

Living Deliberately into the 21st Century: Messenger, Witness, and Connector

Kate H. Brown

Abstract:

It is not easy to live responsibly with the knowledge that our daily lives contribute to future ecological disasters and social injustices world-wide. People of good conscience ask ourselves what is the nature of our ethical responsibility and how might we best express it. The internal and external constraints to positive action are real. The potential of our impact is small and often confused by contradictory aims. Moral agency is daily strained by the experience of seemingly endless hindrances as we navigate between good intention and actual behavior. This commentary offers three humble examples from the work of applied anthropologists who have chosen to use our skills, theory, and intuitions to respond to the awareness of our interconnectedness with the future health of the planet. One, in the tradition of anthropologist as “messenger,” incorporates material about the future of the world in her teaching and public presentations. She frames factual details about a variety of emergency ecological and social problems within an anthropological perspective. Another colleague chooses a more private venue to express her concerns. Mindfully, as a participant observer, she “witnesses” with reverence the weekly death of wild animals run over by cars travelling on her seaside road. I end with a portrayal of my own role as a “connector,” describing my work with others on an urban agriculture project in the Midwest.

Introduction

My heart is moved by all I cannot save
so much is being destroyed
I have to cast my lot
with those who age after age
Perversely
And with no extraordinary power
reconstitute the earth.

Adrienne Rich 1978

There is no denying it: the future looks bleak. As Kitty Corbett’s article in this issue reviews in painful detail, human population growth and the unjust distribution of wealth already strain global resources. This, in turn, creates increases in otherwise preventable disease and death, especially among the poor who are least able to secure relief from medical interventions. The alarming rate of environmental degradation that accompanies our current models of human “progress” only speeds the inevitability of more– countless– heartrending disasters in the future.

Like others in my generation born around 1950, I have been vaguely aware of these issues looming in the outer corners of my daily horizons for many years. But until recently I have held them outside of my usual consciousness for the most part. Instead, it has been easier to give priority to the heady mix of schedules,

lecture plans, grocery lists, nuances of relationships, the next publication, balancing my checkbook, e-mail correspondence, dental visits, political campaigns, dinner parties, etc. that fill a life of privilege for someone in my social and age group. For all their complexity, these details of daily life are understandably more comfortable than the despair and helplessness that arise so often when I contemplate the facts about the future for the world. This is not to say that one set of issues should be or is of greater consequence to consider. More and more I am aware of their interconnectedness: my present life ramifies into the future– into a dire future indeed. And, as Kitty reminds us, with this awareness comes an ethical responsibility. But a responsibility to do what?

Friends and colleagues of mine – all people of good conscience – find ourselves asking this question increasingly, too often in unresolved wonderment, confusion, guilt, and grief. Responsibility for our impact on the future health of the whole planet seems overwhelming. Where do we start? Is there an end? Sure, holding in mind future generations, we know to recycle, re-use, and live as simply as possible; this is good and we try to honor it in our daily lives. We think twice before buying gas-guzzler cars. Sometimes we walk or bike to work. We support organic and regionally-grown produce. We squirm at the supermarket when forced to decide between “paper or

plastic,” wondering again how we could have forgotten to bring along those nice cloth grocery bags. We donate money and scarce time to worthy causes and vote for environmentally sound policies when we can.

Is this ethically enough? If we do less, are we in a sense, unethical? What about our responsibility for that over which we have little or no control? Many of the most destructive global forces that will lead us to future disasters lie far outside of our personal influence. Investing in socially responsible retirement plans is one thing, but it is naïve to think this will stop the ozone hole from growing. Similarly, using a mulching mower on our lawn instead of applying fertilizer seems like a paltry effort in the face of massive nitrate pollution resulting from current industrial farming practices.

Part of the tragedy of our future course is that we are infantilized by the very real limitations of our individual moral agency. In western philosophical ethics and democratic traditions of governance, the concept of responsible action hinges centrally on individual choice. However, so many of our “choices” to respond ethically to environmental problems are in fact merely Band Aids. These important, but largely symbolic gestures leave unquestioned the underlying political, economic, and cultural premises that support systematically unjust, exploitive, and destructive resource extraction and distribution.

Anthropological Responses

At the spring 2000 meeting of the High Plains Applied Anthropological Society, I had the opportunity to reflect on these questions of ethical responsibility for the future of the world. The final panel and discussion at the conference stimulated me to think about how anthropologists’ perspectives and skills can guide our field and others through the ethical thicket of our interconnectedness with a global future. The framework I have devised poses three roles for activists in this area, exemplified by the work of two anthropologist colleagues and myself. All three of us trained as medical anthropologists and share an unabashed commitment to applied work, though much of our careers have been spent in university settings as teachers.

The roles we have chosen to take in response to global environmental and social injustices are not

presented here as either definitive or heroic. Each of us acknowledges that our efforts are actually outside of the main focus of our research and teaching. Our concerns are more like a backdrop than a central plot in our careers so far. Kitty Corbett has concentrated her career mostly in the areas of tobacco control, HIV prevention, and the mis-use of antibiotics. Margaret Mackenzie is well-known for her research on obesity and eating disorders. My work centers in the field of bioethics.

Our humble responses to the crises at large are not unique, nor is our impact that monumental. Perhaps persistence is the common thread besides our rootedness in the theory and methods of anthropology. In this regard I take heart in theologian Henri Nouwen’s sage remarks in his article, “Nuclear Man.” Although written thirty years ago in reference to the threat of nuclear annihilation, his message still holds sway with my students today. Nouwen believes that hopefulness in the face of an otherwise devastatingly grim future is found in the consoling truths that: we are not alone in our efforts; with each responsible act we join in a beginningless stream that flows without end; and successful results are measured by a commitment to the effort and less on the actual attainment of some distant, impossible goal (Nouwen 1972).

I have identified three kinds of responses that my colleagues and I have adopted for addressing our concern about the interconnectedness of our lives with global distress. These responses are merely different ways of being applied anthropologists, since each form that we have taken to express our concern is imbued in one way or another with our identities and perspectives as anthropologists.

Messenger

When Kitty began some years ago to give lectures in anthropology courses on the future of the world, she stepped into the anthropologist’s role of messenger. In so doing, she joins others such as John Bodley and Barbara Rose Johnston who are working on the anthropology of the global environmental and social emergency before us. In our field’s time-honored tradition of holism, Kitty and these others bring together facts from a wide range of disciplines to alert their audiences to events beyond our hearths. In so doing, they reframe our everyday local assumptions in light of larger, universal dilemmas. Like the early

cultural anthropologists returning to Europe last century, they do colleagues and students the service of expanding our “world views” to actually encompass the world.

Kitty’s anthropology requires culling through the research of biologists, historians, physiologists, epidemiologists, climatologists, economists, sociologists, and political scientists to make sense of the grievous issues at hand. She works hard to update her facts for the class and she draws them from reputable sources. “I like the concreteness of facts,” Kitty recently told me. The lack of intersubjectivity in a climate report about the increasing frequency and velocity of typhoons in southeast Asia, a report about the recurrence of drug-resistant TB in Peru, or the declining fishcounts off the coast of Newfoundland is at once reassuring and terrifying.

This blend makes Kitty highly sensitized however to the intersubjectivity of her audiences’ responses to these facts. Admittedly, these facts are hard to hear. As spokesperson for bad news, she observes people move from sympathetic horror, to outright aversion including accusation and doubt, and then to denial within minutes. One real personal danger of working in this area of anthropology is that she has a double-whammy dose of negativity coming at her as the messenger. Her preparation for lectures requires her to hold herself open to a steady stream of factual reports detailing the demise of resource stability and social cohesion. Details about scarcities, preventable disasters, greed-driven policies, and seemingly insane prevarication are the stuff of her lectures. Information becomes at once fodder for her insistence that things must change soon and the source of tremendous sorrow and impotence. Once she digests and analyzes these realities, she then must face her audiences’ projected responses of disbelief, anger, apathy, and reluctance when they hear what she has to say.

Because she recognizes these same responses in herself, she is in a better position to field her audiences’ distress and confusion about grappling with such significant tragedies. For instance, a few days ago we were talking about her sense that the geography and material acquisitiveness represented in patterns of suburban sprawl are not sustainable. And yet she suspected that change was nearly intractable in such situations until the problems of resource

scarcity and lowered quality of life hit home for people living in suburbs. For them, as for all of us living in plenty, most moves toward simplification would be viewed as loss, lack, and require some kind of internal or external punitive discipline to enforce. I asked her how she dealt with her feelings of frustration knowing that our unsustainable patterns of life are so entrenched. Typical of her humor and self-reflexivity, she made fun of her own practice of denial, “Oh, I just don’t go to the suburbs so I don’t have to think about it.” And later in discussion about the difficulty of change she confessed to a kindred sense of resistance to change with others, “When I have to make a change— just about any change— I whine a whole lot about it.”

Witness

Simply being aware of our feelings, the harmfulness of our lifestyles, and the contradictions all of us live with is the essence of Margaret Mackenzie’s response. She believes we have at minimum a responsibility to be compassionate witnesses to the ways that our own and others’ lives perpetuate the very environmental problems we abhor in the world around us. She models her response on the nonjudgmental position of a participant observer in the field. Her field in this case is the road that runs by her home in the countryside about an hour north of San Francisco. Her commentary as an anthropologist takes the form of what might be seen as an on-going performance art piece that is at once deeply hideous and humane. Or more concretely, it could simply be the systematic data collection of a careful researcher. Either way, her action and commentary about responsibility is notably powerful in its simplicity.

Margaret’s road is a winding stretch of pavement that separates a wooded hillside from wetlands. Deer, skunks, raccoons, snakes, cats— wild and domestic, and other animals all pass back and forth over the road with regularity, especially in the evenings. They descend to drink and hunt in the wetlands and then return home to the safety of the woods. Usually the road is sleepy in the evening with few cars passing by once the daily flow of commuters subsides. However, each weekend the road becomes very busy when city folks come to visit the nearby beaches. Every Monday afterwards the road is littered with dead animals, killed by passing cars.

It's hard enough to witness the weekly slaughter, but Margaret also appreciates that it represents only a microcosm of the monstrous destructiveness of humankind. Each time a car wheel smashes the head of an animal on the road, it reverberates for her as a powerful metaphor, recalling the tragedy of other losses, even the extinction of whole species at the hand of humans and our technologies. At the same time, Margaret loves the beaches that attract the weekend traffic. She drives to them herself regularly to enjoy the sea breezes and crashing waves. She would not deny this restorative beauty to others wanting to visit such places. Margaret also values the road that passes by her house, of course, and cars. The road and her own car allow her not only to visit the beaches but to commute a hour to the city for her work. Late from school some evenings, she has had her own close calls swerving to avoid animals on the road.

Margaret spends little time thinking about trying to identify individual hit and run executioners, for in her mind we are all culprits. But culpability lends itself to accusation and judgment, both which she feels can paralyze us from any positive action at all. Denial and deflection of responsibility are natural defenses against blame-laying, so what would be served? Instead, she asks only that we be aware of what we are doing and how we are feeling: to witness with compassion our place in the real dilemmas of our times.

Toward an expression of this witnessing, each Monday Margaret leaves a little early for work. When she sees a dead animal in the road, she stops her car and steps out. Gently, she honors the creature by moving it off the pavement. She plucks a blade of grass or a wildflower and lays it on the carcass, whispering a prayer of farewell. Then she records the location of its death in a little notebook kept in her glove compartment, and she drives on.

Connector

My own moment of reckoning with a sense of interconnectedness between my life and the specter of global devastation came about five years ago one morning in my kitchen before leaving for the office. An announcer on National Public Radio had just eulogized yet another environmental tragedy. My then husband began to expand on the problem with facts from a book he was reading on a related, similarly distressing subject. I interrupted, asking "So what are we going to

about it? What am I going to do about it?" The question resonated somewhere deep inside me and would not let go. What from my upbringing, my training as an anthropologist, my work in bioethics, our inner-city home in Omaha, Nebraska, and my life skills could I bring to counter the destructiveness of our human footprint? Suddenly what I was used to holding aside as an academic problem of moral agency was facing me head-on as a personal Rubicon— a moment to step forth into a commitment to do something differently. That's when the idea for City Sprouts, Omaha's urban agriculture and food security project, began to take root.

A number of things came together then and in the subsequent years I have helped with the formation of City Sprouts. They all seem to pivot on the concept of change agent as connector. This was an idea that I first learned as a community organizer and then had confirmed in graduate training in applied anthropology and in public health. As connector, the change agent simply looks for ways people can themselves connect with one another to build a sense of community. A key factor in achieving lasting connections is for there to be an ongoing sense of achievement. A one-time accomplishment is not enough, but successfully reaching small, incremental goals motivates continued interest in building and sustaining connections over time. People like to work together to make real, observable results happen. The object of their actions must also make a positive difference, and it helps to have it be fun, inspiring, or somehow enlivening. Also, goals have to be complicated enough that people need to draw on each other's strengths to accomplish them, but not so complex that we get bogged down behind too many insurmountable barriers.

In a place like Omaha, a garden project has proved ideal for me and others to build a sense of connection to the future health of the planet. Gardens necessitate a localized understanding of the interconnectedness between bugs, soil, seeds, humans, food, animals, energy, pollution, and spirit. Anybody raising even one tomato plant in a pot is led to larger questions about the nature of soil, the toxicity of pesticides, and the need for a clean water source. Gardens also connect people with cycles of labor, seasons, and decay and birth. In these ways, gardens make real the imperative of caring for future resources. And, for many people in the Midwest especially, gardens carry the weight of a virtuous tradition of agriculture and

thus connect us with history. This shared history can sometimes establish vital bridges between people who are otherwise separated by education, ethnicity, religion, and social class.

Like others working in other urban garden projects elsewhere, participants in City Sprouts have found our work to be a meaningful response to the bumper sticker challenge to “think globally, act locally.” Urban gardens can do a lot to address a range of social and ecological issues, including beautification, economic development, environmental stewardship, and food security. This has been true in City Sprouts since friends, neighbors, and I formed a non-profit volunteer-based corporation and began developing a ½ acre demonstration garden on the site of a drive-by murder around the corner from my house. Over the past five years City Sprouts has grown in collaboration with many other organizations, churches, and government agencies. City Sprouts runs a youth program at our demonstration garden; helps neighbors and community groups start their own gardens; offers a series of classes in chemical-free horticulture and produce marketing; hosts a regular inner-city farmer’s market; and organizes an on-going food security policy council.

The important issue of food security has connected my work with City Sprouts to my professional life in bioethics. The right to food is essential to good health. Since starting City Sprouts I have become more aware of the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity in our food-glutted nation and around the world (Gardner 2000). Cities are especially vulnerable in this regard when their links to rural growers are threatened by economic disruption, oil prices, war, and weather changes. A United Nations report documents the growing significance of urban gardens in such places as Moscow, Dar es Salaam, and Bogota (Smit 1996). After the fall of the Soviet Union and the tightening of an embargo by the United States, Cuba instituted an impressive program supporting urban agriculture. As a result of their efforts, “some [urban] neighborhoods are producing as much as 30 percent of their own subsistence needs (Murphy 1999: iv.).

In the United States, food shortages are reported among people living in poverty in many cities. In Omaha, two thirds of families responding to a 1998 survey by the county Extension nutrition program

reported that they ran out of food each month. City Sprouts was interested to learn that 80 percent of these families indicated that they would like to start a garden to supplement their family’s food budget. It has been calculated that the yearly household vegetable needs can be harvested from a 10 by 10 meter plot under average growing conditions in a 130-day growing season (Sommers and Smit 1994)

Most cities have unused land which could be transformed into use for food production. In some Asian cities where 80 percent of families are involved in agriculture, gardens spring up on balconies and even in highway medians. Not untypical of urban development, the pattern of suburbanization in Omaha has resulted in an abundance of vacant lots in the inner-city where homes and businesses have fallen into disrepair and been bulldozed. There are more than 3,000 such lots within five square miles around the City Sprouts demonstration garden. Not all of this land is suitable for gardens due to poor drainage, lack of sun, or the very real danger of heavy metals in the soil. Interestingly though, some researchers have found that certain plants can actually extract lead from contaminated soils (Brown 2000).

Since the seed was sown into my imagination that morning five years ago, City Sprouts has blossomed in a variety of ways. Each direction we have taken has connected volunteers and others with each other and with the earth in significant ways. My role has changed now that I have moved from Omaha. However, the connections that I facilitated have taken on a life of their own as City Sprouts continues to grow. As a result of my experience with City Sprouts, I now know activists all over the world who are using urban agriculture as a vehicle to support local networks of people. Their gardens represent an essential example of how to express healthier, simpler interconnections that create a future that is more just.

Conclusion

Concern about how to act in coherence with our sense of responsibility for the future requires little more than “to live deliberately” (Thoreau 1971). To do so, however, in the midst of our busy and complicated lives is not so simple. The examples that I have described here provide only a few ideas about how we might be guided by our skills, theory, and intuitions as anthropologists to “cast our lot with those who... with

no extraordinary power reconstitute the earth” (Rich 1978). The task ahead of us has no end, of course. But we are in the best of company.

References Cited

Rich, Adrienne

- 1978 *Natural Resources. In The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Brown, Kate and Andrew Jameton

- 2000 Public Health Implications of Urban Agriculture. *Journal of Public Health and Policy*, 21, No. 1:20-39.

Gardner, Gary and Brian Halweil

- 2000 The Underfed and Overfed. *World Watch*, 13, No. 4:24-35.

Murphy, Catherine

- 1999 *Cultivating Havana: Urban Agriculture and Food Security in the Years of Crisis.* Oakland, CA: Food First Institute for Food and Development Policy.

Nouwen, Henri

- 1972 *The Wounded Healer: Ministry and Contemporary Society.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Smit, Jac, Annu Ratta, and Joe Nasr

- 1996 *Urban Agriculture Food, Jobs, and Sustainable Cities. New York: United Nations Development Programme* Publication series for Habitat II, Vol. One.

Sommers, Paul and Jac Smit

- 1994 Promoting Urban Agriculture: A Strategy for Planners in North America, Europe, and Asia. Cities Feeding People Report Series #9, Ottawa, Ontario. International Development Research Centre (IDRC). www.idrc.ca/cfp

Thoreau, Henri-David

- 1971 *Walden.* Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.