Loretto Earth Network Lenten Reflections: April 3, 2019

Excerpts from “The Lesson of the Hummingbird” by Eknath Easwaran

*You see things and you say, “Why?” But I dream things that never were and I say, “Why not*?”

* George Bernard Shaw

Often, as I eat my breakfast, I see a flash of iridescent orange zip by the kitchen window and hover in mid-air at the lip of a flower. A hummingbird threads its long, delicate bill into the center of the flower, not even touching the petals, and sips its breakfast. A moment later it is gone, having drunk only what was necessary and leaving the flower pollinated. Precise, efficient, agile, respectful: I think humanity can find no better teacher in the art of living.

To me, the hummingbird holds out a promise: this is how we can all live, gradually outgrowing a way of life in which we gulp down all the nectar, spoil the flower by pulling off the petals, and finally uproot the plant. “Such a way of life,” writes E. F. Schumacher, referring to our overuse of fossil fuels, “could have no permanence and could therefore be justified only as a purely temporary expedient. As the world's resources of non-renewable fuels are exceedingly unevenly distributed over the globe, and undoubtedly limited in quantity, it is clear that their exploitation at an ever-increasing rate is an act of violence against nature, which must almost inevitably lead to violence between men.” The same could be said about any of our precious resources, from bauxite to rainforests.

To put it in economic terms, we are frittering away our capital when we should be living wisely on the interest, leaving the capital to bear rich dividends for future generations. This is what Gandhi calls “commerce without morality,” a way of life in which all our nobler goals and aspirations are subsumed in the desire to produce and consume more and more.

If it were up to bureaucracies and boards of directors to determine our fate, it would be far more difficult to change things. But it is not up to them. It is up to us. In matters of commerce and the environment, we are the President, the Supreme Court, and the Congress. We decide what to buy and what to ban, what to support and what to discourage.

In other words, the solution is not revolution but evolution. Lasting change happens when people see for themselves that a different way of life is more fulfilling than their present one. A nobler image of the human being can lead to a much more important evolution in daily living. The question is, how can this higher image replace the current low image, which is so deeply reinforced by conditioning?

One thing is certain: nothing will happen if we all wait for others to do it first. The first step in creating a healthy, peaceful post-industrial era is for a few of us to start basing our lives on a higher image of who we are and a deeper understanding of what we need for a satisfying life.

In the midst of a quickly changing world, such “evolutionaries” can provide an inspiring example of what Schumacher calls “a viable future visible in the present”: a life built on cooperation, artistry, thrift, and compassion; a life that is not only ecologically sound but vastly more fulfilling than modern industrial life.

We need those who can, as George Bernard Shaw says, dream of things that never were, and ask “Why not?” Our present way of life is characterized by a lack of sensitivity and inventiveness, by a lack of freedom, but hypnotization by the profit motive. We need men and women who can think and invent with a mind filled with compassion, charged with the kind of creativity that finds a place for the smallest songbird and the largest elephant. We need people with the artistry to live in simplicity as the hummingbird does, enjoying the nectar without bruising the flower.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

We are the ones who will decide what kind of Earth we leave future generations. In that sense, we are their trustees. It is up to us to see that the earthly home children of all species inherit will be at least as healthy as the one we inherited.

Working in cooperation with nature's restorative process is essential work, to which all of us should give our best, but just as essential is the task of developing the restorative powers within ourselves. These two cannot be separated. We can discover and learn to use the restorative powers of nature only by discovering and using these powers in ourselves. It is not so much a duty as an adventure - an adventure in which we discover that, like every other living creature, each of us is a unique and essential member of a compassionate universe.

The ecological crisis is not a separate, isolated concern. It is connected with all our attitudes, conscious and unconscious: toward each other, toward other countries, toward children, toward ourselves. Until these attitudes change, we will go on damaging Earth, no matter what sort of surface changes we make.

A trustee lives according to the realization that the world is home to billions of living creatures, all of whom have an equal right to a healthy habitat and a life in peace. Trusteeship is exactly the opposite of the industrial hypothesis, which looks on Earth as a kind of treasure chest to be plundered by the most cunning or powerful. To the trustee, the Earth is a beloved friend. The trustee’s abiding desire is to adorn her with all the things she loves: trees, clean water, a rich topsoil, and all the needs for countless generations of healthy children of all species.

We need people in every field who can serve as a bridge between humanity and its highest aspirations. We need parents who dream of their children growing up in a compassionate society and ask: *why not?* We need scientists, business people, politicians, and journalists who have the courage to dream of a world where people, animals, and ecosystems are more important than profits or national rivalries and ask: *why not?* We need ordinary people of every nation and color who dare to look beneath the iron mask of self-centered conditioning, see something they never believed they could be, and ask themselves: *why not?*

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is the lesson of the hummingbird? Is it just about drinking “only what was necessary”? What is one thing you might do differently if you lived more like a hummingbird?
2. As a trustee for future generations, what do your lifestyle and consumption habits reflect about your trusteeship?
3. Take a few minutes to *imagine*. What would you like to envision and say, *“Why not?”*