

Institute News

Listen to the Drumming

ICA Canada's Listen to the Drumming has sent a team of four volunteer facilitators to Kenya to support a locally-driven plan to provide HIV/AIDS testing, education, and care to all 6500 residents of the rural community, Il Ngwesi. They have assisted in conducting a baseline survey of all households to assess current health issues and HIV/AIDS awareness, facilitated strategic planning, and developed action plans for the next six months. ICA Canada is working to fundraise for this effort—we need the support of our membership!

Staff And Board Changes

DAVID BUWALDA has resigned as Fundraiser for Listen to the Drumming and has gone to volunteer in Kenya for the Il Ngwesi HIV voluntary counseling and testing initiative. EOWYNNE FEENEY has replaced David as the Fundraiser for Listen to the Drumming. LEAH TAYLOR has become the new Project Coordinator for the Youth As Facilitative Leaders program. CARA NAIMAN has left ICA Canada to work for the United Way.

FRED SIMONS has resigned as volunteer Executive Director and a new management system has been put in its place that has different people from the board taking over management of different programmes.

We wish all of you the very best of luck in your new endeavours and hope that your stay with us has been happy and personally profitable

Youth as Facilitative Leaders (YFL)

In Georgina, Ontario, ICA Canada's Youth as Facilitative Leaders (YFL) program has partnered with Earth Day Canada's ecoMentors program and Jericho Youth Centre, a local organization, to develop the Georgina Youth Mentorship (GYM) project. The project involves training Georgina youth as group facilitators, trainers and ecoMentors. Six youth have been trained as group facilitators as well as trainers through the YFL program and two of these six youth are currently leading the Tools for Teamwork and Group Facilitation workshops for their peers. Earth Day Canada's ecoMentors program is also currently on the verge of being rolled out in one of the three Georgina high schools and is hoped to be implemented in a second high school very shortly.

—Shelley Chapman, Coordinator, Georgina Youth Mentorship

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Individual members form a valuable part of our network and at ICA Canada we depend upon and deeply appreciate your support. As an Individual Member, you will be connected to ICA activities all over the world. You will receive a copy of our quarterly newsletter *Edges* and you will be a part of a great group of people who are committed to social responsibility in Canada and elsewhere. To become an Individual Member, please fill in the form below and send it to 655 Queen St. E. Toronto ON M4M 1G4 or simply reply by e-mail to membership@icacan.ca

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EDGES

NEW PLANETARY PATTERNS

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Mission Statement: ICA Canada

ICA Canada exists to develop the capacity of all people to contribute to positive social change through research, publishing, education and social change projects that demonstrate positive social change.

Statement of Purpose for *Edges*

Edges highlights new cultural patterns and fresh approaches to participation and social change.

The opinions in *Edges* articles do not necessarily represent the policies or views of ICA Canada.

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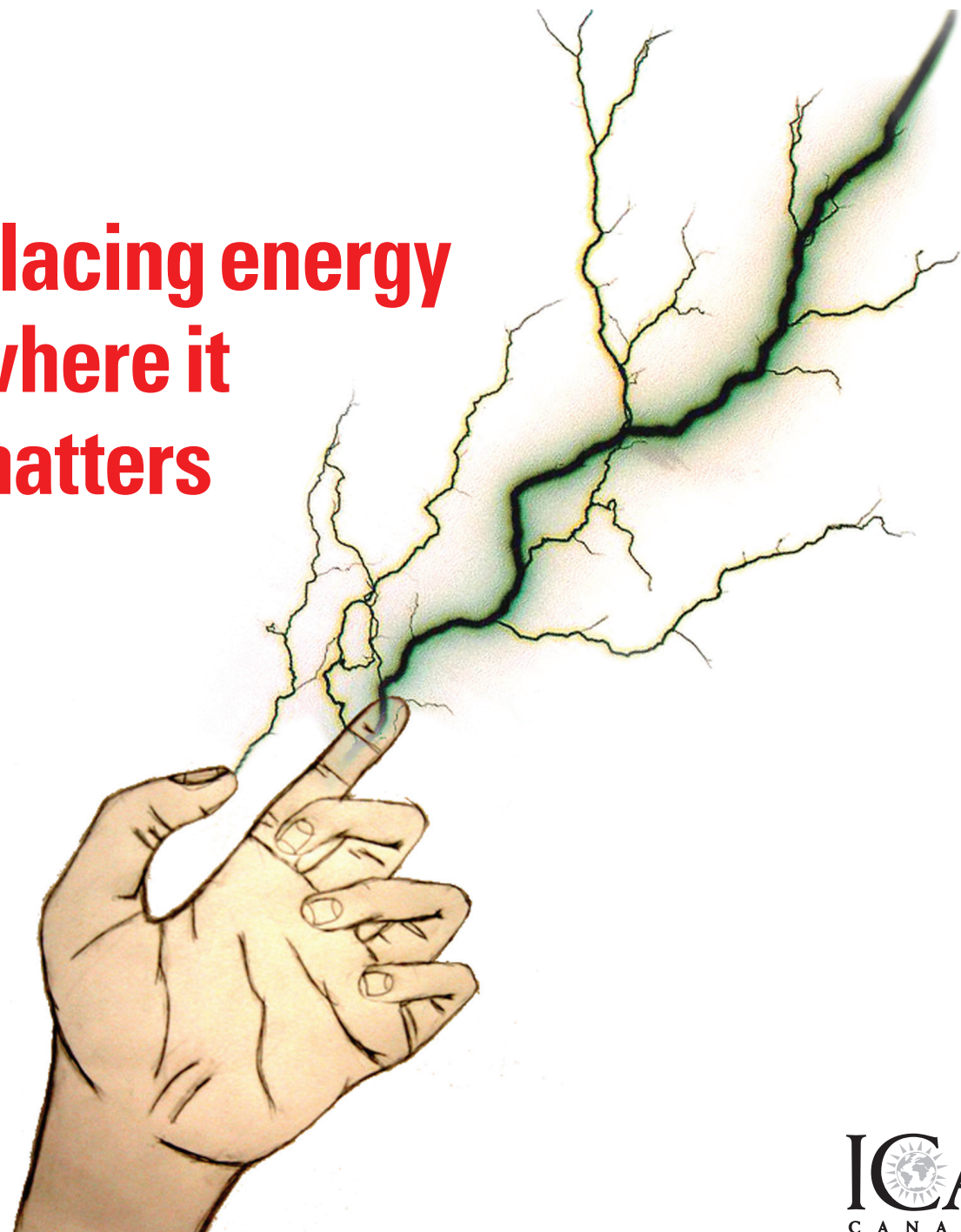
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NEW PLANETARY PATTERNS

Placing energy
where it
matters



ICA
CANADA



Desertification and World Security

BRIAN GRIFFITH

In Libya recently, Muammar Gaddafi informed the ministers of 50 European and African nations that cross-border migration is “inevitable”. “God”, he said, “commands all human beings to migrate on Earth to seek a living, which is their right.” For Europe, trying to restrict the tide of migrants from Africa would be “like rowing against the stream.”¹

This reminds me of similar concerns in the Americas, where the United States is building a wall along its border with Mexico. It is not only people, however, who are crossing this border without official sanction. For at least a century desert trees and bushes have been spreading northward into the U.S. Southwest. The authors of *The Changing Mile Revisited* capture the picture in Arizona clearly. By comparing photos of the same places taken decades apart, these botanists are tracking a dramatic shift in plant species over time.² As the cool-weather plants retreat up the mountain slopes or off to the north, the desert plants move in like a tide from Mexico. It’s just one of the faces of global warming, along with advancing deserts and migrations of more or less desperate people. It is a global theme with a deep history.

Back in North Africa, the spreading deserts are a major cause of migration off the land. As a BBC children’s program recently explained, “In Mali, the Sahara Desert is steadily growing, and nomadic tribes are being forced to settle near water as climate

change and farming techniques turn once fertile areas to dust.”³ The environmental refugees are moving to Africa’s mega-cities, or to greener fields in the West. And as the land’s capacity to support life shrinks, people are fighting over what remains in Darfur, Chad, Nigeria, or Somalia.

I experienced this shifting relationship between humans and the Earth while living in rural India in the 1980s. Each year the tree population declined, and it got harder to find firewood. The dry season came a bit earlier and the wells dried up sooner. Some villagers said the water table was falling at a foot or two per year. The villagers worked like miners with digging spikes to deepen their wells, chasing the water downward. When several wells in our village struck bedrock, the people nearby needed permission to use other people’s wells. And due to various issues between families or castes, plus concern that the supply was not enough for all, this permission was sometimes denied. I wondered how bad this could get. As a visitor from the west I could leave at any time. But still the prospect of having no water touched a level of fear I had never known. For those with no other home, the psychological impact was perhaps indescribable.

When we western urbanites talk about environmental problems, we tend to deal in predictions about the future. And doubters can easily dismiss forecasts as mere speculation. But actual experience from the past is more difficult to dismiss. The archaeological record reveals that vast regions of North Africa, the Middle East and Inner Asia used to be far greener, sup-

porting substantial populations of hunters, gathers, and gardeners. Then, in various periods over the past 7,000 years, the people of these regions suffered what Jared Diamond calls an environmental collapse, though probably in very slow motion. To this day the same slow wave of environmental catastrophes is spreading further into Africa, Asia, and to a lesser extent the Americas. We are learning how we have helped cause this decline, and how it has affected human history. The consequences for our economic and political life, our social traditions, even our religious values, have been enormous.

The Social Impact of Desertification

In the string of deserts now stretching almost unbroken from Mauritania to Manchuria, each region’s biological and cultural diversity has been diminished in a different way. Each community of people has adjusted to the wasteland in its own style. But for all local differences between situations, desert history holds certain common themes. The increasing scarcity of food and water has changed the conditions of life in similar ways across the arid belt. In coping with those conditions, certain cultural patterns emerged in the ancient Middle East and seemed to spread with the desert itself. At the risk of over-generalizing, here are four of these cultural patterns:

1) *In the non-productive lands, women were commonly viewed as the non-productive sex.*

In the pre-desert environments of North Africa or West Asia, women were very often the primary breadwinners. Their gardens, field gleanings, groves of trees and barn-

A Graduating Student’s Existential Crisis

STEPHANIE POPE

This issue is about energy, and I have a lot of it. My education has prepared me to go out and make a difference. After four years of studying international development and anthropology at York, I’m filled with anger at the injustices of the world. I can discuss ideas and issues like Poverty, AIDS, War, Globalization, Neo-Colonialism, Capitalism, Development, Trade, Transnationalism, Empire, Racism, and New Social Movements. I speak in acronyms: NGO, IMF, WTO, GATT, NAFTA, TNC. I’m aware of the global implications of my every action. I buy oranges from South Africa, and on my way to the check-out I think about the less-than-living wage the orange picker received, mechanization of agriculture and its implications for rural farmers, genetic modification and chemical inputs that have given the fruits their bright fresh colour, the systems of transport, trade and economic imbalances that have made it feasible and reasonable for me to eat oranges in January in Toronto. (This is before I get to the checkout and start thinking about the feminization and flexibilization of labour or the environmental consequences of plastic.) I know my privilege and I know my guilt. I’m more than ready and willing to use my energy, skills, talents and abilities to improve the lot of humanity.

But, where to place my energy? Education has also paralyzed me. The social science professors at York have an Agenda, although they may not have articulated it (I suspect they have. I suspect they have sat in a secret conference room and drafted a Resolution to Destroy Students’ Hope). They have fashioned me into a walking, talking Critical Machine. Nothing is sacred, not even nothing. Everything can be criticized, taken apart, re-fashioned, re-deployed as something else. While my anthropology professor lectures the class on the collapse of the nation-state, biopower, societies of control and how resistance ultimately just feeds right back into the system, I imagine a giant blob, expanding and contracting. This is society; this is me; this is you and everything we do, every category we use to talk about anything is just an artificial separation of what is in fact one goopy mass of glue. This is my metaphor, but there are a host of others suitable for any taste. How about a web? A network? A cellular system? I can draw you a diagram. The message is the same; we are all connected, nothing makes sense, everything sucks, nothing works.

It’s alright for the pros: they’re paid to be critical. But not everyone can have that job, or the whole system would collapse. Then again, maybe that’s something

to hope for. Then again, then again, then again. Endless reflexivity until your head explodes. There are endless opportunities for me to work in “international development”, in an organization, government or university, for example. But even when you think you’re helping, you’re probably just producing more problems. Snap back to my anthropology lecture: the prof says that any action that fails to challenge the underlying discourses and power structures ends up reproducing them. In other words, unless you’re going to start a revolution, you might as well go work for Coca-Cola because it’s all the same ... and actually, don’t bother with the revolution because it just feeds the system too. Anyway, this antiquated notion of hope is just a manifestation of the European salvation/apocalypse concept. As my development studies prof helpfully explained, it’s quite possible that the world will simply continue to get minutely worse each day for eternity. Isn’t that great to know?

But the central problem is, my energy remains. I may be just part of a giant blob, but I’m still responsible for my part of it. Where do I place my energy where it can make a positive difference? At this point I would settle for placing my energy where it doesn’t make any negative difference, or at least minimizes its impact. Should I just opt to do nothing? No, this isn’t acceptable and besides, it isn’t even possible! Opting out is just a new fashionable way to opt in; don’t bother trying to get off the grid, because you can’t. Nowhere can you escape the system, not even if you become a hermit, live in a bio-degradable cabin in the Arctic and eat berries. So I’m going to have to figure out something to do when I graduate, and there’s no easy way out of this puzzle. I can’t pretend I haven’t learned anything over the past four years, so I’ll just do the best I can. Wish me luck...



I sometimes use a “Connecting the dots” image (pictured above).

Sandi Trillo is an Associate with VISION Management Services (VMS). VMS is a catalyst for change, building accountable organizations through strategic leadership. She pursues her environmental passion as a Board member with Greenest City.



Stephanie Pope is graduating from York University this June with a double major in Anthropology and International Development Studies. She’s still trying to figure out how to make a “difference”.

1 BBC News, Nov. 23, 2006

2 *The Changing Mile Revisited: An Ecological Study of Vegetation Change With Time in the Lower Mile of an Arid and Semiarid Region*, by R.M. Turner, Robert H. Webb, Janice E. Bowers, and James Rodney Hastings, University of Arizona Press, 2003.

3 CBBC Newsround, *Africa Week*, January 14, 2003



Placing energy where it will make the most difference

DAPHNE FIELD, EdD, C.A.

If ICA values placing energy where it makes the most difference, which strategies are most effective?

In this context, energy is not the carbon-based source used to power our lives but rather a personal motivation to improve the social conditions around us. But how can we know if we are making a difference? What measurement can we use?

ICA members love to tell stories. And through these stories the personal energy flows — for sharing, encouraging, inspiring, and supporting. A recent example of such enthusiastic sharing is the ICA: I *Global Buzz*, which emerged from the ICA: I Assembly in Toronto (June 2006). A few inspired participants created a weekly newsletter and invited ICA offices all over the world to contribute their activities, events, and general news. Then they disseminated the newsletter via the internet. This community of ICA members from Peru to Kenya, Taiwan to Canada, or Nepal to the United Kingdom, now know what is happening, what various ICA members are proud of, and what they have accomplished. The *Global Buzz* informs us all about prevailing conditions in various countries and the contributions being made by volunteers. The result has been a feeling of belonging to a larger community. We are tuned in and in tune with one another. By emphasizing communi-

cation, this group of members has helped unite the ICA community and strengthened its commitment to positive social change. To read *Global Buzz*, find www.allmembers.org/7dayreport

Outside of ICA's operations, Stephen Lewis's Grannie project is another compelling example of personal energy, devoted to a group of African grandmothers who are raising children orphaned by the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Lewis describes how a cohesive, empowered group of child raisers emerged from a nearly hopeless, impoverished and isolated group of grandmothers. With few resources to offer, Lewis went to listen, comfort, support and to encourage these women. He was able to connect them, not only with one another, but also with other grannies in vastly different circumstances. Lewis's initiative (energy), prompted by his concern (motivation), made a discernible difference to both these communities of grannies, who now have a real commitment to support one another. No measurement exists to definitively quantify the Grannie project's results. But as these different sets of grannies met each other at the 2006 AIDS Conference in Toronto, a new sense of hope and pride was evident in their demeanour, their singing, and their laughter.

Education is another important ingredient of ICA's Mission. When we educate

communities, we add to their knowledge, support their confidence, strengthen their resolve, and start a momentum of change. It's like in the old edict: give a man fish and he can eat for a day but teach him to fish and he will eat for a long as the fish bite. The culmination of such efforts is to influence people's decision making processes and support positive social change.

The initiatives described here, involving enthusiasm, sharing or education, are most effective in communities where ideas feed from other ideas, and encouragement inspires new energy. Only in this way will there be added value that endures. I am personally inspired by the thought that one need not finish a process or project, but must begin it.

If the currency of people-energy is communication — communication that takes the form of newsletters, education, or simply listening and encouraging, then it is possible to accomplish much with very little. And as these examples show, the ICA and other change agents have a long history of enabling important changes with few material resources.

Daphne Field is the accountant for ICA Canada and has been a member of the board of ICA Canada for approximately ten years. She is currently absorbed in ICA's World Views research project. To reach Daphne, contact her at daphne@heathcote.ca

A Question of Impact

SANDI TRILLO

Canadians are spending more and more time at work each year, so our work may be the biggest investment of personal energy that we make. What if we chose our work with a view to 'placing energy where it will make the most difference'...and in doing so to have an impact on the things that are important to us? How many of us would continue to do what we're doing today?

I started asking myself this question while working in a small consulting firm that worked with large corporate clients. I wasn't convinced I was achieving the kind of impact I wanted, and that uncertainty led me to take time off to assess how I could change that.

During that time I considered returning to school to do an MBA, and deepen my expertise in a particular area. But it

seemed to contradict my desire to make an impact, at least in the shorter term. Being a generalist by nature, with a mixed bag of skills and experience, I had thrived on the variety that consulting offered. To date I have resisted the temptation to specialize, largely because I sense it would limit the creativity that comes from synthesizing diverse experiences. But it seems to me that our society tends to place a higher value on specialization — so I sometimes question that decision. Perhaps the focus and depth that come with specialization are required to make a significant impact?

The other question that kept arising for me at that time was whether I could make a bigger impact as a staff member within an organization, or externally as a consultant. I have yet to fully explore and resolve that

question, as strange twists of fate led me to my current role at another small consulting firm. The major difference now is that I work largely with clients in the non-profit sector, which feels like a world away from corporate culture. Today I am constantly inspired by the work our clients are doing within their communities, and this amplifies my motivation to support their work and their ability to make an impact.

My current work gives me a real appreciation for doing a lot with a little. Some of what we do involves helping organizations plan strategically how to best use their limited resources to achieve their larger vision. The question of impact often recurs at the board level, whose members often question what difference they are making in the work of an organization.

yard animals probably supplied most of their peoples' food. Where the land was relatively productive, women managed all these kinds of work while mothering their children. But where the land turned to desert, such household production became more difficult, less fruitful, and therefore less respected. Women's gardens were blighted by drought. The wild plants they gathered in nearby fields grew ever scarcer. Their household animals could no longer find enough grass near the yard. Care for domestic animals soon required ever-longer treks through the wilderness, searching for food. The more arid the grasslands grew, the more difficult it was for anyone to manage both the children and the animal herds at the same time.

Where the land grew barren, women's capacity to market their household products also gradually faded away. Since few places could sustain a community for long, most permanent settlements dispersed. Trade in the desert then became a long-distance operation. Later the caravan trade evolved to carry supplies through a killer landscape, to and from distant trading centers at the desert's edge. This also was hard, dangerous, and quite incompatible with caring for children.

A third important activity in the desert economy was raiding. Under periodically desperate conditions, raiding grew accepted as crucial for survival. But of all economic activities, this was the least compatible with mothering. It was men, not mothers, who could best take the risks of living by the sword.

So the hardship of desert conditions tended to force a growing separation between economic work and childcare. In such an impoverished and hostile landscape, women could be increasingly seen as dependents of male herdsmen, traders and warriors. The whole female dimension of humanity became subordinate to the male and this was increasingly seen as inevitable in the eyes of both men and women.

2) Where the earth seemed hostile to humanity, culture grew hostile to the earth.

In the pre-desert nature religions of the ancient Middle East, the Lord of heaven was commonly seen as a male deity, whose sperm fell as rain on the female earth. The earth then brought forth life like a divine mother. But where the land grew barren and lifeless, people no longer experienced the Earth as a living goddess. In the Sahara or the Taklamakan, the once nurturing Mother Earth seemed to turn hostile. Frequent dust devils and sand storms appeared to be incarnations of malice, and the "forces of nature" seemed primarily forces of death. In that case, only the heavens above still

seemed holy. In the common themes of desert mythology, this Earth was seen as a fallen world, an abode of evil, or a place of trial and exile for the human soul.

When migrants from the deserts of the Middle East came to other lands as conquerors, they brought their views of the world with them. Religions from the ancient Middle East spread north into Europe and south into Africa to become foundational to western cultures, as we now know them. Out of that heritage "western science and economics" came to presume that the planet is a dead resource, and only human needs matter. Later the worldview of "nature is enemy" played out in the European conquest of North America, as settlers sought to "tame the wilderness" by clearing away the trees, the native grasses and wild animals. Only recently did many Western people start to question the inherited assumption that human welfare requires a battle against nature.

3) In the lands of scarcity, the means of coercion were often more important than the means of production.

Experience in the desert seemed to prove there could not be enough for all. And where this was accepted as a fact of life, the main question was who would claim what was available. The issue of a pecking order emerged, and often took on central political importance. Of course scarcity was a problem in every part of the world as populations grew, but it was most extreme in the desert. There, production of food and supplies was often so unpredictable it seemed beyond human control. What the rulers could control was the distribution of whatever little there was. Traditional desert rulers therefore relied less on fostering production than on gaining military control of supplies. Down to the present time autocratic rule is characteristic of the arid zone, and budgets for military security commonly dwarf investments for human development or environmental security. It is an inversion of priorities that creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of scarcity that now threatens our very survival.

4) Where the countryside no longer supported its people, waves of migrants moved toward greener lands

As desiccation spread over the past 7,000 years, wave after wave of environmental migrants moved toward the greener lands of Europe, tropical Africa, India, and China. Sometimes these migrants came as beggars, as when the starving Hebrews went down into Egypt. Other migrants came as invaders or conquerors. According to Marija Gimbutas and Riane Eisler, the basically peaceful farming cultures of Old Europe were overwhelmed by

nomadic tribes, who imposed a social order of "force-backed ranking" under military strongmen. A similar series of "dominator" invasions repeatedly overran every region bordering the arid zone from China, to India, to Eastern Europe and Africa. In *The Chalice & the Blade*, Eisler says these various conquerors generally came from "the less desirable fringe areas of our globe".⁴ Those "fringes" were Inner Asia, Arabia, and North Africa—the regions that were then turning to deserts.

In most history books, these invaders from the harsh lands are described either as superior conquerors or as scourges of the earth, depending on the writer's point of view. The ancient Chinese and Romans both looked on the steppe or desert people as subhuman barbarians. But many modern Europeans, Indians or Iranians, romanticize "the Aryans" from Inner Asia as the bringers of all "higher" civilization. The kinds of civilization these invaders brought were generally what Eisler calls "dominator culture", as opposed to traditions of partnership. And to this day our loyalties are divided between such traditions. Probably most people in the world are mixed descendants of the old desert migrants and the village gardeners they often conquered. A certain clash of cultures, values and environments lies imbedded in our minds.

Implications for the Future

Of course people are far more than a product of their environments. We cannot strictly predict that the above-described patterns will appear wherever environments collapse in the future. Technological change has continually shifted the ways people deal with environmental decline. Still the problems of desiccation are massive, and their effects may be very persistent. During the closing years of WWII in Germany, Adolph Metternich wrote a manuscript later published as *The Deserts Threaten*. In this he described the course of environmental destruction in ancient times, how modern industry and plantation agriculture accelerated the process, and how a terminal degradation of nature would be the ultimate threat to human survival. Building on Metternich's warning, plus that of more recent writers such as Vandana Shiva, James DeMeo, Jeremy Rifkin or Pierre Rabhi, we can summarize some of the likely social costs of desertification as follows:

1. The less biological wealth remains, the more people tend to compete for what is left.

⁴ Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice & The Blade: Our History, Our Future*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988, 43.



2. The more desperate the competition for organic resources becomes, the more society is fragmented along ethnic, racial, and sexual lines.

3. The more impoverished the landscape grows, the more people are cast adrift as economic refugees.

4. Where large numbers of people cannot find adequate sustenance, either the rule of law breaks down, or the law of the strongest prevails.

5. Where the health of the environment declines, human health breaks down as well.

6. The more lifeless the environment

becomes, the less people regard the Earth as a sacred source of abundance; the more they see this world as a hostile place, and the more commonly they hope for salvation in a different world.

Making Civilization Good for Nature

In resistance to these trends, a great diversity of people around the world is struggling for a different kind of future. Vandana Shiva, for example, speaks of a growing “Earth Democracy” for healing our land and our social divisions at the same time. David Korten describes the same trend as a “Great Turning” — from the past values of dominator empires, toward partnership in a real earth community. As the old story of a hostile Earth created self-fulfilling prophecies of scarcity and war, so a future story of Earth as our nurturing mother may call us to honour and restore the Earth’s fecundity, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of abundance. We see growing evidence of an Earth-honoring culture appearing among farmers, mothers, teachers, and engineers.

For farmers experimenting with no-till planting, the immediate goal is to reduce the speed of erosion. The real long-term goal is to grow back the soil richer than before. Tradition and science both demonstrate that ecological capital can increase over time. So for millions of years, over most of the earth, the soil has generally grown deeper and more fertile. It has only been during the past few thousand years that human activity began accelerating rates of erosion, sometimes exceeding soil formation by 300 percent.⁵ If we choose, we can restore the long-term trend.

The positive leadership in this effort is, in almost every instance, coming from ordinary people rather than our centers of wealth and power. A disproportionate number of these leaders are village peasants, who are often the foremost workers for protecting and restoring the planet. On the arid zone’s frontiers in China, Iran or Kenya, there are strings of villages standing before the desert. Their people are largely traditional farmers, skilled in the arts of nurturing plants and animals. In many cases they have to revive their soil from virtually lifeless sand and clay by mixing in layers of wild grass and compost. They try to protect their seedlings from harsh wind with shelters of earth, shrubs and trees. Where their efforts succeed, they slowly regenerate a microclimate favourable to

⁵ Eisenburg, Even, *The Ecology of Eden*, Random House of Canada, Toronto, 1998, 30.

Suzuki, David, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*, GreyStone Books, Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, Toronto, 1997, 100.

life. Perhaps in the future their powers of nurturance will accomplish more. A future economy could arise that enriches nature as it grows. That, as Indian environmentalist Anil Agarwal said, would be the real green revolution. Such a civilization would be environmentally literate. It would have a vast working knowledge of how people and environments can help each other.

I am ending with a hopeful story about some village women I had the honour to meet in Kenya. “Mama” Benedetta Ndolo was the leader of a local women’s association in the Iveti hills of Machakos District. From the top of the hill in her village you could see for miles to the northwest, over the dusty countryside stretching towards Somalia.

For a whole afternoon Mama Ndolo took me around her village, showing off her group’s various accomplishments. We toured the hill slopes terraced by village work parties. We examined cement rain-water jars, paid for one at a time by funds from the women’s group gardens. Then we looked at the many small nurseries of fruit tree seedlings. Ndolo’s friends had begun planting tree nurseries of mango and other seedlings three years earlier.

Several years before that, at the UN Conference on Desertification in Nairobi, a number of African governments had proposed planting two great belts of forest, one across North Africa and the other south of the expanding Sahara. But after the conference most governments did little about it—perhaps due to pressures to cut spending in order to pay interest on World Bank loans. So the work of environmental restoration fell mainly to village women. They were the ones committed to saving the land beneath their feet. Nobody paid these women or reimbursed the costs of their efforts. The trees were their only pay. And now, at the time of my visit, the new forests of Mama Ndolo’s village stood around 12 feet tall.

I stood on the hillside listening as the breeze sifted through a whole forest of young trees. It was a sound like whispering or the purring of cats, as if the trees had moods. As if they felt confident that Mama Ndolo’s women are here, and this place will never become desert.



Brian Griffith is a Canadian writer who spent seven years in village development projects with ICA in India and Kenya. This article is based on his book *The Gardens of Their Dreams: Desertification and Culture in World History* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2001).

A Summer of Emergence and Awakening: Placing energy where it will make the most difference

JANIS CLENNETT

When I agreed to write this article for *Edges*, I envisioned a simple little narrative about a volunteer project that I spearheaded a short while ago with marginalized people in downtown Toronto. However, the more I thought about this philosophically, the more challenging the task of writing the article!

While working with a downtown not-for-profit agency, I and two others started a volunteer project dealing with marginalized, homeless and recovering addicts who are also artists. The concept was to help the artists raise income, improve their self-esteem, and give them some work experience that could help them get a job. We three were not people to idly sit by and let someone else deal with the problems, nor did we believe that government is the sole provider for this type of work experience. Our idea was to start a community enterprise (the community being the artists) that would provide employment and a sense of purpose. We were told many times that this couldn’t be done — it would cost too much; THESE PEOPLE aren’t reliable; their art isn’t good enough, etc.

Our process was quite simple. We held a meeting to discuss what kind of enterprise we would have and then set up task teams. The meeting was well attended and my ICA facilitation methods stood me in good stead. We left the meeting with a clear plan and enthusiastic teams tasked to launch the enterprise. This business was a summer-only outdoor boutique to sell art cards, note cards, poetry and original art pieces. A combination of volunteers and artists operated the boutique under my supervision. And at the end of August during our wind-down session we established that: 1) we had made a small profit; 2) our suppliers had all been paid on time; 3) the artists had earned some money; and 4) we had broadened the general public’s notion of who the homeless really were.

We also discovered that a major problem for us and our artists was the welfare system in its present condition. It es-

entially forces people to remain in a helpless state, or cheat the system. All of the money that the artists earned was in danger of being clawed back by either Welfare or The Ontario Disabilities Services Board.

I truly believed, and believe now, that our energies were well spent. The effect of the enterprise was much greater than the money raised. The community was energized and has gone on to successfully launch other projects. However the difficulties have caused me to search further for some answers. And my search has led me to both Catherine Austin Fitt and Ken Wilber.

According to Catherine Fitt, our highly centralized social systems have developed some seriously counterproductive elements. The pattern of history, she believes, is that highly centralized systems grow perverted from their original purpose. She calls this the “Tapeworm Effect”. An article in *Common Ground Collective: Community vs. Covert Commerce*¹ by Geoff Olson relates the essence of Fitt’s research: As a tapeworm in the human body feeds on and eventually kills its host, so do highly centralized structures in our current economy. Eventually the social tapeworm grows too big to take on. It is too wealthy and too well connected politically. To starve the tapeworm (in this case the social welfare system) we need to rebuild financial and human capital closer to home. We have to invest time, energy, and money locally.

On the positive side of social change, Ken Wilber’s book *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*² explains that human evolution is a spiral made up of various “memes” or stages that are in constant flux. The Post Conventional meme, which Wilber believes is an outcome of the boomer generation, is characterized by a scrutiny of myths, values

¹ *Common Ground* December 2006 Issue 185, Community vs. Covert Commerce by Geoff Olson
² Ken Wilber *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*, Shambhala Publications

and ethno-centric biases. People operating in this meme meet the world on their own terms, as individuals in a community operating by mutual recognition and respect.

Through both of these authors I have come to believe that one of the best and most productive things that we can do is to decentralize, but not dismantle our social safety net. The centralization alone can cause a state where the welfare organization, that was originally set up to help people, becomes a hindrance in order to perpetuate itself. And even though the present Post Conventional meme is a real breakthrough in awareness, there are still some people in society who really do need structure in order to survive. But the true value here is the worldview of community with individual respect and recognition. I believe that we need to further inspect the systems to ensure that the necessary structures are there to not only give help where help is needed, ensure that all people are adequately clothed and fed. I also believe that the system should encourage people to work in any fashion that they can. The system of claw-backs needs to be reviewed to ensure that people and community enterprises are not penalized for making some money.

I also believe that ICA, its methods and values are uniquely positioned to foster and create a society that holds a broad, ever-changing worldview. These are methods and values that are respectful of different views, cultures and people.



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