

The Extended Family Regroups

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There have been many changes in the eighty years I have been on this earth. These changes are all connected and together they have dictated how we are evolving as a species in all of the important areas of life, including our relationship to the environment and to each other. Our economic systems and environmental systems are both faltering and in my opinion this has been led by a turning away from human values in favor of corporate ones, particularly in the last 30 years, which as a result has separated out the young from the old.

After World War Two, young people moved across the country where the jobs were and that usually meant leaving the old folks behind. Grandparents became socially devalued - their roles of being social arbitrators and stewards of the land in rural and small town life, with important roles in how their grandchildren were raised were no longer needed or available. And the computer world has played a large role in driving a wedge between the young and the old, as old people were totally mystified by virtual reality. So elders were increasingly marginalized as their experience was no longer applicable to the modern world. We were encouraged to think of ourselves primarily as consumers of modern life. If we didn't have the resources to amuse ourselves on cruises then we could go play bingo or the slots, but just don't meddle in important affairs. The younger generation wouldn't presume to think we would have anything to contribute to how the economy and the environment should be managed, as modernity was a whole different ball game.

And yes, it was. And is. It's one where the idea that the corporate business model is also a model for life, and that it can be extended to include our relation to the environment, and even our most intimate relationships with each other. And if certain citizens cannot contribute as producers in the economy, then their needs will not be made a priority - and that means primarily children, the sick, the handicapped, and elders. But there is a price to be paid for putting all of our eggs in the corporate mentality basket. We may be facing the demise of the human race along with many other species. And it isn't just global warming; it is also the chemicalization of industry that is threatening the health of our species by seriously interfering with the human reproduction system, along with other diseases.

There is hope. But it won't come from governments or the corporate sector. Hope will come from people - plain, ordinary, regular people who know something is drastically wrong with living as though the bottom line is our collective supreme life's goal.

At times when I talk to little ones in school about trees and want them to understand the difference between an old growth forest and a tree farm I use the analogy of an extended family. I tell them that in a old growth forest the grandparents grow a special food that is shaken down to the little trees that is like a sort of super vitamin that will help the baby trees to stabilize and grow strong and these grandma and grandpa trees absorb lots of water during winter storms to keep the little ones from drowning and then give the young trees drinks of water when they are thirsty. I tell them the mama and papa trees shelter the young ones from the high winds so they won't fall down or blow away. So in these ways, the little trees are taken care of by all of the grown up relatives surrounding them. And then I contrast this to a tree farm where all of the little trees are the same age and they are all orphans because there are no grown up trees to care for them and they are periodically fed artificial food by people who are just paid to do this job and some of the orphans get drowned out or blown away. By this time some of the children are saying "Oh...aw" and the teacher begins to look a little

nervous and a few of the children seem ready to cry. So I back off.

But we're all adults here and I think the time for crying is past. I think we are all becoming more sensitive to the notion that in order to evolve as humans we need to rise above individual greed that the corporate value system has tried to instill in us all, and instead think community. I believe most of us will learn how to do things for ourselves again because we will simply have to. We will relearn how to make things, how to grow things, how to cook, sew, do carpentry, even in the cities. Especially in the cities we will learn how to conserve, trade, barter, how to collectively care for our woods and streams and stop looking at these life-sustaining resources as simply things to be used to create money.

I believe we are in a turning, a turning away and a turning toward. I think we will begin to value relationships and families in a new way; to recognize that family constellations can be composed of not only biological ties, but include created families where the ties are not necessarily biological but ones of affection and trust - families headed by single women and men, families headed by grandmothers, by gay couples, by childhood friends.

Never turning back, but a going forward with what we have learned...that a tree farm is not an old growth forest and that community is necessary for little ones to grow up healthy and strong - whether it is humans or trees; and that artificial food is not the real thing; and that elders bring resources that bottom-line think tanks cannot; and that the spiritual dimension that has been missing in our lives is vital to our survival. I'm not talking religion. I'm talking the love of life that is diminished when it is thought to be lurking in the latest toys and possessions instead of in family and community. I'm talking about the spiritual connection that comes from loving this earth and it's natural processes, including the processes of youth, middle age, and old age and learning not to fear any of them, but to embrace them all.