

TO DO OR NOT TO DO

For a long time I have wanted to write about an idea that keeps bubbling up into my awareness. We, today, in this culture, forget that it is sometimes (often) wise to do nothing-- to not fix what we ourselves have messed up--to not rock the boat, as the saying goes.

Global Warming is here. We have known that for some years, but gradually it is seeping into our consciousness. Our response has been almost universally, how do we stop it.. And, also universally, our ideas for fixing things presuppose that, of course, we cannot change the way we live, our economy, our system.

As I see it, what caused GW is our now widespread idea that we own this planet, we are the boss of all creation, we can do what we want. That means we disregard the reality of the ecosystem that is the biosphere, the thin layer of air, water and earth that makes life possible. In any ecology everything is related to everything. If one species declares itself supreme, and takes more out of the earth than it puts back in we endanger the whole. What we put back is tons of garbage that is not biodegradable, poisons the earth, the sea and the ground.

If the way we live, the way we think, caused GW, how would more of the same fix it?

Not easy to say this in a culture that worships the idea that anything and everything can be fixed with technology, modern science, plenty of money, or with our wonderful human brain. We have examples all around us that attest to the wonders we can do. We can send a man to the moon; we can keep people alive who would have died before; we invent machines that do marvels we never even considered (or needed) -- and today we cannot imagine doing without a cell phone (mobile phone in other countries) that also takes pictures that we can send to other cell phones all over the world, and play music to entertain us, and send and receive written messages, and always more--all in a little box that easily fits in a man's breast pocket.

The motto of today's world is "More." More of everything. An unsustainable idea.

One of the things we--meaning humans--have done for the last two, perhaps three. centuries is to move plants and animals around. One of the first such imports in our recent history was tulips. Tulips now a thriving industry in Holland and in Washington State, originally were brought from Persia.

Here in Hawai'i most of the flowers and trees shown on Hawaiian tourist propaganda are imported. Not a few of those imports have become problems, always because there are no bugs, grazers, or diseases, to keep the imports in line, so they enthusiastically take over, replacing native species. Ecologies are balanced, what one plant takes out of the soil another puts back in; a population of rabbits (or mice or other animals that breed fast) is kept in check by other animals that feed on rabbits, and by rainfall that greens plants rabbits eat. Introducing foreign species requires an adjustment that takes time. But at first some imports can and do replace species of original plants and animals. That has been amply demonstrated all over the world over the last century.

The Hawaiian islands are a good place to observe this man-made problem. We (humans) are the cause, planned or not, of the problem. For instance, the latest "problem" here is a tiny frog, the size of a man's thumb nail, that has a very loud voice. I'm not sure that the coqui frog was brought from the Caribbean intentionally or by accident, but now it is here. The little guy does no harm that I know of, does not replace any local frogs, but some people object to the noise. So, the State has allotted twenty million dollars to eradicate the coqui frog. The experts found a chemical that kills them if sprayed under leaves that the coquis like to cling to during the day. The white powder dries them out, as boric acid dehydrates, kills, cockroaches. Of course getting a glaring white drying powder to cling to the underside of a banana leaf is a Sisyphean task. And, from what I have seen in this neighborhood, the little frogs simply go next door. I have no problem with coquis, I rather like their co-qui co-qui at night (they sing only in the

evening and very early morning before sunrise). It reminds me of the jungle noises I grew up with.

We have other pests of course, plants we don't like. Efforts to eradicate introduced species, more often than not, have been either unsuccessful or created another problem that is worse. Native species on these islands, as everywhere, are much more effected by loss of habitat, consequences of our voracious pver-use and abuse of land. The loss of habitat is one of the main causes of the extinction of thousands of animal and plant species all over the world. And the eradication of a species is forever.

The problem of imported plant and animals considered a problem, is similar, of course, to the problem of "illegal immigrants." Building walls has never worked. Nor have guns or even land mines. I doubt that laws work any better. The lesson is that we must learn to live with the consequences of our actions. Many eastern peoples have always known that, they call it karma.

We are--have become--the most destructive species on the planet. We have quite literally changed the face of the earth. We have cemented over enormous tracts of (arable) land, we have destroyed more than half of the world's rain forests, filled in swamps, dammed rivers that made lakes on land where people lived, we are busy fishing out the oceans, we have poisoned the atmosphere. We still do all of that, and probably more intensely, changing our planet faster than we imagine, and certainly faster than we have grasped the consequences of what we have done and are doing.

Our response to "Climate Change" so far has been no more than mild attempts to find alternate ways to continue how we live and think we must continue to live.

My thought is that we have been remiss in not thinking wide enough. It is time that we understand ecology. We, humans, knew long ago that we were part of all that is, but our so-called civilization made us forget. We have forgotten to think generations, to realize that our children and grandchildren must live in--have to put up with--the world we made. We have become strangely reluctant to consider consequences.

On the level of individuals, I know people whose life style is supported by credit cards--even though credit cards, in this country, can charge interest rates of 23% and more, then adding fees for this and that on top of that. They not infrequently end up owing twice or more of what they borrowed--and I imagine they don't even think of the credit card money as "borrowed." There are enough offers for new credit cards that charge zero percent for the first six months, apparently, so that people can skip to another card, and another. Is it not obvious that there is a limit to that system? At a time when the price of oil is high and probably going higher, people still buy big (huge, enormous) vans that are like small buses, and other huge vehicles, gulping gasoline, often driven by one small girl.

Politicians obviously think they are the movers and shakers of this world. Maybe they are. But they seem to have no understanding of ecology, or human nature, or reality. This country, that prides itself on being the richest, strongest, toughest country on earth, has a budget for "defense" that is more than the military expenditures of the next three big spenders, but we cannot afford universal health care. We cannot afford to fix our own old bridges, built long before we had as many cars as people. I have no idea why we are in Iraq. None of the reasons we have been given over the years turns out to be the real one, but I know that it is costing us several billion dollars a day and uncounted deaths and wounded, ours and theirs. The situation there is obviously a mess, and a very dangerous mess at that. So now we are planning to give another sixty billion in arms to a few friendly countries in that part of the world. Nobody seems to think it remarkable that although our current stated goal is to insert a democracy there,

these friendly countries are all dictatorships. It must be clear to everyone that the great majority of the American people (70%) do not want us to be in that war at all. But now they say-- whoever "they" are--that we cannot leave because the place is in such chaos. I may be cynical but it seems to me we probably "can't" leave because we want our hands on the oil. It is only too obvious what the consequences are and will be of that ill-conceived adventure.

If our unchecked growth industries, if "how we live," caused Global Warming, and its resulting Climate Change, would it not be obvious that we must change how we live? Not seeking alternatives for oil, but doing without. Rethinking automobiles.

Are centralized energy plants the best way to provide electricity to billions of people? Reconsidering importing our food from all over the world. Rethinking priorities. And so on, and so on. We must think about changing how we live. What can be more important than survival?

We survived for a hundred thousand years-- perhaps longer--by adapting to what we found in the environment.

Now we are in danger of eradicating not only half the species of the planet, but ourselves because we live by altering our environment, changing it, poisoning it--the very opposite of adapting.

How about not having progress in the sense of more of everything. How about not frantically searching for more oil, or control of the oil there is. How about accepting what is, sitting back and enjoying the smells of summer, or the purity of winter if you live farther south?

I want to propose a moratorium. Let's not "do" anything for a while about problems that result from previous misjudgments. Let's not fix anything. Let's let nature take seek its own dynamic balance--nature seems to do much better than we have done. Leave illegal immigrants alone, don't worry about plant and animals imported from the ends of the world. Our job, as one of the billions of species on this planet, is to adapt to the environment as we find it--not to make over the planet. Let's adapt. That is what humans do best. We learned ages ago to live in the tropics, at high altitudes, in the snow and ice of the Arctic, on small islands, in deserts. We can survive on an all meat diet (as we do in the Arctic and on small islands in the Pacific), and we can survive on a vegetarian diet (as we do in India and elsewhere). We have even adapted to living on artificial food as we do in this country--although we have become grossly overweight on junk food and no physical work. Now we must accept living with the plants we have imported, with the people who worked for us even though they are now called "illegal."

We cannot eradicate our mistakes, we must live with them. But things change, that is the reality of all that is. The hyper rich will find that they cannot do without us--and we we will come to realize that we are not willing to starve when the rich eat cake.

Extreme religious fanaticism (of any religion) will fade by exhausting its fanatics. Fighting capitalism, or extremism, just fans the fire. Fighting with shock and awe will inevitably create equal or greater shock back against the aggressor.

Not doing also means not acting hastily to make new mistakes. Global Warming is here; there are signs all over the world of climates changing. I doubt we can stop the changes. I think our job is to accept, and adjust.

We need not make everything and anything we can imagine or invent.

I'm impressed with the many reports of individuals who use their heads to adjust, do the usually simple, and obvious, things we can do to adjust to changed circumstances: install a windmill for our own energy, or solar panels, get a bicycle.

These efforts won't change Climate Change--but, very likely, that cannot be changed anyway. Smaller and better designs for houses, bicycles, windmills, are smart adjustments to What Is.

Yes, I too occasionally feel that yearning to "do something," to help, to make better. But how do I know what is better? When I consider my wanting, I see that it is my expression of our modern idea that Man is in charge. I do not want to be in charge, and I strongly feel (I "know") that we, humans are not in charge. I am part of the totality of all beings, part of the air we share, the water, the ground, of this planet. We do not own this planet.

Too many things we humans have done to the planet are now dangerous disasters. And yes, dear B., L., and others, there are, and always have been, individuals who are wonderful and do wonderful things.

The species homo sapiens may be a planetary disease.

Long ago I heard someone say: "In case of doubt do nothing." It works for me. What I do must be done with awareness. Of course I have done things that turned out bad, but I have also avoided worse doings. If there is any doubt about which way to go, I don't go. The situation that made me think I have to do something may well be my own doing. My responsibility is to adjust to a situation I find myself in, not to fix it.

In case of doubt, do nothing

and good night.

robert wolff, august 2007