

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING**Peter Schwartzman****Can we give more since we have more?**

Ever since I began studying and then teaching about global inequalities and environmental issues, I have wondered why so many Americans seem disinterested in both topics. I do not believe that we are a selfish people without concern for the world's poor or the well-being of future generations. Living in the Midwest, it's hard to believe that we lack a sense of attachment to the land. So the question is, why aren't more of us environmentalists? In light of this question, I suggest we think about our privileged position in the world. And rather than feeling guilty or self-satisfied about it, we should decide to be energized by our relative fortune. This energy might propel us to care for the environment and our fellow creatures at a level not currently realized. (Note: The arguments that follow are not directed towards any of you anymore than they are directed at me; actually, they are part of a recurrent debate that I have with myself each and every day.)

While I have little specialized knowledge of the demographics of *The Zephyr's* readership, it's probably safe to assume several things. We are wealthier, more educated, better fed, drink cleaner water, and have better access to information than most people in this world. We all also live in a country where we can do many things more safely and readily than most can elsewhere. We can write, speak, or visit our state and federal representatives and expect to be heard. We can protest peacefully without fear of violent repercussions. We can expect our legal system to defend us against unsubstantiated charges. And, we can affiliate ourselves with organizations of our own choosing. In sum, we are privileged.

If you have any doubts how fortunate you are, consider the following global snapshots: One-fourth of the world's people live on \$1 or less a day; nearly half (47%) live on \$2 or less. Over 40 percent of the world's population lives without basic sanitation. Only one out of every twelve people uses a personal computer and only half of them have access to the Internet. Only one out of fifty people in the world has a college degree and, shockingly, only one out of every fourteen has been educated at a high school level (PCFS). Can our privilege be denied?

As thankful as we might be, being thankful isn't enough. We need to ask at least two follow up questions: What makes us so fortunate; and, Do we have an obligation to others less fortunate?

How did we become so fortunate, and others so unfortunate? Say what you will, but for almost all of us, our current fortune is due to sheer luck. (If you hold that your privileged position owes itself to hard work and sacrifice, how do you reconcile this with the reality that most people in the world are desperately poor despite the fact that they work in the fields (or factories) for up to 18-hours a day and have nearly no hope of mobility or improvement?) Any one of us could have just as easily been born in a malaria-infested, dengue-riddled part of the world. Or, alternatively, we could have been born in a country where violence, displacement and political repression are ever-present factors of life. If we accept that our privilege is happenstance, might we not have an obligation to reduce the misfortune that comes to so many of our brethren? To do otherwise is to resign oneself to the view that humans live in a "dog-eat-dog" world with inevitable winners and losers—a position not compatible with a healthy, fair and sustainable society and therefore not an acceptable one.

There is much to be gained admitting our good fortune. We should feel empowered to promote policies that will improve the

fortune of all, leaving no one, especially children, to suffer through no fault of their own. Policies that might encourage such an end include, but are not limited to, the following. Increasing funding to international family planning programs will reduce unwanted pregnancies and improve the health of the children that are born. Restructuring of the subsidization of certain foods and energy forms will encourage more responsible eating habits (those low in excess protein, calories and fat) and more efficient uses of technology. Putting into action the principle of "reuse, recycle, and reduce" will slow down our rapacious extraction of finite resources from the Earth which will not only increase the habitat for megafauna like the African black rhino and the Asian elephant but also the likelihood that our grandchildren (and their progeny) will inherit an Earth that is habitable for humans, animals, and plants alike. All of the above are starts not finishes, but most of us need to start somewhere.

And once we admit our privilege, what then? The response that we make to this admission will vary from person to person, but each one of us will undoubtedly begin to see ourselves as part of a larger whole. We will begin to recognize that our good fortune comes at the hands, hearts, minds, sweat and blood of people and other living things the world over. (If you are wondering what I am getting to here, read the tag of your clothes to find out where the majority of them come from or consider the origin of the wood or plastics that you have in your house.) With this recognition, we may begin to make an effort to take less or give back, in other words sacrifice a little. Perhaps, some of us will be moved to develop a more sustainable form of living—by improving our diets by reducing excess and unhealthy consumption or by choosing to purchase vehicles that are more efficient and less polluting. Others will realize how little they know about their connection with the natural world, something our schools are greatly negligent in providing, and they may begin to seek out opportunities to learn about such things. Fortunately, literature on these topics abounds in our libraries, bookstores, and on websites. Others might decide that they are just too busy to do much for anyone but their immediate families. Even these people might begin to see how interconnected their family is with other families here and abroad. A global fellowship might spread that will foster friendship and understanding rather than the hate and violence being perpetuated by terrorists and governments alike. Call me an idealist, you wouldn't be the first, but at least contemplate the creation of a world that is much more in harmony than the one we have today. Challenging as this might be, it represents perhaps our greatest hope.

If not us, then who will promote and espouse environmental principles? We certainly have our own bills to pay and our retirement to think about. However, if we, the residents of the richest nation in the world, are not able to sacrifice for the betterment of others and our environment, then who is? Many people, such as Ken Saro-Wiwa (of Nigeria), Chico Mendez (of Brazil), and Wangari Maathai (of Kenya), all were beaten or killed when they peacefully defended their local peoples and environments. We do not have to fear the same sort of repression for participating in similar activities. I am not advocating that we all become Peace Corps volunteers (although that wouldn't be a bad idea), but rather that we spend some of our "free" time and "excess" money making the world a better place rather than gallivanting around the state, nation, or world polluting



and despoiling the environments that support us. That is not to say that we should all live as hermits in our homes but rather than we recognize that if we take from the environment, then we must give back. If we take more than we give, then we are responsible for the exacerbation of our world's many environmental problems. Alternatively, if we all take strides to give more (than we currently do), then we are on a road towards healing and reconciliation.

In the 20th Century we began to realize something very important. We came to understand that we have something to gain from living more in harmony with the natural world. This recognition led to the creation of national parks as well

as air and water quality standards. As we transitioned into the 21st, we began to observe the ramifications of the finiteness of our Earth and time scale of its many ecological services (i.e., aquifer recharge, forest regrowth, & ocean-atmosphere gas exchange). The 21st Century, thus, represents the period when we will begin to live sustainably, by choice or by default. Many are showing us the way (such as Julia Butterfly Hill, Wes Jackson, Winona LaDuke or Sandra Steingraber), yet most of us are either not looking hard enough to find them or are so preoccupied with our day-to-day existence that we don't think we can sacrifice a moment or a dime. It is time for all of us to look harder and/or escape cynicism. Cherish your fortune and use it to make the world a better place for all to live.

Works Cited

PCFS. (2002) Population Connection Fact Sheet. <<http://www.populationconnection.org/Communications/ED2002WEB/WorldOneHundredDataMaster.pdf>>

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