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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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2010

STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

Advance Praise for *State of the World 2010*:

“If we continue to think of ourselves mostly as consumers, it’s going to be very hard to bring our environmental troubles under control. But it’s also going to be very hard to live the rounded and joyful lives that could be ours. This is a subversive volume in all the best ways!”

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“This year’s *State of the World* report is a cultural mindbomb exploding with devastating force. I hope it wakes a few people up.”

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Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth’s ecosystems. Left unaddressed, we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave, intentionally transforming our cultures to center on sustainability, we will not only prevent catastrophe but may usher in an era of sustainability—one that allows all people to thrive while protecting, even restoring, Earth.

In this year’s *State of the World* report, 50+ renowned researchers and practitioners describe how we can harness the world’s leading institutions—education, the media, business, governments, traditions, and social movements—to reorient cultures toward sustainability.



full image



extreme close-up

Several million pounds of plastic enter the world’s oceans every hour, portrayed on the cover by the 2.4 million bits of plastic that make up *Gyre*, Chris Jordan’s 8- by 11-foot reincarnation of the famous 1820s woodblock print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai.

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Ritual and Taboo as Ecological Guardians

Gary Gardner

“Keeping kosher,” the ancient Jewish practice of observing dietary laws, has great practical and symbolic value for many Jews. It promotes awareness of the abundant generosity of the divine and prescribes a particular, respectful relationship with the fruits of God’s creation. Some observant Jews are now working to establish an “eco-kosher” tradition: right eating and right consumption to preserve environmental health. Eco-kosher would infuse Jewish commandments with modern meaning: *Bal Tashchit*, the injunction not to waste, might apply to excessive or non-recycled food packaging; *Tzaar Baalei Chayyim*, the commandment to avoid cruelty to animals, could speak to confined livestock operations; and *Shmirat Haguf*, the requirement that people take care of their bodies, might prohibit foods that have been sprayed with pesticides. The environmental framing of ancient kosher rituals and prohibitions adds a powerful transcendent dimension to environmental protection.¹

Transforming cultures of consumerism into cultures of sustainability will require a broad set of tools, including, perhaps surprisingly, ritual and taboo. Rituals—defined here as formal acts, repeated regularly, that have deep meaning for a community of people—help people

to internalize and communicate deep-seated values. And taboos—the cultural prohibition of specific acts and products—might also help to proscribe human activities in an environmentally degraded world.²

Although commonly associated with spiritual practices, rituals and taboos are as much a secular as a religious phenomenon. A prime minister or president singing the national anthem, hand over heart, is engaged in a powerful ritualistic behavior that speaks deeply to compatriots, for example. And disrespecting a flag or other national symbol is a common taboo in many countries.

Whether secular or religious, political or personal, rituals and taboos in a consumer culture often reinforce that culture and the environmental problems it brings. But increasingly these practices are being used to bring mindfulness to modern habits of consumption, as the example of eco-kosher suggests. Ritual and taboo could become powerful, if largely intangible, tools for building cultures of sustainability.

The Power of Ritual

Ritual communication has long had an important role in protecting the natural environ-

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ment. Cultural ecologist E. N. Anderson observes that in indigenous societies that have managed resources well for sustained periods, the credit often goes to “religious or ritual representation of resource management.” This is in part because of the nature of ritual. Anthropologist Roy Rappaport and others suggest that ritual is a more powerful form of communication than even language and that this advantage is useful for environmental protection, especially in cultures like indigenous ones that are deeply embedded in the natural environment. Rituals express deep, culturally accepted truths in ways that language, which is easily manipulated and often used in service of falsehoods, cannot.³

As an example of the power of ritual, Swedish historian of religions Anne-Christine Hornborg cites the effort by the Mi’kmaq people on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, to stop development of a quarry proposed for a Mi’kmaq sacred mountain in the early 1990s. While a range of groups, including environmentalists, stepped up to oppose the project, most of them used data, analysis, and rhetoric to highlight environmental and other impacts of the quarry. The quarry company easily parried these arguments with its own statistics and analyses.⁴

The Mi’kmaq, however, took a different approach, relying on ritual, including a sweat lodge, drumming, and pow-wows, as their “argument,” and documenting that the mountain was a traditional Mi’kmaq sacred site. The company had a difficult time countering the Mi’kmaq rituals because, as Hornborg explains it, rituals are “immune to bureaucratic control.” Or, as another scholar eloquently summarized it, “You cannot argue with a song.” In the end, the company dropped its bid. While many reasons are given by different parties for the company’s decision, the Mi’kmaq rituals, says Hornborg, were a powerful and possibly decisive influence.⁵

Rappaport and other scholars cite many

examples of cultures that use ritual and taboo for environmental protection. The Tsembaga people of New Guinea, for instance, use elaborate pig festivals that include ritual slaughters and pig-eating rituals to achieve ecological balance. Ritual pig slaughtering, which occurs when pig populations have grown too large, lowers ecological pressures, redistributes land and pigs among people, and ensures that the neediest are the first to receive limited supplies of pork.⁶

Ethnographers tell similar stories. In Ghana, the traditional beliefs and taboos of the Ningo people protect turtles, which are viewed as gods, and mollusks, whose habitat is found in a sacred lagoon. Harvesting each species is forbidden, but no such taboos exist in neighboring Ghanaian coastal cultures. As a result, some 80 percent of turtle nesting areas along the Ghanaian coast are found in Ningo protected areas, and mollusks are up to seven times more prevalent in areas protected by taboo than in neighboring areas.⁷

These examples are not isolated cases of conservation. A 1997 analysis of species-specific taboos found strong overlap between taboos and official assessments of species endangerment: some 62 percent of reptiles and 44 percent of mammals protected by indigenous rituals and taboos were also identified as threatened in the World Conservation Union’s *Red List* of endangered species, suggesting that indigenous peoples are skilled monitors of species endangerment. And as the examples just cited suggest, indigenous peoples have also developed strategies for protecting species, perhaps through co-evolutionary processes whereby human practices, including taboos, change in step with threats to the well-being of various species.⁸

Rituals of Consumerism

Rituals in consumer cultures may be powerful carriers of meaning, just as they are in indigenous cultures, but many also help to spread



McKay Savage

Less toxic than most: In Chennai, India, a statue of Ganesh is made almost entirely of fruits and vegetables.

consumerist values. Consider modern rites of passage—weddings, funerals, bar/bat mitzvahs, and *quinceañeras*, for example—which in many cases have become events marked by heavy consumption, compared with their old-fashioned predecessors.

The Wedding Report, a market research firm, says that weddings are a \$60-billion industry in the United States, with the average celebration in 2008 costing nearly \$22,000. The expenditures cover a range of goods and services—invitations, gifts, meals, paper goods, flowers, rings, guest travel, and attire, to name a few—each with its own ecological footprint. Guests who fly in for the event, for instance, have an extraordinary carbon footprint. The reception can have a large impact as well, especially if meat is served and if the food was not grown locally. And the two new gold rings that the celebrants exchange required the removal of tons of ore and earth, along with toxic flows of chemicals to extract the gold.⁹

Modern funerals, too, can carry an unnecessary ecological footprint. Today funerals in western countries typically involve an elaborate casket, embalming, flowers, and a cemetery plot with a concrete liner and marble headstone. The materials requirements for funerals in the United States—some 1.5 million tons of concrete and 14,000 tons of steel for funeral vaults, and 90,000 tons of steel and nearly 3,000 tons of copper and bronze for caskets—is not huge as a share of all concrete and metals used in the country. But many of the features of modern funerals are recent innovations that are entirely unnecessary. After all, just a few generations ago, even in industrial countries, the body

of the deceased was prepared at home—wrapped in a shroud or placed in a simple wooden box. And in some cultures today the ritual has scarcely any environmental impact: in the Tibetan “sky burial” the body of the deceased, believed to be an empty vessel now devoid of a soul, is cut up and left for vultures to feed on. However unpalatable to the western mind, this ritual is environmentally restorative and does not spread consumerist values.¹⁰

Traditional holidays and feasts can be occasions of heavy consumption and environmental impact. Christmas is a commonly cited example, but other holidays make the point as well. In India the festival of Ganesh Chathauri—which honors Ganesh, the god that is half-elephant, half-man—typically involves the use of thousands of large idols painted in bright colors. At the festival’s end, these are immersed in rivers, lakes, and the sea, where the paints and other materials contaminate the water. In the Bangalore area,

where an estimated 25,000–30,000 idols have been used in festivals in recent years, a test of four lakes found increased acidification, a doubling of dissolved solids, a tenfold increase in iron content, and a 200–300 percent increase in copper in sediments. Many observers have called for alternative ways of marking Ganesh Chathauri—using biodegradable materials for the idols, for example, or ritually sprinkling them in lieu of immersing them in water bodies.¹¹

Shopping itself has become a major ritual around some holidays. In the United States, “Black Friday”—the day after Thanksgiving and a non-working day for most people—is a shopping extravaganza that marks the opening of the Christmas shopping season. A Web site promoting Black Friday deals is up months before the day arrives, and people line up outside of malls and major stores, many of which open their doors before dawn. Black Friday has become a popular shopping ritual in itself, with extensive media coverage. And it now stands as a symbol of excess, with some stores experiencing violence, injuries, and even death as shoppers rush the doors at opening time.¹²

Rituals and Taboos for Sustainable Consumption

Modern rituals for sustainability can be developed out of virtually any dimension of the human experience. “Green funerals” are increasingly common, in which families can choose an environmentally benign end-of-life ritual that foregoes embalming, uses a simple wooden box or even a shroud for the deceased, avoids use of a burial vault, and in some cases marks the grave with shrubs, trees, or a stone native to the area, leaving the burial field or forest in an entirely natural state. According to the Centre for Green Burial in the United Kingdom, green burials are now available in Australia, Canada, Europe, and the United States.¹³

Holidays are another opportunity to green

common rituals. New Year’s Day, for instance, is celebrated in many cultures, whether on the Gregorian, Chinese, Hebrew, Islamic, or other calendar. For many people, entering a new year is foremost about marking the passage of time. And in this era of civilizational transition—an epoch akin to the shift from hunter-gatherers to farmers, or from agrarian to industrial societies—the new year may be a time to reflect in a long-term sense. (See Box 4.)¹⁴

But New Year’s Day is also a time to set a new direction. In Peru and other Latin American countries, for example, people make effigies to represent all that was bad in the year past, then burn them at midnight. In Japan, *Bonenkai* or “forget-the-year parties” are held in December to prepare for the new year by bidding farewell to the concerns of the past year. Would annual cleansing rituals be an appropriate time to review personal and community failures to respect and preserve the natural world—and to vow to do better in the new year?

Earth Day is a relatively new calendar-based ritual that was established specifically to promote environmental awareness and care for the planet. Since its founding in 1970, Earth Day has become a global celebration, with more than a billion people participating, according to the Earth Day Network. The group claims to work with more than 15,000 organizations in 174 countries to create “the only event celebrated simultaneously around the globe by people of all backgrounds, faiths and nationalities.” Such a global platform could become a powerful place from which to lead the entire human family in ritual appreciation of the planet.¹⁵

Fasting, a ritual discipline practiced in many religions, is being used by many people to raise consciousness about personal practices that might be used for a more sustainable world. In 2009 the bishops of Liverpool and London called on Christians to undertake a

Box 4. Deepening Perceptions of Time

The Long Now Foundation was founded in 2002 to help change long-term thinking from being difficult and rare to common and easy. (The foundation uses five-digit dates; the extra zero is to solve the deca-millennium bug that will come into effect in about 8,000 years.) It started with an idea from Danny Hillis, who pioneered the massive parallel logic of today's fastest super-computers. Hillis wanted to build an all-mechanical 10,000-year clock as an icon to long-term thinking.

Hillis was inspired by a story relayed to him by *Whole Earth Catalog* editor Stewart Brand: "I think of the oak beams in the ceiling of College Hall at New College, Oxford. Last century, when the beams needed replacing, carpenters used oak trees that had been planted in 1386 when the dining hall was first built. The 14th-century builder had planted the trees in anticipation of the time, hundreds of years in the future, when the beams would need replacing."

Over the last 14 years, several prototypes and material studies have been completed of the clock, and the monument-scale version is now being built. It will be located at one of the foundation's high desert sites and stretch out through several hundred feet of underground caverns. Hillis hopes that a clock "that ticks once a year, bongs once a century, and the cuckoo comes out once a millennium" will help reframe the way people look at the future. Since that first inspiration, the foundation has embarked on several projects to promote long-term thinking.

Long Bets is an online wagering site where anyone can make bets and predictions of social and scientific consequence. All the proceeds plus half the interest go to the charity of the winner's choice; the rest of the interest goes to Long Bets to maintain the service.

Since its inception in 2002, bets have covered a diverse set of topics, from when the human population will peak to when solar electricity will become cheaper than fossil fuels.

The Rosetta Project is a compendium of all the world's documented languages micro-etched as readable text onto a three-inch wafer of pure nickel. The disk was designed to last for millennia and act as a key to languages that may become lost or extinct. In 2009, one of the disks was accepted into the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archive. Just as discovery of the original Rosetta Stone allowed researchers to decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics in the 1800s, this modern version could provide the same service for future civilizations.

All these projects, as well as a monthly seminar series about long-term thinking hosted by Stewart Brand, are attempts to change the conversation. If society only works on problems that can be solved in a four- to eight-year election cycle, then none of the truly large issues can be tackled. Solving problems in education, hunger, health care, macrofinance, population, and the environment all require a diligence and responsibility over decades, if not centuries. If the right time frame is used to solve these issues, what was once intractable can become possible.

Humans are a tenacious species. Chances are that 10,000 years from now, just like 10,000 years ago, there will be people walking on Earth. Just what kind of Earth, and just what kind of life those people may be living, will likely depend on the acorns we sow today that grow into the great oaks of our future.

Alexander Rose
Long Now Foundation
Source: See endnote 14.

carbon fast as a way to demonstrate restraint in consumption and solidarity with people affected by climate change. The call was sup-

ported by Ed Milliband, the Minister of Energy and Climate Change in the United Kingdom, and promoted by a development agency, Tear-

fund, which had enlisted more than 2,000 people for the 2008 fast. Similarly, Muslims in Chicago are being asked to “green Ramadan” by expanding their understanding of the annual ritual fast to include eating locally grown food, reducing their household ecological footprint by 25 percent, switching to cleaner sources of energy, and stepping up the practices of recycling and walking.¹⁶

Fasting can be conceived more broadly to include a wide range of activities in modern consumer societies. Many possibilities for setting aside consumerist habits already exist. World Carfree Day, for example, established in 2000 to help people experience life without an automobile, is now celebrated in more than 40 countries. Bike to Work day is a similar effort. Earth Hour, which involves turning off lights at a designated time, has become a worldwide phenomenon in the past few years. And TV Turnoff Week encourages families to watch less television and spend more time together.¹⁷

Meanwhile, in the United States, Buy Nothing Day now stands as a counteroffer to Black Friday, and Take Back Your Time Day offers people the chance to say no to overwork and overscheduling and instead reclaim their time for meaningful activities. Any of these “fasts” could conceivably become ritualized by religious or secular groups to give them deep meaning and impact.¹⁸

At a personal level, there are many opportunities to ritualize consumption and increase mindfulness about consumption habits. Indigenous practices could be a useful model here, especially the ritual of offering a small act of repentance or gratitude before using a resource. The Tlingit people of Alaska, for example, who use the bark of cedar trees to make clothing and other items, ask permission of the spirits of the tree before harvesting the bark and promise to use only as much as they need. Imagine saying a silent prayer of thanks

and a vow not to waste before every act of modern consumption. Such a private ritual would likely bring mindfulness to a person’s use of resources.¹⁹

One example of a more mindful approach to personal consumption comes from Peter Sawtell, a minister in Colorado who explores the link between spirituality and environmentalism. He has proposed that long-distance travel, especially flying, become a ritualized experience, with the Muslim ritual of the Hajj—the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca—being the gold-standard model. Acknowledging that travel is enlightening, broadening, and even life-changing, Sawtell nevertheless suggests that because of the high environmental impact of trips by air, travel may need to be intentional and sacred now. And while a once-in-a-lifetime trip may be too strict a standard for most people, Sawtell suggests that once a decade or “once a life-stage” (adolescence, adulthood, retirement) might be helpful in thinking about long-distance travel. In the process, he suggests, people may find that less is more: they might appreciate travel and use it more meaningfully than when it was cheap and the environmental impact was ignored. Moreover, intentional travel could easily be ritualized, says Sawtell. “Imagine what it would be like in our churches if we celebrated the value of exceptional trips with special blessings for those who are embarking on this sort of once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage.”²⁰

In sum, ritual and taboo figure into many aspects of any human life and help to transmit and shape cultural values. While resistant to cynical manipulation, these ancient human practices will likely find a place in development of new cultures of sustainability. In this epoch that cries out for rapid and comprehensive cultural transformation, human societies need to use every tool in the cultural toolbox.

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Ritual and Taboo as Ecological Guardians

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