

STRATHMORE SUSTAINABILITY PORTFOLIO

The new Strathmore Sustainability Portfolio features the inspiring stories of six companies that are pioneers in environmental and social stewardship. It is intended to empower designers to initiate their own sustainable initiatives at work, at home and in communities across the country.

SEVENTH GENERATION, INC. FOUNDED 1988 BURLINGTON, VERMONT 55 EMPLOYEES
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A humble company with confident convictions. Seventh Generation is transforming the home cleaning and personal care industry into a new paradigm for health and well-being with planet-friendly products.

START: ANN WILLOUGHBY'S INTERVIEW WITH GREGOR BARNUM, DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE CONSCIOUSNESS, SEVENTH GENERATION

Ann: What would your company like to say to 30,000 designers who are responsible for making sustainable choices in their own lives and for their clients?

Gregor: Doing more with less. Buckminster Fuller, in his design ideas, really began to look at and challenge the potential science and potential paradigm that existed. I had a conversation with the University of Vermont, who came here wanting to engage us. I said, "Tell me why I'm going to the Buckminster Fuller Institute looking for designers and not coming to the university." I feel like there is such a stagnant world in engineering, business and the sciences. There's a cap on how much we know and how much people are willing to change their habits and actually begin to think differently. Internally, as we as an organization change, we're also looking at ways to actually look at the idea of systems thinking, which is a much more layered thinking, to design the next level of the company.

Ann: Seventh Generation, is one of the companies out there in the trenches with this, and there are few of you. It seems like it involves rethinking every single thing.

Gregor: Can I ask you what rethinking means?

Ann: For me it means not taking anything for granted. Really being mindful and considering everything one does, whether it's how we use energy, the materials in the products we buy; it's how we live our lives as citizens and how we participate in the community, but it's also how we engage in our business life.

Gregor: Can I challenge you on that?

Ann: Absolutely!

Gregor: Just rethinking the way things are done won't result in the dramatic changes our world needs. If you are continually thinking about rethinking, your thinking starts from the same epistemology that you fought it from. What I'm suggesting is that we have to change the epistemology that we actually begin to work with. So it's not even a rethink, it's an evolution. Cradle to cradle to me is like old thinking. It's not that it's bad; it's a nice idea to think that you take one substance and put it back into the world in a way that it becomes again another substance. But it's not a "doing more with less" strategy. Using Buckminster Fuller's ideas, you would want to think inherently within each system how you can move the system to a higher level of efficiency. And just existing within that same system, because cradle to cradle is the same system, you're not allowing for evolution. And he uses the word "regenerative" again and again and again. So in a sense he enters into this whole idea of an evolution of being an evolution of becoming an evolution. Did you see *What the Bleep?* What they're saying to you is: **It's an interesting world where all of a sudden you break down the armor and you begin to see that the constructs you have are basically constructs that you inherited and that you picked up from an inadequate education system and from parents that didn't know how to deal with a certain world and ultimately the whole world may not exist in any way that we've designed it right now.** How do we at that point begin to see the real texture of the design that is inherently outside the system we live in? **To get to a new level you have to evolve your thinking and begin to see design in a whole other world.** The biomimicry people are coming in next week to begin

to think about mimicking nature, which is interesting, and asking, “Can we begin to take from nature?” Here’s an idea I’ll just throw at you. I actually think electricity is really wasteful and an inadequate means of providing the energy we need. And we inherently feel that that system is the only way in which we can power the world. And in some ways, it allows us to only think of the construct of electricity. And ultimately, to design the next level of system, we have to get away from the whole concept of electricity. And to do so, we have to begin to see that maybe there is a level of nature that moves nature along in a way that we either have to mimic or we could begin to adapt to, because nature doesn’t really use electricity to move the world or the whole idea of evolution forward.

Ann: Are you suggesting energy forms like wave power, and the new solar technology—are you talking about moving toward those kinds of systems, or are you even thinking about rethinking how we collect, store and use energy?

*Gregor: I’m thinking there’s something else going on out there. There’s an interesting part in *What the Bleep* from a guy named Dr. Emoto. He talks to water and makes water different. He came to Burlington, and I actually interviewed the guy, and you have to begin to think of a new science to understand that we have no relationship to water and no understanding of what water is. And because our science has allowed it to be an object and has reduced it to a molecular form, and we see it as something that’s just a part of the earth, we cannot view inherently what is a part of the energy of water. It doesn’t use electricity. People argue from the standpoint that the molecule does have an electrical charge.*

Ann: I’m really interested in your take on systems thinking and how that is a part of your culture at Seventh Generation.

*Gregor: We actually have hired someone to come in and work with the whole company over a two-year period to help us think through this. It’s a loose term as to how you begin to understand what it really means. I’ve begun to see this word everywhere, changing the framework out of which you begin to look and begin to think through the world. We just went through a two-day leadership meeting looking at how we think through not just a product offering, but product systems. And the product system in and of itself will inherently look at everywhere, from how do we engage in whatever means we get whatever the product is going to be to market; how do we think through a strong way in which we are engaging more and more people because **we’re looking at the idea of self-extending relationships because our products are mainly looking at ways not only to help people clean in a more efficient way with less impact on the environment, but also less impact on health.** And how do we begin to use more and more of our product development in a “doing more with less” idea? I mean, I’m still held back by the fact that the product is only affordable to people who’ve got dough, and why aren’t we making it a product that’s accessible to everybody who does the simple thing that’s called cleaning?*

Ann: Your brand helps me learn, and I trust you because I trust what your president says, I trust what your products say and I trust that you tell the truth. I wanted to hire someone to come in and help me make my home healthier.

Gregor: It’s one of the ideas we’re thinking about where to go from here. How do we begin to engage the idea of a healthy homing idea? With all the new LEED stuff coming out, there’s not much of a database about how people can begin to look at all aspects of how to make and design a house that continually remains at a high level of health and well-being.

Ann: My great grandmother made almost everything. She bought flour and perhaps corn for the chickens, but that was about it. She cleaned with baking soda, vinegar. It was just amazing. She was born in 1874.

Gregor: How did she clean?

Ann: She used water and vinegar and some soap product—maybe it was borax. She had a method for everything, and she saved every button, every piece of thread. I think what’s amazing is that my generation, in my lifetime, we’ve gone from those kinds of family farms to a place where life is so much more complex. From reading books and listening to the radio to a world where there are so many more choices. I do think that inherent in a lot of women of my generation and earlier are those memories of doing things in a simpler way. I guess I feel more hopeful than not about it.

Gregor: What do you feel unhopeful about?

Ann: *I really worry about how the developing world will develop. It's the same issues that were around when I was younger, but I think there's acceleration in third-world countries. Everybody in the world wants to improve their lot in life. It's just human nature. I was just recently in China, in Beijing and Hong Kong, and I have to tell you—I'm just amazed that you have people riding bicycles with loose eggs stacked five feet high next to two-story buses next to Donald Trump towers. People are living in three different centuries all at once. And China is growing so rapidly. Those are the things that I think have great opportunities.*

Gregor: We had a meeting here today with the head of Wal-Mart Watch. We won't sell to Wal-Mart, and we're continually looking more and more at their systems. There's the labor issue, healthcare issue, environmental impact issue, the supplier issue. It's just an interesting world in how you begin to look at the immense number of forces at work, the complexity of the issue; in the hearts of most people on this earth is a strong sense of wanting an "Okay, we're okay." There's almost a sense on some level that the complexities overwhelm people. Having gone through this leadership meeting over the last two days from our little corner of the earth, I'm asking, "How do we think through thinking about the world from a different place? And from a whole different sort of systems orientation?" I actually walked off these two days with my brain hurting! It's a humbling part of having to change the very way that I view the world. That the belief system and the structures and the thought structures that I've used in my life up to age almost 54 suddenly have got to go into an intense question mark, and how do you begin to think at many different layers at the same time? And it's only then that I get the sense that we must begin to look at the complexities in a way to not be overwhelmed by them; look at them from the standpoint that inherent within those is a new dynamic of understanding reality. How do we take that and use it as a way of moving the structure that's out there now to its next level? **How do we begin to look at thinking and rethinking so that we can begin to make the world a better place?**

Ann: *I think Wal-Mart is a really good lens to look at a lot of the problems through. I was at two sustainability workshops in New York, and Wal-Mart was at one of them. They have a chief sustainability officer, and so does Sam's Club. They made one of their announcements at that conference that Wal-Mart is really taking on the environment. And one of the things they're doing is that 20 percent of a buyer's compensation will be based on these criteria of the products they buy: whether the materials they're made from are sustainable, transportation, recyclability of packaging. This is the way they're going to start measuring the companies in their supply chain. Did you see the big section in The New York Times last Tuesday? Wal-Mart even announced it in that, with two big pages on it. Amory Lovins is there helping them with more truck fuel efficiencies. But what I thought was most interesting was how they ended up positioning in The New York Times. The position was this: "We're Wal-Mart. We've always saved you money, we've always been low-price, and now it's time to save on waste and energy."*

Gregor: Jeffrey Hollander went down there and actually met with Lee Scott. It was interesting to listen to the Wal-Mart Watch guy today, because he basically said that their design is going to start to consider, "How do I reach X percent of people who only visit Wal-Mart once a month, and how do I begin to lure them in once a week?" Target has really captured the idea of a more progressive person. So yeah, they're doing it, and they're doing it with the idea that they're making the world a better place, and inherent within it is their business model, which is finding a way to attract more customers. And going back to your grandmother—I mean, she didn't need a lot to find well-being in the world, and that's always interesting to me.

Ann: *I'm also working on a poverty project with IDE, about third-world poverty. It's about designing things for only 90 percent of the world, and a large percentage of that lives on less than \$1 a day. So how do you help people find ways of staying in the country and living off the land in a good way so we don't have millions and millions of slum cities, which is what's happening now? And here is one of the ways that this company has found—they do this amazing job of going into small communities and saying, "What do you need?" Whether it's water or new crops or whatever, and they help them build communities. Once that community*

is able to create self-sustaining markets on its own they move on to the next one. It seems to really work, but they're really taking simple technologies and helping them do things in very green ways and I just find it fascinating. Another thing we have to evolve is the world's agriculture model. The world has to eat.

Gregor: I think all of these questions are inherently built somewhere in the design for the next level. You know where we borrowed the name Seventh Generation from?

Ann: Yes, from the Indian saying, "In our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

Gregor: When you think about the impact of every one of your actions—this is what Ralph Waldo Emerson was talking about in his compensation treaties. **Inherently, in every action you make, you drop a pebble into the great water of consciousness and it ripples out into time. And to inherently build that kind of a paradigm where people see what impacts they have on the next generations would be a dynamic way to begin to think through every action we make right now.** And dynamically it begins to set in motion what we do in the present, but I also think that somehow we can use some of that thinking in this whole idea of dealing with the lower end of the pyramid. I don't really like the symbolism, but there's a lot of world out there that could be encouraged to thrive given the knowledge that we have that could provide for another level of well-being in the world.

Ann: I think people in most parts of the world are still tied to their land in some kind of a way that's so important. E.O. Wilson said something I'll never forget. He said that one of the problems with evolutionary biology, as far as he could tell, is that human beings are not programmed to be able to care for any human being in the future beyond a person they could see. If you could see your great grandkids, you could care about them. And that takes an act of human moral courage, moral faith. Stepping outside of your own biological yearnings. I think it takes sort of this collective consciousness to do that. And how does that happen? Here's my hope. I have this dream that this summer, when Laurie David comes out with this new movie with Al Gore, An Inconvenient Truth, which they previewed at Sundance, it's going to cause sort of a man-on-the-moon effect, and people are going to rally around and be ready for action. Have you seen any of the clips from it?

Gregor: I've seen the clips. Actually, Green Mountain Coffee, Ben and Jerry's and Seventh Generation are going to be previewing the movie here. I've heard from the Green Mountain guys that they liked the movie but it didn't leave a lot of next steps for people. It would be nice to have some way of being able at the end of the movie to have people actually talk about what people can do.

Ann: I'm sure you read all the blogs and websites that I do, and it seems like there is just this bubbling conversation going on right now. If you look at the lifestyles of the health and sustainability market, which is 33 percent of the U.S. market and is going to go up to 50 percent soon, if you really begin to think about it, if it's really true, that is reason to be hopeful about people who care about these things. And if there are companies like your company and other companies and other ways that people can come together and vote with their wallets as well as their ballots—that's my idealism.

Gregor: But I think that's an ideal to hold because I think **we do all have a certain sense of power, that in the way we buy things, we support something.**

END: ANN WILLOUGHBY'S INTERVIEW WITH GREGOR BARNUM, DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE CONSCIOUSNESS,
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