

Greetings All,

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Need vs. Want in Sustainability

I am continuously struck, these days, at how in love we are with "new". We love new information from new books, blogs, programs and processes. I too, certainly embrace "new"; but sometimes recycling "old" can be the most innovative. I talk to those of you as students about the "Dynasty Syndrome" referring to the '70's show where women wore sequined gowns to dinner and men, tuxedos. (For those of you who are colleagues and not my students, this is a secret we will admit to you.) So, to amend my first sentence, many of we humans seem to be in love with new and costly. What strikes me most is the juxtapositioning of this adoration and our work in sustainability.

So, let me move in the opposite direction with fervor.

A few years after John Muir was born, H.D. Thoreau was living in a small cabin writing (and he clearly declared in the opening pages of Walden that he wasn't writing in order to make us conform to his opinion unless it fit; so certainly I would second him in this). When H.D., early on, addresses housing he seems baffled by double standards. Native Americans who are "rich" are those who own dwellings (simple as they may be) and everyone in the village owns a house. But "civilized man" is commonly poor if he hasn't the resources to actually both to own a house and also specifically a house with "spacious apartments, clean paint and paper, Rumford fireplace, back plastering ..." etc. However; he wisely goes on to caution, ["If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man - and I think that it is,](#)

though only the wise improve their advantages - it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run."

In earlier pages he marveled at how we, as children, seem to instinctively be enamored with shelter. "Who does not remember the interest with which, when young, he looked at shelving rocks, or any approach to a cave?" This need for shelter arose out of needs "first of physical warmth, then the warmth of the affections," (and perhaps in children a sense of adventure). But he goes on to examine the practicality of large railroad boxes to serve these needs. With such simplicity, each man could *own* a house but his/her richness would extend from the traditional viewpoints - trading spacious apartments and Rumford fireplace for richness in time to think and freedom to act beyond the requirements of paying for, maintaining and upgrading a dwelling. He also astutely advises that, "In the long run men hit only what they aim at." (*For students: Aside from the fact that he ends the sentence with a preposition . . .*) This leads me to ask you what you are aiming at in your work within sustainability? Let's think about the whole thing further.

I think, despite his language from an earlier time, he states his point clearly. What new book or blog can surpass that elegant simplicity and clear divination between "need" and "want". And though I am not warning readers away from economic success, how can we chase so feverishly designs, processes and technologies which target *only* making the "Dynasty's dynastier"?

A group I was working with in Linked-In last year came to the conclusion that the environment, particularly watersheds but applicable to all realms, would never be truly sustainable until we dealt with poverty. So to that point, we should examine what makes the rich rich, and the poor poor. Ownership seems universally to connote wealth. Additionally, I'd like to borrow from Mr. Thoreau to suggest that more, bigger and shinier "things" may not always make us richer without the time to think and freedom to pursue activities as we wish. People without money often do have the latter and many times we envy them their happiness as we do with the people of Bhutan. As we think of poverty though, we think not of people who are purchasing chandeliers or solar panels or those like the happy people of Bhutan; but mostly people who are

seeking food to fill their bellies and basic shelter while avoiding disease in polluted water and air. It is here that the intersection of environment and people becomes important. There are three types of people who cause environmental damage:

1. People who will persist in actions no matter what because of greed (the Malevolent)
2. People who could do better but don't see the harm they're causing or don't know how to do better (the Ignorant)

and by far the largest number -

3. Desperate people denuding forest slopes for firewood, allowing too many livestock onto too few acres and into community water sources, draining toilets directly into streams, harvesting endangered animals in order to survive, et. al. (the Desperate).

Sadly and ironically, many of the people in #1 and #2 also end up exacerbating poor environmental conditions under which the third group is trying to survive. But what are we, as sustainabilists, to do? Clearly, we won't be rallying the masses to live in railroad boxes anytime soon. However, with 5.8 of the world's 6.5 billion people lacking access to most of the things we all take for granted including things like clean water, food, shelter, or some combination of these things, I'd like to tug at your brain to blend business with social justice with some very practical resources.

In "The Future Corporation" Paul Polak <http://blog.paulpolak.com/> writes:

Three key practical strategies need to be incorporated by businesses serving \$2/day customers.

1. Small margin x large volume = attractive bottom line profits. Supermarkets used this formula to replace mom and pop grocery stores, and Wal-Mart improved on it. For emerging markets, it's really the Wal-Mart strategy x 100.

2. Design for radical affordability. A movement, called design for the other 90% is gaining a lot of momentum: learning to design things that are affordable enough for people who live on less than \$2 a day and that also are income generating.

3. Implement profitable last mile supply chains. Spring Health, the company I've started with my partners in India will, if successful, will create a model platform for profitable last mile supply chains to small rural villages in India.

While Mr. Polak cites examples from remote areas I would ask you - where is the poverty around you? Do all the people in Nashville have access to healthy, affordable housing which doesn't tax the environment? Are they getting enough to eat from sustainable sources? Are their children able to play in clean water? What about people in rural Tennessee? How many wells are polluted from poorly maintained septic systems and what are the effects? What about people in Appalachia, other rural centers, other urban areas?

When moving forward in our careers we have an opportunity to positively affect BOTH the environment and the people around us which can create greater positive effects on the environment and so on, in a natural cyclic fashion. We need not live in railroad boxes, but what would it look like to alter our investments, financially and in terms of our outputs and careers to live a simpler, yet more abundant life as H.D. suggests, and be able to provide abundance for others as well? For those of you who have studied biomimicry with me or Sandra or others, that can be one tool to move in this direction. Students Corbin Gibson and Samuel Leu are working on such a project right now in order to keep small farmers from losing their family farms while conserving both water and energy. On the website Dutiee <http://blog.dutiee.com/four-social-incubators-that-can-rock-your-startup-world/> , Deepa Chaudhary lists four social incubators which can help you with funding, exposure, training and mentorship to start down this road if you choose. What are you aiming at?

In a world of 6.5 billion people, it seems wise to at least consider our impact on the environment and each other. Need vs. want seems a good path into that realm and old H.D. blessed us with a good read to set the stage.

Tennessee's Environmental Literacy Draft Plan

The final Tennessee Environmental Literacy Plan draft is on the eeintennessee.org frontpage and ready for review! This is one of the last projects I worked on for the Compact as Fellow - and one which will hopefully have a long-term positive effect in the state.

The Environmental Literacy Plan is a step towards integrating environmental learning into students lives in an official way within the educational system of our state. For more years than I can count teachers have had to "teach to the test" and have often not had time for "extras" which - unbelievably - the environment was in many classrooms. So, when faced with that challenge over too many years and with the advent of Richard Louv's book Last Child in the Woods, environmental educators from across the nation (and beyond) were moved to get out there and MAKE change happen! Now, several states have or are working on environmental literacy plans for their states - and if you visit the website, you'll be able to see *and comment on* Tennessee's draft. Comments are due by November 10th and they would love you to take a gander and submit any comments to the folks you'll find listed on the website. This is not a closed process so you can forward this to others so they can give input as well.

Here's to you and our big, blue ball too!

Margo

Margo Farnsworth

Screendoor Consulting

Adjunct Faculty, Lipscomb University Institute for Sustainable Practices

[615-478-4889](tel:615-478-4889)

Give good people good information and they'll do good things.

(If you've just received this single newsletter, it may be because I thought you'd be interested in this particular subject. You may or may not get others. If you want on my list regularly, e-mail me. If you want off my list, e-mail me. Thanks!)