

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Integral Health and Healing

MICHAEL LERNER

The environmental health movement

both differs from and shares much with the environmental movement. Many analysts of the environmental movement now recognize that this great shift in global consciousness, for all its accomplishments, has largely failed to connect its passionate advocacy for nature with the immediate concern of most people living in an increasingly urban world: the preservation of their own health. Yet the truth is that human health, animal health, and ecosystem health are inextricably connected.

Millions of people around the world intuitively share this apprehension of the essential unity of life. The great Buddhist poet Thich Nhat Hanh calls this the consciousness of “InterBeing.” It is a venerable consciousness shared by many indigenous peoples, and an ancient knowing that has been driven to the periphery of modern consciousness by industrial interests, the specialization and fragmentation of the scientific enterprise, corporate control of the global media, and other forces. But InterBeing is a way of knowing the world that is ineluctably returning to the center of post-postmodern discourse. The Law of InterBeing is, as Michael Soule says so beautifully, “the simple, karmic law of ecology: All is interdependent and all is interconnected.”

The emerging environmental health movement is the prose that is putting the poetry of InterBeing into practice. When breast-cancer patients, women with endometriosis, mothers of children with asthma and birth defects, and representatives of people with dozens of other diseases begin to recognize their shared interest in reducing chemical contaminants in the environment, they will form a potent new social force. When they are joined by the physicians, nurses, and other health professionals who care about them, their power is further amplified.

Like the civil rights movement, the emerging environmental health movement is a complex social phenomenon. It brings together, in often uneasy alliance, many groups with different primary concerns. Patient groups, for example, are first concerned with service delivery and the search for a cure. But as they begin to recognize that environmental factors are either a known or highly suspected contributor to the disease they share, their concern with prevention begins to rise.

I believe we are beginning to see that grassroots-based, market-focused campaigns with the real power to change corporate behavior in the marketplace have become the new tool of many groups working for environmental health goals. People have discovered their power in the marketplace, even when legislatures, the courts, and the executive branch have become dominated by special interests. Corporate brands contain much of the value of global corporations, hence they remain fundamentally vulnerable to grassroots-based, market-focused protest campaigns. These market campaigns cannot resolve the fundamental question of how an ecological society should be organized, but they do represent one of the instruments for peaceful change of our time.

Human health is the common language of those who would disagree on everything else. We may or may not care about spotted owls, or about the struggles of low-income Americans, or about famines in Africa. But all of us—progressives, libertarians, and conservatives—care about whether we and those we love are healthy or sick.

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MICHAEL LERNER is president and founder of Commonweal, a health and environmental research institute in Bolinas, California, and co-founder of Smith Farm Center for the Healing Arts in Washington, DC. He is a co-founder of Health Care Without Harm, and is present-

ly working to develop the Collaborative on Health and the Environment at www.cheforhealth.org