



MURLEY CENTURY ARTS

Recommended Reading

essay on the future: More Happiness, Less Stuff

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More happiness, less stuff. It's the conclusion I've been drawing lately on the speaking circuit, as I describe my reworking of a famous equation by Paul and Anne Ehrlich from their book *The Population Bomb*—the environmental impact equation. It is a mathematical depiction of the negative impact of population, affluence, and technology on the environment. As I work through to a new solution, I make the case for minimizing negative technologies and maximizing beneficial technologies. We wind up with less affluence (less stuff), but more happiness. This always gets a big reaction—audiences love the idea of more happiness, less stuff. So why do we find ourselves in the mess that we're in, environmentally and socially speaking?

Industrialism—the industrial system of which we are each a part—developed in a different world from the one in which we live today: fewer people, more plentiful natural resources, simpler lifestyles, less stuff. It made perfect sense to exploit nature to increase human productivity—300 years ago! These days, with people overly abundant and nature scarce and diminishing, industry mines, extracts, shovels, burns, wastes, pumps, and disposes of four million pounds of material to provide one average, middle class American family its needs for a year. With the whole world aspiring to the American standard of living, that cannot go on in a finite Earth. And it is finite. You can see it from space; that's all there is, and there isn't any more. The rate of material throughput—the metabolism of the industrial system—is now endangering prosperity, as much as enhancing it, and the toxicity of some of that stuff is really endangering the biosphere, thus everyone's health—ours and that of the 30 million other species that share the biosphere with us. Clearly, it is manifestly the wrong thing to do.

When you talk of viewing environmental destruction as the “wrong thing to do,” you're talking about what I see as a shifting mind-set, a growing sense of ethics. This growing sense of ethics might be the push we need to find our way out of the mess that we're in.

In the final analysis, the ethical thing—the right thing to do—is driven by enlightened self interest. The study of ecology tells us we are part of nature, not above or outside it. It also tells us that what we do to the web of life we do to ourselves. Industrial ecology tells us the industrial system, as it operates today, simply cannot continue on taking, making, wasting—abusing the web of life. The industrial system takes too much, extracting and frittering away Earth's natural capital on wants, not needs. It wastes too much. It abuses too much. It takes stuff and makes stuff that very quickly ends up in landfills or incinerators—more waste, more abuse, more pollution. I'm told that less than 3 percent of the throughput of the entire industrial system has any value six months afterward. We industrialists operate a waste-making machine. Each of us is part of the problem—either as producer, specifier, user, or consumer.

I believe that a sustainable society depends totally and absolutely on a new mind shift to deeply embrace ethical values—values that, along with an enlightened self-interest, drive us to make new decisions. I also believe that it doesn't happen quickly. It happens one mind at a time, one organization at a time, one building, one company, one community, one region, one new, clean technology, one industry, one supply chain at a time—until the entire industrial system has been transformed into a sustainable system existing ethically in balance with Earth's natural systems, upon which every living thing is utterly dependent. Again, what we do to the web of life, we do to ourselves.

So what about this sacred shrine of growth and affluence, the one that fuels the extractive, abusive, and linear technologies upon which we are so dependent? How do we make the shift? How do we decide, if we are moving toward a sustainable society, what should grow? What should not grow?

Here are some thoughts to stimulate your thinking: The lowest impact technologies, those that are beneficial, should grow. The abusive technologies should shrink and eventually disappear. The sale of services should grow. The sale of products should shrink. Applied brainpower should grow. Applied brute force should shrink. Market shares for the sustainable companies should grow. For companies that are not sustainable, market shares should shrink—to zero.

Each of us has a role to play, each of us has power. The power to vote, with our dollar and our ballot. The power to shape commerce, with what we buy and don't buy. We have power as individuals and collectively as a community. We each make choices, large and small, every day, that translate into power—power to change the paradigm.

To get where we need to go requires a vast mind shift that leads to a cumulative and collective mandate: Less stuff, more happiness. Will we get there in time?