

GARDENING AS A SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY

Daniel L. Dustin

Professor, Department of Recreation, Parks & Tourism
San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182-0368

The following text was given as the opening address to the Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium in Saratoga Springs, New York on April 7, 1991. It characterizes a mismatch between the environmental problems confronting the planet and our human capacity to perceive them and do something about them. Based on that characterization, ways in which we might begin to behave in the light of our limitations as a species as well as our potentials are discussed. The text concludes by considering the metaphorical power of gardening as a practical means for curing what ails us.

We live in a crazy world. Or so it seems. Weather reports in Los Angeles admonish millions of us not to go outside because of the poor air quality and we do not even flinch. At the same time, the plight of two -- count them -- two grey whales trapped in an Alaskan ice floe captures national attention, tugs at our hearts, and prompts calls for immediate action. Meanwhile, half way around the globe, we are gripped by the news of one American's abduction by Middle Eastern terrorists while in our own back yard the deaths of thousands of Americans every day from preventable automobile accidents, heart disease, smoking, and the consumption of drugs and alcohol go unnoticed.

What's going on here? Why is it that we are oblivious to the real environmental hazards threatening our existence on this planet while preoccupying ourselves with transient matters that are, in the course of things, likely to be of little consequence? Why do we behave the way we do? And what can we do about it?

I have come to believe that we human beings are biologically ill-equipped to deal effectively with the environmental problems confronting the world today, that there is a fundamental mismatch between the nature of those problems and our ability to perceive them and do something about them, and that if we are to have any hope of turning things around, we must better understand the causes of the mismatch so that we might begin to act in the light of our limitations as a species as well as our potentials.

To foster that understanding, it is first necessary to appreciate the context out of which we present day humans evolved. Such appreciation is difficult to effect because of the immensity of the time involved, but it can be made easier by condensing that time into the equivalent of one calendar year. If midnite January 1 represents the "Big Bang," the origin of the universe, then every day thereafter represents approximately 41 million years. At this rate, the formation of the earth does not even take place until September 14. Dinosaurs emerge on Christmas Eve only to disappear by December 28, the same day flowers bloom for the first time. And we human beings do not make our entrance until 10:30 p.m. on New Year's Eve. Finally, all of recorded human history takes place in the last 10 seconds of the year (Sagan 1977).

This cosmic calendar illustrates vividly two essential points about human evolution. First, the climb up from our watery origins was a long and laborious one, consuming over three

months of the year. Second, our ability to change the face of the earth in cataclysmic ways has happened only in the last one second.

Embedded in these numbers is the source of our human predicament. They reveal that our mental machinery, the way we take in the world and make sense out of it, was forged eons ago. Indeed scientists tell us there has been no appreciable change in either the size of our brain or the way the brain functions for thousands of years. What this means is that almost all of our biological evolution took place long before the times in which we live, and long before we fashioned tools powerful enough to destroy the earth.

Biologically, then, we are wired for a world that no longer exists. Our nervous system was formed in a relatively stable environment where only recognition of dramatic changes in our immediate surroundings -- a sudden movement, a breaking branch, an unfamiliar noise -- spelled the difference between life and death. In that world it paid to filter out the familiar, the common place, the slow to change. We learned over a long period of time to take note of certain things and to ignore the rest. It is a way of processing the world that characterizes us still.

What we have inherited is a mental mismatch of gigantic proportions. On the one hand, we are biologically predisposed to concentrate on the transitory, the fleeting, the passing moment; hence our concern for the precarious position of two grey whales trapped in the ice and our interest in the sudden kidnapping of an American overseas. On the other hand, that same biological predisposition discourages us from noticing changes marked by a slower cadence, changes that take years or even decades to be felt; hence our obliviousness to the gradually eroding quality of the air we breathe and our disinterest in the common place deaths resulting from familiar hazards of contemporary life.

The problem is that most environmental crises jeopardizing the earth have not announced themselves. They have proceeded at a snail's pace, too slow to signal our alarm, and too fast to adapt to biologically. This is true of deteriorating air and water quality, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion in the atmosphere, acid rain, vanishing species, the destruction of tropical rain forests, the leeching of nutrients from farmland, urban sprawl, overpopulation, toxification of nuclear wastes, and the decline and fall of quality recreation opportunities and environments. One has to wonder, given the large gap between the pace of our biological and cultural evolution, just what will become of us? We are not unlike television's "The Simpsons," Neanderthal-like creatures struggling to survive in a world of our own making that nonetheless seems out of control.

Exacerbating the situation is our age-old habit of simplifying the world in which we live to facilitate its understanding. Since we can't possibly process all incoming stimuli, we have evolved mental sorting mechanisms to filter them. These default positions of the human mind automatically channel our thinking in certain ways (Ornstein and Ehrlich 1989). They encourage us to "look for discrepancies in the world, to ignore what is going on constantly, and to respond quickly to sudden shifts, to emergencies, to scarcity, to the immediate and personal, to 'news.'" (Ornstein and Ehrlich, p. 91) What they result in are mere caricatures of reality, caricatures that may have worked well enough in bygone times, but that obscure rather than clarify the reality of our present world.

The Exxon Valdez incident is a case in point. When the tanker ran aground in March of 1989 discharging millions of gallons of oil into Prince William Sound, the suddenness of it all, the sense of urgency, the emergency, triggered our primeval "fight or flight" response. It was tailor-made for the default systems of the human mind. It was news. It was an environmental crisis that had announced itself. If only Captain Hazelwood had not been drinking, we reassured ourselves, everything would have been just fine. Or would it?

What was obscured by the commotion over the Exxon Valdez disaster was the reality of a disaster of larger proportions, a disaster that would have been fueled by the Exxon Valdez only if it had delivered its cargo to port intact. For if the 10,000,000 gallons of oil that despoiled the Gulf of Alaska would have reached the gasoline tanks of America's automobiles, they would have fed into the much larger environmental crisis caused by the increased spewing of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. That crisis, however, is not one our default systems are designed to register. Indeed the global warming crisis is all too reminiscent of the "boiled frog" syndrome. Put a frog in a pan of slowly heating water and the frog will not detect the gradual rise in temperature. It will sit there until it boils to death. Is it possible that we human beings are not that much different?

Our caricatures of the world not only misrepresent its complexity, they also lead us to adopt solutions to problems that are themselves caricatures or simplifications of what needs to be done. We are attracted to the promise of a quick fix or magic bullet to cure what ails us when in reality what is needed is the discipline of a long term commitment, a long term program of care, a long term change in behavior. Health fads come quickly to mind, as do pie-in-the-sky promises of aspiring politicians, as does the naive notion that if Exxon is forced to shell out enough money everything will be just fine. The prescriptions for our maladies are touted as fast and painless and, to make them palatable, are advertised as being of no significant cost to anyone. Is it any wonder they are seldom of significant value to anyone?

We are, in sum, living in a world of accelerated change where our cultural evolution -- our creativity, our inventiveness, our technological know-how -- far outpaces our biological evolution, our ability to perceive the consequences of our actions and then to do something about them. We are increasingly out of step with our own nature.

For most of human history this has not been a significant problem. That's because, "humanity, until very recently, lived almost entirely on its 'income' -- solar energy captured by green plants in fields, on farms and in forests by the process of photosynthesis. Now, thanks to cultural evolution, humanity is living largely on its 'capital' -- nonrenewable resources." (Ornstein and Ehrlich, p. 45) We are living on our savings. One of the principal questions of our time, both for the individual family and for the human family as a whole, is how long can this go on?

As Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich argue persuasively in their book *New World New Mind*, our triumph has not been in adapting to or understanding the natural world, but in transforming that world to make it a more hospitable place for our species. The irony results from the Pogo-like realization that in this triumph we have become our own worst enemy and that, barring a fundamental change in the way we live our lives, we may do ourselves in from within.

If we are to extricate ourselves from this predicament, we must recognize our shortcomings and mend the error of our ways. We human beings are fortunate in this sense because we have the capacity to step outside ourselves, to observe and reflect upon our own circumstances. Self-awareness distinguishes us from other life forms and offers us the possibility of recovery from ill-conceived acts. So it is that the same process of cultural evolution, the same process that is responsible for our major environmental crises, offers us the hope of turning things around. For if this same creativity, this same inventiveness, this same technological know-how, can be recast in ways that consciously allow us to change our thinking, then there is still hope for a healthier and happier future for us all. The burning question, of course, is how do we go about doing it?

I have little hope for political solutions to our environmental problems. I say this for two reasons. First, politicians are ill-suited to offer leadership in dealing with environmental crises. Crises that evolve over long periods of time, or that demand long periods of commitment to resolve, or that demand long and costly programs of care to mitigate, or that demand significant changes in individual behavior to be done away with, simply do not play well to the voting public. What politician in his or her right mind is going to take a stand on an issue that will principally benefit generations of voters yet unborn? Politicians understand this. They know they must promise immediate results if they are to get elected. They also know that to have any chance of getting re-elected they must give the appearance, however false, that everything is progressing on schedule. Successful politicians are masters of the caricature, of presenting the illusion that everything is hunky-dory. It is a skill akin to acting. If recent history teaches us anything about politics, it is how well such acting works on the American public. If it teaches us anything else, it is that, however entertaining, masters of this craft are not likely to get the job done.

Second, and more importantly, I do not see the major environmental crises confronting the world as public problems. Indeed the ease with which most of us are inclined to elevate such problems to a global level puzzles me. What we seem to be saying, in effect, is that if only this business or that business would behave responsibly, if only this public agency or that public agency would behave responsibly, if only this country or that country would behave responsibly, if only they...they... they.... Why is it that we always blame someone else?

We are the ones who demand increasing amounts of gasoline for our cars. We are the ones who eat beef raised in Central and South America. We are the ones who spray chlorofluorocarbons into the atmosphere. We are the ones who insist on a bigger house in the suburbs. We are the ones who dream of visiting exotic and faraway places. We are the ones who are never satisfied with what we have. We are the ones who don't know the meaning of enough. We...we...we are the guilty ones. We need look no farther than into the nearest mirror to see who is really responsible for the state of the world.

We also need look no farther than into the nearest mirror to see who really is in a position to do something about the state of the world, to see who really is in a position to make a difference. Garrett Hardin (1985), in his book *Filters Against Folly*, admonishes us to "never globalize a problem if it can possibly be dealt with locally." By globalizing problems we shove them away to some distant authority so we can evade culpability. It's a way of turning our problems into their problems. It's a way of getting out from under the burden of responsibility. In the long run it is failure's way.

What, then, can one individual do to make a difference in this world? There are several things. But first let me be clear about expectations. If my reasoning has been persuasive, if the environmental crises facing us are as monumental as they appear to be, if as much of our evolutionary biology works against the effective resolution of these crises as I think it does, then obviously I can prescribe no simple remedies. On the contrary, all I can prescribe are ways in which an individual can proceed in the context of his or her own life. In doing so, I recognize the cumulative possibilities, the potential synergistic effects of individual actions considered collectively, but I do not dwell on them. For to do so would be to obscure the significance of that one individual who, against all odds, seizes the initiative. That individual, whoever she or he may be, is destined to be the real savior of this planet.

As a first step, I recommend the conscious slowing down of our lives. This recommendation may seem illogical in an age when everything else is speeding up, when we feel heightened pressure to keep up with the Joneses, but that is precisely why downshifting is called for. Recall that our "old" minds are programmed to respond quickly to visceral issues, to the rapid unfolding of events. We are designed to be quick on the draw. Yet sudden reactions to surface appearances result in short-lived, poorly chosen courses of action. "New-mindedness" demands removing ourselves from the immediacy of things, pondering the long-term implications, thinking before we leap. New-mindedness means developing the habit of stepping back from the fray.

The recent Yellowstone fires are illustrative. Remember the hullabaloo over the crackling events of the summer of 1988? Remember the clamor, the uproar over what ought to be done? Remember the concern for the immediate economic consequences for tourism? Remember the politicians demanding William Penn Mott's resignation as National Park Service Director because his fire policy did not bring a quick solution to that "horrible ecological disaster"?

Fortunately, calmer heads prevailed. Director Mott was not removed from office. The fires gradually were subdued with the assistance of God-given snow, and within a year of the fires' extinction the scientific community had concluded that the fires were not the disaster they were made out to be, that they were likely part of an age-old pattern of periodic burnoff. But what if we had allowed the heat of our emotional or political response to dictate our course of action? Where would those policies have led us in the long run?

Do you remember as well that all the while our national attention was fixed on Yellowstone, all the while our senses were glued to the smoldering imagery, all the while our caricature of the nation's first national park going up in smoke was calling us to action, thousands of miles away to the southeast a national park was really dying, and continues to die, a slow and insidious death? While the Yellowstone fires may have captured our flair for the dramatic, for the theatrical, for "news," the death of Everglades National Park for the lack of a drink of water goes virtually unnoticed. Old minds can be excused for that oversight. New minds cannot.

Perhaps by slowing down we will be better able to see such unannounced crises and do something about them. Perhaps by slowing down we will begin to appreciate more deeply the backdrop against which our human drama unfolds. Perhaps by slowing down we will be more inclined to give that backdrop its proper care. I know such a slowing down will not come easily. I know it will demand a conscious effort, a disciplining of the

mind. I know as well that we have it within ourselves to effect such a slowdown if we so desire.

Second, I recommend scaling down our list of "necessities," of consciously living below our means. This, too, is a tall order. There is an old saying among backpackers that what one doesn't carry in one's head one must carry on one's back. I think the saying can be applied to the general conduct of our lives also. If indeed we are living increasingly on our savings, on the earth's limited nonrenewable natural resources, then it behooves each and every one of us to draw as little as possible on that savings, to carry proportionately more of what is necessary to live a full and satisfying life in our heads. We need to measure the fullness of our lives not by the number of our possessions, but by the quality of our relationships with others and by the degree to which we continue to learn and grow intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. We need to get the weight off our backs, to lighten our physical loads.

I wonder why this is such a difficult thing to do? Philip Slater (1970), in his book *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, questioned the custom of sacrificing our lives for the accumulation of dead things. Where is the wisdom in expending our life's energy for the sake of things that in and of themselves are lifeless, for things that do not have the capacity to receive or tender affection and care? Where is the meaning in that kind of existence? Wouldn't it be better to recognize such things for what they are, mere fillers for an otherwise hollow life, and turn our attention to issues that really matter?

Third, I recommend stepping down from our anthropocentric pedestals to assume a more humble position among the creations of the earth. I encourage us to cultivate a lifestyle characterized by reverence and restraint. Just as we are awed by our own accomplishments, by our own ingenuity, we must exercise the humility that allows us to be awed by all that is beyond our making and our ken.

We must never forget that history is written by the "winners." There are histories untold and future histories waiting to be written. Who will write our history? Do we ever consider the possibility that it will be written by somebody or something other than ourselves? Will our history be written by the wind swirling over America's Great Plains, made parched and lifeless by shortsighted agricultural practices? Will our history be written by the silence of a planet made barren by the greenhouse effect? Will our history be written by the cold and emptiness of an earth no longer fit for life because of a nuclear holocaust? Or will our history be written by our children in celebration of their parents' good sense in mending the error of their ways and in developing new patterns of behaving and relating to the world around them?

If I were asked to propose a tangible first step, an individual initiative that would lead us in the right direction, a revolutionary change in human conduct that would shake the very foundation of contemporary life, something our children could take great pride in writing about someday, I would propose that each and every one of us plant and tend a garden. Gardening, it seems to me, is the quintessential metaphor for all that I have been trying to say.

It is difficult to rush a garden. Planning is called for. Preparation of the soil is necessary. Decisions about what to plant, where to plant, and when to plant must be made. This all takes time. The weather matters. Precipitation is important. Temperature is a concern. One needs to think about the long term, about the relationship between this year's planting and

future plantings, about the ability of the soil to rejuvenate itself, about the recycling of wastes.

At the outset, then, "a person who undertakes to grow a garden at home, by practices that will preserve rather than exploit the economy of the soil, has set his [or her] mind decisively against what is wrong with us." (Berry 1970) Gardening demands slowing down and stepping back from the fray. It is an antidote to the accelerated pace of contemporary life. It is calm and calculating. It is marked by a slower cadence, a beat in step with the seasons. But gardening is more than that.

Gardening is also taking responsibility for the condition of one's own plot of ground. Gardening, if done organically, is a way of improving a piece of the earth. (Berry, p. 82) Unlike public officials or bureaucrats who talk in generalities from afar about the proper stewardship of the land, gardeners are down on all fours, with rolled up sleeves, actually doing something about it. They are "serving the world's future more directly and surely than any political leader, though they never utter a public word." (Berry, p. 80) They are illustrating that responsible husbandry of the earth's natural resources is carried out by individual citizens in everyday life.

Gardeners are also scaling down their dependency on middlemen for life's sustenance. As Wendell Berry points out, "most of the vegetables necessary for a family of four can be grown on a plot of forty by sixty feet." (Berry, p. 82) By reducing the need for the grocer, and the need for a car to get to the grocer, and the need to seek pleasure beyond the bounds of one's own back yard, the gardener is involved directly in reducing the drain on the earth's bank of limited natural resources, on the earth's savings. The gardener is relearning the ability to live on the earth's income, on the solar energy captured by green plants by the process of photosynthesis. The gardener is acquiring knowledge that leads toward greater self-sufficiency, toward a way of living that is based on the wisdom of carrying more in one's head than on one's back. Gardeners are choosing to live below their means.

Finally, gardening is a way of living the connectedness that defines our relationship with the earth. Gardeners are in step with their own nature, a nature forged in close proximity to things natural, a nature inextricably intertwined with the larger community of life. While delighting in the day-to-day progress of their work and the gradual appearance of the fruits of their labor, gardeners recognize their vulnerability to larger forces -- to unexpected droughts, to sudden storms, to drastic changes in temperature. Gardeners are both proud of and humbled by what they have accomplished. They are happy with their lot and are aware that things could have turned out otherwise. Gardeners know there are thanks to be given.

Perhaps you are bewildered by my comments? Here we are, after all, confronted by environmental problems of devastating proportions and all I have to offer is the planting of a garden. Where are my slogans, my petitions, my protest songs? Where are my references to civil disobedience? The world is falling apart before our very eyes and I can't even muster a drum roll, a clanging of cymbals, a rally to arms. I should be stirring everyone up, but instead I try to calm us down. I should be inciting us to immediate action, but instead I suggest tending a garden over time. Gardening. Some subversive activity that is. I should be shouting at the top of my lungs for all the world to hear, but instead I lower my voice and speak to you personally about what it is you can do to make a difference in the context of your own life. What's going on here? Why do I behave the way I do?

The future is open-ended. It is history waiting to be written. Whether we human beings will be treated kindly by future historians depends, I think, on the degree to which we begin to act with increasing recognition of our obligations to others, with an increasing sense of humility about our place in the order of things. On an evolutionary scale we are not so far removed from the animal kingdom. We have strong genetic ties to the past. But we also have the ability to rise above our bonds and dream of worlds unknown. That ability, and our capacity to make such dreams come true, give us cause for hope and fear. The challenge facing our human family is unparalleled. How we will respond to it is a question that is up in the air.

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