

RE-EDUCATING THE PERSON

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Having been part of the sustainability movement since the late 80's, having witnessed the increasing environmental interest, research and expertise arising out of the Rio Conference in 1992, and having observed attempts by pioneers, experts, researchers, leaders, governments, businesses and educational institutions to try and inform people of the imminent and serious threat of global warming, I have often wondered why the message has not been getting across.

We know that what we do and the way we live have serious consequences for the future of humankind. Those of us with children can imagine the challenges they will meet, and wonder whether they will be able to live as fully as we have had the privilege of doing, or whether indeed, they will have a life at all. Yet we have been behaving as in the story of the frog in the pot of water. As the water gradually gets warmer and warmer, the frog does not jump out but stays until she dies. In our instance the repercussions go further. Our entire species is at risk and still we haven't jumped out, even though we have the research, technological solutions, methodologies and the know-how to mitigate global warming, adapt to changing climate and to live sustainably. Somehow, though, we have lacked the will, the impetus, the desire and the ability to do what it takes.

The excuse for not taking personal action is often that there is a lack of leadership. People frequently say something along the lines of 'I'm willing to take action but only if government legislation forces everyone else to do likewise.' In the field of design, where I operate, the response from designers to issues of sustainability is frequently 'When businesses require that I know how to undertake lifecycle analysis or adopt the cradle-to-cradle approach, then I'll take action'. Businesses, likewise, have been saying: 'When the consumers want goods that are sustainable, then we'll start producing them'. We have been waiting for someone else to take the lead, to start, to show us what to do and even to demand and require that we do it. No one wants to take the responsibility for starting the process (Blincoe and Spangenberg 2009).

The failure by environmentalists seems to have been the inability to explain and demonstrate both the immediate as well as long term gains of sustainable living. We have not been able to convey the life-enhancing benefits of engaging in more sustainable practices (Blincoe and Spangenberg 2009). We have not been able to engage and stimulate people's imagination of a worthwhile future (see *Futures Thinking, this volume*). The negative and apocalyptic scenarios of the future created by the film industry are powerful: *Soylent Green*, *Waterworld*, *The End of the World*, *the Day After*

Tomorrow, and The Age of Stupid have captured people's imagination. Where are the visual artistic scenarios of a sustainable, beautiful world, a world in equity, a world for everyone? People need dreams. They need the carrot. Until now all that has been flagged is the stick: 'unless you change your ways'... 'see what you have done'... are the mantras, even though the dream of a meaningful life and better future is what motivates most of us.

It seems then that a different, more positive way of communicating the need for a sustainable world could inspire people into action. We need to be able to demonstrate what 'a better life' might look like and feel like, within a paradigm of a new set of values and principles. We need to be able to demonstrate how this can be achieved, what to do and what both the immediate as well as long term gains are for the individual as well as for the community at large.

It is also apparent that some retraining and disciplining of our minds needs to take place, together with a revision of our values and belief patterns. We need to learn to live from a place beyond our feelings of greed and understand at an emotional level that instant gratification has no real value.

Inspiration for more sustainable ways of living comes from many sources, including Buddhist beliefs and practices and the philosophical principles of Taoism (Dyer 2008, and [see *Effortless Action*, this volume](#)). These are spiritual beliefs where humans and nature co-exist in harmony, where people are seen as an integral part of nature, and part of the universal ebb and flow of life. Everything is seen as interconnected, a matrix, or concentric circles overlapping, and nothing stands alone. Buddhism provides a whole series of meditative exercises for experiencing interconnection and directly perceiving the world we are part of. The exercises help to temporarily quieten the reductionist, rational side of the mind that is so quick to form abstractions, and reduce the constant internal mental chatter, opening up new ways of being in the world ([see *Being-in-the-World*, this volume](#)). The teachings provide wisdom which we recognize (on reflection) but which we, through our current living patterns, have suppressed, denied or simply forgotten.

Mainstream education can help correct the current imbalances, help learners gain a sense of interconnection, and educate the next generation for a sustainable life even in the midst of climate change. To teach competences, tools and skills with this in mind, new educational principles have to take the place of current practices. The Western educational system has become as rigid as the development, production and economic infrastructures that it has both shaped and been shaped by. The wheels can only turn one way and cannot solve the problems we are faced with.

From an early age, learners are being taught in a chronological and linear fashion. Current schooling uses teaching and learning methodologies which are based on a left brain, technical, reductionist and atomistic belief system. As this belief system is the platform on which Western society rests and from which globalization and development

problems like global warming derive, it is a platform which needs reshaping in order to effect change.

Teaching is currently focused on giving learners the tools and skills to get along in a market-orientated world (see *A Learning Society*, this volume). They are taught about a world where winning and losing are important, where being good and clever is measured against a standard based on competition. Education passes the old materialist dream on to learners time and time again, and we are all reaping what it has sown. The seeds and the method of sowing need changing.

We could start by rethinking our educational platform to include intuition, imagining, wisdom, spirituality, holism as well as basic knowledge of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things. We could teach the next generation of learners skills in how to relate to other people, how to be part of a community, how to deal with loss and sorrow, how to go beyond winning or being first (see *Effortless Action*, this volume). We could help them gain the attributes of being true, authentic and content with who they are, at any time and in any place (see *Emotional Wellbeing*, this volume). Learners could 'go walk-about' as the aborigines in Australia do to learn to communicate with their natural environment, expand their senses and increase their intuitive powers, and gain storytelling skills to share their experience.

Learners would then learn the difference between knowledge and knowing, between science and wisdom, between religion and spirituality, between doing and being, between being disconnected and connected, between being fragmented and being whole, between the 'me' and the 'us'. All contain constructive as well as destructive elements. The education would be in learning balance and the wise use of each.

A glance into the past can bring inspiration to learn from. When lecturing on education for sustainability I often look back at the events that changed Danish society in the mid 1800's, and wish we had retained some of the qualities from that period. When Denmark went bankrupt in 1813 following a period of corrupt government, the country changed beyond recognition. Feudal rule was abolished and the country got a constitution and a parliament. Danish democracy was founded on thoughts of seeds sown in Europe during the 18th century as a reaction against royal absolutism. Change became a way of life in Denmark after the bankruptcy. Change agents and pioneers emerged from the church, the fields of literature, philosophy, politics, law and the arts and together they created the platform on which the future of the country was based. The co-operative movement flourished and farming became the main area of development. The Education Act of 1814 introduced schooling for everyone, with the aim of lifelong learning for ordinary people as well as a radically different approach to teaching and learning.

It is interesting to look some of the new principles for education that were being put forward at that time. Some of the most profound concepts were based on the following ideas:

- A person can find her/his uniqueness in their reflection from the community. We must seek others as others must seek us. We must be each other's mirrors and be inclusive.
- Education must be lifelong education/enlightenment/information. Education must address learners' lives here and now - and not be aimed solely at some future career.
- The purpose of education is to make the students wiser and more knowledgeable regarding the meaningfulness of their lives. Through lifelong learning the mystery of life will slowly unravel.
- Education must be for the 'whole' person, using imagination, feelings and intuition in order to keep the mind 'in place'. There must be a balance between mind, body and spirit.
- Taught subjects must bring life to words through dialogue and discussion.
- Education must be both historic and poetic: Education should give learners knowledge of the history they share with others (historic) and motivate them to find their dreams and hopes in life (poetic).
- Learners and educators must learn from each other since both are equal when it comes to the wisdom of life.
- Educational institutions should give information, knowledge, tools and skills. However, they must also inspire. Learners should love life as well as learning.

The educational philosophy from that time contributed to creating a socially and environmentally aware nation, which Denmark was more or less until the last decade, when materialism and right wing policies took the lead and drove the country into a period of primitive and aggressive materialism and intolerance, which I sincerely hope will be shortlived.

Whilst I am not advocating applying old principles to a new educational philosophy for sustainability literacy, I do believe that some of the principles are valid and could be mixed with new ones based on what we now know. What I also have learned from looking back into history is the fact that people seem to need crises to radically rethink their behaviour. If Denmark had not gone bankrupt, then radical change would not have come about. There are many other examples from history of societies changing when a crisis looms, sometimes in time to avoid collapse or disaster. We currently have the ideal environment for radical change - change that could bring about sustainability worldwide. Even if governments are fixed in old thought patterns there is now room for visionaries, radicals and pioneers from all fields to change our societies.

One first glimmer of a positive outcome from the economic crisis is a new mainstream trend towards serving others, rather than wanting to be served. There is a move from the focus on ego towards wanting to become part of communities and make a difference for others (van Hauen 2009, Hopkins 2008). There is a greater move towards philanthropic actions, wanting to give rather than take. This is quite extraordinary and people who push

these boundaries, the pioneers and new thinkers in the forefront of change, are the ones we should write about and create films about.

We live in an extraordinary time on the planet. What we do now and how we act will have a determining effect on humankind and countless other species. We are the stewards and responsible for not just ourselves but also for each other, our environment and future generations. If learners are provided with an environment that allows them to gain sustainability literacy skills then they could contribute to a collective leap beyond instant gratification to the creation - and more importantly, the implementation - of a framework for a sustainable future.

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