

**Re-imagining Society Sustainably**  
*Imagining a future as clear,  
clean and beautiful as can be,  
with wholesome human interactions,  
enjoyment of nature  
and our needs met from the abundant earth.*  
**EcoQuaker talk Summer 2020.**

As we look at the state of the world around us and the impacts we are having on the natural world and one another, it can be quite overwhelming. It can often be difficult to know how to best respond. I'd like to suggest five things that we can do in our own lives that can make a difference.

Firstly, we can spend money consciously to support suppliers and businesses who are building a better world.

Secondly, we can do less and buy less, living more simply so that our ecological footprint is reduced.

Thirdly, we can speak truth to power and put governments and corporations under pressure to do the right thing rather than the usual thing, advocating for change in policies and practices that are causing harm and blocking the way towards a healthy world and society.

Fourthly, we can build and strengthen connections with others to help bring about the changes we want to see.

Lastly, we can remain optimistic about our chances of creating a bright future together, and reimagine a clear vision of a beautiful, happy and abundant earth.

So let's look at these five things in a bit more detail.

**The first thing is to Spend Money Consciously**

There is a story in the Native American tradition about two wolves. One is gentle and kind, caring and generous, protective and nurturing. The other is mean and aggressive, greedy and selfish. These two wolves battle endlessly with one another within our hearts and minds, each one vying for control. The question that inevitably gets asked is "which wolf wins?", to which the answer comes back: "The one you feed." Our behaviours and our decisions are the food for these wolves, and the one that dominates is the one we feed, bit by bit, day after day, year after year.

So too in the the world. Each time we spend our money, we support companies that either poison the planet or nurture it. With the help of our current global economic system we have been dangerously overfeeding a wolf that threatens to devour us all. By changing how we spend our money, we can instead feed the wolf that protects us and our future. We can buy organic produce and shop at Farmers Markets; buy clothes that are FairTrade, organic or second-hand; buy unbleached recycled paper for our offices; source organic seed for our gardens.

We can use homoeopathy, acupuncture or herbalism instead of drugs and their harmful side effects. We can build well insulated houses of local timber instead of high energy concrete, and use compost

loos or treat sewage using plants rather than electric pumps.

There are so many ways that our decisions impact on the Earth. But each decision can have a positive impact rather than a negative one; actively feeding the good wolf, actively building a world we can be proud to hand over to our children and grandchildren.

### **The second thing is to Live more Simply –to Do Less and Buy Less**

I thought we were doing pretty well with our waste minimisation endeavours; down to about one bin of rubbish every six months, with more frequent runs to the recycling centre with glass, metal and plastics. Then two things converged in my mind: China stopped importing European waste plastics for recycling; and the proposed LNG terminal on the Shannon estuary got extended planning permission from An Bord Pleanála.

In the first instance, China had been busily receiving vast streams of supposedly clean washed plastics for recycling. It turned out that the plastic wasn't as clean and washed as needed and they got fed up of sorting our rubbish. Suddenly our big bag of clean plastics in our shed looked more like out and out rubbish than a valuable resource in somebody's production line.

Secondly, the Shannon and Cork LNG terminals are designed to import fracked gas from the US into Europe. One of the uses is to make plastics. So a lot of that plastic sitting in our shed might be made on the backs of communities in the US destroyed by the fracking industry. Fracking also has a carbon footprint worse than coal, so it's not something that we can afford to continue if we want to tackle climate breakdown.

With those two events converging, I recognised afresh the need to avoid plastics as much as possible. I was reminded of Gandhi's phrase to live simply, so that others might simply live. Sometimes we don't just need to buy the better thing, or the organic thing or the more durable thing. Sometimes we need to not buy that thing!

At it's core, simplicity is a conscious choice to voluntarily step back from consumerism. One side of the coin is buying less - the flip side is noticing that this brings with it a reduced pressure to earn as much. So we spend less and work less; generate less waste to deal with, and have less pressure to bring in money. This is a win for the planet and a win for our selves.

### **The third thing on the list is to engage in Advocacy – to Speak Truth to Power**

Have you ever had the feeling that nothing ever changes? No matter how much effort and energy you pour into it? Well let's remember that in the time of Henry VIII homosexuality was punishable by death. By the time of Oscar Wilde this was reduced to a term of imprisonment. Now through the concerted awareness raising of many people, gay marriages can happen in Ireland and in our Meeting Houses.

Women couldn't vote on these islands 100 years ago. Poor people couldn't vote 200 years ago. Arguably poor people are still grossly under-represented. Legal slavery was once the mainstay of the global economy. Black people in the US couldn't sit with white people on public transport, go to school together, work together. If you were native to Australia in 1970 you could be shot and killed quite legally.

All these things changed for the better only through a concerted process of putting pressure on governments to do the right thing instead of the old thing.

In Ireland we've had a recent string of examples of advocacy paying off. Smoking is banned in public buildings, making it far less appealing to our young people. The tax on plastic bags has played a major part in the cleaning up of our countryside. Land-based fracking is now banned. The state is also to divest from fossil fuel shares and investments – the first country in the world to do so.

Whether you write a letter or email, phone a politician or company, or take to the streets, the essence of advocacy can be summed up in Jack Charlton's famous phrase “put 'em under pressure”.

A couple of years ago a rather significant event happened. Globally, the incentives, subsidies and tax breaks for renewable energy exceeded those for fossil fuels for the first time. That's quite something. It shows us that the world is changing for the better. But it also shows something else; that obscene amounts of our taxes subsidise some of the richest and most dangerous industries on Earth. Driving less is certainly important as an individual choice – but that our hard earned tax money should be paid out in subsidies for oil and coal and gas and peat should be changed immediately!

And yes, there are campaigns to help make those changes. Look up [Change.org](http://Change.org), [Uplift.ie](http://Uplift.ie), [SumOfUs.org](http://SumOfUs.org) and [Avaaz.com](http://Avaaz.com) for a whole host of petitions and actions that are challenging the madness of business-as-usual.

### **The fourth thing is to Hold hands – to build on our Connections with Others**

We are social animals. It's really incredible what we can do when we work together. I was walking along the road at Shannon Airport a little while back and was suddenly struck with a profound sense of wonder. It wasn't your typical spiritual experience scene. On my left was the estuary, beautiful and expansive, but on the right was the vast sea of cars waiting for their drivers to fly back home. It was like a huge collection of brightly coloured beetles, all sitting there on a big grey slab. Airport sounds carried over the roads and buildings and enormous signposts. These are all strong symbols of the madness of our age – cars, roads, flashing signs, flights – all quintessential climate change antagonists.

Yet what I felt was a deep sense of wonder, of love actually. A sense of awe at the phenomenal achievements of the human imagination and the power of our cooperative spirit. All of what lay to the landward side of the road was shaped by so many different people working together. People from all across the globe holding hands to produce tyres and windshield wipers, the software for the display board, the paper for the ticket machines, the glass in the building, the paint along the road. All of it part of a vast network of supply chains built on interdependence on a global scale.

Working together we have created incredible things in the world. But we have been motivated by the wrong set of guidelines. The so-called “invisible hand of the market” is throttling our long-term capacity to survive and for a great many people it has taken away our capacity for a dignified life in the meantime.

Even as I felt wonder at the human achievements on one side of the road, I was acutely aware of the rising tide on the other. The road at the Shannon Airport car park in itself a flood defence. Ironically it is one that may be hopelessly inadequate to cope with the consequences of our high carbon lifestyles. A good portion of Limerick city lies below existing high tide level.

But by holding hands with those around us and those who are working in a positive direction we can bring about wondrous changes in the world. Together we can rebuild topsoil in our farms and gardens by composting manure and humanure and kitchen organic waste. We can clean our rivers and seas by reinstating wetlands and wooded buffer zones in lowlying farmland and by filtering urban runoff through reed beds. We can plant billions of native trees to feed pollinators and birds and store carbon and provide building materials for the future. We can shift every endeavour and product and service from being a problem to a solution.

All this will require cooperation on a huge scale, but we have already shown that we can work together on vast projects. Remember that we change the world not through one-off heroic acts, but simply by linking up with one another and working together.

So hold hands with local organic growers and producers, artisan bakers, ethical clothing suppliers, green builders. Team up with neighbours to plant orchards, to grow food, dig a pond, plant a local woodland. Hold hands in the park, as you stroll by the sea or the river, watching a beautiful sunset together. Create time to hold hands with friends, family, the young people around us and the old, the newborn and the dying.

### **Finally the fifth thing is to Hold the Vision – to Image a Bright Future**

Lastly, I believe we need to remain optimistic about our chances and hold a positive vision of the future clearly in our minds. This is not to deny the scale of the challenge before us; more an acknowledgement that miracles happen all the time. If we hold a very clear picture in our minds of a clean and beautiful world, we are much more likely to achieve it than if we believe the media myth of scarcity and division.

Top athletes know that to succeed they need to train the mind as well as the body. Quantum physics is finding that as we view the world, we change it. Energy and matter are directly interrelated. Our thoughts influence our reality. With a clear vision of a beautiful Earth, we can help usher in a spontaneous remission for the many ills that beset the planet and create a wonderful future.

We can anchor the vision in our minds and hearts through prayer, contemplation and meditation and also through immersing ourselves in good messages from others. We can select books, articles, video clips and documentaries that show the potential beauty and abundance available to us. When we hold the vision with others, we support our own inner vision, and affirm it in others.

In our conversations we can admit to our new inner compass, we can talk about working on zero waste in our homes, about composting, about a wonderful wild swim or walk in nature.

We have an innate human urge to tell one another stories. By holding a clear image of the future we want and by sharing our stories with one another we strengthen our new vision and help it to spread. We can let go of the old story of economic growth, of having more toys than our neighbours and imagine something better.

A similar urge exists to conform to the norms of our chosen group. I see the norms shifting steadily and inexorably from economic priorities to more people-friendly and planet-friendly priorities. By imagining our future and sharing our stories we help to shift these norms further in the direction we want to go.

**So to recap**, the five things we can do are:

- (1) feed the right wolf by spending money consciously,
- (2) live more simply,
- (3) advocate for change,
- (4) connect with others,
- (5) imagine a brighter, better future.

Almost every aspect of modern life takes its toll. Extracting more from the Earth than it puts back. The IPCC reports show that we are ridiculously close to a precipice of our own making and that we are repeatedly failing to grasp the nettle and reimagine how our lives and societies can work without fossil energy. At times I fear for our very survival. At other times I feel a huge grief for the harm we have already caused to our rivers and seas, plants and animals and wider human family.

But we *can* imagine a future that is clear and clean and beautiful. We *can* create wholesome human interactions all around us. We *can* immerse ourselves in the sheer enjoyment of nature and meet all our needs from the abundant Earth.

We can create a society that holds each person and the land and the waters around us in love and care and warmth. It will take work and dedication and one another, but it can be done. I invite you to adopt something from each of the five things to work on this coming week and together we can watch a beautiful future unfold before us.

Thank you.