

CHRONICLE 8

Caring for Lifeboat Earth

In my last few chronicles I discussed the new vision of Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, the *Ecozoic Era*. It foretells a time when humans create and enjoy *a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth*.

Then, in the last chronicle I talked about the need for a transition from Sustainability—trying to improve the current systems that are damaging the Earth—to Regeneration, the need to create new systems that can live within a living Earth.

But this leaves us with a problem. If our current efforts are focused on improving the existing systems, how do we make the transition to new systems? Obviously we need a different approach. This challenge reminds me of a story.

On one occasion Thomas Berry gave a talk about a new Ecozoic Era. At the end of the talk a man in the audience stood up and said, “Father Berry, you are a Roman Catholic priest and during this whole talk you didn’t say one single word about caring for those who are poor, sick or suffering. How can you justify this?”

Berry paused for a moment and then said, “When we are all together in a lifeboat and there are people who are sick and suffering, we must do all in our power to care for them. But we also have to care for the lifeboat.

As I relate this story to our present situation in a climate changing world it suggests to me the need for two kinds of activists. We need interpreters and caregivers.

Interpreters are those who tell us how our present systems are helping to create climate change and are damaging lifeboat Earth. The key folks here are the scientists. But they have been warning us for the last fifty years about what we are doing to Earth with very limited success, especially at the political level. So there is a communication problem.

We need interpreters who can translate the science into day to day language that people will understand. The interpreters need not be scientists. They can get an understanding from other interpreters who do understand the science and write about it in articles and in the press. So, in practice, most of us who are interpreters are actually interpreting the interpreters.

Caregivers are the community people in lifeboat Earth who care both for those in need and for the lifeboat. So what does this mean in practice?

It means helping people develop different mindsets—where they can see themselves as earthlings. They come to realize they are part of Earth and not beings separate from it. This awareness carries with it a responsibility to care for Earth.

It means coming to an awareness that just as you can’t have healthy people on a sick planet you can’t have healthy communities on a sick planet.

It means assisting individuals and groups who are already caring for people in the community to extend their mandate and concerns to the Earth itself.

It means organizing and encouraging support for one another, for the task cannot be accomplished by individuals alone.

It means helping to build a community culture that can be passed on to future generations: recycling, removing plastics; using solar panels, clean energy and electric cars; cleaning up streams, improving public transport, etc.

There are many people who can and are performing all of these functions: writers, artists, poets, musicians, educators, politicians, religious leaders, environmentalists, technicians, mothers, fathers and children...all of us. But there is often resistance,

Dealing with the Resistance.

Many people don't want to get involved unless they have a very good chance of success. But in this new and unfamiliar world we can no longer guarantee success. Our systems are integrated with one another and in this trial and error process all initiatives are uncertain and conditional. We must be willing to start with what we have, take certain risks and get over our desire for perfection. As Leonard Cohen put it...

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

Finally, the most inspiring models are people who accept the challenge and dedicate their lives to creative change.

I'll always remember the words of Nkomi Johnson an AIDS activist in South Africa who was born with AIDS. He and his foster mother set up a care center for AIDS victims and Nkomi gave talks in communities to help the cause. His advice...

"Do all you can
with what you have
in the time you have
in the place you are."

Nkomi died in 2001 at the age of 12.

Mike Bell, www.comoxvalleyclimatechangenetwork.ca

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