

## TRUE SUSTAINABILITY

### The Miracle-Economy

I was born in 1962, during the so-called German "Economic Miracle". I can imagine that our generation will go down in history as a remarkable one. With remarkable energy our parents shaped war ruins to vibrant industries. Full of confidence in the future, they created the so-called "Baby-Boom". Full of enthusiasm, they invented new technologies and helped Germany to become the world champion of exports. As the boom-babies grew up and we became the first "I-just-wanna-have-fun-youth", there was already an abundance of things. The ancient dream of mankind – prosperity for everyone - was fulfilled in our generation. We lived carefree lives and enjoyed leisure, holiday and prosperity. Democracy spread from nation to nation and our old continent Europe enjoyed an amazingly long period of peace. Then as our parents stepped back and we stepped forward, people wondered how we would continue. Because we were the pupils of the 1968 teacher generation, people expected us to squander the accomplishments of our parents on our own pleasures and bring the Economic Miracle to an abrupt end. But far from it, they under-estimated us! We even surpassed the economic success of our parents; we developed the Economic Miracle into a proper "miracle-economy". And it performed one amazing thing after another. Just like magic it changed fed-up-to-the-top-people into consumers with ravenous appetites. Even though they worked less and "leisured" more they had enough money to afford it. Robots were recruited to the factories, the work force was sent out onto the street. But interestingly enough, even the unemployed earned more than the average worker of the preceding generations. Our miraculous economy not only produced more output with less people, it also managed to survive without too many factories. Manufacturing plants were transformed into pleasure parks. The production of goods went to cheap labor countries. The sectors that still blossomed within the old industrial nations were wellness, pleasure and excess. Like in a fairy tale, this did not lead to a downfall but to more prosperity for all. The demand for more goods and the reality of less inland production seemed to be a discrepancy. But not for our miracle-economy: "Abracadabra!" - and it invented new finance products with supernatural abilities, so that the value of mortgages could grow according to greed and not to their real value. Through faith in the miracle-economy and its continual thriving, the growing mountain of debt became more and more insignificant.

### The Foundation of Our Miracle-Economy Is Not Solid

So I think that our generation with its wondrous economy really deserves the title "remarkable". However, we are still in the best age of our career, so it is too early for a final conclusion. We still have quite a few years in power ahead of us. Who knows, perhaps we will conjure up more remarkable facts for future history books. This could happen, for example, if after our phenomenal rise we experienced a phenomenal downfall. Then we would not only be the remarkable generation which drew tremendous riches out of nothing, but also the one which squandered the riches and had a remarkable fall. Until a few years ago, most of us viewed such a scenario as completely unrealistic or absurd. Then the financial crisis has revealed, how instable our global economy really is. In the meantime, almost three years have

passed and through further debts some of our countries have managed to regain certain levels of growth. This should not mislead us to believe in an ongoing continuation of the miraculous powers of the market. Our system is still, to a great extent, driven by the short-term growth generator greed – which is everything but sustainable.

### **The Miracle-Economy Depends on Greed in Society**

We all understand that greed drives our economy, don't we? Greed is if you want more of something, more than is good for you. The word "more" often serves the interests of greed. Today it is one of the most frequently used words in the language of advertisement. It is human and good to strive for more, but never was the pursuit of "more" so perverted as it is today: When I was a baby, people wanted more in order to have enough (survival); when I was in my teens, people wanted more than they needed (luxury); now that I am a parent, I observe that most people want more than is good for them (greed). Once we were needy, then we had enough, and now we are greedy. Today's children, for example, are greedy for more than is good for them: too many hours of senseless TV, too many hours in front of the computer or other electronic devices, too manipulated by the newest trends, too much junk food, etc. Who drives them to be so greedy for more? It is their social environment that is controlled through the media by the commercial interests of our miracle-economy. By the way, it is the same social environment that also drives us adults to more than is good for us: too much stress, too much medicine, too much soul food, too many debts etc. It is hard to deny it: our system promotes greed in us and uses it for its short-term expansion. Advertisement proves this fact. I recently observed three related advertisements at an airport. "Treat yourself! Spoil yourself! Indulge yourself!" In other words: "Ignore your good resolutions and just let go. Leave your ambition to be sustainable. Be negligent. Surrender yourself and your money to us! Our products will take care that you will be spoiled and become a slave of your negative passions."

### **Greed Leads to Negligence - Negligence Is Dangerous**

Advertisements that promote greed are rather standard than an exception in our system. It counsels us: "Buy as much as possible, more than you need". It doesn't say: "Be careful that you do not buy in excess, it could have bad consequences." It sounds ridiculous to imagine an advertisement industry which would encourage consumers to be moderate buyers. Everybody knows that our system prefers mindless indulgence to sensible modesty. We all know our system welcomes greed. Greed leads to blindness and stupidity. Whoever lives in a system dominated by greed lives in danger. Greed is always accompanied by negligence and is therefore like a time bomb. If somebody is too greedy for food, his sweet treat will turn sour within him. Countries which showed most greed before the crisis were struck the hardest afterwards. How remarkable – nowadays in the days of "mega-enlightenment" through the internet, we have been deceived by a system which claims to be a miracle-performer. "If we all join in and are greedy...", so boasted our miracle-economy, "...then we will continue to grow and magically create a surplus for everyone". So people didn't think it necessary to use their minds and think about the situation. But we should be asking ourselves whether it's worth the risk to continue participating in the system – in view of our own and of our children's future.

Do we really want to continue to buy goods that we don't need, from the money we don't have, perhaps only to impress people we don't like. Perhaps we are not like this, and for sure, it wouldn't be so easy to step out of the system. It would be an enormous project laden with risks. But I believe the alternative to continue with greed is a much greater risk.

### **Our Society is in Need of Sustainability**

Greed and negligence have stimulated our economy to be in high spirits. The fast pace of growth can soon be lost in times of disillusionment. Our economy and our society need to be placed on a foundation of sustainability and temperance. In German, the words "negligence" and "sustainability" almost sound identical ("Nachlässigkeit, Nachhaltigkeit"), but their meaning couldn't be further apart. Both words deal with an attitude towards the future. Negligence avoids effort today and fails to care for the future, it ruins values. Sustainability dares self-control today and cares for the future, it preserves values.

Let's have a closer look at the term "sustainability": The concept was created not further than 50km from our company base in Klipphausen/Saxonia by a captain of mineworkers called Carl von Carlowitz. As there was not enough wood for the mining of silver at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he developed the concept of sustainability: "Refrain from using up all the available resources in the present and care for the future!" was his demand. "Only cut down as much wood as can grow again through reforestation." After the Industrial Revolution, the wars and the Economic Miracle, this term has long since been forgotten.

In 1987 the UN-Commission came up with a new definition of this term: "Sustainability is if a generation cares for its own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the word of sustainability spread from continent to continent. So our generation was actually the one which re-discovered this good concept. And not only did we understand the necessity of implementing sustainability in our economy, but we have achieved quite a lot in this respect. We could write a long list of our accomplishments from environmental protection to recycling. As Germans we are proud to be leaders in the technology of renewable energy. Certainly all these issues are steps in the right direction.

Yet there is no reason to be over-confident that we are on the way to establish a sustainable society. As long as we try to achieve sustainability by the means of negligence we will fail. Our media calls for a sustainable society - and for negligent consumers. Advertisement continuously leads our emotions to "take pleasure in the present moment!", while on the other channel environmental reports challenge our minds with "don't forget the needs of the future generations!" On the one hand, pleasure without effort is displayed as ultimate happiness in life, on the other hand, there is the demand for more enthusiasm in education and at the workplace. This is contradictory. But our system proclaims: "You can have the best of both worlds - you can continue to be negligent and live over your budget and at the same time establish a brave new world of sustainability." This balancing act cannot be sustainable in the long run. Until this discrepancy is dealt with, all the extensive talk about sustainability remains a farce. You can't preach negligence to the consumer - "Just enjoy yourself!", "Buy now and pay later!", "Follow your emotions!" - and then expect them to establish a society of sustainability. This doesn't work.

## **A Sustainable Society Needs Self-controlled People**

It is only too obvious that a truly sustainable society can only be achieved if its individual members are prepared to be sustainable. Individual sustainability can be described as self-control. A self-controlled person is one who uses his brain to evaluate what is good for his future and afterwards puts it into practice. By acting according to his convictions he shows that he is *self*-controlled and not controlled by others. Just as sustainability on the level of society orientates on the needs of future generations, so self-control orientates on the future needs of oneself. Self-control can refrain from pleasures now in order to spare resources for future well-being.

This kind of personal sustainability is a good test for the individual members of society, whether they really view sustainability as a desirable concept, and if they are willing to pay the price for it. If somebody isn't self-controlled and sustainable on a personal level, how can he expect society to move forwards towards sustainability? There are quite a few contemporaries who show us by their way of living that it *is* possible to live self-controlled lives in our present age. Self-controlled people have advantages. They achieve their goals more often than others, which gives them self-esteem and a spirit that confidently looks forward. They know the freedom of being masters of their appetites. Sometimes they treat themselves, other times they control themselves - but all the time they have in mind what is good for their future needs. The undisciplined person is a slave to his desires and feels insecure and dissatisfied, because he dreads the consequences of his behaviour. Though self-discipline is about learning to refrain from certain things, it would be far from the truth to think that self-discipline only means restriction and pain. True enjoyment actually cannot be experienced unless one has learnt self-restriction. A greedy person cannot really enjoy things, a disciplined person in contrast appreciates things much more and enjoys at a far deeper level.

## **Our Miracle-Economy Wants Undisciplined People**

The advantages of such personal sustainability are obvious, yet the spirit of our time has declared self-discipline to be "out". The motives behind most messages in advertisement are easy to detect: The best clients are those who remain dissatisfied and who try to compensate their emptiness through buying. The promise of finding satisfaction through the purchase of a product is often hollow. The life-span in which a product can give that shallow but satisfying feeling of "I am *in* now" is getting shorter and shorter these days. Not long after the purchase of the product, the same voices that declared the product to be *in* now declare it to be *out*, because it should make room for the next product. The system loves to manipulate consumers like puppets on a string and makes them feel ashamed if they do not buy the newest trend. Whoever conforms will be rewarded with a feeling of acceptance amongst the throng of trend buyers and will have access to their circles.

In this way a lot of time is spent, debts accumulated, tons of resources are wasted and trash is piled up for products with deliberately short life-spans – not very sustainable indeed! But: "It

promotes labour and future!" (...), says the system. I once heard somebody say: "Men over 40 will develop a belly." That's wrong! Undisciplined men over 40 will develop a belly - is correct. If you eat too much of the wrong things, then it is predictable that you will develop a belly. If you do not want this to happen because you value long-term health higher than short-term excess, you can do something about it: You practise personal sustainability and only eat as much as your body needs, thus remaining in harmony with your weight. But such behaviour does not represent our current trend, probably because overweight creates further consuming, for example buying new clothes, medications and other soul-comforters. A different example: We know that broken marriages are one of the main causes for behaviour disorders in children. Without the example of caring parents who love and respect each other, the main ingredient for the development of a strong personality is missing. We also know that one of the main reasons for the failure of marriages is sexual unfaithfulness. It could be expected, that a system that pursues sustainability would therefore strive for healthy marriages and fight adultery, so that the children of today will become the stable adults of tomorrow, who can earn the billions of Euros required to pay for our pensions. However, we shouldn't expect such initiatives from our miracle-economy: "It's possible that a husband's appetite towards adultery is encouraged by our erotic advertisement ..." the system might admit, if it was honest, "... and perhaps some child might even suffer the consequences, but where is the tragedy? Don't we all benefit, if a marriage fails: new homes, new furniture, new equipment, etc." Once I was in Bangkok and a taxi driver revealed to me that approximately 50% of the western businessmen wanted to be taxied to the Thai girls. Whoever understands the connection between faithfulness, a good marriage, mentally healthy children and his own welfare as a pensioner will desire to be self-controlled to remain faithful to his wife.

Obesity and divorce are on the increase in the West, and many other examples prove the tendency that more and more people can't control themselves. This tendency is not a coincidence. It is desired and designed by our miracle-economy's greedy and short-sighted appetite for rapid growth. Unless we as individuals move away from this tendency and head towards personal sustainability, all the talk about it achieves little.

### **Personal Sustainability Requires an Ethic of Sustainability**

And now? Should our politicians announce the era of self-disciplined citizenship? Should our governments teach the people about duty, self-denial and modesty? Our German history tells tales of the negative implications of such government enforced discipline. If the gap further increases between the need of a sustainable society and the reality of negligent people, I fear that we might see something enforced again and this probably won't be funny. The appreciation of virtues like self-discipline is a requirement for a sustainable society, but it can't be forced upon the people, or it will take their freedom. Comprehension is better than enforcement, and a growing understanding from within is better than demanding from above. Self-discipline or personal sustainability is only possible if society wants and welcomes it. This asks for an ethic of sustainability.

## **An Ethic of Sustainability from our Historic Roots**

Can our generation of greed bring forth future generations of sustainability? Such a re-orientation would probably only work if the focus was shifted to our identity and our values. Confronted with the growing challenges of multi-cultural issues and integration, there has been quite a lot of public talk about our German identity recently. Germany seems to be asking basic questions such as: "Who are we actually?" "What is our ethic foundation?" "Do we have more values than peace and prosperity, more than, only if the Euro in the coffer rings, will blessings for our nation spring?" Surely we understand that pure materialism on its own isn't a strong enough basis for stability and confidence in the future. What we need is an ethic consciousness that leads us now to sow the seed of sustainability, so that we can harvest the crop of sustainability in the future. In this respect it is helpful to take a look back into history. Our occidental roots can give us some lessons on the subject of sustainability. Take a look at the Bible. Most of us Germans know that Martin Luther's translation became the starting shot for a common German language, but not many are aware of the fact that the teaching of the Bible is like a handbook to sustainability. Modern people who have been shaped by our miracle-economy to become inconsistent and contradictory do not like to hear that. For them, this book seems just as dubious as the call for a more temperate lifestyle. They have broken off from the religious roots of their forefathers – apart from celebrating the 25th of December, the "Holy Day" of the miracle-economy. Yet the question remains, have they found a better world-view than the biblical one, which motivates them towards sustainable living? A Bible believing Christian knows where he comes from, why he lives and where he is going to. He perceives himself as a created being that has been designed purposeful with reasoning and moral discernment. He strives for the goal that is ahead of him, eternal life, and he views the presence as a "probation period". Respect for God's creation, contentment with little, patience, love for his neighbour and the future generations – all this is part of his self-conception.

## **The Sustainability of a Cross**

The God of the Bible reveals Himself as king of a sustainable kingdom. He founded his kingdom on such justice, that it has not lost its validity from Moses through to Christ until today, and which in fact will never change eternally. When mankind, designed in His image, rebelled against His law, he preferred a painful separation instead of making compromises with His justice. Yet He cared for their future needs and prepared a way for them, so that they could have the prospect of returning to Him. He sent His son Jesus in their transitory world, so that those who believe in Him would receive imperishable life through His death. He chose to endure the agony of His perishable body, because He valued the well-being of their imperishable spirits more. And He has promised an amazing exchange for those who trust in Him and in His work: His perfection for their failure and sin. They surrender what they can't keep to receive what they can't lose. Jesus challenged those who listened to Him to strive for imperishable values and not to seek treasures that will be destroyed. The Bible values wisdom higher than silver and teaches, that a sensible lifestyle is more desirable than gold. It condemns negligent indulgence and encourages people towards wise and sensible temperance. Ultimate sustainability can be found at the core of its message – love! While other things pass away,

love never does. In my country the Bible seems to be the book that is bought the most and read the least. Of course, if it only sits on a bookshelf it can't have a sustainable impact. This was the case in my life.

### **The Biblical Ethic of Sustainability has been Tested in the Real World**

My personal life is certainly not a prime example for sustainability, but one thing I know: My life used to be a prime example for negligence. My generation served as a guinea pig for new concepts in child-rearing. One very popular concept was: "They don't need our morals, they should have their fun. In this way they will become decent people all by themselves." In my case this didn't work. My social environment and my personal inclinations shaped me into becoming a young adult with unbelievable self-centredness. Respect for others was completely unknown to me. As a spoilt adolescent I learnt how to get maximal pleasure with minimal efforts. From the first grade through to the tenth, my results in school showed a linear descent. The only employer who offered an apprenticeship to this spoilt guy was my father. So I became a sales rep, and this was actually quite pleasurable for me: In the mornings I sped hastily from one client to the other, in the afternoons I secretly pursued my private priorities, like going to the swimming pool. As time passed, I realized more and more that I had arrived in the challenging reality of adulthood. I wasn't prepared for that. My growing needs remained increasingly unfulfilled. And waiting was not my strength. Psychological and physical problems followed. So I was driven to the turning-point in my life at the age of 23. As I was in desperate need for orientation, I remembered the God my parents had taught me to pray to. Up to then I could never make sense of written material. Now as a man in my early twenties, I took the initiative to read a book for the first time ( ... ). It was the New Testament. I read a lot about myself in there; my greed for possessions, short-term treats and recognition of people. I became aware of my lost nature and the consequences of my negligent lifestyle, but I also recognized the unyielding love of God for me. During this time I was travelling as a globe-trotter to the end of the earth and met Christians, who didn't just listen to the message of the Bible but who also lived it. This led to my personal surrender and I gave my life into the hands of Him, who through His death reconciled my life with God.

This was the start into a wonderful new life, which since then has brought me great blessing and sustainable fruit. In the years that followed, many gifts and skills were added to my life that I had never known before, like foreign languages, music, reading or a passion to learn. I read that God's way to overcome greed is self-control. The Bible speaks a lot about this subject and explains that through a life controlled by God's Holy Spirit, He leads His people in His ways of blessing. That was what I was longing for. But I also saw the damage that the years of unrestricted greed did to me. I observed that my movements were hectic, my eating-habits were unhealthy and my back was bent because of the fear of men. I resolved to get rid of all the bad habits of my negligence. But I was too weak and I failed. Then I discovered something beautiful in the book of books and something that brought freedom to me: True Christianity doesn't just have a book with a theory of sustainability. It hasn't only got a living God, whose nature is full of sustainability and free of negligence. But it has much more: God actually empowers the followers of His son by His own sustainable nature to overcome their negligence! He has promised this to all who believe in Jesus and who pursue the imperishable

life and desire it more than their perishable existence. Such Christians are people of hope. They are full of confidence, even if they discover the de-generation progress of getting older. Even if they outwardly waste away, they rejoice, because inwardly they are being renewed day by day. Through this discovery I was set free from the prison of my own inability: What I couldn't achieve, God would do for me through His Spirit. My lack of discipline and consistency was overcome. God by His grace gave me the new life of a student; as one who increasingly learns to imitate His nature. The Bible calls this "discipleship". Whoever follows Christ receives the grace to say "no" to the things that are not good for him. And God grants to him the fruit of self-discipline, to be able to say "yes" to God's will and therefore to sustainable and eternal life.

To be on the way with Christ does not mean that we've already arrived. I have noticed that the old nature of greed still comes up too often and leads me to inconsistency. But it is especially in failing that the big difference becomes obvious that Christ has made in my life. At one time, my failures became my tragedies, but today I often experience His triumph in my weaknesses. Whenever I trust in my Creator, who loves me unconditionally in spite of my negligent nature, I experience His sustainable renewal. Once my shortcomings drove me to despair and to overhasty actions. Today I know that He gives confidence in times of crises and enables me to act wiser. As far as I'm concerned, I can testify: The one who is the fulfillment of all human desire for happiness, health and imperishable life, has given me wonderful and lasting peace.

If you are also having problems finding an ethic of sustainability in the jumbled values of the miracle-economy, I recommend you to take up the book of scandals - the Bible - and check out what it says about the subject. Try to find Christians whose lifestyle conforms with the book. Do not be discouraged by "Christians" whose faith is only a copy of the miracle-economy with a "C" in front of it. And if one of those miracle-economists wants to convince you that there is no God who can perform miracles and that the Bible is full of fairytales, then don't forget what great economic fairytales he believes in! I rather be seemingly naive and believe in a God who can perform miracles, and who can transform our negligence into his sustainability – instead of being so naive to believe in a wondrous market, who declares that he can magically bring forth sustainability out of our negligence. Rather find the life of true sustainability than get lost in the life of negligence.

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