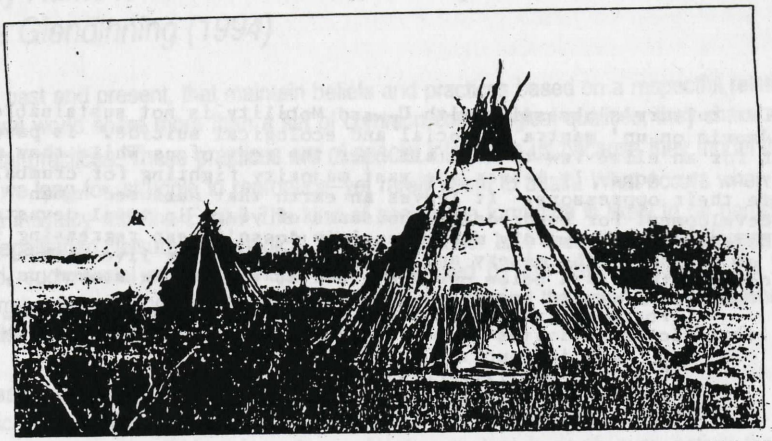
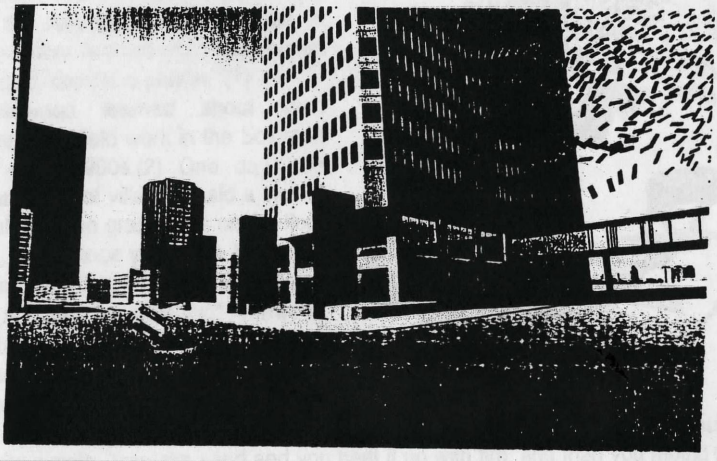


MY NAME IS CHELLIS & I'M IN RECOVERY FROM WESTERN CIVILIZATION



By Chellis Glendinning

Our culture's obsession with Upward Mobility is not sustainable. The old 'movin on up' mantra is social and ecological suicide. It paves the path for an elite few to walk all over the rest of us while they make their way to the top. It leaves the vast majority fighting for crumbs, trying to emulate their oppressors. It leaves an earth that nurtured human social development for hundreds-of-thousands of years in total devastation.

Rejecting the upwardly mobile society doesn't mean regressing into the past or accepting the misery and poverty that so many live with. It means looking down at the earth below our feet, and at the people around us, and learning how to go forward together...

For more info about these ideas, or to get involved in local/global activites to build community and create social change get in touch:

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From: *"My Name is Chellis & I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization" By Chellis Glendinning (1994)*

Cultures, past and present, that maintain beliefs and practices based on a respectful relationship with the natural world share more than a set of common cosmological qualities; they share a set of common social practices. These practices are of special interest to us because they model the very social forms we long for, struggle to reproduce--yet rarely seem to attain. What occurs when human beings live in intimacy with the Earth? The kind of society we formulate is likely to be participatory, democratic, egalitarian, leisurely, ecological, and sustainable. Like the elliptical wholeness of the natural world, such social practices shape and are shaped by the psychic state of the people, springing from healthy psyches and simultaneously guarding against the emergence of psychological aberrations like addiction and abuse.

Making Glass on the Solomon Islands

Full participation in the life and survival of the group is one of these social practices. In nature-based cultures, nearly everyone is an expert, or at least competent, in nearly every activity the people engage in. By contrast, few of us are competent, much less expert, at more than a few minor activities that contribute to the functioning of our society. To make things worse, as our technologies become more complex and our society increasingly fragmented, we become less competent. An astoundingly small percentage of us knows how to record a television program on a VCR, repair an electronic device, or decipher a Publishers Clearinghouse prize notification. *[...]* Meanwhile, the only activities we seem to share are shopping, driving, and watching television. Such a predicament is not how humans evolved.

According to anthropologist Stanley Diamond, the average man of the hunter-gatherer-pastoral African Nama people is "an expert hunter, a keen observer of nature, a craftsman who can make a kit bag of tools and weapons, a herder who knows the habits and needs of cattle, a direct participant in a variety of tribal rituals and ceremonies, and he is likely to be well-versed in the legends, tales, and proverbs of his people." Diamond goes on to say, "The average primitive . . . is more accomplished, in the literal sense of that term, than are most civilized individuals. He participates more fully and directly in the cultural possibilities open to him, not as a consumer and not vicariously but as an actively engaged, complete person."(1)

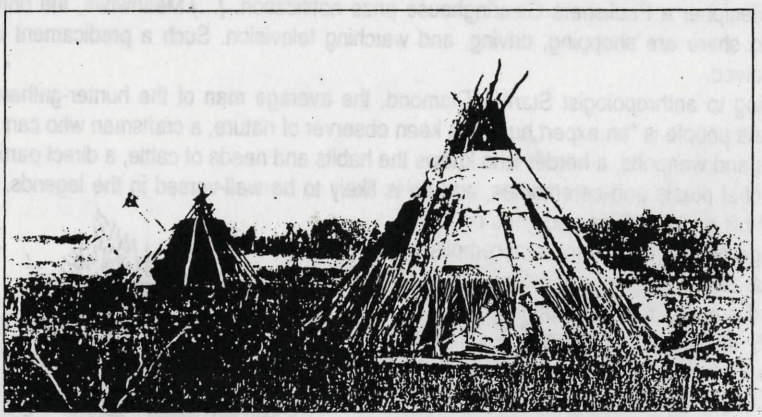
Frances Harwood learned about such participation during her field work in the Solomon Islands in the early 1960s.(2) One day, she relates, an assemblage of villagers paid a visit to her hut. They sat down on grass mats on the floor and said to her, "Ever since you came here, you have been asking us a lot of questions. Now we would like to ask you a question." Harwood perked up in attention. "Please . . ." pleaded one tribesman as he picked up the glass she had brought with her. "How do you make this?" "Oh yes, well . . ." she sputtered, trying to bring together the right native words to communicate the process. "It's quite simple. You take sand and you heat it up with fire, and then you mould the glass." "Ah-ha!" the islanders responded, enthusiastically nodding their heads and passing the glass around the circle. "Then we'll meet you down at the beach tomorrow at dawn--and you'll show us how to make a glass."

Harwood was stunned. Already struggling to communicate in a language she had barely mastered, she now flailed as she attempted to describe such labyrinthian phenomena as industrial process, factory manufacturing, and division of labour. Her guests grasped none of what she said. They did, however, grasp her refusal to meet them on the beach. Thereafter, they let it be known among the villagers that Harwood's real purpose in coming to the islands had been revealed: she had been sent because she was an incompetent, incapable of doing the simplest things in her own culture.

Turning through the Air

Democracy is a second practice shared by nature-based cultures. In a democratic system every single member of the group has the opportunity to participate in decision-making. You and I clearly value and long for this opportunity. The cries for democracy that rang across the world in 1989 from Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China, and the psychic reverberations these cries caused among millions of others, have constituted one of the most passionate statements of the twentieth century. Yet truly satisfying participatory democracy seems always to evade our reach, even for those of us who inhabit one or another of the great "democracies" that emerged with the Enlightenment.

The crux of the matter is a little-appreciated factor: scale. Democracy is automatically abrogated when any gathering of people becomes too numerous for the continuous involvement of each member. As Austrian political philosopher Leopold Kohr puts it, "When something is wrong, something is too big."(3) In a more humorous comment about the unwieldy hierarchies and bureaucracies that accrue in even the most well-intentioned democratic nations, social critic Kirkpatrick Sale writes, "If a mouse were to be as big as an elephant, it would have to become an elephant--that is, it would have to develop those features, such as heavy stubby legs, that would allow it to support its extraordinary weight."(4)



Small, face-to-face groups are a universal characteristic of nature-based cultures; in fact, this quality is what defines them. According to anthropologist Joseph Birdsell, five hundred people is the model size of nature-based groups in aboriginal Australia, with fifteen to fifty inhabiting each local band within that larger grouping.(5) At the time of Columbus's arrival in North America, it is estimated that fifty-six people inhabited every fifty square miles along the California coast. In the Southwest the number of people for every fifty square miles was fourteen, while east of the Mississippi it was nine.(6) The average number of people per square mile among all documented hunter-gatherer groups is one.(7)

Democratic decision-making is likewise a common characteristic among nature-based peoples. Because of ongoing face-to-face contact, as well as councils for decision-making in some communities, every member has the opportunity to talk things out, make suggestions, have them heard, and participate in guiding the group. Among the BaMbuti (Pygmy) of the African Congo,

interpersonal conflict and offensive acts are settled without any apparent formal mechanism at all. Anyone can discuss any issue that is of concern to the community, and anyone can join in creating solutions. Each dispute is settled as it arises, according to its particular nature, and responsibility for righting the balance is always considered communal.(8) In many nature- based groups, because each person over the age often or twelve is capable of surviving in the wilds alone or joining another band, she can leave if she dislikes a decision. A sense of freedom we can hardly fathom reigns: each person can follow his inner guidance or stand up for what he believes, and because of this sense of freedom and responsibility, there is little acting out, rebellion, or addiction to the power games that define politics in mass society.

[...] The idea that democracy is practiced at its best by nature-based people flies in the face of our perception of these "primitive" cultures. In particular, it flies in the face of our projections of the chieftains and medicine men we think run them; in nature-based communities chiefs are rarely the coercive, authoritarian rulers we assume them to be. Hierarchy is not particularly developed, crystallized, or needed. In fact, in some groups, like the BaMbuti, there are no chiefs and no formal councils at all, no juries and no courts. As nature writer Dolores LaChapelle puts it, "Just as in a flight of birds turning through the air, no one is the leader and none are the followers, yet all are together."(10)

In communities that do have designated leaders, they are chosen for the purpose of embodying clan, family, or tribal heritage. To honour them is not a sign of giving over power; it is an act of communal self-respect. Leadership may also be situational, with chiefs chosen for their skills as facilitators and teachers or for their knowledge of medicine, fishing, or ceremony. The Plains Indians of North America had literally dozens of chiefs, and depending on the season or the event, the degree of prominence accorded to each would shift. No chiefs were ever assured of their role for a lifetime either; they performed their duties for as long as they listened well, responded well, and retained full support. Western people wouldn't necessarily know this, of course, because historically we sought after and valued only the war chiefs.

The anthropologist Francis Huxley tells a marvelous story about the native relationship to leadership.(11) Because of a medical emergency, an American friend of Huxley's, also an anthropologist, transported an Indian man from the sweltering wilds of the Xingu Valley in Brazil to the bustling "wilds" of the city of Sao Paulo. The year was 1955, and what followed was an archetypal moment: Natural Man Meets Modernity. As the two men made their way through the streets among towering buildings, sooty traffic jams, and electric crowds, they passed by a massive bank. Standing erectly at the entrance were two stern security guards, each wearing an elaborate military uniform with black, Gestapo-like boots and carrying a loaded machine gun. The native man was puzzled by this spectacle, never having seen anything like it, and he asked what it might be. Taken aback by the challenge of describing a nation state's economic system to a hunter-gatherer, the American flailed about, stuttered, and scratched his head just as Harwood had. Finally he explained that this place was a "house" where "the chief" kept

his "riches." The Indian became even more perplexed. He stuttered, scratched his head, and then declared, "Well then, if he needs this much guarding, he cannot be a very good chief."

Dine' Necklace

A third practice common to nature-based cultures is equality of the sexes. This is clearly a topic charged with emotion and controversy for us, and many of the addictions we are plagued with--co-dependence, sexaholism, romance addiction, violence against women--revolve around problematic relations between the sexes. For centuries, probably since the beginning of these painful aberrations of the human experience, women have been addressing their diminished standing in society, calling for greater valuing of their contributions, greater freedom to express themselves, and greater safety in which to lead their lives. It has taken men longer to awaken to the restrictions of the current definitions of manhood, probably because the outward status they are accorded has blinded their insight into the pain and limitations they have been accepting. In the 1970s, though, men have begun realizing and attempting to address, with rage and grief their need for full humanity.

We might ask if there isn't a deep and universal propensity operating here. If a need for equal opportunity, participation, and rewards were not ingrained in our primal matrix, we might simply accept any definition placed upon us or role assigned to us, no matter how limiting or oppressive. But the raw eruption of discontent in our times tells us that at heart, women and men consist of more than what current social constructs dictate.

Evidence from nature-based cultures reinforces this conclusion. Just as Larry Emerson's turquoise necklace shares different but equal strands for male and female, so the sexes in most nature-based cultures focus on different tasks and modes of expression--while sharing equal opportunity for participation and comparable social status. One detail is worth our notice: perceived differences between women and men may not be as fixed as they have been for us, restrictions not as confining. Women are both nurturing and assertive. They are physically strong, travel the territory with freedom, and have contact with other peoples. Men are intimate with their inner psychic terrains just as they are with the land upon which they hunt, and they participate openly in caring for the children of the band. Probably because of women's biological involvement in childbirth and early child rearing, the main difference in roles is a well-defined division regarding the provision of food--with women gathering plant foods and men hunting animals.

[...] Apart from the grace that Earth-based people emanate through their sexual natures, there is also tremendous freedom in relationship between the sexes. Most relationships in nature-based cultures are entered into by choice and dissolved by choice, rather than rigidly held in place by contracts, conventions, and social pressures. "Commitments are personal, not formal, institutionalized, or rule governed," reports anthropologist Peter Wilson. "Relationships are activated and animated through proximity, and proximity is determined by affection and friendliness ."(13) Likewise, ties between spouses are not formal or absolute. To begin, the responsibility for child rearing does not fall

heavily onto each isolated nuclear family but is more a communal task. And responsibility for each child does not last twenty years; rather, it lasts no more than six or seven. The upshot is that pressure for women and men to stay locked together in rigid contracts of matrimony does not exist. If they stay together, they do so because they choose to.

Indolent Savages

A fourth social practice common in nature-based cultures concerns leisure time. Put another way, there exists in nature-based community a decided absence of workaholism. It seems no coincidence that our modern bodies rebel against the harried work schedules we keep with heart attacks, back problems, cancers, and influenzas that appear so often they are considered "normal." According to a poll taken by Louis Harris and Associates, the average work week in the United States in the 1980s was forty-seven hours, up from forty hours a decade earlier. The U.S. Department of Labour reports that nearly 6 million working men and 1 million working women punch in more than sixty hours a week.(14) (Neither of these statistics includes the extra hours many women, and some men, put in to run their homes and raise their children.)

Journalist Kent MacDougall cuts to the heart of this predicament in a Los Angeles Times series entitled "The Harried Society." "Back in 1609 when the Algonquin Indians discovered Henry Hudson sailing up their river," he writes:

> They were living off the fat of the land. They lived so well yet worked so little that the industrious Dutch considered them indolent savages and soon replaced their good life with feudalism. Today, along the Hudson River in New York, supposedly free citizens of the wealthiest society in the history of the world work longer and harder than any Algonquin Indian ever did, race around like rats in a maze, dodging cars, trucks, buses, bicycles, and each other, and dance to a frantic tempo destined to lead many to early deaths from stress and strain.(15)

According to a study conducted by researchers Frederick McCarthy and Margaret McArthur, the average workday for men in aboriginal communities in Western Arnhem Land, Australia, including all time spent on economic activities such as hunting and tool repair, adds up to three hours and forty-five minutes; for women, for their plant collecting and food preparation, the average workday is three hours and fifty minutes.(16) Anthropologist Richard Lee reports that in Africa, the average Dobe Bushman's workweek is fifteen hours, or two hours and nine minutes a day--with only 65 percent of the population working at all. "A woman gathers in one day enough food to feed her family for three days," explains Lee:

> and spends the rest of her time resting in camp, doing embroidery, visiting other camps, or entertaining visitors from other camps. During each day at home, kitchen routines, such as coolung, nut cracking, collecting firewood, and fetching water, occupy one to three hours of her time. This rhythm of steady work and steady leisure is maintained throughout the year. The male hunters tend to work more frequently than the women, but their schedule is uneven. It is not unusual for a man to hunt avidly for a week and then do no hunting at all for two or three weeks. During these periods, visiting, entertaining, and especially dancing are the primary activities of men.(17)

So Many Mongongo Nuts

Another benefit of the nature-based way of life is good nutrition. Neurophysiological studies tell us that the chemical imbalances resulting from poor nutritional intake often lay the foundation for, or exacerbate, the psychological imbalances that manifest themselves as substance and behavioural

Harwood was stunned. Already struggling

addictions, while over-consumption of foods like sugar and caffeine only adds to this downward spiral. Yet in technological society, we tend to believe that we are magically blessed with endless pyramids of Princess grapefruit, cornucopias of fried chicken, and instant-coffee-under-glass--while Earth-based people exist in a constant state of malnutrition, if not starvation, and a tooth-and-claw struggle for food.

The truth of the matter is that we westerners have lost our ancestral knowledge of how to survive on the Earth. A subterranean fear of not having enough food lies at the base of our civilized psyches, expressed obliquely in personal and cultural messages whose deeper meanings we would rather overlook. Clean your plate! Think of the starving children in China! Cut down the cholesterol! Avoid Alar! Cook from the four food groups! Fast food! I scream for ice cream! In the 1950s, the grand prize of a national contest was three minutes to careen through a supermarket with an empty shopping cart and grab as much food as possible, and the image on our television screens of housewives frantically stuffing turkeys into their wire carts made us all feel exhilarated--and nervous. Anxiety about food is also expressed in epidemic eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia, overeating, and overdieting.

Since Columbus arrived in North America, a full 75 percent of the wildwood ecosystem has been wiped out. Originally, 95 percent of western and central Europe was covered with lush forest land, from the Black Forest to the Italian Alps; that amount is now 20 percent. Ten thousand years ago, China was 70 percent forest; today it is 5 percent.(18) The age-old sense that nature provides has rightfully been lost, and we are rightfully scared to death about our next meal. As Marshall Sahlins reports in his book Stone Age Economics, "One-third to one-half of humanity are said to go hungry every night. Some twenty million [are] in the U.S. alone. . . . This is the era of unprecedented hunger. Now, in the time of greatest technical power, is starvation an institution."(19) Indeed, in the wake of the technology-fueled Green Revolution of the 1970s, we have witnessed increasing famine, starvation, the dependence of hundreds of thousands of people on airlifts and feeding camps, a decline in the nutritional quality of all food, and an overall loss of momentum in world food production.

By contrast, true nature-based people rely on a diversity of food sources, and simultaneous failure of all resources is highly unlikely. Anxiety about food is rare, and when it appears, it is usually seasonal. In his book Health and the Rise of Civilization, Mark Nathan Cohen reports that food supplies among nature-based people are usually abundant and reliable, while starvation may occur but is rare.(20) Surely there have been times of hardship and uncertainty, but nature-based people who have lived unhampered by the encroachment of civilization tend to hold the attitude that since food is available in abundance, storing it is unnecessary; nature itself stores food for people, who merely need to know how to find it. Pau d'arco. Salmonberry. Wild turkey. Mugwort. Yucca flower. Jamaica ginger. Perhaps the famed statement by an African Dobe Bushman says it all: "Why should we plant when there are so many mongongo nuts in the world?"(21)

Then there is the issue of quality. Anthropologist Peter Farm writes that truly nature-based peoples are "among the best fed people on Earth and also among the healthiest."(22) It goes without saying that those who live in the wilds eat organic food, uncontaminated by chemical preservatives, pesticides, and other additives. Descriptions of the diets of nature-based peoples throughout the world reveal that they uniformly match the standards of the National Research Council of America for consumption of vitamins, minerals, and protein,(23) while erosion of the quality of the nature-based

diet consistently occurs when outsiders invade, bring in technological agriculture, cattle, or mining, and set up trade networks and outposts of civilization.

Also, because of their healthy diets, relaxed life-styles, and clean environs, nature-based people do not fall prey to such modern diseases as cancer, coronary heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes. High cholesterol is unknown. Studies of isolated peoples in South America reveal that infectious diseases like influenza, mumps, polio, and smallpox occur but cannot be transmitted in epidemic proportion by small, self-contained groups. Blood pressure is commonly low; and such intestinal disorders as appendicitis, diverticulosis, and bowel cancers are rare--until such groups are introduced to civilized diets.(24) According to the nineteenth-century German physician Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathic medicine, the basic "miasms" or energetic patterns of weakness that underlie and prepare the way for modern diseases did not even exist in human history until the transition out of nature-based culture.(25)

Contraceptive on Your Hip

A sixth practice common to nature-based cultures is a relatively stable population. In today's world the human population is spinning out of control, and along with this explosion of humanity, the capacity of our biosphere to sustain life is being stressed to the breaking point. In 1992 the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the British Royal Society issued their first joint report, warning: "If current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued poverty for much of the world."(26)

As the current global population approaches 6 billion, people everywhere around the world are starving--in "undeveloped" areas like Bangladesh and Nicaragua, in "developing" nations like India and China, in industrial countries like the republics of the former Soviet Union, and on the streets of overdeveloped cities like New York and Los Angeles. Projections from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities estimate that the total human population will grow, before levelling off, to an unfathomable 16 billion.(27)

According to physicist Vandana Shiva of India, rapid population growth is typical not of secure, sustainable societies but of "displacement, dispossession, alienation of people from their survival base, and inequality of women."(28) [T]he transition from nomadic foraging to agricultural civilizations constitutes the original "displacement, dispossession, alienation of people from their survival base, and inequality of women." Some ten thousand years ago, when all human societies on the Earth were nature-based, global population was stabilized at 5 million people.(29) According to archaeologist Fekri Hassan, yearly population growth in those times ranged from .01 to .005 percent,(30) while today's world population is exploding with an additional 95 million each year.(31)

The ability to maintain numerical stability exists in human history only in nature-based cultures. Methods of family planning built into hunter-gatherer life worked successfully for a million years, allowing the human population to grow gradually but not to overrun its capacity to live sustainably. This success is attributable to fertility-control factors that evolved when people lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers--and that disintegrated when civilization emerged, or for many people around the world, was introduced by force.

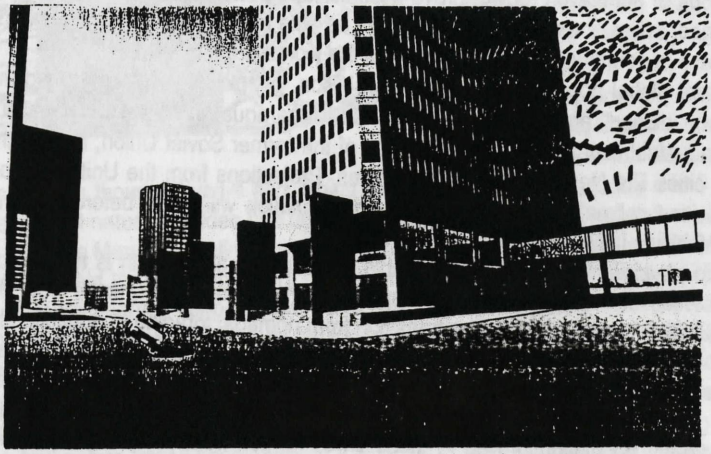
One of these factors is long-term breast-feeding.(32) As I have mentioned, foraging women carry their children on gathering treks, into rivers, through forests, sitting around the fire, and they feed them on demand for the first three or four years of their young lives. This practice offers yet another facet of the elliptical whole of the natural world: it not only provides the nurturance necessary for the child's physical and psychological development, but can trigger the secretion of a pituitary hormone that suppresses the mother's menstrual cycle. As Lee puts it, the child's frequent stimulation of the breast is "rather like carrying your contraceptive on your hip."(33)

Other contributing factors to low birthrates among nature-based women include a noticeably late onset of menstruation, as well as extended periods when the blood cycle simply disappears.(34)

Contemporary researchers attribute these physiological conditions, in part, to the high-protein diets and lean bodies of hunter-gatherer women and, in part, to the strenuous demands of walking long distances while carrying equipment, mounds of plant food, and children--physical conditions that are reproduced among today's female athletes who also report fewer periods and irregular cycles. The upshot of all these factors is that family size is small, the pressures we typically associate with child rearing are more relaxed, and population remains low--because for every woman of reproductive age, a new child arrives but every five, six, or seven years.

Most of the Trees

A last social quality typical of nature-based life is ecological sustainability. This is a quality we want desperately to attain and yet, for all our Earth Days, eco-conferences, recycling programs, and environmental regulations, it remains elusive. As we know all too well, the situation is dire. The kinds of technologies that are needed to maintain our ever-expanding mass civilization, from nuclear and chemical to mining and electromagnetic, virtually encase the planet. Addiction to consumerism, military buildup, and industrial expansion is so rampant as to be considered normal by many people and certainly by those who identify with these developments. Yet, at the same time, scientists studying global disasters such as climate change, ozone depletion, and toxic contamination estimate that we have until the year 2000, or maybe 2010, to turn around the unecological practices that are causing global destruction.



During the 1980s when I was working to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons, I had a disturbing conversation with a corporate CEO. While we were dining one summer evening in a Hakka restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown, he told me that from a business standpoint, nuclear war would not occur until multinational corporations had succeeded in commercializing China. After that accomplishment, he said, there would be no more room on Earth to expand the market economy (which must always, of course, be in a state of expansion), and so there would be no more viable reason for human beings to stay alive. His opinion reflects the going ethos of both an expansionist technological system and an addicted psyche: use up what resources are here now; when you run out, do whatever you must to get more--with no regard for the consequences.

By contrast, nature-based people neither force the Earth to produce at maximum levels nor impose wholesale realignments of nature's rhythms and physical layout. A commitment to ecological sustainability was the ground upon which our humanity came into existence, and the sustainable life is inseparably intertwined with full participation in social life, democratic decision-making, self-esteem for both women and men, a relaxed approach to daily life, good food, and a stable population. The key seems to be that we humans can successfully survive on this planet only so long as our presence

contributes to and meshes with the life of the Earth. According to Marshall Sahlins, within nature-based cultures this objective is accomplished by a gestalt of factors that are its hallmarks: "labour power is underused, technological means are not fully engaged, natural resources are left untapped . . . production is low relative to existing possibilities. The work day is short. The number of days off exceeds the number of work days. Dancing, fishing, games, sleep, and ritual seem to occupy the greater portion of one's time."(35)

Plus, nature-based people move on when existing sources reach their limit, and this limit is never the outer maximum limit of the terrain as we have come to define it. Rather than clear-cut the entire forest, kill every deer, pocket every chestnut, pull up every wild yam, and catch every salmon, nature-based people understand that to let most of the trees stand, most of the animals run free, most of the fruit drop to the ground, most of the vegetables complete their cycle, and most of the fish swim away is to honour nature's sacred wholeness. As with a Keres word that "doesn't break down into anything," to live this way is to participate in the great round of the natural world; it is to enhance the Earth's abundance and, at the same time, to ensure the sustainability, survivability, and sanity of the human community.

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During the 1980s when I was working to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons, I had a disturbing conversation with a corporate CEO. While we were dining one summer evening in a Hakka restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown, he told me that from a business standpoint, nuclear war would not occur until multinational corporations had succeeded in commercializing China. After that accomplishment, he said, there would be no more room on Earth to expand the market economy (which must always, of course, be in a state of expansion), and so there would be no more viable reason for human beings to stay alive. His opinion reflects the going ethos of both an expansionist technological system and an addicted psyche: use up what resources are here now; when you run out, do whatever you must to get more--with no regard for the consequences.

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