



UNEXPECTED GIFTS

THE REAL REWARDS OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

TOM BENDER

Solar '96 - Solar Energy Association of Oregon Conference

5 October 1996

We can't continue to support exponential growth on a diminishing resource base. With the exhaustion of fossil fuels, our planet cannot support even our *present* resource demands. The core values of greed, growth, and violence which underlie a growth society must now be abandoned for any successful transition to sustainability.

Those values are unsupported by the laws of nature we now know, and incapable of producing enduring patterns of life. Maintaining them inevitably twists and distorts any "solution" to problems into new problems elsewhere.

Change in those values leads to inevitable change throughout our lives, as the impact of our base values is ubiquitous. Even subtle things like our prevailing practice of "\$49.95" instead of "\$50" pricing is nothing more than a blatant pattern of intentional deceit when viewed from a value standpoint.

The material and financial costs of greed and growth currently represent a *quadrupling* of our cost of living. This includes the 33% to 40% of all our work now spent on creating the infrastructure to accommodate more people and things; the 20% surcharge on our cost-of-living for debt purchasing necessitated by growth; and the *doubling* of our expenditures as a society to support the wealthy few over what it would cost to support everyone equitably at current median family incomes.¹ Coupled with the order-of-magnitude inefficiency of institutional patterns that our wealth has allowed², it is now clear that on the material level stabilizing growth brings major cash *benefits*, not "back to the stone ages" costs.

The *real* rewards of sustainable communities, however, go far beyond the material ones inherent in resource efficient buildings, transit-oriented land use, and renewable energy sources. The true benefits of a sustainable society lie in the totally different dimensions of meaning and connection that give its cohesion, meaning and enduring value.

* *The source of our true wealth is not depletion of our resources, increase in our numbers, or taking from others.*

A truly wealthy individual is one who has the love and respect of others and the ability to give; equitable opportunity for the physical, emotional and spiritual health which the natural world

can sustain; and opportunity to develop and employ their abilities and to be of real value to the community.

A truly wealthy community is one with a meaningful sense of its place in the universe; a healthy and growing diversity of capabilities, individuals and life forms; and a satisfying spiritual, emotional and material heritage, life, and prospect.

A truly wealthy world is one with a healthy and growing diversity of life forms, communities and capabilities. With this awareness, we can find far more direct and effective ways of maintaining and nurturing our wealth.

Letting go of values and cultural patterns that no longer benefit us may seem like an impossible task. In reality it is like shedding a skin that no longer fits - letting loose of one thing after another that no longer feels comfortable, only to find a new and more solid basis underneath.

*** CURING DISEASES OF THE SPIRIT**

Our most daunting and seemingly unconnected social problems today stem directly from following the beacons of greed and growth. Unemployment, drug addiction, abuse; crime, obesity, mental and psychological illness - all are symptoms of a single cultural *disease of the spirit*. They are all temptations present in every society. We fall prey to them through the lack of self-esteem, mutual respect, and being of value to each other and our community inherent in our material, greed, and power-centered culture.

The numbers of people unable to function in our schools and cities is increasing rapidly - people destroyed by lack of love, not being valued, absence of opportunity; by resultant abuse, drug and alcohol addiction. They in turn create non-functional families, compounding the damage. To our great danger, we leave the human, psychological, emotional, spiritual and communal dimensions of life out of our goals, our institutions, and our lives.

To be sustainable, a community must nurture, not neglect, the emotional and spiritual well-being of all. The nature of its work, institutions, and all interactions must nurture self-esteem, mutual respect, and being of value to each other and the community. The principles of equity, security, sustainability, responsibility, giving and sacredness are the healing path for these central diseases of the spirit in growth societies, and living from the heart the way to act upon them.[3](#)

*** LIFE WITHOUT FEAR**

It is curious the degree to which, in a world of apparent material plenty, life is filled with fear. Fear of abuse, mugging, rape, murder. Fear of job loss, age, death. Fear of auto accidents, plane crashes, hurricanes, floods. Fear of inadequacy, failure, nuclear war, crippling disease. Fear of what the future may, or may not, hold.

In a community where we each care about, honor, and ensure the well-being of all life; where life is based on equity rather than greed, where we don't have to hide our fears and struggle alone, life gains a security

and freedom unknown in a society of greed and growth. When the primary causes of violence and the reasons to fear others are minimized and violence itself not valued as a base belief of society, positive relations are possible. Where we identify with the well-being of all creation, the larger climatic, geologic, and evolutionary patterns of nature are seen and honored from within a different understanding. True security comes from equitable access to non-depleting resources, a stable supporting eco-system, and a real community to support and back our needs and ensure the emotional health of all.

The life-nurturing values and principles upon which sustainable communities are based result in freedom from some of the most emotionally-crippling dimensions of a society based on greed and growth.

*** AN ECONOMY OF *GIVING*, NOT *TAKING***

The economics of a sustainable community are far different from that of a greed and growth centered one. It, of course, employs accounting of full social and ecological costs, and restricts its resource use to renewable ones in sustainable quantities. Instead of single-focus engineering analyses, it employs an ecological one - keeping intact the connectedness of things, and knowing that a real solution isn't arrived at to a problem unless it also helps resolve multiple other problems. It's motto of " $1+1=3$ " reflects those multiple rewards into accounting of full costs and benefits.

Its economics knows the true value of *sharing* - of allowing multiple beneficiaries of a single action or product. It accounts for the gifts of the rest of creation in providing for our needs, and our need to provide for its well-being in return. It eliminates the false distinction between work and leisure to restore freedom, and the ability to give, into our work. It looks at meaningful rewards for all we do with all our time. It recognizes the need for less work, and provides the opportunity for us to develop and apply our capabilities in ways that contribute directly to the good of our community. It looks at work as means of nurture, growth, development of skills, and the creation of a future, not as a means of acquiring money to spend on material gadgets.[4](#)

Looking at the nesting of patterns, it sees that most of our "secondary" "office-type" work, and that of advertising, transportation, law and most large institutions, as unproductive. Though effective at *centralizing profit*, it is not effective at real production. It is not *real* work like growing food, building buildings, or caring for the sick - and is incapable of giving the true rewards of that real work. That takes local production for local needs.

But even more uniquely and centrally, a sustainable community has an economics of *giving*, not of *taking*. Giving is an integral part of loving, and loving is the root of holding things sacred essential to sustainability. It enriches the giver and the receiver both, and creates multiple value out of each and every exchange. If "What can I give in this situation?" is in our hearts every time we talk with or do something with someone, we not only leave a legacy of gifts in addition to our intended interaction, but we generate an enduring climate of trust, mutual caring, thankfulness and happiness which moves outward like the waves in the sea.[5](#)

A *giving* economy allows us opportunity to share the bounty we enjoy. It provides means to express thanks for other gifts received, and to give someone, some thing, or some place what we feel they deserve. It acknowledges that whenever any of us puts creativity into our lives we are creating something new which did not exist before, and making a gift of that to others. Enriching all, a *giving* economy stands in clear contrast to most exchanges today which often leaves the equally unhealthy feeling of having "put one over", or wonder if we've "been taken".

The gift economy of a community based on love and honoring gives multiple benefits, and fulfills our emotional as well as material needs, while providing the glue of love and trust essential to any enduring relationship.

*** LIVING FROM THE HEART**

Excess material wealth and numbers, inequity, and unconcern for the rest of life poison our souls. *Taking from* rather than *caring for* others closes off our hearts. Closing ourselves off from the pain we cause loses us the connectedness that gives life meaning. It sentences us to a life of psychological and emotional barrenness and meaningless existence. The only thing that can alleviate this pain is love, and opening ourselves to the vulnerability and pain of allowing love even in the face of our unloving behavior.[6](#)

A world where everyone wears masks, hides their feelings, and closes off connection with what lies outside their skin leads quickly to collective insanity. We grow up thinking we're weird because we're not happy - when all we are seeing is the masks that hide the feelings of inadequacy, unhappiness, anger and confusion of others. We close ourselves off from the flow of energy that generates, pervades and nurtures all life, with resulting illness and atrophy of our own lives.

In truth, we can't lie. Our unconscious interconnectedness knows the difference between what comes from the heart and what comes from the head. In the absence of experiencing living from the heart, we mistake our own masks and those of others for the underlying reality.

The actions necessary to move from a world of greed and violence to one of generosity and giving are simple and can be initiated by any of us. Speak from the heart. Let down our masks. Be willing to be vulnerable, and open our hearts to others. Honor and hold sacred all life. Deal with the roots of our fears. Learn to give. Seek wisdom and joy, not power.

These changes involve humility, trust, and vulnerability; facing and dealing with pain and its causes; dealing directly with hard questions of equity and fairness; and a 180 degree shift in the goals and operation of every aspect of our society. This sounds daunting, until we begin to understand and personally experience the deep personal and social rewards of those changes and the vast improvement in effectiveness inherent in them.

When we speak from the heart, we speak the truth - our truth. It may not be a universal truth, but it is a real truth grown out of the unique life and experience of each of us. I can take your truth and add it to mine, and find a greater one. Your fear of losing a job if we cut back on overlogging or wasteful oil use is as real as my fear of a bigger collapse if we don't. In the open, we can take each of these truths and bring them together into a more encompassing one. And the acknowledgment of our individual realities can make it possible to work together to find solutions that encompass both.

Speaking from the heart, we can touch real issues, fight real demons, and make real progress. We can achieve true consensus and group support for all actions. With that, we lose all patience with the invisible walls created by our conventional patterns and rituals of conferences and meetings and confrontations which prevent real progress.

Living from the heart is the essence of true connection needed for sustainable and effective interpersonal relationships. It yields both the opportunity for others to understand and give to us, and for us to find right

action in our interaction with others. It helps us gain the true rewards of self-esteem, mutual respect, and being of value to the community for our efforts - not just the material substitutes we settle for today.

*** SACRED SURROUNDINGS**

Living in a sacred way transforms our surroundings as well as our lives. Not promoting consumption removes advertising from busses and billboards and the public eye. Living from the heart transforms our cities into ones which reflect passions, not inner poverty. Stabilizing our population and learning to give can transform our communities physically. Putting our effort into *better*, rather than *more*, our cities can, like cities such as Prague, come to reflect the culmination of pouring a thousand years of love into the places we live.[7](#)

Learning to honor all of creation gives all of creation an honored place in our surroundings - trees for *trees*, not trees for shade or cooling or recreation parks. Like the hill towns of Spain, the mountain villages of Austria, or the countryside of India, shrines and places of silence give ways to express thanks, to connect deeply with the rest of creation, to honor the special power and energy of a place, and for our surroundings to express the sacredness with which we hold them.

Such communities find new ways to express a new unfolding of our understanding of the wonders of the universe and our place in it. These new reflections of our understanding are inevitably different from, yet capable of the same power as French gothic cathedrals, Japanese Zen gardens, Angkor Wat, or Persian mosques,

Sustainable communities require that we learn to make where we *are* paradise, rather than to seek it through endless travel. In them, we discover the special soul of each place and the ways to build and live in harmony with it; with ecological sensitivity, natural energy flows and native materials. Replacing tourism with pilgrimage transforms our energy in visiting and sharing places other than our own.[8](#)

These changes bring an unprecedented depth and richness of meaning to our surroundings and how they interact with our lives. Places have souls, and can connect with and enrich our own.

Living in a sacred way, our surroundings become sacred to us, and reflect the sacred values underlying our lives. They take on layer after layer of meaning and value to us, and become loved and inviolate in their own right. At the same time, they give power and strength to our lives and direct our actions into healthy paths. There is no way, as Chief Seattle said, we can treat our surroundings without reverence when the earth itself is composed of the ashes of our ancestors.

*** CHANGE FROM A LEGAL TO A SACRED BASIS FOR SOCIETY**

Our society has been based on a legalistic structure - of limited commitments easy to break. In that kind of system, those embracing greed have unmatched rewards and incentives to win. As a result, endless regulations are inevitable to even partly control the damage. The only true alternative is to find a basis for our lives and actions which makes harmful action inconceivable and rare, rather than the rule. Simple regulations then are needed only to embody and convey consensus on right action. That basis for our lives must be a sacred one.

Why a *sacred* basis of society? Nothing less than that - our holding sacred the health of our surroundings

and the well-being of all life will ensure that we act strongly enough or soon enough to ensure that health and well-being.

It doesn't take long being with someone we love, to realize that there is no way we can be happy if the person we love is dissatisfied or unhappy. Their happiness is our delight, and their lack of happiness quickly shadows our own.

Anything or anyone we spend time with and come to understand, we come to love - warts, wrinkles and all. When we love something, we cannot be happy ourselves unless the health and well-being of what we love is ensured. Loving thus results in making the well-being of what is loved inviolate. That is the essence of holding something sacred, and the glue of life - not laws and government regulations. All follows from that.

Honor ourselves. Honor others. Honor all life.

When we do that, the absurdity of an agriculture based on violent and futile insecticides, herbicides, and pesticides becomes obvious, as does that of a medical system based on primary use of anti-biotics to attempt to kill parts of the web of life that sustains us. We learn, rather, to deal with *causes* of the imbalances that allow unbalanced growth of one part of life.

A basis to social interaction that nurtures rather than drains, tied to creating happiness rather than fighting, creates good and creates wealth for society through its process as well as its product. Its greater effectiveness in managing society's resources is merely a bonus.

*** LIFE WITHOUT FAILURE**

Drumming is different from traditional western music which has a *right* sequence of notes and a *right* way of playing. Once entrained by the beat of drumming, it leads us without conscious effort to be part of the shared rhythm, and blesses us with the inability to do wrong. With drumming or any improvisational music, variations we make within it only enrich the music and make it respond to the immediacy of time and place within which it is occurring.

The music breaks only when we fail to incorporate whatever happens into it. One 'wrong note' is an error. It stands out that we didn't mean it. But if we repeat it again - however odd it may have been - embrace it and draw it in, acknowledge it and incorporate it, it becomes part of the path of the music. It sets the participants a new challenge, and sets the music off in a new direction. A good way to approach life, too, perhaps!

All participatory music makes clear that paying to hear the best performer in the world cannot match the joy of *being part* of the making of the music, or the dance, or the song. Taking part gives pleasure - to us and to others at the same time. It gives us full-body experience, learning, and catharsis. It leaves us self-esteem rather than a feeling of inferiority and of never being able to equal the professional. It gives us the value of enjoyment, beauty, and pleasure inherent in the rhythms of life, without money, skill, or fancy equipment. What a wonderful thing, and model for life - a way of living designed for success, not failure!

Being an integral "fail-proof" part of something evolving organically and beautifully is a joyful reward whether music or the ongoing creation of all life. It gives powerful meaning and context for our lives and direction for our actions. It overturns our values of "privacy" to do our own thing without distraction from something "outside", and replaces it with enjoyment and interest in the news and activities of the family or community in which we live.

We have related to the world outside our skin as something separate from us - 'others', the 'environment'. Yet there is no way we can be separate from the health of what surrounds us; from the air, food, life, and energy that we draw back and forth across that boundary of "our skin".

The world was not created for us - we are part of it. As much as we are 'humans', we are also an incredibly complex group culture that mitochondria have developed. We are the technological innovation of rock to transport itself and give it a particular perception and voice. We are a creation of plants to transform the toxic oxygen wastes they release into the air back into the carbon dioxide they need for photosynthesis.

We are as well a beautiful element in the conscious body of a planet, and a local "standing wave" vortex in the energy song that generates nodes of complexity in local regions of the universe. We can see ourselves in many ways as part of nature, life, and creation. What we cannot do is to continue to see ourselves as something *apart* from nature and outside of its rules.

Like failure-proof ways of self-expression, seeing ourselves as not bound by our skins, as a part of the wonderful song of creation, can give a greater sense of meaning and worth to our lives.

As we find joy in being part of the evolving songs of life, we see the identity, attachment and meaning we have found as individuals and family expand to that of community, nation, planet, and all creation often held in other cultures. We come to see our ancestors and descendants as part of the thread of life and giving that is our own, and to see even the stars, the rocks, and all life around us as kin.

"Fail-proof" patterns of work and relationships are inherent parts of achieving sustainability, restoring self-esteem, healing our emotional damage, and learning to honor and know our selves as a vital and integral part of life and the goals we pursue in it. A meaningful identity with the broader flows of life also enrich and deepen our self-esteem and emotional health.

*** VITAL RESOURCES ARE INNER ONES**

Limited material resources make us again aware of the power and value of our *inner* resources. We've forgotten what many of them are - *will, courage, giving, endurance, anger, fear, love, curiosity, passion, intuition, resolution, resistance, wisdom, cunning, compulsion, restraint, joy, wit, hopefulness, rashness, caution, wonder, pride, humility, gratitude, forgiveness* - to name a few.

Use of these resources involves us *personally* in the act of creating. It gives the tangible rewards of self-esteem, confidence, and community respect for our accomplishments. In many fields, the wise use of inner resources is far more vital to accomplishment than any material resources.

These resources acknowledge that our emotions are vital dimensions of our lives coming from our hearts - dimensions to be respected and used as guides and sources of energy, not brushed aside in favor of what comes only from our heads. They acknowledge the power and value of our inherent interconnectedness with others and with all life. They connect us with magic, and the power that lies outside the limits of the rational.

The patterns of life and interaction in a sustainable community give continual reminder that we, and the resources within each of us, are one of the most vital resources of our society and planet. Our challenge is to develop them rather than ignoring them in preference for depleting material resources.

* **ENERGY PERMEATES ALL**

We are bathed in and permeated by energy from the sun - far, far greater amounts and broader spectra of energy than the visible light that fuels photosynthesis and supports the metabolism of life. The earth's magnetic fields and rotating iron core induce much of that energy into the earth itself and its atmosphere.

You might expect the multitude of life forms that have emerged on this planet to have seized upon this, like any energy source, to fuel and inform their life. And so they have.

Matter is congealed energy, and our bodies and the physical world around us the congealed patterns of matter that have formed around a matrix of energy. In a sense, our energy bodies are more primary than our physical ones, and the processes and relationships there more basic than in our physical bodies. And they are profoundly interconnected.

Our sciences in the 20th century have ignored this energy dimension of our existence - in part because of that very interconnectedness. This, in spite of almost a hundred different cultures having described energy or auric field phenomena, many with detailed healing practices for both people and place and the accepted success of acupuncture, kinesiology, and other healing practices based on this energy dimensions of our lives.

Many people have personally experienced the '*chi*' of yoga, tai chi, or acupuncture. We find ourselves consistently happy or uncomfortable with the '*feng-shui*' energy of certain places. It is no longer possible to deny such things that we have repeatedly and clearly experienced personally. Yet a shift to truly acknowledging that energy dimension of life means realizing we are intrinsically and inseparably one with the rest of creation. And we can no longer support our old values and actions once we do that.

Experience of this aspect of existence profoundly changes our view of our lives and our world. Nurturing energy flows that course through our bodies except when we block them off; existence as nodes in a continuous interconnecting field of energy rather than discrete, separate objects; spiritual healing; being so coherently interlinked with others that our thoughts and memories are one; walking in the fields of incipient form where things and events take shape - strange and unexpected new worlds open before us.

To touch on the edges of these worlds totally changes our perceptions, our values, and the lives and actions which can sustain health and achieve our potentials. It transforms health, healing, and medical practices. It gives us a totally new understanding of the use of dance, song, and ritual by traditional cultures to align, and to align with, harmonic vibrations in the earth. It opens vast new avenues of research in physics and science. It restores and opens new dimensions to our lives and our concepts of the possible.

The patterns and values which underlie sustainable communities give rise to new perceptions, world views, and awareness of the nature of life. These, in turn, bear bountiful fruit in generating more effective and meaningful patterns and practices of living.

* **NOBILITY, NOT MOBILITY**

Our cities reflect a curious pattern of values and goals - great volumes of work spaces isolated and disconnected from true productive work; zoning-segregated and mutually contradictory fragments of lives;

and above all - mobility. Mobility is a curious disease - justifiable only in allowing access to places that are different, but in the process requiring that all places become alike.

Sustainability, and the life-nurturing values upon which it is based,⁹ gives us opportunity to set new goals for a society which is floundering without meaning and without direction. Equity, security, sustainability, responsibility, giving, and sacredness are its principles, and initial goals. Beyond that? Perhaps *nobility*, not mobility. Excellence. Wisdom. Harmony. Being a part of creation and the evolution of new possibilities.

Immense opportunity beckons.

The new values, world-view, and nature of relationships in a sustainable community give opportunities and impetus to defining and attaining new and vastly more meaningful goals for society.

A familiar feeling wells up in a book about South African Archbishop Desmond TuTu:

"We Africans speak about a concept difficult to render in English. We speak of UBUNTU or BOTHO. You know when it is there, and it is obvious when it is absent. It has to do with what it means to be truly human. It refers to gentleness, to compassion, to hospitality, to openness to others, to vulnerability, to be available for others and to know that you are bound up with them in the bundle of life, for a person is only a person through other persons."

These same characteristics distinguish what it is like to live as part of a sacred and empowering world in absolute contrast to the characteristics of life in a world of greed and self-centeredness.

* * *

Such a future is not inevitable, but *is* possible. Achieving it and avoiding the alternative of collapse and destruction inherent in our present patterns requires our commitment and living that future into being. When we look in awe at the achievements in South Africa in recent years, we know that miracles do exist, that we can achieve the impossible and create for ourselves a future worth living for!

We belong to the world. We belong to life. It is a glorious thing to behold and be part of the ongoing creation of life. We are finding that the creation of which we are part is even more awesome than ever imagined. Casting our lives into the balance on the side of life - of becoming and being a part of the ongoing evolution of new, more unexpected, and ever more wonderful combinations of life - is a future to brighten all of our dreams.

TOM BENDER

38755 Reed Rd.
Nehalem OR 97131 USA
503-368-6294
© October 1996
tbender@nehalem1.net

1 See my *"Eco-Building II"*, May 1996, In Context, Issue 44, August 1996; or Environmental Building News, July 1996 for more detail, and *"Some Questions We Haven't Asked"*, April 1996 for more detail on achieving those savings.

2 It's now more than 23 years since I first showed that this order of magnitude improvements were possible in *"Living Lightly: Energy Conservation in Housing"* 1973. See also the many progress reports of the Rocky Mountain Institute, 1739 Snowmass Creek Rd., Snowmass CO 81654; work of the Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems, 8604 F.M. 969, Austin TX

78724; and John Todd's work with biological water purification at Center for the Restoration of Waters, One Locust Street, Falmouth MA 02540. Also Lovins and van Weizsacher's upcoming FACTOR FOUR, and Lovins and Hawken's upcoming NATURAL CAPITALISM.

3 See my HEART OF PLACE, Dec. 1993, for how these manifest in one aspect of society.

4 See HEART OF PLACE, above, or E.F. Schumacher's *"Buddhist Economics"* in SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL, 1974; or my ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN PRIMER, 1973.

5 See my *"Sewage is Art - The Healing of Place with Chi"*, June 1995 for what happens when we apply this to a building project.

6 See my *"Shedding a Skin That No Longer Fits"*, March, 1996 for a deeper discussion.

7 See my *"Sacred Roots of Sustainable Design"*, Sept. 1995

8 See HEART OF PLACE, above.

9 See my SHARING SMALLER PIES. Monograph. 1975. *"New Values"* section reprinted in RAIN, April 1975; NEW AGE JOURNAL, Nov. 1975; THE FUTURIST, 1976; RESETTLING AMERICA, Gary Coates, ed. Brick House, 1981. Excerpted in UTNE READER, Fall 1987. See also *"Shedding a Skin..."* above.