

A New Path...

the inner search for
Sustainability

Amelia Lake digs deep to discover a world of compassion and love at the root of true sustainability.

light bulb moment

Somewhere along the line, slowly perhaps, I realised that I had my focus wrong. I had a light bulb moment after giving a presentation whilst studying to be a teacher. I was to give a talk to my fellow trainee teachers on Steiner education, an alternative system which, as do many, I strongly feel is preferable to mainstream education. Having spent many hours with these people, plugging the possibility of taking an alternative view on education unsuccessfully, I knew my talk would fall on deaf ears. I was tired and frustrated at what seemed to be closed mindedness and I went into the talk with a negative attitude. I gave the talk with minimal effort and enthusiasm, without investing any of my emotions in it for fear of, yet again, being knocked down. My presentation raised as much enthusiasm for the subject as I had shown for it. I had closed my heart before I even began speaking and lost the opportunity to open minds.

Not long after it dawned on me that I could cycle to work every day, buy organic and fair-trade, plant my little patch of paradise, but if I live my life with a closed heart all those positive actions are in the shadow. I had been treating sustainability as an entirely technical and practical issue. Indeed many physical systems will need to change if we are to limit the environmental and social damage we cause, including the monetary system and the energy system. However, it is clear that if we are to solve these most challenging issues we need to go beyond technology and policy and begin to place these issues firmly within the realm of our hearts.

nurturing ourselves

Now this realisation wasn't well received by me to begin with. It is much more palatable to believe that with a few more allotments and wind turbines, a better government, perhaps we will be

neatly on the path to sustainability. However in reality, although those are vital, it is our intent which is most important. I had spent the best part of my life so far campaigning, growing, saving energy; I hadn't once thought to nurture my emotional, personal or spiritual credentials. I hadn't acknowledged the emotional and spiritual core of sustainability, or myself.

I feel that I had been searching for a quick fix when in reality if we are going to turn the tide on our social and environmental crises, we need to look deep within ourselves and not just to the 'eco-living' aisle in the supermarket. Changes need to come from the heart not the head. We need to challenge who we are as a society and explore alternative pathways if necessary. Eminent scientists in the Club of Rome who famously wrote *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, updated 30 years on with the conclusion that more than anything else, love is required to steer this ship from disaster. When I started digging I found a whole host of voices calling for us to take a more value driven, spiritual, slow approach to sustainability including the WWF and Buddhist groups.

changing our minds

Exploring the spiritual and emotional aspects of sustainability has thrown up some unexpected and much welcomed side effects. The most significant of these is happiness. I met Paul Murray, expert in Education for Sustainable Development, who stated that adjusting our values and living a sustainable life might take a lifetime to achieve. Similarly through meditation classes I found that Buddhism teaches that because happiness can only be found in our minds it may take a lifetime to achieve. This can seem overwhelming at first but it soon fades and becomes empowering, the pressure is off. Working towards sustainability in a slow but grounded and focused way is far more likely to be successful than

haphazardly implementing techno-fixes.

Focusing on Buddhist teachings of compassion and loving-kindness has been a greater challenge even than trying to grow trees in salty winds. Retraining the mind away from seeking happiness in external things and towards one which seeks to show compassion to all people (yes including bankers and professional footballers!) is a long and hard task. However I have found that through trying to approach each day with an open heart instead of frustration has had a huge impact on my ability to effect change. It seems obvious to me now that we cannot expect to live in a world of social and environmental justice if we cannot show small and simple acts of compassion.

on the path

Today my work towards sustainability is as much focused towards compassion and love as it is on making physical changes to my land. I am still taking on big practical challenges like managing the land without any fossil fuel input, but meditation has taken me so much further along the path to sustainability than any physical action. I thought that becoming the guardian of four acres was the largest commitment and challenge I'd face. Having taken the first few steps on the path of inner sustainability I realise that in fact living a life of love and compassion is far more challenging, but fortunately even more rewarding than any prize crop of vegetables! By focusing on my inner actions as well as my outer ones I have more clarity on decision making and all my practical efforts are so much more meaningful now that they are initiated by my heart.

We don't know what a sustainable society will look like, but as Einstein said: "We cannot solve a problem with the same thinking which caused it." Whereas once I found myself searching for sustainability in a green shopping catalogue or the bottom of my compost bin, I now understand these are simply the tools to

What were you doing in August 2009? I was 22 and had just made the biggest commitment of my life. No not marriage or a mortgage, bigger than that. I had become a landowner. It was now my responsibility to care for a small patch of land and all the living things in it. Standing on this patch for the first time was the pinnacle of a lifetime striving towards sustainability. Writing environmental magazines at primary school, out campaigning with Greenpeace at secondary school and as an adult cycling to work, sourcing a renewable energy supplier, buying organic and fair-trade products and supporting international charities. Like many readers my whole life had long revolved around negating the negative environmental and social impact my being on Earth had. I was frustrated with the slow pace of change in society and felt like something more was required. By taking this patch of poor agricultural land and creating a highly productive and biodiverse space, which acted as a flagship for sustainable land management, I would leave something positive which might help us steer this ship on course.

Many of you will be familiar with the sorts of things I have put in place to make my vision a reality. From natural bee-keeping, green manure, tree planting, habitat conservation, water collection, coppicing etc. And oh it can be hard work, planting trees in the cold December wind and rain. Giving up those summer days sunbathing to water and weed is also far from idyllic. But I was convinced that if we all made these changes to our lives we would be on the right path. I doggedly continued to fight through extreme weather, naysayers, pests and disease to create this example of sustainable living I felt was needed.

