

## Looking forward to the future

### Denise Gabuzda (Cork Meeting)

Summary: Ancient peoples instinctively felt that they were part of Creation, not apart from Creation, but most modern humans have lost this sense of connection with the Earth. Creating a sustainable future can lead us back into harmony with both ourselves and Creation, sometimes in unexpected ways. This talk will explore a vision of a creative and joyful future in which we have been physically and spiritually liberated by our ability to live sustainably.

=====

I'm going to share with you and explore a vision of how we might live our lives in a sustainable future, how our minds might be opened and our lives improved. Some aspects of the sustainable future I've created in my mind will be familiar, while others may be unexpected. One thing we must bear in mind throughout is that creating a sustainable future is a spiritual endeavour.

Ancient peoples were aware of the interconnectedness of all living things. They instinctively felt that they were part of Creation, not apart from Creation. This is also true of some modern-day indigenous peoples living in traditional ways. However, most modern humans in both rich and poor cultures are losing this sense of a direct physical and spiritual connection with the Earth.

The richness of life on Earth is almost unimaginable. For example, the soil beneath our feet looks to the casual eye to be inert, but is actually teeming with life. A handful of fertile soil contains thousands of species and billions of bacteria. Imagine all the handfuls of soil all around the globe, together with all the plants the soil supports, and all the animals supported by these plants, and it begins to feel natural to talk about "Pachamama", to use an indigenous South American name, or "Mother Earth".

But even farmers, who work closely with earth, are made to feel detached from the soil they till due to the impersonal and mechanized nature of mass agriculture. The Earth is being enslaved and abused by agriculture aimed at crop yield, at the expense of the health of the soil and the biodiversity it should be able to support. And the farmers who are forced to carry out this abuse by our economic system are also emotionally and spiritually damaged by this experience.

In fact, we are all emotionally and spiritually damaged by the many ways in which we are torn away from Mother Earth by our industrialized and in some ways overly technological society. We are also damaged by the ways in which our society isolates us from each other. Deep down, we know this. We yearn for a world where we have technology and comfortable lives, but can also have a flourishing natural world and vibrant communities that foster healthy interpersonal relationships – and it's not too late to make this a reality.

Creating a sustainable future can lead us back into harmony with both ourselves and Creation. What might a sustainable future look like – one in which we truly work together with Nature rather than allowing our perceived needs to dominate those of all other creatures on Earth? What would our lives in such a world be like? Envisioning such a future in an

authentic way requires us to bring into question and ultimately reject some ideas that are deeply embedded in our current world view.

For example, we often take for granted that new inventions and new technologies take away drudgery and better our lives. This is true to some extent. But, in fact, many people are having to work harder and harder to maintain a basic standard of living, despite the fact that our domestic work has been drastically reduced over the past number of decades by any number of labour-saving devices.

A recent anthropological study by Mark Dyble and his colleagues has shown that hunter-gatherers in the Philippines who become farmers work around ten hours a week longer than they did as foragers, with the shift to settled agriculture impacting most negatively on the lives of women. The need to have women join in the agricultural work also has a detrimental effect on their children and families, because they are not free to care for them as well as they had previously. We assume that the transition from foraging to settled agriculture must have come about because it enabled communities to meet their needs with less work – this seems logical to us. However, such research has found that hunter-gatherers actually have quite a lot of leisure time – more than people in societies who get their food through farming, and more than we do in the modern world.

To me, this is sending a clear signal that our society and our lives are out of balance – we’ve missed something somewhere – what are we working so hard for, and is this really in the best interests of ourselves and the world around us?

I believe that one aspect of a more balanced, sustainable world should certainly be that we’ll be able to work less, and our work will be more meaningful. We’ll have more time for family & friends, leisure activities, contemplation, reflection – or just daydreaming. This will also open more space for imagination and creativity. This will be true for both the adults and the children in our society – more “unprogrammed” time to let our imaginations run free. Moreover, we’ll be liberated from a crude quantity-based work ethic that says “working more is better, and if you want to work less, you’re lazy”. We’ll be valued for the quality of our work, not the amount of time we spend at it.

We’ll also spend less time getting to and from work – either because we’re able to live close enough to work to get there on foot or by bicycle, or because we can do much of our work from home. This would have seemed difficult to realize before the pandemic, but our experience over the past four months has shown that many jobs can, in fact, be done at least as efficiently from home.

This is possible in part through the use of technology that enables people at multiple locations to communicate together. We will use such technology to reduce unnecessary and time-consuming travel, and also to promote inclusivity.

The health of our society will be measured in terms of the overall well-being of its citizens, rather than using financial measures, such as Gross National Product or rate of economic growth. In fact, the idea of measuring the health of a society based on economic growth will become laughable, and we’ll be amazed that we did this for so long – after all, how can something keep on growing forever? We’ll live in a zero-growth economy, which will offer us a stable, not stagnant economic system.

Our society will be much less unequal. This will have far greater ramifications than is obvious at first glance. It has been shown by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their book “The Spirit Level” that the level of inequality in a society is a key factor determining the severity of a very wide range of social problems – drug use, teen pregnancy, racism, crime rates, poverty and so forth. Inequality is also correlated with various health measures, such as rates of physical illnesses, mental health problems, obesity, infant mortality rate, and life expectancy. More equal societies have less severe social problems and higher levels of physical health and mental wellbeing – and interestingly they also tend to have lower levels of carbon emission, be more environmentally aware, and be less consumer driven.

Thus, the increased equality of our society will be manifest in many positive ways. One way this increased equality might come about could be through the introduction of a Universal Basic Income scheme, which will pay every member of our society an income that is sufficient to cover their basic needs. This may sound like an unrealistic idea, pie in the sky – however, the new Irish government has promised to try out an Irish Universal Basic Income pilot scheme within five years.

Our consumer choices will be guided by a desire to keep our ecological footprints lighter in a way that also improves the quality of our lives. We’ll buy things that may cost more initially but will last longer, and use sustainable materials to make the things we need – for example, making furniture of wood, which captures carbon. We’ll eat more locally and naturally grown food. We’ll be more in touch with the natural rhythm of the seasons, not feeling the need to have every type of food available all year round, and understanding that local food that is in season is the most delicious. We’ll live more simply, but no less richly.

Of course, our energy will come from renewable sources – solar, wind, water, tidal, geothermal. We’ll also be leading lifestyles that require us to use less energy. Our homes will be designed to be energy efficient, and to passively keep us comfortably cool in Summer and warm in Winter. We’ll live in neighbourhoods designed so that most shops, schools and other public amenities are within walking or bicycling distance, so that we usually don’t need to use a car to do our errands. The extra exercise we get will help keep us physically fit and mentally alert. We’ll also know our neighbours better, because we are all out and about more on foot, making our communities stronger. I’ve gotten to know a number of my neighbours better over the past four months, regularly crossing paths with dog walkers and others out on errands as I have made my way back and forth to our local shop.

There will be fewer private cars, and those that there are will be electric. We’ll use well connected public transport, which will also be electric. This will have a transformative effect on our urban areas – less congested streets, much less vehicle noise, and much cleaner air. In addition to putting carbon dioxide into the air, burning oil products also gives rise to a variety of other noxious emissions. We’ve had a glimpse of the positive effect that having fewer, and only electric, vehicles will have on our cities through our experience with lockdown – only once we had far fewer petrol and diesel vehicles on the roads did it become clear just how much noise and air pollution they were creating.

We’ll travel by airplane much less, and flying will be much more expensive. This means seeing friends and family who live far away in person less often, and we’ll make use of platforms such as Zoom to keep in touch. Most professional conferences will also be held remotely. Perhaps once every few years we’ll make a long trip to a distant part of the globe,

taking time to travel on the surface. We'll be entitled to extra time off work once every say four years in order to take such a trip.

We'll have set aside a considerable portion of the Earth as protected areas where Nature can thrive, and live in cities with green areas where biodiversity is also protected locally and regionally. It has been proposed that we set aside half of the Earth for Nature. We are one out of about 6.5 million animal species who live on land – we can surely make do occupying half the surface of our planet.

Watching videos made during lockdown of goats wandering through a seaside town and sheep riding on a roundabout in a children's playground makes me wonder whether it just might be possible to share our space amicably with other wild or feral creatures too.

The Earth will be a more peaceful place. The process of working together to limit the increase in global temperatures to 1.5° has shown us that what we have in common is more important than our differences. A more equitable distribution of resources has started to come about, making people the world over less fearful for the future.

This is just a vision, or a dream, at present – of a creative and joyful future in which we have regained our balance, and we viscerally feel our deep spiritual connection with the Earth and with that of God in all living things. Some irreparable damage has been done to the Earth, and many species have been lost forever – but in this vision, we will have willingly agreed to let Nature take her course on a large fraction of our planet's surface, giving her time and space to heal and ultimately to thrive. As our planet heals, so will we, becoming spiritually whole again, and rediscovering our instinctive understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things.

This future is by no means the most likely one at present. But it is possible, through a combination of open-mindedness, “out-of-the-box” thinking, creative and responsible development and use of technology, determination, openness to new ways of living, and openness to the Spirit. Close your eyes and let yourself imagine a future like this – this is a key step toward allowing it to become a reality.