

PERSPECTIVE: Where Will All the Garbage Go?

By DON SANDERS

Los Angeles

Only intelligence, culture and religious faith can lead us out of the Animality that thoughtlessly consumes nature, leaving a barren wasteland. The desertification of our planet is linked to the desertification of the human spirit.

— Daisaku Ikeda

A friend asked me whether I have trouble with accumulating paper and computer support products, or was it just her? All of us present agreed that technology has made it possible for heaps of attractive printed materials to pile up on our desks to sort through. Computers are at the front of a long line of things we've been sold that were supposed to solve all our problems and make our lives simpler and better. Computers, it was promised, were going to give us paperless offices!

New technology is sold to us along the path of least resistance, with promises of the wonderful things it'll do for us. For example, remember the ads that said "Ever send a fax from the beach? You will." What's always omitted are the hidden costs, the trade-offs. The people who sell things to you know many of the downsides because they weigh all the business risks, but they're of course not talking about those with you or me.

We're thoroughly immersed before we ever get to question anything. There is no forum (or even language!) for discussion and evaluation of new technologies before they are in widespread use.

Even if we do benefit personally, we don't have a grasp of the big picture. We don't understand what's happening to the Earth which sustains us.

A friend of mine who is a geologist has his own business doing environmental clean-up. He won't touch the jobs in the Silicone Valley near San Jose in northern California which involve the toxic wastes left behind by the computer industry. For those you have to wear special protective suits.

Most of us have heard how we consume more non-renewable resources here in North America than anywhere else. Resources which took centuries to accumulate in the Earth have been exploited in an amazingly short time.

You may have heard how even old-growth forests in supposedly protected areas are being clear-cut to keep up with our appetite for wood and paper. You have to get an aerial perspective to see that trees are left by the highways to give you the illusion that the forest goes on forever.

I'm not naive, and I don't think we can all go back to the idealistic good old days. But as we think more globally, we are more and more at odds with the issue of sustainability. Can we go slower or even hope to put the brakes on a little?

The people who produce and sell everything we buy are not solely to blame because we are demanding and buying all the *stuff*.

When you talk to people about environmental concerns, the response is not usually enthusiastic. Are we sleepwalking creatures of habit? Mostly in denial because we don't want to do without conveniences and lots of things? Do cynicism and apathy influence us to believe the problem is too big, so we mostly choose to do nothing? Or do we think it is someone else's problem? That it won't matter that much in our lifetime?

What do we really need? In terms of survival, the list is short: sunlight, pure water, protection from the elements (warmth such as fire or clothing and a shelter big enough to lie down and sleep in) and nutritious food.

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Since we humans are cerebral creatures, we have learned to enlarge on this list considerably with our wants. There are armies of advertisers out there who are paid to convert our every want into a perceived need.

In the early '80s I had a business clearing and hauling brush to help pay for my college. I drove truckloads of organic debris to a landfill close to West Los Angeles.

As you crested the top of a hill there, a grimy bulldozer slogged through rolling hills of garbage that were later covered up with dirt. Now that dump is full and the trash must be taken farther away.

It was disturbing when I thought about replication — garbage mountains in every town across the United States every day. I wondered where are we going to put all this eventually? This thought produces a heavy, sinking feeling in me, if I allow it to. Like the feeling I get when I imagine a million discount department stores and fast-food restaurants all pumping out more trash for overloaded landfills to accommodate.

Gandhi said we must *be* the change we wish to see in the world.

My uncle was a botany, biology and systems ecology professor at Stanford. He took me hiking and camping in Yosemite many times.

What he knew and shared with me has resulted in a time-released desire to do something other than just talk about or ignore the problems. I chant and do activities to clean up my life, which I believe does the greatest good.

And over the years I have come to feel that actions such as recycling, composting my organic trash, driving and buying less, picking up a bagful of litter with my family on a hike or volunteering as a docent to teach kids some appreciation for nature is making a difference, too.

I knew a wonderful man in his nineties, who recently died, who lived simply and efficiently with no more possessions than could fit in his small, square, one-room apartment. Part of it was a kitchenette. If he wanted a book, he walked to the library. He inspired my wife and I. We've realized there is an art to living so simply and not accumulating. Our household motto has become "Collect Only Memories."

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