

## **Fate, Karma and Grace**

Dr. Sung Sohn's Response for the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual lecture series, "Solution to Sustainability."

Thank you, Beth, for evoking a vivid image for us to understand our relation to the earth, comparing our living planet to a pool of water and human beings as swimmers in it. You have encouraged us to be sensitive to what's happening in our natural environment. Your analogy has persuaded us to be good swimmers who move forward effectively, in accordance with the water current. You assert that we should adopt new way of living that helps the earth flourish.

Dr. Philip Clayton, your speech has indeed awakened us. We are honored that your talk is dedicated to the ministry of Myra House. Your tangible support has been precious to this ministry. We cherished our early morning meditations with you during your residency when you were commuting from your home in northern California. You have alerted us that the fate of the earth, based on the latest scientific research, is gloomy. Instead of leaving us in fear of the impending climate catastrophe, you have encouraged us to take on simple and practical ways to more sustainable living.

I am very appreciative of both of your comments about how the Myra House is a practical setting where ecology and spirituality merge and my response is twofold: (1) Why "Solutions to Sustainability" matter to us in a very personal way and (2) How we can not only endure this life journey but also make it sustainable, holistic and enriching.

On November 12, 2013, an LA Times article presented updated data released by the United Nations-backed Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It revealed that climate change by global warming "will disrupt not only the natural world but also society, possible risks to the world economy and food and water supply and contribute to violent conflict." Climate change was pinpointed as the primary cause for those detrimental effects. It will not only instigate those effects but will do so through interaction with other factors such as population growth, urbanization and exploitation of natural resources. The article emphasized how the global climate change would directly impact every family's access to "our food, water, health, roads, buildings, infrastructure and natural environment."<sup>1</sup>

15 years ago, when my vocation was taking a turn from architecture to religious study, the above issues urgently seized my attention. My ecological sensitivity was heightened by Rachel Carson's now outdated book *Silent Spring* (1962). She detailed how birds and animals died by contaminated water and disrupted the natural food chain. Her report waived a red flag about the harmful effects of DDT and other pesticides, which caused cancer and genetic damages to people. Over four decades after her book, numerous books and articles followed in support of her findings, which revealed how excessive human activities altered the planet's atmosphere, biodiversity, land ice masses, ocean temperature and the climate cycle.

Around the time just before the Myra House was built, I learned about the Gaia perspective. Built on co-evolutional theory of earth science, it argues that the well-being of the planet is directly related to the well-being of people. Asserting the ecological unconscious as a core of the human healthy mind, leading theorist Ralph Metzner identifies three symptoms: addiction, amnesia and autism as partially being the result of our disconnection from the earth. He implies that behaviors such as acting compulsively, being constantly distracted and being highly selfish are correlated with our estrangement and mistreatment of our natural habitat. He argues that these tendencies are more predominant in highly industrialized western European countries. According to this view, it is crucial to reconnect with the natural environment

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1. Tony Barboza, "Climate report depicts planet in peril," AA4, Los Angeles Times. November 12 (Tuesday), 2013.

in order to recover holistic health.<sup>2</sup> I became convinced that the wellness of my home and family was interconnected with the wellness of our planetary home. Nevertheless, the idea of restoring the planet remained a remote global issue and a marginal concern within academia. The impact of global warming seemed to become more and more unsustainable to me but I only knew of few communities such as the Lyle Center for Regenerative Studies at Cal Poly Pomona University and the Eco-Village co-housing community in Los Angeles, that were actually addressing the issue.

Similar to other immigrant families, Myra and I wanted to settle down in the US for a better future for our children. After fifteen years of harsh struggles, we realized how we became serious ill with our emotional and physical health. We were desperate to search for another way and yearned for healing and renewal. For that reason, Myra House was built in 2001 as a family project and we began the Sustainability Lecture Series in 2012, open to the public, as we celebrated our first harvest of crops and vegetables from the farm.

More recently, the impact of global warming and food crisis are coming to the forefront of environmentalists' minds and are finally getting the public's attention. The 2008-2009 food price crises<sup>3</sup> received a lot of press. There have been many articles and scholarly works arguing that the gloomy fate of our earth is unmistakably drawing near this decade.<sup>4</sup> The notion of fate connotes predetermination and that we cannot change the course of what's happening. It makes us believe that there is no other option but to embrace our unavoidable fate, this generation or the generations to come. However, **to understand the key concept of sustainability, we must recognize our personal and local responsibility.** As such, I want to see the impending waning signs not as a guidepost to a dead end of the life of our planet but as a wake-up call. The word "karma" in Asian spirituality refers to the notion that we can choose with our own free will, even when one is led to believe that our lives will come to a tragic end. Each individual and family can make authentic choices freely and willingly. Surely, Sohn's family has been there we thought were dead ends that were created by "fate." When we forge a new pathway at those places our lives become enlivened by surprising wonders. I can testify to this and can only acknowledge it as "grace": aid for life sustenance, which has been poured out on me throughout my whole life.

Living intimately with the land and its bounty has placed our lives far different than we had imagined. Communal living and intentional farming have indeed disciplined us to stay in tune with the life-sustaining energy. Our lives have become more holistic as each Myra House family member has been enriched by three essential practices: Re-Minding, Re-Cultivating and Re-Visioning.

### **Re-Minding**

By fate I was born and raised in a Christian family so my faith was initially formed through Christianity. In karma, I chose meditation as the core of my spiritual exercise. During meditation I hold my thoughts and pay attention to the present moment. During meditation, I am awakened to how all living beings are intricately interconnected with one another. This cognitively oriented exercise requires a re-minding mental process—the process of seeing into the nature of my whole being with new clarity. Peeling layer by layer of ignorance, my heart gradually opens and begins to feel various degrees of pain, despair and suffering in the reality of our lives. Accepting my fate as a human being, I am able to see how finite my life span compares to the infinite life span of the earth, which expands 15 billion years. In karma, human beings can develop compassion or reap destruction for the earth.

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2. Theodore Roszak, ed. *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth Healing the Mind* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 57-61.

3. [http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2012d3\\_en.pdf](http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2012d3_en.pdf)

4. [http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/uploads/WGIAR5\\_WGI12Doc2b\\_FinalDraft\\_Chapter01.pdf](http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/uploads/WGIAR5_WGI12Doc2b_FinalDraft_Chapter01.pdf)

Looking back at the footprints of my life journey, my life seems to have consisted of more than events merely caused by fate and karma. By the time my graduate study was over, Myra and I had nothing but credit card debt. There were no relatives or supporting family members to help us. During our journey, we have had many incidents that have filled us with hopelessness and fear, but each time, we were caught by surprise and awe. Each day's needs were provided for just as the Jewish people were given manna each day in the wilderness journey. Even now, we still experience each day's sustaining source from the each day's income at Ecoterra. And since the farm was built, we have been nourished by fresh fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. Likewise, the planet Earth has been the main source of sustenance for all living beings. This thought process helps me to appreciate and savor what has been given to us and strive to use it to the fullest. With gratitude, we place our efforts to till and care for our planet earth.

### **Re-Cultivating**

Myra House was first built with several energy saving features. The house was installed with solar-photocell-electric panels, a grey water reusable system, sun heating water tank, high thermal windows, and green rated building materials. However, our way of life still fell short of living "sustainably" during those years. The house was considered an eco-home architecturally but the sustainable aspects of caring for the land and finding sustainable food sources were not yet fully incorporated. As we became serious about being intentional gardeners, we owed much to our neighbors and garden experts at the local nursery for every bit of knowledge they shared with us. However, once we began to apply those ideas in our garden, it unfortunately did not turn out as expected. Developing plots of land and harvesting produce require much effort, experience and knowledge. Our real learning happened through years of trial and error. We learned that good stewardship for the land does not mean doing the same work over and over again. Rather, it requires us to continually evolve our techniques in accordance with the intimate knowledge we can only acquire by working with the land.

Most recently, we decided to incorporate permacultural farming techniques to the north east corner lot. The mini farm was irrigated from the biologically balanced pond water, the farm includes worm's shelter, composting drum and tea stations. Dr. Guntram helped to extract compost tea brewing with a microbial food source-molasses, kelp and humic- acids. This farm technique has taught us how aerobic process extracts and why microorganisms become beneficial. He also helped us to install a container to collect liquid extract from chicken manure, pond water and green waste. We were able to cultivate bioactive organic matter in its various forms. These techniques have contributed to the regenerative cycle of the soil organisms and the rich diversity of life.

### **Re-Visioning**

By fate I was born into the Sohn family, in karma I chose to live in a community. At Myra House, our family members have been mostly young adults whose ethnicity is different from ours. With grace, the Myra House community has grown out, expanding our connection to the local community. Some friends have become benevolent supporters of what we are striving for. Visioning entails the ability to imagine how a community will develop in the future and to plan in a suitable way. Our path evolved as ongoing re-visioning took place over the decades. Communal living has been the key momentum that has helped us break through each impasse. The Living Water farm was one of the latest projects that wasn't possible just by the Sohn family.

The north corner lot was neglected for many years. The cultivation of that corner lot seemed impossible and overwhelming in terms of how much labor and financial resources it required. Through revising through re-visioning, that plot had the best turn out. The farm project became the center of interest as people came to visit it. It also enabled us to create partnerships with two local restaurants. The Myra House facilitates a network of interactions from the home to the farm to the local community.

Dr. Clayton spoke about the role of the Myra House community by reinterpreting Mathew 5: 14-16: "...A house on the hill on the Mills Ave...cannot be hid... gives light to all cities..." Indeed, we are especially grateful for what the Myra house has earned. Our re-visioning process will continue as the house truly

becomes the “house on the hill” giving light to people. Perhaps not coincidentally, that very passage was my early vision when I made the Myra House mailing label using same passage “let your light shine,” 12 years ago, during the beginning stages of the Myra House.

As we continually re-vision the mission of the Myra House, it is ironic and yet poignant that it never strays from the original vision statement “to educate future leaders of the local and global society facing emergent ecological crises and human illness.” We hope to continue strengthening our interdisciplinary curriculum in the areas of integrative health and sustainable living. Young people will not only engage with professional experience at Ecoterra Holistic Compounding pharmacy, also learn more about living in stronger connection with the earth networking partnership in the local neighborhood. We hope that each day, this community may grow closer to reaching that vision of becoming the “house on the hill” giving light for all people.