



By David W. Orr

AT THE END OF HIS LIFE, science-fiction writer and historian H. G. Wells was no optimist. Surveying things from his vantage point at the close of World War II and not long before his own death he wrote: “The end of everything we call life is close at hand and cannot be evaded” (H. G. Wells, 1946, p. 1). And 58 years later, Martin Rees, England’s Astronomer Royal and professor at Cambridge University, was no more optimistic, giving humankind 50-50 odds of making it to the year 2100 (Rees, 2003, p. 8). Indeed, any moderately well-informed high-school student could easily assemble a list of dozens of ways things could all come undone, ranging from whimpers to bangs. Gamblers at some intergalactic casino would not likely bet much on us. And what can be said for such a violent bunch that seems so intent on mutilating its own earthly home? We are a long shot, but so, too, were those small, unimpressive mammals scurrying about amidst the invincible dinosaurs of their time. If such intergalactic bets *are* being placed, there are a perceptive few who might see a modern-day equivalent to that earlier time when the long shot paid off. The small, vulnerable and unimpressive mammals won for many reasons, including their agility, resilience, adaptability and intelligence-to-body-mass ratio.

All informed citizens know about the perils ahead, including rapid climate destabilization, species extinction, pollution, terrorism and ecological unraveling in its many forms, and the human, political and economic consequences. But fewer have stopped to look at

the wider topography, where something quite remarkable is occurring. Below the radar screen and outside the cultural buzz, a revolution is beginning to gather steam at the grassroots and in out-of-the-way places around the world. While the headlines report one military excursion or another on the chessboard of geopolitics, or yet another “triumph” for the juggernaut of globalization, people and small organizations with long names and short budgets are beginning to construct a different world. As unimpressive as those small furry mammals were relative to the giants of a distant time, the outline of something far better is beginning to emerge in communities and organizations around the world.

It is happening first at the periphery of power and wealth, where revolutions often start. It is evident in farmers beginning to mimic natural systems in order to preserve their soil and land. It is evident in a new attitude emerging everywhere about the value of biological diversity and species protection. It is evident in the rapid development of technologies that harness sunlight and wind. It is evident in the burgeoning interest in green building, green architecture, green engineering and green communities. It is evident in a growing number of businesses selling “products of service” and preserving natural capital as a matter of conscience and profit. It is evident in a new religious sensibility across the full spectrum of faith traditions that regards stewardship of the Earth as obligatory. It is evident in education and the emergence of new ways to think about the human role in nature that stretch our perspective to whole systems and out to the far horizon of imagination.

The “it” is often called “sustainability,” an indefinite term. But by whatever name, this revolution is more sweeping by far than that which we associate with the Enlightenment of the 18th century. The sustainability revolution is nothing less than a rethinking and remaking of our role in the natural world. It is a recalibration of human intentions to coincide with the way the biophysical world works. It is a slowing down to the rhythms of our bodies, convivial association and nature. The concern for our longevity as a species represents a maturing of our kind to consider ourselves first as “plain

members and citizens” of an ecological community, and second as trustees of all that is past with all that is yet to come — a mystic chain of gratitude, obligation, compassion and hope.

If this revolution grows and matures as I believe that it will, it will do one other thing: it will improve our worthiness to be sustained. Imagine a tribunal of all species sitting in judgment over *Homo sapiens* charged to rule on our fitness to remain on Earth based on our behavior over the past ten thousand years. How would we be judged? Other than the votes of cockroaches, crows and any number of viruses, the motion to evict us would win by a large margin. Even to raise the question, however, would be taken as a sign of misanthropy or worse. But failure to do so rests on the fatal assumption that we live outside the community of life and beyond the call to a larger duty than that of human dominion. The revolution described here, in other words, is not simply about making ourselves physically sustainable at whatever cost, but rather about something akin to a species maturing into its fullest stature — one worthy of being sustained — a revolution of charity, magnanimity and spirit.

In the pages that follow, educator, designer and consultant Andrés Edwards paints what he calls a portrait of this revolution. His description crosses national boundaries as well as the divisions between academic disciplines and sectors of the economy. The sustainability revolution is steadily reshaping our lives and our place in the larger fabric of life for the better. But there is nothing inevitable about any revolution or about any good thing. Ultimately these are matters of choice and fate. But this book helps us put the odds in perspective and clarify the point that despair can be overcome by a revolution of hope, competence and intelligence underlain by wisdom.

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