

Donella Meadows Institute

By Donella Meadows

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I have just had the privilege of escorting six Hungarian visitors on a cross-country tour of the United States. All six are agricultural experts. They came to see our farms.

From them I learned a lot about America, in that special way I always learn from people who see my familiar world with eyes and minds conditioned to a very different reality.

The Hungarians are what we call communists. Their small country is under the control of the Soviet Union. In 1956 they tried to throw off Soviet control and partially succeeded. They have more freedom and prosperity than other East Europeans, but are still occupied by the Soviet Army, still bound in trade agreements dictated by the USSR, still conscious of a powerful Presence on their northeast border. Their information about the United States is state-controlled and limited. Most of what they saw here was new to them, and much of it was wonderful.

Our glittering consumerism dazzled them, as it dazzles nearly every visitor from the East. They stood speechless with wonder in supermarkets. They loved department stores. They thought Burger Kings were great. “So clean,” they said. They liked to see people carrying their own meals to the table and trays to the trash container. They thought it was very socialist.

I pointed out how much trash we had generated during our fast-food meal, hoping they would see in it, as I do, a ridiculous waste of resources. But they were impressed by wealth so apparently vast that resources can be wasted. They asked where the trash goes, which led to a discussion of how America handles solid waste. They were amazed at the idea of public hearings and votes on where to put dumps. In their society such things are planned for them.

One night we arrived late at an airport and were met by a van from an agricultural research station. As we had arranged, the driver handed me the keys and I drove us to the motel where we were to stay. The Hungarians were dumfounded. “No papers? No signatures? They just hand you the keys to an official vehicle?” From then on they noted the ease with which transactions took place — car rentals, hotel check-ins, getting papers copied, getting things repaired — all layered with frustration and bureaucracy in their country, all simple and efficient in ours.

They were impressed with the skyscrapers of New York and the bridges of San Francisco, but to them America’s greatest wonder was the topsoil of Iowa. They ran it through their hands and said, “You can drop seeds in that and grow anything.” And since in Hungary farmers are wealthier than city people and are guaranteed jobs for life, they could not understand how anyone working that fine black Iowa soil could ever go broke. They asked me to explain. I am still wondering how to.

There was a lot I couldn’t explain. How a single family could own all of Rockefeller Center. Why there were homeless people on the streets of New York. What an Elks Club is.

We were invited to an Elks Club for breakfast one morning. The entry was bedecked by pictures of various Elk dignitaries in their full regalia. “Is it military?” asked the Hungarians. “Is it royalty?” No, just a club for socializing and community service. They noticed the wall covered with reproductions of

historical peace treaties. “But these are the documents of humiliation of other nations,” the Hungarians said. “Why put them on the wall?” I couldn’t answer.

They didn’t like our television. “It’s nothing but propaganda,” they said. I told them they had used the wrong word; they meant advertising, not propaganda. They asked me what the difference was. How would you have answered that one?

They were deeply impressed, however, by the confrontations on television between the press and public officials. “We could never ask our leaders questions like that.”

One of the highlights of the trip was a county fair in Wahoo, Nebraska. They watched the 4-H kids show off their calves, admired the blue-ribbon tomatoes, and joined the boys of the Beefraisers Association for beans and barbecue. The only explanations necessary there were the do-si-do and allemande-left of the square dance, and that was easy.

At the end of the journey I asked the Hungarians what they would tell people back home about the United States. “We will say that everyone is not like Ronald Reagan and Caspar Weinberger.” Those are the Americans they see most often on their television, always in a rigid, warlike stance.

The Hungarians had met, coast to coast, a succession of what they came to call Real Americans — farmers in their dungarees discussing the fine points of hog-raising; researchers who invited them for backyard cook-outs; young people who traded folksongs with them; people everywhere who were interested in them not as ideological enemies, but as human beings. Every country has kindly people, but I thought, as I watched the spontaneous welcome these Hungarians received, America has a special, unpretentious, come-on-home-and-have-a-beer openness to strangers.

“Why is it?” one of the Hungarians asked me, “that your people are so much friendlier than your government?”

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