

# KAW Panel Talk on Education

Gene Marahsl  
April 28, 2001

I want to talk about bioregional education, about education that can awaken the ordinary adult citizens living on our continent.

I am passing around a journal and a book that have both been very helpful to me in boiling down immense ecological wisdom into competent and simple images.

The journal is *The CCPA Monitor* published by The Canadian Center for Polity Alternatives. In the issue I am passing around is an article by Herman Daly on how the slogan "Sustainable Growth" is ridiculous. "Growth," as we popularly use that term, is not sustainable on a finite planet. A sustainable society can include improvements in effectiveness and equity but not growth.

The book I am passing around is Thomas Berry's recent book *The Great Work--Our Way into the Future*. It has a chapter entitled "The Corporation Story" which tells the entire history of the corporation and how current transnational corporations destroys democracy and the natural world. Sections of this chapter can be lifted out and placed in our talks on this topic.

Also useful to me have been David Korten's books, *When Corporations Rule the World* and *The Post-Corporate World*.

Though such books contain accessible wisdom, they are not yet accessible enough for most members of the public. We have to simplify these resources still further into metaphors and images and stories that speak clearly to ordinary citizens.

Also, we need to do our bioregional education within the understanding that bioregionalism is not the only meaningful movement going on. There is a wide band of sensitive and responsive people whom I like to call "The Vanguard of the Earth." The best of bioregionalism is part of this vanguard. But also the greener Greens, progressive eco-feminists, parts of the labor movement, many deep ecologists, and nameless other forces comprise the Vanguard of the Earth.

All these vanguard forces face this same big choice at this time in history:

Are we going to help the corporations rule the world better?

Or are we going to end the corporate rulership of our lives and of our national democracies?

Some of my friends have clearly chosen the strategy of helping corporations rule the world better.. And I agree that corporations can be improved. For corporate life to be more democratic and less top-down is an improvement. To pure fascism I definitely prefer modified fascism.

So I say to those who are working to improve corporate life, keep up the good work. There is nothing wrong with what you are doing.

But I want bioregional education to focus on the big picture: the fascism of corporate wealth over the entire life of our planet. Free trade actually means the free unhampered flow of capital in creating slave labor, the further disempowerment of the poor, the destruction of democracy,

and the devastation of the natural world.

Bioregional education needs to help people understand that the World Trade Organization, The Free Trade Area of the Americas, NAFTA, the World Bank, and The International Monetary Fund are organizations that function to tyrannize our lives.

The transnational corporations through these global organizations limit national governance in favor of planet-wide values. But those values are being set by the business interests of very powerful pools of money. Not by you and me. Not by our democratic governments. And not by ecological wisdom.

In fact, transnational corporations take their business to wherever labor is cheapest and ecological accountability weakest. No one holds them accountable for what they do. Not even their stockholders. And many corporations are far more wealthy than entire nations. In large nations like the United States, corporate wealth exercises inordinate power in choosing political leaders.

Our national democracies are the only toe-hold we have left on democratic governance. Our democratic institutions are far from perfect, but they are or can be forceful players in the planetary drama.

The current situation of the global economy is like an athletic contest with no referees. The biggest players referee the game. They even change the rules to suit themselves. Our problem is not big government but big business. We need governments that are powerful enough to referee the economic playing field in a manner that is fair and indeed free-enterprise rather than enterprise dictated by transnational corporations.

The issue of ending corporate rule is not just one more issue. It is not like saving one more wetlands or shutting down one more caustic incinerator. Ending corporate rule is a planetary emergency. All democratic governance is being destroyed by the economic power of the transnational corporations. In the next few years, the citizens of this planet will be deciding whether democracy or big-money oligarchy is going to be our destiny.

There is no hope for ecological sanity if the transnational corporations continue to expand their rulership of the world.

Unless popular democracies can begin holding them firmly accountable, all hope for meeting the ecological crisis passes away.

Our society is like the ocean liner Titanic when it was heading toward the icebergs. The crucial issue is to grab the steering wheel and change the course of the ship. Local work is good and important, but it does not deal with the icebergs. Here we are on this doomed Titanic doing many useful things: putting low-energy fluorescent light bulbs in the ball-room ceiling, recycling aluminum cans, upgrading the sewage system, putting weather striping on our leaky doors, and repairing some dangerous deck chairs on the aft deck. None of these things are bad, but they do not change the course of the ship.

Ending corporate rule means taking hold of the steering wheel in order to have some hope of steering away from the icebergs..

This is not just my opinion. This is a growing consensus among sensitive thinkers everywhere. Here are a few paragraphs I found in an article by Walden Bello in the CCPA Monitor:

“I am talking about disabling not just the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, but the transnational corporation itself. And I am not talking about a process of “regulating” the TNCs, but of eventually dismantling them as fundamental hazards to people, society, the environment, to everything we hold dear.

“Is this off the wall? Only if we think that the shocking irresponsibility and secrecy with which the Monsantos and Novartises have foisted biotechnology on us is a departure from the norm. Only if we also see as deviations from the norm Shell’s systematic devastation of Oganiland in Nigeria, the Seven Sisters’ conspiracy to prevent the development of renewable energy sources in order to keep us slaves to a petroleum civilization, Rio Tinto’s and the mining giants’ practice of poisoning rivers and communities, and Mitsubishi’s recently exposed 20-year cover-up of a myriad of product-safety violations to prevent a recall that would cut into profitability. Only if we think that is it acceptable business practice to pull up stakes, lay off people, and destroy long-established communities in order to pursue ever-cheaper labor around the globe--a process that most TNCs now engage in.

“No, these are not departures from normal corporate behavior. THEY ARE NORMAL CORPORATE BEHAVIOR. And corporate crime against people and the environment has, like the Mafia, become a way of life.”

I find such arguments convincing. Ending corporate rule is an emergency. And this is something that simply must be done in a short period of time. It is my opinion that any movement for inclusive social transformation is irrelevant unless it tackles this problem.

Basic ecological survival is not the only issue involved. Feminine values, gun safety in our schools and city streets, fair wages for ordinary working people, the drug-use epidemic, the aids epidemic, quality education, religious liberty, basic human rights, slavery. None of the gains made in any of these arenas can be maintained and further resolved if corporations rule the world.

The TNCs are the focus of this problem, but behind these institutions are the supporting mentalities that have been brainwashed into the majority of the citizens on this continent and other continents as well. Furthermore, it is now the TNCs who control the ongoing brainwash.

Going to business school results in a form of brain damage.  
Going to law school results in a form of brain damage.  
Going to medical school results in a form of brain damage.  
Going to a Christian seminary results in a form of brain damage.

The bioregional movement is one of the forces that I feel is awake enough to take on this massive task of brain repair.

By” bioregional education” I do not mean simply teaching school children some ecological basics. Bioregional education includes basic brain repair for the entire adult population.

Consider the typical mid-American farm family. They are almost completely out of touch with how to understand which social trends are in their true self-interest and which candidates serve them best. If they fully understood their actual situation, then voting for conservative Republicans would make no sense whatsoever.

We have only just begun to think about the possibility of reeducating the salt-of-the-Earth citizens of this continent.

And unless we or someone does this sort of education, there is no hope of empowering our fragile national democracies to hold accountable the TNCs and eventually phase out TNCs in favor of institutions that are actually appropriate for the next era of planetary destiny.

In our recent e-mail exchanges, David Haenke has expressed the concern that we not fall into an US/THEM mentality--demonizing some THEY so we can feel righteous. I agree with this.

But avoiding US/THEM thinking does not necessarily exclude using methods of in-your-face confrontation. Gandhi and ML King used in-your-face confrontation very effectively. With these methods King provided a racial education to Jack and Bobby Kennedy as well as most of the continent. His use of such methods changed the history of the world.

The way we avoid US/THEM thinking is to realize that there is no US and there is no THEM. WE are all THEM. THEM are US. We are the transnational corporations; we work for them; we buy from them, drive their cars, fly their planes, burn their fuels; we invest our money in them. WE ARE THEM. So who is to blame for the entire planetary mess? I am.

I am to blame for all of it. We are all to blame. No one is less guilty than everyone else. Furthermore, everyone of us is going to be guilty of ecological devastation for the rest of our lives. There is no way out of being guilty. There is no US and THEM. As the Pogo comic strip put it, "We have found the enemy, and we are it."

Within this context of all of us being totally guilty, what does it mean to be part of the vanguard of the Earth? The vanguard of the Earth are simply those of who are sensitive and responsive enough to realize and admit that we are all to blame, that we all are guilty. The vanguard of the Earth distinguish themselves by their ability to be specific about what we are all guilty of and how we are guilty.

Then having admitted this guilt, the vanguard of the Earth can begin to take some steps in the opposite direction from that guilt. And the vanguard do not do this in order to be more righteous than other people. We, the vanguard, do these steps in order to lead other people into taking similar steps away from this common guilt in which we are all swimming.

Now admitting guilt and taking corrective steps will entail serious confrontation with others. Imagine a herd of cows stampeding toward a cliff. Any cow that tries to turn in another direction will be in conflict with the general herd.

The protests that have been occurring in Seattle, Quebec City, etc., are part of a larger turning within the general herd. These protests are only a small part of the whole picture of social change, but they are part of this turning. The anti-globalization protests are accomplishing two things: (1) they are awakening more people to the emergency that faces us and (2) they are uniting a lot of progressive forces that have been separated from one another--progressive labor, progressive feminists, progressive ecologists, etc.

A wide range of forces are able to see that the transnational corporations are destroying the last traces of democracy on this planet. Bypassing and destroying democratic governance is the deep meaning of the work being done by the IMF, the World Bank, and especially the WTO, NAFTA, and FTAA. When and if those who are pushing these so-called free-trade agreements succeed with their objectives, democratic governance will be irrelevant. Even the modest accountability which transnational corporations now face in labor unions and democratic governments will be gone.

In time this rulership by the economic elite will become so normalized that the word

“democracy” will also be abandoned as an obsolete notion that did not work. When people read Lincoln’s speech about government of the people, by the people, and for the people they will just laugh at this quaint notion.

This is the emergency we face. It is a key battle in the history of the planet.

Some part of the vanguard of the Earth has to protest this trend. Bioregionalists are among those who are doing these protests, and we need to be proud of them.

All protests are messy. I participated in the protests of the civil rights movements. Clearly, people showed up in M.L. King’s movement who were only interested in acting out their anger, or in finding sex. There were certainly clueless people involved. But the core of those protests were lead by people of clear purpose. And I believe that this is true in the anti-global protests. The leadership of these protests is diffuse, and they barely agree with one another. But you certainly cannot call David Korten clueless or Starhawk. or many, many others. If these people are clueless, then we are all clueless.

And who among us are fully clear about where we need to go? Even if our positive direction is unclear, we can be clear we do not want to go where the Free Trade Area of the Americas is going. When we engage in massive social transformation, we have to build the road as we travel. We may not have a fully clear picture where we are going until we get there. Full clarity may not come in our life times.

So we need to be willing to live for decades in the chaos of not knowing where we are going. And we need to have the courage to ask masses of people to live with us in that insecurity.

Probably, it will take decades to detach a bare majority of the population from doing society in the manner in which we are all now doing it. Only when such detachment exists can people have space to think clearly about what we need to do next.

My main criticism of the anti-globalization protests is that we don’t have a million protesters in Quebec City. I would prefer these protests to be pristinely nonviolent. But I feel it is worth all the messiness just to get said that any city on the planet that dares to host one of these horrible meetings is going to pay a price.

But on the other hand, I don’t think these protests are the whole story. They are just a small piece of it.

Much more important to me is having 50 million to 100 million people on this continent protesting at the polls. I want us to retire all political candidates who even look like they are colluding the corporation domination of the planet.

In order to make a big difference at the polls, a great deal of transformative education must be done. The sort of images I am casting about in this talk suggest the sort of content such education needs to include.

Finally, I want to share with you that a group of us are currently working on a one-day course that could be taught by any of us to regular law-and-order republican-voting citizens. It has four high-spirited talks each followed by an interactive workshop. The idea of this course is that ordinary salt-of-the-Earth citizens can be provided with an opportunity to think their own way from unconscious conservatism to bioregional enthusiasm. To download this course go to: [www.RealisticLiving.org/PDF/DEY/](http://www.RealisticLiving.org/PDF/DEY/)