry, and biology cannot be altered by any political process.
- (6) The most direct way to decrease emissions of carbon-based greenhouse gases is to tax fossil fuel combustion directly. (Cap and trade is more complicated and easier to “game” than a direct carbon tax.)

“Business as usual” with increasing anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions ensures crossing one or more tipping points, leading to irreversible climate changes that are unpredictable. Precautions should be taken to avoid producing an alien planet due to these irreversible climate changes.

One obstacle to the badly needed quest to preserve a habitable planet is the insistence of some developed countries (particularly the United States) that developing countries show “good faith” by reducing their anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. However, any reductions they could make would have, at most, a minor effect on total emissions. The world’s richest people (roughly 7% of the world’s population) are currently responsible for 50% of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions, while the world’s poorest 3 billion are responsible for just 6 % (Assadourian 2010, p. 6).

Presumably, humankind’s purpose is to save the present biosphere and not to engage in word games with low per capita emissions nations. Time is short and should not be wasted on trivial issues. The primary goal is to reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide to match Earth’s assimilative capacity. Keeping direct focus on the major problem increases the simplicity of the task.

“Preventing the collapse of human civilization requires nothing less than a wholesale transformation of dominant cultural patterns. The transformation would reject consumerism – the cultural orientation that leads people to find meaning, contentment, and acceptance through what they consume – as taboo and establish in its place a new cultural framework centered on sustainability. . . . Human beings are embedded in cultural systems, are shaped and constrained by their cultures, and, for the most part, act only within the cultural realities of their lives” (Assadourian 2010, p. 3). This approach can be stated more simply as: exponential population growth, coupled with rampant consumerism, threatens the health and integrity of the biosphere that is humankind’s life support system. Powerful forces maintain a consumer society, and the most potent is the worship of economic growth.

Monbiot (2010) notes: “. . . we revert to irrational destruction [of nature] as soon as our economic interests are threatened. . . . We could lose badgers and – except for those of us who spend summer evenings watching them as they shuffle out of their setts – suffer few tangible losses. But the urge to destroy them springs from the same pathological instinct for power which would deprive us of almost everything.”

Humans are destroying the biospheric life support system because of their addiction to ever more stuff. “Ultimately, whether high consumption levels make people better off is irrelevant if they lead to the degradation of Earth’s systems, as ecological decline will undermine human well-being for the majority of society in the long term” (Gardner and Assadourian 2004, as quoted in Assadourian 2010, p. 9).

British economist Paul Ekins (1991) describes consumerism as a cultural orientation in which “. . . the possession and use of an increasing number and variety of goods and services is the principal cultural aspiration and surest perceived route to personal happiness, social status, and national success.” A strange cultural pattern that presumably produces contentment and acceptance at the cost of damaging biospheric health and integrity should not be our goal. Possibly the ultimate expression of consumerism is the opulent wedding that costs much more than many individuals in the third world earn in a lifetime.

Until the global financial meltdown, the United States was the “poster child” for unrestrained consumerism. This American lifestyle was, and still is, the polar opposite of the simple life with few material possessions. Some unfortunate patterns of consumption reflect the “needs” of a car culture: “The 107 million tons of grain that went to U.S. ethanol distilleries in 2009 was enough to feed 330 million people for one year at average world consumption levels” (Earth Policy Institute 2010).

For practically all of human history, humankind was aware that resources were limiting and that limits existed to growth (Meadows et al. 2004, Hardin 1993). Population control for all other species is accomplished by Mother Nature’s ruthless methods – predation, starvation, disease, and death. The present, unavoidable issue in the 21st century is: should human society keep population size within Earth’s long-term carrying capacity or, through inaction, let Mother Nature do it? Far too many humans are already living in misery and represent a superb breeding ground for pandemic diseases. Eliminating rampant consumerism will help reduce the misery during a transition to a population within Earth’s carrying capacity; however, if humankind does not take measures to see that this reduction is accomplished, Mother Nature (i.e., natural law) will.

Much attention has been given to sustainable transportation, sustainable agriculture, cool cities, and the like, while the biosphere is pillaged because of consumerism and population growth. Humankind “talks the talk,” but does not “walk the walk.” Supply and demand are not in balance, but, if humankind does not get these two entities in balance, Mother Nature will.

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