

Use Sustainability As Your Yardstick

By Joanne Poyourow

Sustainability is defined in many ways.:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

-- United Nations Division for Sustainable Development

"improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting eco-systems."

-- United Nations Environment Programme

"Sustainability encompasses the simple principle of taking from the earth only what it can provide indefinitely, thus leaving future generations no less than we have access to ourselves."

-- Friends of the Earth Scotland

Think back to your 5th grade Science class. You learned that this planet functions through many cycles. The water cycle, for instance. The evaporative process forms rain clouds over the ocean. The clouds drop rain on the land. The water flows down the rivers and through groundwater basins back to the sea. The cycle repeats again and again. It self-perpetuates. It is Sustainable.

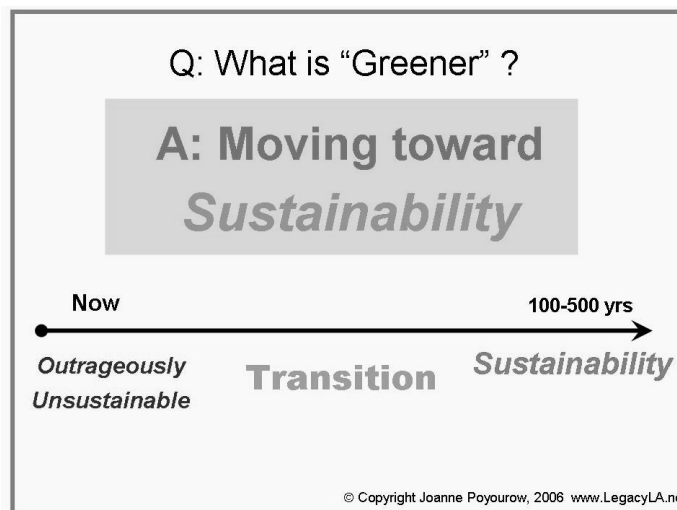
What is "greener"? We really cannot consider a new resource or a new technique to be "greener" unless it takes us closer to Sustainability, unless it takes us closer to the cycles of the earth.

Given the natural cycles of the planet, does the resource in question have the ability to regenerate itself? Can the earth grow/compost/create more, as quickly as humans are using it? Anything short of forward progress on the Timeline of Sustainability merely constitutes treading water.

By what set of values do you make your decisions as to which actions/choices/goods are preferable, which are "greener"? When we make our choices – about modes of

transportation, political issues, consumer products, or the activities we select for our lifestyles – the standard of measurement, the definition of earth-wise and "greener" must be Sustainability. Does the product or technique under consideration bring us closer to the natural cycles of the earth? What is the cost, to natural and human capital, of getting that product to the consumer?

Learn how to spot the differences between green-washing (a.k.a. green-luxury), versus Sustainable choices. Many companies have created products which sound greener but aren't really, such as hydrogen fuel which relies on fossil sources for extraction. We're still in Outrageously Unsustainable territory. They market products which perpetuate our consumption mythology, like "compostable" plastics for use-it-once products. These don't move us forward on the Timeline. Industries push products which misuse a limited resource (example: turning agricultural land from food production over to biofuels). This isn't headed toward Sustainability. Ask yourself: does the consumer really need the product for sufficiency living, or does the product enable our addiction to excess?¹



"The Timeline to Sustainability"

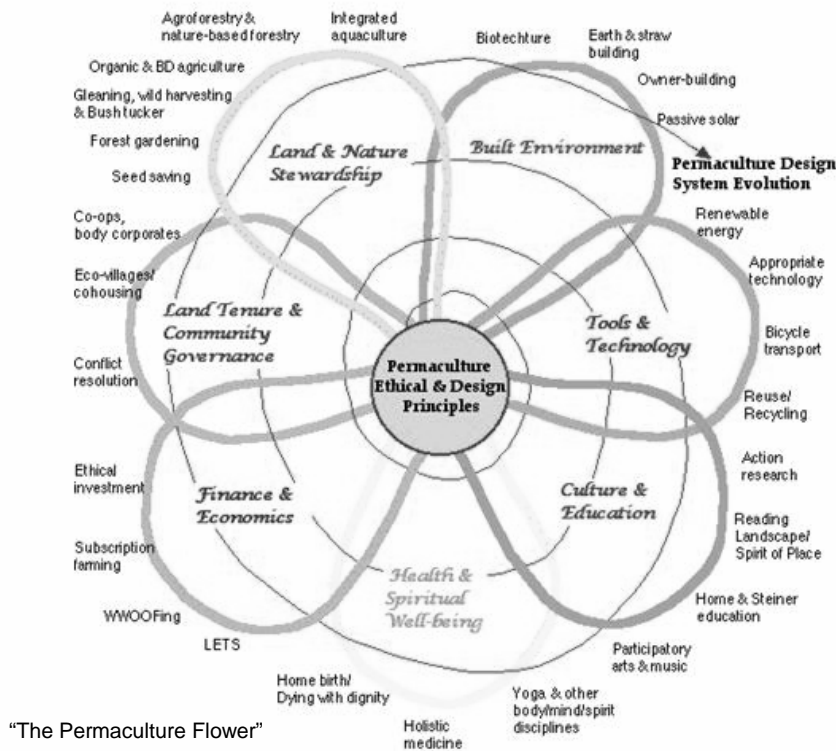
Joanne Poyourow
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www.LegacyLA.net

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We are currently moving into the Transition time, a period of vast changes. Changes in habits and lifestyles. And bigger changes: changes in the way we view the relationship between people and the planet. Called paradigm shifts, these are changes in the basic values by which we make every decision.

As we journey toward Sustainability, paradigm shift will occur in every facet of society: transportation, energy, food, economics. Everything will change. At Environmental Change-Makers of Westchester we often refer to a diagram created by David Holmgren, the co-founder of the Permaculture movement.



The term Permaculture comes from Permanent + Culture, or an ongoing, Sustainable human lifestyle on the planet. Holmgren's Permaculture Flower captures the various realms of human society.²

Many people think of environmentalism as preserving a beautiful mountain range or saving an endangered raptor. In Holmgren's Flower these activities fall into the Land & Nature Stewardship petal. But care for our environment is much broader than that. Converting to renewable energy like solar and wind is working to reform the Tools & Technology petal. Using greener building materials improves the Built Environment petal.

Reworking our zoning laws to permit graywater use falls under Community Governance. Teaching our children about the Earth's ecosystems: Culture & Education. Embracing our spiritual obligation to *do* something about our environmental issues: Health & Spiritual Well-Being. Through the Permaculture Flower diagram we can see quite clearly how all of these realms of human endeavor are interconnected.

Our task in the present age is to bring all aspects of human society to a more Sustainable existence. Each petal of the Permaculture Flower must move along. Around the world thousands of people are working toward Sustainability, each from their own Petal of specialty. It's a big job, but it's not impossible. Come join us.

¹ Biofuels: see George Monbiot, "The most destructive crop on earth is no solution to the energy crisis," The Guardian, 5 Dec 2005, online at <http://www.energybulletin.net/11525.html> Disposable goods: see Joanne Poyourow, "Dispense with Disposables," www.LegacyLA.net/articles.htm

² Permaculture Flower diagram © David Holmgren, from *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, used with permission.

The Environmental Change-Makers meet the fourth Thursday of each month in the Westchester area of Los Angeles. Our meetings highlight various topics of Sustainability, working our way around the Permaculture Flower. We are a peer group of people who support each other in bringing earth-wiser habits into our everyday lifestyles. www.EnviroChangeMakers.org

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