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Pro Se

Fiat for a small planet: tend your own garden first, but always be aware of the global landscape

By William Hollingsworth



There is a *New Yorker* cartoon that has two ladies Christmas shopping in a department store. They are looking at a large globe—a beautiful replica of the whole world. And one shopper says to the other, "Personally, I can't imagine a gift that would be more depressing."

No person, no city, no nation, is an island anymore. We must look at the world, for its future will be our future. And what do we see?

We see immense economic inequality. In some familiar neighborhoods of

the global village, we see people getting thousands of dollars of real annual income, but elsewhere on the globe we see neighborhoods where masses of people endure levels of human need beyond anything now known in this nation. And nuclear weapons—terror enough in the hands of a few superpowers—may soon be accessible to all.

Within most of the developing nations we see the threat of population growth so great as to virtually demolish the chances for freedom, human dignity, and world peace. Human population is expected to reach somewhere between eight billion and 13 billion in the next century—though massive famine or some other macrotragedy could make a mockery of present estimates.

Already, the earth's agriculture is showing signs of being unable to service the ever increasing demand. Already, the earth's forests, jungles, wetlands, and brushlands are being mowed down at rates that should alarm even the

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craziest optimist. If present population and land use trends continue, in only the next few decades the human race could easily commit genocide against half a million or more plant and animal species whose value to man and to the world is totally unknown.

Careless, mindless modes of industrialization, worldwide, are progressively poisoning the biological base on which all life depends.

There is, I submit, a fundamental need for what one writer has called a planetary bargain—a global deal involving all the peoples of the earth. All nations and individuals would have to accept some unwelcome limits. The population bomb must be defused. Third World nations, with their soaring populations, must commit themselves to policies designed to achieve adequate reductions in birthrates in a humane fashion. Any nation with a high birthrate must do the same. Contingent upon such commitments, the affluent nations must be willing to expend massive amounts of international aid in one or more forms: aid for family planning, health care, water and sewage systems, shelter, schools, and agricultural and other needed economic development.

Other needs: Without causing excessive internal or international hardship, each industrial nation must begin the enormous but necessarily gradual task of converting its misdeveloped economy into one that cares for the earth. Great amounts of imagination and wealth must be expended to create modes of material well-being that can be safely shared with the entire world. In moving toward an earth-caring technology, the affluent nations will need to gradually but markedly decrease their consumption of scarce resources and the havoc they cause in the environment. In exchange for the massive aid to be offered them, developing nations would have to carry out development in ways designed to minimize its ecological impact.

You may well be thinking that this all sounds politically impractical. Indeed it does. For mankind's most critical need is that of a new world view, a new global ethic, a genuinely new politics. The old politics, East and West, is dead. It has, it offers, no future. Here and abroad, what is needed is a new vision, a new politics

of global responsibility.

Each of us can play a role in helping to achieve the kind of world of which we all dream.

One way is simply by doing one's own job well. The creation of a better world is an enormous task. But it is primarily the sum of many individuals who care about their so-called small tasks. Competence, honor, concern, and kindness do not mean less in times of crisis. They mean more. In peace or in war, the smallest good word or deed can make the world more beautiful and, like ripples in a pond, can have secondary effects far beyond the sight of the giver.

Another way one can better the world is by taking better care of one's self. I don't mean things like switching to a more expensive shampoo. I do mean taking time to figure out what you believe and then trying to live your life in harmony with those beliefs. I mean seeking a life-style that promotes health—of body and of mind. While some researchers are still trying to figure out which is more harmful, booze or grass, other researchers have already learned this: Pats on the back or hugs from a friend or a loved one can do more for more people's health than any single medicine money can buy.

In a world of crisis, personal relationships mean more, not less. We should make the time to tend to those relationships. If you think you want the joy of having children, don't wait forever to have them. And if and when you do have them, save enough of yourself—men as well as women—for them. Doing so will cost you money, at least in the short run. But, in case you hadn't noticed, more money is about the last thing most American kids need. In preparation for tomorrow's resource-scarce world, one of the things we need to teach our children is how to have fun—how to live joyful lives—without spending a bundle. And the only way to teach that is by example.

Making a better world by tending one's own garden is essential. But it is not nearly enough.

Each of us is morally obligated to look at the big picture—to consider the whole world. We must all become well informed about its complex problems and the possibilities for humane solutions. Alas, one cannot rely solely or

mainly upon the popular media for this information. Television, newspapers, and popular magazines are doing a horrible job—a shamefully poor job—of providing information about the real needs of the world. So we must be hunters and seek out the information in obscure places, some of which are listed below.

It should be a necessity in each of our lives to keep current on the big picture, and share our learning with others at every appropriate opportunity. We should be keeping up on, and carefully evaluating the proposed solutions of others. Any one of us may come up with some innovations of our own.

And as we increase our own awareness of global imperatives, we should let that awareness enlighten our political advocacy, our voting, and all of our political decision making.

If you seek political office, do so in the best tradition of representative government. That means not only listening to the people but helping to inform them. It means learning and then telling the truth about the sacrifices that will be required in the coming years if this nation is to help create a humane and livable world. It means genuine leadership. As Winston Churchill learned, it may well mean not being elected—or not being reelected. The survival of representative government cannot be entrusted to office seekers and office holders who deem their election or reelection the most important thing. The old politics is dead. We need politicians whose egos do not require short-run personal victory. We need politicians whose overriding concern is bequeathing a better world to succeeding generations. We can no longer afford any other kind.

I cannot describe all the ways in which one can help to make a better world, but there is one kind of help that deserves particular mention. This category involves the individual who is a born money maker. You know the type. Everything he or she touches turns to money. Even his tax shelters make money sooner than he would like. If you are lucky enough to be one of these people, you bear a special responsibility in the task of rescuing this world and its people. You can provide generous support to organizations and institutions

that are endeavoring to create a humane and livable world. Doing good, however, requires more than a big pocketbook and a warm heart. Those with resources—more than anyone else—need to do their homework on what strategies are apt to help, and what strategies are apt to hinder, the long-term good of the world and its people.

For those of us who lack the Midas touch, there is a different warning. If we want to maximize our personal freedom and self-fulfillment, if we want to play a more creative role in helping to build a better world, then we must keep the list of material things we have to have to a minimum. To some extent we are all slaves to our paychecks or to our clients' fees. But we can limit that slavery by limiting our addiction to material goods.

You may well be thinking that all of this is bad news. That value judgment ultimately rests upon one's view of the good life. Traditionally, a people's view of the good life has been symbolized by that people's view of paradise. In most societies, there seem to be two competing views of paradise. One view is an adaptation (really a misadaptation) of Greek mythology. In this view, paradise—the good life—has everyone lolling around in elysian fields getting stoned on spiked ambrosia.

But there is a second view of paradise. Permit me just one biblical reference and a free (but I think fundamentally faithful) translation at that. The simplest statement of this second view of paradise is found in one short verse in the Book of Genesis. If the deity language bothers you, then just focus on what this verse says about what it means to be a human being:

"The Lord God took the [person] and put him [or her] in the Garden of Eden to till it and [to] look after it."

In this view, paradise—heaven on earth—means tending to, looking after, caring for, the Beautiful Garden of Earth. To be really alive is to help tend the garden. To help look after it. To care for it.

And this is good news. This beautiful, wondrous, holy gift of a world—and all the people and other creatures in it—are worth all that we each have to give. To strive for a future in which all persons can live in peace and justice and in which the beauty of nature can still flourish: that is a cause worthy of our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

Reading List for a Small Planet

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