

The Land Must Live

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I was born in 1930 and thus had the wonderful opportunities of a child growing up during the Great Depression. Ours was the magnificent world of work, fun, games, good times and happy children. I never saw a whining fussy child until the Great Economic Boom brought us Future Shock along with television, swimming pools, built in obsolescence, and finally the use-it-once-and-throw-it-away economy.

The Depression gave the nation its lowest fertility rates. Children grew up with a sense of stability of the land and their environment, a sense which contributes strongly to the feeling of security and the development of sound mental health. We saw firsthand the fundamental relationship between human beings and the land, a land that was not being destroyed to build new shopping centers and superhighways. We also learned the basic laws of ecology by simply observing the fundamental interrelationships among living things. We knew what type of place the catbird would choose for its nest and where it would forage for food. Without television and swimming pools to distract us, we were able to spend all our summer spare time playing outdoors.

Perhaps of greatest value to us kids growing up during the Depression was the land we had. Around my home there were many lots whose titles had reverted to the city in default of taxes. This land grew up in wild cherry and locust trees. It was used by no one but the kids and it belonged to us as completely as if we owned title to the land. Here we built our tree houses, kept trails cleared, planted apple cores and peach seeds, cut a tree now and then, made slingshots, and had corn roasts. The land was ours to manage as we chose so as to keep it wooded and reasonably wild. It was large and diverse enough that we always had a wood thrush, a towhee and a field sparrow nesting there in the city.

Urban Sprawl

As I watched the drastic reshaping of our Earth as urban sprawl engulfed the nation following World War II, I often wondered what the effect would have been on us kids had the bulldozers moved in and converted our woods and fields into a parking lot for a new shopping center. At the very least such a traumatic experience would have alienated us against the Establishment and caused us to question the values and the concept of progress held by the older generation.

Yet today such an emotional shock has come to be a routine part of the growing up of most children. I suspect that it is also a major cause of such problems as the generation gap, rising rates of delinquency, crime, drug addiction, mental health problems and the general rebellion against society and its lack of values.

Consider the changes in our ability to destroy the land that have developed within one generation. There were no bulldozers when I was a boy. Roads were built by workers using a pick and shovel. Coal was mined with the same tools. Today we have giant earthmoving machinery that can pick up 200 cubic yards of earth in a single scoop to get to the coal seam beneath it. In building highways we do not hesitate to move mountains and fill in valleys.

Progress?

I can remember when it was a major job to fell a tree. In cutting timber two people with broad axes would chop into one side of the tree and then use a hand-drawn cross cut saw from the other side until the tree fell. With today's power saws two workers could clear a substantial area in the same time. To destroy a forest and replace it with a paved parking lot is not nearly the job today that it was 30 years ago. This is a major reason why we are now paving the land surface of this country at a rate of over a million acres a year. In California alone land is going under at a rate of 375 acres a day.

In 1962 I bought a home in Lexington, Kentucky. Behind the house is a stream and small open field. Although I realized that in the nation's 14th fastest growing city, the last of such green open spaces would soon be destroyed, I decided that it would be nice for the children while it lasted.

The little stream died last year. Even though it had been barely limping by from one year to the next, the end came as a shock for me and the children. We had known it well and had come to be close friends.

When we arrived in Lexington I was surprised to find that this little stream was alive. Although it had lived happily for several thousand years before I first saw it, human impact had hit it pretty hard by then. It arises from a culvert leading from beneath a parking lot of a shopping center, flows about 50 yards, and then enters another culvert which carries it underground so that the beauty of suburban Lexington need not be marred by a free-flowing stream.

In this short section of stream dwelled an abundance of crayfish, snails and leaches. All three repeatedly found their way into my home in glass jars as the children successively went through stages of their development. The stream was a laboratory for the study of life, much to the delight of the neighborhood children, and the unfortunate consternation of most of the mothers.

Few care about the loss of this tiny stream and others of its kind. But I think its loss is an important symptom of the disease that affects this dying Earth and represents a cause of our ever growing social degeneration and loss of humanity among us. The next generation of children will never see a living thing in this stream. As they grow up with stinking, dead and trash-filled streams, would you expect them to develop an appreciation of life and a humane attitude toward animals and their fellow citizens? I don't see how they could unless they rebel against the ugly, meaningless and self-destructive lifestyle that my generation has left for them.

Two Messages

There are two other messages that come from my little stream to you. First is that if you want your new baby ever to be able to fish in the streams, you had better join the fight for clean water now. Life is disappearing from our watercourses at a rapidly accelerating pace.

Second is a broader message from Earth to all human inhabitants. Earth is giving us a nonnegotiable demand. Either we change our ways or She will roll over and die. If we continue to destroy all life on successive pieces of land and water on this finite Earth, the end result is known: It will be only a matter of time until we have destroyed ourselves.

Next to go will be the open field behind my house. I would love to buy it as an investment in the mental health and stability of my children and future generations. I would plant a vegetable garden out there, but most of the land would be undisturbed, to grow grasshoppers and lightning bugs.

But I cannot buy the land, for it would cost about \$100,000, which is many times my annual income. The irony is that in the depth of the Depression my father was able to buy a piece of land across from our house to prevent someone's building on it. He paid \$150 and \$200 per lot, or about one-tenth his annual income, for it.

Thus we see that, although modern mass production and a growing economy has given us more material things and has allowed us to turn our natural resources into junk at an ever-accelerating rate, we are now less able to afford those things needed to maintain the quality of life than we were during the Depression.

The reason we have been gulled into thinking growth is progress is that we have a basic misunderstanding of the difference between cost and value. When speaking of land and homes, we use these words as interchangeable synonyms whereas they are actually antonyms. This was best brought out by naturalist writer Joseph Wood Krutch in the last paper he wrote before he died.

Twenty years ago Krutch built a home on five acres outside Tucson, Ariz. As the city crept out to surround his little oasis in the desert wilds, real-estate developers tried to get him to sell his land, telling him that it had risen in value to many times what he had paid for it. "Value for what?" he asked. "Certainly not as a place to live." Now that the traffic congestion, noise, smog, high crime rate and drug addiction had come out to join him, he claimed the value of the land had gone down. The developers found it hard to believe that someone would rather live on a piece of land than to sell it at a profit.

What goes up is not value, but cost - cost to everybody. The owner does not gain by selling, for to get a comparable home the owner must pay the same high cost plus the agent's fees.

Cost goes up because there are more and more people each year entering the housing market. Since they are not making any more land these days, but are destroying it at an ever-increasing rate, this means that each year more people are snapping at an ever-smaller piece of the pie. Naturally the price goes up.

Inverse Relationship

So what has developed as a result of urban growth in America is an inverse relationship between the cost and value of land and homes. Cost goes up, especially for young people trying to acquire their first home, and the value goes down for everyone, as the quality of life deteriorates in a cloud of smog, noise, traffic and the other unpleasant by-products of growth.

An earlier writer who recognized the value of land as different from the cost was Aldo Leopold. "There is much confusion" he wrote, "between land and country. Land is the place where corn, gullies and mortgages grow. Country is the personality of land, the collective harmony of its soil, life and weather. Country knows no mortgages, no alphabetical agencies, no tobacco road; it is calmly aloof to these petty exigencies of its alleged owners.

"Poor land may be rich country and vice versa. Only economists mistake physical opulence for riches. Country may be rich despite a conspicuous poverty of physical endowment, and its quality may not be apparent at first glance, nor at all times." ('A Sand County Almanac').

The land behind my home is zoned for agricultural use. Land bought for that use sells for about \$300 an acre. With a zoning change for residential housing use, the cost lumps to \$15,000 an acre. Changed to professional or business use, the cost of the land would take another quantum jump.

Open Space is Highest Value

That the highest value of the land, on the other hand, is as open space, is evident from the unanimous desires of the people of the neighborhood to have it remain as such. The people of this city do not need more office buildings, more service stations and fast-food restaurants, or more traffic problems. It is ironic that, with their demand for housing, new people moving to the cities are paying for the destruction of those values that we most wish to keep. And the cost of our housing is so high that we of the affluent society cannot afford to buy additional land in order to save it.

In 1949 Aldo Leopold wrote that we must develop a land ethic. The truth of his message comes across more urgently with every passing day. The destruction of the land for personal financial profit is a behavior that is simply not ethical and cannot long be tolerated.

Ethics in human behavior have probably been with us since our earliest civilization, although what we consider ethical has changed somewhat with time. When Odysseus returned from the wars of Troy as hero of the wooden-horse episode, he hanged on one rope a dozen of his slave girls whom he thought to have been unfaithful during his absence.

There was no question of right or wrong, for no ethic is involved in the manner in which one disposes of his or her property. The act would be considered wrong today only because people are no longer slaves and women are finally being recognized as individuals entitled to the same personal consideration as men. But the lack of relationship between morality and that which the law considers private property remains unchanged since the time of Homer, and is a major factor which prevents any real progress in dealing with some of the most obscene aspects of the environmental crisis.

Today's equivalent of the Greek slave girl is the land. This land is your land and my land, and like air and water it is a basic element upon which our survival depends. On it stand our cities and our homes, and from it we derive nearly all our food. And the land, more than any other factor, is the measure of the quality of life now available to you and me. It is the landscape, and the trees and the rabbits thereon. It is also the city park, or the one that should have been there. For the farmers, it is peace of mind as they gaze out over their fields on a quiet evening. Yet, as we enter the last part of the 20th century we still have no land ethic. Although we sing our praises to the amber waves of grain, we consider the land upon which it grows as no more than dirt, to be subdivided and covered with asphalt as soon as the profit margin becomes satisfactory. Land is treated as a commodity, to be exchanged for money, with the sole object being profit for buyer and seller. The fate of the land at the end of the hangman's rope is supposed to be of no concern to anyone in spite of the fact that it is of value to us all.

Farmers 'Kicked Around'

No one on Earth is more deserving to stand tall and proud than the American farmer, who has fed you and me and most of the rest of the people on Earth. Yet farmers are kicked around economically and forced to flee to the cities by the thousands each year to earn a living while the giant land companies get an ever-tightening stranglehold on the nation. It is a sad commentary that the poorest investment one can make is to buy a farm and farm it, while the best investment is to buy a farm and subdivide it into a real-estate development.

To the ecologist perhaps the most insane of all meanderings in the business world is that which equates land to paper money and makes the two freely interchangeable. Once sold, the land can be flooded behind a dam, blasted away to open a mine or road, or sent helter-skelter down into the streams via erosion. We consider no moral question to be involved in this. The only value judgment for society is made on the other side of the transaction: The money received for the land is viewed in a positive light as a stimulus to the local economy.

Perhaps the time is ripe for a new religion based upon a reverence for the land and all the life which springs therefrom. Is it not every bit as logical to worship the solid earth beneath your feet from which the mystery of life springs eternal with each vernal equinox as to have to imagine some unseen being in the sky? If the Great Spirit still stalks this Dark and Bloody Ground so long after the last Indians fled to the West from their Happy Hunting Ground ahead of Boone and Kenton, surely He must reside in the land and trees as He always did. If we make the land our temple, perhaps at last we will respect it as we do the man-made structures with their spires rising helplessly in the wrong direction in their search for hope and eternal life.

The time has come when we must all develop respect for the air, water, land and the living things thereon. We are all dependent upon the same life support system - Earth, and must protect Her if we are to survive. I hold these truths to be self evident: All living things are created equal and are interdependent upon one another. All flesh is grass. Only plants can make food. Humans and all other animals are totally dependent upon the plants which we so casually push aside in pursuit of the ever greater megalopolis. Animals need their oxygen and the plants our carbon dioxide. Both are dependent upon numerous species of microbes which make amino acids and vitamins, digest food, fix nitrogen for our use, and return it to the air when we die. And all are dependent upon the exceedingly complex ecosystem of producers and consumers, predators and prey, herbivores and carnivores, and parasites and disease, to provide for their needs for survival and to control their numbers. We cannot survive alone. Nor can we continue to increase our numbers at the expense of other living things.

But we are arrogant. We refuse to face reality. Four centuries after Copernicus we still really believe that the Earth is the center of the universe and that God's only concern is with our welfare. A century after Darwin we still think of ourselves

as apart from nature, with a divine destiny to conquer nature and exploit the other creatures for our own use.

No wonder our young people rebel. They are concerned not only about the deterioration of the quality of life, but also about the prospects of surviving on the dying planet they will inherit. Activist Penfield Jensen recognized the real issues when he wrote, "We will stop the destruction of this planet even at the cost of our own futures, careers, and blood. If you are not going to live for the Earth, what are you going to live for?" ('No Deposit, No Return', Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass. 1970)

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WEB DEVELOPER'S NOTE: Over a thirty year period Dr. Davis and his wife Shirley have built and installed over 3,000 bluebird boxes on Kentucky major and minor highways. Of the many works Dr. Davis has published, he considers this essay one of most critical importance. The reason is apparent, and today, his message much more urgent. We cannot delay in the protection of our land. If we are to survive, we must reconsider what is meant by growth and progress. Our Earth will not be able to give us a second chance. -Janet Powell

EDITOR'S NOTE: I agree with most of what is written here by Professor Davis. However, in place of a new religion as suggested, I'm convinced that recycling works. Our religious adherents need to look fully into their hearts, minds, and ways of behaving. -Al Fritsch, SJ