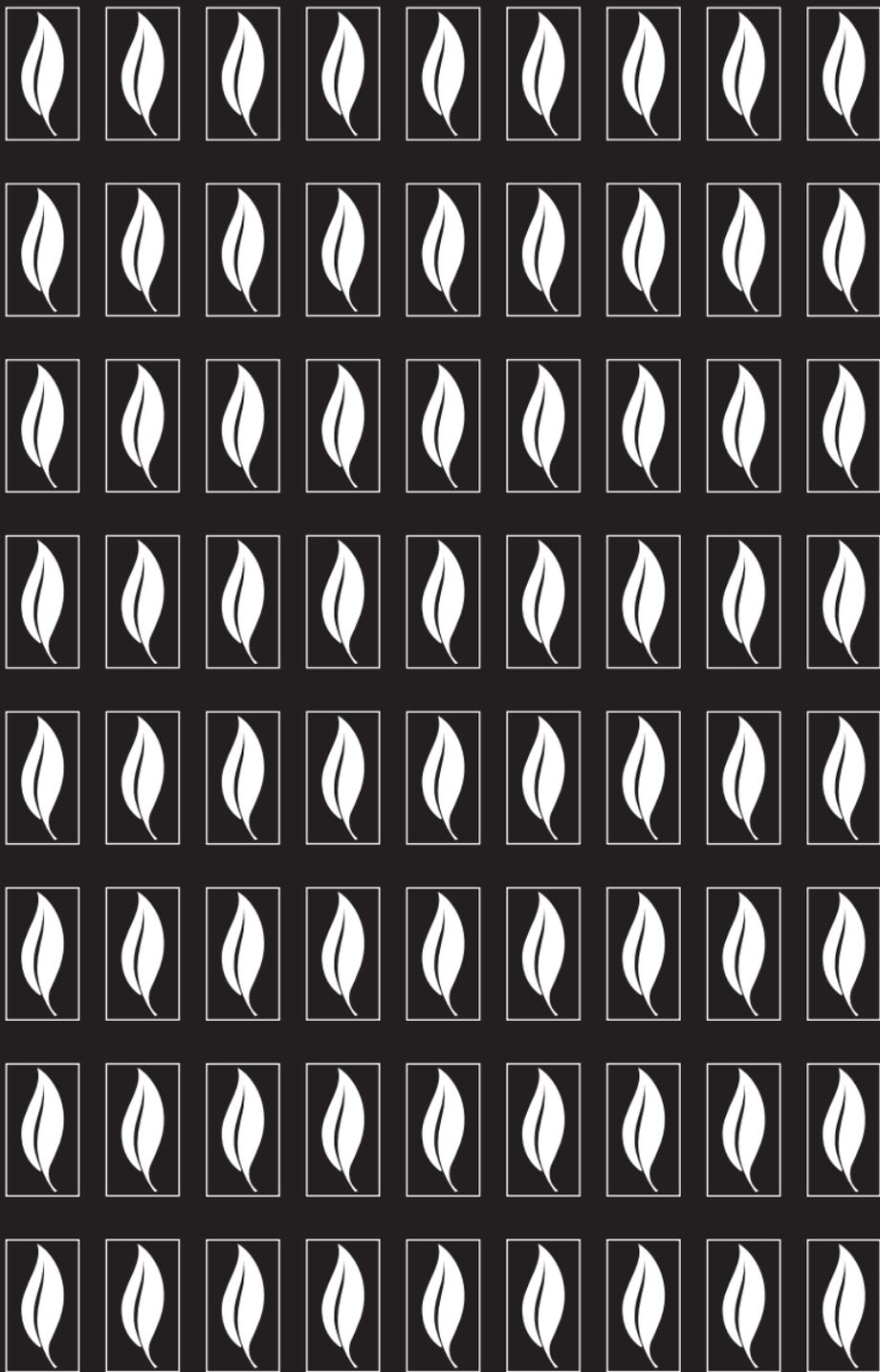


THE JOURNEY
FROM THERE
TO HERE • THE
ECO-ODYSSEY
OF A CEO 

Ray C. Anderson



FELLOW ASTRONAUTS
ON SPACESHIP EARTH
WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER
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The Journey from
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Ray C. Anderson
Founder and Chairman
Interface, Inc.

Keynote Address
The U.S. Green Building Conference
Big Sky, Montana
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INTRODUCTION

It was an unlikely group of us who gathered in Big Sky, Montana, on August 14, 1995. Radical environmentalists and early-stage think tankers, a recovering developer and a handful of architects, designers, and contractors, visionaries and foot soldiers, Hollywood royalty in the person of Jane Fonda, and me - an air conditioning marketing guy, and this courtly Southern gentleman, who, it turns out, made carpet tiles for a living.

As often happens when small bands of people set out to change the world, the relationships we forged that day came to define a collective destiny that has left us alternately holding our breaths and breathless at the possibilities we have unleashed.

It turned out that Ray Anderson, our keynote speaker, was a bit older and considerably wiser than the rest of us. He had already started down the path that most of us were still trying to find. In his inimitable way, he didn't preach or lecture. He didn't shake his fist or stamp his foot. He simply told us a story, sharing both his epiphany and what he was doing about it, and offering to continue to share what he was learning and to walk with us as we made our way.

Just shy of 16 years later, Ray reached the end of his journey, but not the end of the influence he will continue to inspire in our movement. We're honored that Interface chose this, the tenth anniversary of Greenbuild, to reprint and share with us Ray's remarks from that most seminal moment in our history. The "journey from there to here" would have not been possible without Ray, and we're grateful we could walk much of that path alongside him.

S.Richard Fedrizzi
President, CEO, and Founding Chair
U.S. Green Building Council



EVERYBODY STAND AND MEET THOSE AROUND YOU. That's the first keynote, fellow astronauts on spaceship Earth: we're in this together and need each other. Let me begin by confessing that I don't know what I am doing here this morning. I know I'm here to make a speech; but why me? What am I doing here, delivering a keynote address to this audience, which I notice is a young one, certainly younger than I. I grew up in the era of Roosevelt and Truman and graduated from Georgia Tech the year Eisenhower completed his first term as President. There was a saying in those days that those three presidents, collectively, had redefined the presidency. Roosevelt had shown that a president could serve for life. Truman had shown that anyone could be president. And Eisenhower had shown that the country could get along without a president. Today, I guess I identify most closely with Truman, proof that anybody can address the U.S. Green Building Conference.



Since I can't really tell you why I am here, let me try to tell you about the route by which I came to be here. I am a product of the postwar era which was, of course, one of enormous prosperity and economic opportunity. I graduated from Georgia Tech in 1956 and spent the next 17 years preparing myself, mostly subconsciously, to become an entrepreneur. In 1973, I cut the corporate umbilical cord when I was 38 years old and had a very good job with a major corporation. I left that to found a new company to produce, of all things, carpet tiles which were just beginning to be used in office buildings where the electrical wiring was in the floor, the furniture was open plan systems, and the office was becoming computerized. In those days it was called the "office of the future." The office of the future needed carpet tiles. The new venture was an entrepreneur's dream: beginning with an idea, adding the equity capital, including my own life's savings and the investments of friends, arranging the bank debt, acquiring a site, building and equipping a factory, securing raw materials in a time of extreme scarcity, developing and producing products, and launching a sales and marketing effort in the teeth of the worst economic recession since 1929. The company survived and



prospered beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Many of you contributed to that success by specifying and using our products. I take this opportunity to thank you.

Today that company is global. We produce in 22 manufacturing sites, located in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Holland, Australia, and we are now building a factory in Thailand. We sell our products in more than 110 countries. Our 1995 sales will likely exceed \$800 million. We manufacture and sell 40 percent of all the carpet tiles used in commercial buildings today, enjoying the largest market share in nearly every one of those 110 countries. We also produce commercial broadloom carpet, textiles, chemicals, and architectural products, specifically access floor systems.

For 21 of our 22 years of existence, I, for one, never gave one thought to what we were taking from the earth or doing to the earth, except to be sure we were in compliance and keeping ourselves "clean" in a regulatory sense. Until one year ago...

True, ten years ago we began to develop a program called Envirosense®, which is focused on improving indoor air quality and alleviating Sick Building Syndrome and Building Related Illness. This effort is based on Intersept®, a proprietary chemistry we



acquired in the field of antimicrobials. Intersept is an additive which, if incorporated into plastic materials, will render the surface of those materials self-sanitizing. Materials such as carpets, paints, fabrics, air filters, and HVAC duct liners, cooling coils, and drip pans can be made to be more hygienic. This process produces better air quality by reducing bacterial and fungal counts, contributing to healthier indoor environments and tackling the microbial contamination piece of the very complex indoor air quality equation.

More than 30 firms support the EnviroSense Consortium, itself a nonprofit educational organization. Many of those companies incorporate Intersept into their products under license from Interface, all with a profit motive in mind. That is, they make money by selling their products or services to solve a problem, a real and important problem. EnviroSense has been, and still is, an external, market-focused program, and it is accomplishing good things in the field of indoor air quality.

Then, about a year ago, the president of our research arm, Interface Research Corporation, organized a task force with representatives from all of our businesses around the world to review Interface's



worldwide environmental position. He asked me to make the keynote remarks, to kickoff the meeting and give the group an environmental vision. To be quite frank, I did not have a vision, but finally I very reluctantly accepted his invitation to speak to the new task force. I sweated for three weeks over what I would say to that group. And then, through pure serendipity, somebody sent me a book: Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce*. This book changed my life. It was an epiphany for me. I wasn't halfway through it before I had found the vision I was looking for, together with a powerful sense of urgency.

In making that kickoff speech, I incorporated many of Hawken's examples of what's happening to the ecosystem: the reindeer of St. Matthew island as a metaphor for the earth—to illustrate carrying capacity, overshoot and collapse; the depletion of the Ogalala aquifer and the famine implications for America; the loss of 25 billion tons of topsoil, equivalent to all the wheat fields of Australia, every year while a hungry world population increases by 90 million a year; the usurpation of a disproportionate share of Net Primary Production by the human species, moving toward collapse and extinction of thousands, maybe millions of species—Hawken's the



“death of birth” concept; the loss of tropical forests in order to raise soybeans to feed cattle in Germany which produce surplus butter and cheese that piles up in warehouses while a million displaced people from the forests live in squalor in Rio de Janeiro; the alarming increase in the rate of species extinction, deaths by pesticide poisoning, resources depletion, and so forth. I borrowed his thoughts shamelessly, and I completely bought his main theme, that business and industry, the largest, wealthiest, most pervasive institution on earth, must take the lead in saving the earth from man-made collapse. I gave the task force a kickoff speech that, frankly, surprised me, stunned them, and galvanized them into action; and through them, our whole company began to step up to our responsibility to lead.

I offered the task force a vision: to make Interface the first name in industrial ecology, worldwide, through substance, not words. I also gave them a mission: to convert Interface into a restorative enterprise; first to reach sustainability and then to become restorative—putting back more than we ourselves take from the earth—by helping others achieve sustainability, even our competitors. The first time I said that, I could not believe my own words.



I've since been challenged for my fuzzy thinking on this point. "Helping others" need not be a free service, and ought not to be. The biggest help may well be the stimulation to get going! And I suggested a strategy you've probably heard: reduce, reuse, reclaim, recycle, redesign; adopt the best practices; advance and share them. The strategy also involved developing and investing in sustainable technologies. I challenged them to pick the year by which Interface would achieve sustainability. Two days later, they told me their target year, the year 2000. I'll be 66 that year and hope to live to see it happen. I think they may be a little ambitious. It may take longer, but I still hope to live to see it. We gave this program a name, EcoSense®. We are implementing it throughout our company of 5000 associates and hope to involve everyone in the process.

We also coined a word, PLETSUS®. It is an acronym for "Practices LEading Toward SUSTainability," and we began to share PLETSUS ideas, internally and externally. You can access Interface's home page website on the Internet and find EcoSense and PLETSUS ideas, right there for you and the rest of the world to see and use. Feel free, and share yours with us. We'd be very happy if it caught on and



became a worldwide clearing house for idea sharing. However, EcoSense is really our internal effort to do what's right, but it's not just the right thing to do; it's also the smart thing to do when a manufacturing company is 100 percent dependent on petroleum, a nonrenewable resource, for its raw materials and its energy-intensive processes.

In the months that followed, I made other speeches patterned after that kickoff address. One of those was given to a group of Georgia Tech alumni and faculty. Afterward, one of the professors in the audience sent me a copy of Daniel Quinn's book, *Ishmael*. I read it and immediately read it again. I've read it five times now and have bought and given away over 200 copies. I'm here to tell you that, together, Paul Hawken and Daniel Quinn, will not only change your life, but make you understand why. If you haven't already, read *Ishmael* to understand why the world is a mess. Hawken will tell you what is wrong, and Quinn will explain why.

There's so much to learn! I continued to read, going back to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Vice President's Gore's *Earth in the Balance*, the really scary *Beyond the Limits* by Meadows, Meadows, and Randers, Lester Brown's *Vital Signs*, 1994 and 1995



editions, and Joe Romm's *Lean and Clean Management*, and others, including David Brower. I recently read the work of Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt of Sweden, in which he outlines his movement there called "The Natural Step." Keep an eye on this one; it's very important!

In another life-changing experience, I met and came to know and love a fellow named John Picard. John is an environmental consultant. He's smart, knowledgeable, enthusiastic and so practical and aggressive at the same time about what's realistically doable. John is a consultant to the Southern California Gas Company's Energy Resource Center building project, also known as the ERC. It's a landmark building, and John Picard's influence can be seen throughout. Tony Occhionero was ERC project manager for the Gas Company. Interface worked with John and Tony to devise, to my knowledge, the world's first perpetual lease for carpet. We called it the Evergreen Lease®. In the Evergreen Lease, Interface, the manufacturer, not only made the carpet, but we also took responsibility for installing the carpet, and maintaining it. Because it is free-lay carpet tiles, we selectively replace worn and damaged areas, one 18 inch square at a time. That way we can



implement a progressive, continuous face-lift with an agreement to periodically, over the years, selectively replace modules. Most importantly, we committed to recycling the carpet tiles that come up. In other words, we continue to own the carpet. The title for the carpet tiles never passes to the user; it stays with us, the manufacturer, along with the ultimate liability for the used up, exhausted carpet tiles. The Gas Company pays by the month for color, texture, warmth, beauty, acoustics, comfort under foot, cleanliness, and healthier indoor air with built-in Intersept. We deliver these benefits but continue to own the means of delivery, theoretically for as long as the building stands.

Here's the thing: the economic viability of the Evergreen Lease for us depends on our closing the loop, i.e., being able to recycle used face fiber into new face fiber, and used carpet tile backing into new carpet tile backing; and we have yet to learn to do either economically. So, you might say, we're cantilevered a bit. But we will get there. It's a key to achieving sustainability; this, along with thousands of little things and a few other BIG ones, like developing benign energy sources to drive our production processes, and eliminating scrap and



emissions throughout our processes. If we can get it all right, closed loop recycling, benign energy sourcing, and scrap and emissions elimination—converting our linear processes to cyclical processes—we’ll be sustainable, and never have to take another drop of oil from the earth. We’ll spend the rest of our days harvesting yesteryear’s carpets and other petrochemically derived products, and recycling them into new materials; and (hopefully) converting sunlight into energy; with zero scrap going to the landfill and zero emissions into the ecosystem. That’s the vision. There’s a lot of work ahead if it’s to be realized.

The Evergreen Lease is a manifestation of what Paul Hawken and Bill McDonough have called *licensing* or *products of service*. It’s the future. We are grateful to the ERC, John Picard and Tony Occhionero for driving this concept to a reality and for letting Interface be a participant. I’ll add this footnote: for the Evergreen Lease to become broadly successful, not only must we master closed loop recycling, but the financial institutions must get outside their comfort zones also by becoming third-party participants in the strange concept of a lease without a term.



After hearing about him for years, I finally met Bill McDonough. He's a visionary architect. Bill approaches everything, even the ecological crisis, as a design problem. We're working with him in our textile business, our carpet business, our chemical business, and our Architectural Resources business to execute some of his design solutions in product form. Bill has blazed the trail for 20 years, leading with such concepts as "waste equals food" and "cradle to cradle." We're following just as fast as we can and trying hard to catch up.

We're also wrestling with the complex issue of how to measure ecological and environmental impact. We've called it EcoMetrics. For example, how do you evaluate the following hypothetical trade-off? One product consumes 10 pounds of petrochemically-derived material (per unit), a nonrenewable resource. Another, functionally identical to the first, consumes only six pounds by substituting four pounds of abundant, benign inorganic material, but through the addition of a chlorinated paraffin. How do you judge the true cost or value, which is it, of that chlorinated paraffin—in God's currency? That is EcoMetrics, the search for God's currency, a scale that weighs such diverse factors as toxic waste, dioxin potential, aquifer



depletion, CO² emission, nonrenewable resource depletion, and embodied energy. EcoMetrics helps us measure where we are and which direction we're headed and will help us know when we reach sustainability. In my reading, I encounter others who are wrestling with the same issue, especially during the transition phase toward sustainability.

During the year, I've continued to read. A friend took issue with me and disputed Hawken and Lester Brown and others as "alarmists." We have a friendly debate going. He sent me Bast, Hill, and Rue's book, *Eco-Sanity*. It's the other view. It says good science doesn't support the alarmists' views; the world has 650 years supply of petroleum, not 50; the concern over the ozone layer is misplaced and unfounded; acid rain and global warming are disproven theories; problems with automobiles, nuclear power, and oil spills are past problems that are nearly solved; pesticides and toxic chemicals are manageable problems; and deforestation and resource depletion are problems limited mainly to third-world countries. There's another book, *The True State of the Planet*, edited by Ronald Bailey, that conveys a similar "the sky is not falling" message to "chicken little" environmentalists. It forecasts a coming age of



abundance; says we can wait a while on global warming to get the computer models perfected; claims that famine is a thing of the past for most of the world's people; and so forth. These people write persuasively and test one's resolve! Honest people of good will and with good intentions can disagree. They can interpret the same data differently and even reach opposite conclusions without having to be branded as foot-draggers or alarmists, but how do we reconcile all of this? Where's the truth?

The title of this address is, "The Journey from There to Here: the Eco-Odyssey of a CEO." Well, environmentally speaking, *there* is where I was just about a year ago, pushing Intersept through the Envirosense Consortium to make a buck and staying in compliance on all the rest. *Here* is where I am today with an awakened, sensitized conscience—realizing, for example, that compliance can mean "as bad as the law allows"—and an awakened, sensitized company; hoping to do what's right, wrestling with what the truth is in all of this, and looking for a reconciling statement. I think I have found one or, at least, the beginning of it:

Whether the earth will run out of oil in 50 years



or 650 years may seem like a big contradiction in conclusions reached, but either, in geologic time, is the blink of an eye. Our life-span is just so short that its like being in only two or three frames of a movie that has been running a long time and has a long time yet to run. Our time on earth is so short that we don't see enough of the movie. We can't even see the next scene, much less where it's all headed; but our few frames can have a huge effect on the outcome of the movie. Not to trivialize through analogy, but I remember hearing a NASA scientist say in reference to Apollo XI, the first man-on-the-moon expedition, that the spacecraft was off-course 90 percent of the entire mission! It was the critically important mid-course corrections that allowed it to reach its destination. Those corrections determined the final outcome. I stand here today, firmly convinced of one thing: earth, no, humanity, is off-course and in desperate need of a mid-course correction.

Our planet is billions of years old and has billions of years to go. Creation goes on. Even the 10,000 years since the agricultural revolution began are a blink of God's eye. As David Brower reminds us, if we compress all of geologic time to date into the six days of biblical creation, 10,000 years is barely one second.



Using the same time scale, the industrial revolution began just $1/40$ of a second ago. A lot of damage has been done in $1/40$ of a second. Without a doubt, a lot of economic growth has also occurred, but at what price—measured in God’s currency? Common sense tells us that neither the damage nor the economic growth can continue indefinitely.

The 10,000 years since the agricultural revolution began is, say, 500 generations. Fifty years of oil is two and a half generations worth; 650 years is $32\frac{1}{2}$ generations worth. Seems like a big difference on our scale of observation, but whether we’re living in the last $1/2$ percent of an epoch or the last 6 percent of an epoch doesn’t really matter much. Time is short. In a blink of God’s eyes, the whole epoch will be over.

Today, I realize I’m preaching to the choir, but we are all part of the continuum of humanity and life in general. We will have lived our brief span and either helped or hurt that continuum and the earth that sustains all life. It’s that simple. Which will it be?

How can we help? I believe one person can make a difference, you and I. People coming together in organizations like yours and mine, like this one, can make a big difference. Companies coming together, for example, customers and suppliers uniting in



recycling efforts, can make a huge difference. Harnessing wind and current solar income can make a monumental difference. As in Daniel Quinn's mission in his paradigm-shifting novel, *Ishmael*, if five billion people change their minds and decide to live their daily lives with the earth's welfare in mind, then earth, humanity, and all the continuum of life will gain a new lease on life. The mid-course correction I think earth and humanity need probably depends on, more than any other one thing, changed minds and new paradigms.

Another part of the reconciling statement lies in what I'll refer to as the "McDonough Paradox." Bill and I were talking one day about the contradictory position of the two polarized schools which I've called the "alarmists" and the "foot draggers." Let's express those positions in terms of *perception*, *action*, and *outcome*. The alarmist perceives the earth to be in crisis, sees our actions as totally inadequate, and predicts the outcome to be collapse. On the other hand, the foot dragger perceives things as not so bad, even getting better, sees our actions as good enough, maybe too good—meaning expensive and misguided—and sees the outcome as an abundant future for all.



Here's the paradox: the surest way to realize the alarmists' outcome, collapse, is to accept the foot draggers' view of where we are and what we need to do. On the other hand, the surest way to realize the foot draggers' outcome, abundance, is to believe the alarmists' view that we are in trouble and have to change.

Bill, himself, puts it this way: "You're the alarmist and you've got a big bet with your foot dragger friend about how it will all turn out; and you're working like he'll to lose that bet."

If enough minds change, I believe a new paradigm for business will emerge: doing well by doing good. It's not original with me, but I agree with Paul Hawken; this concept can move the world from the path of exploitation to the path of sustainability.

Finally, as we used to sing in Sunday School when I was a child, "Brighten the corner where you are, brighten the corner where you are." Many years after learning that Sunday School song, I was exposed to the writings of the 18th Century philosopher, Emmanuel Kant, and his somewhat more sophisticated corollary, which he called, "The Categorical Imperative." What a great cause in which to invoke Kant and his 18th Century admonition. To paraphrase: "Before you do something, consider what the



consequences would be if everybody did it.” If we all succeed, individually, in doing good for Mother Earth in the corner where we live and work, in setting the example for others, and in governing our actions by the Categorical Imperative, “What if everybody did it?”, we will be helping Daniel Quinn in his mission to change five billion minds and giving earth that mid-course correction. I believe it’s not an option. It is humanity’s only hope.

Now, here’s the second keynote. For the next two days we will be concentrating on the corners where we live and work: architecture, engineering, manufacturing, education, government, construction, and so on. Let us learn from each other how to brighten our corner. Let us ask ourselves, “What if everybody did it?” Then let us resolve ourselves to set the example, and, here’s the hard part, let us spread the word until everybody gets it and does it, because it’s the right thing to do and it’s the smart thing to do.

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A B O U T T H E
U. S. G R E E N B U I L D I N G C O U N C I L

The U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) is a Washington, D.C. based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to a prosperous and sustainable future for our nation through cost-efficient and energy-saving green buildings. USGBC works toward its mission of market transformation through its LEED green building certification program, robust educational offerings, a nationwide network of chapters and affiliates, the annual Greenbuild International Conference & Expo, and advocacy in support of public policy that encourages and enables green buildings and communities.

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