

Scarcity, Abundance, & Sustainability

RQ asks: Is “changing consciousness at will” the key to abundance?

A dialogue with Starhawk

As part of our “Economics” theme section, RQ’s Luke Hauser talked with permaculture organizer Starhawk about issues of abundance, scarcity, and sustainability.

RQ: Much of Reclaiming’s magical and political work involves “changing consciousness at will.” Do you think that a change of consciousness can address issues of poverty, scarcity, and unequal access to resources?

Starhawk: It depends on how that is meant. I have a concern about framing this work as “prosperity consciousness.”

One of the main tenets of prosperity consciousness could perhaps be stated as, “It’s only our attitude that keeps us from being prosperous. If we change the way we think about money, if we get rid of the guilt, we can have all the abundance we want.”

By and large, this statement holds true for many U.S. citizens, especially those of us who are urban and educated,

and particularly those who can pass as white-middle-class, heterosexual, and not too weird. It is true that many of us could be more prosperous if we let go of the fears and blocks that hold us back.

However, this idea is only empowering when applied to ourselves. Applied to others, it can be deadly.



It very easily transmutes into victim-blaming: “The poor are poor because of their bad attitudes.” It’s an Aquarian version of “the poor are shiftless and lazy.”

It seems to me like another version of the old myth that anyone can make it here in the “land of opportunity.” The myth is perpetuated because this *is* a land of opportunity for many — but not for all. And if we forget or ignore or blame those who don’t make it, then we aren’t building a new culture, we’re perpetuating the old one.

RQ: A problem I see is, the overflowing abundance of our society is directly dependent on the massive waste we generate. Plenty of people buy used clothes or musical equipment or other goods. We furnish our homes by scavenging from dumpsters. So in that sense, by adjusting our consciousness and accepting second-hand goods, we can participate in the abundance that’s all around us despite our limited income. Unfortunately, the model only works so long as our society is being so incredibly wasteful. If others quit throwing perfectly good things away,

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how would I furnish my home?

Starhawk: Right. Outside the borders of the Western countries, it would never work. The idea that poverty is the result of attitude becomes ludicrous. In the Third World, the very meaning of poverty and abundance changes.

I've spent time in Europe, Canada, Latin America and the Middle East. Being out of this country has made me see the whole debate about prosperity and scarcity in very different ways. When I visited Nicaragua some years ago, I would enter people's houses and wonder if they were inhabited, they were so empty of goods.

In the US, I associate poverty with shoddiness and cast-off goods. In Nicaragua, shoddy goods were the mark of the middle class. The poor have nothing — maybe a hammock or some beat-up chairs, perhaps one change of clothes carefully kept for best. Prosperity is measured in beans and rice, in basic health care and schooling. And even the poverty of Nicaragua seems like immense wealth compared to the starvation in parts of Africa, where life itself is at issue.

All this is not to say that we should be wallowing in guilt, but that we need to keep a sane perspective when talking about abundance. When I arrived home from my trip to Nicaragua, I was greeted with truffles redeemed by Pagan anarchists from a dumpster outside one of the Bay Area's elite candy stores. Here, we can afford to fill the garbage with expensive chocolates tossed out because they've lost the first bloom of freshness. We are surrounded by wealth and waste. Even those of us who don't have a lot of personal money

have access to resources undreamed of elsewhere.

Our access to material abundance is a direct inheritance of many years of Western expropriation of the Third World. If we want true worldwide abundance we may have to give up some of our own access to material goods. At the very least, we can give up our willingness to waste.

RQ: Do you see this as a "new asceticism"?

Starhawk: The recognition that our wealth is based on others' poverty is not asceticism or puritanism. It has nothing to do with seeing money per se as something "dirty." But it does come from a recognition that scarcity is a very real operating condition in much of the world, not a mere illusion of the unenlightened.

RQ: I recently read an article describing

scarcity as an illusion. It called the belief in scarcity the "big terror behind all the monetary greed," the "primal terror" that keeps us from challenging the status quo. Do we need to move "beyond scarcity"?

Starhawk: Some people criticize our culture for a "belief in scarcity," but the truth is the opposite. Our entire economic system is based on the illusion that the Earth's resources, particularly fossil fuels, are infinite, and that the Earth's ability to absorb waste is inexhaustible.

We are coming to the end of the era of cheap fossil fuels. We are rapidly polluting irreplaceable groundwater deposits in the same way we waste the surface water and air. We need to come to grips with the reality of scarcity or we will destroy beyond salvation the air, water, and Earth that are the foundation of any abundance.

Ironically, it is the very cultures that have the most refined attunement to scarcity, tribal cultures attuned to the real limits of their environment, that are most characterized by sharing of resources. Among the Bushpeople of Africa or the Eskimos, greed or selfishness is seen as a disease.

RQ: So how do we challenge the status quo? How do we begin to rethink our lives in an Earth-friendly, life-nourishing way that takes account of economic realities such as scarcity?

Starhawk: In other words, how do we envision and create revolution?

Perhaps instead of dwelling on prosperity or scarcity, we need to think



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about sustainability. A movement is growing around permaculture, or sustainable agriculture, developing new attitudes, practices, and resources that conserve and replenish soil and water, instead of wasting them.

We need to develop a sustainable union of spirituality and political action – to build sustainable groups and organizations.

For something to be sustainable, we cannot be putting in more energy than we are getting back. We cannot be using up resources faster than we are replenishing them.

RQ: Even if it's not asceticism, it still seems like part of the solution is people living their lives in a simpler manner —

living collectively so more people are using the same resources, finding ways to eliminate daily use of cars, eating locally-grown food, supporting local culture.

Starhawk: Collective living is a good



example of the change that is needed. Perhaps over the years we will be able to join collective households into neighborhoods, to transform our physical environment so it becomes more ecological and sustainable.

That is my personal dream. I want to live in a community that can thrive and prosper in balance with the Earth and with all her beings.

This discussion is based on an article originally written in the mid-1980s. The article appeared in Reclaiming Newsletter No. 20, available through the Reclaiming Quarterly Archives.

RQ questions by Luke Hauser. Visit www.directaction.org

Starhawk is an activist, organizer, and author of many books. She teaches Earth Activist Trainings that combine permaculture design and activist skills (see ad below). Visit www.starhawk.org

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