

Time, energy, and money



By Nate Smelle

By the time this newspaper ends up in the hands of most readers, Earth Day will have come and gone. Luckily, for the sake of our home planet and our shared future, there are no restrictions preventing us from living as if Earth Day was every day. Noticing online that #EarthMonth was trending, it appears that people are catching on to the fact that humanity needs to adopt an Earth-friendly way of life for more than one day each year.

As with any ongoing global crisis - climate change, rapidly declining biodiversity, systemic racism, food insecurity, income inequality, poverty, homelessness, the opioid epidemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic to name a few - before a solution can be implemented, there must be an understanding of the causes, nature, and state of the crisis. It is also imperative that this understanding is based in scientific facts derived from firsthand observations and experiences gathered on the front lines of the crisis.

Our understanding of each of the above mentioned crises has grown over time, through our active engagement with the problems they pose society, and finding solutions. While to some it may seem a bit too tree-huggerish to declare that all of these crises are interconnected, in actuality this is a truth that must be acknowledged before any real progress can be made.

For anyone unconvinced regarding the interconnectedness of these crises, take a moment to reflect on how income inequality impacts each of the others.

According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, by lunch on the first work day of 2021 (Jan. 4) Canada's 100 highest earning CEOs had earned \$53,000. As a full-time worker in Bancroft, it will personally take me a year and a half to earn this much. For someone who is living on the monthly allowance provided by Ontario Works - on average \$733/month - it would take more than six years to bring in this same amount of income.

Is this inequity sustainable? Should it be?

One doesn't need a calculator to divulge from these numbers how income inequality is fueling food insecurity, homelessness, poverty. In light of the observations and experiences shared by those working on the front lines of the opioid epidemic, it has also become clear that the traumatic experience of living in poverty created by income inequality, most often leads to homelessness, food insecurity, mental health issues, and addiction.

It almost goes without saying, however, as we have all witnessed throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the origin of income inequality - greed - and its presence in Ontario's for profit long-term care homes, has taken the lives of thousands of our loved ones. Again, with more than three million people dead world-wide, we have seen how those who can afford the best health-care are more likely to survive than those required by their income to take what they can get.

Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization, 87 per cent of the 700-million+ COVID-19 vaccine doses administered globally, have gone to wealthier countries; with the lowest earning countries receiving just 0.2 per cent. While in the highest earning nations one in four citizens have been vaccinated, in low-income countries only one in 500 have received the coronavirus vaccine.

With so many people struggling to survive with the little they have, at the end of the day there is little time, energy, and money left to invest in solving the climate crisis or the planet's rapidly declining biodiversity. Unfortunately but necessarily, in many ways, the pandemic has shifted the focus of the scientific community, and the environmental movement for that matter. This, of course, is a huge step backwards. Yet, at the same time, seeing how the scientific community has come together beyond borders to find and implement a solution at this tragically urgent moment in our history, one can't help but feel a sense of hope for the future.

We are all hopeful that the vaccine will help to restore a relative degree of normalcy to our lives. But, with the case count and death toll rising fast on the crest of the third wave, it appears we obviously still have some work to do before we get there.

In the meantime, since the environmental crisis is also not going away on its own any time soon, why don't we use this Earth Day as a launch pad for a new movement? A movement that takes the mistakes of our past and employs them as lessons moving forward.

Arising from the ashes of this pandemic as it still burns hot, there is an energy demanding greater accountability for the officials we have elected to lead us. Sadly, this energy appears to have been manipulated to serve the political needs and aspirations of a relatively small group of individuals with no respect for science. In most cases, these are the same politicians who in the past have voted to privatize our health-care system, education, and virtually every publicly-owned asset in our possession.

Buying into their greed and opportunism hook, line, and sinker, the anti-mask/anti-lockdown crowd continues to waste valuable time, energy, and money on equating freedom with the ability to disregard the health and well-being of others. Last week two of the local organizers of the recent anti-mask/anti-lockdown mini-super-spreader gatherings were fined for their role in endangering the community. Imagine the world, the future we could create, the lives and species we could save, if this misguided mob of passionate individuals were to devote their time, energy, and money to understanding and solving homelessness, food insecurity, climate change, declining biodiversity, systemic racism, poverty, and the opioid epidemic.

Instead of constantly whining about how frustrating it is to keep our hands clean, wear a mask, and stay home as much as possible to keep everyone safe, why not channel that energy towards something that matters such as the health of our loved ones and the planet that gives us life?