

Towards the Sun – Direction, Priority Speech on the Day of the “Sun City”

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The day after tomorrow it will be 125 years, since: Elm, 11th September, 1881. Farmer Heinrich Elmer packs the family's belongings into a large suitcase. His 30-yr old wife, Elsbeth Elmer says “ I'm going with the children“. She takes both their children (two girls, aged 4 and 2) by the hand, and runs out of their farmhouse. Intuitively, she heads towards the eastern mountain side, and with her girls, hurries up the steep grass slope. She lays the children in the bed of a stream, and to protect them, lays herself down over them. At that very moment, the north face of the Tschingelberg comes away. With rocks the size of houses, 10 million m³ of mountain mass, thunders down to the valley and buries the farming hamlet Untertal under more than 30 m of debris. 114 people are killed. 83 houses are destroyed, 90 hectares of land are covered with debris. A violent pressure wave precedes the rockslide. People, who try to flee in the direction of the village, as well as approaching helpers, are sent flying into the air and stand no chance of survival.

The game with the residual risk

How did it come to happen? For decades, slate has been extracted from the slate mine above the hamlet Untertal, on the “Plattenberg”. The valuable slate was mined deep inside the mountain, to a width of 200m. A private firm provided work here for more than 100 men. To support the mountain, massive slate pillars were left standing in the tunnel. When the extraction of slate from this layer was completed, the firm made over the works to the community. The community wanted to retain the work places, and so, gradually, the slate was extracted from the supporting pillars.

That did not remain without consequences. The goatherd and the hunters observed, how an ever-widening crack appeared, above the Plattenberg, at Stäfel. Rocks, which were thrown into the cleft, took a long time to tumble down into the depths. The forester reported, how the pine trees above the slate mine were beginning to tilt more and more. The Zurich geologist Albert Heim predicted the rockslide and ordered an evacuation of the residents. The warning was ignored.

In the week before the 11th of September, it rained continuously. From 10th September onwards, rocks rolled down from the Plattenberg, again and again. Shortly before the biggest rockslide, two smaller “warning” rockslides occurred.

Maternal instinct

Elsbeth Elmer had sought a place with her children, which was safe from the rockslide and the pressure wave. Her intuition, which drove her to flee at exactly the right moment and led her to choose the correct direction, saved her life and the lives of both her children. Unlike her husband, who had given precedence to saving belongings, Elsbeth had set the priority to save their lives. After the rockslide, she climbed with her children to the Camperdun Alp, where they spent the night. She went grey over night. On the following day, they climbed over the mound of debris. The only reminders of their life before the rockslide were a deformed two-franc piece and a torn piece of Glarner cloth. They found refuge with relatives in Schwändi, a

hamlet further down the valley. Subsequently, Elsbeth was described as a very quiet person. A wave of solidarity broke loose. The Swiss people made generous donations. There were also donations from abroad, e.g. from the USA. With this money, Elsbeth was able to buy the spacious former vicarage in Elm, where she moved with her children in 1882. The house is now in my possession, because Elsbeth Elmer was my great-grandmother. I will relate more about the house a little later.

There are many parallels we can draw from this event, to the threat we are now experiencing through the climate changes. How the threat of the rockslide of Elm was caused by people. The symptoms are increasing: storms, floods, droughts with forest fires, melting of the polar ice and the glaciers, thawing of the permafrost with all the consequences. What can Elsbeth Elmer teach us in connection with this, for our survival?

The correct direction

Intuitively, she had chosen the correct direction. What would be the correct direction for us to take in order to prevent a disastrous climate collapse? After the speeches of Franz Alt and Hermann Scheer, there isn't really much left for me to say. We know the challenge: to make mankind, with all his activities, earth-compatible; to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1/5th of their current level through energy-change, through renewable energy sources and energy efficiency; to get rid of nuclear power stations and nuclear weapons; and to retain the fertility of the soil, through organic farming, and the avoidance of toxins and non-biodegradable substances. We must no longer be allowed to take away more from the earth than we can give back or than can grow back. We must all adapt our "ecological footprint", so that we come through this with our planet intact.

Not with bad intentions, just out of habit

Why is it so difficult for us? We are creatures of habit. Changes of behaviour often require a long time. Every morning when I shave, I begin with my left sideburn. Day in, day out. Even if I intend to begin with the right sideburn, I am very soon back to my old shaving pattern. Old habits die hard. It is often very difficult to break away from our habitual behaviours and this often takes a long time to achieve.

Other than that, our perception is heavily influenced by our immediate needs. Psychological defence mechanisms such as denial and repression, dampen or distort our sensual perception. In this way, the desire to retain all the work places at the slate mine in Elm and to continue to profit from the valuable stone, made the people blind to the warning signals preceding the rockslide. At one of Bruno Manser's events, an industrialist admitted, without beating around the bush, to owning a big hardwood company, which chops down large numbers of trees in the African rain forest. He fells the thousand-year-old trees and markets them, without a guilty conscience. On the contrary, he claims thereby to be the rescuer of the rain forest: "When we cut down trees, we give the forest a value. If we didn't do this, then the natives would come and burn down the rain forest, because the forest would have no value. Our wood-economy plays a large role in the maintenance of the rain forest," he explains.

That perception and the feelings triggered by perception can change according to our current needs, I know from my own perspective. If I am walking in the mountains and I hear the noise of an approaching motor car in the midst of the otherwise peaceful nature, then it disturbs me and makes me angry. If I hear exactly the same noise when I'm standing on the pavement

hitch-hiking, having just missed the last bus, then this noise is most welcome to me, because I hope to get a lift.

Priority

The topic “priority“ simply won’t leave me in peace any more. 16 years ago, I was showing Joseph Weizenbaum around the old city of Basel. Weizenbaum is a computer specialist and critic, one of the fathers of artificial intelligence and retired professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. We walked through the moonlit Augustine Street on the hill of the Basel Minster. The moonlight flooded silver-waved onto the water’s surface of the old fountain. “Such a wonderful world. Will we manage to fit ourselves into this wonderful network of life?” And after a long pause: “If we fail, we fail through our inability to set priorities. We do this and that, and with many of our activities, we place the very basis of life at risk. Therefore, we should do everything possible, to retain and re-establish this basis of life. This deserves to take precedence. Otherwise it is questionable, whether our species can continue to live on this Earth and all other problems become irrelevant.”

The boat in the storm

I often think back to this conversation. I see mankind as a crew in a small boat on a stormy sea. The boat has a leak. More and more water seeps into the boat. The crew contains various actors. Only a few of the crew members have realised the gravity of the situation. They call out to the others, that they intend to plug the leak as quickly as possible and then bail out the water. However, they cannot yet carry out their intention. Some of the crew, namely, find that it is too expensive to repair the leak, and that it would be sufficient just to bail out the water. Others engage themselves with body and soul, for the enlargement of the leak. Most of the crew are lying below deck, sleeping. One group listens to a preacher. He announces with raised forefinger, that this storm is the apocalypse, prophesied in the bible. One can do nothing against it, although the orthodox believers will somehow come through unscathed. Another group of considerable size has opened a bottle of wine and tries to forget their uncomfortable position and the storm by drinking and having a brawl.

What could provide the necessary direction for the people in this picture? If they could all experience and perceive the immediate threat, see and recognise the seriousness of the situation, agree as a community which measures need to be taken in order to survive, and with united force repair the leak and empty the boat, then these people, sharing their common fate, would stand a real chance.

First Aid

As physicians and lay people, we know that in a life-threatening situation - intense bleeding, heart failure, respiratory failure - life-rescuing measures must take precedence, they must be given the utmost priority. The climatic changes correspond globally to such a life-threatening situation for the individual. In politics, science, business, culture and in individual behaviour, life-rescuing measures are of utmost priority. If this is possible, it will be a miracle. Why should such a miracle not be possible? I believe in this miracle.

Time for Change – Time for a Miracle?

Perhaps we are already witnessing the unfolding of this miracle. I would like to enumerate a few examples, which could be part of the miracle:

- For example, what has become possible here in Germany in recent years, thanks to the renewable-energy law.
- The initiated “U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement” of Greg Nickel, mayor of Seattle. Already 224 towns and cities from 27 states with a total population of 44 million inhabitants, commit themselves to upholding the Kyoto-protocol.
- On 21.8. the SBI will be signed in California. This law prescribes the installation of 1 million solar-panelled roofs with a total power of 3000 MW, during the next 10 years. This will provide a 30-fold increase in photocell production in California, and halve the price for a photovoltaic Kilowatt hour.
- Finally, a small, but encouraging episode from Elm. For 15 years now, I have been trying to get planning permission to install solar panels in the house in Elm, which Elsbeth Elmer and her children moved into in 1882. My application has been turned down twice on the grounds of historic monument protection, in order to maintain a uniform roof-landscape in this listed village. In 1995, the community clerk held the outlook: “As long as I am in office, the sun will not come into this village”. Two months ago, the same community clerk, at an inspection with the village VIPs concerning my latest application, gave for consideration: “What was correct 15 years ago, is perhaps no longer correct today. We must take care of the Earth, and support the use of renewable energy sources.” His vote brought the breakthrough. On 1.9. the system will be taken into operation. I am convinced: If that is possible in Elm, then it will be possible everywhere in the world.

Enthusiasm

We cannot make the miracle happen by ourselves, but in our way, each and every one of us, can help to prepare for the miracle. We need community, marvel at the miracle of creation, impetus, humour and enthusiasm – the word “enthusiasm” comes from the Greek – en qev einai, to be in God, connected with the divinity. We learn, thereby, how wonderful life is and how much joy is derived from being effective for life.

Transatlantic21

In this sense, we are setting out from Basel to New York City with the solar-catamaran sun21. We set one priority and for the time being, leave everything else standing. We give the ship a direction and we hope that sun21 will fill many people with enthusiasm for the start to a better future, for renewable energy, for the ingenious invention of photovoltaics, for energy-change.