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12/11/18

Accessibility in Green Practices: A College Animist's Perspective from a City Landscape

Introduction: Wanting to "Go Green" but Can't?

Who doesn't want to go green? Looking around, one can see the growing popularity of "earth friendly" options and articles, and it seems like on the surface, most everyone has a general concern about the planet. Most of us want to see it cared for and we're not short on ideas for what to do better but sometimes that advice is conflicting about how to go about that. There is no lack of trying to save our planet but reports of climate change reaching panic level seem to show another picture about how well we're actually doing. What gives then? Somewhere between wanting and doing, we fall short. In this paper, I will examine how we fall short in our duty to the Earth and more importantly, examine why and how we can change that. I will outline and explain what is getting in our way and suggest how we might get around it.

In many belief systems, especially of those apparent in our Western worldview, there is a great importance placed on the Earth and her* inhabitants. From western views of Christianity and the dominion theory (Curry, 33), to the animist views of many pagans (Murphy-Hiscock, 25), a lot of people seem to be on board with making their own lives reflect more eco-conscious or "earth friendly" practices. However there are

many who want to do more but are held back in a variety of ways that often go overlooked and unaddressed. There are many restrictions that are overlooked in the notion that people ought to be more ecocentric in their practices but many people would like to be greener in action than they are able to for a variety of reasons such as space, cost, and accessibility.

Ethics form the basis of these reasons, describing what we think we *ought* to do (Curry, 28). In the study of epistemology, an offshoot of ethical studies, one questions our knowledge of how we know or decide what is valuable and “good” versus what we deem “bad” or even “evil”. However, in these discussions, in *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* Peter Singer points out that “...authors who wish to challenge [the prejudices reflected in the English language] are in a well-known type of bind: either they use language that reinforce the very prejudices they wish to challenge, or else they fail to communicate with their audience... We commonly use the word ‘animal’ to mean ‘animals other than human beings.’ This usage sets humans apart from other animals, implying that we are not ourselves animals - an implication that everyone who has had elementary lessons in biology knows to be false.” (22). He goes on to say of himself that he tries “to avoid language which tends to degrade animals or disguise the nature of the food we eat. (Singer, 23). In the Handy Garden Answer Book, Karen Troshynski-Thomas gets scientific about the difference between plants and animals informing that “The basic difference is in their cells. Plant cells have a rigid cell wall that provides support to the plant. Animal cells do not have these since they receive internal support from their skeleton.” (4). Humans, receiving support from

our skeletons, are animals. For the sake of discussion, I will use humans to depict the group of us who are aware of our choices in the matter of our environment and who seem to have a cognitive dissonance going on in the matter of actually doing so.

In dialogs about animal and environmental ethics, there is this struggle not only with the language we use, but struggles in overcoming personal and systematic restrictions that we all must face when trying to make eco-conscious or ecocentric choices.

Ethically then, we should make earth friendly choices in the sense of becoming or doing good for the earth and also for ourselves. Patrick Curry recites four aspects to the biocentric outlook in his book *Ecological Ethics*: humans are members to a community on equal footing to all other living things, that community being based on interdependence, with each member looking out for their own goals and ends, and where there is no understood superiority to humans (Curry, 76). And ethically, humans could be doing a lot better for the earth on which they live.

Spirituality and Religion of Ecocentrism

Spirituality and religion play an important role in why we *ought* to make these greener choices. As Patrick Curry says in *Ecological Ethics*, “Virtually all ethics began, and for most of human history has persisted, as *religious* codes of behaviour. There is a wide variation, of course, but such codes are derived from interacting with either local spirits (animism), a pantheon (polytheism), the sacred nature of reality itself (Buddhist nontheism) or God through the words of His prophets and/or incarnation (Judaic,

Christian and Islamic theism).” (32, emphasis author). He differentiates between religion and spirituality as such: “...’religion’ is a particular institutionalized instance of ‘spirituality’, which latter is therefore the more comprehensive phenomenon.” (Curry, 139).

Animism led me to a book by Arin Murphy-Hiscock on green witchcraft, often rooted in Wicca or paganism, where she outlines the way not only nature affects humans but how we affect nature as well. “The modern green witch understands that humanity impacts the natural world, not only via the energy created by their feelings and beliefs. Just as nature affects us, so too does our energy affect nature, and that effect isn’t always positive. Therefore, the green witch seeks to maintain harmony between humanity and nature.” However, she notes at my first major point, and though she is speaking of those who deem themselves green witches, I suggest that she says we all “... must function in harmony with the realities of her own life. This means working out your own goals and obstacles and knowing your own self so that you can apply your energies and skills to the best of your ability.” (Murphy-Hiscock, 16-17). (We will get to the limitations of ability and accessibility below.)

Murphy-Hiscock speaks about the importance of the earth in the green witch practice, “The green witch understands that the earth incorporates the planet and all living things upon it, including animals, plants, and people. In this respect, yes: the earth is a collective term for all living things. However, the green witch also knows that to lump them all together means that we sometimes forget the more individual emphasis each deserves.” (Murphy-Hiscock, 16). Curry claims that the world’s major religions

have mostly failed being anything better than an “anthropocentric exploitation of nature” (138) and claims that “...Christianity in its dominant form (and, by implication Islam) had removed the sacred focus from the Earth and its creatures.” (33). However, he also puts forth, “According to this benevolent reading [of Genesis 1:24 and 2:15], humanity can use the natural world but only with due regard for the fact that God created it and gave us responsibility for its well-being: something which provides an opportunity for Christian environmentalists to try to put ecology onto the churches’ agenda.” (Curry, 34) Pagans, however, hold nature itself as sacred (Curry, 33). Karen Murphy-Hiscock says, “If you love and respect the world around you, you will not abuse it. The more empathy and sympathy you have for your surroundings, the better you will treat them. This is tied to the basic Golden Rule found in several religions. It’s ethical reciprocity: if you treat those around you with courtesy, they will extend the same to you. What you put out into the world returns to you, and that goes for thoughts, acts, and energy.” (18).

The Case for Eco-conscious Behaviors

The general consensus indeed seems to indicate a need for change on our behaviors regarding earth and her resources with the Paris Agreement reaching to almost every country, but ours unfortunately is not among them. Based on the agreement of 181 countries have signed the Paris Agreement outlining guidelines and plans for countries to change behaviors regarding the environment (UNFCC, [the-paris-agreement](#), [what-is-the-paris-agreement](#)). The United States is not one of those countries in a most controversial decision by the forty-fifth president, because

climate deniers sit in positions of authority on this matter and actively engage in self sabotaging ways in regard to harming the planet instead of saving it.

In backing out as the leader of the agreement, China is left to lead (Hsu, 1:06). As TED Talks speaker, Angel Hsu puts it in her talk *How China is (and isn't) fighting pollution and climate change*, "We still have a gap between current policies and what needs to happen if we want to avoid dangerous climate change. Leadership is what we desperately need, but it's not coming from the US, for example. The US administration last June announced its intent to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, so now people are looking towards China to fill that leadership void." (Hsu, 10:24). Speaking specifically of China, a documentary created in 2015 called "Under the Dome" by a former CCTV reporter named Chai Jing linked to likened to Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" for the attention it brought to the public about pesticides and their harm of human life, "stamped into the popular consciousness that air pollution was leading to one million premature deaths every year in China alone." (Hsu, 3:11).

Roadblocks, Setbacks, and Limitations

The amount of countries signing this agreement shows climate change as a global issue, but there is a lot of denial and systematic restrictions set in place right here in the United States that make it difficult for individuals to fight back against this decision on their own. There are many systematic choices that people face on a daily basis that keeps them from making more earth friendly choices. As a student, one is restricted by time and access to options on or around campus. Meal plans are becoming more

flexible and more options are added regarding special diets, but it can still be a challenge to keep up a particular diet when lines are long or diners are closed. The fast food and a-la-cart options aren't always as friendly. Sometimes a few inches of snow may shut the entire city down leaving you with only the milk and bread you brought home from the store that may or may not be cruelty or dairy free.

Speaking specifically of our options on the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, dining options do what they can, but they can only do so well. They were severely restricted over the few days we had the snow storm (UNCC, inclement-weather). Most rooms are otherwise equipped with microwaves, if one of the roommates brought one. Otherwise, campus seems to have maybe a kitchen per floor if that in most dorm halls around campus, shared among way too many students needing to use it. When open though, our dining halls do cater to multiple diet types with multiple options at different hours. However, some diets will always be easier to cater to as it's easier for places to also serve salads or things without meat, but it's harder to convince them to stock up on lactose free milk substitutes and other dairy and egg alternatives.

While my apartment affords me better than a dorm room window, my porch is still too small and not lit well enough to sustain a full garden producing enough to live off. I am on my second year of gardening in this small, low light porch for two years and believe I have made one dish of salsa and otherwise supplemented my grocery store bought, cage free eggs with fresh herbs and a few small tomatoes here and there for a few breakfasts. It is not an easy task to bring forth enough food for oneself in such limited spaces.

Nowadays, with the light rail finished up to campus, students have access to anything along the route, including at least one seasonal farmer's market down in Noda and plenty more food options. But even with access to local markets, not everyone still has actual access to them. The light rail may connect students to local sources for their food but it won't carry their grocery bags back to their dorm rooms for them. Speaking from experience, that walk from the dorms to the light rail station is fairly hefty, up some hills in different directions, and carrying multiple grocery bags is not going to make that walk any easier. The market also constantly changes vendors and it's not always guaranteed what the selection will be. Spontaneity in meal planning can only go so far when the vendors only have pasties, jelly, or lemonade when you are trying to plan out a week of meals until the next market.

Students aren't the only ones who face struggles to make greener choices. The new "skip the straw" movement is great for saving the turtles when you can skip the lid and straw, thus keeping straws out of landfills since they can't be recycled. But there are a great many reasons for needing that straw. Many people with disabilities rely on that straw because of different restrictions. Whether because of an inability to lift the cup and needing assistance or having different jaw capabilities, that straw can mean the difference between actually getting that liquid into their mouths and going thirsty. The family I work for has a wheelchair bound dad and husband who relies on much assistance and they have a drawer full of reusable and washable straws. But it shouldn't be on them to have to fight for their rights to be able to get straws in their drinks while they are dining out or having to keep up with the backlog of dishes in an already busy

household to remember to grab a clean one in case the place they are going is trying to save the turtles.

As Elise Roy comments in her TED Talk “When we design for disability, we all benefit”, she says that we need to observe people in real life situations. These real life situations paint the bigger picture of the burden of the individual. Whether it’s on the disabled person or their family members to keep up with straws in the sink, or the college student trying to follow the best options out there,

Cost and Maintenance

Despite all of the many reasons for becoming earth conscious, there are still many setbacks to doing so. Speaking directly from the college perspective, sometimes it comes down to the space you have and what you’re allowed to do with it. A small dorm room with one window that may or may not open limits what you can grow. One can certainly try the plans outlined and shared in the TED Talk *A garden in my apartment*, but Britta Riley claims that even an apartment window in New York was only able to grow about a salad a week which wouldn’t keep you satisfied for very long. (3:19).

Gardening is at least a part time job if one is going to maintain something to feed a household. It requires good light, a lot of space and time to bring crops to fruition. If space or light is limited, accommodations need to be made by way of grow lights that are either connected to a timer, or must be manually switched on and off, either taking more money for start up costs or time if one is doing it manually. And while Riley claims that their team was able to cut their carbon footprint in half with their systems, she admits

that it took “a whole bunch of systems to get it right” (Riley, 4:24). In the introduction to *The Handy Gardening Answer Book*, Troshynski-Thomas says that though gardening can be seen as anthropocentric by imposing our will on the land, it can also be helpful to the land to help revive native species and she chooses to focus the book on practical gardening to aid plants in growing stronger for themselves than being dependant on human caretakers (xiii). Though it takes time to grow a hardy garden producing a self sustaining or at least self satisfying meals for a household.

Conclusion: Next Steps

There is no lack of desire to become more ecocentric. But the fact is that we are up against conditions enforced on us by people in power over us who are making choices to harm instead of help our planet. There are always little things we can do but until we change the people in charge who are holding us back, moving forward is going to be like facing a brick wall. This is going to mean hounding current representatives to put pressure on the administration and if the current representatives aren't listening, elect new ones. Getting active in the policy changing part of this whole process will be instrumental in removing those brick wall type people in power.

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