

Philosophically Speaking

with Dale Lugenbehl

Tipping Points and Social Change

Sometimes it seems as though movement toward a sustainable and compassionate world is taking place at a much slower pace than we would like. Rather than get discouraged by the apparent small amount of progress, it is good to remind ourselves how large social changes often take place.

Many times a process of change is taking place but we cannot see much happening. Then, in a relatively short period of time, changes on a large scale happen rapidly. This is what is called reaching a “tipping point.”

A simple children’s teeter totter can serve as a useful illustration. Suppose there is one very large child sitting on the south end of the teeter totter. One very tiny child after another climbs on the north end but nothing moves and it appears that they are totally ineffective—until finally one little child more is added and all of sudden the large child on the south end is lifted way up in the air! Something actually was happening all along but we could not see it at first. Large social changes often take place in a similar manner. With societal change it often takes far less than fifty percent of the population (maybe only seven percent if they are people we respect or admire) to “tip” things into big and rapid changes.

Here is a simple example. One person in a neighborhood starts a vegetable garden around their house. Some people think it is really strange, but a few people think: “What a great idea; I never thought of taking out the lawn and growing my own food.” One person after another puts in a garden until nearly everyone is doing it and it has become “what normal people do around here,” just like presently we think “the thing to do” is to repeatedly water grass to make it grow and then cut it with a fossil fuel powered mover so it looks “respectable,” and almost everyone is doing it.

Such a change to widespread vegetable gardens actually took place on a completely voluntary basis with the Victory Gardens movement during World War II, when people realized the necessity of providing some of their food for themselves. In 1943, at least sixty percent of the population of this country was involved in growing food in local gardens. These gardens produced forty percent of all the vegetable produce that was consumed in the nation. When people see clearly the genuine necessity of doing something different, their behavior can change on a very large scale and change very quickly.

Recycling is another example. It started with a few people doing something “strange” back in the early 1970s and at some point it rapidly became “the thing to do,” even though there was never a law passed requiring people to recycle.

When we look at the world, it is apparent that more and more weight is accumulating on the vegan side of the teeter totter. So much has changed since I chose veganism: vegan restaurants, vegan menu options at restaurants, vegan products present and labeled as such in supermarkets, vegan college dorms, vegan airplane meals, regular articles in major newspapers (not always buried in the food section, either), and so on.

We also know that there are large forces presently at work in the world that are helping to move us toward where we need to be: climate change, resource depletion, world hunger, unprecedented severe weather, and deteriorating personal health in even the wealthiest countries. People are becoming more and more aware of these huge and threatening problems, and this in turn creates that necessary consciousness for change described earlier: a growing number of people are beginning to see the genuine necessity of doing something different. And it is this perception that creates the right climate to bring about a tipping point.

Each crisis that arises can be just the extra pressure needed to tip us toward change. Either a severe water, food, or petroleum shortage, or a national health crisis could tip us toward wide-spread veganism because our consumption of animal foods uses such enormous amounts of water, land, and energy, and this fact is becoming more and more known by people. One or more major crises, coupled with the ongoing awakening of consciousness, can create a world that is hugely more vegan in a surprisingly short period of time.