

Quaker Eco-Bulletin

Information and Action Addressing Public Policy for an Ecologically Sustainable World

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AT the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen in December, the world community labored to limit global greenhouse gas emissions to what many climate scientists believe is necessary to head off the worst effects of harmful climate change. Representatives of industrialized and less developed countries were able to resolve some differences, such as verification and how costs would be fairly apportioned. The conference ended not with the treaty that had been hoped for but with a set of nonbinding pledges as a basis for future negotiations.

Most of the analysis leading up to this conference focused on the more obvious hurdles, including: 1) narrowly defined political and economic interests that keep some nations from seeing how their needs are bound up with those of the entire planet and 2) the well-organized, industry-funded “climate change denial” lobby that has been very effective at feeding doubts about the seriousness of climate change and bringing the financial clout of the fossil fuel industries to bear on political leaders.

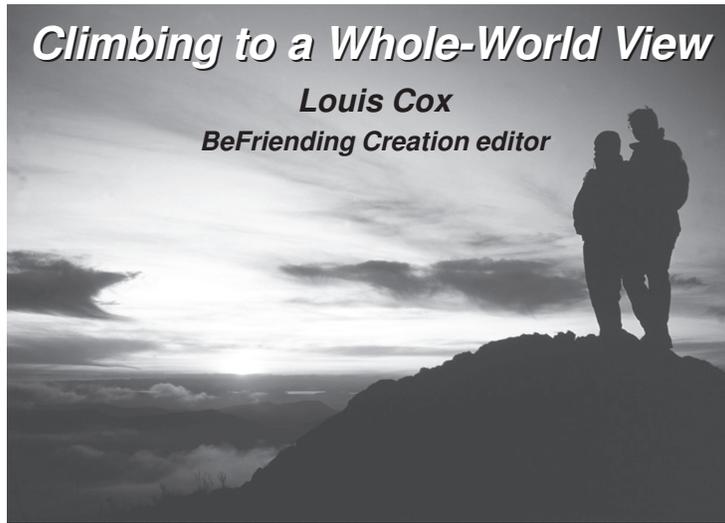
This *Quaker Eco-Bulletin* is about a less obvious but important challenge to reaching international consensus on the climate issue—one that has been largely overlooked by the mainstream media. That has to do with differing *worldviews* or *levels of consciousness*. States of awareness are seldom discussed by the media because they cannot be measured directly and are difficult to talk about. Yet our fundamental sense of who we are and what kind of world we live in the end holds the key to how we respond to fundamental problems. Will we choose to remain in denial, apathy, and confusion, or will we choose to act with wisdom, foresight, and courage to change course in time?

There is no question that we humans already have the potential to make difficult and transformative changes. Our species survived several close calls with extinction because our ancestors responded to changes in geography, climate, and other threats by gradually climbing several rungs up the consciousness ladder. But wisdom is not evolving fast

Climbing to a Whole-World View

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enough to keep pace with changes that are rapidly unfolding on a global scale. In order to meet these new challenges, human consciousness must rise rapidly to still higher levels.

A whole-world view

The idea of raising consciousness brings to mind one of my favorite late-summer outdoor destinations, the top of Camel’s Hump, the second highest peak in Vermont’s Green Mountains. I have a good view it from where I live about 25 miles to the west. Ascending the west face doesn’t require special climbing equipment, just sensible shoes and clothing and several hours of clambering over and around slippery rocks and fallen branches that litter the steep, eroded trail. The higher I climb, the farther and wider I can see—and the more I am reminded of my connection to the rest of the world.

On reaching the treeless, wind-swept summit of Camel’s Hump, I am greeted by a uniformed conservation agent, who is sent up there every day during the hiking season to answer questions and make sure hikers stay behind barriers that protect the fragile alpine vegetation. Some restrictions are needed because most individuals can’t appreciate the cumulative damage that would result from allowing thousands of visitors (many with dogs and children) to run loose at the top.

From Camel’s Hump on a clear day I am able to look down over a lush landscape of mixed forests, farms, lakes, and steeped villages. But all is not well down there. Still recovering from the extensive deforestation from colonial times through the early 20th century, this beautiful and vibrant land is being ravaged again by urban sprawl and other ill-considered development. And yet another, more serious, threat to this fragile environment has arrived at the state’s doorstep—human-induced climate change. Higher-than-average temperatures have already started to disturb ecological relationships. For example, migratory birds are arriving sooner in the spring and are heading south later in the fall. Over the past 20 years, the time between the last spring frost >>

“It’s time to begin to focus on the big picture.” —Yvo de Boer, top UN climate official at the Climate Summit

Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB) is published bi-monthly by Quaker Earthcare Witness as an insert in *BeFriending Creation*.

The vision of Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW) includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington, D.C. for peace, justice, and an earth restored.

QEB's purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to the earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for QEB. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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and the first fall frost has been growing longer and longer. This may be good for gardeners, but the trends are very worrisome when the accelerating rate of change is projected over the next 20 years.

To the west I can see the setting sun mirrored in Lake Champlain. For generations there were ice boat races every winter on the frozen lake, and some daring souls would even drive their cars the ten miles across to New York. However, beginning about 15 years ago, the lake has ceased freezing solid enough for anything but occasional ice-fishing near the shore.

And as I scan the horizon, I also notice a purple streak of photochemical smog starting to obscure the views of New Hampshire's White Mountains to the east and New York's Adirondack Mountains to the west—a reminder of the countless jet engines, smokestacks, and tailpipes all over the planet that are spewing many tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every day. Even a consciously “green and clean” place like this is, after all, affected by what happens in the rest of the world.

Different visions of the future

From the high vantage point of Camel's Hump, I can see the central spine of the Green Mountains heading north into Canada and south into Massachusetts. Some ridges are being studied for possible commercial wind power. But this and other renewable-energy/conservation proposals remain on hold while Vermonters wrestle with different visions of their energy future. Supporters see wind as a practical way for the region to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and to produce fewer greenhouse gases. However, this idea has run into a buzz saw of protests from those who see wind turbines as blights on the landscape.

Off to the southeast, next to the Connecticut River, sits Vermont Yankee, the state's only nuclear power plant. No longer able to market their product as cheap, the plant's owners have been promoting it as low in carbon emissions. Trying to capitalize on growing concerns about climate change, they are asking the state to re-license this 40-year-old facility, one of the oldest in the country, for another 20 years.

I have attended public hearings and read many letters to the editor in which the supposed advantages and drawbacks of wind power and/or nuclear fission are passionately argued. These often-heated exchanges tend to bypass each other and keep the public conversation at an unproductive low level. People on opposite sides of these contentious issues assume that policy decisions are decided on a combination of “hard facts,” “logical reasoning,” and emotional appeals. Accordingly, they may devote a lot of time and energy to gathering poll results, expert testimonies, and studies conducted by private “research” institutes, which tend to support whatever conclusions their clients happen to be looking for.

One side claims that wind turbines on scenic ridges would destroy the tourism industry while invoking images of piles of dead bats and birds at the bases of the towers. The other side counters that wind power is a no-brainer when it comes to competitive cost and low vulnerability to terrorist attacks. One side argues that failure to re-commission Vermont Yankee would lead to blackouts, increased unemployment, and a less competitive business climate. The other side cites reports that this problem-prone plant has been linked to a higher incidence of leukemia in children living in the area.

There is probably a measure of truth in most of these claims. But most people who tune into these debates can tell that all the verbal jousting is mostly about securing funding, permits, or votes, not moving everyone closer to the truth. Few minds or votes are changed.

Our innate capacity for seeing the world as a whole will atrophy if it is not nurtured and guided, especially when we are young. This should be the foremost goal of education.

The reality is that a person chooses to believe or emphasize certain facts or reasons and to dismiss others according to whether those points seem compatible with that person's existing assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, or overall worldview. We all have such deep-seated, complex, and largely unconscious internal "maps" to help guide us through life. But if we are ever to unite around the climate change crisis, we will need new rules of engagement that encourage everyone to be open about their own worldviews in the public discussion.

Worldviews and levels of maturity

In the July-August 2006 *Quaker Eco-Bulletin*, Keith Helmuth, Judy Lumb, Sandra Lewis, and Barbara Day say that modern Western society seems to be slowly moving away from an industrial-age worldview that sees the natural world as a kind of machine. Many people are recognizing the folly of patterning organic processes, such as education, medicine, and farming, on industrial systems. A small but growing number seem to be evolving toward an ecological consciousness, rediscovering Earth as a living, evolving organism and themselves as part of it.

Continuing humankind's transition to a whole-world view will be crucial to meeting the twin threats of human-induced climate change and the imminent peak of global oil production. If the industrial mind-set continues to hold sway, particularly among our leaders, precious time and resources will be squandered trying to engineer short-sighted and counterproductive "solutions." Appropriate technologies—solar, wind, etc.—are a necessary part of the transition. But we must not be lulled into believing that we can simply invent our way out of this crisis. Our first order of business is to restore a sense of place, a sense of purpose, and a sense of our relationship to the commonwealth of life.

Outgrowing worldviews or paradigms that are seriously out of touch with ecological reality is only part of the challenge of sustainability. We also need longer-term perspectives and increased ability to appreciate others' points of view. This is part of what characterizes a mature adult's thinking. Modern society—largely through its political, economic, and educational institutions—seems to have arrested its collective development at a level of maturity that is inadequate for today's complex issues. Narrowness of vision and short attention span are reinforced by vested interests who generally don't want the public at large to think critically or plan for the seventh generation.

General outlooks on life are narrowed further by overspecialization. As Joseph R. Royce explains in *The Encapsulated Man*:

"The dilemma of the specialist as truth-seeker is that he has not seen much of the universe from the black bottom of his nicely furrowed rut, but he proceeds to proclaim his world-view anyhow and, in many cases, with considerable

vigor. Thus the dilemma of specialism is partialness or meaninglessness, on both an existential or daily-living level and at the level of coming to grips with reality or truth."

E.F. Schumacher makes a similar point in *A Guide for the Perplexed*: "What we have to deplore ... is not so much the fact that scientists are specializing, but rather the fact that specialists are generalizing," that is, confusing the part with the whole, the simplified map with the infinitely complex territory they represent.

Diversity within unity

Apprehending the basic unity and wholeness of all that exists is not about uniformity or unanimity, however. A healthy whole-world view also reflects and promotes the inherent diversity and creativity of human and natural realms.

Consider the richly varied ways of being human around the world and throughout history—the astonishing range of substances people classify as edibles, even delicacies; their many forms and styles of marriage; their highly varied child-rearing practices; the rainbow of customs, folkways, stories, dialects, and rituals. This incredible diversity of thought and

behavior is an essential quality of the human family—like all healthy ecosystems, a store of wisdom, resilience, and future possibility. That is why most attempts to impose uniformity and unanimity (as in the cases of indigenous peoples who have been systematically stripped of their cultural heritage) have

been so destructive.

On the other hand, societies sometimes have moved to ban certain customs or practices, such as slavery and trafficking in endangered species, in the interest of the general welfare. In the same way, we are now compelled as a global society to take bold, united action to stop global climate change for the sake of our common survival, phasing out coal-fired power plants, mandating energy-efficient transportation and housing, halting the destruction of the oceans and rainforests, and ending perverse incentives for converting land from food crops and rainforests to bio-fuel production.

It is imperative that we move quickly to harmonize economic systems with Earth's natural processes, stabilize human population, and end our reliance on unsustainable and unsafe power systems. Forging a common appreciation of Earth as commonwealth of unique and interdependent ecosystems must be as much a part of our survival strategy as analyzing factual evidence and logical arguments.

Iconic NASA photos of Earth from outer space, completely innocent of political boundaries, may have marked the first moments of humankind's great awakening to its true identity as a global family. But special interests are always trying to turn us back into passive consumers. "Weather Eye" television broadcasts help millions to decide what clothes to wear tomorrow, but they don't consider it their responsibility to show let the public see dust storms in China, shrinking polar ice, or fires ravaging the world's rainforests. >>

Lower and higher levels of being

In *A Guide for the Perplexed*, E.F. Schumacher says,

“Our task is to look at the world and see it whole....One way of looking at the world as a whole is by means of a map, that is to say, some sort of plan or outline that shows outstanding landmarks, as it were, which you cannot miss, or if you do miss them, you will be left in perplexity.”

Schumacher explains that problems involving inanimate objects tend to be solved over time because consensus converges around the most effective materials and methods. But situations that involve living systems, including humans, always present moral dilemmas that we have to grapple with. These dilemmas generally give rise to divergent theories, philosophies, and interpretations.

A common response these days is to shrug and say, “To each his own” or “It depends on who you ask.” But post-modern relativism is a cop-out. One of the greatest contributions to Western thought was Socrates’ discovery that seemingly contradictory ideas can be reconciled, through dialogue, at higher levels of thinking. Schumacher goes on to say. “The loss of the vertical dimension from today’s philosophical maps means that it was no longer possible to give an answer, other than a utilitarian one, to the question, ‘What am I to do with my life?’”

He says we need a “turning around, a *metanoia*. This then leads to seeing the world in a new light, namely, as a place where the things modern man [sic] continually talks about and always fails to accomplish can actually be done.”

CAN we actually learn to “look at the world and see it whole,” as Schumacher urges? That can be accomplished when we understand that the world “out there” is intrinsically whole and that every atom of our being is one with it. Fixed concepts and categories are only the intellect’s attempt to freeze and dissect the living organism of reality. We depend on discrete bits of sensory data to perceive and solve problems, of course, but our brains are also “pre-wired” to convert these signals back into an intuitive grasp of the whole, a “gestalt” in psychological language. I see this whenever I drive through the old covered bridge near my house: Even though the bridge is sided with vertical boards, at a slow forward speed my eyes automatically reassemble the slices of daylight coming through the cracks between the boards into a complete image of the world outside. Every ray of light is a hologram, a window into the universe.

However, our innate capacity for seeing the world as a whole will atrophy if it is not nurtured and guided, especially when we are young. This should be foremost goal of education. Addressing the ecological and social challenges ahead will require clear-headed, holistic-thinking people. Life offers no guarantee against error, but we are more likely to move in the direction of higher consciousness if that is our goal.

There are nearly seven billion people on the planet, and their outlooks on life appear to vary along a continuum—from those preoccupied with short-term personal needs to “world citizens” who are dedicated to peace, justice, and

equality. The majority seem to fall within the middle range. A realistic goal is to nudge the average person along that continuum, not to try to transform everyone. That work begins by changing ourselves. Others may decide to change because of us, and still others may change because of them. We don’t aim for a majority, only a “critical mass,” which might be relatively small. As Margaret Mead once said, all great movements in human history can be traced back to thoughtful, dedicated action groups. They are the catalysts that help to mobilize the unfocused majority.

What can Friends do?

What can we Friends contribute to the spread of a whole-world view, one that honors diversity, improves our chances for ecological survival, and helps us to fulfill our higher purpose as a sacred Earth community?

As Quakers we are already working for peace, justice, ecological sustainability, and international cooperation when we support the work of Friends organizations. But being part of the Great Turning is also a personal calling that we can’t pay others to carry out in our name. There is much that we can contribute as individuals in our homes, Meetings, and communities, starting by elevating the discussions of current issues that we find ourselves in.

- ❖ Try to “re-frame” a divisive issue to a whole-world perspective. If a discussion focuses excessively on only one side-issue, such as dollar costs or health risks, remind others of the proverb about “straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel.” Emphasize that it is the big picture that counts—the overall balance of concerns, what benefits everyone. Ask whether a proposed action would be reasonable if everyone acted that way or whether it would bring harm and injustice to future generations or to other species, who have rights, too.
- ❖ Bow out of heated discussions in which people are simply showcasing their opinions and show little interest in what others know or believe.
- ❖ Practice “friendly persuasion.” Don’t back people into a corner by trying to prove them wrong. Invite those with strong views to explain how they arrived at their positions, but don’t try to embarrass them by insinuating they are prejudiced or uninformed.
- ❖ At public events don’t enable the media to sensationalize and oversimplify controversies. State your convictions quietly, simply, and honestly; if that doesn’t make the evening news that’s probably for the best.
- ❖ Encourage more right-brain thinking in policy-making and problem-solving, and use inclusive language consistently.
- ❖ Shut off the television and get outdoors. Get to know someone who sees the world differently. Participate in cultural exchange programs.
- ❖ Support bioregionalism and other alternative programs founded on holistic principles.
- ❖ Encourage schools to foster creativity, civic-mindedness, and critical thinking. ❖