

VIEWPOINT

My Sustainability Makeover

By GAY NICHOLSON

I'VE decided to give myself a "sustainability makeover." I figure this is the kind of makeover that really matters — reconfiguring my life to align with the triple bottom line of environmental stewardship, healthy community and economic stability. It'll probably take me five or 10 years to get most of the elements in place, and since I'm not getting any younger, I figure I'd better get started right away. At least I have a good base to build upon. My old house is mostly insulated; the light bulbs in my home are almost all compact fluorescents; the waste I send to the landfill is pretty minimal. But recently, I've been feeling a growing motivation to make more of the changes that are going to be necessary to craft a lifestyle that is sustainable for me, my community and our planet.

I started with food. I'm a horticulturist by training, so I've been growing and buying local organic fruits and vegetables for years. But I'd resisted switching over to organic dairy products. The price seemed so high! Then last February, the larger picture around this choice came into much clearer focus. My niece, working on her senior thesis about trade subsidies and sustainable agriculture, was visiting Ithaca to conduct interviews with a

variety of local growers. On a bright, cold Saturday I drove with her over the snow-covered ridges of several counties.

That afternoon we visited with the owners of a mid-sized dairy that had recently undergone the transition from conventional to organic production. Initially, their reason for making the switch was economic — they just weren't making it financially as conventional farmers. Ever since they started using bovine growth hormone, the death rate in their herd had really escalated. Production per cow was up, but the price of milk just wasn't generating a good return. Listening to their story, I could see from the light in their faces that the switch to organic had done more than turn their finances around. As they discovered the multiple benefits of going organic, they began to recognize just how much they'd been affected by the ill health of their herd — how spiritually damaging it had been for their family and employees. Now, farming was a joyful occupation again.

I started buying organic milk and butter the next day.

Recently, I decided I had to get serious about an extreme makeover of my energy diet. The moral issues around the oil war in the Middle East provide enough reasons on their own, but I confess to having additional selfish motives. I think it might turn out to be one of my soundest financial investments. Like lots of other baby boomers, I'm casting a wary eye on

the stream of articles about the worrisome trends in the global economy and the stock market. Who can count on their retirement nest egg remaining viable? Ditto for the solvency of the social security system by the time I retire. One thing I can count on, I believe, will be the constantly increasing cost of fossil fuel-based energy.

I may not be able to control the value of my pension fund, but I can make plans to limit the energy bills I'll be paying in my elder years. My first step was to convert to a tankless hot water heater. I'll save at least \$125 in propane every year. Next year, I hope to install a photovoltaic array to power lights and electrical devices.

These two steps will help buffer me from high utility costs, but I know that space heating and transportation are really my two main dependencies on the petroleum economy. Thankfully, there are some options available that I should be able to transition to in the coming years. Hybrid and biodiesel cars are proliferating in the market. For space heating, wood and other biofuels make sense here in the northeast, especially in combination with geothermal or solar heat sources.

My sustainability makeover is likely to be a work in progress for many years, but I already feel better about my aging process.

Nicholson, of Lansing, is a volunteer with the local group, Sustainable Tompkins. ■