

Meeting Rivers Series - 17

Re-visioning in the Tumultuous Era of Climate Change

by Siddhartha*

James Lovelock, the father of the Gaia theory and a distinguished scientist, believes that climate change is happening faster than we expected. “I think we passed the point of no return some time ago - we don’t know when”, he said in an interview to the Financial Times. Then he said the unthinkable: “If we get away with 20 per cent survival by the end of the century, we’ll be doing terribly well.”

A recent piece in the Indian magazine, Tehelka, by Prem Shankar Jha states: “The Arctic’s ice-melt of 2008 summer was what the climate change committee had predicted for 2055”. This is what 2500 scientists concluded in March 2009 in Copenhagen at the International Scientific Congress on Climate Change. With proof mounting by the day we are still sadly trapped in a paradigm of development and progress that takes us down the path of self-destruction. Are we actually wired to self-destruct? Nicholas Kristof believes so, and recently wrote in the New York Times: “Evidence is accumulating that the human brain systematically misjudges certain kinds of risks. In effect, evolution has programmed us to be alert for snakes and enemies with clubs, but we aren’t well prepared to respond to dangers that require forethought”. He states that if you came across a snake “nearly all of your brain will light up with activity as you process the ‘threat.’ Yet if somebody tells you that carbon emissions will eventually destroy Earth as we know it, only the small part of the brain that focuses on the future - a portion of the prefrontal cortex - will glimmer.”

But this may be an incorrect, or at least incomplete, way of viewing things. There are some reasons to believe that the situation is serious, but not irreversible. One, because we still do not have hard evidence that climate change will indeed wipe out 80 per cent of human beings on the planet, despite the likelihood that we will face acute food and water shortages and serious flooding of low lying regions. Two, scientific breakthroughs may possibly help us radically reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and further help us with mitigation and adaptation strategies (agricultural scientists, for example, believe that we can develop varieties of crops that may not only use less water but be resistant to higher temperatures). And finally, we have overlooked the ‘miracle’ of the human spirit; history is replete with social and spiritual movements that have radically changed the course of events. The inward-outward dialectic of

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and the social movements they engendered, are facts of relatively recent history.

A huge part of the reason for finding ourselves in this predicament is not that our brains are wired to self-destruct, but that our values are wired to do so. Unlike the brain, our values can be changed, particularly if they are largely created to sustain a system that will otherwise collapse. There is enough evidence to show that our consumerist world-view and our highly competitive and exploitative mode of functioning have led us to this state. Not only is it normal to exploit each other but we are brutally exploiting the very earth, from which we have all co-evolved. Chief Seattle had the prescience to say a hundred and fifty years ago that all things are connected: “Teach your children... that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves”.

What is clear is that our dominant value system is geared to self-aggrandisement. Concern for others and the health of the planet is often given only lip service. Nature is now commodified into real estate, mineral, property and resource. For many in the modern world nature does not evoke awe and sacredness, but has value only if it can be exploited for quick profit. This may sound like preaching from the pulpit. It is clearly a cliché to say that our world is driven by the pursuit of success, quick money and instant gratification. There is nothing as obnoxious as a guilt-inflicting and piously moralistic view of things, particularly since we know that we have all, in different degrees, contributed to the present situation.

Part of the reason why we find personal change so difficult is that our values do not entirely emerge from our own volition, but are fostered by the system. Systemic needs press for the legitimisation and self-perpetuation of the present mode of market fundamentalism. After all, how will the system survive without manipulating our consciousness with messages that are cleverly romanticised, whose underlying purpose is to convince us that the good life is a package that includes aggressive competition, exploitative profiteering and mindless consumption? Some would affirm that it is extremely difficult to expect radical changes in the global neo-liberal system without a major crisis. But there are also countless courageous efforts to bring about change by individuals, organizations and social movements. Unfortunately these efforts do not appear to be making much headway as yet. I would hazard a calculated guess that the lack of success is due to our neglect of the dimension of values and spiritual insights. We have focused almost exclusively on analyzing and changing the outside system without paying attention to the inner architecture of our consciousness.

Without transforming this inner architecture we cannot relate meaningfully to other human beings and to nature. The good life is thankfully not about what the global neo-liberal system is propagating. The present understanding of the good life is delusionary and diminishes us as human beings. It takes us away from relating meaningfully to other human beings and to nature.

Religions, spiritualities and secular values, which should have led us to the good life, have been largely co-opted by the system. They largely help to legitimize the status quo. Religions have certainly contributed to enlarging the parameters of compassion, but they have also contributed to divisions and violent conflict. Religions rarely wish to rock the boat. Some people believe that 'religions divide, and spirituality unites'. But spiritually attained persons prefer to live in 'bliss' and ignore the suffering, injustice and ecological degradation that is around. Likewise, the domain of secular values can be diluted by the compulsions of market fundamentalism, where 'growth at any cost' and 'profit as the final goal' have contributed to atrophy our sensibilities and diminish our capacity to feel.

The great challenge is to re-authenticate our religious, spiritual and secular values so that they produce flowing streams, and not stagnant pools. For, unless the inner architecture is renewed we cannot bring about the systemic changes that are so necessary. Transforming our consciousness and bringing about systemic changes must happen simultaneously. Meaningful political changes are intrinsically interwoven with the values we bring to them.

Up to a few years ago the ecological crisis did not even appear on the radar screens of religious and secular concerns. Many compassionate leaders believed that it was enough to create a just society where wealth would be re-distributed. The good life was to develop more, to produce more so that everybody could partake of the fruits of development. For the market die-hards the goal was to create a mass market for consumer products. Today these dreams are imploding. For the first time since the dawn of human history the earth is shuddering at the ongoing impact of what we call 'development'.

To save life on the planet appears to be highly unlikely without an enormous effort at re-visioning. Only new visions can help cast out the failed ones. We have to move from life-denying visions to life-affirming ones. However difficult it may appear we need to create varieties of non-exploitative consciousness that pull in the same direction as our efforts to stave off climate change. These new visions are not altogether new; they are already being lived out in the chinks and crevices of our flawed dominant visions. Obviously the emerging visions cannot be inflexible or dogmatic, even if they need to lay down the ground rules clearly. To be relevant they have to draw from all that is good from the religious, spiritual, secular and scientific traditions. We have to admit that no one tradition has the complete answer, but the partial answers emerging from several directions may be woven into a formidable tapestry that help us re-discover the good life, and enable us to joyously connect to other human beings and the planet.

Our efforts must move in the direction of creating living values and spiritual insights that have us 'wired', in a manner of speaking, to care for each other and the earth. We are about to embark on a tumultuous period of our history where we can save ourselves, our children and grandchildren,

only if our spiritual and secular traditions inspire us to find and practice the life affirming visions and life-styles that can green our planet once again.

***Siddhartha** is the founder of the inter-religious centre, Fireflies Ashram, based in a village outside Bangalore, India. He is also the coordinator of the Meeting Rivers programme.

Contact:

Meeting Rivers
Fireflies Inter-cultural Centre
Dinnepalya, Kaggalipura P.O.
Bangalore – 560 082 India

Email: meetingrivers.fireflies@gmail.com

Website: www.pipaltree.org.in

Phone: +91-80-28432725