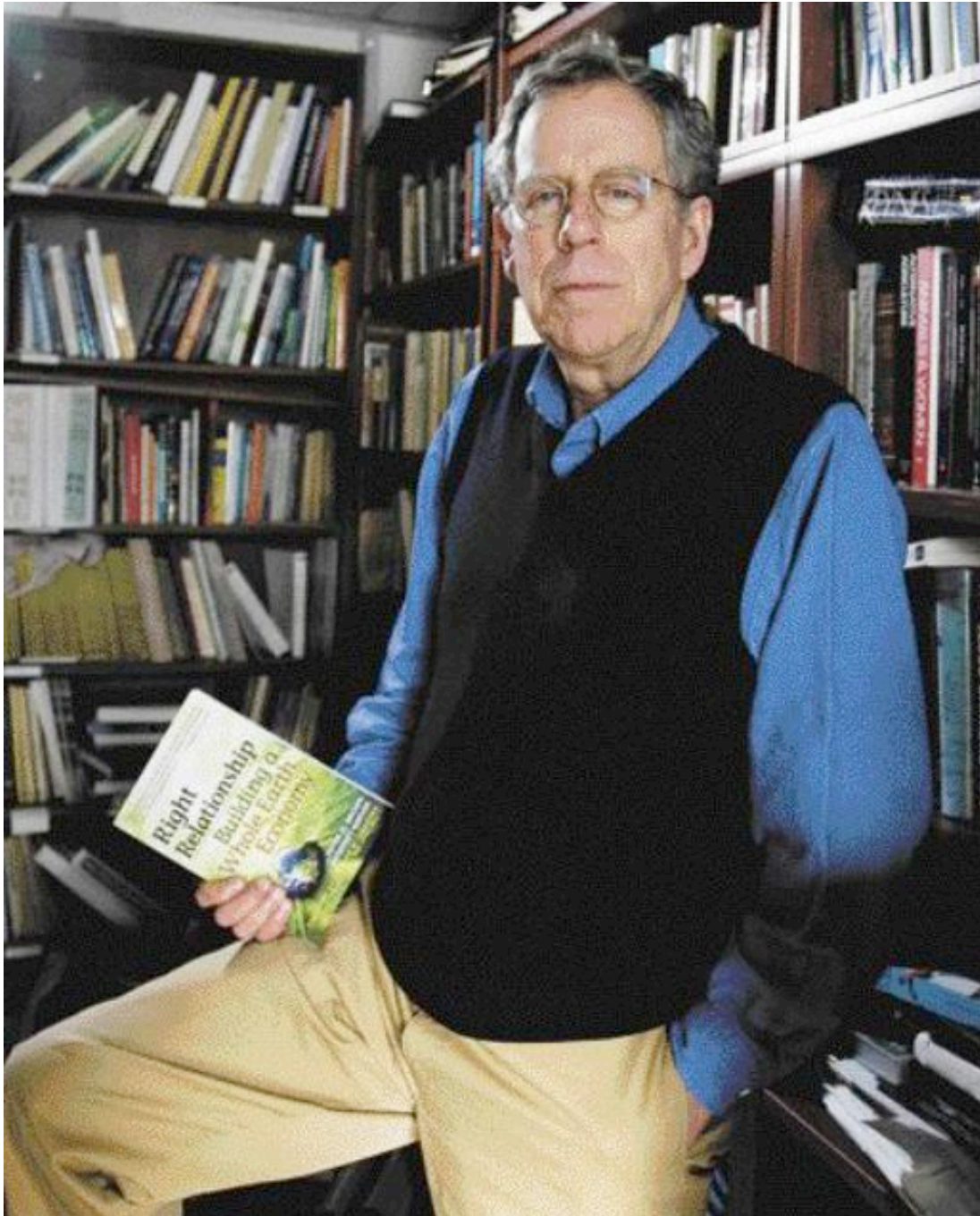


Environmental ethics

BY MICHELLE LALONDE, THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 23, 2009 12:01 PM



"We need a global transformation in human consciousness," Peter Brown says.

Photograph by: ALLEN MCINNIS,, The Gazette

This column is usually all about challenging ourselves and our readers to change their individual behaviour, to green up their little corner of the world, in hopes the overall impact of those efforts will make a difference.

But a couple of Montreal-based academics - who both happen to be Quakers, but more on that later - have just published a provocative new book reminding us that all of these small efforts, while important, cannot possibly reverse the tide of planetary destruction on their own.

In *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 218 pages, \$16.95), co-authors Peter Brown and Geoffrey Garver argue convincingly that what is needed, apart from our individual greening efforts, is a major societal rethinking of the global economy, one that takes the Earth and its finite resources into account.

In their economic activity over the past couple of centuries, humans have behaved as if they operate independently from the Earth, while using the Earth's resources as they see fit. What is needed if we are to survive, Brown and Garver argue, is a "whole Earth economy," a new kind of economics that respects ecological limits and allows the Earth to replenish its resources while humans and other earthly species flourish.

"The current economic system makes no sense because it can't answer five simple questions about itself," Brown, a professor at McGill's School of Environment, said in a recent interview. "It either cannot answer, or the answers given are incoherent, wrong or morally wrong."

These basic questions are: What is the economy for? How does it work? How big should the economy be? What is a fair distribution of its burdens and benefits? And finally: How should the economy be governed?

That first question, what is the economy for, is crucial, yet most of us do not stop to ask it because it seems so obvious. The purpose of the economy, as it is now structured, is to provide wealth through unlimited economic growth. Its facile assumption is that growth, regardless of how it is defined or how it is attained, is good for everyone, everywhere, because "a rising tide lifts all ships." So, a huge oil spill in the ocean is regarded as economic growth because it creates jobs for the cleanup crews. The oil sands projects are regarded as growth because of the thousands of jobs created and dollars raked in by oil companies, even though rivers are being poisoned, life-giving lands spoiled permanently, and gases released that will warm our planet to dangerous levels.

The authors propose instead an economy whose purpose is "to preserve and enhance the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the whole commonwealth of life." They ask us to think of money as a licence to use up some of the shares of the Earth's limited capacity to create and sustain life.

"Why should some people have more shares than others? How many shares does it make sense to give someone who has mastered the stock market, or gotten lucky at poker? And why should we humans, as a species, have all the shares or even as many as we already have?"

These are deep and unflinchingly moral questions. While this is not a religious book, from its very first pages, the authors make it clear that their economic philosophy is based on the Quaker notion of

"right relationship": When the right kind of relationship exists - between two people, two countries, between humans and the rest of nature, etc. - both parties to the relationship thrive.

The authors dare to suggest that morality can and must figure into our economic, political and even scientific reasoning.

Our current economic system completely disregards the welfare of the biosphere, Brown said. This has led to all kinds of environmental and societal problems that are imperilling not only our economic system, but life itself, human and otherwise.

If we are going to flourish on this planet, Brown said, we need to redefine our economy to make it serve the Earth and all its inhabitants. We have the "wrong relationship" with our planet, and this poisonous relationship has clearly not been working well for most of us.

Brown realizes it is unusual for academics to talk about their religious beliefs, or even to openly discuss ethics in the context of science, politics or economics. But he said he believes fatal errors are committed when we pretend ethics do not play a major role in these disciplines.

"Right relationship is not an idea that is used only by the Quakers It is a common sense notion. You can have a right or wrong relationship with your spouse, or your employer. ... It is in no way a cult notion."

The book goes so far as to propose new institutions: a global federation to protect human rights and global resources, and a global court to prosecute civil and criminal offences that are harmful to natural systems upon which we all rely to survive.

Taking on the global financial establishment and recommending a new global governance system may seem ambitious, even presumptuous. But Brown and Garver belong to a bold new Quaker movement that began organizing in earnest in 2003. It now includes organizations like the Quaker Institute for the Future, Quaker Earthcare Witness, the Quaker Environmental Action Network here in Canada, and others.

And if you think Quakers don't have the power or the numbers to change society's basic assumptions about the economy, just Google "Quakers and abolition of slavery." There was a time when the world thought of slavery as absolutely necessary for the smooth functioning of the economy. Eighteenth-century Quakers played a major role in the movement to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire.

"If we are going to get off the course we are on, we need a global transformation in human consciousness. It has happened on major issues in the past, like slavery, and on smaller but very important issues like drunk driving. People have been successful in changing public consciousness on harmful behaviours."

For those of us who have always been troubled by the "growth for its own sake" nature of traditional economics, the message of this book is refreshing. Those who speak out on environmental issues have often been dismissed, especially during election campaigns, as not understanding the economy, as if we are illogical romantics who care more about polar bears, frogs or endangered plant species than about jobs and quality of life for human beings.

But it turns out the environmentalists have been the logical ones all along. Because, as Brown said, the economy of unlimited growth steals resources and quality of life from current and future generations. There has to be a better way, and this book starts that discussion.

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