

On Turning the World the Right Way Up.

About twenty years ago, I was out of a job, we were out of money and - worse, with three dependent kids, - we were out of home. So I responded positively to a telegram (yes!) sent to me at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, England, where Tineke, Nicola and I were staying, inviting me to a job interview at the Gloucester Hotel in London. No other address given. The phone book showed four so-named hotels in London; luckily the first one I phoned had a Mr Badenhorst staying that week. Mmmm... Badenhorst.... Ah, that could be the Bophuthatswana Agricultural Development Corporation. Well, why not?

Sitting on one of the twin beds in his room, after apologising for the rather unsmart venue, he cut to the quick and opened with: "Well, Mr Gilbert [all Afrikaners called me that], what makes you tick?" Good question. What makes me tick? I cannot remember what I said, but let it be my starting point today.

Two things make me tick: a quest for Truth, and a preference for Harmony over Confrontation. Let's start with Truth. What is Truth? I think George Fox once said that Truth is not the starting point; you must first discern it. And that means listening to people. In the old days, Truth was often obscured by superstition, bad teaching and, sometimes, religion. Nowadays, there is still superstition (its modern equivalent might be: "They said it on tv ..."), bad teaching and sometimes religion, but also advertising and more often than not, tendentious tv and newspapers and politicians. People in Europe and America had witches in the eighteenth century, socialists in the nineteenth, communists in the twentieth and now terrorists in the twenty-first century whose visions of truth were or are so unwelcome that they were or are ejected from society. People are now *employed* to obscure the truth, to make us support their political party or buy their products.

So we listen and, as Quakers do, look for that of God (or, if we are not believers, let's say we look for that of Good) in the person with whom we are talking. Consider that they may be right - so hold up what they are saying to the Light. And we read and "listen" to what the writer is saying when reading a book. As Quakers, we usually read widely from the devotional writings of the world religions, especially the Bible, but we remember Fox's question about the Priest saying this, the Bible saying that, "...*but what do you say?*" We can even - and should - hold the Bible up to the Light, for, as Professor Dawkins in his book "The God Delusion" correctly reminds us, it has a lot of quite strange and even "irreligious" stuff in it. Some of us also have rôle models or gurus, or, when young, buddies, who give us direction at certain points in our lives and with whom we can check out some aspect of Truth that we are trying to discern. Others of us construct a model of the world (or paradigm) and then try to attune our conduct and beliefs to it - or *harmonise them* with it. This is especially so in this ecologically conscious age we now live in.

That brings me to Harmony. Working *with* people, listening to them, letting them challenge you and your own paradigms and prejudices so that you can align yourself better to understand and survive this funny old world. But in so exposing your own precious beliefs and prejudices, you are vulnerable and inevitably will sometimes disagree. Do you then have an argument, or what Douglas Steere, an American Quaker of the last century, called a Creative Encounter? Either way, remember Jesus's advice: don't let the sun set on your anger if that is the way your encounter goes.

That leads us back to Truth again. Are there any absolutes here? Are there times when we should be economical with it, perhaps to spare someone's feelings? Is Truth just - not telling lies, even if we mislead someone by not telling the whole story? Like advertisements. Being economical with Truth can extend to filling an income tax return or making a statement to the police about a Road Traffic Accident where your negligent action may have been a contributory cause. It is getting near the bone here. So do we find that we sometimes choose comfort? Jesus came not to comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable. Quakers, on the whole, are comfortable. I am. Very. We actually tend to become rich as well with all our Truth and Simplicity in our business lives. But there are exceptions among us, and some are here at Yearly Meeting. Certainly, early Friends were pretty uncomfortable. George Fox had a terrible time as he cut through the hypocrisy of the established church with its paid but usually bigoted priests with his idea that people should be under God rather than under the priests. Friends in Latin America, Madagascar, East Africa and, now, Zimbabwe similarly are strangers to the sort of comfort many of us take for granted. I wonder if Quakers reflect the current ugly division in the population of the world as a whole: the haves - mainly of European ancestry - and the have-nots - the rest. These extremes of wealth do not make for harmony. Can we, should we, be doing something about it? Perhaps the have-nots don't want all this stuff we clutter up our lives with, or perhaps their governments deny it to them. If we don't have something that makes us comfortable like a car or a television or a pension (especially if we don't know much about it), does it bother us? Probably not if no one else has them either. It was a bit this way in immediate post-war Britain. I remember being seriously hungry, hanging around the school kitchen in the hope of an extra piece of bread - food was tightly rationed. Few had cars. Electricity was often cut off due to coal shortage and of course there was no television, only the wireless. But when your neighbour gets a car or you see a TV aerial go up on his roof, there is envy. You aspire to join them, or else suspect them of cheating the system somehow. But does it matter? Jesus acquiesced in the social status quo of his time, with its rich and poor, beggars and nobles, slaves and land-owners. He went further and on one occasion said, "Take even what he has and give to the one who already has". Well, we are not all born with equal abilities and opportunities. Our genes and the relative wealth (or otherwise) of our parents confirm that. So in our - or at least my - search for harmony, do we or can I feel comfortable with these extremes of material well-being in the world today? Are we comfortable in the presence of extreme poverty?

At this point, I encounter pressure to conform. Don't rock the boat. There are accepted norms of behaviour and there is peer group pressure and, most insidious of all, fashion. Fox knew about all this and denounced it alienating some of his friends and

frequently ending up in prison. John Woolman turned up at London Yearly Meeting wearing a suit made of undyed cloth (dye was a product of slave labour) - shock horror. Richard Gush, here in the Eastern Cape, stayed, unarmed, on his farm when his settler neighbours fled to enjoy the protection of the military in town. So there is this *conformist* pressure all around us. And this has led to the evolution of ideologies, of which a current example is the belief in the power of the global market. But an ideology is a poor taskmaster. Let's look at some of them.

Capitalism and Socialism, the old political -isms of the last century. These have been replaced by the neo-liberal and the neocon world views which reflect their supporters' respective paradigms of where we should all be going (or *be taken?*) Then we have some personality ideologies like Stalinism, Maoism and Thatcherism. As with allegiance to a political party, adoption of these usually leads to atrophy of a person's ability to think for themselves. They reflect the innate mental laziness of many of us, but their widespread adoption can cause serious political change, as a Christmas card from a Zimbabwean friend said once: "Let's all pull together, even if it is backwards." But can there be ideologies in marriage, child care, agriculture? Well, yes. Organic Farming is an ideology and that, as far as I think sometimes, is as far as it goes. "There won't be enough manure to go round" a school friend of mine once said when this particular debate started at my school in 1956. Now, with a world population of over 6 billion and projected to rise to 9 billion, the organic farming ideology is nice, but it may not feed everyone in our lifetime. Yes, we should do organic farming, but we must also recognise the value of conventional, commercial farming which puts food in the shops. So no room for ideology there. Do we have vegetarian ideologies? I must tread carefully here... But having worked most of my life in the semi-arid parts of Africa, I have found that livestock production (and consumption) is the only sustainable farming system that can work there - growing food crops is ecologically perilous, and certainly uneconomic. Now for ideology and religion. This is even more dangerous ground. Ideology is an emotive word, implying that it is a paradigm to which we allow ourselves to become enslaved. A mental short-cut. A sign of mental laziness. I detect strong signs of mental laziness in myself, and being asked to give this talk has jolted me out of this - for a time, anyway!

For starters, Creationism makes an easy creed - it's all there written in the Book. Darwinian Evolution is mentally challenging, so don't try to understand it. Ideology doesn't admit doubt. If we doubted it, we would have to think. unlike in the military where the first, unwritten, command used to be: DON'T THINK. In the light of today's asymmetric conflicts, that seems thankfully to be changing. So does your religion admit DOUBTS? Test it. Ask yourself: when Jesus asked on the cross why his God had forsaken him, did he suddenly become like you and me and lose his nerve? Or was it misreported or mistranslated and he really was all-powerful? Similarly, what really happened the previous night in the garden of Gethsemane? Was Jesus doubting that he could go through with it all? These two parts of the gospel narrative open up for me a side of Jesus which makes me respect him more, as my life model. He had it tough, like we sometimes have it tough, and he had doubts - notwithstanding his being the Son of God etc - like we have doubts. I wonder if the Koran has similar

thought-provoking passages. The religious ideologue may say: “This isn’t what Jesus really said. Of course he couldn’t doubt the existence of God and the certainty - as a member of a race so strong on prophecy - of what he had to do. He was, as his father is, all-knowing and all-powerful.” Open and shut case. But read those two short passages to yourself in Meeting, perhaps, and let the Spirit speak to you. To me, they add immeasurably to the stature of Jesus and his teaching, showing him less than the Superman of children’s stories and more of an ordinary chap, like you and me. So was he the Son of God? The answer to that is the stuff of ideology and ideology, as I’ve said, is a poor task-master. And while we are here, there are some other odd things Jesus is reported as saying, like: he who has least, will have even what he has taken away from him, and the parable of the astute steward which suggests him condoning something less than Quaker integrity in business.

There are other ideologies that we have allowed ourselves to become enslaved to. I have mentioned fashion and its cousin, peer-group pressure. More insidious, there is modern economic theory: we worship the Market . The supreme example of the application of Market Forces is the history of the Congo - from King Leopold’s theft of the entire country for his personal gain a hundred years ago to the current rape of its natural resources to supply us with “affordable” timber and minerals.

But this ideology also applies much nearer home: buying a litre of milk in a Spar shop. Supermarkets are driven by one thing - increasing their market share. So their prices must be competitive, i.e., lower. So they have to pay less to their suppliers (oh, and of course be more efficient etc). So the suppliers, let’s call them farmers because they are people like you and me and not just numbers, have to produce down to a price. How can they do that? Through economies of scale, mostly, now. Big farms, big machinery, big debts, and ignoring the future health of the land (and us, the consumers?) as well - and more especially - the health and well-being of their livestock. Not every farmer is prepared to do this. Some try and fail, some commit suicide, especially in India, and even in Britain, and some struggle on and perhaps find a niche market for quality products. And we let this happen because we see no alternative and we don’t have time to shop around and be more discerning. But this time, so saved by convenience shopping - what do we do with it?

So we come to time management. And how we relate to each other in the till queue, chance encounters in the street or conversation in the pub. Do we “save time” at the expense of our inter-personal relationships? Are we *present* when talking with someone? I think this is something better done in Africa, and has something to do with the concept of *Ubuntu*. But what do we say on the shop floor, in the office, when the best suits come round with their clip-boards, stop watches and conventional economics (for come they will)? There *are* alternatives. The early business Quakers of England succeeded in banking and chocolate making because they saw their workers as people, rather than HR, as staff are now so called. Go back a bit further and read John Woolman’s journal and learn how his business ethics led him to start his personal campaign against slavery. I won’t say that I am always looking for that of God in my employees, but I have at least tried to do two things in my inter-personal relationships

besides the Quaker thing, and that is to *listen to people* and the other is *never to get someone to do a piece of work that you wouldn't be prepared to do yourself*.

Listening. Having only ever been an employer in deep rural Africa, I have always had a language problem, and, like many of us British, I am lazy with language. So listening has been especially important. By **listening** to a person, you give him or her value, or respect. When our late daughter Hanneke's farm manager, Alex, spoke at her funeral, he said: "Hanneke, you have given us back our self-respect." I try to listen to people to the extent that, if I am interrupted, I will stop in mid-sentence to hear what my interlocutor is saying. At least, I try to. Meanwhile, the best suit with the clipboard is only observing, not listening, or asking why a worker does what they are observing in a particular way. If they did, they might learn something and - shock-horror - experience a paradigm-shift! Don't rock the boat. I exaggerate, as usual. When I listen to a worker speak, I realise that he or she is actually *engaging* in the task at hand. Best of all is when he or she starts asking questions. I used to tell my new trainees when they started at the Serowe Farmers' Brigade that we only had a few rules, but that one of them was that they should ask a question every day. "If you don't ask any questions, you are either telling me that you know it all, or that you are really asleep even if your eyes are open." Years later, my right-hand man, Mbuzeli who helped on my hundred-square-metre farm in the Eastern Cape, began to ask me questions and even make suggestions. Those seeds that I had planted in his mind and which were then germinating gave me more satisfaction than all the production data we generated. Sadly, he died in 2005, a few weeks after our daughter died. 2005 was not a good year.

The other thing I have tried to do is **never to give a worker a job to do that you haven't first done or wouldn't do yourself**. Not an absolute rule: I never became qualified as an artificial inseminator and for a long time I avoided intimate contact with computers, so perhaps I refer more to unskilled or even menial tasks. So this business of time management is even more important than the best suits with their clipboards believe. When we glibly say we haven't the time for something, are we fibbing? Do we mean we just don't want to do whatever it is? Let your "yes" be yes, and your "no" no. Don't tell fibs. Remember, we are all on Death Row. My heart attack in March last year reminded me of Gerald Priestman's remark when he suffered a severe stroke: "The Grim Reaper took a swipe at me - AND MISSED!" It was a near miss in my case I think, but it has prompted me to go more for the creative encounter in this talk and easier on the religious clichés and pious platitudes.

"Let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" no brings me to that very special part of the Bible known as the Sermon on the Mount. Some scholars suggest that Matthew, who has written by far the fullest version, had just cobbled together various teachings of Jesus during his ministry to make a whole stand-alone discourse. No matter. What hits me every time I read it is how central it is to the Gospel as a whole. Our friend Guy Clutton-Brock used to say that, if we took it a bit more seriously, we wouldn't need to wait for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven - it would be here already. So why do the mainstream churches and their Bible Study groups seem to avoid it, for so it seems to me?

At this point, I am reminded of an Entrance Scholarship exam paper for my old school, the Quaker Leighton Park School in England. The candidate was asked to write an essay on this subject: "Near Leighton Park, there is a pub called 'The World Turned Upside-down'. Suggest how it came to be so named." Luckily, I wasn't faced with that one as, at age 13, my mind didn't easily roam the remoter shores of my imagination. But now? What springs straight into my mind is Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. It really turns the conventional wisdom of our funny old world on its head. Now I am not a Bible scholar, as you may have noticed, and I'm not going to add yet one more take on this subject. But what I want to say is this: things are not going to get better in this funny old world - or the Kingdom of Heaven will not come to it - unless we turn it upside down. For starters, just consider the fashion industry, the sweat shops of Asia that make all these fashionable wear-today throw-away-tomorrow clothes. Well, I suppose the lilies of the field flower today and wither tomorrow, but they don't have their sweat shops and there is no embarrassment if the flowers don't always come out just right. But, seriously, look at the state that South Africa is in. Crime and Security. Even I have been mugged - walking round the corner to a shop in Jo'burg. I could afford a taxi, and, looking back on it, my mistake was not to *share*. Maybe this is what we have to do more of in South Africa so let's think about this for a moment. I recall my wonderful colleague Jim Bond with whom I worked for two and a half years in Sudan whose motto in life was: "Spread a little happiness." Just like Tineke has been doing all the time we have been in Queenstown with some small ragged boys who hang out at Kwikspar. It is missing the point saying it is no good giving anything to such kids - they'll only spend it on glue. Jesus never helped anyone conditionally. What would he be saying to us in our pubs or in our homes when this discussion comes up? Well, he wouldn't be there would he? He'd be out buying those kids some bunny-chow.

And there we have it: the rich in South Africa have painted themselves into a corner, putting up ever stronger walls to protect their wealth rather than learning how to share it, to spread Jim Bond's little bit of happiness with it.

How has this acute polarisation of wealth come about? In three ways:

- through inherited wealth,
- the family environment that we grew up in
- our education.

Inherited wealth. Government could abolish that route of recruitment to the ranks of the rich very easily by lowering the threshold and tightening the rules of Inheritance Tax and then using the revenue so raised to spread some more happiness more widely.

Our home environment. This is where we grow up and acquire some of our more enduring values. We pass on to our children our ideas of how to regard wealth: its acquisition, its use and its management, when and if acquired; whether our strategy is to store up wealth on earth where moth and rust corrupt it, or whether to use it to spread happiness and forgo some of the add-ons that seem to be obligatory now, but which our grandparents did without.

The **school**. This is the toughest one, but one where the rewards can be the greatest. Spreading a little happiness through the Department of Education is not enough: what counts is the teachers' motivation, day in, day out. Throwing money at schools, what I call the face-brick approach, won't work unless there is a real paradigm shift in the teachers. Can you all, just for a moment, reflect on what was best about your own schooling, what it was about your schools that really gave you a leg up in the world, so that you can find yourself here taking an active part in this rather intellectual activity known as Yearly Meeting, instead of on the beach or slumped over a beer in a tavern. I think my school taught me to think. No surprise - it was a good Quaker school, and a very expensive one. Well, I am inclined to mental laziness so I can't say I have retained as much of a cutting edge as I should have done, but it did propel me through Cambridge and could have landed me some quite well paid work. That it didn't was my choice, I suppose. Tineke and I started spreading a little happiness 45 years ago in what was then the world's poorest country, the Bechuanaland Protectorate.

So, if this is a model to follow, how do we teach kids to think? The Ministry of Education can re-write the curriculum - again. We can change the exam system - this has potential, coming shortly. We can give the class-rooms a lick of paint or tarmac the staff car park, but none of this will alter what happens between teachers and taught. Our two older kids attended Maruapula School in Gaborone, run by Deane and Dot Yates. Now *there* was a couple with a paradigm that delivered the goods. Classes were small, perhaps 25 or so, and consequently teachers could give kids some individual attention.

Well, we are all very different so this is important, and this could be the first target for any money we plan to throw at schools. But there must still be motivation: teachers must teach the kids in the condition in which they find them, and not see them as receptacles that have to be filled with knowledge to regurgitate at exam time. Which brings me to exams. We live in an age when everything has to be *measured*. We are learning ever more suffixes (giga-, pica-, tera-, nano etc) to describe ever greater or smaller quantities of stuff, and our annual job appraisals increasingly involve the bosses not just ticking (or otherwise) boxes but actually putting scores in them which can then be crunched and used to determine whether you get a pay rise, and if so, how big. So back to measurement and where it first hits our kids and can hurt them - at exams. Pass or fail. Fine if you pass, tough if you fail. And too often in Africa, if you fail - end of story. There is usually no ¹Plan B for those who fail. There isn't a Director of Further Education for Failures in the Ministry of Education. Think of this for a moment. Those who have passed are now fixed up and continue smoothly through the System. But failure is also an outcome of the Education Process: the student has failed to regurgitate some required knowledge, but *the Department of Education has also failed to motivate the teacher to teach it effectively and the teacher has failed to persuade the student to absorb and regurgitate it*. Perhaps that knowledge wasn't offered in an accessible manner, perhaps the kid was interested in something quite different. But either way, all those years of schooling seem to be wasted. So, smaller classes to allow more individual

¹ The Botswana Brigades, especially the Farmers' Brigades, actually constituted a pretty good Plan B in the 60s and 70s.

interaction between teachers and taught and a Directorate for Further Education for the Failures might be a very good plan. Or should we scrap exams altogether?

Now I think there is some enlightenment creeping into the exam process here and there, and for young people going to school in, say, London the whole exam system has been much improved. But improvement seems not to have reached the South African matric system, judging from my experience coaching a young Xhosa lad for a re-sit of his biology three years ago. Perhaps I am getting closer to my education paradigm in this ramble. You have to get your pupil *interested* enough to mentally move ahead and then start asking questions so that both teacher and taught can be ambushed by surprises and anomalies that crop up as a result. Teachers should spot this, create space for it, and draw it out. So we come back again to this Quaker thing about that of God (Good) in everyone. We have to listen to the learners more. We have to *respect* them more. Remember how Jesus once asked his disciples "Who do people say I am?" Not an exam question, but one that got them thinking, most of all on this occasion - Peter.

I find I am saying this as though you are all teachers. I think some of you are, but then, aren't we all teachers? In our daily lives, there is usually something we do or say that requires explanation. I hope so, anyway. It may not turn our interlocutor's world upside down, but it is an opportunity to give it a minor tremor. Then we know we should skip the jargon and the easy phrases and clichés that roll off the tongue of the lazy speaker and make it into one of Douglas Steere's "Creative Encounters". I wonder if we do this enough, that we are reluctant to get bogged down in heavy debate and detail, and maybe this is why some might say that SA Quakers are stagnant. Just look at that debate raging out there over Professor Dawkins's book "The God Delusion" - a book which deftly pulls out the religious prop from under most of us as he writes that scientists are driven on by mystery, while religion teaches us that not to understand mystery is a virtue. There must be stacks of people out there who want to find some Higher Purpose to their lives². They are not on the whole moved by or even attracted to the obfuscating theology, re-worked pagan rituals and usually mind-numbing forms of words rattled off every Sabbath day in the mainstream churches, that have no meaning to the average man, woman or child in the street or on the farm. I know we Friends sometimes slip away to churches sometimes. But do we go for the Words and Tunes (as in the beautiful prose of the old English Prayer Book and those grand old hymns) or the Worship? And if that beautiful old language is thought to be unintelligible to modern man, is it then made worse by making the whole thing like children creeping into the *voorkamer* to try to talk *Oupa* into giving them a treat. "Ag Pleez Father God..." So, Friends - and I say this as much to myself as to you - we must remember that we have something so valuable, bequeathed to us by George Fox, John Woolman, Richard Gush and lots more, that we must go out there and share it through daily Creative Encounter. Or do we not have the time? Really?

² As suggested by the writer, Julian Barnes, in a quote he attributes to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: "The demolition of antique faiths had been fundamental to human advancement; but now that all those old buildings had been levelled, where was man to find shelter in this blasted landscape?"

Now, all that I have said applies to myself first of all, but I must say, in my own defence, that I do now look for opportunities to have Creative Encounters on the very urgent issues associated with climate change and the need for us all to adopt a more sustainable way of living. Perhaps some of you expected me to make this the subject of my talk as I suppose it has, in a way, been my life's work. Well, let me give it an airing.

I have to start with a bit of autobiography. When I was a small boy, I saw a lot of my Mum, perhaps more than many of you did in this age of working Mums and women's liberation. She was a trained horticulturalist and I acquired a love of the Outside, and especially gardening from her. But those happy days came to an end with the end of World War 2. Passenger shipping to West Africa started again, allowing my Mum to go out to Nigeria where my Dad had been working in the colonial agricultural service. So, at 6 years old, I went to boarding school and, I can tell you, that wasn't too fantastic in 1946 as Britain struggled to get going again after that awful war. The school, like all such schools, was sport-crazy. It seemed I was almost the only one who didn't share this form of insanity, kicking balls around a muddy field to no apparent purpose. I was already, at 6, a non-conformist. I had my share of bullying and ridicule because of this, but, possibly in view of my size and relative strength, it was never in the same class as that meted out to George Fox - though he was no wimp either - as he rocked the foundations of the English church and the English Establishment. Luckily for me, I had my Judge Fell in the shape of the school's headmaster and proprietor who, shock-horror, agreed to commute five afternoons a week of compulsory sport to working a piece of land in the school grounds, on which I grew enough vegetables to sometimes sell stuff to the school kitchen. Fast-forward to my secondary, Quaker and still all-boys, boarding school where compulsory sport was only two afternoons a week. I soon had that commute to another piece of land and the chance to sell its produce to the boarding house kitchens, proceeds to Friends' Good Works. By now, I was getting a grasp of the Fertility Cycle in agriculture because my biology and chemistry lessons dovetailed well with my gardening. We didn't talk about gardens being "sustainable" in those days, but aged only 17, I began to feel this unease over the way we seemed to be running down our reserves of soil fertility with the cavalier way we took food and material from the land, ate or used it, and then flushed its waste products down the rivers into the sea while burning the rest. I remember the opening words of my speech in the rather prestigious annual school Speech Competition in 1957: "If I told you that, in fifty years' time, you would all be eating seaweed..." I think the rest of the speech was pretty disastrous, but it is now 50 years later and, although we are not eating seaweed yet, it looks a distinct possibility. Soil degradation has become a hot issue.

Now, soil fertility is really the bank balance that we draw on to get the world's food supply. Every harvest we take in is a withdrawal from that bank. Every time we dig or plough in some manure or compost is a deposit. Unlike most current accounts, this one does actually earn an, albeit low, rate of interest. Soil fertility is replenished naturally from a number of sources. Examples are nitrogen fixed by lightning and washed into the soil along with nitrogen oxides from car exhausts. Bacteria living in the roots of leguminous plants like peas and beans and lucerne do the same thing. Then, as plant material decays, organic acids are produced that slowly break down the rock under the

soil and liberate minerals from it, some of which are plant nutrients. But let us not be blind to the underlying fact that almost everywhere nowadays we are drawing down the soil's fertility bank balance faster than all these deposits and interest accruals can replenish it.

So why aren't we starving? Six point seven billion people living off a land area that fifty years ago struggled to feed a then world population of three billion. We have been doing what the best suits do in the city board-rooms with their equity buy-outs, hedge funds and their constant pressure on us to borrow more and consume more. In other words, we have created the necessary extra fertility out of thin air. Am I joking? Sadly, no. We feed the 6.7 billion people because we have perfected a process that uses vast amounts of fossil energy (there's another big bank balance we are drawing down, and this one definitely doesn't earn any interest. When it is finished, we are finished.) to turn nitrogen gas (three quarters of the air in this room) into fertilizer. Added to soil in which a crop is growing, such fertilizer stimulates growth spectacularly. Most of you have seen this - and its converse, a stunted, yellowish crop grown in poor soil without nitrogen fertilizer. But, spectacular as such growth may be, it is like a sprinter taking a stimulant just before a race. A spectacular win in a spectacular time, but at the expense of a draw-down of the athlete's long-term health. Farmers apply more than this nitrogen though, using the products of mines and dried up lake deposits, phosphates and potash, to balance it to make a "complete" plant food. These are also bank balances that are being run down, and, unlike soil nitrogen, these earn no interest.

So, in feeding the world's 6.7 billion people, we are drawing down the soil fertility bank balance and the world's fossil energy balance and the phosphate and potash balances. While this is going on, we are all trying to raise our living standards, not least of all, the 1.3 billion Chinese who, after the dark night of Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, surely deserve something better at last. The rich part of the world has gone so far down this road that most of the food they grow is fed to livestock to reappear as meat, while the rest is thrown away (26% of the rubbish collected by our District Council in England is food waste) and so has - in this context - gone too far.

Now I have again strayed too far from the task in hand (as I do). What are we to do before food becomes prohibitively expensive for half the world's population and we begin to see the sort of hunger and malnutrition already evident up the road in Lesotho more widely - a hunger caused this time not by drought but by greed? A world-wide switch to so-called organic farming won't work - too slow. People are already going to bed hungry. By inserting "so-called" in front of organic farming, I have given myself away. Remember my earlier point - ideologies make poor taskmasters in agriculture? Organic farming is an ideology. Our late daughter had her farm registered as "organic in conversion", but it didn't work. It is like trying to be a good communist in America (or South Africa) - the context is wrong. I am not saying that it shouldn't be done, (it should) but that we have to do something more pragmatic, more urgent. I sometimes wish organic farming was more like the concept of Christianity. We might say that Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount can't work in present day South Africa. The context is wrong for it. So we re-interpret it in a way that lets us slide gently off the hook

and say Jesus didn't really mean that. Well, I think he did and since we have made the context wrong, we should put it right. Someone once said: "It is not that we have tried Christianity and found it wanting; but that we haven't tried it." The trouble with seeing organic farming in the same context is that nature can't be hurried; it can't have a Damascene conversion. It will take years, and even then I wonder if there'll be enough manure to go round for a projected 9 billion people, as my school friend said.

Back to the point, again! Next time you are walking, driving or cycling somewhere, look around you a bit more and observe just *how much unused land there is*. It is not idle because no rain falls on it. It is not too polluted to grow crops. And it is clear that it has depth of soil - we can see that. The fault lies with us and our System. We are too idle to farm or garden on it, and, equally, it doesn't *have to belong* to a land speculator or a Council. There are plenty of ways a government can encourage landowners to divest themselves of un-needed land and so release it to, for example, people who want to grow food on it. I well remember the post-war years growing up in England. We had few cars and less petrol so we all went by train. Everywhere, on the track-side, we saw beautiful, productive well-kept vegetable gardens actually inside the railway reserve. No more, it's all take-aways now. Land for production is there - plenty of it.

Now look again next time you are in a town or a village. Everywhere there are clumps of people standing on street corners or outside a shop. They are not waiting for a bus, they are not yacking into their cellphones. They are not even shopping. They are just letting time pass, like the traffic. They have *nothing to do*. So we have spare land and spare people. We have rain and sunshine. And we have almost limitless sources of material that we can use to replenish our soil's fertility bank balance. Am I crazy? Perhaps. But something has got to give here - and everywhere else, for South Africa is typical not exceptional here. We can't allow half our population to be malnourished and hungry while we allow our best land to be degraded by "modern" farming and much of the rest left as waste land.

I see a series of steps we must take to bring this all together.

1. Motivation at the top: we have to *want to change things*, to turn the economics of land ownership upside down, to change our paradigms - what makes us tick;
2. Motivation at the bottom: we must be able to speak to the condition of the un- and under-employed at those street corners who watch the traffic go by in such a way that they catch the spark and burst into flame;
3. Set up working models of sustainable food production - let me call them **track-side gardens** - as living proof that this all works;
4. Based on 3, enrol a cadre of innovators, experimenters, instructors who can take the idea out from these model track-side gardens and introduce them to all those people watching the traffic go by, before their fire goes out again.

Change from the top will come through changes in land taxation. If only the Landless People's movements could focus more on land as a productive asset rather than a political or spiritual right...

Changes from the bottom would come if we took the time to understand more of what makes people tick and that means becoming proficient in an African language, something that I am bad at.

There are already some working models of trackside gardens, but they are not on the track-side. They are in the lush gardens of opulent suburbs of our towns - gardens of the leisured or moneyed classes - or tucked away on an obscure farm like mine.

And there are training institutions galore in South Africa; they just need to be staffed by people working their own track-side gardens rather than college-trained theorists, who are not enslaved to a syllabus and a curriculum.

But is it really practical? Here I must have my little tootle on my trumpet. When I finished my work with Land Reform in Eastern Cape in 2001, I did not retire, but regarded myself as *liberated*. *Liberated to do something that I have always wanted to do all my working life. To find out exactly how much food a person can produce from a small garden using only locally available stuff.* So I have been farming on square metres, not hectares near Queenstown for 6 years. Good soil, yes, but poor climate with hot dry winds for half the year, only seven frost-free months and erratic and sparse rains. I use no fertilizers and only a synthetic pesticide if there is no alternative way of saving a crop. I have dug and lined three hafirs to store rainwater run-off from which I can irrigate my plots and I have a helper who also looks after everything when I am away, as I often am. For the first three years, we kept meticulous records of all the vegetables produced plus, in years two and three, we also collected data from fodder plots from which we gave supplementary feed to one or two milking cows. Vegetable production was a very consistent 2,000 kg per year from 100 square metres - the size of a typical English allotment garden. Fodder production showed almost identical results: 6,000 kg from 300 square metres which would have converted to about 1,000 litres of milk during the 200-day dry season. In year three I added a maize and beans unit, but raids by baboons meant that I could only come in with a rough estimate of maize production at 140 kg from 200 square metres.

No rocket science here and no rocket budget either. Only donga science and common sense. I keep the soil fertility bank balance in good shape using compost, cow dung (collected in the veld with bucket and spade like my Mum and I did 60 years ago), and our own personal - we have a composting toilet. So the carbon footprint is... well, it hasn't got one I think. Only if the unit is scaled up, as it can be, with, say, a 9kw Chinese 2-wheeled tractor and an electric pump in the hafir would it have one, though barely registering on the Al Gore Scale. But there are further advantages. Such a survival strategy not only puts surplus land and people to good use, but it would put families back together and give them a wholesome diet free from dodgy chemicals with unknown long-term effects. It might do more to reverse the AIDS pandemic as well because all the drugs in the world for AIDS only work on a full stomach and in a person who is on a good plane of nutrition. It would also reverse the degradation we are seeing and the

steady migration of our lovely topsoil to the sea - to fertilize the seaweed we're going to eat.

So my concern has been, ever since my school days, about what is now called the unsustainability of modern life. That the process of producing our food and disposing of our waste just didn't add up and that sooner or later, something had to give even if it meant our eating seaweed. In the same way, something else which is clearly unsustainable has come to pass: the extraordinary polarisation of wealth, where the rich have just got richer and the poor - at least in sub-Saharan Africa - have got poorer. In reading the gospels, it seems that Jesus didn't have a problem with this *per se*. He preached more emphatically against the religious establishment than against the rich. He seemed to condone slavery, but he attacked the habit of passing by on the other side. In other words, we could say he was anti-establishment, not anti-rich or anti-capitalist. Indeed, he sometimes seemed to endorse the smart capitalists of the day. But he doesn't let the rich off. He reminds them of their *burden* of possessions, their *responsibility* for Lazarus at the gate and the sheer *difficulty* they will have entering the Kingdom of Heaven. And he reminds them of the need to care for the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and those in prison - and let me add: the immigrants and refugees. Most of us see Lazarus at our gates every day in South Africa. We are certainly aware of the sick, the hungry, the thirsty and the prisoners - and the Zimbabweans. We know that the public health system is crumbling, especially in the rural areas of the E Cape and Limpopo; that many schools are a travesty of education and that the prison system in many cases just isn't fit for purpose. So when we read the Gospels and do not attempt to re-interpret them in a "modern context", we have a heavy responsibility as Friends, and a very heavy one as South Africans. We all have our own strengths and weaknesses, and we are not all rich. But that we are here at Yearly Meeting suggests that we have something inside us which can occasionally glimpse the first rays of that wonderful Light breaking through the dark night we have endured, the first intimations of the Kingdom of Heaven coming to a place near us. We can all turn whatever gifts and strengths we have to spreading a little of Jim Bond's happiness every day, to turning this world upside - - no, no, it is the world we are already in which is upside down. We must turn it the right way up.

8,024 words

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