

## Those Damn Idealists: *When Reality Strikes*

I get accused of being an idealist. Fairly frequently.

I am pretty idealistic, and it's not surprising that people notice. What bemuses me, however, is that this generally comes as an accusation rather than an observation.

"Oh, you're just an idealist," people harumph, "you're not realistic."

Which makes me wonder a couple of things.

First, how and when did idealism become such a suspect pastime in this culture? Democracy itself is an exercise in idealism, one that we've wrestled with for more than a couple hundred years and one that we believe in enough to want to spread around the world with missionary zeal.

Second, why do we believe that idealism and realism are mutually exclusive concepts?

I set out to write this column on energy-saving decisions and gizmos for your home -- all that good stuff like dual-glazed windows, on-demand water heaters, solar panels, sun-deflecting landscaping, and so on.

All practical, do-able, realistic ways in which we can think about greening our houses and saving our planet, or at least a few metaphorical inches of it.

But I am struck by a sense of preaching to that ubiquitous choir -- aiming my snippets of information and opinion at those who are inclined to think that it's important to worry about saving our planet. I suppose that kind of preaching has its place, reassuring us that other folks out there value the same things as we do. But it does nothing to build a dialogue and understanding with those of us who aren't particularly interested -- and, in this wildly divided era, seems to just further calcify the differences between us rather than finding commonalities.

So I am going to step away from that pragmatism of a laundry list of small steps towards sustainability, and leap, unashamedly, into idealism for a while.

My hope is that you will be willing to leap with me, particularly those of you who aren't convinced that sustainability isn't achievable or even worthy of trying for.

I'm going to begin with a question: what's important to you? What in your life do you cherish and want to protect? Your family? Your wealth? Health? Freedom to make your own decisions? Mobility? Community?

What I imagine for my life may be very different than what you imagine, but one commonality that we all have is that we don't want to lose or damage those things we cherish.

In a word, we want to sustain them. And that's what the sustainability movement is about -- understanding that we have different values and working to find solutions that will honor the needs of people, of the economy, and the environment around us so that we can all survive and thrive.

So let's talk energy for a moment. Right now, oil prices are soaring skyward with all indicators that they're going to continue to zoom upward. For those of us who lived through the oil crisis in the 70's, there's a tacit assumption that while it may get uncomfortable for a while, the last time this happened it eventually sanity returned and prices and availability were resumed at reasonable comfort levels.

However, that may not happen this time around. Geologists, energy advisors (of both major political parties, by the way) and even oil companies are suggesting that production of oil and gas are likely to decline enormously over the coming years. The amount of oil and gas reserves on the planet are, indeed, finite, and it's looking like we've already used up the majority of sources that are high enough quality and easy enough to get at to be financially viable. (For more information on this, check out [www.peakoil.net](http://www.peakoil.net)).

So, let's assume that they're right. If, in the next 20 to 50 years we've run through all of the fossil fuels that we can use, what do we do? Think about it -- your life is entwined with the use of these fuels -- not only in the obvious ways, like heating your house and gassing up your car, but essentially everything you do. How food gets packaged, refrigerated, and transported. Petrochemicals used in the production of your computer and your television, the electricity generated to pump water to your home, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, waste disposal, you name it. And it gets rarer, it's going to get more expensive. Fast, and by a lot.

Let's go back to your life now -- what you value and what you cherish. What will happen to your life when our transportation, food, water, and industry systems no longer exist as we know them? Is it idealistic to think about alternatives? Or is it deeply realistic?

*(Leigh Melander is a member of the Sustainability Council of Ventura County. You can find out more about their activities on their website, [www.sustainabilitycouncil.org](http://www.sustainabilitycouncil.org))*