

Becoming Earth compatible – a Planetary Ethic of Responsibility

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Und wenn de amme Chrützweg stohsch,
und nümme weisch, wo 's ane goht,
halt still, und frog di Gwisse z'erst,
's cha Dütsch, gottlob, und folg sim Rot.

And if you are at a crossroad,
and you don't know where to go,
hold on for a while and ask your conscience,
it knows German, thank God, and follow its advice.

Johann Peter Hebel

At a crossroad

This verses of our regional Alemannic poet describes a present situation: We are at a crossroad. One path leads to the collapse, ecologically and economically. The other way goes to the breakthrough – towards a world family that has learned to respect the cycles, laws, and conditions of this unique planet we are privileged to live on.

Unscientific projects

All of you are aware of the fact: We are not living in an Earth compatible way these days; we face the huge challenge to become Earth compatible again. If not – we will be dispelled definitely from the paradise we still live in.

What we hear about uranium mining at this Congress is outrageous: Radioactive contamination of the land, mostly land of the native people; depletion of the water resources; and that's just one precarious aspect of nuclear technology. What to do with highly radioactive waste during the next 25'000 generation? In case of an accident huge territories can become uninhabitable. The nuclear physicist und former director of the Max Planck-Institute Hans-Peter Dürr closes the nuclear debate with the following sentence: "Ich nenne nur einen Grund, der für mich als Kernphysiker ein absolutes Nein zur Kernenergie bedeutet: Wir Menschen sollten nie und nimmer Technologien entwickeln, die bei einem maximal möglichen Störfall zu einem Schaden führen, der nicht mehr von uns verantwortbar ist. Und diese Forderung muss gelten, ganz gleich, welche Wahrscheinlichkeiten für den Eintritt eines solchen Störfalls ausgerechnet worden sind." (We are not allowed to develop technologies that – in a worst case scenario – can lead to a damage for which we cannot take responsibility anymore – independently from the probabilities of such a worst-case scenario).

Priority

Climate change is the other issue. Not only we as medical students and doctors know: There are situations where there is only one single thing that should be done. If you have an arterial bleeding it's malpractice to examine the sprained ankle or the athlete's foot. There is one priority: Stop the bleeding – and stop it 100 %. Climate change for me is a life threatening condition at the global level. We have to mitigate and finally reverse climate change. The life saving measure: 100 % Earth compatible, renewable energy, as quickly as possible.

How so?

The nuclear industry is taking climate change as a pretense to get back into business. They employed an international PR office, Burson Marsteller, to promote the so-called “Renaissance of Nuclear Power”. These people have a gruesome portfolio: They worked for Pinochet in Chile. They tried to clean the image of the cruel dictators in Argentina. They worked hard to make genetic engineering socially acceptable. And now – with the huge amounts of consumer money – they promote the revival of nuclear power worldwide. Don’t feel hopeless – there are good conditions that we can stop this. Nuclear power is highly inefficient – two thirds of the produced energy is wasted as heat into the air or into the cooling water. It’s not at all economical and can be realized only thanks to consumers and state subsidies. It needs 10 to 15 years to realize a power station. And what’s happening now in reality is the Renaissance of renewable energy. Wind power worldwide doubled within four years from 60’000 to 120’000 Megawatts. There is a big boom in solar energy; and the efficiency revolution is gaining momentum. Next week there will be the prize giving ceremony for the Swiss solar prizes. They will be given to architects and homeowners who built houses that harvest more energy than they need. If all new houses were built with this Energy-Plus-Standard and if the 1.5 million houses in Switzerland would be made energy efficient, 170 TWh/a could be saved that is the amount of energy produced by 22 big nuclear power plants.

A new global consciousness: Planetary ethics

We need a new global consciousness, new planetary ethics that will catalyze the change we need so urgently.

I have dedicated my life to the number 1 priority I see: Becoming Earth compatible again. I am an enthusiastic walker. With every step I get in touch with the Earth. After three weeks of walking I feel the miraculous globe – the mountain ridges disappear behind me, new ones arise at the horizon. The days are full of surprises, encounters with hospitable people, animals, and breath taking landscapes. And in addition: Except for some food that has been driven around, my walks

represent a life style that is pretty much Earth compatible – and healthy! So we can say: What’s good for me is also good for the planet!

In 1999 I walked from Constance, Germany, to Santiago de Compostela, 10 weeks, in 2003 from Basel to Jerusalem, 5 ½ months. I felt so happy and healthy during these walks that there was the question “what’s next?” USA! I worked at Harvard Medical School for almost 3 years, I am having friends in the States; and I believe in the innovative potential of this country. If an idea is ready, it can take off quite quickly there. Furthermore: As a Swiss I am so attracted by the vast space, the big sky and the colorful desert in North America. So I decided to walk through the USA, from L. A. to Boston. But how can I get across the Atlantic without fuel?

We found a unique vessel, the “sun21”, a solar catamaran. A Swiss boat builder, Mark Wüst, had the dream to cross the ocean with one of his solar boats. We did it during the winter of 2006/2007. In 2008 the SunWalk 2008 through the USA became reality, in 7 ½ months; and this year I returned to Dominica in the Caribbean and worked on a solar project together with the Kalinago, the last native people of this area.

I show you some pictures of my American adventures.

<Slide show>

During my travels I got an idea what could belong to the new global consciousness, the new planetary ethics.

- Awe, awareness of the miracles of our world
- Empathy, solidarity, non-violence
- Respect for the animals and the trees
- Joy about the variety
- Abundance and sufficiency
- Humor, enthusiasm, courage, and fantasy
- Confidence.

Awe

Imagine – waking up in a narrow hull of a solar catamaran, in a cove of the Rhine River near the German-Dutch border, on a foggy October morning. The air is filled with bird voices. When I crawl on deck I see thousands of wild geese, taking off in groups for their flight towards south, flying in V shape formation. Or imagine a clear night on the Atlantic. The dogstar is so bright that its light is reflected like a golden ribbon on the dark velvet of the ocean. Suddenly a splashing sound – a dolphin's back emerges. The animal is dancing around our boat. Where it passes fluorescent algae are lighting up – a microgalaxy floating in the dark waters.

What a wonderful unique planet we are living on: The perfectly shaped ball is exactly the right distance from the sun so we don't burn and don't freeze. It is exactly the right size so the water of the sea, the rivers, and the lakes doesn't disperse into the universe. It has this awesome „skin“ of air – four to five miles of air with oxygen - that allows us to breathe and to live – a very thin layer, a distance that can be walked in less than two hours; and the sun, a powerful nuclear fusion reactor in safe distance to Earth, sends us all the energy that we need.

If we experience our planet with awe we are learning to appreciate its miracles; and the question arises: How can we take care of it.

Empathy, Solidarity, and Non-Violence

During my US walk 300 people stopped their car and asked me: “Do you want a ride?” I told them that their offer warms my heart and gives me energy, but that I have made a vow not to get into a vehicle until my arrival at the Boston Common. Then they asked: “Do have enough to drink – we have water for you. Do you want sandwiches? We live ten miles from here, you can stay with us!” Or: “That’s a story – we call the local newspaper!” 30 out of 40 interviews and articles were organized by people I met on the road.

We have a completely distorted view of the world. The daily newspapers are full of crime, violence, awful things. When I walk I meet hospitable, helpful people every day. They usually don't make headlines.

The new consciousness will be characterized by empathy, by solidarity, not only for all the people who live today, but also for all the generations that will still come. Our solar system has reached half time, another 3 to 5 billion years to go. Exploitation of natural resources has to stop. There is only one long-term sustainable resource: the sun.

Respect for the animals and the trees

What we do to animals and forests is suicidal. Eating meat is not Earth compatible – with meat it needs at least 10 times more water and energy to produce the same amount of calories compared with food from plants. In the USA there are 230'000 km² used for animal food, only 16'000 km² for human food. Meat – what an enormous detour and, at the same time, what a great saving potential!

During my walks I have so many wonderful encounters with animals. The horses e.g. are not used to meet a human being without a metal cover. They look at me, they prick up their ears, they nod, I nod back, they nod again; then they gallop a circle, very excited, they come back to the fence and follow me until the fence stops them. Or in Tennessee I hear a loud nature symphony in the wooden hills – cicadas that stay in the ground as larvae for 17 years. Then all of them come out. They sing for 3 weeks, lay their eggs and die. And it takes again 17 years until they sing again.

Respect for the animals, the old trees and their habitat will be an important part of the planetary consciousness.

The joy about diversity

What is true for the cuisine could become true for the religions. We are happy that there is Chinese, Italian and French cuisine. We enjoy the differences and the variety. The same could become true for the religions and cultural beliefs. And maybe the inhuman aspects of religion, of fanaticism, can be overcome more easily if there is mutual respect, interest and joy about being different. During my walks I am overwhelmed by the interest of the people for the motives of my adventures. Those who are not interested in energy issues ask me about the athletic aspects – how can a 60-year old man walk such distances? How do I prepare myself? Shoes? Food? Lodging?

Abundance and Sufficiency

Imagine a cherry tree – loaded with ripe fruits. Every cherry contains a cherry pit – again a potential tree. This abundance reminds me of the free solar heat that the sun provides for warming up my water boiler. Or the experience with solar panels that harvest solar energy without noise, fumes, with no movable parts. Amazing!

I came a long way from driving a car, eating meat, flying around in airplanes to a vegetarian life style with public transportation and lots of walking; and my life quality improved tremendously, and I became healthier and healthier.

Humor, enthusiasm and courage

Eastern 2008: I put up my tent in cattle shelter in Oklahoma – it's a rainy night. In the morning the sky is clear and cloudless, a wonderful Sunday morning. I am in celebration mood, and so I eat all the food I still have with me. I think I might find a store to buy food again. But that's not the case. After seven, eight hours I become so thirsty and hungry. I send a wish to the universe: "Please, send me something to eat and to drink!" The road goes down, to a brook and bridge, and there is a sign with the name of the brook: "Starvation Creek!" I chuckle and think: The answer of the Universe – don't bother me with

such minor things. Take responsibility for them yourself! After a while I see a house, a garage, a man is working there. I ask him: “I am walking from L. A. to Boston. I ran out of food. Can I buy some bread and cheese and get some water?” “You have a heavy Swiss accent. My wife comes from Switzerland, from the canton Aargau. Come in, be our guest!” The second answer of the Universe...

During my walks I encounter often the twinkle of the universe. Humor and enthusiasm will be an important part of the new consciousness – “you do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting” – a line in Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese”. Get in touch with the source of your enthusiasm – for me it’s walking. Have the courage to live your dreams; and then you feel alive, enthusiastic – the word comes from old Greek: εν θεω ειναι – to be one with God, to be one with the divine force.

Confidence

Fatalism is frequent and paralyzing. Is it too late? Can we reverse the suicidal trend?

We need a miracle to become Earth compatible again. I believe in this miracle. We were witnessing big shifts of consciousness – remember the end of the Berlin wall in 1989 or the non-violent revolution in South Africa. Hans-Peter Dürr encourages us with modern physics. All the things we thought were durable matter are moving and in development; and everything is connected with everything. Therefore if one individual changes, the whole system changes.

On the sea we had sea maps. There were arrows showing the direction and the force of the wind and the current. All of us are such arrows. When we act in an Earth compatible way the arrow points towards breakthrough, if not towards the collapse. The more people choose to do Earth compatible steps the higher are the chances that we will make it. Join the crowd! Follow the direction towards the breakthrough! Thank you!