

A Fossil Fuel Addict

by Muriel Strand

Hi, I'm Muriel and I'm a fossil fuel addict. It's a bad habit.

Needs are simple—we can't live without them. But needs aren't usually seen as addictions.

Maslow's classic pyramid summarizes our needs. First, our basic physical and biological survival needs—clean air and water, healthy food, comfy shelter, and plenty of sleep and exercise. Then, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs—needs for and from other beings, friends and community and the world.

So we have physical needs and metaphysical needs, and we live in a wholistic reality where needs and wants that are physical and metaphysical are seamless, like a good hug. And even during scarcity, before 'enough', people want to live by more than bread alone.

Many Friends and spiritual seekers have over centuries offered such rich meditation and testimony that our metaphysical needs must be well supported. So now, facing the long slow emergency of climate change, caused by deforestation and combustion of cheap fossil fuels for physical energy for our material comfort, our physical needs are my target.

Clarity about our simplest physical needs helps us notice and and extract our – my – fossil fuel addiction from our daily lives. When asked about their needs, people usually speak of jobs and money, namely, their habits for meeting their needs. But we can hardly stop there. Most jobs are now larded with fossil fuel use, often unconscious.

We need to confess that we are totally needy, ultimately and utterly, for the healthy Earth we are evolved to live in. Reviving Gaia, restoring Eden, means healing the natural cycles and flows we humans have individually and collectively exploited and perverted.

We need to restore the water cycle of evaporation, rain, infiltration, forests, and waterways that we have diverted and drained with our pavement and piping. We need to restore the bio-nutrient cycle of flora, fauna and soil biota, by pooping in composting privies instead of in water, and by farming Nature's way instead of the fossil-fuel way. We need to restore the only solar collector we can't live without, Earth's protective blanket that was the world forest, instead of clearcutting more of it for junk mail and suburban sprawl.

We need to speak truth to fossil fuel power, to our weaknesses. We need a wraparound 12-step program. We have enslaved the Earth—how ready do we need to be to cut off those chains and break up all the pavement? Can we trust Gaia? Can we learn again to live Nature's way? 'If not us, who? If not now, when?'

Living in cities, we needn't notice the distance between our indoor lives and the world of wildness. So far, we needn't notice the exploitation of natural communities and indigenous people that fossil fuel's power-at-a-distance intensifies. And we needn't notice that Europeans were unfriendly transplants where we now live. Yes, we feel we belong here, and we do belong within Gaia. But since arriving we have mostly not lived within this land, as indigenous peasants. There has always been a lord or distant dominator.

Leaving fossil fuels in the ground will not be easy because their energy is very cheap. A healthy adult can generate about 75 watts of work, so humanpower costs (here) at least 200 times more than gasoline. No wonder we're addicted. Keeping this multiplier in mind will help us know our place.

And money is just a symbol, the 'poker chips' we have all 'agreed' to use to play the life game, an artifact that only humans control. So how can it be unprofitable to stop sickening ourselves and the flora and fauna we absolutely need? Can we choose wellth and healthy pleasure over money?

Humanity as a species survived, evolved and thrived remarkably, for millennia, free from toxic fossil fuels. So it is perfectly possible to live happy and comfortable lives with only daily sunshine to create our daily bread. We can do it again.

But what about our carrying capacity? Well, we just don't know how many people can live healthy lives on a healthy Earth, and we won't know until we are there. We do know that more driving and deforestation just reduces Earth's capacity ever more. And I see few signs that fossil fuels are providing peace and contentment.

Many liberals believe in the divestment movement, even while we keep using. And many people believe that with enough PV panels and windmills we can graft our fossil-fueled lifestyles onto these energy harvesters, and business as usual can continue.

Unfortunately, I am unaware of ways to mine or refine, without fossil fuels, more than a tiny fraction of the metals and minerals needed to make that many PV panels and windmills, let alone electric cars or smartphones for everyone. (And traditional simple technology is way less hackable.)

I want to leapfrog this standard technocratic plan, and invest time and energy (of all kinds) in just one renovation of our infrastructure and institutions, not two. It's easier and cheaper. Laziness may have helped induce our addiction, but it can also induce simplicity.

We can live in traditional villages of several hundred, among forests and fields where we can walk and run and find clean air and water and healthy food. We don't belong in giant centralized, authoritarian cities, states or corporations. We can have sophisticated cultures and education in independent small towns that visit and trade in an interdependent global network, as outlined here: www.commontrust.blogspot.com/

We need to invest in public education in traditional crafts such as spinning, weaving, carpentry, and masonry, as well as traditional ways of gathering and preserving food. Replacing batteries and engines (like chainsaws) with musclepower offers plenty of exercise. And without all that noise we can talk while working, or listen to the birds.

Bigness and bureaucracy disempower us as individuals, weakening our communities and our species. Hierarchy and regulations may allow institutions to grow much larger than tribes, but there are limits. Living in cities that push us past those limits, whether slums or suburbs, just doesn't feel good. Can we stop doing it the bandaid way?

How does nature think, design and invest? Choosing nature's way means discerning basic, steady-state, ongoing strategies for meeting our needs. We need to envision and build, inhabit and employ, the friendly, humanscale infrastructure that's healthiest for all flora and fauna.

Can we relearn the lazy way of letting go and letting Nature do (almost all) the work? Herewith some tips about Nature's logic: www.bio-paradigm.blogspot.com/2010/09/mechanical-logic-vs-biological-logic.html

We have the criteria. We have the ingredients. Will a 6-step program suffice? Can we be simple enough to be at peace with enough or even not enough? Can we find the integrity needed to discern and balance all needs and wants, so that the whole is better than the sum of the parts? Is that dandelion really my equal? (We eat them now, they eat us later.)

Stewardship is well-meaning, but it feels, well, patronizing. I fear mission creep. A kind and wise Friend used to say, "The means are the ends in the making." So I am moved to substitute "service." The ways we choose to live among, to serve and care for, Gaia's flora and fauna, creeks and oceans will determine the people we will end up becoming. 'We are the ones we've been waiting for.'

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