



Living Sustainably

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We are already stressing the resources we need for a livable life. It is expected that by 2050 there will be between 9.5 and 10 billion people living on this planet and this will add to the stress. Can we learn to live in a comfortable way without depriving future generations of needed resources and preserving for them the beauty and diversity of life on this Earth? In other words, can we learn to “live sustainably”? The majority of us mostly just “talk the talk”, but I put the following questions to two individuals who actually “walk the walk” — Peter Schwartz, Cal Poly Physics Professor, and my son, Steve Weymann. A condensed version of this essay will appear in the October 10, 2014, edition of the Atascadero News. Readers should also view Pete’s wonderful short video about his home at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKe_u5o4GMs

What does “sustainability” mean to you?

Peter: On a procedural level, it means considering the wider ramifications of my choices - activities I choose to do, what I buy, where I go and how I get there, what I say, how I treat my neighbors, how I treat my students. I don’t mean to imply I make the “right” choices by these metrics, but my intention is to consider them and hold myself accountable for these decisions. Part of sustainability to me is evaluating in retrospect my choices, accomplishments, and mistakes and what I hope to learn from them.

Steve: A “sustainable practice” can be continued indefinitely without draining the resources it relies on. In this context, sustainable living refers to making choices that minimize impact on the ecosystem. Conceptually, it is similar to living within a budget, where you consider the use of environmental resources as well as financial resources.

What lay behind the decision you made to really walk the walk rather than just talk the talk?

Peter: It’s so much fun. It brings value to my life. I enjoy the problem solving on a day-to-day basis. I like how I can engage my family, friends, and students in the process.

Steve: It has been and continues to be a gradual process. Coming from Tucson, my awareness of finite resources started with water. As an engineer, I also am interested in good design - and designs that don't waste resources are better designs. In the early 1990's, I became increasingly aware of the application of good design practices to housing and daily life, noticing both good and bad examples. My interest grew as I learned more, and as well, my values shifted towards better stewardship of the earth. It became increasingly important to live consistent with my values.

c) What specific actions have you taken to make “living sustainability” a way of life rather than just a slogan?

Peter: I think that I “walked through the door” of this decision when I bought a house in 2003 and realized, “Oh my gosh, now I have the opportunity to actually make good on all I’ve been spouting my whole life about how people actually *should* live.” I felt unease in living in conflict with my values, and somehow realized I really didn’t have a choice in the matter. Again, the difference isn’t that I do things “right” now. It’s more about problem solving -- considering the wider impacts such as CO2 and other pollution emissions, equity, wise use of resources such as water, natural gas, and other minerals; and holding myself accountable for all the stuff I throw away.

Steve: It started with the common practice of better fuel economy in our car. My wife Laurie and I began using less electricity where possible. When we decided to leave San Jose, we deliberately chose small rental housing to better understand how much house we really needed. When we decided to build, we built smaller, and specifically targeted passive solar design as we selected property and worked with architects. Active solar (using photovoltaic to generate electricity) was built into the home and incorporated into the mortgage. We commute to work in one car, and switched to an electric vehicle for our daily commute 3 years ago. We’re increasingly eating more locally, as we enjoy more from maturing fruit trees and garden, buy from local markets and producers where possible, and pay attention to where food and products come from.

d) Have you found that you can “live sustainably” without sacrificing a satisfying and pleasant lifestyle and without it causing economic hardship?

Peter: It’s hard to say if we “live sustainably”, but rather that we have this priority. Anyway, you must be kidding. The choice to explore living outside of the present industrial consumer paradigm has created great amounts of financial and personal wealth for us. Making a choice to reduce one’s impact on the planet is usually accompanied by reduction in costs. Also staying home and living smaller brings us closer as a family. Engaging in crazy projects like our composting toilet, grey water system, and fruit trees brings the kids into our activities and brings up important questions and learning opportunities.

For example, why go out when we can cook beans, grains and farmer’s market veggies, splitting a beer while the kids raise hell nearby (sometimes we kick them outside)? It takes the same amount of time, costs very little, and we talk. There’s a little more organizing necessary when we take off on our bikes to go somewhere, but its more fun than being in a car. While showering together outside among the fruit trees in solar heated water we don’t miss the indoor shower. No, the words “sacrifice” and “hardship” don’t come to mind when I think about our choices, but rather “celebration” and “abundance”. In the end, having no fun just isn’t sustainable.

Steve: Yes, no doubt about it. Our home is by far the most comfortable place I’ve lived in. When I travel and have to use forced air heating and cooling, it is so nice to come

back to our house where we don't need that. Living sustainably does involve making different choices - building smaller, being conscious of whether we will need to drive beyond the electric car range, and so on. But these just require thinking ahead, not economic hardship. We are not wealthy, and it is not necessary to be wealthy to make better choices about resource usage.

e) If others want to seriously explore a sustainable lifestyle, what resources are available to them?

Peter: I think that sustainability is a conversation. It begins when a person questions the alternatives to what seems as required practice. So you hear yourself saying, "I have to do this *because...*" or "I can't do that *because...*" and you replace it with, "in order to do this, what would need to change?" and sincerely inquire into alternatives. Then try something and see how it feels and reevaluate. I mean, when the sun doesn't shine for two days in a row, we take a quick shower indoors with natural gas heated water. There are alternatives, sure, but for now, this is what we do.

As for resources, we couldn't be living at a more interesting time! The Internet is aswim with stories of people experimenting with different ideas. The Internet also can bring you into contact with local groups doing interesting things. Did you notice your neighbors ripping out their lawns to replace them with desert scapes or food-bearing plants? Stop to talk to them! If you want to make changes to your lifestyle with a priority of sustainability, it will take you in a direction that will bring you into contact with those who will teach you and learn from you. I invite you to begin this conversation. It's so much fun.

Steve: Many Internet resources exist for evaluating energy efficiency in your home and commute, for alternative transportation, for gardening and local food sources. Organizations such as Transition Town chapters typically are umbrellas with a lot of connections to deeper resources. I've enjoyed courses in permaculture; depending on who teaches this, the focus can be on designing with appropriate technology and wise use of materials. SLO Green Build is a resource for housing. Green Goods has a lot of interesting materials and good people that can help whether or not you are building or remodeling. There are many solar energy suppliers and installers out there. The Master Gardeners of San Luis Obispo have good courses on water topics, such as harvesting and retaining water on your property.