



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Plant a tree

Clay Nelson © 23 June 2019

There is a story in the Jewish Talmud about planting trees. A sage is walking along the road and sees someone planting a carob tree. The sage asks the person, “How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?”

“Seventy years,” replies the gardener.

The sage then asks: “Are you so healthy a person that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?”

The gardener answers: “I found a fruitful world, because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise I am planting for my children.” (Talmud Ta’anit 23a)

This simple story is about hope and stewardship of the world gifted to us by those who came before, but it raises a question for me. If I went out this afternoon and planted a fruit tree, would there be anyone around to eat the fruit in seventy years? It may seem a long time away to the young, but to someone who is seventy it is the blink of an eye.

We are making the planet inhospitable to human life at an unprecedented rate. A harrowing new climate change report by an Australian think tank warns we may be on the way to extinction, claiming there is a “high likelihood” human civilisation will come to an end by 2050 unless action is taken on greenhouse gas emissions.

According to the report’s central “2050 scenario,” one billion people will be forced to relocate from unliveable conditions while food production will become inadequate to feed the global population.

North America will suffer from devastating weather extremes including wildfires, heatwaves and drought — while other places in the world such as the Middle East and West Africa will become unliveable.

Meanwhile, 55% of the global population would be subjected to more than 20 days a year of lethal heat conditions, “beyond the threshold of human survivability.”

“This scenario provides a glimpse into a world of ‘outright chaos’ on a path to the end of human civilisation and modern society as we have known it, in which the challenges to global security are simply overwhelming and political panic becomes the norm,” the authors claim.

That may just be scare-mongering but a day doesn’t pass without news of more catastrophic damage to our environment. In only the last week there was a report of permafrost melting much faster than predicted releasing large amounts of carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide into the atmosphere. We all know what carbon dioxide does, but I didn’t know that besides

contributing to global warming, nitrous oxide eats away at the ozone layer that allows life on the planet by protecting us from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

So what are we going to do about it? This is the only question worth asking. But the answers appear elusive. Faced with a multifaceted crisis – the capture of governments by billionaires and their lobbyists, extreme inequality, the rise of demagogues, above all the collapse of the living world – those to whom we look for leadership appear stunned, voiceless, clueless. Even if they had the courage to act, they have no idea what to do.

The most they tend to offer is more economic growth: the fairy dust supposed to make all the bad stuff disappear. Never mind that it drives ecological destruction; that it has failed to relieve structural unemployment or soaring inequality; that, in some recent years, almost all the increment in incomes has been harvested by the top 1%. As values, principles and moral purpose are lost, the promise of growth is all that's left.

We cannot hope to address our predicament without a new worldview. We cannot use the models that caused our crises to solve them. We need to reframe the problem.

Kate Raworth does this in her book *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. Raworth of Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute reminds us that economic growth was not, at first, intended to signify wellbeing. Simon Kuznets, who standardised the measurement of growth, warned: "The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income." Economic growth, he pointed out, measured only annual flow, rather than stocks of wealth and their distribution.

Raworth points out that economics in the 20th century "lost the desire to articulate its goals". It aspired to be a science of human behaviour: a science based on a deeply flawed portrait of humanity. The dominant model – "rational economic man", self-interested, isolated, calculating – says more about the nature of economists than it does about other humans. The loss of an explicit objective allowed the discipline to be captured by a proxy goal: endless growth.

The aim of economic activity, she argues, should be "meeting the needs of all within the means of the planet". Instead of economies that need to grow, whether or not they make us thrive, we need economies that "make us thrive, whether or not they grow". This means changing our picture of what the economy is and how it works.

Nearly fifty years ago, economist E F Schumacher laid down the principles that have clearly influenced Raworth in his book *Small is beautiful: Economics as if people mattered*. In the first chapter of *Small Is Beautiful*, he makes the case for reinventing the modern industrial system because it fails to value correctly three kinds of capital, which he designated as 1) "fossil fuels" or non-renewable energy; 2) "the tolerance margins of nature" (meaning that nature has a certain capacity to absorb what we throw at it, but beyond that amount the tolerance begins to erode); and 3) "the human substance." Schumacher argued that economic analysis and enterprise accounting should focus on a triple bottom line, not only return on financial capital invested but also return on social capital and environmental capital invested. Such enterprises are now called "profit, people, and planet" businesses or social enterprises.

Raworth takes up Schumacher's challenge to reinvent the modern industrial system. The central image in mainstream economics depicts a closed flow of income cycling between

households, businesses, banks, government and trade, operating in a social and ecological vacuum. Energy, materials, the natural world, human society, power, the wealth we hold in common ... all are missing from the model. The unpaid work of carers – principally women – is ignored, though no economy could function without them. Like rational economic man, this representation of economic activity bears little relationship to reality.

So Raworth begins by redrawing the economy. She embeds it in the Earth's systems and in society, showing how it depends on the flow of materials and energy, and reminding us that we are more than just workers, consumers and owners of capital. It looks like a doughnut.

Picture a classic doughnut with a hole in the middle. It's made up of two circles – one, the inside edge, and the other, the outside. The former can be thought of as the *social foundation*, while the latter represents an *ecological ceiling*.

Between these two rings – in the dough, to stick to our metaphor – is what the author terms “a safe and just home for humanity.” A place defined by *dynamic balance*. Within it, all our social needs can be met without overburdening the planet.

The doughnut's social foundation includes everything that humans need in order to live. That covers basics such as access to clean water and food, but there's more to it than that.

We don't just want humans to simply survive, we want them to *thrive*. A full human life is about more than just having enough to eat. It also requires more abstract social goods like support networks, a sense of community, political representation and gender equality.

And what about the ecological ceiling?

Essentially, this is the ecological boundary we have to respect if we also want the earth to thrive.

In 2009, a group of earth systems scientists, led by Johan Rockström and Will Steffen, identified nine processes vital to our planet's ability to sustain human life. These processes are threatened by ozone layer depletion, ocean acidification, nitrogen and phosphorus loading, chemical pollution, freshwater depletion, land conversion, air pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss.

The outer ring of the doughnut functions as a “guardrail” to protect these key processes. If we cross it, we risk environmental catastrophe. The problem, however, is that we've already leaped over the rail at least four times! Climate change, nitrogen and phosphorus loading, land conversion and biodiversity loss are already well underway.

The clock is already ticking and time is in short supply. If we want to get humanity into the doughnut, we have to act now.

But before we do anything, we need to change the way we think about the world. And that starts by challenging our obsession with endless growth.

I find a glimmer of hope in Labour's recent "well-being" budget that seeks to move away from gross national product as a measure of economic success to one focused on the well-being of every New Zealander. But it will take more than one budget to overcome the 18<sup>th</sup> century thinking put forth in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* that has dominated economic thinking to the present if the environment is to be saved. Whether it will work and become a new international norm, saving the planet in the nick of time, is impossible to know.

In the meantime I will turn to those who have found hope in spite of insurmountable odds, like African American women, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. They are examples of writers speaking from a context of grief and injustice, offering narratives of survival and restoration, about attaining peace. We can learn hope from those who have known hopelessness and have come through to the other side.

As you face the truth of beauty and apocalypse, and as you sift through the ashes for wisdom, who are your guides bearing the scars of suffering and survival? There are many around us. May we be open to learning from those who know the terrible truths and recognize their restoring and sustaining practices, as Rebecca Parker writes, "*reconstructing from the ruins, a world of hospitality and peace*".

Poet Adrienne Rich writes:

"My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.  
A passion to make, and make again  
where such un-making reigns."

Schumacher would add that the most radical thing we can do to reconstitute the world is plant a tree.