

Today's Youth will still be here in 2050

by Ralph C. Martin

Although I lost my qualifications for Youth status a few decades ago, I was fortunate to attend the IMPACT! Youth Conference for Sustainability (www.impactyouthsustainability.ca) at the University of Guelph. It was instructive for me to hear so many energetic conversations with a depth of understanding.

There was no doubt the 165 young (ages 19 – 25) participants could articulate visions for the future. Peter Senge, the author of *The Necessary Revolution*, would be proud to see they are following his advice to approach the future with a clear vision as well as a firm understanding of reality in the present.

Unlike me, the young conference goers expect to be here in the latter part of the 21st century. This is when the destabilizing consequences of human disturbances are likely to become more acute.

These young inquirers do not accept all conventional wisdom. Their suggestions caught me off guard. I have no idea whether social media will help to shift consciousness as much as some expect. It might. I don't know if advanced hot air balloons will reduce energy needs and greenhouse gas emissions. Possibly. They know they need options to live well in 2050 and beyond.

I was struck by how many exchanges resulted in commitments to reduce debt, to reduce consumption and to reduce waste. In addition, an awareness of the risk of burn-out or cynicism when struggling without a moral and/or spiritual orientation was discussed on the basis of evident experience.

At one point, in an Open Space session, a large circle of highly aware young people chose to share what they had learned about sustainability and spirituality, from wise elders, including Thomas Berry (www.thomasberry.org), Jonna Macy

(www.joannamacy.net) and Paul Hawken (www.paulhawken.com). This was not a rah-rah pep rally to simply work harder and do more of the same. There were pauses and occasional tears. Talking was balanced with listening, thinking and empathy. The levity and exuberance of youth were appropriately on full display in this circle and yet, in the context of responsible Canadians persevering for the long haul.

I asked several conference participants why so few of their friends vote. Many of them are discouraged with our political system and they suspect that politicians are under pressure to strengthen society as it has been. They worry that there won't be sufficient money or resources left to deal with problems they will face when boomers are gone. I'm still old fashioned enough to encourage them to vote. Imagine what might happen if all voters under 30, flexed their political muscles. On the other hand, substantive shifts may germinate, emerge and grow outside political channels and politicians may then follow to support successful new options.

When I was a younger baby boomer, we were on track to be YUPies – Young Urban Professionals. For several years I've been encouraging my students to be YEETies – Young Ecological Entrepreneurial Professionals (or Practitioners). They will make it their business to know how ecological systems work and will design and implement enterprises, jobs and products congruent with the cycles of our Planet.

YEETies understand that our Human Project as Thomas Berry calls it, has impacted Earth in geological proportions. The Earth Project or Ecozoic of Thomas Berry, is a more sustainable option. If we choose the Earth Project, YEETies will attempt to understand how evolved systems of feedback loops maintain resiliency and to avoid damage by allowing these systems to function. Their motto might be extracted from our grandparents. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

In this conference I learned that bright young citizens see the future in some ways unfamiliar to me. They expect to live in that future and are serious about explorations to

sustain a living with clean air, adequate clean water, healthy soil, social equity, food security, energy security and peace.

As the conference closed, quotes from these wise youth rang true. “I will build relationships; they are the new currency.” “I pledge to buy less and love more.” “If we have an unsustainable base, how will we get to a sustainable future?” “I want a future that is cooperative as in the name of the Co-operators who sponsored this conference.” “Excuses will stop.”

What then is the role of boomers like me? Most of us have had a good run in this world. Our demographic bulge has been pampered at each of our life stages. Perhaps our role is to offer the most authentic wisdom and support we can. Then we can take a few steps back to create more space for youth who legitimately aspire to live their lives well, now and tomorrow.

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