
Chapter 1

Introduction

My neighbor Bill says, *“I have this vague uneasiness that maybe things aren’t so good with our environment. You teach young people about the environment, what do they think?”*

Frankly, many of them are worried. We did a study of environmental knowledge, awareness, and concern among 3,200 eleventh graders in New York State in 1990. We included this statement in our questionnaire and asked students whether they agreed or disagreed with it: “The quality of life in the future looks like it will be better than the quality of life we have now.” Only 14 percent agreed and 55 percent disagreed (28 percent disagreed strongly). Why are our young people so profoundly pessimistic? Why are our institutions unable to cope with the problems we face? Why is Congress tied up in gridlock? Why are so many people out of work or afraid of losing their jobs? Why does

our natural environment seem to keep going from bad to worse?

Those sound like separate problems to me. Are you suggesting that they're connected?

In some respects these are separate problems, but they're similar in that **all of them are connected in one way or another to the faulty way we think about the environment.** By that I mean that many of the premises underlying the beliefs in our society about how the world works are not true. Our ways of thinking are taught to us by our culture as we're growing up. Of course, as we mature, all of us develop our own ways of looking at things. But the underlying premises that shape our thinking come from our culture; they're simply taken for granted as we communicate with others. In the United States, the media, especially television, constantly reinforce those unspoken premises.

What do you mean? Give me an example.

OK! Last evening, the television news anchor said, "Good news tonight. The Commerce Department reported today that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was up 1.6% over last year, mainly due to increased sales of automobiles and gasoline." Well, why did he say it was "good news"? Apparently, he assumed everyone would believe that a rise in the GDP is good news; he never dreamt that anyone would disagree. So indirectly, the viewer was taught by that statement that economic growth is good.

Everyone I know thinks economic growth is good. Are you suggesting it isn't good?

Your response illustrates my point. Our culture teaches us that economic growth is good, and you believe everyone agrees with that. Actually, some of our leading thinkers are sure that it is not good.

Why would they say that? Who are these thinkers?

Before I can answer those questions to your satisfaction, I should share with you some basic principles that most people in our society don't grasp. If you can bear with me for a while, I'll show you this new way of thinking.

OK, I'm skeptical but I'll give it a try. How do we begin?