

Thinking Locally, Acting Globally

Everything that man accomplishes or does, that he teaches or wants to learn, must have its right proportion.

– Pico della Mirandola

A familiar message inviting conscientious citizenship in a new “world order” is the mantra *Think Globally, Act Locally*. The suggestion appeals to our ethical sympathies, stirred by media images of starvation and violence in far away places and reinforces proclamations of global interdependence as the new reality of life on Planet Earth. Thinking globally is thought to be thinking realistically because it requires us to think holistically and take account of the complex chain of interaction that binds all life. We learn this way when we realize how our health and prosperity depends upon a world-wide system for distributing resources. Thinking globally is seen as an ethical approach to life on earth because global perspectives will evoke recognition of universal principles of justice and motivate us to “do something” for the common good. In addition, thinking globally is attractive because it is free and immediately accessible. Nothing or no one can stop you from using a grand trip of the mind to circumvent the globe.

However, the challenge to thinking globally is, of course, the difficulty of developing knowledge of the world and its web of interdependence. How daunting is this task? How limited is our information? Water shortages created by drought we might understand as a source of a refugee crisis. How do we know that the starvation in Darfur is linked also to the Chinese government, which is developing enormous power within the world economy in a way that can affect our ability to secure an automobile loan? Thinking globally is tough and is made more difficult by the unpredictable changes that sweep through the human and natural world in a matter of hours. How can we think out a stable analysis of global reality if its truth can be fundamentally altered by the “breaking news” created in minutes by the actions of a few of its six plus billion human citizens?

Therefore is recommended the value of acting locally. Change your own life style, we are told, and do what you can in your local community. In your familiar orbit of daily life, you can see what to do and more easily muster sufficient power to make the changes that are needed to ameliorate problems. You don’t have to be a world traveler or student of world history to be a responsible citizen of the world. Like thinking globally, acting locally is immediately accessible and may be

less costly in the use of resources. The challenge is to find ways to make change that do indeed connect to global problems. Helping to maintain a local food bank is commendable and needed, but as we donate our boxes of canned goods are we not simply extending the reach of corporate food giants? Have we tried growing and eating local food? Does biking to work affect the enormous increase in automobile use in China and India? Will acting locally become just another way of cocooning in a parochial righteousness?

An impressive application of the prescription to think globally and act locally can be found in the agricultural projects in India supported by Vandana Shiva. These local projects do not stop her dynamic analysis of global interdependence and her continuing critiques of destructive globalization. It is expected that when she speaks in Santa Barbara at the end of this month she will give a cogent update on the current challenges to “eco-sufficiency” on a world-wide scale. Her message of and practical experiments in local self-sufficiency indicate that a deeper and broader type of thinking is now needed at the local level. Those with a well-thought out approach to local sustainability agree. Conservation of resources by individuals is not enough. Comprehensive redesign of the way we provide food supplies, housing, water, transportation, to name a few basic needs, is required if affordable and sustainable communities are to flourish. Stefan Polyzoides, a recent speaker in Santa Barbara (see IWC Newsletter for March) captures this vision of local redesign in the concept of “New Urbanism.” Acting locally to be globally responsible is not just the task of the earnest few. Government agencies, banks, architects and builders need to be active partners in rethinking and planning sustainable communities. Whole neighborhoods need to become models of responsible living. Also, citizens need to redesign their psychological expectations of desirable life styles so that they might contribute to greater parity among the world’s peoples in the use of resources.

Interesting was the point made by Stefan Polyzoides that in the first half of the 20th century, communities in southern California “naturally” developed in healthy social and environmental patterns. However, boxed in, linear thinking implemented with a blind attachment to the freeway and the automobile destroyed that health. Trapped we became in urban messes magnified by massive dependency on a global economy. Trucks filled with containers shipped from Asia compete for scarce freeway space with commuters seeking refuge in distant suburbs. Both consume millions of gallons of imported gasoline each year. An emerging competition between food and fuel for the grains of the American breadbaskets reinforces the import of food products from South America to be consumed by those who can still afford a nutritional diet. The connection between local and global is so complex and immediate that thinking locally quickly becomes an education in global interdependence.

Concord House

1407 Chapala Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 966-3961

Thus the effort to rethink our patterns of local living and develop “eco-sufficient” communities can lead to actions that are simultaneously global in impact. We become citizens of the world by becoming citizens of healthy communities. Understanding the principles and facts reflected in local planning can give insights into the principles and facts reflected in the world community. The near enters into the far. Local thinking can provide an effective alternative to the globalization structured by highly centralized organizations pursuing interests in ways destructive to healthy communities.

Carolyn Dorrance, President

Institute of World Culture

April 1, 2008