

A Carafe of Hope Nick Enge

It's a classic conundrum: is the glass half empty, or half full? The pessimist, it is said, believes half empty, the optimist half full. The engineer believes the glass is twice the necessary size.

I believe that regardless of its state, the glass is waiting to be filled, and that beside every glass sits a full carafe waiting to fill it, if we would only pick it up and pour.

Although I am clearly hopeful about our prospects for the future, I am also realistic about the problems of the present. If the state of the environment were represented in such a metaphorical glass, we could reasonably expect it to be significantly less than half full, and draining fast. Fortunately, for the past few decades, a dedicated community has been gathered around this glass, examining its diverse leaks while attempting to develop solutions to patch them. Today we profile the various types of people who encounter this glass.

The first type is the citizen who sees the crowd, but turns a blind eye and continues walking. Understandably overwhelmed by the many problems we all face today, environmental and otherwise, she falls prey to the false dichotomy of ignorant bliss versus enlightened depression and eagerly chooses the former.

The second person to encounter the glass instead stops to understand the situation. However, due to the overwhelming nature of the problem and the tendency of those already working on the leaks to sensationalize, she soon comes to understand the crisis, but has no sense of its solvability. Her knowledge may haunt her each time she knowingly contributes to the problem, but she continues to live in a state of morose inaction.

A third reacts more violently when he comes across the glass and learns of the problem. Not wanting to accept that he has the ability to cause such a catastrophe, or the responsibility to stop it, he begins to deny that the problem exists, convincing himself and anyone who will listen that they could not cause such a problem, or that these leaks may somehow actually be beneficial.

The fourth type of person actually decides to do something productive, jumping on the bandwagon to help. She joins the crowd of problem-solvers, and lends a hand where she can, learning the old-timers' techniques for patching the holes in the glass.

While she indeed provides a helping hand, she succeeds only at continuing what has been started, failing to create anything new.

A fifth passerby also joins, but quickly realizes that the current efforts are not nearly enough. Despite continued efforts, the water level in the glass is falling daily, as new, bigger leaks keep springing open. In some cases, he notices, the patching efforts are even contributing to the new leaks opening up. Hoping he can change the problem solvers' old and tired ways, this pessimist criticizes their methods, publicly condemning their failures. When his critical lectures do nothing to change their ways, he retreats from the crowd, disillusioned by the public process. He wanders off, searching for smaller glasses to fill.

Having seen the crowd's failure in providing meaningful change, and the critic's failure in changing the way of the crowd, a sixth passerby has what she hopes will be a revolutionary idea. Instead of focusing on the problem or on the failed solutions, she focuses on the positive, on demonstrating a better way forward. She shows the crowd how they can patch the holes so that they stay patched without opening new ones, and reveals to them more positive ways of getting the attention of new passersby.

Finally, she inspires them with a new goal: not only to sustain the world, but to heal it as well--not only to patch the holes and maintain the water level indefinitely, but finally to reach for that full carafe, and fill the glass right up to the brim. In this column, I have aimed to be this sixth type of citizen, and inspire this change. As more people come to support this mentality, I have every hope that we will indeed be able to solve every problem we face today; to create a world that for once is ethically, environmentally, and economically elegant.

Positive Sustainability will continue to promote this forward-looking viewpoint as the ideas presented over the past eight weeks are honed and expanded upon in a new book--"Positive Sustainability: Sustaining and Healing the Earth and World." But as the sixth passerby realizes, talk is cheap, so my life will be dedicated to discovering and implementing the very best solutions in the real world. I hope you will join me in my positive quest.

Refill your glass and follow Nick's past and present work at <http://positivesustainability.org>. He is always willing to share his carafe and talk about sustainability at nick@positivesustainability.org.

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