

The Struggle to Change

David Osborne finds out why we find it hard to adopt more sustainable ways of living, and shares ideas on how we can break down barriers to change in our lives



“Why We Struggle and How We Can Change”. This was the subtitle of the talk I was on my way to hear. My struggle at that moment was simply to get there. It was the end of November. It was a Saturday. And I was on a bus going from Hammersmith to Euston, along Oxford Street. The annual consumerfest known as Christmas Shopping was not yet in full swing, but it was busy: still stable but on the brink of turbulence.

Coming from my small home town in Somerset it seemed bizarre. But to those moving from store to store and gathering their trophies, my own day would probably have seemed equally bizarre. Would Ian Christie, the speaker at the Green Christian gathering, have some light to shed on this?

He began by affirming that lifestyle change is difficult. It's good to be honest about this. J. Scott Peck's immensely popular and helpful book, *The Road Less Travelled*, begins, “Life is Difficult.” Buddhists reckon that the first of the Four Noble Truths is “Life is suffering.” I don't think I agree with that, but I am clear that Jesus didn't promise an easy life.

Ian Christie works at the University of Surrey's Centre for Environmental Strategy with Tim Jackson (author of *Prosperity Without Growth*). Their research on what motivates and sustains a greener lifestyle shows that only 2 to 3% of people are actively minimising their environmental impact, while 10 to 15% try to. A similar number simply aren't bothered. And the rest, which is by far the majority, simply drift.

Why is it so difficult to move towards sustainable living? Ian suggested a number of reasons. For many people ‘sustainable development’ and ‘green living’ have negative associations: hair shirts and all that. And this is not balanced by positive stories being well told.

Then there is a lack of supporting infrastructure. People are locked into high-consumption behaviour patterns, for example, having to travel many miles simply to get to work and back. When you commute 60 miles a day it must seem of little consequence how many food miles your cheese has clocked up.

There are also matters of identity. Think of those shoppers in Oxford Street. That is what they do before Christmas. Then they tell other people that is what they did. And what they wear, and give, and put on the tree, and eat and drink, is what gives them a sense of who they are.

Whereas I don't do that. I spent my day travelling 200 miles by public transport to attend a meeting in a church hall in Euston which I believe will help save the planet. And then I tell people, different people, about that. That's who I am.

And do I feel superior? Green smugness is no doubt another thing that puts people off changing. So even if they do start getting serious about climate change and pollution they don't

want to come over as smug. They might be afraid they will be alienated from friends, family and colleagues if they became “an eco-nut” – a bit like becoming a “fitness freak”. Peer pressure is strong; it’s often easier to stand out among strangers than it is among friends.

Then there is the conflict of values. A friend of mine is very careful to keep her carbon footprint as small as possible. But she flies to Seattle once every two years to see her grandchildren, otherwise she’d never see them. When people start thinking about their lifestyle the questions can seem too big, too complex and the answers full of contradictions.

So what do we do? Ian described a “Collective Action Problem” – a kind of Mexican stand-off where the various actors involved, government, business and citizens, all think that the others should take the lead. The pace at which government can implement change is affected by what the electorate will support. Businesses need customers and are controlled by government legislation, but they can also lobby government. Meanwhile, ordinary people are limited in what they can do, and might simply wait for government to do something. The best that can be hoped for is a shuffling forward with messy and clumsy solutions.

This process will be helped if people are addressed as citizens rather than consumers, and begin to think of themselves as such. It will also be helped if people work together. There are, of course, numerous examples of this at local, national and international level. The fact that they have not yet “solved the problem” does not mean these endeavours are insignificant. From campaigns for allotments to international agreements on pollution, and from local

nature reserves to accreditation schemes for sustainable forestry, there have been a multitude of environmental improvements in recent decades.

But those who work for change can also, according to Ian Christie, “act smarter” – not only working together but having a clear focus, developing their skills and learning from others. Like many people I am familiar with the Transition Movement. Ian Christie also pointed to Community Learning and Action for Sustainable Living (CLASL) a joint project between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). A pdf file is available free on the WWF website. That was new to me but looks useful. He also pointed to the resources of the project he works with, which are available at www.sustainablelifestyles.ac.uk.

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As we have seen throughout the history of the Church, it is not bad news that produces significant change, but good news. It’s possible to argue that we need a sustainable

lifestyle because the alternative is death and destruction. Alternatively, we can say and show that living sustainably is good for us and for all life, because it takes seriously both our own and our planet’s potential and limitations. Put theologically, the Earth is part of God’s Creation so respecting it is bound to be good for us: joyous, liberating and healthy. Groups from Alcoholics Anonymous to Weight Watchers all recognise that people are more likely to change for positive reasons than because of fear, guilt or criticism. In our struggle for a greener world I think it’s important to bear that in mind.

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Photographs by Mark Boulton