MORE ON THE NATURAL STEP

After writing about The Natural Step (TNS) last week, I received E-mail from Sarah van Gelder, the executive editor of YES! A MAGAZINE OF POSITIVE FUTURES. YES! is an important magazine, and one of my personal favorites.[1] (To subscribe, phone toll free: 800-937-4451; $24/year and definitely worth it.) Ms. van Gelder pointed me toward an interview with Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert -- the Swedish scientist who initiated The Natural Step -- which YES! had published in 1998.[2] She also told me that my reporting last week about Paul Hawken was badly out of date. (See REHW #667.) Hawken, who introduced The Natural Step to the U.S., has completely changed his view of Monsanto. Let's look at that first.

Hawken is an articulate, successful businessman who worries about the future of the planet and of business. After he began to introduce the Natural Step to the U.S., Hawken was being courted by Monsanto's top management and for a brief interlude he had nice things to say about them. Unfortunately, as Hawken explained in a published interview just a few weeks ago, Monsanto never took sustainability seriously.[3] After Monsanto invited Hawken to St. Louis, "Although I refused initially, I accepted reluctantly for a simple reason: if Monsanto could change, then any company could," he said.

However, he said, "I don't know of any new [Monsanto] products that came about because of any environmental commitment, and the old underlying divisional culture of ramming products into the marketplace without consulting a broader stakeholder community about effects, values, science, and other potential concerns --with the arrogance that entails -- remains intact. What exists now is a company without any clear leadership, with divisional heads consistently putting their foot in their mouth, and a product line that is truly unnerving."

"I continue to follow their devolution," Hawken says, "especially in Europe where they have become the most reviled American corporation. No small achievement."

"... It is hard to say, looking back, what their interest in sustainability was. They... have largely dropped their sustainable development division and any pretense that sustainable is a word or concept that informs their activity," Hawken says.

Earlier in the interview Hawken had commented, "When you get an organization like Monsanto completely prostituting the concept of sustainability, that understandably raises the level of cynicism as other corporations announce that they are moving in that direction." So Hawken realizes the damage that Monsanto inflicted on the very idea of sustainability when they pretended to be interested in The Natural Step. It is good to finally hear Paul Hawken speaking plainly about Monsanto because The Natural Step is an important movement, full of hope, optimism, and real promise. A disingenuous embrace by Monsanto would have been the kiss of death.

The YES! interview with TNS founder Karl-Henrik Robert offers some unique insights into Robert's thinking. For example he perceives that humans have reversed evolution:

"Most people are not aware that it took living cells about 3.5 billion years to transform the virgin soup of the atmosphere -- which was a toxic, chaotic mixture of sulfurous compounds, methane, carbon dioxide, and other substances -- into the conditions that could support complex life.

"In just the last DECADES humans have reversed this trend. First we found concentrated energy like fossil fuels and nuclear power. As a result, we can create such a high throughput of resources that natural processes no longer have the time to process the waste and build new resources.

"Dispersed junk is increasing in the system as we lose soils, forests, and species. So we have reversed evolution. The Earth is running back towards the chaotic state it came from at a tremendous speed."

Robert describes our situation as moving into a funnel, with the walls of the funnel closing in on us dangerously. "I think most people in business understand that we are running into a funnel of declining resources globally. We will soon be 10 billion people on Earth -- at the same time, as we are running out of forests, crop land, and fisheries. We need more and more resource input for the same crop or timber yield. At the same time pollution is increasing systematically and we have induced climate change. All that together creates a resource funnel."

To avoid hitting the walls of the funnel, businesses need to turn away from activities that violate the four "system conditions" which are essential for life, essential for the common good, and which form the basis of The Natural Step.

The four system conditions necessary for life are:

#1: Substances mined from the Earth must not systematically increase in air, water, soil, or living things; this means that sustainable businesses need to decrease their dependence upon heavy metals and fossil fuels, substituting renewable sources of materials and energy.

#2: Substances produced by society must not be allowed to systematically increase in air, water, soil, or living things. This means that sustainable businesses need to avoid using persistent unnatural compounds such as brominated fire retardants, chlorinated plastics and solvents, and persistent pesticides.

#3: The physical basis of productivity and the diversity of nature must not be systematically diminished. This means we must live off the interest of what nature provides and we must not use up nature's capital. This means sustainable businesses must not derive wood or food from ecologically maltreated land, and must not use materials that require long-distance transportation. (Think of what this means for the "global free market" religion that has enraptured Wall Street and Capitol Hill in recent years.)

#4: We must be fair and efficient in meeting basic human needs. This means we must stop wasting resources.

Businesses that comply with the four system conditions will successfully flow through the hole in the funnel and thrive. Their ignorant competitors will run into the walls of the funnel where they will incur increased costs for resources, waste management, insurance, loans, international business agreements, taxes, and public fear. Competitors who direct their investments away from the walls of the funnel will be rewarded by their customers and will do well. Those who benefit in the short term by violating the system conditions, the essential requirements of life, are firms that have no future, Robert says.

The fourth system condition is as fundamental as the first 3, and flows directly from them, Robert says. He explains it this way:

"Fairness is an efficiency parameter if we look at the whole global civilization. It is not an efficient way of meeting human needs if one billion people starve while another billion have excess. It would be more efficient to distribute resources so that at least vital needs were met everywhere. Otherwise, for example, if kids are starving somewhere, dad goes out to slash and burn the rain forest to feed them -- and so would I if my kids were dying. And this kind of destruction is everyone's problem, because we live in the same ecosphere."

Will businesses voluntarily make the transition to sustainability? Robert does not think so. "My belief is that free will of individuals and firms will not be sufficient to make sustainable practices widespread -- legislation is a crucial part of the walls of the funnel,
particularly if we want to make the transition in time."

Despite the need for legislation, businesses acting voluntarily have a tremendously important role to play. "The more examples we get of businesses entering the transition out of free will, the easier it will be for proactive politicians. In a democracy there must be a 'market' for proactive decisions in politics, and that market can be created by proactive businesses in dialogue with proactive customers. For example, in Sweden, some of these proactive business leaders are lobbying for green taxes. In that triangle of dialogue: business-market-politicians, a new culture may evolve, with an endorsement of the values we share but have forgotten how to pay attention to," says Robert.

How will the transition to sustainable behavior evolve? "A deepening intellectual understanding is a good starting point for change of values." And, he says, "The Natural Step introduces a shared mental model that is intellectually strict, but still simple to understand. These are the rules of sustainability; you can plug them into decision-making about any product."

"The first thing that happens is that this stimulates creativity, because people enter a much smarter dialogue if they have a shared framework for their goals...."

"A strict shared mental model can really get people working together," Robert says.

What does the future hold? Will we successfully make the transition to sustainable practices? Robert is not sure. He says the world is probably in for very difficult times in the years ahead, perhaps even collapse. He says, "What worries me the most is the systematic social battering of people all around the world, leading to more and more desperate people who don't feel any partnership with society because of alienation, poverty, dissolving cultural structures, more and more 'molecular' violence (unorganized and self-destructive violence that pops up everywhere without any meaning at all).

"The response of the establishment is too superficial, with more and more imprisonment and money spent on defense against those feared, leading to a vicious cycle."

"If this goes on long enough, a constructive and new sustainable paradigm in the heads of governments and business leaders will not necessarily help us in time. We will have more and more people who are so hungry to meet their vital human needs that it will be hard to reach them," Robert says.

Thus -- though Robert does not say so -- we can see that the fourth system condition is ultimately the most important because if the "fairness" condition is not met, then society will not be able to organize itself to comply with the first three system conditions and sustainability will not be achievable. The world's slide into chaos, which has become increasingly evident in the past 25 years, will accelerate.

Thus environmental groups and government agencies (including the President's Council on Sustainable Development) who refuse to address the essential issues of economic opportunity and economic fairness are whistling in the wind, wasting our time, and misleading their supporters. For the most part, the U.S. environmental movement isn't working toward sustainability because it has never developed a complete view of what sustainability entails: sustainability requires more than salvaging ecosystems. It requires major efforts to assure economic fairness (in many countries, especially the U.S., this means confronting racism head-on) and to assure the survival of cultural diversity. Anything less is merely environmental hand-waving.

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

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