Sustainability and Truth

by Louis Cox

THE TERM "SUSTAINABILITY" came into fashion with the modern environmental movement, particularly after the 1992 UN Earth Summit. The concept has offered hope in the face of relentless bad news by highlighting things that ordinary people can do that would make a big difference if enough of us got on board (e.g., "50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Planet")

But as a Quaker organization, QEW has brought a somewhat different set of values and testimonies to bear. Our interest group, "Sustainability: Faith & Action," explores steps that we all can take personally and corporately to reduce our ecological footprints. But we believe that the objective has to go beyond "sustaining" our primary role as consumers of the planet's resources. Above the mantra of "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" we hear the call to be citizens of God's Peaceable Kingdom, to respect the right of all species to thrive in their respective domains and to conduct our own affairs accordingly.

This conviction has led many Friends to take a new look at the historic Quaker testimony of simplicity. Originally a discipline to avoid worldly distractions from the life of the Spirit, simplicity is re-visioned by some today as a voluntary program for averting our civilization's collision course with diminishing carrying capacity: We discover that we are actually happier and healthier (and in many respects wealthier) with fewer possessions and worldly entanglements-and we reduce our ecological impacts at the same time!

Living examples are the Amish communities who have lived sustainably for many generations through simple living and determined resistance to modern conveniences that threaten to weaken community and family life. But their discipline is maintained by an authoritarian structure that most Quakers today would not tolerate. Living simply and frugally is difficult for us to the extent that we share the wider culture's distaste for anything that tends to interfere with personal "freedom."

Another problem is that, as several Quaker writers have suggested, even voluntary simplicity is not enough. The global environmental crisis requires us confront the institutions that constrain us to live in ways that are wasteful and destructive. Sustainable living, we are told, includes participating in
grassroots initiatives that support viable alternatives, while drawing support away from systems that are driving us all to destruction. In the process we form alliances with such "sustainability" movements as:

- Simple-living support groups and anti-globalism campaigns.
- Advocates of the Precautionary Principle in corporate decision-making.
- Permaculture communities, community gardens, and community-supported agriculture.
- Local currencies, barter systems, and various kinds of co-ops.
- Bioregionalism and buying and eating locally.
- Renewable energy development and organic farming and gardening.
- Eco-system preservation and eco-tourism.
- Right Sharing of World Resources and Alternatives to Violence projects.
- Smart Growth and New Urbanism coalitions.
- Etc.

These are all worthwhile endeavors. But other Quaker writers have pointed out that, as a rational technique for moderating our demands on natural resources, even sustainability is still not enough. As one Friend queried, "Would you describe your goal in marriage as having a sustainable relationship?" How about "loving and committed"?

This suggests why Quakers in general have not warmed up to the word "sustainbility." For many it has failed to evoke a compelling sense of being in a living, loving relationship with the divine in all Creation, in the way that terms like "reverence for life," "ahimsa," and "tikkun" speak to other faith traditions.

For early Friends, such a transcendent meaning was evoked in their use of "Truth," referring to their personal encounter with the enduring, creative life force of the universe (also called "God," "Spirit" and other names). Interestingly, "truth" shares the same linguistic root as "tree," which has long been a symbol of things that are durable, creative, and trustworthy, and therefore sustainable! So, coming full circle, we can think of "sustainable living" as a natural desire to "keep the earth in sacred trust," as a result of recognizing that we all belong to the Tree of Life.

Empowered by this deeper meaning, we can begin to see ourselves and the world with different eyes. We can pierce the cultural veil that has concealed the absurdity and immorality of our arrogant treatment of the earth and its inhabitants.

Seeing the Truth we can begin to live anew.

-Louis Cox

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