

Dear Students, Colleagues and Friends,

Once upon a time I worked in a backpacking shop. We all viewed our chosen outdoor avocations as the harvest we brought to the shop to make it work. I was the boater. I had sailed and raced during my adolescence and become a canoe instructor and rescue volunteer for local and national whitewater races in and after college.

In this world, I encountered a guy who had been a climber cum inventor of great climbing gear. His name was Yvon Chouinard. Now in writing this, let me not mislead you. I didn't actually meet him. I just worked with my colleagues to test his gear. We field tested everything back then. It was all for the purpose of giving our buyers the best, safest, most cathartic experiences we (as purveyors of fine outdoor gear) could.

As with most revolutions (industrial or outdoor play), our suppliers continued to invent and sell more, bigger and better "stuff". Soon, Chouinard went from being Great Pacific Ironworks to a company with a new name – Patagonia. As the company moved from hardware to software we sneered. We renamed the company "Patagrooviness" for its rapacious spread. But, the gear worked and we pristine sleeping-bags-used-for-comforters-on-our-beds, holier than thou outdoorsniks – bought it. The thing is – as with all consumables in an affluent society – it just kept coming. A lot of us kept our original pile and fleece jackets (I'm happy to say mine are over 30 years old.) but with the growth of grooviness our customer base spread and with it, the demand for more and ever groovier products.

As we were living our lives, boating in our rivers, climbing our mountains, the world – the environment - was continuing to change. Somewhere along the line a few folks had epiphanies. Our lifestyles could not continue. We were destroying the natural capital responsible, not only for our affluence, but for our very lives. Four pretty smart fellows (Karl-Henrik Robert, Herman Daly, Paul Hawken and John Holmberg) came up with some fine observations. We shouldn't be increasing the allotment of man-made items or materials from Earth's crust into the ecosphere. Biodiversity and productivity needs to be guarded from decline. These elements from their collaboration creating *The Natural Step* are scientifically sound – and pretty much ignored by many, many people.

I don't mean to sound dismal. I'm getting to the uplifting part. (Yes, there is an uplifting part.)

For the purposes of this newsletter I need to introduce you to another mogul now. His name was Ray Anderson. He revolutionized the carpet industry by looking to nature for solutions and applying the tool of biomimicry to his work. He didn't start there – but he moved to sustainability after learning a bit from *The Natural Step* crew and other science and social visionaries like the writer Daniel Quinn, who had begun to get louder. Responding to customers asking what Interface Carpets was doing for the environment, he began to study and ended up making a product which mimicked a

forest floor and drastically reduced material usage, working to comply with the elements of *The Natural Step* listed above – and then aimed his company directly toward zero waste.

I did actually have the pleasure of talking with him in his office one day. His thoughts there were profound, but those you can access by reading [Mid-Course Correction](#) are similarly so. He wrote in part, "... I remember hearing a NASA scientist say once, talking about Apollo XI, that first man-on-the-moon expedition, that 90 percent of the time the spacecraft was off course. The critically important mid-course corrections made it possible to reach the moon, and that determined the outcome. I stand firmly convinced that Earth – no, humanity – is off course and desperately needs a mid-course correction."

Can we slow our transport of man-made items and materials from Earth's crust into the ecosphere? Can we, no, will we work to protect biodiversity and productivity? Will we collectively make this mid-course correction?

Both businessmen, Chouinard and Anderson thought about this. Then, they acted.

In a recent interview Chouinard said the following:

"We're no longer called citizens. We're called consumers."

"Americans consume 75% more than Europeans."

"Are you just bored, or do you really need it?"

Our sustainability behaviors are sometimes illogical and less than genuine. Chouinard continued with a reference to our buying habits. We like "...energy efficient refrigerators – so much so that we buy two and leave on the lights."

He thoughtfully offered, "Consume less but consume better." adding that Patagonia, in an unheard of reversal, is now reducing the number of items in its lines. They also contribute to sustainability in a multitude of programs from donating 1% of all sales to environmental organizations to recycling used outdoor wear to creating a tracking device that allows consumers to see what their goods cost from cradle to recycle. He continued, offering substance from what Patagonia has done, but also poking us – consumers (the proverbial sleeping badger) about what we need to do to make bigger changes. "The Zen Master would say, If you want to change government, change corporations. If you want to change corporations, change people and their buying habits."

In all of this both companies have profited. Chouinard intoned, "Every time we've made a decision that's right for the planet, it's made us more money." His company was recently measured at revenues over 500 million. Anderson's company stood at over a billion. They tested the gear. It works.

So, what about it? Shall we quit putting more and more stuff – whether we make it or pull it up from under the Earth's crust – into the part of the planet where we live? Shall we do a better job of protecting biodiversity and all that it provides by consuming less

and consuming better? And shall we start designing products, buildings, processes in a way that works in concert with Earth's operating systems?

A friend and fellow biomimicry instructor, Adelheid Fischer, wrote, "For designers, I cannot think of a more fertile — or little explored — arena of adjacent possibilities than the natural world. Getting outside the box — the box of a building! — can liberate designers from what can often seem like the echo chamber of the studio, where many are apt to look to the works of other designers for inspiration — that is, to stick safely inside their own networks rather than to venture beyond. As John Thackara observes in *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*, "Perhaps we would learn more quickly from penguins and spiders if we were not surrounded by swarms of our own technologies. Stranded on an ice floe, with nothing but penguins for company, we'd probably study them more closely. But we live in a world filled with materials and devices invented by ourselves." [12] To be sure, expanding the adjacent possibilities of nature doesn't necessarily mean boarding a plane to "nature" — to a land where there are more penguins and parrots than people. As books such as *The Natural History of Vacant Lots* make clear, there are dozens of plant and animal species ripe for inspiration-making in the heart of even the most urbanized place. [13]"

Whether we are designing products, running businesses, governments *or our daily lives* these are lessons learned and actions taken that we can emulate. Anderson wrote, "If we all succeed, individually, in doing good for Mother Earth in the corners where we live and work, in setting the example for others and in governing our actions by the Categorical Imperative, "What if everybody did it?" we will be helping Daniel Quinn in his mission to change six billion minds (now 7.1 billion), creating a river of change, and giving Earth that mid-course correction. I believe it's not an option. It's humanity's only hope."

A river of change – now there's a river I'd like to travel.

Be the change today,

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do good things.

Give good people good information and they'll

(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!)