



Making the
GOOD LIFE LAST

Four Keys to Sustainable Living

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Foreword by SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

An Excerpt From

***Making the Good Life Last:
Four Keys to Sustainable Living***

by Michael A. Schuler

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Part One

Reimagining the Good Life

Chapter 1

Embracing New Rules of Conduct

If life and love are to endure, if better health and greater happiness are to be obtained, and if the communities and ecologies that sustain us are to thrive, society will have to reappraise its values. More specifically, the principle of sustainability now needs to move to the forefront of our planning and problem solving.

What, then, would this entail? As I've already pointed out, most of the commentary on sustainability focuses on technical solutions—specific, scientifically determined measures meant to solve particular social, environmental, or economic problems. What have been missing are a few basic behavioral norms that can provide the initiated and uninitiated alike with the insight and proper incentive to accomplish some very important goals. What I recommend is the application at both the individual and collective level of four deceptively simple and straightforward rules of conduct, or “keys.” Their ultimate purpose is to ensure that the efforts we make to create the good life will produce the desired results. The rules are these:

- Pay attention.
- Stay put.
- Exercise patience.
- Practice prudence.

Pay Attention

The first key—pay attention—may strike you as somewhat puzzling. After all, doesn't every reasonably observant, healthy individual know how to attend? Perhaps those afflicted with some perceptual malady may find the task difficult, but otherwise this is an ability most of us take for granted.

In this department we undoubtedly give ourselves more credit than we deserve. Is the *quality* of our attention such that we accurately perceive what's going on around us and inside ourselves? The sad fact is that many of us are eminently distractible, noticeably preoccupied, and solidly entrenched in a pattern of preconceptions and prejudicial thinking that seriously compromises our ability to see clearly.

This is not invariably the case, of course. Most people are quite able to pay close attention when engaged in an activity they really enjoy or feel passionate about. That quality is clearly displayed in the demeanor of a professional poker player or a pinball wizard. It is also an ability most new mothers develop, such that even the faintest cry from their baby's crib will bring them to instant alertness. A computer game, a concert, or a compelling research project can all produce rapt attention in their respective participants.

And yet many aspects of personal, interpersonal, and planetary life don't receive sufficient attention. If an enterprise, a relationship, or an environment isn't sufficiently engaging, we tune out and turn our attention elsewhere. Why? Because paying attention requires energy and self-discipline—a greater expenditure of sustained effort than most of us want to invest. But if we restrict our powers of attention only to those areas that seem likely to pay immediate dividends in terms of pleasure or profit, much that is critical to our well-being won't be given the serious consideration it deserves. The quality of a person's attention will decisively affect that person's performance as a parent, an employee, a citizen, or a steward of the planet.

Paying Attention on a Farm

My own upbringing on a modest working farm in the upper Midwest has helped me as an adult to appreciate the critical role that atten-

tion plays in the practice of sustainable agriculture. Apart from a few rudimentary practices like crop rotation, neither we nor our rural neighbors consciously adhered to sustainable standards. We almost certainly did not pay the kind of close attention to what we were doing that the noted Kentucky farmer-writer Wendell Berry advocates. Berry, whose observations of Amish culture and his own determined efforts to make a small, hardscrabble farm productive have made him something of a sustainability guru, can help readers appreciate the difference between his and our own more conventional approach to agriculture.

Farmers of the “old school,” Berry writes, are always alert to what Alexander Pope characterized as the “genius of the place.” They are guided in their work and their ambitions by the natural contours of their property, by the presence of certain wild plants and animals, and by subtle variations in the soil. Marketability and mass production are not the only or even the first consideration for the sustainable farmer. Plants and animals are raised according to what best suits the land and its resources.

The farmers that Berry cites recognize the indissoluble connection between the land’s aliveness and their own livelihood; they strive to be conscientious stewards as well as successful producers. Berry finds appalling those industrial-style farmers and absentee owners whose hunger for profit and reliance on technology have led them to abdicate their responsibility. Their jaded sensibilities and unwillingness to pay attention to the consequences of their actions have undermined the health of rural ecologies and communities alike. “The inability to distinguish between a farm and any farm is a condition predisposing to abuse,” Berry writes, “and abuse has been the result. Rape, indeed, has been the result, and we have seen that we are not exempt from the damage we have inflicted. Now we must think of marriage.”¹

Peter Martinelli, who operates a small, coastal farm north of San Francisco, offers an instructive example of how attention and intuition can be used to solve an agricultural problem. Farming in this region is an ongoing challenge; in contrast with

California's sun-soaked central valley, the weather is less predictable and soil conditions are less uniform. The environment demands an opportunistic and flexible orientation and a willingness to explore many possibilities. Consequently, Martinelli is always looking, questioning, and rearranging the pieces of his farm to obtain better results.

A few years ago he decided to make a stab at growing strawberries—a common coastal crop. He studied the subject and learned from the literature that because the fruit's sweetness is directly affected by heat and sun, strawberries should be planted in his warmest field—a flat, treeless expanse of valley real estate. Accordingly, he planted his berries “by the book,” but the resulting product wasn't what the literature had promised. Martinelli ended up with small, excessively tart berries that were barely edible. To make matters worse, during the ensuing winter most of the plants in that “prime” location died. Nevertheless, the persistent farmer wasn't ready to throw in the towel. He still had a gut feeling about those strawberries.

Laying “science” temporarily aside, Martinelli thoroughly reinspected his property, walking and looking and, as Wendell Berry put it, trying to get a sense of its “genius.” Finally, on a hunch, he planted a second crop in a hillside clearing surrounded by woods. Although experts would hardly have considered it an ideal spot for domesticated strawberries, Martinelli felt confident. The plants did well, and when the berries ripened, they were simply exquisite—“delicious in a way that forces you to stop and consider each one deeply,” as Martinelli himself reported.

There was really nothing all that mysterious or magical about this unexpected success. Rather than allow his judgment to be clouded by his previous assumptions and prevailing agricultural opinion, the farmer simply resolved to pay close attention and let the land speak directly to him. On one of many saunters around his property, something had made Martinelli pause: on a hill at the edge of the woods he discovered a few wild strawberries stretching their tendrils across a litter of leaves. In the lower field where the crop

had failed, no wild berries were present. There was something about the higher elevation that seemed to suit the plant. The farmer only needed to notice what was already there.²

Going about our daily lives, how often do our own decisions and actions reflect close attention? Our behavior might reflect ingrained habit or standard operating procedure. Often we feel obliged to follow the guidance of experts or conventional wisdom. But there is also a lot to be said for the power of simple attention as we search for the optimal place to sow the seeds of happiness.

The Tao of Attention

Traditional Eastern philosophies have always placed a premium on this quality of perception and the practices that promote it. Over 2,400 years ago the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu provided a holistic description of “attention” that remains relevant:

The goal ... is inner unity. This means hearing, not just with the ear; hearing, but not with the understanding; hearing with the spirit, with your whole being. ... Hence, it demands the emptiness of all the other faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then the whole being listens.³

Taoism teaches that by fully attending to things as they are, we can enjoy a harmonious relationship with the Tao—that ineffable, all-pervading principle that governs and gives coherence to the cosmos. In the process, we gain the ability to move through life mindfully, with ever-greater poise and equanimity and free from the need to be always “in control” of others and the environment.

Philosopher-anthropologist David Abram has reached a similar conclusion. Despite the rapid expansion of our knowledge about the world, the incredible amount of information literally at our fingertips, and the sophisticated technology we now command, awareness of and sensitivity to our surroundings have eroded. Knowledge derived from secondary sources causes us, as it did Peter Martinelli, to make assumptions and often as not to draw the wrong conclusions. Technology keeps us at arm’s length from that

which nourishes us. Abram believes that our best hope for moving from estrangement back into relationship is to take our cues from pretechnical, nonliterate traditional peoples who still know how to pay attention. Statutory codes, cool rational appraisals, and philosophic principles, while important, are not sufficient. If a more compelling environmental ethic is to gain widespread acceptance, “*a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics* (my emphasis) and a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us” will also be required.⁴

Or as the British philosopher John Gray succinctly put it: “Why do we need to have a [definable] purpose in life? Can we not think of the aim of life as being simply to *see*?”—seeing being just another way of saying “Pay attention!”⁵

Stay Put

In addition to improving the quality of our perception, we have to get better at controlling our restlessness. Novelist Wallace Stegner was a close observer of American culture, and he once observed that people in this country can generally be assigned to one of two categories: they are either “boomers” or “stickers.” He lamented that the former—folks who with very little forethought will pull up stakes and head for the latest boomtown—were becoming increasingly dominant. Modern society, Stegner complained, schools its citizens in discontent and encourages us to “get up and get out.” The itch for greener pastures or greater adventure—symptomatic, perhaps, of an unresolved frontier fixation—is one we just can’t resist scratching. But, Stegner wrote, “Neither the country nor the society we build out of it can be healthy if we don’t stop raiding and running. We must learn to be quiet part of the time and acquire the sense not of ownership, but of belonging.”⁶

Stegner first voiced this concern a half century ago, and today the average American pulls up stakes and heads for a new home, neighborhood, or community about once every seven years. Underscoring Stegner’s point, Scott Russell Sanders observes that

“from the beginning our heroes have been vagabonds of every stripe.” Rather than create viable livelihoods and livable communities where they already are, Americans have continually hankered for a new environment more suited to their needs. “The promised land has always been over the next ridge, or at the end of the trail, never under our feet,” Sanders writes.⁷ The problem has reached such proportions that environmental writer Terry Tempest Williams has even suggested that “perhaps the most radical thing we can do these days is to stay home.”⁸

Why We Don't Stay Put

The reasons for all this meandering about aren't necessarily trivial, and boomers sometimes protest that they don't have much choice. The explanations people give include loss of local employment, educational opportunities elsewhere, environmental health issues, and the need to live nearer to close relatives. Nevertheless, a good bit of this transience appears to be based on internal restlessness rather than real necessity. People “get up and get out” for the sake of a more congenial climate, an upscale lifestyle, or a more child-friendly atmosphere. I'm familiar with these rationales because earlier in life we ourselves made similar choices. At this stage of the game, however, I'm pretty well convinced that the American reluctance to sink our roots too deeply in any native soil has had a negative impact on families, communities, and ecologies.

The Dividends It Pays

I have become a convert to the second key of sustainability: *stay put*. For the past two decades our family has lived in the same tightly integrated neighborhood. We have watched our son and his friends move from infancy to adulthood and then leave home, and we have marveled at the many changes that have occurred in our surroundings and in ourselves. While it is certainly conceivable that circumstances might eventually cause us to move elsewhere, we would take that step with great reluctance and with a genuine sense of loss. Trina and I enjoy our status as stickers and wish more Americans shared our own appreciation for its pleasures.

People come to the city where we live, Madison, and swoon over its most obvious assets: four beautiful lakes, Frank Lloyd Wright buildings, the nation's best and biggest farmer's market, its expansive park system, and its funky State Street shopping area. They say that they "love" the city, but what they're really describing seems more like infatuation than real devotion. Commitment comes when residents become curious and attentive enough to develop a deep sense of identity, after which they begin seriously to care. For a bona fide sticker, the fate of self and the fate of community are felt to be intertwined.

Communities owe their health and beauty to those with the fortitude and faithfulness to stay put—those who, as Stegner wrote, are prepared to place homemaking ahead of profit making. For stickers, a house is first and foremost a home and only secondarily an investment. Such residents are thus more likely than most to protect a community from those whose paramount concern is their own enrichment.

These are people who've been around long enough to know that their community actually has character and that this is one of the qualities that makes it habitable. As time passes, stickers inevitably learn something of their local history, recognize important landmarks and artifacts, and come to understand who and what makes the community tick. The economic, cultural, and environmental forces that have shaped and reshaped the region are obvious to stickers, and they are eager to do what they can to maintain continuity with the healthiest aspects of the past. When Terry Tempest Williams urges us to "stay home," it is for this express purpose: to deepen our knowledge of and commitment to the place and the people we are part of.

Of course, sticking doesn't guarantee that the special identity of a community will be preserved and its long-term interests well served. Often the developers, real estate brokers, and investors who are most responsible for altering its character can cite long residency and routinely express great pride in their community. But because their first priority is profit making, actors such as these

tend to think and perform more like boomers than stickers. Despite their status as homegrown products, they have nevertheless aided and abetted a development process that has rendered many of America's towns and cities culturally sterile and commercially homogenous. These communities are "purposely held in bondage by a local network of moneyed families, bankers, developers, lawyers, and businesspeople" who are not the least interested in community values or the health of its citizenry, journalist and gad-fly Joe Bageant complains.⁹

To be a sticker is not to be an obstinate opponent of change, but it is to be a person who understands his or her community thoroughly enough to know what deserves to be left undisturbed, what needs to be restored, and what is, in fact, dispensable. In the absence of persons with this level of sensitivity, indiscriminate profit seekers and indifferent newcomers will sap a community's strength.

We Need More Stickers

So Wallace Stegner is surely right about society's need for more stickers, by which we mean persons who are willing to make a spiritual as well as a physical commitment to a place. Equipped with in-depth knowledge and an appreciation for its "genius," they pay attention to the things that really matter to their community and thus are able to offer the necessary resistance to those whose vision has been clouded by the lust for personal power and profit.

Iowa native John Price recently penned an open letter to the young people of that state, many of whom are eager to settle elsewhere. In that missive he acknowledges that Iowa is probably not the most stimulating place to live, and he understands a youngster's restlessness. Still, give your home a second look, Price urges. Don't be so eager to rush off before you've considered what you might be leaving behind. "By staying put," he writes, "the place I once wanted to escape has taught me to see the world in a new and better way, with a degree of hope I could've hardly discovered on my own."

Most of all, Price promises, if you stay, you will never feel alone, for you will be surrounded by a dependable network of family,

friends, and, yes, even strangers “who are bound to you by the land we share and by the vow of all committed love: to be there, to try.”¹⁰ Staying close to home isn’t always an option, and it isn’t always desirable; but if we are feeling antsy to get up and get out, let’s at least be aware of what we may be leaving behind and how our own departure may affect a community’s future.

The present discussion has concentrated on the most obvious physical implications of this key, *staying put*. When we come to consider our labor, relational life, health and fitness, and spiritual well-being, its relevance will become even more apparent, for this key also suggests traits of character like perseverance, fidelity, and self-discipline. Modern culture has made it too tempting and too easy to opt for a succession of spouses rather than our first love, to experiment with multiple spiritual paths instead of deepening our understanding of one, to move from job to job without ever developing a true sense of “calling.”

While circumstances may sometimes make it difficult to stay put in the ways I’ve described, it’s important to understand that by *choosing* the lifestyle of a perpetually restless boomer, we forfeit the many subtle pleasures that require continuity and that are part and parcel of the good life.

Exercise Patience

The ability to stay put implies patience, but casual observation of people’s behavior in checkout lines and eating establishments suggests that the latter has little standing in any recent catalogue of American virtues. It is on the thoroughfares we use to reach our dining and shopping destinations where the absence of patience is most noticeable. Both civility and safety concerns evaporate the minute we settle into the driver’s seat and hit the gas.

Tucson is an example of a city that is, from a planning standpoint, well designed to accommodate cyclists. Clearly designated bike lanes provide easy access to most important destinations for commuters and casual riders alike. But as some bicyclists quickly learn, appropriate infrastructure offers no real protection against

impatient and incautious drivers. A surprising number of people behind the wheel honk, shout obscenities out their windows, and seem to relish playing “chicken” with those who opt for peddle power. Serious and fatal injury to riders occurs all too frequently in Tucson and in other hypothetically bicycle-friendly cities.

The problem is compounded by the fact that hardly anyone observes the posted speed limits, which are a generous forty-five mph on Tucson’s main arteries and seventy-five mph on Arizona’s limited-access highways. Driving less than the posted upper limit is to risk being rear-ended. To be fair, conditions aren’t all that different on East Coast arteries like the Massachusetts and New Jersey Turnpikes or even Chicago’s Eisenhower Expressway. Not only does such impatience produce a higher number of fatal accidents, but it represents a gross waste of resources.

Excessive speed, jack-rabbit starts, and quick stops are the primary culprits in loss of fuel economy, and it has been amply documented that if the typical driver relaxed a little and resisted the temptation to press the pedal to the metal, the result would be a marked reduction in overall gas consumption (in this respect, every vehicle sold should feature a dashboard display similar to the one on the Toyota Prius, which provides the operator with instant miles-per-gallon feedback). If we think that by simply going faster we’ll somehow capture the “good life,” we’re probably on the wrong highway. To paraphrase those ubiquitous road signs: “Slow down and live well.”

Patience and Appreciation

The heedless waste of an increasingly costly nonrenewable resource is one compelling reason for cultivating patience. A second has to do with the quality of our human relationships and the character of our communities. No matter how cordial and considerate folks might be within the charmed circle of family and friends, on the streets they too often act like chariot drivers in the Circus Maximus or stock car jockeys at Talladega. I’m not even talking about road-rage—a relatively rare phenomenon. The aggressiveness of the typical hurried, harried driver has created an adversarial

atmosphere on the nation's roadways and seriously compromised our consideration for one another. Comedian Steven Wright's humorous remark that "God is going to come down and pull civilization over for speeding" makes a valid point: when a culture runs out of patience, it also falls out of grace.¹¹

People who are constantly in a hurry lose the capacity to reflect meaningfully on their own actions, and thus they find it difficult to uphold their core values in challenging circumstances (e.g., lambs at home become lions behind the wheel). If we made a more deliberate effort to take our time, we might also become more proficient, as author and essayist Mark Slouka puts it, "at figuring out who we are and what we believe." If our desire is to maintain a more consistent ethic of care, we simply have to slow down.¹²

Patience is also a must if we desire a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the world around us. Naturalists from Henry David Thoreau to Annie Dillard offer cogent reminders that the sentient universe is so much more sublime when we take time to savor it. Too often their soulful appeals fall on deaf ears.

Consider the simple process of preparing and consuming a cup of tea and how the experience is enhanced by adding an extra dollop of time and attention. "Just a cup of tea," Stephen Levine concedes, but liberated from our usual habit of haste, tea-tasting can provide a genuine opportunity for healing.

Just this moment of newness. Just the hand touching the cup. Just the arm retracting. The fragrance increasing as the cup nears the lips. . . . Noticing the first taste of tea before the tea even reaches the lips. The fragrance and heat rising into the mouth. The first noticing of flavor. The touch of warm tea on willing tongue. The tongue moving the tea about in the mouth. The intention to swallow. The warmth that extends down into the stomach. What a wonderful cup of tea. The tea of peace, of satisfaction.¹³

No matter how suggestively such voices ask us to reconsider our addiction to speed, most of us still have trouble setting a

healthier and holier pace for ourselves. Soon after the day begins we shift into high gear and from there our own momentum carries us forward. We rarely will stop either to smell the roses or appreciatively to sip the tea.

The tragedy of too much haste struck me forcefully one early October evening in Tucson. Trina and I had returned from an excursion to Mt. Lemmon, where we had spent the day high above the valley's scorching heat. We were welcomed by one of the most dramatic sunsets either of us had ever seen. Storm clouds were slowly receding, and both the western and eastern horizons displayed a palette worthy of the great Venetian painters Titian and Tintoretto. The two of us spent the better part of a half hour strolling to various vantage points, trying to capture just a bit more of the evening's glory before darkness fell. Cars and bikes whizzed by, but no one slowed down, much less stopped, to gaze toward the firmament. Perhaps most Arizonans are so accustomed to spectacular sunsets that they are no longer moved by them. For us, however, it was soul food of the most satisfying sort.

The late Sigurd Olson, a noted naturalist and prolific essayist, described a similar experience he had many years earlier. At the other end of the state lies the majestic Grand Canyon. When Olson and several friends arrived at the southern rim on an excursion, the sun still hung well above the horizon. Their timing was deliberate, for that company had come to savor the subtle color shifts in the canyon walls as the evening progressed. "For over an hour," Olson reports, "we feasted on a panorama unequaled anywhere in the world, and over it was a silence and timelessness that gave added meaning to the scene."

Olson's party had suspended all peripheral needs and personal agendas to be fully present for this delectable experience. They were content to nibble slowly at a visual feast rather than gluttonously try to take it in at a single glance. Then, as the canyon was at its most colorful, two vacationing parents and their children roared up to the lookout spot where Olson and his comrades were sitting. The family noisily piled out of the car, walked quickly to the

guardrail, and peered out over the abyss for a few moments. “Well, we’ve seen this one,” Dad pronounced. “Let’s try to make it to the next vista point before we call it a day.”

In telling this story, Olson expressed sympathy rather than irritation over the intrusion. He felt that this family, like so many casual visitors to the canyon, had to have come away disappointed. “They are so imbued with the sense of hurry and the thrill of travel that they actually lose what they came so far to find,” he remarked.¹⁴

Many Americans have become accustomed to living in the fast lane and feel so pressured to meet their obligations and work into their schedules an ever-expanding array of activities that patience is a luxury few feel they can afford. We have created an economy and a culture that fairly demands that we keep quickening our pace. Many also equate patience with excessive caution, lack of ambition, inefficiency, and lagging productivity. Any attempt to promote its practice is likely to be regarded as unfeasible, if not downright subversive.

And yet the epidemic of fretfulness and anxiety that has spread through the country, and that is the proximate cause of so much personal and interpersonal distress, would seem to indicate the need for a change of pace. Sedatives and sleeping pills (prescriptions for which have increased dramatically in recent years) are not a sustainable solution. In the words of the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh: “We must organize a resistance. . . . We have to resist the speed, the losing of ourselves.”¹⁵

Practice Prudence

The fourth key, *practice prudence*, is contingent upon the three already discussed—pay attention, stay put, and exercise patience. Unsound or imprudent behavior often reflects failure in one or more of the other areas. People are more likely to act and live prudently—that is, with due caution and foresight—if they are willing to abide and take time to attend. Easier said than done, however. In a brief discussion of personal finances, environmental and social

commentator Bill McKibben highlights the problem: “Only twenty percent of Americans are currently ‘planners’ who save toward a quantitative goal.” The rest, McKibben asserts, leave their future more or less to chance. They are “strugglers,” “impulsives,” and “deniers.” Often as not, the issue is lack of will power rather than awareness. Americans generally agree that they know *how* to cut back on household spending — sixty-eight percent, for instance, indicated they could save by eating out less often—but they have difficulty putting that knowledge into practice.¹⁶

McKibben’s research indicates that even though a majority of Americans acknowledge the importance of being prudent, four out of five concede that they are not self-disciplined enough to make prudent decisions. This is hardly surprising given the constant encouragement we receive to consume our way to happiness. Living on credit, never putting off until tomorrow what can be purchased today, has become the accepted way of doing business. For many Americans, shopping has become the primary recreational activity. Without it, we might not know what to do with ourselves. Even former President George W. Bush told us at one time that a trip to the mall should be considered a patriotic act!

The word *prudence* has an old-fashioned ring to it, and for some it may evoke images of men in starched collars and or tight-lipped schoolmarms in petticoats. Further explication of its relationship to the good life is, therefore, in order.

Helpful Synonyms

One suggestive synonym for prudence is *mindfulness*. While this word appears often in the literature of meditation and spiritual development and is closely related to *attention*, here mindfulness carries a different connotation. Apropos of the signs posted in British subways advising riders to “mind the gap,” it means to “be careful.” Prudence, then, suggests the exercise of due care.

Before embarking on an adventure or beginning a new enterprise, the prudent person makes a patient and mindful attempt to anticipate problems and lower the chances of mishap. If we don’t see prudence displayed often enough, it

may be because a culture that countenances and even encourages high-risk ventures would equate it with timidity. The brave, self-confident person seizes the day and lets tomorrow take care of itself. If the choice is between the impetuous and the prudent, it is all too probable we will opt for the former.

Prudence can also be equated with common sense, which the futurist Marilyn Ferguson has defined as “an attitude of continuous investigation.” The problem is that common sense isn’t all that common any more. Our resistance to a consumer culture that continually tickles our appetites and discourages due deliberation has grown weak. In the spring of 2008, as his quest for the presidency was getting under way, Barack Obama warned his New York audience of an impending financial disaster. “A complete disdain for pay-as-you-go budgeting,” he presciently observed, “... allowed far too many to put short-term gain ahead of long-term consequences.”¹⁷

The fact is, we just can’t have it all. We need to do our homework, carefully consider our options, and exercise sound judgment. Healthful and happy living requires a prudent disposition.

Sometimes prudence substitutes for words like *economy*, *thrift*, and *husbandry*. The prudent individual or community keeps close tabs on its resources and resists the temptation, as the *Tao Te Ching* puts it, to “overreach, overuse, overspend.”¹⁸ Defined in this fashion, our fourth key can be directly applied to the quest for economic and environmental sustainability. When *Small Is Beautiful* author E. F. Schumacher offered his “first principle” of sustainable economics, he was making a pitch for prudence. An economic practice is life affirming, he wrote, when it produces maximum well-being with minimum consumption.¹⁹

Cautious But Not Compulsive

I come from a long line of farmers and businessmen who seem to have sworn some sort of oath to the idea of prudence, which may explain why I am also drawn to it. My paternal grandfather, Harry Schuler, died of work-related emphysema in his early sixties (OK, maybe he wasn’t all *that* prudent!), well before we could sit down

together and discuss his values. But according to family lore, Harry's cautious approach to investment served him and his loved ones well during the Great Depression, when so many Americans lost most of their hard-earned assets. I remember my grandfather as a hard-working man who sewed patches on his old khakis and drove sensible cars. Since they were moderately well-to-do, the family could have afforded more luxuries. But in the end Harry's prudence paid off, making it possible for his widow to live comfortably and securely to the enviable age of 102.

In this regard, Harry's son, my own father, is a chip off the block. Dad had always declined to invest in the stock market (a casino, he complains, where clever brokers, inside traders, and big investors control the outcome) and has placed most of his and my mother's assets in instruments that produce modest but dependable returns. Hedging their bets against the high cost of future medical care, my parents have forgone the temptation to buy the new cars and lavish furnishings they could certainly afford. Now in their mid eighties, they indulge moderately and are content to enjoy comfort rather than splendor.

Trina and I began setting money aside for our son's college education while he was still a toddler, so we're obviously following in my forebears' footsteps. We avoid buying on credit whenever possible, pay off our balance immediately, and carefully monitor our discretionary spending. We live well, but well within our means. Prudent planning has put us on a solid financial footing, and it has also kept our stress level low, given our son a healthy head start, and laid the groundwork for a sustainable retirement.

The prudent person is levelheaded and not anxious, deliberative and cautious but not hypervigilant. Indeed, if equanimity and peace of mind are what we are after, prudence is the name of the game. By assessing the future and establishing sensible priorities, we eliminate a lot of unnecessary worry. To the extent that we allow the impulsive side of our personality to dominate, we may feel satisfied one day, only to wake up the next troubled and anxious. As the world's social, economic, and environmental problems

mount, Americans would do well to explore more sensible avenues to the good life because the road we are running on seems likely to end in a cul-de-sac.

Confronting a Fatal Flaw

A pioneer in the emerging field of bioethics and an eminent University of Wisconsin biochemist, Van Rensselaer Potter spent a good bit of time in retirement thinking about the future of the planet and trying to understand why human beings exhibited so little common sense. Ultimately, he concluded that our species suffers from an inborn deficiency, or “fatal flaw,” that threatens to undo all that we have achieved. The problem, he observed, is that most men and women lack prescience; they have lost—or perhaps never acquired—the ability to anticipate the long-term consequences of their actions.²⁰

But Potter merely updated a thesis presented several centuries earlier by that bleak English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes lamented that the insistent physical and emotional urge to satisfy our immediate wants prevents us from “foreseeing the greater evils that necessarily attach” to the goods we seek.²¹

Years of inaction on critical planetary issues like climate change, resource depletion, and species losses would seem to confirm the fatal flaw thesis. Even repeated, forceful admonitions from the world’s most respected scientists haven’t convinced the average person to make more prudent choices. Ours may be an extraordinarily clever species, but we are also experts at rationalizing our irresponsible behavior and selectively ignoring mounting evidence that we are on the wrong track. One hopes that enough of us will recognize the aforementioned defect and correct it before the planet’s slow sickening becomes acute and irreversible.

Fortunately, the shortcoming that Hobbes and Potter identified doesn’t afflict everyone. Although eighty percent of Americans are impulsives, the remaining twenty percent do plan deliberately for the future. They consider the odds and make decisions with one eye trained on the distance. These are the people we need to listen

to, aspire to become, and promote to positions of leadership. Panderers who proclaim that “the American way of life is not negotiable” and that even token sacrifice for the sake of the future is unnecessary can no longer be tolerated and must be vigorously challenged.

If technical arguments and dire warnings have proved insufficient to overcome the fatal flaw, perhaps sober consideration of the ugly legacy we are preparing will give us pause. It certainly has had an effect on Bill Moyers, a distinguished journalist with six grandchildren. Their sweet visages serve to remind him of the need to reflect upon his own responsibility:

I look up at the pictures on my desk, next to my computer . . . and I see the future looking back at me from those photographs and I say, “Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do.” And then the shiver runs down my spine, and I am seized by the realization: That’s not right. We do know what we are doing. We are stealing their future.²²

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