

## gardening as if it were spring

End of January 2009. These days I have been gardening. “Heavy” gardening as I call it. Moving rocks to protect a small papaya plant from chickens. Heavy work for me, but for anyone under fifty, say, it would be nothing.

What I call “gardening” is not easy to explain, most of it is without a spade. I don’t make flower beds, I have some grass that is cut once in a while but is definitely not a lawn. When I do plant something, I see to it that it looks (and feels) as if it has always been there. I walk around, see how everybody is doing. I touch a plant, talk to it, wonder whether it is doing as well I hope, or perhaps suffers from our mild drought. It is winter here, which means not much colder but wet. This month we have not had any real rain for 21 days; highly unusual. Last month the weather people promised a wet January.

I really live for those walks through this small domain. I have done this in every place I have lived after academia; there were many. Size is not important, a smaller area is simply easier to get to know. The kind of trees, plants, flowering people-pleasing plants, weeds, are all different depending on latitude, orientation to sun, water, air. But always and everywhere I need that close, intimate, contact with the real world. The world of life, of the earth, the wind, sun and rain.

In other words the world as it was, before we got civilized. The world that still lives and breathes underneath our man-made world, our huge buildings, roads cut to be straight and level. Our man-made world is the product of an unbelievable amount of force and intent aimed at nature, the planet. Now, it seems, the planet is hitting back.

Our man-made world, now on the way to being global, is not all that strong any more: there are huge cracks in it, divisions. What I think of as vertical cracks are from differences about how this man-made world should be designed for tomorrow. In politics “left” and “right” — although some countries mix the two perhaps successfully.

There are also horizontal cracks, because most of the present man-made world is made on a design that emphasizes (rewards) the individual, who has a “right” to differentiate himself from the group. He is encouraged to get better than his neighbor, smarter, richer. In some parts of the globe this has been the pattern for many ages.

In a society based on the idea of hierarchies, obviously there are many people at the bottom. These people also react. That is nothing new, it is part of the universe that we know: any and all force has counter-force. Sticking a stick in water is easy, in rock probably impossible. But even in air there is what scientists call “resistance.”

Populations of people too have resistance to being oppressed. The more oppression from above, the more resistance from below. We live in a time when our science has allowed us to dream up and make destructive weapons just below the forces of nature perhaps. Now the counter-force from below must leak around the edges with swords and home-made explosives.

The last eight years have been an example of force—counter-force *extreme*. This nation got a surprise punch (a “media event”) that hit us in our pride. Our counter-force

was an overwhelmingly disproportionate (we now call it asymmetrical) application of power, more extreme than the attack on two buildings. The age of extreme. Extreme everything. Extreme words, ideas. Extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Extreme cruelty, probably also extreme compassion. Extreme religion — every religion today has elements of ultra orthodoxy, extreme interpretation of holy books, extreme counter-force (resistance): “martyr” oneself. What else can the powerless do to resist enormous force? Pitting strong belief against strong bombs. It may work.

It is interesting to reflect why “they” chose those two towers, not once, but at least twice. They considered their attack a counter-force. The buildings stood for a global economical/financial system that was (and is) felt by many to be very oppressive. We were told to understand it as an out of the blue force, requiring a counter-force. The collapse of the towers did not affect the financial/economic system much, but our response may have led to a global meltdown of that economic/financial system.

Our western culture is based on the idea that some people are higher up in some invented hierarchy — they think themselves smarter, better. And perhaps it is a human trait to assert force from up there to keep the commoners down. Consequence: the more oppression from above, the more force comes back in one form or another from down at the bottom of a society. Rules of language come from above; our colorful slang comes from the bottom of societies.

We think hierarchy of an animal species that has a gender hierarchy. The alpha male dog has his place in the dog pack, because he has more power, we think, and that gives us an excuse to think we too can, or must, have or get more power to get to a human alpha position. Dogs have a sort of alpha position but it is much more flexible than for instance a mayor’s position. I live with a few tribes of almost wild chickens. Chickens are aggressive — they are said to be far descendants of tyrannosaurus Rex — but the role of alpha rooster is not very dominant. The alpha rooster has the largest harem. That does not mean that he conquered all those female hearts; the females chose him to, some of the time, hang with (is that a local expression?). This rooster is a gentleman, strong and big, but not loud and not at all aggressive. There are two other roosters who are much more active sexually, rape all the females that even look at them. In terms of survival of the species the two “lower” roosters contribute much more than the alpha.

I am beginning to see that this hierarchical thinking is neither natural, nor “right.” The planetary ecology is not vertical. It must be many dimensional. Neither a vertical nor a horizontal spider web will do as a model for an ecology. We want to simplify what we think of as the chaos of nature, but we simplify too much. And we are much too scared of a chaos we cannot understand when we think too one-dimensionally. Science dictates that kind of thinking. We like to think ourselves at the very top of the “food chain.” Plants are eaten by animals, we eat plants and animals — but they don’t eat us. Wrong! Of course we are eaten, but by smaller life forms: viruses, bacteria, fleas, funguses, molds, mosquitoes, cancers, maggots. Yes, we are very much in the circle of Life. As all indigenous people knew: we are all related — “All my Relations” (even

maggots).

And so I came to think of how “we went wrong,” because I know from my own experience that most non-western, and ancient, societies were (are) not hierarchical. Nature is not hierarchical, up and down — it is up and down and sideways and front and back, all at once. ***Hierarchies are a human invention.*** Now we have presidents and street sweepers, and doctors and beggars, and women and men, and children, and directors and secretaries, and all of that is thought of as under or over another in the same chart. But that is unreal. Just because somebody pays me to do something does that make him better? Higher? Only in our imagination.

Of course it is more complex and multi-dimensional. That is what I experience in the real world, the world of nature: something vast, alive, constantly shifting, changing, and all the time everything related to everything else. Plants relate to neighbor plants, animals, stones, wind, sun, rain. That is not horizontal, not up or down, but all around.

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Force and counter force I experience all the time in my immediate environment. It is not some abstraction — the abstraction comes later.

We are in the Tropics, that is, we are located on the planet between the two circles that mark 22.5 degrees north and south of the Equator. But we are close to the edge, and this is an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, so our climate is much more tempered than what one thinks of as the Tropics: hot and humid, lots of mosquitoes and other flying dangers. We do have mosquitoes (we brought in) but it rarely gets as hot and humid as elsewhere at this latitude. And this island is very “young” geologically. We are the top of an enormous volcano resting on the bottom of the ocean. Still active, and has been for the last twenty-five years. Lava is still flowing from two or three cracks along the sides (and maybe the top?) of the mountain, making new land as it flows in the ocean, after having destroyed strips of land on its way to the ocean. The lava here, where I live, is a few hundred years old, so there is beginning to be some soil in hollows and places where trees were able to crack the rock with their roots. Lava is quite fertile when it gets broken, but it needs trees to help crack existing (or made) cracks. When lava dries, it dries as if it were a frozen ocean, with large waves, rounded hillocks and bowls. In the depressions rain stays a few hours, collects dirt, plants grow, and that becomes green. Grasses and other plants that have wide reaching roots begin to cover many of the hillocks. It is not hard to see where a plant I would want to plant can find some soil. That is one of the reasons I walk with a staff, to poke in the ground. When my staff goes down more than a couple of inches, and when I see that there are healthy weeds growing around here as well, I know this might be a good place for a plant that is not difficult to please, for instance some kind of hibiscus. Hibiscus does not need too much water, nor soil, but they are vigorous in this climate. Gingers, on the other hand, really like rain — but they don't tolerate roots in water that does not drain away, so they don't grow in the bottom of low places. You learn these things. Some plants can be

easily propagated by cutting a woody stem and sticking it in the right place with the right kind of soil and moisture that plant needs. Others have to be started from seed. Now I am beginning to know more about the plants (and that always includes “weeds” of course) to know what to put where. This morning I found a little heap of cut weeds that has pale blue flowers and grows in clumps. I picked up the cut pieces and stuck them in the ground of an area far away where they had not been before, but where the soil was the kind they like. Tomorrow they will look as if they sprouted there by themselves.

It feels like Spring here, I guess, and it is waxing moon. I have an urge to plant, propagate...

Suddenly I realized that I am interfering in Nature. That must be a very human characteristic, and the very characteristic that got us on this “wrong” path, I think. A few thousand years ago our foreparents were so encouraged by their first attempts at controlling (domesticating) plants that we began to control animals, and then each other.

Now, I suspect that most of us in western, or aspiring-to-be-western cultures, are convinced of our ability to conquer nature. I am almost certain that most westerners and perhaps many others are utterly convinced that we already *have* conquered nature. Haven't we proven that we are the strongest?

It certainly seems that way. I can and do move plants and trees from here to there because of some idea in my head. I think I am making it more beautiful, or, when I grow edibles, I think it more useful (to me!). Nevertheless, my intentions are to change what is.

And isn't that what I preach not to do!

I don't believe in planned sustainable gardens. It goes against nature. And I cannot believe that we, even collectively, are smarter than the planetary ecology.

The world around me — *the world I do not control!* — scares me. It feels raw to me, artificial, plastic, too mechanical, too forced with straight lines, paved, painted, signed. Too loud, too fast, too unknowable. Enormously stressful because it has so many rules that must be enforced by people because the rules have nothing to do with anything natural, but are entirely man-made, often by people who have very different values or ideas than I have. I don't fit.

This man-made world feels more dangerous now because it is falling apart. Too many thoughts and ideas and organizations that cannot keep all the pieces together. There is nothing natural about what we call the economy, it is a web of illusionary concepts (“money”) that now is crashing all around us. Some think our grandchildren's wealth must fix the financial chaos we created today, but others vehemently disagree.

Personally, I am irritated, insulted, bothered, by the traffic on our little country road twice a day on weekdays. Our street has recently been paved and suddenly it has become a thoroughfare for commuters. I'm sure that was why it was paved, to relieve the one highway that serves a huge area that now is becoming a sort of country suburb

of a small town 15 miles from here. Our little road is too narrow so it has no shoulders. Most of the cars that come zooming by now go 35-40 miles per hour (56-65 km/hr) straddling the yellow line in the middle (official speed limit is 25 mph). One way in the morning, the other way in the afternoon. Speeding through a monument to Man's power to control Nature. On both sides of the newly paved road are large entirely bare acres with large houses, many of them empty. My personal observation is that so much clear cutting makes us get less rain. (Sun heats rocks, not shaded by plants, hot rocks make air go up, keeping clouds away.. etc.?) A few miles from here, in three directions, it rains noticeably more, and more often.

So, we are so smart that we can and do change Nature significantly. This is a different place than it was 5 years ago, different people live here, different plants grow here, different animals have their home here. And the consequences? Less rain perhaps, which means hotter, some plants will not grow here any more, native trees will not grow here any more. The change we have made is not what we had foreseen. Some people foresaw an area that is getting more expensive, taxes to be raised. Other people foresaw an improvement to the congestion of the only highway — but that is relative, our little road feeds into the same highway anyway, a little further on. For the first time in five years I now hear the feverish screaming of sirens.

What kind of "progress" is that? It looks to me as if all our meddling was a mistake.

And here I am doing the same thing, albeit with different intentions. I meddle.

One excuse I give myself is that I am aware of consequences. I know some plants will spread fast and attract others because they make shade. Others will grow very slowly, but when they do they get big! And I know that I am enriching the ecology. True in the sense that the lava here is new enough that it had mostly natural plants and trees that pioneered here, and they are not as abundant and colorful as the ones that grow here now. Making shade is important for plants that have green leaves and colorful flowers. In twenty years we have introduced more shade here, more plants, more color, and significantly more soil. Of course, also more pests. And, believe me, we have some pest plants that scratch and strangle. But they're part of the mix. All ecologies strive on rich mixes. That is scientific!

I really prefer ("need" I was going to write) to look at the endless range of colors of green, brown, red, purple, yellow, blue of living plants and trees than at a straight, square wall that is dead, regardless of how I decorate it. My environment is not, but it *looks* wild. Almost wild dogs, cats, chickens, ducks. Frogs, toads and lizards — they are everywhere and the fact that they love it here makes me feel that it is wild enough..

But, I admit, I am meddling. trying to create a small enclave that is more wild than much of the land around me..



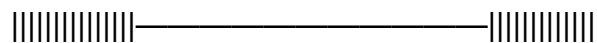
Early evening, when it is dark outside, sometimes I watch movies or pictures on the computer of Africa, Asia, some island in the South Pacific, the ice world. Brown and black faces are beautiful to me: clear skins, beautiful teeth, lots of hair, muscles from hard work. Isn't that what humans are supposed to be like? Not people (like me) sitting on a chair (not on the ground as most people did), working on a computer to tell stories to unknown, unseen, readers — without the little camp fire to sit around where we can look at each other, feel each other's presence, perhaps even a light touch.

I know in my soul that is the way it is supposed to be. My life is a compromise. Don Quixote, fighting windmills to make my little world the way I wish it were but isn't. My way of protesting, rebelling against a man-made world that I find it increasingly hard to live in. My counter force to the overwhelming force of our so-called civilization.

Now my species may be going to cover the planet with windmills, and silicone panels that will make boundless electricity for us to drive all our devices, without having to go far away to steal or buy oil which we now burn to get the energy to make electricity, etc.

Is covering the planet with a layer of concrete, controlling water and air, building more cities, flying more airplanes, killing more cultures, better if you do it without burning coal or oil? Or if you get energy from an atomic furnace that makes waste products that remain radioactive for 50,000 years?

I don't see it.



In my thinking — the large thinking I do as an Aquarius — we, homo sapiens, must **learn to do without**. I should cook with wood, there are enough fallen branches around for a daily little cooking fire. I should eat what I can grow. I could, but it would be more work. I, alone, should not occupy a 400 square feet house (37 sq. meters), with toilet and kitchen inside. I did not want it this way, but the “code” prescribes it, and here: no code, no power. And for living off the grid you have to have lots of money up front.

I should be living in a small village with a few dozen people of all ages. These people might even listen to my stories and get some benefit from them. We wouldn't need cars, or go places far away. We are free to walk. Young people often go on a walkabout, as they say in Australia. Sometimes they come back, sometimes they don't. Our need for food and shelter would be minimal, in any case sustainable. Our other needs, love, sex, beauty, song, taste, touch, are met more intensely than in any western world. We would laugh and sing little songs, and deeply respect the other beings who live around us: our lives are interdependent. True, we might not live as long but we would waste no days in hospitals or other institutions, having to go through hour long waits and inspections before boarding a plane. We would never have to stand in line for anything. We would not worry about money — there isn't any. Our worries would be about each other — and

“other” would include the forest or the ice fields around us, and the plants and animals we need for food, companionship and beauty. Think of the years and years we have spent learning things that we never had to use. I got ulcers from having to memorize “facts” in order to pass exams. Time I should have been somewhere in the wild, hunting, or digging planting holes. Making love with willing girls in our and a neighboring village. You think about these things when you get old.

We, modern Man, have become restless. We’ve been told life should be striving to have always more. More money, more power, more house, more cars. Some of us have become used to spending summers in a warmer climate. We expect strawberries to be available in winter. We prefer coffee from Columbia and salmon from the Atlantic. We eat and consume magnitudes more than we need! We plunder more land and people than is reasonable.

But being used to all this means that we think it normal, the way it should be.

From whatever angle I approach this, I always come to the same feeling: our way is wrong. The key word is **unsustainable**. How can there be always more in a closed system like the earth’s. It can only mean that I take it from someone who then has less. We are creating the counter forces to all our force. The more force we apply, the more counter force will come back at us from the planet, from people, from our neighbors, and ultimately from our own soul.



Yes, maybe I am wrong. Perhaps with enough power (and will power) and smarts we can conquer this planet and make ten billion people live as middle class Americans dream they could live.

All I can say is, I don’t think so. I cannot imagine how we could survive if we divorced ourselves from the realities of this planet any more than we do now.

Have a good night.

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*“The only problem facing you in life is your belief in separation from the Source. Solve that one, and all the others will vanish.”*

*Nana Veary, Hawaiian elder*