

From the Kitchen

2 May 2012



Listening to a talk by Gunter Pauli¹ in which he admonishes us – almost everyone – for our cramped thinking, I realised, again, how frightened we are, as a society, probably as a species, of the possible consequences of the changes we need to implement to save ourselves. We seem even more frightened of this than the likely consequences of doing nothing effective or in time. Even talking of needing change is probably less than useful, as it implies doing things in incremental steps rather than engaging in very different ways of thinking and behaving.

Change makes reference to something that already is and implies adjustment of that. If the subject under discussion is destructive then change may involve merely being less destructive, whereas the destructive behaviour needs to be stopped completely. Pauli refers to the madness of awarding companies for polluting less and likens this to excusing a criminal because he is stealing less. It is still pollution and it is still stealing.

The way we humans behave towards the degradation of the natural environment is similar to a smoker who has symptoms of lung disease – it is an addiction and giving up requires an act of will. Within an individual the struggle, if it is a struggle, takes place within that person. For a society the struggle is between those who benefit from the pollution and those who want it to stop, although some individuals may be on both sides of that fence. Governments are also often on both sides, or even sitting *on* the fence.

The irony of people desperately holding on to activities and processes that destroy our environment is that changing the relationship we have to that environment and changing our activities within it can often lead to economic and social benefits that far outweigh the benefits of the original activity. One example is the felling of forests which, if preserved, can be the centre of a thriving tourist industry. But this still involves a change rather than something new and increased tourism can lead to increased pollution through car travel, extra transport of food, etc.

Governments are in a position to discourage or outlaw activities that are damaging or destructive and to encourage or mandate those that are supportive or healing of the natural environment. Unfortunately, governments largely fail to resist the unrelenting lobbying of those who continue and want to continue to pollute and exploit. This seems to be driven largely by a fear of losing the next election. There is also the attitude, in government as well as in the community, that while it's there we should be using it. In Australia's case, the extraction and exploitation of minerals and fossil fuels is also driven by the need for government revenue (through royalties and taxes) and foreign exchange earnings, though many of the profits are expatriated by multinationals.

There are many thoughtful people who advocate the abolition of our capitalist economy, as it inherently supports and relies on exploitation of people and of the environment². Some advocate a society based on mutual co-operation, in which people are engaged in activities

that nourish them and others – not just physically but also emotionally and spiritually. In such a society, people would not necessarily all be involved in ‘productive’ activities – many would be engaged in creative pursuits, as these are also important to a healthy society. People’s ‘value’ in the society would not be measured by how much they earn or own; value would be measured in less tangible currency – the contributions made to the welfare of the society as a whole, the impact made on the natural environment, and on how happy a person is.

For any of this to come to pass, we need dreamers and those dreamers need to be given opportunities and support to inspire others to dream and to anchor those dreams in the physical world. We need to support our artists of all flavours and give room for scientists / researchers to indulge in pure research, to follow threads to see where they lead, if anywhere. We need to teach our children to recognise the magic of daydreaming and the thrill of discovering something for oneself, even if it has been discovered before by others. We do still need to teach what we know, but only as a platform from which to launch into everything we don’t yet know.

1. see his web site: <http://www.gunterpauli.com/>
2. see, for instance, [*Life Without Money*](#), a scholarly examination of this idea.