

Saving the Earth (but mainly saving us)

Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.

The thing about saving the earth- the important thing about saving the earth- is that it isn't really about saving the earth. The earth is in no real danger. It is we humans that are imperiled, along with some of the attributes of the earth we currently enjoy.

We think solutions and salvation comes with more technological prowess, but what may be more important is the ability to weigh its consequences. One of the rules of physics is you can't go faster than the speed of light. This parallels what could be the first rule of human dynamics which states you shouldn't go faster than the speed of enlightenment. The first rule, from Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity is immutable; the second one is broken relatively routinely.

We might find some momentary wisdom in the words of Douglas Adams, from his novel "A Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy":

"For instance, on the planet Earth, man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much- the wheel, New York, wars and so on- whilst all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins had always believed that they were more intelligent than man- for precisely the same reasons."

Like many of you I often fly on commercial airlines. I board the aircraft and dutifully snap the buckle on my seatbelt shut. My cynical side ponders how well my seat belt will protect me as a 55 ton Boeing 737 plummets to earth, obeying the immutable law of gravity.

I am aware of the safety lecture which is, charitably, a perfunctory bit of due diligence with a box ticked off somewhere in corporate headquarters that we were warned. If we don't heed the warning, well it's on our heads. The impression we passengers are left with is that we are in good hands; the seat belt, safety briefing and fold out safety card in the seat pocket our salvation in case of an emergency.

There's not much to read on the safety card. I assume that's by design as an aid to a quick scan on that plunge to earth, amid the screams of my fellow passengers engaged in less calm endeavors. But, no one around me appears pale or anxious indicating we are all cushioned in the illusion of safety, buoyed up by air traffic statistics, the standards of routine inspections and, the experience of our pilots.

None of us have concluded our lives are inexorably governed by the laws of probability and confounded by chaos theory. I'm pretty sure I'll survive, based on past experience and the blind faith that has most of us believing we will win the lottery but never be involved in a car accident.

Around me like minded people read, chat and sleep. All of us are passengers in a tube hurtling along 30,000 feet above the landscape at 600 mph. Somewhere out there in those immense skies other tubes fly filled with people, hopefully not on an intersecting course with ours. I'm sure the pilots are monitoring the other traffic but we passengers are blissfully ignorant about our fellow travelers and have little concern about them. They're on their own; they've had their own safety briefings. Some of them may be on flights that still serve meals. I try not to think of that perk.

When we all arrive safely at a destination of our choice we disembark and all of us, from different tubes, mingle around the luggage carousel with the promise our bags arrived too. We all make little, involuntary

sighs of relief or offer silent prayers of thanks for being back on the earth's surface. But, on the ground it isn't much different; we're still passengers on a liner hurtling through the cosmos. All the same, except there is no safety briefing, no pert flight attendant telling us to keep our seat belts fastened, not to smoke in the lavatory and to keep the cell phones turned off so they don't affect navigation.

Maybe there should be a safety briefing when we return to earth. It might make more sense than the perfunctory one we get when we climb into a tube to leave the earth's surface. What could we include in that safety briefing for the planet we ride on, before we all head home, luggage safely stowed under our arms? How about:

- All of us ride this ship together; no other ships exist.
- Learn more about the craft we are riding on; read all the manuals.
- Consider the limited carrying capacity of this vehicle.
- Don't lose any of the pieces; there are no replacement parts.
- If you make a mess, clean it up; otherwise we all sit in it.
- Air, water, soil and biodiversity fuel this ship; don't screw with the fuel.
- Regular inspections and timely maintenance will keep the craft functioning.
- Share the resources aboard the ship equitably.
- Once on, you can't get off; it's a one way trip.
- Keep the heat down; some parts of the craft are temperature sensitive.
- Limit your luggage; ask yourself what you really need.
- Remember, after you're gone, others will be riding on this craft; leave it nice for them.

Most importantly it's not politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, atheists, academics, generals, farmers, loggers, plumbers, environmentalists, corporate executives, the right wingers, the left wingers or the buffalo wingers piloting this craft. It's all of us with equal responsibility, accountability and influence.

Many of you are no doubt wondering where I'm going with this very global, very planetary; maybe even galactic line of thinking. We're now on a ride together on the third rock from the sun. Please fasten your seatbelts.

Perhaps it would be useful to start with some fundamental principles that form the "mighty truths" governing our approach to the world. They are:

1. What goes around comes around;
2. Everything is connected;
3. Everything is additive;
4. Diversity = stability; and,
5. We (humans) are in the loop.

These five principles underpin everything. They are integrative, unifying and stand as a group to provide order to our thought processes as we try to grasp the complexity of the task. Understanding them does not mean we are granted immunity from their actions. Neither fighting the principles nor ignoring them is an option. You might be able to bargain for short-term relief but over time, acceptance is the only option. Let's explore them in a bit more detail.

“What goes around comes around” isn’t just a cliché; it’s an instruction manual. The world is a recycling center on a massive scale as well as an interconnected web. We breathe the same air and drink the same water as did the dinosaurs and our ancestors. The difference is the air and water of today has been fortified with the exhausts of our industrialized world. A nuclear reactor in Japan suffers an upset and very shortly we all breathe in the result. In the plume from multiple stacks and pipes are heavy metals, toxic chemicals and combinations whose synergistic effects are poorly understood. Once released, the substances are exported over the globe by currents that know no boundaries, provincial or national. This is an unintentional consequence of the global economy, that with benefits come significant costs.

“Everything is connected” speaks to the observation of John Muir who said, “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe”. We burn fossil fuels, cut down forests and rip up native prairie which store carbon, fail to invest in alternative forms of energy and then watch in amazement as polar ice caps and glaciers melt. Much of humanity is concentrated along coastlines, many of which are, or will be subject to ocean level increases. Climate change, a consequence of the things that flow from our smokestacks and tailpipes means weather patterns have become unpredictable and the weather vicious. The majority of our agriculture, the source of our regular meals, is rain dependent; tinker with that and the plate may not be full at supper time.

“Everything is additive” including that second dessert or an additional drink. You may also be familiar with issues of bioaccumulation of DDT and other persistent chemicals and the effects on nesting birds and fish. Many of those substances we filter out of air, water and food with our lungs, kidneys and other organs. These things linger, accumulate and magnify in us as well, so that as an example, mother’s milk is now richly infused with persistent organic pollutants, heavy metals and endocrine disrupting chemicals. The effects of all our endeavors are cumulative and inevitably there is a line in the sand followed by a precipice. The science of cumulative effects analysis has progressed to provide us reasonable interpretations of overlaps, what the future trajectories are, given the growth rates of today, and the signals to determine when to stop.

“Diversity equals stability” isn’t just an ecological construct. Diverse systems are inherently more resilient, stable and resistant to perturbations. The principle applies to a forest, a business, to a community and probably to the world. I understand that to succeed in business you need to identify your particular assets and leverage them to create your own competitive advantage. Alberta’s competitive advantage isn’t solely vested in barley, beef, oil or dimensional lumber. It is our clean air, water, productive soil and biodiversity (and associated ecological goods and services) coupled with an educated and healthy population that provides our strengths. Once we lose that foundation our advantage is gone.

“We humans are in the loop”. Let me incite you with a startling statement. Let’s not kid ourselves that we manage the environment. It is impossible to send a fish on a course to swim better in less water, or a cow to a workshop on sustainable grazing or persuade water to avoid being contaminated. Less startling, but not yet fully understood is that we are not immune from the effects of our own activities. Nothing happens in environmental management until people agree to behave in ways that recognize the effects of their actions. With recognition comes responsibility, and with responsibility eventually comes accountability. Then we will understand the challenge of learning as a modern society how to live the good life on earth without abusing the generosity of our hostess.

Speaking of abuse the phone rang recently, as is the usual case, in the middle of a meal. My negative reaction was partially mollified by the soft, female voice asking if I was the head of the house. I quietly

answered “yes”, hoping my wife wouldn’t hear. The call was from a national conservation organization that had teamed with a major credit card company. As it was explained to me, if I signed up for a card a percentage of my purchases would go to the conservation organization to help fund more good work.

“Imagine”, said the lady, “the more you spend the better it will be for conservation”. Alarms bells began to toll. To clarify I asked “So, the more stuff I buy, the more things I do that are channeled through my credit card the better off wildlife will be and more habitat will be saved?” “Yes!” was the enthusiastic response.

“But”, I said, “wouldn’t all that activity, caused by me buying more stuff, actually cause habitat to decline and wildlife to suffer? After all, stuff has a cost outside of what I pay for it- the impact on the environment of more oil pumped, trees cut, minerals mined, factories built, roads constructed, trucks operated, stores opened, water diverted and so on. The more I spend, the more I consume; the more I consume the more I am responsible for using up the natural environment your organization is trying to protect.”

I was really warming to the subject when the initial sweet voice turned sour and snarled, “I guess you don’t care about conservation”. She then hung up on me. “But”, I struggled to say into a phone receiver already dead in my hand, “I do care”. Many of us do. Bird identification guides outsell bibles. The majority of Canadians agree the environment is a high priority. I just don’t think you can put conservation on a credit card or that we can consume our way to a healthy world.

Consuming our way to a better world seems self defeating. I believe we have developed a societal blindness to our consumptive, or more to the point, over-consumptive habits. “The split between what we think and what we do is profound”, says Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer and philosopher. In our myopia we can’t connect the dots between consumption and loss of valued pieces of the natural world. It is a truism in nature; everything is connected, additive and cyclical.

So, to bring this back to earth here’s a question. How many of you have children, are contemplating having children in the future, associate with the children of others, or think children are our future? If you remain unmoved at this point, were you a child in the past, secure in the notion that adults were operating with your best interests at heart? I hope I’ve achieved some level of solidarity amongst you, on the subject of responsibility for future generations. To take on that responsibility, to ground it for the earth, might start by contemplating what you would write in a letter to those that follow us. It could be to your grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, or the descendants of others. It is a letter to the future.

This is what I might write:

Dear Alex and Monica and hundreds of you I will never meet,

As I write this to you today I realize it may be a while before you will be able to read, you may not be born yet; in fact, your parents may not yet be born. But as I think and plan for the world you will occupy, especially for the essentials that will sustain you I want to keep you in mind. I want you to be top of mind in my thoughts.

Considering water, air, soil and space I am not so much bequeathing them to you as I am thinking about how my use of them now will affect you, at a time down the road. As I write this I share the responsibility of planning your future with many. While we hope and dream of what your future will be like we realize that whatever opportunities you have for employment, security, stability and health will be largely determined by our activities today.

I think I can speak for all of my fellow travelers when I say we want you to be happy. I'm unconvinced though that happiness is related to the acquisition of more stuff. A healthy economy allows us to buy stuff but a healthy environment ensures there is stuff to be bought. Without a healthy, stable and diverse environment the economy falters, stumbles and we fall into survival mode. We can't buy ourselves out of that position.

We want you to find employment-good jobs; jobs that will keep you here. But, we also want to ensure you not only make a living, you make a life. Life revolves around family, community, recreation, responsibility and health, not just a job. We are just now beginning to appreciate that a healthy landscape supports healthy people. Perhaps that realization will be more ingrained in your time.

To me the measure of a healthy landscape includes water clean enough to drink, air pure enough that breathing it isn't an article of faith, productive soil to raise food, the natural expression of biodiversity, and ecological integrity within the influence of a relatively benign climate. If the quality of these things becomes our measure of how we make a living, from all the things we do now, including farming, extracting oil and gas, timber harvest, manufacturing and urban development, you will have a great life. I'm not sure you will be able to appreciate how hard it is to do this now, to slow down, to save and to conserve when the opportunity seems so pressing and the financial rewards so enticing.

Someone wise said the ultimate test of a man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard. We aren't looking for thanks; it is our responsibility to do this, to leave you a landscape with possibility. Our "bottom line" is that evolution didn't set itself on a course for humans to have us end up with large investment portfolios, starter castles and adult toys. No, its purpose is to ensure the species continues and passes on the inheritable traits that serve the next generation well.

So, as we think and plan, we ponder what will best serve you. It would seem to me that the two most important gifts we can give you are the ability to use information to make wise decisions and a quality environment in which there are still choices left to be made.

My fondest regards, Lorne

Think about what you might write. Take off the hats you wear that represent the interests of today and think about those who don't have a voice about the future, especially those yet to be born.

If saving the world and ourselves is worthwhile consider this simple proposition. Buy less, consume less and live on a healthier earth longer. Connect the dots. This may be said about maintaining our earth; the truism that if we want a better world we will have to become better people. This is a practical, pragmatic, simple, cheap and easily adapted solution to the issues of the globe. All that is required is that we change ourselves.

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Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist and an Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary.

lafitch@shaw.ca ; 403 328 1245