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"Faced with today's food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?"

Summary

Faced with unprecedented global crises, can we find a way to turn mud to gold, and emerge better-connected, wiser as a species? Psychologists fear we are unhappier than ever; ecologists that our evolutionary baggage has led to an exploitative ethic: how can we escape into a future state of security and authentic happiness? Sustainability must be broadened to include all of the liberal arts. Progress is possible when disparate knowledge coalesces into wise action. We can observe this today in emerging approaches to urban living. Consilience among disciplines will reinforce old notions of improvement with new urgency and wide-ranging synergies.

Main Essay

From crisis to well-being; from the century of 'peak-everything' to a new level of human satisfaction and happiness. Certainly, this transformation is skulking at the backs of minds throughout our affluent, reportedly unhappier-than-ever, societies. Faced with unprecedented global crises, can we find a way to turn mud to gold, and emerge better-connected, wiser as a species? Sustainability might be the watch-word of the new century, but the word is treacherous; covering, snow-like, the landscape of the millions of revolutions that must happen for our species to survive the coming years, happy and prosperous. Sustainability must be unpicked, unravelled into the clarity of the threads that will allow individuals, governments, industries and academies alike, to make their contribution to a stronger fabric for the future. I would like to unpick a couple of the strands with which I am most familiar; whilst also recognising that there are an almost infinite number of which I am completely oblivious.

The psychologist Oliver James, who has been tracking the ailments of the modern world for the past couple of decades, is convinced that 'affluenza' is rife in the English-speaking developed world. James suggests that since the 1970s this virus of materialism has made us envious, wealth-obsessed, and has led to levels of depression and anxiety hitherto unknown. These values, held previously by only tiny sections of society (royal courts, theocracies etc.), have spread throughout nations, across a bulging human populace. The mathematical ecologist Sir Robert May, reaches a comparable conclusion

concerning our environmental problems; in a book otherwise concerned with theoretical ecology, he speculates, “it may even be that, over the millenia since agriculture was invented, the answer shaped by evolutionary processes to the problem of building complex but stable human societies was to favour acquiescence in authoritarian hierarchies, with their concomitant rigidities.” Our predicament in a world of finite resources, and our response to this, is shaped historically by a tension between this prior, now unacceptable, adaptedness and our capacity to change. To put it another way: how can we all be decent, authentic people, with all our freedoms intact, and use our planet’s resources in a way which won’t undermine our very existence? No mean question!

Using our resources in a way that ensures we won’t wake up tomorrow to find the remainder usurped by some nepotic band frames the narrow problem of sustainability, underlain, ideally, by ecological economics. Achieving this, whilst also ensuring an increase in the essentials of well-being, and ensuring that these essentials will not themselves be undermined or forgotten in the face of the first goal, is for me the true, wider meaning of sustainability, and so the essence of the title question posed. Addressing this problem is not limited to promoting self-sufficiency, organic agriculture, lower food-miles, energy efficiency, and all the things enthusiastically promoted by the stalwarts of ecological living, although it may include them in carefully reasoned measure (recent research at Carnegie Mellon University, for example, has found the impact of food-miles to be negligible compared to the carbon-contrast between vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets). Addressing the problem successfully is nothing less than mobilising everyone working on every aspect of social and environmental improvement, from those designing liveable urban regions, to those promoting public-service broadcasting or literature. Now we have the knowledge and the impetus to do so, environmental and ecological strategy must integrate with the traditional, humanities-based thinkers, in continually redesigning our societies.

There is no new-fangled way of achieving this, and success is probably not even truly dependent on new information. As always with human problems, dialogue and exchange will be the only sensible ways forward. The capacity to think across disciplines, to recognise synergies; for scientists and researchers especially to engage with the public, ensuring that the shriller voices of ideologues, whether green or free-market capitalist, are not the only voices heard in the myriad and multi-faceted debates needed on food, energy, education etc. Any traditional zone of conflict between the environmental and development camps, for example, can be picked apart using the storehouse of information already

available across a range of disciplines. If only those involved always knew where to look for it; or if those creating the information knew how to supply it most effectively. A housing development for example, can be made infinitely more liveable and sustainable with green roofs, bicycle racks, recycling facilities, sustainable urban drainage systems, street design that encourages outdoor play and slows vehicles, proximity to public transport, gardens for wildlife and people, allotments et cetera, et cetera. And all these things feeding back into each other, and into a better future: Biophilia increasing the chance of residents being healthy and happy; opportunities for new hobbies based on nature or exercise; and, of course, all with minimal environmental impact. In Britain we have moved a little way towards this particular example, with the Code for Sustainable Homes. But the point is that this type of thinking, this integration of stores of knowledge from ecology, urban design, psychology and beyond, coupled with the urgent necessity for limiting our environmental impact whilst improving our lives, should not be unique. It should be mandatory, and comparable examples should abound. This consilience, the 'jumping together' of all the previously disparate types of knowledge, has been posited to be indicative of the maturation of human knowledge.

The solution to the title question, is the same solution that could have been given forty years ago, to comparable questions that may have been asked, concerning notions of improving society, which would now be considered old-fashioned in such terms. With all humankind knows today, with the understanding we have of the necessity of ecological living, for well-being and narrower concerns of sustainability, the more pertinent question might be: how is society still failing to improve its well-being? The answer is not revolutionary or new; it is only marginally more recent than the hills. We need communication and education; exchange between those who have knowledge, and those who give us its essential wisdom by applying it effectively.