

REAL HOPE – REAL CHANGE
Michael D'Aleo

Eight years ago, in October 2003, the United States Military commissioned a study to consider some of the extreme but “plausible” scenarios surrounding the issue of climate change. The report was titled *An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and its Implications for United States National Security* and was written by Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall. The report made mainstream news when a summary of it was published in an article in Fortune Magazine entitled *Climate Collapse* by David Stipp (*Fortune*, January 26, 2004). The report considered the possibility of many extreme possible changes to the earth that might occur due to possible human induced changes to the climate. One of the key scenarios described how by 2011 the effects of significant global warming might cause a shutdown of the gulf stream in the Atlantic Ocean, causing the Scandinavian countries to experience unprecedented cooling. The report went further to postulate the possibility that this would result in a huge displacement in the population of the world as it sought warmer climates and lead to a war for space and resources. According to this report, it was a possibility that Scandinavia would be essentially uninhabitable by 2011. In 2004 a movie, *The Day after Tomorrow*, depicted the possibilities examined in the Pentagon’s report. In many ways, the report served as the plot script for this movie, which created fear, anxiety and a sense that we’d better do something about this climate change issue. Interestingly enough, in one part of the movie the studio created an animated scene of a huge glacier breaking apart and falling into the ocean. This studio-created scene was later taken and used in another movie on climate change, Al Gore’s 2006 “documentary,” *An Inconvenient Truth*. While it is clear that some of humanity needs to take a long hard look at how their lives are affecting the earth as a whole and make some changes, changes based on fear are usually motivated by those seeking power and control. I can’t help but notice that the carbon credit scheme being touted as a solution for trading pollution credits has an historical similarity to the papal indulgences sold almost 500 years ago by the Church as a means of atonement for one’s moral sins.

At least now, in 2010 as I write this article, such a scenario as described in the Pentagon report appears to be extreme and unlikely to take place in the coming year. A close read of the news presently suggests that much of the “science” around this issue was overstated at best, and often flawed. We also successfully survived the fear that was supposed to manifest in the great Swine Flu epidemic of 2009 -2010. (The same hype and same surviving happened with the swine flu scare in 1976.) In the last couple of decades we survived the West Nile Virus, Y2K, Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and a series of other “certain dangers” that were put in front of us. In fact, the majority of the predictions of human catastrophes have been associated with actions such as a new tax, a new vaccination, a new governmental body to regulate another aspect of our lives, or the creation of new laws (usually involving some small group controlling significant sums of tax money). Yet in each case we seem to have averted the global catastrophe. Understand, I am not trying to suggest that humanity can go about living on the earth with “business as usual.” Actually I believe the contrary. Yet many of the proposed solutions being advocated in main stream society simply create the conditions where big business or big government (still big business) interests are the primary

beneficiaries of environmental (or economic) legislation passed for the “good of humanity and the earth.” Now, the slowly emerging conversation is becoming one of increasing human population and the carrying capacity of the earth.

There are presently about 7 billion human beings living on the earth. The majority of them do not live with a Western standard of living but something far simpler. Many live under conditions we would consider to be inhuman. Yet the population continues to increase, and within our lifetime it is expected to reach at least 8 billion. Many would ask, “Is the earth as a whole able to sustain this many people?” I would suggest that we phrase the question differently, “Are *you* willing to live *your* life in such a way so that 8 billion people can live their lives in a humane manner on the earth?”

The earth is a sphere that is just less than 8,000 miles in diameter. Almost 70 percent of its surface is covered in oceans, and of the remaining 30 percent, perhaps half of the land is either too hot (extreme desert) or too cold (Antarctica and Northern Greenland) for continued human habitation. If we were to take the land that remains and divide it equally amongst the 8 billion human inhabitants, how much land do we have available to every human being? The answer is an area approximately 100 meters by 100 meters (or about 109 yards by 109 yards). This is one hectare of land per human being or approximately 2.5 acres per person. On first thought you might feel that this is a very small parcel of land or perhaps when imagining having a piece of property this size you might feel that it’s quite large. If we think about this more carefully, the exercise becomes rather interesting. Imagine living on 5 acres with a spouse or friend. Imagine that your home is built from materials off this land, your food comes from here as well. Does the land also support any other creatures either as a food source or for the simple appreciation of seeing and experiencing other living beings? Is your energy supply able to come from this land? How about the materials for your clothing, your means of transportation, for all of the conveniences we have. Also consider that if we were to divide the world up equally, not only would the property need to be efficient in supplying your physical needs but you would also have to insure that it contributed to your aesthetic requirements for beauty, as there would be nowhere else to go on vacation. (All of the other land would be occupied by other people.) Don’t forget that a portion of the roads and other modes of transportation (should you choose to travel) would need to be allocated on a portion of property, as would your ability to deal with any wastes that you produced.

If you really take the time to consider this exercise carefully, you will quickly see that most of us in the western world are likely to be taking up considerably more than our 100 meters by 100 meters of space, especially when you consider the facilities and land necessary to produce the raw materials that our modern society consumes. If we utilize more than our 100 meters by 100 meters, it means that someone else in the world doesn’t have access to the same amount of land. Is that really how we want to be living, at the expense of other human beings? Note, there is no fear behind this question; it is simply looking at the facts as they are. You are free to choose to think about it or discard the thought.

To be clear, I am not advocating that we simply section off the world and require all human beings to stay on their plot. The possibilities for efficiency, better livelihood and greater caring for the earth arise when the possibilities for collaboration, sharing and appreciation of the talents and abilities others can easily occur. Trade that benefits all parties involved, including the natural world, is to be encouraged. Yet we are still left with the question of a human being's cosmological right to life on the earth equitably with other beings, human and nonhuman.

We can choose to live a life that is accessible to all, or we can ignore the impact it has on others' ability to live their lives and, like a real game of *Survivor*, we consciously and unconsciously vote people and other life forms "off the earth." To truly appreciate the importance of this reality and not make it an abstract game, I would encourage you to begin to take stock of whatever piece of property you are responsible for. Regardless of its size or location, whether you own it or rent it, what opportunities do you have for taking a greater responsibility for the needs of your own existence as well as for creating beauty for yourself and others? The more you pay attention to the specific qualities that exist on that particular piece of land, the more you will begin to live harmonically with the world around you. We can no longer leave the ability to read a landscape only to the farmer. This type of thinking, in which a relationship is cultivated between human beings and their surroundings, must become a daily practice. This problem can not be solved by any governmental body that will legislate a solution for each of us to carry out. The answer will only be meaningful if it is arrived at through the interaction of individuals with their particular surroundings. This process requires that we tap into the wisdom cultivated by the old nomadic cultures, farmers and foresters as well as the new insights arriving out of the true scientific approach to the world. Utility and beauty must be equally accounted for or what remains through our influence will be neither life-giving nor scenic.

Do not be discouraged by the fact that you are only one person and you think your impact will be insignificant. Imagine that there are 1000 people in the world who truly practice this way of being (there are likely more) and imagine that over the course of their life they influence 8 people to take up the same way of living in direct relationship with their surroundings (again, I am sure more than 8 people will be influenced). Then these 8 people influence 8 more each in their lifetimes. Even under these very conservative estimates, in 7 generations all 8 billion people on the earth will be living in this manner. What if Henry David Thoreau had managed to go just a bit further in his experiment at Walden Pond and managed to convince 8 others to live their lives in an integrated manner with their surroundings, and this process would have continued? If Thoreau and 1000 others had begun in the 1840s, we would all now be living in this wonderful imagination, the enlightened ideal. This would be happening today, 7 generations later. If you do the math, it is that simple.

So for the past year, every morning I have asked myself, "What will you do with your 100 meters by 100 meters?" My life has changed a little, the world has changed a little, and one person has made a person's worth of difference in the world. I still have more to learn – but one person's striving to lead an integrated life on earth is getting much closer

to being a reality. So I ask you, “What will you do with your 100 meters by 100 meters? Will you be taken by this way of thinking and commit yourself to an integrated life? Is this a question you can ask yourself every day?

Some simple points might help create a means for beginning to think this way. Go outside and take a walk around your yard or property. In what way are you working with the possibilities of what might happen here? Is there beauty in what you see or is there any functionality in the landscaping? Would it be possible for you to form a more conscious relationship with the earth by tending a garden for food, for beauty or simply as a place where other beings can live? Growing even a token amount of food for oneself is one of the most liberating and grounding experiences that anyone can have. Even if you have only a city apartment, a few flower pots with herbs is a beginning. What is essential is that you begin to see your surroundings as a place of potential beauty and begin to become aware of what is needed to support your needs.

Are your work and home in the same community? Eliminating the need for commuting in a car to and from work is usually the most beneficial change we can make in our life. Not only does it reduce the use of resources, it also brings us closer to the community within which we live. If you aren't living in or near the community within which you work, then perhaps your workplace is having a negative impact on its surrounding community. When a new power plant or landfill is needed we often hear the phrase NIMBY, Not In MY Back Yard. Can we turn this phrase around so that every new structure we build can indeed be welcome near my back yard? The intention here is not to discourage travel between communities as such but to ensure that it is meaningful rather than mere habitual daily commuting.

Make a commitment to educate yourself about every aspect of your life. From first waking in the morning to when you go to sleep, what are the processes and relationships that are called into being simply by living your life? Take, for example, the simple act of flushing the toilet. Where does the water come from? Must it be treated? Where does the water go? Do I feel fine with having all of these processes occurring in the same local area? Are there other acceptable means for working with human waste in your particular environment? Once we begin to pay attention to what is happening in our daily interactions with the world we will initially see how unconscious many of these interactions are. However, if we keep working at becoming more conscious and speak with others so that each of us can share our understanding, then we will begin to create a life process that slowly becomes harmonic with our surroundings and those around us. Having practiced this for a while, I can begin to see how radically far we can go in this direction. To list it all out would be neither helpful, because of its relevance to the particular set of conditions in which I live, nor would it be useful *because it is in coming to experience the relationships themselves that we find the key to this way of living. It is the conscious awareness of individual human beings of their surroundings that is the basis for real hope and real change. Each one of us can make it happen.*