

Christmas 2005, Taby, Sweden

Dear friends,

Growing up in my family, the dinner table was a daily philosophical forum where we discussed the people, events and ideas that were in our minds at the moment. How I miss the opportunity to share thoughts with you on a regular basis! Be that as it may, here are a few of my thoughts from during the year that I want to share with you now.

Beginning with *events*, I retired on June 1st, deciding that I had enough money and pension to live on, and that my work was not interesting enough to make it worth the stress and poor health that was beginning to show. I spent most of my first free summer at my little rented cabin on Tjocko in the outer Stockholm archipelago, together with friends, my garden and my kayak. When the Fall chill came, I spent weekends at Tjocko for the peacefulness (no cars) and worked in my garden, starting a new part, Japanese inspired, where the natural rock formations interplay with ferns and bright green mosses. I took an evening class in beginner's French. I intensified my search for a new home that is quiet, peaceful, surrounded by birds and trees and near to water—as well as near to public transport.

At home in Taby I soon found myself restless, and saw how I have defined my life very much by what I do. I am still restless and open for new areas in which to engage my mind and energies. It surprises me and may simply be a hangup to come to terms with, but I would rather think I am needed somewhere and that what I do makes a difference. Maybe this is why I pick up trash whenever I see it on the sidewalk and rescue “junk” that people throw out in our trash bins and take it to the secondhand shop where it can find a new home.

I created a new web site www.alternativ.nu/EcologyBeginsAtHome (with the generosity of my publisher, Green Books in Devon, UK, and the Swedish Society for Self-Sufficiency, who house the web site) at which you can download the complete text of my revised **Ecology Begins at Home**, published in Britain in 2004. The story of how the book came into being is posted at www.thestrengthschronicle.com, a site with personal stories that encourage and inspire, created by my old teacher Mike Pegg, consultant in team building and father of the Encourager's Philosophy.

Considering *people*, I overheard a friend's son, idealistic and newly graduated from university, tell how disappointed he was at the materialism of so many of his friends. I feel this way too sometimes. I have come to the conclusion that people's materialism or other such views do not really concern me, that what is important for me are the good examples that I can follow, not the bad. This is one of the reasons I seldom read the newspaper, and instead look for inspiring books. It is my choice which people I spend my time listening to.

The people who have influenced my thoughts most during the year are **Gandhi** (a very fine biography is by Louis Fischer) and **Peace Pilgrim** (you can read her book *Peace Pilgrim* or visit www.peacepilgrim.org). I also watch a lot of documentaries on TV and listen to public radio, where some very inspiring people tell how they thought and acted in what to me would have been very tough circumstances. I am humbled, find courage and a sense of “I am not alone”, “We are all here in this together”, which is very important. (The stories of crime, corruption, greed, violence, etc. instead create a sense of “It is a dangerous world and I am all alone.”). Gandhi and Peace Pilgrim both taught living your life based on connectedness and cooperation.

Others who have influenced me are the people who speak out against wrongs, and even more, those who act to correct them, such as **Rachel Carson** and **Helen Caldicott** (concerning the environment and nuclear weapons respectively) and **Nelson Mandela** and **Desmond Tutu**, concerning racism and genocide. This kind of speaking out and acting occurs daily on local levels all the time, too, and if it doesn't, you and I have the opportunity to do it whenever we see something that doesn't feel right. On a private, family level, I have wonderful friends in Sweden who did not accept that their son's autism was incurable and instead have spent the majority of their energy for the past four years helping him to discover the joys of being in the world together with others. They not only help the world but provide an inspiring example to follow. See www.jakobprogress.se.

Harold Pinter's selection for the Nobel prize in literature this year has created heated discussion here because of his strong political views and outspoken support of Castro and Milosovic. I saw his long Nobel TV speech, felt his anger and was grateful to him for speaking out. He really called a spade a spade and it opened my eyes to things which I, like many Americans, would not like to see because they do not fit our self-image of being good guys who provide an example for the world to follow. One commentator described Pinter as politically naive, and I thought, yes, Pinter's analysis is simplistic when he blames all the world's problems on the self-interest of the American and British governments. Which leaders or governments in the world today act altruistically or are commissioned by their citizens to act for a greater good outside their own countries? Again, it is the good examples that are needed, not the bad ones. One was provided by South Africans with their peaceful revolution, lead by Nelson Mandela, an example which even if selfish helps us all because it can be copied by other peoples in conflict. The South Africans decided to keep their country intact and live together rather than fight and divide it up into small bits, one part for each ethnic group living separately, as is occurring all over the world today. For an insightful, extremely well-told recounting of both the accomplishments and shortcomings of the South African revolution, see **Beyond the Miracle** by Allister Sparks.

Swami **Yogananda**, Swami **Muktananda**, Swami **Chidvilasanandra**, **Thich Nhat Hanh** and the **Dali Lama** are all great religious leaders who inspire me. Their considered words give me food for thought. They use religious thought developed over many generations to build bridges rather than to create dissent.

Lastly, *ideas*. The most upsetting idea I encountered this year is that human society is on its way to collapse, probably beginning early this century, due to overpopulation and overconsumption with their intent strain and destruction of the physical resources of the planet. Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers and Dennis Meadows make this clear in **Limits to Growth—The 30-Year Update**. They do not predict exact times and events, which would be impossible, but developed a model that calculates the flows of resources needed for, and pollutions generated by, given world population sizes. The model includes the attendant interrelationships, for example, that more food and other consumption means more environmental degradation, which requires people and resources for environmental repair and restoration and to maintain human health, which in turn leads to not enough people and resources to produce food, resulting finally in population decrease by malnutrition, disease and starvation (if not war, which they do not attempt to model). The only way out is to consume much less of what we do today, thus freeing resources to feed other human beings. This is why I do not own a car, buy mostly fresh foods (which do not require factories, chemicals and packaging), eat little meat and fish (which require enormous resources to produce), shut off my refrigerator and freezer part of the year, find what I need at secondhand, and travel little (air travel is, unfortunately, extremely energy expensive, equivalent to driving a car the same distance with only one person in it). Other ideas, such as how to cook pasta with much less hot water, are in my updated book and I am sure you have your own ways to live with less.

Climate warming is of course just one result of overconsumption. Others are shortage of water and land, overfishing and more mines, oil, coal and nuclear power, all of which cause pollutions as well as conflicts and the need for weapons. My personal restraint, or lack of it, thus has big repercussions.

How many people can the earth support? It depends on the consumption level. The land area needed to support a given level of consumption is called the **ecological footprint** (see **Our Ecological Footprint** by Wackernagel and Rees, who developed this measurement tool). Estimates show that the western life style (which is also lived by many in the developing countries) requires 3-6 times more land than the earth has available per capita. The only way we rich (I include myself as among the world's rich) can live the way we do is because we do not share. It is time to stop hogging all the bacon and to share. This means learning to be happy with much less. Is it possible? Or is happiness dependent on what I have? This question leads me to the next idea.

I have had a fine upbringing with loving parents and sisters, truly dedicated teachers, encouraging youth leaders and many fine friends, in a wealthy, peaceful part of the world, and still, all told, I could not call myself a happy person. Looking around me, in general I do not see very many happy people, but some are definitely more joyful than others. What is their secret? It is not that they have more material things, this goes across national, class, educational and ethnic borders. So what do they have that I don't? Barry Neal Kaufman teaches very

persuasively in his book **Happiness Is a Choice**, that it is not what our situation is but how we take it that matters. He and his wife did not accept the experts' prognosis of a short, institutional life for their autistic son but instead developed the Son-Rise method (see www.son-rise.org) and successfully helped their son to live a normal life. We are born with the freedom to choose. A choice to be happy might help. It certainly cannot hurt!

Another secret to happiness that we have all heard about is to live in the now. The crux is, how? I have found practical help in **just listening to my breath**. If my breathing is short or shallow, I breathe a little longer and deeper, which calms me. If thoughts or emotions distract me, I take a deep breath and say to myself, "Thank you for Now, thank you for *this* Now". This is like listening to a sleeping baby or the sound of the surf or water lapping the shore. Certain pieces of music do the same, but the breath you always have with you. I got this little exercise and others from the book **The Power of Now** by Eckhart Tolle. Is happiness simply a matter of breathing and appreciating what we have? I realize in a flash that I am very grateful for my breath, to my heart and lungs for providing me *this* breath, and the next, which could stop at any minute. They could have said "that's it" long ago, but instead have given me these moments of now, the one after the other, breath after breath, in continuous ebb and flow, with not a single interruption, ever since I was born.

On that peaceful note I think I will close. Other ideas can wait for other times that you and I may have together. With gratitude for your friendship, with love and affection and best wishes to you and your family for a healthy, peaceful year,

Archie

Other good books I read this year are:

Colinvaux, **Why Big Fierce Animals Are Rare** (on population size and interconnectedness as seen by an ecologist)

Vandana Shiva, **Water Wars** (on fresh water conflicts, privatization of city water, big government dams, etc.)

Nussbaum, **Women and Human Development** (a deep philosophical treatise that further develops the human rights concept with the difference between formal rights and the capability to use them in practice)

Hernando de Soto, **The Mystery of Capital** (an extremely interesting book on legal recognition of informal property rights as a condition for economic development in the developing and ex-Soviet-block countries)

Arundhati Roy, **The Algebra of Infinite Justice** (and other essays on politics, with special attention to India)

And I look forward to reading Jared Diamond's new book, **Collapse**, on why major civilizations have broken up, to get some clues as to what is happening to ours in this time. Other favorite books concerning the world and environment you can find on my web site and in the back of my updated Ecology book, both at www.alternativ.nu/EcologyBeginsAtHome, which you can easily find by searching on my name.