

A Celebration of Life . . .

by Rene Dubos

Rene Dubos, a Pulitzer Prize winning biologist, died February 20, 1982. This is his last written work.

As I lie here in a hospital bed in my eighty-first year, I am more convinced than ever that life can be celebrated and enjoyed under the most trying and humble of circumstances.

The warmth of parents hugging their children, the fathomless joy of smiling faces, the sensate pleasures of a stroll down a country lane or through the bustling diversity of a city street have not been increased by education or civilization. I always have in mind the expression of bliss in the eyes of a young Australian aboriginal girl as she anticipated eating a fat, delectable larva she had just extracted from under the bark of a tree. And I have never forgotten my own walk in Ile-de-France with my mother when I was seven years old. For months I had been confined to my room, recovering slowly from rheumatic fever. In that short walk to buy milk I became intensely aware of the springtime chattering of the birds, the perfume of the flowering trees, the soothing warmth of the rays of sun, and the happy smiles of the neighbors we met. From then until now I have known that simply being alive is the greatest blessing we can enjoy.

But the disarray and disenchantment so common in the technological societies of our times reveal the extent to

which many of us fail to take advantage of this innate ability to appreciate the simple wonders of life. Abundance of goods, physical comfort, and control of disease are clearly not sufficient to bring about individual happiness and harmonious social relationships.

Everywhere in the countries shaped by Western civilization, the amenities of existence are threatened by environmental degradation and existential nausea. The mounting roster of material and psychological problems creates the impression that humankind has lost control of its affairs. The deteriorating conditions in our cities, our adversarial relationship with nature, the futile occupations that waste our days, are--unnecessarily and unconsciously--determined more by technological imperatives than by our choice of desirable human goals.

In human affairs, the willed future always prevails over the logical future.

To rediscover our innate celebration of life, the first obstacle to be overcome is the widespread belief that things are now going from bad to worse and that little can be done to reverse the trend. Countless expressions that reinforce this defeatist mood can be found in the writings of economists, sociologists, and environmentalists.

Certainly great tragedies do exist in the world today. Paradoxically, however, much contemporary gloom

comes not from actual tragic situations but from the prospect of social and technological difficulties that have not yet occurred and may never materialize. We are collectively worried because we accept the highly inaccurate predictions that, if demographic and technological growth continues at the present rate, the earth will soon be overpopulated and its resources depleted; food shortages will be catastrophic; pollution will alter the climate, poison the environment, rot our lungs, and dim our vision. I believe, as do many others, that industrial civilization will eventually collapse if we do not change our ways--but what a big if this is.

Human beings inevitably alter the course of events and make mockery of any attempt to predict the future from an extrapolation of existing trends. In human affairs, the logical future, determined by past and present conditions, is less important than the willed future, which is largely brought about by deliberate choices--made by the human free will. Our societies have a good chance of remaining prosperous because they are learning to anticipate, long in advance, the shortages and dangers they might experience in the future if they do not take technologically sound preventive measures.

A key to overcoming the passivity born of pessimism is to remember that the really important problems of our times are not technical. They originate in our thoughts, our uncertainties, or our poor judgment concerning parascientific values. Unclear values allow us to accept the possibility of nuclear war for reasons of national prestige when every

here, in Europe, and in Japan are reminders that we can choose the world we live in by changing even these enormous threats to our existence...one step at a time.

How? By thinking globally, but acting locally. This is the motto of the Center for Human Environments at Wave Hill in Riverdale, New York, which bears my name.

We have begun documenting stories of how single individuals have started movements that successfully changed the social and biological envi-

ronments around them. Lakes, rivers, mine-adjacent land once given up for "dead" have been rejuvenated, as have the communities that flank them.

The Industrial Revolution placed a premium on the kind of intelligence, knowledge, and skills best suited to the invention of manufactured articles, as well as to their production and distribution on a large scale. In contrast, a really humanistic society will have to emphasize skills that facilitate better human relationships and a more creative interplay between nature, technology, and human kind. Such a society would prize *joie de vivre* and happiness over the achievements of power and the acquisition of wealth.

Happiness is contagious. For this reason its expression is a social service and almost a duty. The Buddhists have a saying about this commendable virtue: "Only happy people can make a happy world." Since optimism and cheerful spirits are indispensable to the mental health of technological societies, the most valuable people may turn

out to be not those with the greatest ability to produce material goods but those who, through empathy and happiness, have the gift of spreading a spirit of good will.

We are still on the way, renewing and enriching ourselves by moving on to new places and experiences. Whenever human beings are involved, social adaptations make it certain that trend is not destiny.

Life starts anew, for all of us, with each sunrise.

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An Editorial Note:

When I first read this essay, shortly after the death of Rene Dubos, I didn't immediately see how it applied to my passion of helping manufacturing companies become more competitive.

The more I read it, however, the more clearly I could see that it's meaning applied as well to manufacturing as it does to our ecology, our environment, or our society.

While some preach doom and gloom relative to the future of manufacturing in America, changing that "logical future" is a decision of our human free will. It starts with a single step.

Good luck and I hope this essay means as much to you as it does to me.

*Good reading,
Bob Stahl*

Change happens one step at a time, by thinking globally, but acting locally.

sensible person knows that the inevitable result of nuclear warfare would not only be immense suffering for humans and immeasurable damage to every living and inanimate thing on earth, but also the virtual collapse of Western Civilization.

Poor value judgment also leads us to ignore an already existing tragedy, the greatest pollutant of our peacetime world--youth unemployment. Because they are not given the opportunity to function in normal society by being meaningfully employed, young people are organizing themselves into social groups of their own. Their struggle for their inalienable rights will inevitably lead to disastrous social conflict.

Yet there is no reason to wallow in despair. The success of several public and privately financed youth conservation programs leaves no doubt that even delinquent youngsters can be reintegrated into normal society by being given the opportunity to do meaningful work. So too the fledgling peace movements