



QUESTIONS TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

BY ELIZABETH SAWIN

Viagra may help to save endangered species. That was the odd-sounding headline of a recent Reuters story.

It turns out that Viagra has reduced demand for reindeer antler velvet and for the sex organs of Canadian seals. It may be helping green turtles, geckos, and sea horses, too. Parts of these animals are used in Chinese cures for impotence, and, because Viagra provides a cheaper, more effective remedy, demand for the organs of these animals is diminishing.

Wildlife protection programs that have been trying to protect these species for years have been pushing against a pressure arising out a very basic human need. With the discovery of a better way to meet that need, protecting these species might no longer be such an uphill battle.

This story has its amusing side, but it also makes an important point about the transition to sustainability. If a problem is arising from an unmet need, meeting that need directly can make the problem fade away almost effortlessly. This makes addressing fundamental needs a powerful point of leverage, a place where small efforts can create large changes.

So, what are our real needs? Are they actually met in the ways we expect them to be?

These tend not to be comfortable questions. If you don't believe me, play out these two scenarios in your mind.

Imagine yourself wondering aloud over Thanksgiving dinner at Aunt Mary's house how well her new rug has filled her needs for acknowledgment, respect, and self-expression. Or imagine yourself standing up at town meeting and asking if others agree that your town has grown prosperous enough to have no need to attract more businesses. You may be brave

enough to ask questions like these, but I'd be surprised to hear that you find the asking easy.

These are hard questions because they reveal a growing tension in our society.

On the one side lies the set of assumptions that most of us grew up with. According to this way of thinking, we need an awful lot. And much of what we need is scarce. We need to be strong and smart to secure our share. The only way we will be able to satisfy our needs is for our economy to grow and grow and grow.

On the other side of the divide the assumptions are flipped around. According to this mindset, we have some basic physical needs that could be easily satisfied on our finite planet if we could just be efficient with resources and equitable about their distribution. The rest of our needs, this way of thinking proclaims, are non-material. We need love, respect, appreciation, creativity, and a sense of contribution. The resources to meet these needs are virtually limitless, although not yet very well tapped.

If two such different ways of thinking co-exist within one society, then things are bound to feel uncomfortable. All of us, from the most fervent believer in the status quo to the most radical tree-hugger, carry at least a little bit of both of these paradigms inside of us. We can't help it. Pretty much all of us grew up in the midst of the first way of thinking, and the second way is slowly percolating in the oddest places. Movie stars question a war over oil. Demand for organic food is rising. Quiet church congregations market fair-trade coffee. Our culture embraces two contradictory views of the nature of our needs and the best way to meet them. As individuals, most of us do as well.

That's why these questions are so hard to ask. It feels pretentious to question Aunt Mary's apparent attempts to satisfy a non-material need with a material object when we know that we did something similar ourselves last week. And it is hard to have faith that there really will be enough if we could just share, when we have never lived in a world based on sharing.

New paradigms replace old ones when peoples' confidence in the old paradigm is shaken by observations that can't be explained by the old paradigm. That is why we must ask these questions no matter how hard they are to raise.

How will having more stuff make any of us happier? Ask yourself, your aunt, your church group, and your senator. Ask as clearly as you can, and as compassionately, remembering that each of us is a mixture of the old thinking and the new.

Build up the new, even as you see the old thinking faltering. Talk about the happiness you find in family or community, the joy that fills you on a walk to the sea, the meaning you find in serving others. Make your own life a reference point that shows how it looks when non-material needs are filled non-materially.

What we take from the earth today shapes our children's future. How we see our needs shapes what we take from the earth. And the questions we ask shape how we see our needs.

Which is to say, our questions shape our children's future.

So be brave. Ask good questions. ■

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