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Michael Braungart

Learning to Celebrate Our Human Footprint

Over the last decades, people have tried to protect the environment by destroying less. Different methods are used to communicate the same message: shrink your ecological footprint by reducing your water consumption, energy use, and waste production. Traditionally, people think they are doing good if they are less bad. This approach does not lead to environmental protection; it is actually just minimizing damage. If I prevent my child from running into traffic only half of the time, I'm not really protecting my child. Following this logic, you can also claim that Poland during the Communist Era “protected” the environment much better than West Germany, merely because its industries were inefficient and poorly developed and thus did not manage to do as much damage.

For years this has been a basic premise of the environmental movement: we can only save the world if we choose lives of thriftiness—use less, reduce consumption, and minimize our ecological footprint. This design principle is based on four tenets:

- 1) It is impossible to have a positive impact on the environment; instead, all we can do is decrease our negative impact;
- 2) Environmental friendliness is incompatible with (economic) growth;
- 3) Waste cannot be eliminated; we can only try to reduce it;
- 4) Since we feel so guilty, we constantly have to make sacrifices in our daily lives—for the sake of sustainability.

In other words, traditional sustainability focuses on becoming more efficient and reducing use. This message is not at all attractive for business, politics, or society. Especially for companies and entrepreneurs it is rather difficult to communicate the “consume less” principle to their customers. Ironically enough, this negatively focused approach will not even save us and it creates no long-term answers to the root causes of today's challenges. Such an approach only adds suffocating layers of pessimism and gloominess to our society, through which we ultimately get stuck in a negative spiral. What humanity actually needs are narratives of hope and the encouragement of true innovations.

Green Living

To give some examples of how absurd this attitude is: if we really think that the “less bad” philosophy will help, there are endless opportunities to employ it. Eating oysters, for example. Each oyster contains at least 1,500 microplastic particles; the more oysters you eat, the more plastic we get out of the plastic soup in the ocean. We can also minimize our carbon footprint by emptying our digestive system before we enter the airplane; when flying from Munich to New York, it would save five tonnes of jet fuel. Moreover, if people were to fly naked to go shopping in New York, we could even save another two tonnes. During your shopping spree in New York, you should always avoid the “healthy” stairs and only take the elevators in the shopping malls. Because if you are using the elevator, it takes five times less energy than the stairs. Since our perverse agricultural industry needs ten calories of energy to produce one calorie of food, it is far more environmentally friendly to use the low-calorie elevator.

Moreover, in our quest to be less bad for the environment, we have failed to consider all the effects of our “environmentally friendly” choices. You return from your eco-trip to your “passive house,” in which the air quality is about three to eight times worse than the urban outdoor air. Your house is sealed, but at least you are saving energy. Half of our buildings have mold problems and it is affecting our health; asthma is by far the most widespread children’s disease in Europe. We are trying to minimize the energy consumption, instead of first asking: “What is the right thing? How can we have healthy indoor air quality?”

The Impact of Wording

Our current efforts to be “less bad” by reducing waste seem incredibly ineffective: Europeans have a lot of “unnecessary” waste because they have to feed their waste incinerators: 80 percent of the calorific value of municipal waste in Europe comes from paper and plastic. They call it euphemistically “waste to energy” or even “green energy” by burning more than 92 percent of the embodied energy. This keeps recycling rates low compared to the amount that we actually have the technological capability to recycle.

And even though the USA is home to a thriving second-hand culture, its citizens seem to be generally more prudish when it comes to recycling. It is notable that US Americans

have five times more one-way products than Europeans. As a matter of fact, in Europe we make a distinction between primary and secondary raw materials; Americans call the primary materials virgin materials. This dissimilarity in wording implicitly illustrates the socio-cultural view of materials and how to treat them. It makes much more sense to recycle primary materials instead of virgin materials, even though we're talking about the same substances.

Isn't it typical that humans are the only species on this planet who are generating waste—products which aren't biodegradable or cannot be reused for other purposes without losing their quality and value? Since the idea of waste is still so deeply ingrained in our daily life, it is challenging to move away from the concept. We can try and change the name of waste into “nutrients” to alter people's mindset, but even then, it is hardly something to capture the imagination.

Efficiency Will Not Save Us

Nor is the solution to become more efficient. When I was a child, a cow produced 5,000 liters of milk a year. Today in the Netherlands, dairy cows produce up to 12,000 liters. Would it be right to squeeze another 1,000 liters out of this poor cow in order to reduce our methane emissions? Instead of continuing to try to improve a system that is broken, why not rethink our eating habits entirely? If we learned to base our diet on eating algae, mushrooms, and bacteria, we would have an elegant means of feeding the more than 50 billion people on the planet and safeguarding Earth's biodiversity without destroying other species. Moreover, if we learn to enter the food chain at that level, our protein intake is much healthier. From beef, you pick up only about 20 percent of the protein, whereas from algae it is more than 90 percent.

The latest policy trend is to become climate or carbon neutral; not only companies but even major cities like Copenhagen or Sydney are convinced that this is the way to stop global warming. What an extraordinary ambition: you can only be climate neutral when you do not exist at all. Have you ever seen a climate-neutral tree? Trees are always beneficial for the climate and their environment; they absorb carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, clean the air and generate food and shelter for living beings. Why is our only choice to be “less bad”? For being less bad, we are too many. Why can't we imitate the tree and try to be “good” instead?

Instead of trying to minimize our ecological footprint, we can celebrate our human footprint. In order to do so, we need to transform our footprint into a fertile wetland. When you are in Sweden or the north of Canada, each footprint means destruction; that is why we want to minimize our footprint. But when you walk along the Rhine or the Mississippi River, you are creating a small retention space. Your footprint means that the water stays longer in the meadow. Look at a cherry tree in the spring: no reduction, avoidance, or guilt management. The cherry tree is not efficient, but very effective.

Native to the Planet

The way we live our lives is such a paradox. We are trying so hard to become efficient that it leads to bizarre production processes; at the same time, we romanticize nature because we are trying to compensate for having destroyed so much of the natural world. There are cultural reasons why we cannot see ourselves as native to the planet. This is why we feel so terrible about what we have done to our environment. Even if nature and human business can be made to work together, the approach is not fully effective. There is not one organic label in the whole global food industry that allows our own essential nutrients to be returned to the soil. Our organic agriculture, in other words, excludes us from the nutrient cycle. This is a critical point, because phosphorus is actually far more crucial for humans than, for example, oil. Without phosphorus we do not have any teeth or bones, and we cannot store energy in our bodies. Since phosphorus is essential for life, but we are afraid of using our own nutrients—feces—in agriculture, we have found a very primitive solution: phosphate mining that extracts phosphorus in a cumbersome manner and exposes us to much more radioactivity than is used in all the nuclear power plants of the world.

Cradle to Cradle

Merely minimizing our footprint is simply not an option. Since green legislation is clearly so ineffective, a new approach is needed: we have to reinvent the whole system. We need to stop thinking about nature as our mother and feeling guilty about harming her. Let us not forget that the most toxic chemicals we know are those found in nature, as are the strongest carcinogens. Nature is not our mother; nature is our

teacher and partner. Nature would not make chemicals that accumulate in breast milk, because this leads to extinction.

We can learn from nature endlessly. We call this “Cradle to Cradle”: it is a world where everything is beneficial. In a Cradle to Cradle world, waste is just an indicator of bad design. When all materials are nutrients and everything is designed to become part of an ongoing biological or technical cycle, we can celebrate abundance. Instead of asking “Is there a future without waste?” it would be more appropriate to question the future of humankind if we don’t manage to banish waste.

Learn to Celebrate Life

Cradle to Cradle enhances the quality and value of materials and products; they become beneficial for human health and nature while improving profitability. This approach helps us to become independent from scarce resources and raw materials. Cradle to Cradle aims to start material banks in which materials maintain their status as resources and can be used over and over. In this way, we will be freed from our current responsibility to reduce any negative environmental effects our behavior has.

In 1859 Charles Darwin had already discovered that human development is not about efficiency, but effectiveness: “In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.” We can learn to celebrate human life again. When we are afraid, insecure, or have lost our sense of identity, it is easy to become greedy. But if people feel safe, accepted and valued, they can be warm-hearted and generous. This is the reason why it is so important to celebrate our human footprint—so that we can truly recognize and increase our positive impact on the planet. Instead of Al Gore’s global warning to fight overpopulation wherever we can, Cradle to Cradle has an alternative message for a newborn child: “Welcome to the planet. How wonderful that you are here!”