

Global Systems INITIATIVES

"Applying a whole systems approach to complex global issues."



The Global Systems Review is a periodic e-newsletter that explores critical world issues through the lens of whole systems thinking

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The Global Systems Review is a periodic e-newsletter that explores critical world issues through the lens of whole systems thinking.

This issue consists of a series of reflections on what a different kind of 'pro-life' perspective might mean for policy-making in general.

Life and Life Only

By Louise Diamond

In August, Washington takes a break. Congress is in recess. Staff take vacations. Sane people leave the swamp (yes, Washington DC was built on a swamp) for cooler climes.

Vermont is where I come to escape the sultry dog days. As the sunset spills down the mountain outside my window like a red curtain, I settle in for a period of blessed reflection. What sense can I make of what I've seen and heard this past year spent in our nation's capitol, on the edges of the policy community?

The one theme that runs through my Washington experience is the theme of life itself. Ultimately all our policies – whether national or global in scope – are about our lives. What follows, then, is a set of musings about what a different kind of 'pro-life' agenda might mean – not in reference to abortion, but in reference to fostering and enhancing the life-force in people and planet.

The Dance of Destruction and Creation

Of people, places, and things, let's start with things: weapons of mass destruction. These are things I'm concerned with; and concerned about. Years ago, a high school senior in my small Vermont town uttered a chilling truth. His physics class had built weapons, essentially catapults, that hurled ammunition (jello squares) at other teams. It was war.

Before they began, though, the teacher told the class that they didn't really have to fight: there was pizza and coke enough for all, not just the winner of the battle. This young man turned to his buddies (they had built the largest and strongest weapon and were assigned the role of the United States in this global conflict) and said, 'Is he kidding? After all the time and effort I put into building this thing, you'd better believe I'm going to use it!'

Humanity has put enormous energy into developing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. It's absurd to imagine that sooner or later someone somewhere won't want to use them. The policy community, gratefully, is working hard to make sure that doesn't happen, but the question we haven't addressed, it seems to me, is the one about why we've developed them in the first place. What does it say about the human family that we want to create things that destroy life on such a vast scale?

Mass destruction is meant to take out people by the millions, and in some cases destroy the environment that sustains life as well. What sense can we make of this desire? Does *thanatos*, the death drive, infuse our collective psyche so deeply? Do we have so little respect for the miracles of creation, whatever our religion or belief system?

It seems to me that weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) are the ultimate expression of the worldview of separation. Violence against any other (individual, group, nation) assumes 'us' against 'them.' Violence against another on such a massive scale assumes life itself – especially the life of 'the other' – is separate from us, and can be destroyed at will. But we are not separate from life, nor from each other. We are all connected in a complex, intricate, magnificent and mysterious web of life; we embody, literally, the life-force energy of creation. We are life, and life only, seeking to fulfill itself. And, as we are beginning to realize in our 21st century interconnected world, there is no 'other;' there is only one of us, one 'we.' As President Obama said repeatedly during his campaign, 'We're all in this together.'

Interestingly, our policy leaders have begun to understand this. Whereas atomic and nuclear weapons were developed to be used against 'the enemy' during the Cold War, and were viewed as necessary to our security, now they are understood as a threat to that security should they fall into the hands of terrorists or

proliferate among many other countries. We have changed the story. When nukes were seen to have positive value, we couldn't build enough of them. Now that we realize they have negative value, we can't destroy them fast enough.

While we can all hope our rush to a world of zero outpaces our high school friend's declaration, what's important is that we have taken the first step: we have indeed changed the story – at least some of us have. Changing our minds is the first step to changing the world. A new definition of being 'pro-life' could go a long way to saving the world from our own folly. As Congress takes up ratification of the START treaty, I pray that this 'pro-life' story will prevail and we will create a new chapter of human life together.

Climate, Water, and Oil, Oh My!

Now on to 'places.' Let's talk about our world, the place where we live. Newsflash: The one interconnected human family is an integral part of one larger interdependent living ecosystem. Humanity shares the web of life with creatures large and small, winged and scaled, with plants and minerals of every shape, color, and size. In the woods and streams, meadows and mountains of Vermont, this is no big secret. In the concrete and steel byways of our cities, including Washington DC, and in the boardrooms of big corporations, this is harder to grasp.

Two recent comments about the Gulf oil spill got my attention. One was a colleague expressing her surprise to discover that nature was stronger than humans. We have pretended otherwise for too long. Another was a newspaper article describing poll results which showed that, contrary to expectations, the environmental devastation from the oil spill did not increase people's interest in finding alternative energy sources. While I understand economic uncertainty and the imperative of jobs, the ostrich head-in-the-sand phenomenon is not useful.

Our separation from and exploitation of the natural world has led us to some dire edges. Not only are we at or near (or past) peak oil; we are also at or near (or past) peak water, and ultimately water is more critical than oil. We've acidified the oceans; turned forests into wastelands; dried up arable land and expanded deserts; lost untold numbers of species; poisoned our soils; fouled our air; and changed our climate. Doesn't sound like a 'pro-life' agenda to me.

In short, to the list of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons of mass destruction, we must now add our abuse of the natural world. Not only have we separated ourselves from our own living environment, taking us to the edge of an unpredictable tipping point and threatening our children's survival, but we have done so for the crassest of reasons – money.

Money is not life-giving – food is. Money is not life-giving – water is. The rainforests are life-giving; healthy oceans, fertile soil, and unpolluted air are life-giving. If we put life and life only at the heart of our policy considerations, things look very different than if we put executive bonuses and shareholder gains – or political careers, or ideology – at the center.

We're changing the story about nuclear weapons; now we need to change the story about our relationship to the living planet. Instead of arguing about climate science, or continuing to subsidize the oil industry, our political leaders need to walk in the woods in springtime and marvel at the wildflowers, or stand in the waves and feel how the vast seas connect us to other continents and nurture unimaginable life forms. They need to remember to thank the water that comes out of the tap when they're thirsty, and feel the earth between their toes not as dirt to be removed quickly but as that which makes possible the food on their plates.

John Donne told us that 'each man's death diminishes me.' Each species that goes extinct; each acre of farmland bulldozed for a new shopping mall; each dead zone in the ocean; each oil spill on land or water; each melting glacier diminishes all of us, and our future potential.

The dictionary definition of the verb 'to diminish' includes not only 'to decrease' and 'to lessen' but also 'to weaken.' We speak of America being strong, of our national security and strength being paramount, even as we continue to weaken the very fabric of life that sustains us. In recent years there has been a growing recognition in the foreign affairs community that climate and energy and food are indeed issues of national security, but that recognition is still mostly tied to our understanding of their economic and military impact. If we want to strengthen our presence in the world, and indeed strengthen the world, we need to start thinking of the life-force/ecosystem impact of all our political decisions. Urgently. Again, a different kind of 'pro-life' agenda.

For the People...

What would life and life only policies mean to the people of this nation (and this world)? While the abortion debate, with which the 'pro-life' phrase is associated, is about the fact of life, what's often missing in our national and international policies is a concern about the quality of life.

The Wall Street/Main Street distinction has become a serious conversation, with the former thriving so outrageously while the latter suffers loss of jobs, homes, health insurance, pensions, and dignity. With the Supreme Court reaffirming the view that corporations are to be considered individuals, we've further distanced ourselves from the life experience of millions of our citizens.

What happens to families when jobs are lost? How are they surviving? What happens to families when they lose their homes? What happens to those ready to retire who discover they no longer have the pensions they counted on? We get the occasional story in the newspaper, or we may know someone personally in

such a situation, but for the most part, that suffering is invisible in the mainstream press, and just more fodder for partisan grandstanding in Congress.

We further separate ourselves from the life-force when we base our economic indicators and our national priorities on 'things.' We honor the quantifiable – how many, how much, how often? – and neglect the qualifiable – how does it feel?

To ask, 'how many jobs were outsourced this year?' is very different than to ask, how does it feel to work thirty years in one company, only to see your job outsourced to a teenager in Asia and your pension disappear?' To examine the results of standardized tests to determine how well our education system is doing is very different than to ask, 'how does it feel to graduate from high school with no good job prospects at all because your education was sub-standard, or the color of your skin puts you at the bottom of the hiring pool?'

To rant about the millions of undocumented workers or the number of border patrol officers is very different than to wonder, 'how does it feel to be grabbed at work, languish for months in an overcrowded detention center, and then deported while your children are left behind to fend for themselves?'

It isn't only that we don't put these questions in the center of our policy considerations; it's that we don't care. We don't care about people's suffering. If we did, we would address poverty, health care, business regulation, immigration, jobs, war, and other issues very differently. We would approach policy-making with compassion rather than ideology; with a people-focus rather than a political or economic or special-interest focus.

A New and Better Story

Orienting our policies toward truly assuaging human suffering, improving the quality of life of our citizens and people the world over, and honoring the fragile ecosystem of this one planet we all call home would require changing our core assumptions and mental models. It would mean revamping the stories we tell ourselves about what's truly important.

Putting life and life only at the heart of all our deliberations and decisions – at the local, national, and global levels; about people, places, and things – would necessitate a shift in consciousness (or at least a re-balancing), from separation to connectedness; from short-term to long-term thinking; from quantity to quality.

I came to Washington and started Global Systems Initiatives to foster that in our political and governmental spheres. While I see glimmers of light here and there in this administration, I see still a great need for that shift to happen quickly and efficiently among our policy leaders.

From the mountain woodlands of Vermont, on a cool summer day, it's relatively easy to sit back and reflect on the big picture like this. I understand that in the day-to-day of decision-making, with patterns and habits and ways of doing and being deeply entrenched, and reinforced by an increasingly fragmented and adversarial media, making this shift in worldview and then applying it to specific policies is quite a challenge.

The start of the school year in September was always, for me, a time of excitement and renewal. As I prepare to return to Washington to assist policy leaders in taking on this challenge, I feel like I'm starting yet another year in school. This one, I trust, will be the best ever! How can it not be, with life and life only as my teacher?

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