Earth Day in the Balance © 2020 by Dr. Philip E. Schoenberg

We have made considerable progress since the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970. Air pollution has declined, and air quality has improved; the hole in the ozone layer is disappearing; drinking water has become cleaner and safer; uncontrolled toxic waste dumps such as Love Canal, and pesticides are tested for safety and their use regulated; many fauna and flora have been brought back from the verge of extinction, and some dams have been unbuilt to make the rivers wild again and encourage the return of fish migration. We have tried to encourage recycling and limit the use of plastic to protect the fauna and flora in the air, in the water, and on the earth. Mass transit has been encouraged; work, play, and housing built close together to encourage walking, and bikeways created to encourage less reliance on the automobile.

However, much remains to be done. Companies must be held responsible for the pollution they cause and encouraged to clean up after themselves while they operate a particular site or cease doing so. We can use a workmen’s compensation model to encourage the cleanup of the environment. Therefore, companies would pay less as they improve how clean they maintain or improve the environment; and they would pay more if they have an above-the-average record of damaging the environment so that they cannot simply write pollution off as the cost of doing business. For example, BP had an accidental oil spill record ten times the industry average Deepwater Horizon accident might have paid an additional penalty to encourage it to do something about its accident rate. Companies that frack must be encouraged to find ways to reduce the earthquakes they cause by holding them financially responsible.

All this progress has been achieved through cooperation and conflict—lobbying the government; people, citizen groups, and environmentalists protesting and pushing back; and companies defending their interests. The power of the marketplace, subject to government regulation, has been unleashed because taking care of the earth and the environment has become a profitable business as well as promoting a company’s image before the public. Lawsuits, private and public, and the threat of bad publicity against the most grievous defenders have also contributed to solving these problems. Human beings are proactive in using science and technology to solve the challenge or crisis instead of doing nothing.

Nevertheless, we must prevent environmental zealots, socialists, and just crazies from hijacking a good cause to serve their interests which is not necessarily our interests. Many environmental groups have a form energy that they perceive as a bête noir want to abolish but the only problem is if they get their wish, we will have no energy at all. They refuse to recognize the tradeoffs and benefits but deal in absolutes in which everything must be perfect. Solar energy fries birds; windmills are eyesores and shred birds; fracking cause earthquakes; dams prevent fish from migrating and if extremely big they cause earthquakes; and nuclear radiation can poison the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the earth we live on. Then we have fanatics that oppose air conditioning even though more people die from extreme heat than from extreme cold and oppose flush toilets that prevent pollution. Then we have others that oppose GMO’s, the Green Revolution, and chemical fertilizers as unnatural even though it would doom billions of people to malnutrition and starvation. Still, more would abolish suburbs, the airplane, the auto, and even mass transit to eliminate pollution of any kind. As a result, they have become the new Luddites. Imposing enormous costs on industrialization and technology as their way of slowing the pace of human progress or even turning it back.

Then there is the long list of failed prophets of doom and gloom from the Rev. Thomas Malthus, an economist, to Dr. Paul Ehrlich, a biologist, and Dr. James Hansen, a meteorologist, as well as laypeople such as Al Gore, a politician turned businessman who sells carbon exchanges, and Prince Charles, a gentleman farmer, have no scientific backgrounds. The doomsayers of every stripe try to bring about the doom or outcome they have foretold. They urge people to sacrifice their freedom, their individuality, their happiness, their standard of living, and even the joy of having children to save the planet. The bureaucrats and socialists declare capitalism, that has grown the pie for everyone and solved many environmental problems, has failed so that the philosopher-king, the planner, in the place of the consumer must decide how a shrinking pie must be distributed. The worst environmental disasters have taken place in Communist countries, former and present, in which environmental costs were ignored and protest quashed. Few of these prophets walk the talk that they urge others to follow.

We must ignore the doomslayers and prophets of doom seek to bring about the dooms they predict, sabotage progress, and seek to hijack our future. The good news is that most people prefer to be doomslayers, problem-solvers, who have the willingness and optimism to make things better for themselves, their children, and future generations. Be a doom slayer and an optimist, not a doomsayer and a pessimist.

Dr. Philip Schoenberg

65-45 Parsons Blvd., Apt. 4L

Flushing, NY 11365

drphil@nycwalks.com

(718) 704-3105