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## The Dilemma of Global Starvation As Intellectual Abstraction

Edited and Published by Plants and Healers International 2014

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April 16, 2008

The title of this essay may lead you to believe that I am discounting the knowledge of how many people starve to death each year. (nearly 3 million this year and counting. Check into some of our collective human vital statistics: [www.loveearth.net/worldcounters.htm](http://www.loveearth.net/worldcounters.htm)). I have been aware of this atrocity for many years. Stop for a moment and feel this. Someone starves to death every three seconds. There are so many paradoxes we live in this modern world including more than a quarter of the food reproduced in the US is wasted (96 billion pounds land-filled of the 356 billion pounds reproduced). Over a third of the UK's food is thrown out! It is realizations like these that gradually shifted me from being the star of my own movie to "tuning in, turning on, and dropping out" as Timothy Leary advised. This I did fully in 1992 and for the next eight years searched to understand the appropriate path through life to walk. The feelings of human suffering still guide me as I live this life in service to Gaia.

This essay is about the failings of trying to approach this condition of suffering through institutions and experts along with suggestions of other ways we might live more in harmony in the planet.

### The Failings of International Development

Our first teacher, Gustavo Esteva, writer, activist and "de-professionalized intellectual" told us how countries came to be thought of as developed/developing in 1949 when then US president Harry Truman declared Mexico "underdeveloped." Gustavo described how demoralizing that felt in the face of the **good life** presented by American culture.

When I was a kid in the 1970's I remember watching on TV fundraisers to help the starving masses during the famines in Ethiopia. From my chair watching the box, in my limited imagination, I saw endless, open desert plains with everyone as skeleton bodies or bloated bellied babies. It was many years later that I learned more about political and war realities. I have read about Ethiopia and have learned that in actuality it is a very fertile nation. But I have not been to Ethiopia. I have no real experiences there. I do not know.

I have been to India. I remember my first time going in 1997. I had read a number of books on India. I remember reading about how impoverished the people were with tens of millions living on less than a \$1 a day. I could not imagine that, honestly. It was not until I got out in the villages that I realized these people had their homes, their gardens and animals. They had community. None of this involved money. They did not need money to live.

*Subsistence living* is depicted as undesirable in modern views. Placed within the context of land-based, community living this phrase can be seen in a new light. Community living is a separate paradigm from modern society's approach to life. It was not something I could fathom without experiencing it. And that is important to emphasize. Modern, educated people believe we can know something accurately through media. But something is lost in crossing the divide between stories and living. Stories have a very important place in human culture, but they are no substitute for living.

## Deschooling

**“Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work...Everywhere the hidden curriculum of schooling initiates the citizen to the myth that bureaucracies guided by scientific knowledge are efficient and benevolent...instills in the pupil the myth that increased production will provide a better life.”**

**-Ivan Illich from “Deschooling Society”**

And so I ask you, where are these big thinkers who attend conferences and think tanks coming from? Are they our experienced elders? Often not. They are from the elite class and live in the non-land of “Richistan” (read Robert Frank). As Gustavo pointed out, they are people who've accumulated a lot of “ass-hours,” rising up through the universities developing their logical, left brains and academic communication skills with abstract thinking.

Gustavo pointed out, “school is not for learning.... There is a bias in education that learning **about** the world (in a bubble) is more important than learning **in** the world.” I am not saying these people do not care about what they are doing. I am saying they are not equipped to do the job.

Even more so, the job is not equipped to address the issues at hand. Top-down decision-making at its very center is flawed as an approach. But even more so, this approach of expert solutions has failed extensively in its manifestations such as creating corporations, the green revolution, foreign aid, every major example does not serve its true purpose for being. Governments do not serve the people, institutions institutionalize, corporations dominate and seek profits at all costs. As Gandhi said, when asked about what he thought of western civilization, “It would be a good idea”.

Ideas are not reality. Ideas come from the mind and reality is so much more. When I asked a local, respected elder about the shortcomings of modern living, she expressed, “Not enough hands are in the soil. We are out of touch with the land. There is no long-term commitment to place.” She asked, “Where are the good role models? The leaders are not competent. We are surrounded by systems of slavery.”

## Corporate Welfare defiling the Commons

Corporation: n. An ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility.

—Ambrose Bierce, 1842-1914.

We have failed as a human culture to see the huge impact that the concept of the corporation has on the future of our world. Governments have been huge in the shaping of history but their powers resided within nations. Now over half of the largest entities in the world are corporations. As the financial assets continue to concentrate in the corporations the agenda of education, research, human rights and much more are being shifted to the corporate agenda. It is important to recognize corporations as an artificial species as Jerry Mander does so well in *The Case Against a Global Economy*. In this book he tells us that at their core, corporations run counter to the evolution of humanity. “The main factors that determine corporate behavior have far less to do with people who work inside a corporation structure than they do with the corporate structure itself.... Profit comes first; growth a close second; amorality...comes third” (pg 81) “In dominating other cultures, in digging up the Earth, corporations blindly follow the codes that have been built into them. It is as if such codes were part of their genetic programming.” (pg 91)

With the rise of the multi-national corporations and their rapid consolidation of wealth and power, we are seeing cultures denuded and humanity being shifted toward the limited definitions of *worker* and *consumer*. Economics has been shifted to the center of humans' lives. In a few decades it has become common place for modern cultures to have strawberries available year round, flowers in winter, and a never ending supply of cheap goods from the third world factories. And 99% of the items made are thrown away within six months of purchase. But this has come at a huge price and at every level the bill is coming due as expressed in catastrophic environmental changes, malnutrition and chronic diseases, pollution, depression (In the US, 1 in 10 women takes antidepressants. The use of antidepressants by adults has nearly tripled in the last decade according to the Washington Post (Dec 3, 2004)) and according to the World Health Organization for people 15-44, suicide is the fourth leading form of death globally).

If we review the history of corporations (for details on this watch or read **The Corporation**) we see that they were created for very different reasons than how they exist now. This needs to be brought to our collective attention. But as the old saying goes, *it is hard to wake someone who is pretending to be asleep*. Those many millions of people benefiting by careers and investments in corporations need to somehow see beyond their personal perspectives. Pulling the plug on multi-national corporations is central to survival on the earth.

## Greed Devolution

**“The vision was based not on cooperation with nature, but on its conquest. It was based not on the intensification of nature’s processes, but on the intensification of credit and purchased inputs like chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It was based not on self-reliance but on dependence. It was based not on diversity but uniformity. Advisors and experts came from America to shift India’s agricultural research...from an indigenous and ecological model to an exogenous and high input one...”**

### ***-Vandana Shiva *The Violence of the Green Revolution****

A horrifying example of the failings of top-down decisions was the post-WWII approach to feeding the world through the green revolution. This involved undermining traditional farming practices, stripping away diversity, poisoning the land and people and has led to the spread of modern culture and its dis-eases worldwide. But it is not as though we have learned from these devastating lessons that are still plaguing us. As Vandana brought to our awareness, the world is being subjected to a second “Green Revolution” now as corporations impose genetically modified seeds, receive subsidies from governments and privatize the commons (land, air, water) for exploitation. If we do not change this direction of death, the future of humanity is in peril.

## Foreign Aid as Farce

Gustavo declared that 90% of foreign aid money is spent within the country giving it. We heard many stories from Gustavo and Vandana about the fallacies around aid. Gustavo spoke of how it felt to receive boxes of “aid” full of people’s old clothes and junk. In one memorable story, he spoke of how one of the Zapatista commanders carried around a single red high heel that had been received in a care package to remember how out of touch the offers of aid can be, how aid is often given out of pity and guilt rather than a sense of understanding and friendship without connection.

Gustavo gave us a speech given by Ivan Illich to new volunteers coming to Mexico to “help underdeveloped” villagers. In this speech he said, “I am here to suggest that you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you. I am here to entreat you to freely, consciously and humbly give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico. I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the ‘good’ which you intended to do.”

We had the head of England’s second largest NGO come to share his perspectives with us, Daleep Mukarji. He came from his heart but his actions were deeply tainted by his paradigm. His beliefs included: western medicine is the best approach



to health, Christianity is the true religion and economics is at the center of living. Some of his beliefs he expressed explicitly, others came across in the stories he shared. He is but an example of the general approach to international aid. These beliefs determine the form of aid given. Daleep claimed that vaccines are universally accepted as beneficial, ignorant of the worldwide challenge to this both in western culture and other cultures. I have seen countless examples of the dominating society imposing its values on the repressed culture.

One example that stands out is from my last visit to the San in Namibia in 2005. A group of us had a day with them in what they called their traditional village with huts made of branches and thatch, their wearing of handmade animal skin clothes. They showed us many plants and their hunting techniques.



The next day they invited us to their new village funded by international aid. Though the village was only a mile away, the reality was a world away. I went from seeing an indigenous people to an impoverished people. They wore western t-shirt and jean hand-me-downs, lived in shacks, drank from a well and ate corn subsidies.

These givers of aid may not see these “improvements” in the San’s life as cultural genocide, and I wonder how many have actually spent time with them. I was in shock for several days after that. Somehow we in the west have this idea that our institutions are not only the best available now, but the best that ever have been. There are a number of books that expound on this illusion including Tom Wessels’ *The Myth of Progress*.

A UK national politician, Clare Short, came to speak to us with the message of the apocalypse coming soon. Though I agreed with many of her comments, respected her knowledge and experience and enjoyed her warrior personality, we largely differed in our approach to being in the world. She could see some benefits to localization but her emphasis was on the need for more big thinkers and international organizations. These big thinkers, as I have already said, are from the elite class. How many are healthy, balanced, open-minded individuals? How many have been among the diverse peoples of the world? How many are experienced, wise elders? What is their relationship to the natural world? How many could forage for food, build a fire or shelter? How many could get lost, find water and their way back again? With few exceptions our leaders and experts are disconnected from the greater world and are not skilled in basic living needs. They are out of touch.

These abstract thinkers live within the cathedral of their minds. They are paid high salaries and supply the rationale behind the actions of the governments and corporations. Their research, full of statistics and charts, discusses “the masses”, “the third world” and “underdeveloped countries” as if they exist as some clearly defined entity that can be manipulated through social engineering. These abstractions are examples of what Henri Bortoft calls *counterfeit wholes* that lead us down the path of inappropriate action.

## Starting with You

As a tree grows, so it becomes. If our belief system is shaped by limited thinking, false notions, outdated myths, then how can our thoughts about solving global problems transcend our limitations reliably? If the experts have not learned basic survival skills how can they even begin to relate to the world of most people? Those of us born after the 1940’s are all “damaged goods” toxic, manipulated, mentally unbalanced, shaped by the experiments of the hundred-year lie. (for details on this, read Fitzgerald). We need to accept that the focus now needs to be on improving our health and connectivity.

Gustavo feels our biggest challenge ahead has to do with “dialoging between the cultures.” With the programs of education, media/advertising, religion and cultural normalizing, we westerners have become full of ourselves. Our perspectives are limited. Even our abstractions are limited and ungrounded in experience. We live in a modern culture bubble largely ignorant of how most of the world lives. As

individuals we are simple, limited beings. Some argue western society is the least skilled in human history.

I would agree that “many minds are more powerful than one” following the adage that “many hands make light work” but let us keep that view in scale. A community of people benefits from the collective stories of its members. A community garden benefits from many hands. But these global issues we are speaking of: poverty, starvation, pollution that involve billions of humans and millions of **other species** are beyond the mental capacity of any group of us to “solve”. Graphic designer and teacher, Terry Irwin describes these as “wicked problems” unable to be solved with linear approaches. Instead we need to approach them with principles outlined in holistic science involving an understanding of chaos and complexity theories. And there comes a point (rather quickly) when we need to see the inadequacy of thought and open to intuition, spirit and feelings.

## Eating from the Wild

When I am asked about the crisis of starvation, I immediately see my inability to imagine solutions at the world level. I believe Nature is abundant and speak of people eating from the wild. When abstract, big thinkers hear this they claim it to be preposterous and paint images of the masses consuming everything in sight creating those dry, dusty plains of my childhood imagination.

But let us slow down a bit. Come into our bodies. Start with our little humble selves. We need to learn the basics of living and health. Do you know them? Once you do, share them with others around you. Stay open to learning throughout your life. Many traditional belief systems emphasize that our main role here in Gaia is to be caretakers, to carry the seeds, to tend to the needs of the land, to bring forth gardens, beauty, art, inspiration....

If we can re-align our energies towards these ways, the 20% of us using 80% of the resources, would greatly shift the reality of humanity's presence on the planet.

Within our lives we need to emphasize sustainable practices and permaculture principles. New technology is not where we need to focus our efforts to find answers. What we have achieved already exceeds the needs and capacities of our collective harmony. More is not better. We need to find our personal gifts and open them for the world through creativity and imagination.

As I mentioned earlier, community living is a separate paradigm from modern society's approach to life. This can be our way through the coming hard times. Sustainable community is expressed through cooperative co-habitation. We are **not islands unto ourselves**. To achieve sustainability requires fundamental shifts of our mindset. Some clues for what this means were given to us by Gustavo in his comparison of indigenous and modern mindsets.



Area	Modern Society	Indigenous Society
Time	Time is real and rules. The people are future oriented. The present is ephemeral. Time is controlled.	No such thing as time People live in cycles The present is wide. The future is brilliant and diffused like a rainbow.
Space	Shapeless space. People are loyal to institutions not places.	Place is the first notion of community and is rooted.
Self	Autonomous being	Not individualism. The persona is a mask-a knot in the web of relations:  Every "I" is a "We"
Purpose	Job-Economics is the center of society	People are multi-skilled in useful activities

Jerry Mander notes many other differences in *In the Absence of the Sacred* including:

Area	Technological Peoples	Native Peoples
Land	private property as basic value	no private owning land
Means of Exchange	currency system-abstract value	barter system-concrete value
Average work day	8-12 hours	3-5 hours
Economics	growth required	steady state
Nature viewed as	a resource	a living being
Reverence for	the young	the old
Focus on	saving and acquiring	sharing and giving
Human and Earth	superior and dead	alive and in the web of life

In addition, I would add that in modern society decisions are made top-down from institutions, governments, and corporations. In Indigenous societies the decisions are made at the human scale. Also, people in modern societies rely on experts to direct their decisions while at an indigenous level people gain guidance from each other and nature. There are many more comparisons that can be made but one last one is that production and consumption are usually widely removed from each other in modern society and are one in the hands of indigenous society. We need to see how life is cyclical not linear and shift our minds into balance and seeing the many kinds of knowing.



Life is a dynamic unfolding. We need to explore and re-invent our whole way of being. As Gustavo warns, “Changing or fixing the world is very hard if not impossible. Instead we need a new world.” In Thomas Berry’s classic, **The Great Work**, we see ourselves at the end of the Cenozoic Era and have a choice between pursuing technological/scientific solutions and ecological ones. He points out that all our institutions are collapsing from their limited visions.

We need to realize that any solution that is attempted from the top-down with one culture presupposing it has the answers for another culture, is doomed to failure. Together, **first** starting from within and then working out from there with grassroots lessons, we can build a new world for the generations to come.

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