

Sustainable living

Adapted from Heart to Heart by C. Robinson & A. Hawkins

What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?

-Henry David Thoreau

In today's highly interdependent world, individuals and nations can no longer resolve many of their problems by themselves. We need one another. We must, therefore, develop a sense of universal responsibility It is our collective and individual responsibility to protect and nurture the global family, to support its weaker members and to preserve and tend to the environment in which we all live.

-The Dalai Lama

As individuals living on the planet at this moment in time, we face a challenge no generation has ever had to face. We need to dramatically change the manner in which we use the Earth's natural resources If the bad news is that individual Americans are a major part of the problem, the good news is that we can also be a major part of the solution.

-David Gershon

Consider This

Our Great Tightness. We who consume so large a share of the planet's resources and who add so much carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to the atmosphere are also in a Great Tightness. We like our lifestyle, with its inexpensive trinkets, fresh food from all over the planet, personal mobility, and toss-away conveniences. We are beginning to wake up to the fact that we are getting too fat to live on the planet, that we are not living in a sustainable way and are going to have to start doing so. It's a many-faceted problem and will likely have many solutions, some easy, some difficult, some painful, some, perhaps, unexpectedly sweet. As we contemplate the losses, sacrifices, and challenges of climate change and the dwindling of fossil fuel resources, we should also contemplate what it really means to live a sustainable lifestyle.

What Really Sustains. Sustainability and sustenance are big, deep words. Sustenance, when applied to food, means more than just vitamins and calories. Sustenance implies food that maintains not only our physical lives but our whole lives—food that tastes good, is good for us, was cooked and served with love, and is eaten in community. Mere calories do not sustain. Honey is not the meaning of life. What really sustains us is having a friend who will read to you while you recover from your foolishness, and who will read the kind of sustaining book that will speak to the depth of your being and remind you of what really gives you joy and meaning.

Living a sustainable lifestyle is an ethical matter of not taking more than one gives back, of living so that others in the world and future generations will have the means of living. There's satisfying, sustaining purpose in living an ethical life. Living sustainably also means living a life that is truly sustaining—that is, a life of real depth, warmth, and purpose. The two matters are related. If we've nothing truly sustaining in our lives, then why would we forgo any comfort, gratification, or whim for others or for the future? Without the sustenance that learning, beauty, love, and faith give us, the journey to ecological sustainability will seem nothing but sacrifice and "stuckness:" and we'll have to be dragged to it, kicking and screaming all the way.

Steps Toward Hope. Perhaps you have already begun a sustainability "diet" in small or large ways. You may have purchased a car that gets good gas mileage, compact fluorescent lightbulbs, or energy and water-saving appliances. Perhaps you have started hanging out a load of wash in good weather, recycling, or sharing rides to work. These efforts may seem very small, but they further a movement, create new markets, and signal to politicians that people are serious about these issues.

Perhaps just as importantly, these efforts prevent despair. Despair is always a shortsighted emotion, a faithless and hopeless and often loveless stance toward the future. A sustainable approach to climate change turns its back on despair and gets to work. The situation is not hopeless for the human race as a whole, and probably not even for civilization as we know it. We need to remember that the solution to almost every environmental crisis we've faced so far has disrupted our lives far less than was initially projected. When acid rain started killing the eastern forests thirty years ago, governments got serious about air pollution, and now the forests are beginning to thrive again. The cost was only about 10 percent of what was projected. We drive affordable cars emitting only 2 percent of the pollutants that cars from the 1970s emitted. Emissions of CFCs, chemical compounds that deplete the ozone layer, have been virtually eliminated from our technology. Our rivers no longer catch on fire. Most of us have home recycling. Slow and clumsy as our governmental processes are, we do know how to regulate industry and commerce and even lifestyles when it is clear that we need to. While we wait for political solutions to problems of sustainable lifestyle (and do our part to bring them about), we can celebrate the sustaining satisfaction of being mindful and thrifty about how we use energy and resources.

Sustaining Values. As we pare down to a sustainable lifestyle, what will sustain us is education, spiritual growth, love, and community. These are all very ecological enterprises—low in resource use, virtually nonpolluting, and most importantly, sustaining us in a way that baubles and bangles never will. If it becomes impossibly expensive to drive across town to shop, we will fall back on the truly sustaining pastimes of conversation, learning, meditation, and caring for and about those who are close by. If we can no longer hop a plane to visit friends and relations whenever we wish, we will relearn the art of letter writing, though it will probably be through

email. If we can no longer eat South American plums in the dead of winter, we will rediscover local food and the fresh joys of conversation.

The unsustainable ways we have been living for the past several generations are catching up with us very quickly now, and the crisis of change has already begun. There are already small island nations in the South Pacific that are nearly under water, people suffering from cancer, dry wells, new and terrible diseases taking advantage of weakened populations, and livelihoods challenged by high gas prices. The solutions to the problems we have created will no doubt require sacrifice, ingenuity, and adaptation to change. What will carry us through the times of difficulty and paring down will be the sustaining values of learning, faith, and community.

Activities: Before the gathering, reflect by doing one or both of these activities.

Pare Down. Walk around your home, making note of how many electrical appliances and devices you have. How many of these are really necessary to a satisfying life? Explore ways to pare down by taking unneeded items to recycling centers, garage sales, or resale shops. Of the items you need, how many stay on all the time? They are still using electricity even when they are "on standby." Develop the habit of unplugging these items when not in use.

Save Water and Energy. Read the following list of ways to conserve water. Put a check by the ones you already do. Star the ones you will try this week. Put a question mark by the ones you want to think about incorporating into your life. Add any other ideas you come up with.

- Reduce your shower time to five minutes.
- Install a low-flow showerhead.
- Air-dry your dishes instead of heat-drying them.
- Get an aerator for your kitchen faucet.
- Consider washing and rinsing all clothes in cold water.
- Reduce the number of loads of wash you do per week. (Can you wear anything an extra time?)
- Set your water heater thermostat to 120 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Catch rainwater in barrels as it flows off the house.
- Plant more indigenous plants and less grass around your home.
- Turn off the faucet when you brush your teeth.
- Repair leaking faucets and toilets.
- Use a bucket instead of a running hose to wash the car.

Questions/Sharing Suggestions:

- Are there lifestyle changes you think you should make, but have not? What keeps you from making them? What would help you make them?
- What worries you most about the future of the earth and its ecology?
- What sustains you in life that is not part of the material world? What do you think will sustain you if our society goes through a period of environmental belt-tightening?
- The author brought up despair towards climate change, have you experienced this? Talk about those feelings of hopelessness towards the problems our world is experiencing.
- How convenient is sustainable living for you? Sometimes it seems only comfortable for those with resources, education & money to achieve a sustainable life. What are your thoughts on this?

Next meeting: October 10th.