

September 2008

Ecology Connection,

Fall is here and our social structures are in a state of change: the economy is down and our leaders are searching for a new way "to do business"; we are heading into an election that requires "Change"; and environmental issues are being pushed aside in favor of giving attention to the election, the economy and the shift in the "war on terrorism" instead of recognizing that the environmental issues are inter-connected to other problems throughout the globe. And the "big" picture doesn't begin to address "social justice" inequities. As

William Somplatsky-Jarman an Associate for Environmental Justice within the Presbyterian Church says,

" Eco-Justice is the well being of all humankind on a thriving earth. It flows from our recognition that God is both Creator and Redeemer. It involves justice in human social relations coupled with the integrity of God's Creation. We will not have one without the other; we will either flourish together or suffer together."

Oh, woe is me! What to do?

I have never been a "dooms-dayer" and am much more inclined to work hard towards making changes and supporting change than to sit and wring my hands. Two things come to mind that a person can do for starters to be informed and to act:

1. Our local AC Transit is continuing to cut service, delete certain "runs" in poorer sections of the county as not being profitable and, as a result, encouraging the use of automobiles amongst people who struggle with car ownership let alone the gas to operate them. This action is, at times, made necessary due to the fact that the MTC (Metropolitan Transit Commission) has underfunded our transit system while spending millions of dollars on studies and actions that they decide are more important.

Greater and greater portions of our citizenry are being hurt by these actions.

2. Read the attached article, talk with others about what it means for our quality of life and what can be constructively be done. Discuss it here on-line, discuss it with neighbors, your book group, any group.

Happy Reading, Contemplation and Action,

Robert Davidson

Change Everything Now

One of the nation's most mainstream environmentalists says it's time to get a lot more radical

Interview with Gus Speth, by Jeff Goodell

Published in the September/October 2008 issue of Orion magazine

JAMES GUSTAVE "Gus" Speth's office at Yale reeks of Old World charm, with a high ceiling and dark, wood-paneled walls adorned with souvenirs from his travels in Africa and Asia. Speth, sixty-six, the dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, is a tall, genial man who wears conservative striped ties and speaks in a quiet southern drawl. If America can be said to have a distinguished elder statesman of environmental policy, Speth is it. Before he arrived at Yale, he cofounded the Natural Resources Defense Council, one of the most powerful environmental groups in the U.S., then went on to serve as a top environmental policy advisor to President Jimmy Carter. In 1982, he founded the World Resources Institute, an environmental think tank, which he headed for a decade. He also served as a senior advisor to President-elect Bill Clinton's transition team and spent seven years as the top administrator in the Development Programme at the United Nations.

It's not surprising that Speth would end up in a wood-paneled office at Yale. What is surprising, however, is that he uses his bully pulpit in academia to push for a 1960s-style take-it-to-the-streets revolution. His new book, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* (Yale University Press), is nothing less than a call for an uprising that would reinvent modern capitalism and replace it with, well, a postmodern capitalism that values sustainability over growth, and doing good over making a quick buck. Sound idealistic? It is-but that's part of the book's appeal. Speth goes beyond finger-wagging to indict consumer capitalism itself for the rape and pillage of the natural world. His proximate concern is global warming and the impact it will have on civilized life as we know it. But unlike, say, Al Gore, Speth is not concerned with details of climate science or policy prescriptions for the near-term. He is after bigger game-the Wal-Martization of America, our slavish devotion to an ever-expanding gross domestic product, the utter failure of what Speth disparagingly calls "modern capitalism" to create a sustainable world. What is needed, Speth believes, is not simply a tax on greenhouse gas emissions, but "a new operating system" for the modern world.

I spoke with Speth at Yale earlier this year.

Jeff Goodell: In the opening chapter of your new book, you say, quite bluntly, that "something is wrong" in America. What exactly do you mean?

Gus Speth: Well, I think we have to face up to the paradox that while the environmental community has become stronger and more sophisticated over the years, the environment is going downhill so fast that we're facing a potential calamity down the road. All we have to do to leave a ruined world to children is just keep doing what we're doing today-the same emissions of pollutants, the same destruction of ecosystems, same toxification of the environment-and we'll ruin the planet in the latter part of this century.

And yet, we know we're not just going to keep doing what we're doing. We're going to grow phenomenally. At the current rates, the world economy will be twice as big as it is today in seventeen years. That carries the potential for enormous additional destruction. The environmental movement has a lot of wonderful things about it, and it's accomplished a lot. But it's not up to this challenge of dealing with this amount of environmental loss and destruction.

The fundamental thing that's happened is that our efforts to clean up the environment are being overwhelmed by the sheer increase in the size of the economy. And there's no reason to think that won't continue. So we have to ask, what is it about our society that puts such an extraordinary premium on growth? Is it justified? Why is that growth so destructive? And what do we do about it?

Capitalism is a growth machine. What it really cares about is earning a profit and reinvesting a large share of that and growing continually. Profits can be enhanced if the companies are not paying for the cost of their environmental destruction-so they fight [paying it] tooth and nail. The companies themselves are now quite huge, quite powerful, quite global, and no longer just the main economic actors in our society. They are the main political actors also.

And so all of these things combine to produce a type of capitalism that really doesn't care about the environment, and doesn't really care about people much either. What it really cares about is profits and growth, and the rest is more or less incidental. And until we change that system, my conclusion is that it will continue to be fundamentally destructive.

JG: So our engine of progress has become the engine of our destruction?

GS: Well, it's certainly the engine of environmental destruction. And what is also becoming apparent is that this so-called engine of progress is also not really improving people's lives very much either. And here I'm speaking entirely of the advanced, industrial, affluent societies, not the developing world, which does need to grow.

In the West, we're seeing that people's own sense of subjective well-being has not been going up with all of this growth that we've been experiencing. Per capita income goes up, but happiness doesn't, satisfaction with life doesn't. It's just flatlined, for decades now. And there are certain pathologies that have increased. A sense of loneliness in our society, bipolar disorders, other problems, stress and disintegration of communities.

This should be a time when we really can take this fabulous amount of wealth that we've generated and enjoy it, and yet we seem to be caught in a system where it's either up, up, and away or down, down, and out. And we seem to careen from crisis to crisis-personal crises, national crises, economic crises.

JG: I know lots of people working on clean energy technology in places like Silicon Valley who would argue that the forces of progress need to be accelerated, not slowed down.

GS: Well, I do stress the need to ditch the old technologies that have gotten us into this trouble and bring on as fast as possible new technologies that are designed with the environment in mind. That's all accurate, I think. And I'm delighted to see the renaissance of environmental concern in the country.

But having said that, I just don't believe it's enough. What you're really describing is what can be thought of as kind of a dematerialization of the economy, of the movement toward every kind of gloriously high-tech economy with just electrons moving around-

JG: A Google economy.

GS: Yes, a Google economy. But there's still huge impacts, even with all of that, and as these new companies grow in size, those impacts become ever larger. And right now there's been very little dematerialization of the U.S. economy. It's gotten more efficient, it creates less pollutant per unit of output in our economy. But still, we're using a huge amount of stuff and releasing almost all of it back as waste into the environment in some form.

Changes of the type that would bring on this technological nirvana are just too slow and too partial. They need to be combined with other things that basically slow the current up. And that means taking the priority off of growth. It means finding a new set of laws for corporations-to change their incentive structure. It means us consumers becoming more interested in living more simply.

JG: Of course, when you talk about taking the priority off growth, it's no longer a technological issue. It's a political one.

GS: Yes, but the trouble is, our politics simply won't sustain the changes that we need. And so we really need to create a mighty force in our country that seeks to reassert popular control over our politics before it's too late.

We're in a vicious circle where the more powerful [certain] interests get, the less able we are to reassert control, and those that have enormous power and wealth in the country [become even more] able to assert even more. And I think that the environmental community needs to see political reform as central to its agenda, and it doesn't now. That's not what the environmental groups do. And that's a huge mistake, because right now they're playing a loser's game, and they keep losing. Winning some battles, but losing the planet.

The other thing that needs to happen is that there needs to be some fundamental challenge to our dominant values. It's been addressed by religious organizations

and psychologists and philosophers and countless others for a long time. But until we reconnect in a more profound way with ourselves and our communities and the natural world, it seems unlikely that we will deal successfully with our problems.

JG: You quote Milton Friedman as saying, "Only a crisis produces real change." What kind of crisis do you have in mind?

GS: I hope it doesn't take that. But I think if you have a crisis—a Great Depression, whatever—in a time of wise leadership, we can construct a new narrative that builds on the traditions of the country and its highest values, but also explains where we need to go in the future, and why we went astray in the past.

In the end, the thing that I hope for is a huge mass movement in the country before it's too late. I really don't know any other way to make the change happen other than a grassroots movement. The nearest thing we've seen to this in living memory was the civil rights movement.

JG: One of the paradoxes of this is that fear is not always a good motivator, especially when it comes to confronting an issue like global warming. People become immobilized and say, "What the hell, there's no point." How do you communicate the seriousness of the challenge we face without pushing people over into despair?

GS: I think people respond out of love and out of fear, fundamentally. We will never do the things that we need to do unless we understand how serious the situation is. So you've got to deal with the facts.

Do we need also to talk in positive terms, to say we can deal with these issues? Absolutely. And is being hopeful about the prospects for the future very important? Absolutely. But in order to make the deep changes that are needed, people need to sense the scale of the problem.

JG: Do you think the notion of sustainability on a planet that is heading toward 9 billion people is an impossible goal?

GS: Well, let me give you a personal example. My wife and I have offset all of our greenhouse gas emissions from our car, our house, everything. Before we moved into the apartment where we live now, we invested heavily in a big photovoltaic unit for our house, which produced about half of our electricity. I purchased two Priuses, gave one of them to one of my children. We do lots of recycling and other things. We've changed all our bulbs to CFLs. You do all those things, and your environmental footprint is still huge.

Moreover, not only is doing all the things that we are able to do ourselves woefully insufficient, it creates this false impression. It gives you the sense that

the problem is an individual one, and it's on you, and you can solve the problem. Whereas the problem is really deeply systemic-it's only through political action that we will solve the problem.

JG: I visited scientist James Lovelock a few months ago, who has long argued that the Earth is beyond its carrying capacity for human beings. He basically says, "Look, if there were 100 million people on the planet, it wouldn't matter if we were all driving SUVs and burning coal-"

GS: And it almost wouldn't matter if we were back in 1950, with half the population that we have now. It still wasn't a full world at that point. Now it is a full world. Everything we're doing is on a scale that rivals the natural systems.

JG: Right. And you can say-as you do-that we consume too much, and that our economic system has become a slave to the idea of an ever-expanding GDP. But you could also just say, "Look, there's too many people on the planet-"

GS: Well, I think a lot of people believe that. I actually have a law, Speth's Law, and it is that the richer you are, the more you think that population is the world's problem. But the scale of the impact is really derived from the phenomenal amount of economic growth in rich countries, not from the phenomenal population growth.

JG: In your view, what's the alternative to pro-growth capitalism? Should we rethink communism?

GS: No, it's not that at all. But I do believe we should be looking for a nonsocialist alternative to today's capitalism. I think we do want to make changes that are sufficiently profound that when you look back on them, you will see that it's no longer the capitalism of the early twenty-first century.

JG: What would a revised capitalist system look like?

GS: Well, let's take the core of it-the corporation. Corporations right now are mandated to serve and promote the best interest of stockholders, by law. And anything it [a corporation] justifies in the nature of doing well in communities or doing well by society, that's also got to be justified that it's in the best interest of the shareholders. And maximizing shareholder wealth is a very fundamental part of the motivational structure of the corporate sector.

I think that needs to change fundamentally, so that corporations really are in the business of serving all of the factors that help generate wealth-all of the stakeholders, in effect. One way to describe what has to happen, and the way that the situation in the future would be different, would be to describe it as a series of transformations. The first would be a transformation in the market. There would be a real revolution in pricing. Things that are environmentally

destructive would be-if they were really destructive-almost out of reach, prohibitively expensive.

A second would be a transformation to a postgrowth society where what you really want is to grow very specific things that are desperately needed in a very targeted way-you know, care for the mentally ill, health-care accessibility, high-tech green-collar industries.

A third would be a move to a wider variety of ownership patterns in the private sector. More co-ops, more employee ownership plans, and less rigid lines between the profit and the not-for-profit sectors. I mean, Google is an example of that now, they are moving in that direction, although I think it's small compared with what they've really got going.

JG: Do you think that this kind of change can be had with anything short of a real revolution in America?

GS: Well, I don't think it can be had without a real citizens' movement-a grassroots citizens' movement that shakes up people's consciousness and forces us to rethink what's really important, and what our role in the world and in nature really is. I think there is a growing sense that something is out of whack in the country, and that we're on the verge of losing something very important, not only spiritually but also environmentally. And if we don't change, we really could pass into some situation where it would be irretrievably lost.

JG: If I read your book right, you stop just short of calling for people to march in the streets.

GS: Oh, I will call for people to march in the streets. I said to my friend Laurie David [producer of An Inconvenient Truth] that it's time for a million-person march on Washington early in the new administration. We could really make the point that the climate issue has to be front and center in the first hundred days of the new administration. It's amazing what can be accomplished if citizens are to march in the footsteps of Dr. King. It's time to give the world a sense of hope again.

THE END