



ARNE NAESS

# The Influence of Arne Naess

BY DAVID ROTHENBERG

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Arne Naess was a man people love to tell stories about, since he always did his best to trip you up, to do something so outrageous and unexpected, so much so that after a while this is exactly what we came to expect of him.

On a backpacking trip he once opened up the flavor packet from some freeze-dried dish and announced “we certainly don’t need this” and then our dinner would be just plain, tasteless rice. Or, once we sat at a fancy dinner at Harvard and a rich, society lady sat next to Arne, trying to engage him in conversation. When he had absolutely had enough of her banter he just bent his head down, keeping his hands on his knees, and gobbled up a strawberry that was perched atop a grapefruit and gulped it down. The woman was speechless for the rest of the meal.

Sometimes it was not the best idea to leave Arne alone in the house. “OK, I’m locking the door,” I said

as I left him in my apartment. “Don’t get into trouble, I’ll be back in an hour.” When I returned I asked him, “anything happen?” And he said, “No problems here. Except that lady in the next building was a bit surprised after I climbed out your window, ascended the fire escape next door, and knocked on her balcony asking her to turn the music down.” Arne was only about eighty years old at the time.

Such tales of Naess’s irreverence, playfulness, and sometimes just plain rudeness are legion. But what I value most about him is that as a teacher, he never encouraged students to agree with him or follow his own way of doing things. “You must,” he would tell me as we were halfway up a cliff somewhere grasping for handholds, “find your own way,” whether on the mountain or in life and work. His students have not become proselytizers for his particular philosophy.

They are innovators in ecology, criminology, peace studies, nonviolence, literature, the arts, and politics. There is no Arne Naess school of thought. That is never what he wanted.

The strongest part of deep ecology works the same way. To ground a philosophical position in a love for nature, everyone must put forth their own personal principles of what the surrounding world means for them. This doesn't mean we should just think whatever we wish, but if we truly want to save the natural world and find a human way to live within it, then we have to believe humanity is understood and developed only upon an understanding that nature is irrefutably at our core.

It is this basic intuition that led Al Gore to write

in the 1980s that if we are to save the environment, we must “change the values at the heart of our civilization.” Over the ensuing decades the former vice-president has worked tirelessly to enable such change, and twenty years later we are beginning to listen to this fundamental insight that emerged from Arne Naess's idea of deep ecology, which, if I had to summarize it in one sentence, would be my favorite quote: “The smaller one comes to feel compared to the mountain, the nearer one comes to sharing in its greatness. I do not know why this is so.” That captures Arne's boldness and humility all at once.

When I give this account of deep ecology to people, they don't often agree. No, they say, deep ecology



Arne Naess: “In the spring the melting water needs help.” PHOTO: JOHAN BRUN

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is radical, extreme, it is the cutting edge, there is *no way* it has been easily integrated into the mainstream. Who but the deep ecologists say that humans are interfering too much with natural systems, and must back off, step down, reduce our interventions, and even reduce our population significantly so the planet can survive. Is this not still radical stuff?

When Naess began preaching such matters in the 1970s, they were the thoughts of an edge-movement, coming from the fringe. By the second decade of this new century, everyone knows that something must be done. None of us are quite prepared for the kind of transformation necessary to keep humanity thriving on this planet, but Naess's philosophical message is that if we change the way we *think*, if we change our ideas of what is natural and what is human, what is valuable and what is incidental, only then can we make a difference.

I always said Gore was the first politician to make this idea of changing our way of thinking about the nature the center of his rise to power. It sort of worked, sort of didn't. Now he leads a venture capital fund to raise money to promote new and green energy solutions, having gone as far as an elected official as he is likely to go. Yet it is philosophy that is motivating him, the notion that new ideas can bring a new world. He got this idea from Naess, and he has put it into practice



Arne playing the piano. PHOTO: PETTER MEJLÆNDER

by influencing thousands of people around the world to think differently about their relationship to nature.

The questioning side of Naess's work is more significant in the long run than his eight-point deep ecology manifesto, which seems too politically naïve to really ground sustained and organized action. But the philosophical questioning, the urge that each of us form our own justification for why we need to think differently about nature, this has influenced me. If we expand our selves into something wider and greater by welcoming in the interests of nature as part of us, not opposed to us, then we will not find the usual conflicts. Yet we will all have to do it our own ways, with whatever reasoning and support works for us in our particular cases. Philosophy is never going to be best at telling you what to think or what to do. Instead it should teach you how to think for yourself. You want your philosophers to be your teachers, probably not your leaders.

Arne Naess was a gentle, light-hearted and humorous character in an arena of dead-serious eco-pundits and proclaimers of doom. His personality, his gentle way of dealing with critics, is legendary. Those suspicious of deep ecology often include social ecologists, feminists, practical activists suspicious of individualized philosophizing and glib manifestos. Whoever they were, from whatever stripe, Arne would say, "yes, yes, of course I agree with you. There is a place for your approach *within* the wide mantle of deep ecology. The frontier is long." This is why it could be so frustrating to argue with him, he was so magnanimous and welcoming to all views. Perhaps he would have done well as a global cultural politician, working for the UN perhaps, without having to worry about offending so many philosophers who felt him to be too vague, too wide in his welcome, far too forgiving.

Note that I am not criticizing him here, just pointing out that this is why it is so hard to argue with Arne Naess, so hard to use logic against deep ecology. It is an organizing force, an alluring philosophy that welcomes you in with your own ideas. We will all have our own ecosophies, our personal environmental philosophies

that will enable us to find our own justification to care about the environmental crisis. This is the only way to hope that each and every individual will find a path toward caring about the tremendous problems that face the planet today. When Naess proposed such an idea forty years ago it was not widely accepted, but today we have the overarching threats of climate change and fossil fuel depletion that are gripping nearly all the world's governments and policy-making bodies. No one wants to care about such seemingly insurmountable vast problems that seem far beyond actual solution, but we all have to worm our own way into concern for this if there is to be any global, human movement to make real difference on these total issues that threaten the survival of our species.

Is it worse than it was in the seventies? At least the nature of the problem is clearer and more widely discussed? Deep ecology may have begun as concern for wild nature and wilderness by a few mountain-loving philosophers, but by the twenty-first century it's all about preserving hope for human civilization as part of the vast total ecosystem of planet Earth. Even sustainable development seems an idea that is not enough to deal with the scope of the crisis we will face in the coming century, that too seems too tame and limited an idea. Can deep ecology give us more? Is there any "more" actually there? You know I am not sure. What most inspires me is a vision, albeit a somewhat vague one, that humanity could culturally evolve to become a species that understands ourselves and our progress and flourishing only in the midst of listening more to nature, loving nature more, understanding nature through the further development of science and tech-

nology that makes more of the real world clearly visible. Better biology, better chemistry, better physics, all that helps us know more about the world we live in so that we care ever more about it.

Time is certainly running out, this is why so many biologists are becoming conservationists, knowing how much of what they want to study is disappearing at an alarming rate. As physics races to discover the theoretical underpinnings of matter it also must reconceive our whole practical sense of how we get energy to power our society. The whole life cycle of combustion, movement, and waste must all be understood in one circle. I know it's vague, obvious, yet it's certainly what we need to do. Will we succeed? Naess liked to say toward the end of his life that he was an optimist "for the 22nd century," always one for the catchy aphorism. No sense being pessimistic unless your sadness leads to anger and your anger leads to the urge to make a difference. If you remain optimistic you can hope for improvement, but never imagine you can sit back and just watch it happen. It's up to you, to me, to us, to figure out how to change the world.

Consider nature, consider humanity. It is not enough to say we are part of nature, we must redefine human-ness so this is really true. The more we know of nature, the more we describe it, grasp it, and celebrate it, the more greatly human we will become. This is an ecological philosophy. It is a Naessian view. He may never have been rigorous or exact about it, but his commitment is as inspiring now as it was while he was alive. May we all be around for thousands more years to celebrate the rich cultural and natural diversity that Arne Naess so loved.