

## Spirituality – the forgotten dimension

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(From “the Friend” – the Quaker magazine - 9 December 2009)

“With climate negotiations underway in Copenhagen, commentators tell us that this is one of the most important international conferences ever held: the last chance to save the planet. Government delegates have been wrestling together with the challenge of cutting greenhouse gas emissions since 1988 when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change began its first scientific assessment. The current talks are to develop new provisions under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, signed by governments at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

But does the public commentary pay too much attention to the science and policy process? The assumption is that first we must have scientific proof of climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Then governments can negotiate a global agreement on targets for emission cuts. Then they will introduce new policies and measures – such as emission trading schemes, efficiency standards, and investment in clean energy. Finally, the policies will bring about the necessary changes in technology, and in the behaviour of corporations and consumers.

This approach falters at every stage. Although the science is as robust as it could be, there will always be those who can find reasons to doubt it. Even politicians who accept the science cannot embrace the deep emission cuts required, or introduce policies that are sufficiently coherent and stringent; and when measures are implemented they usually don't work as expected.

Science is important. So are targets, policies and technologies. But government policy has a poor record in deliberately shaping behaviour. People don't like being told what to do. They mostly do things because friends, neighbours and celebrities are doing them. The best hope for preventing runaway climate change would be if a few trendsetters were to develop a different set of habits – and another way of life were to become fashionable. Government policy may then be an essential part of encouraging that way of life, and helping to develop the technologies and institutions that support and sustain it.

This is where Quakers come in. Friends have been saying all along (since the seventeenth century anyway) that there's a better way of life than consumerism. We are not alone. Most religious and spiritual traditions emphasise values such as simplicity, connection to our deeper selves, taking care of our relationships with other people, and developing a connection to nature. These values are supported too by the Transition and Permaculture movements.

Could we, together, develop a way of life that embodies a spiritual response to climate change and enables individuals, communities and the natural world to flourish?

### Connecting to self

Sustainable living is often portrayed as a complicated, expensive affair only available to those who can afford solar panels and electric cars. It can also be cheap and complicated. I meet many Friends who have developed frugal lifestyles, avoiding fossil fuel use and material consumption. But it takes particular effort to grow and store food, socialise without motorised travel and reuse materials.

To be truly sustainable for most of us, frugality needs to include a spiritual understanding of simplicity: 'attending to what love requires, which may not be great busyness' (*Advices & Queries* 28).

Simplicity means paying less attention to material possessions and less time earning and spending money, allowing a greater focus on the spiritual life. It means observing and letting go of habits and desires, increasing self-consciousness and moving towards selflessness.

Simplicity can also be a consequence of spiritual development and self-awareness, leading to the realisation that material consumption does not satisfy, and to a shift in emphasis to true sources of well-being. And well-being is mostly about connection – to ourselves, other people and nature.

## **Connecting to nature**

People have many different ways of relating to nature. This connection can be one of the main motives for developing a more sustainable lifestyle. Friends often say one of their main satisfactions in life is growing food – developing a deep practical and spiritual relationship with their own local ecosystem.

My sustainability concern has come from elsewhere. Partly it's about caring for other life. It seems bizarre for our way of life to depend on burning the precious remains of past life on Earth. I have no desire to kill and consume other conscious beings. And I'm distressed by waste, so I feel every grain of wheat must be used in the best possible way. A minute from Britain Yearly Meeting in 2005 spoke of the 'sacramental nature of the whole of life.'

There's also an aspect of my relationship with nature that's about understanding. I need to know my place in the scheme of things, to be able to trace where my food and energy comes from and where my waste goes.

But I'm also developing a more experiential connection with nature, partly through long walks and bike rides, which are one of my ways of connecting with myself. Occasionally I stop, look, listen, and feel fully part of my surroundings too.

## **Connecting to people**

Although caring about nature and understanding our place in it are important, we also need to feel able to act. Most people do not believe they can make a difference. They do not even feel able to change their own behaviour. Nor do they believe governments and other institutions can take the action required.

For me, connecting to other people – especially Friends – has been a vital part of developing my sense that change is possible and that personal action is worthwhile. Both in my Local Meeting and in the national network of Friends in Living Witness Project, I have found mutual support, nurture, shared values and encouragement. We have developed a different sense of a 'normal' lifestyle and taken practical action together.

Spiritual approaches to community are founded on recognising the self, or that of God, in the other. This recognition enables us to work positively with diversity rather than seeking out people just like us. Spiritual connection to people within our community can also be the bridge to people outside it. This is particularly important for a response to climate change, which requires global, long-term caring and action.

Perhaps the greatest challenge posed by climate change is to develop the personal and collective will for a new way of life. For the trendsetters, this calls for deep self-questioning, self-understanding, and a willingness and ability to act against social norms.

These capacities are strengthened through spiritual practice and can be supported by involvement in a spiritual community.

If you find despondency creeping in as you listen to the news this week, remember Margaret Meade's words: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has'."