

Chapter 8

About the act of visioning

In her speech ‘Down to earth’ from 1993, Donella Meadows starts by reminding her audience that there is a lot of work to be done in implementing the multitude of steps necessary to move into a sustainable future (Meadows, 1993). For that we need a lot of talented people, implementers, who can make things happen, who can write policy, acquire resources, make the resources useful and create new things and find new ways.

Behind them we need models, data and theory that can guide us in taking the right steps to take us where we want to go. People who understand how we got to this point, who knows what went wrong and what went right. People who can find their way forward based on data and analysis.

And then behind those we need people who can provide vision, i.e. clarity about the goals and themes of the future; goals and themes that are articulated and can be discussed among us, so that all can participate, contribute to and share that vision.

When it comes to creating a sustainable world, the deficiencies in all of the three arenas are evident. However, she states, we as humans have a tendency, when problems arise due to these deficiencies, to focus primarily on the implementation level – we want to ‘go out and do something about it’. The problem with that approach is that before we act we need to be sure that our models and data are correct, or we might – as we have seen so often – act on a false foundation. And before we even get our data right, we need to know which data are relevant, i.e. we need to understand where we want to go. We need vision.

Donella Meadows' professional background is in the model and data part and her first impulse for the speech was to talk about the results of some of her research. She would have made a speech on how to change the economic principles and how we could apply technology better. However, she argues that what we are doing in our problem-solving eagerness is a 'skipping over' of the visioning step – as if we take it for granted.

Therefore, instead of giving the classical speech of models and computer outputs she chooses to speak of visioning and encourages everybody to work with that dialogue. She states that she is completely unqualified for that kind of talk, because she has no training in visioning or communicating vision. But we are all untrained. But we ought to try anyway – even when it goes beyond our classical academic training. The process of visioning is basic to all of us, we can all do it.

Environmentalists often seem to propose non-inspirational visions of sacrifice, frugality, restriction of freedom and increased control. However, if we instead spend time imagining and visioning, something else will emerge. If we instead try to imagine how the world would look like if its environment was healthy; if all water streams were clean and flowing and providing a good habitat for people and nature alike we would get somewhere different in our dialogue. It is interesting how little amount of time we spend to imagine how it would be like to be in such a world. Instead we are occupied with the problems all the time – I wonder if we even take time off to enjoy our small successes when we do succeed?

What is underneath this dismissal of time spent for visioning a brighter future? Donella Meadows has worked with this and the essence of the answers she has heard again and again: 'I can't stand the pain of looking at the world I really want, when I know about the condition the world is in. I can't stand that tension. I really don't want to look at it. I can't share my vision with all of you because I don't know you well enough yet.' Why is it not socially permitted to share our visions and dreams? What dangers hide there? We are fast to deem dreamers naive, idealistic and unrealistic. This is so ingrained in our culture that it is almost an automatic reaction – I can even hear myself judging myself on this.

Donella Meadows' experience, when she found a way to speak with people about her and their vision, was a great relief and the pouring forth of beautiful visions. The words of these conversations would have given a different picture than the current discourse of sacrifice, loss of freedom and increased control. People became invigorated and ready to work for the cause. She explains: 'I have learned how more to tap the part of me – I don't know how to describe it – from which vision comes. It's not the intellect, it's not the mind, it's not the rational set of skills that we have as human beings. It comes from another place, which you may call heart or soul some combination of the two.'

Donella Meadows has implemented a practice of always taking time off before starting a project to vision 'what it would be like if it was perfect'. She spends so much time on it that she knows the vision intimately and can refer to it, when she feels like losing her way. The point, she explains, is to state as precisely as

possible what you really want – not what you think you can get. We have to set aside our mental models of what we believe is possible, because what we earlier thought was impossible happens all the time. Secondly, you are not obligated to know or show a way to get to that vision. Such a requirement again puts a spotlight on what we allow ourselves to imagine – also remember that when you listen to others vision.

‘My experience’, Donella Meadows explains, ‘in having now many times created a vision and then actually brought it in some form into being; my experience is that I never know at the beginning how to get there. But as I articulate the vision, put it out, share it with other people and it gets more polished and more real the path reveals itself. And it would never reveal itself if I were not putting out the vision of what I really want and finding that other people really want it too. Holding on the vision reveals the path and there is no need to judge the vision by whether the path is apparent.’

Your reflections: Have you set time aside to work on your visioning in your current projects or your job? How does the world you would love to live in look like? Donella claims that having such an inner vision alive inside prevents her from selling out to something less. Vision gives you the power to stay on course – can you recognize that in you? How can visioning become a practicality for you?