

Paradise Gardening

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We want to save the world, and we want to save ourselves. It's the same thing. The problems confronting us are enormous and at every level: personal, social, planetary. I will spare you a list. My aim is to suggest they are all symptoms of one problem, and to propose a solution.

The problem: to find a way to live on earth which promotes our health and happiness, is conducive to the full development of our innate potential and at the same time democratic; that is, available to all—which does not use more than our share, and is harmonious with the biosphere's evident drive toward increasing diversity, complexity and stability.

Our world is being destroyed, in the final analysis, by an extremely misguided notion of what constitutes a successful human life. Materialism is running rampant and will consume everything because its hunger will never be sated by its consumption. Human life has become a cancer on the planet, gobbling up all the flows of matter and energy, poisoning it with our waste. What can stop this monster?

Nothing. Just this: walk away from it. It is time, indeed time is running out, to abandon the entire edifice of Civilization, the State, the Economy and walk (don't run) to a better place: home, to Paradise.

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1) Paradise is, first of all, a garden. A garden in which everything we need is there for the taking.

2) Paradise Gardening is a way of life which serves to maintain the garden, and is in turn maintained by it. Odum calls this the "ecosystem manager...an organism that utilizes a small fraction of the total energy budget and in return provides a service which aids the system in its function and continued survival." (The concept "illustrates the idea which man should imitate in his attempts to manage a natural ecosystem.") Genesis, with the characteristic compression of myth, says we were put into the garden "to dress it and keep it. Same thing.

3) Paradise Gardening is not work. Work is a subjective concept: one person's play may be another person's work. Work is whatever you are doing when you'd rather be doing something else. Paradise Gardening is not work in the same sense that what a bear does all day is not work. This is the distinction which the Taoists make between doing and not-doing. Genesis refers to the same matter in saying that only outside the garden do we have to earn our living "by the sweat of our brow."

4) Paradise Gardening is not agriculture. From chemical to organic agriculture is a step in the right direction, but only the first step. Agriculture itself is, after all, half of the one-two punch that knocked us out of Paradise in the first place. (Good) farmers, to be sure, love nature; but they love her in the context of plowing her up every year and deciding what to grow next. Our addiction to annual species and disturbed habitats has put us at odds with the main thrust of the biosphere (and ourselves).

OH, EARTH IS PATIENT AND EARTH IS OLD AND MOTHER OF GODS. BUT HE BREAKS HER,
TO-ING, FRO-ING, WITH THE PLOW TEAMS GOING,

TEARING THE SOIL OF HER, YEAR BY YEAR.

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

Every Spring, nature begins again to clothe the earth in beauty, the process of succession, the initial strands of the intricate web, rebirth of the Tree of Life. And every autumn we scrape it off, rake it into barns, take it to market: we increase human diversity and complexity (butcher, baker, candlestick-maker...) by appropriating to ourselves processes which are meant to benefit all. Paradise is a habitat and a niche. Eliade refers to the universal “yearning for Paradise.” Memories coded into our genes of our place, our fit. How, after all, does a bird (for example) select a place to build a nest? So many factors to consider and such a small brain). It just picks the most beautiful spot available. It was born- with a “template” of paradise. Concerning this, the Book of Odes says, “The twittering yellow bird, the bright silky warbler, comes to its rest in the hollow corner of the hill,” and Confucius commented. “Comes to rest, alights, knows what its rest is, what its ease is. Is man, for all his wit, less wise than this bird of yellow plumage that he should not know his resting place or fix the point of his aim?”

Like any other creature, we are our niche. By our physiology and behavioral programming we are born to live a certain kind of life. Paradise is our birthright and our duty.

Now, instead, we take up a niche in civilization. The premise of civilization is that if everyone is a less than complete human being (I’ll be the brains, you be the back), it will be better for all of us. This insulting premise has guided us for so long that many are unaware of an alternative. We equate “making a living” with “making money.” Thus we spend the best hours of our lives pursuing our careers being part of the cancer.

But everything needful to be completely human is available to us in the environment—the garden and neighborhood. We can rely on the truth of this because “human-ness” is a creation of the environment, the most recent manifestation of a coevolution between our genes and all the other genes out there that has been going on since the beginning of life on earth. Much chancier is the possibility that everything we need to be completely human is available to us in the city, or through money.

* * *

The last time we lived in paradise it was as foragers: hunters and gatherers, omnivorous, opportunistic exploiters of a variety of environments. Specialists, not of disturbance, but of diversity.

This lifestyle has gotten a lot of attention recently (at the very time the last vestiges of it are being eradicated). The view that foraging is a superior adaptation to agriculture is now well established in academia, and the same theme appears in popular literature (e.g., Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* and Vargas Llosa, *The Storyteller*, both inspiring).

A revolution in the study of the human niche was prompted by the realization that foragers, far from living on the brink of starvation, as previously imagined, actually had more leisure than anyone else (Lee and deVore, *Man the Hunter*). Boserup (*The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*) suggests that there have never been any agricultural revolutions, in the sense of a sudden invention of a great new way to produce food, but rather increases in food production always come at the cost of even greater increases in labor (or fossil fuel) input. These techniques were always well known to the producers, but resisted until finally demanded by rising population (or the demands of the upper classes for a surplus, a cash crop). “Agriculture permits denser food growth supporting denser population and larger social units, but at the cost of reduced dietary quality (less diversity to choose from), reduced reliability of harvest (eggs in less baskets), and equal, or probably greater labor per unit of food...agriculture is not a difficult concept, but one readily available to hunting and gathering groups.” (Mark Cohen, *The Food Crisis in Prehistory*).

Human, Domesticated, Farmed

Agriculture in turn, allowed population to expand more rapidly. Any attempt to live a foraging life in the modern world would seem to be only an interesting but ultimately irrelevant exercise of the “historic village” variety. “There is no going back” is merely a truism. What those who recite it mean to say is that there is no changing direction,

progress can be only a straight line—from an original home in nature to a world eventually completely human, domesticated, farmed.

At this point, I would rephrase the “problem” with which this essay began; How can we, with our contemporary tastes and population level, live and coexist as foragers (ecosystem managers)? “Caught in the devil’s bargain,” how can we “get ourselves back to the garden”? (J. Mitchell, “Woodstock”).

The strategy proposed here, Paradise Gardening, may be described as “intensified foraging.” David Harris, in a series of papers, explored “alternative pathways to agriculture.” Particularly valuable is his distinction between “agricultural manipulation and transformation...agricultural utilization may, and, if sufficiently intensive, usually does lead to the transformation of a natural into a largely artificial ecosystem: the replacement of a tropical forest by plantation, of temperate woodland by wheat fields...But agriculture may also proceed by a process of manipulation which involves the alteration of selected components of the natural system rather than its wholesale replacement—a method of cultivation which involves substituting certain preferred domesticated species for wild species in equivalent ecological niches and so stimulates the structure and functional dynamics of the natural ecosystem.”

Harris has recently edited a collection of papers (From Foraging To Farming) which further explores the emerging realization “that many ‘non-agricultural’ peoples were in fact engaged in intensive and sophisticated plant exploitation, previously unrecognized because their plant management practices did not fit our idea of agriculture.”

Our goal is to “naturalize” ourselves in the environment. This will involve changing ourselves and changing the environment: convergence toward “fit.” Perfect fit means the free and easy flowing of matter and energy between ourselves and our environment; life lived as a complete gift—from the garden to us, from us to the garden.

But that is in the future; what we need now is a process, leading to that goal, which is justified on its own terms. Focus on the ideal Paradise Garden will tempt us to take shortcuts, perpetuating the same old pattern of selling out the present for some imagined “better—future. “No act is good unless its goodness is seen in the immediacy of the act. An act which justifies itself by appealing to a later good...all appeals to reason, expediency, and necessity, are appeals to the very forces that wreck all ideals. One must have courage and be willing to take risks” (Wm.. Thompson, *Evil and World Order*).

Ecology teaches that a “pioneer” (disturbed) environment favors life forms that are fast-growing but short lived, widespread, “greedy”—designed to capture the maximum of sunlight, and unoccupied soil. But eventually they are succeeded by trees, which, because they invest energy in making wood, grow more slowly at first, but are more stable, longer-lived and finally, faster growing, more influential, the dominant species, towering above.

We have spread ourselves over the earth, and used or burned just about everything that’s easy to get. The age of the greedy ones draws to a close (they don’t know it yet). At last, we may hope, the “competitive advantage” passes to the practitioners of permanence, rootedness, slow growth and steady accumulation, the vertical expansion of the human spirit into realms uncharted, or long forgotten. A tree derives its satisfaction from the view achieved.

* * *

The process of Paradise Gardening involves:

Extricating our life-support system from civilization/the Economy (bluntly. money). and reattaching it to the natural world of garden and neighborhood. This will be a gradual process requiring a real analysis of our needs and expenditures. Thus, for example, cars and gasoline are not needs, but only the means to the satisfaction of needs.

Getting And Spending Money

The solution is not gasohol but reducing the reason for traveling (usually the getting and spending of money). Concerning this, the Tao Te Ching says “The country over the border might be so near that one could hear the cocks crowing and the dogs barking in it, but the people would grow old and die without ever once troubling to go there.” (Ch. 80; see Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. II for a discussion of “the political program of the Taoists: the return to cooperative primitivity.”)

The key to the self-justifying nature of the process is this: things made or done by professionals or machines may be technically superior to one’s own efforts, but are generally lacking in a quality which, following Castenadas,

I will call “heart.” Satisfaction from things bought usually peaks at the moment of purchase and declines rapidly. Needs which are met by the interaction of ourselves and nature are more deeply met, and there are wonderful surprises along the way. The truth of this will be evident to anyone who has ever made anything “from scratch.” What seldom occurs to us (Someone doesn’t want it to) is that an entire life can be constructed on this basis.

—The (re)integration of needs: not to the market for food, the spa for exercise, the doctor for healing, theater for entertainment, school for learning, studio to create, church for inspiration, etc., but to the garden for all these at the same time.

Enriching the garden by naturalizing useful and beautiful species and learning to incorporate them into our lives. We begin, of course, with the present and potential natural vegetation. to which may be added species introductions from similar areas worldwide; then slight modifications of the environment—micro-habitat enhancement—and the resultant possibilities for new species: a palette of plants, a Cornucopia never available to previous generations.

A well-known biologist proposes “Planned biotic enrichment: It is within the power of science [you and me] not merely to hold down the rate of species extinction, but to reverse it. Among the principal topics of community ecology now under intensive study is the species packing problem...Theoretically, assortive equilibria can be planned that exceed any occurring in nature. Species might be drawn from different parts of the world...”(Edw. Wilson, “Applied Biogeography”). Wilson goes on to discuss “the creation of new (biotic) communities” and “ecosystem manipulation: the ultimate game...the very size of the world’s biota is itself a challenge that only generations more of study will encompass. The possibilities for ecosystems manipulation...offer creative work that is orders of magnitude even more extensive...”

Hand labor. We all have two hands, one lifetime, twenty-four hours in every day. These are democratic factors. Working by hand on a small piece of land we can create a Paradise with relevance for all. Money, machines can’t get us there any faster, in fact, can’t get us there at all, but lead us astray.

We live during a narrow “window of opportunity.” Having come, at last, to the realization that a revolutionary shift of consciousness and lifestyle is required, we find that we have only a few generations to do it in before it will be too late to make a transition (environment degraded, resources depleted, species extinct, soils eroded/polluted, population doubled...).

Our enemy is a paper tiger because it can’t deliver the goods. The world waits for examples, to be shown, not told a better way. Paradise Gardening is vastly more meaningful than the Biodome experiment, and anyone can play.

We have been putting this off for too many lifetimes now.

YOU SEE THE BEAUTY OF MY PROPOSAL IS

IT NEEDN’T WAIT ON GENERAL REVOLUTION

I BID YOU TO A ONE-MAN REVOLUTION

THE ONLY REVOLUTION THAT IS COMING

—R. Frost, “Build Soil”

Author’s Note: I intend to write another article, dealing more with local practice, as well as produce a newsletter by and for persons engaged in the realization of Paradise as a garden. Please send comments and suggestions to me at 3020 White Oak Crook Rd., Burnsville. NC 28714. An excellent resource for beginning Paradise Gardening is *Cornucopia*, S. Facciola. Kampong Pub.. 1870 Sunrise Dr., Vista CA 92084. It is an astounding publication listing 3,000 edible species, many more thousands of cultivars, sources of supply and information for each entry.

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