

Finding Harmony among Economy, Society, and Nature¹

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The history of humanity is filled with conflict, among people and between people and nature. The Bible and other great books tell stories of continuing conflict among families, tribes, and nations going back to the beginning of recorded human history. Prehistoric fossils provide scientific verification that people have been fighting and killing other people, for as long as there have been people on the earth. Much of human history has been written also about an ongoing struggle of “man against man and man against nature.” (The word “man” is chosen purposefully, as most battles among people and between people and nature are carried out by men, although often with the encouragement of women.) The forces of nature - wild beasts, floods, pestilence, and disease - have been cast in the role of the enemy of mankind. Each battle has a winner and loser. Regardless of the victor, there is always another war.

War certainly is not the only expression of human conflict - perhaps not the most important or even the most destructive. Conflicts among individuals may take the form of disagreements, arguments, assaults, and even murder. These personal conflicts have been more pervasive through societies at all times, and thus, may be more destructive than are wars. But, perhaps even more destructive, if in less violent ways, is the inability of people to relate to each other in positive ways within families, communities, and societies. Because of our lack of sensitivity and mutual understanding - our inability to communicate, compromise, collaborate, or cooperate - we live lives of continual disharmony. Conflict is destructive, yet we continue to live in conflict. After each disagreement or misunderstanding is resolved, there is always another.

The war with nature has been seemingly ongoing since Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden. To survive and prosper, we must conquer nature: kill the wild beasts, hold back the floods, stamp out the plagues, find cures for diseases, and stop or reverse the process of aging. Humans throughout history have been locked in a life and death struggle against “Mother Nature.” Ironically, we have been winning battle after battle, but we are still losing the war.

We have killed so many “wild beasts” that non-human species are becoming extinct at a rates unprecedented in history, except in prehistoric times now labeled as global catastrophes. We are just beginning to realize that humans cannot survive, or might we want to survive, as the only living species on earth. How many more species can we destroy before we lose more species than we can afford to lose without destroying the human species?

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We have dammed so many streams the sediment that once replenished the topsoil of fertile farmland through periodic flooding now fills the reservoirs of lakes with mountains of muck. Populations of fish and wildlife that once filled and surrounded free flowing streams, and fed the people of the land, have dwindled and all but disappeared. Floods may come less often now, but when nature flexes her muscles, as she did with the big rivers of the Midwest in 1993, or in with Katrina in the Gulf of Mexico in 2005, nothing on earth can hold back the floods of water. How many more streams can we afford to dam or dike before we give up and let nature have her way?

We may have wiped out some of the plagues that once threatened humankind, but more sophisticated diseases always seem to appear as soon as the old ones are brought under control. We may live longer now than in earlier times, but that doesn't necessarily mean we are healthier. Furthermore, much of the medicine we take today is to treat the symptoms caused by the medicines we are already taking. A growing epidemic of obesity and related diseases now threatens to bankrupt the nation through rising costs of health care. How long can our new cures keep ahead of new diseases and how many more medical miracles can we afford?

To protect our sources of food, we have killed billions and trillions of insects, weeds, and parasites using modern chemical pesticides. However, we still lose about the same percentage of our crops and livestock to pests as we did in earlier times. The pests quickly become resistant to our pesticides, requiring an endless stream of increasingly costly technologies. In addition, public concerns are on the rise about the human health effects of the residues of pesticides and other agricultural chemicals in our food and water. How many more pests can we afford to kill before we kill ourselves? How many more battles with Mother Nature can we afford to win?

People of all races, creeds, and nations have proclaimed their desire to live in peace and harmony, but their actions have invariably promoted continuing conflicts instead. We humans seem to believe, if only other people would just accept our beliefs and values, our ways of thinking and acting, there would be no conflicts among people. We could live in harmony. If we could just overcome the forces of nature that cause hunger, thirst, cold, disease, aging, and death, there would be no conflict with the natural world. We could live in harmony. We want harmony, but harmony on our terms; this is the basic source of our continuing conflicts.

Nowhere on earth are these attempts to dominate other people and the other things of nature more prominent than in the United States. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that we have chosen an economic system that is based on conflict rather than cooperation. The foundation of a capitalistic economy is competition - an organized form of conflict. Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, observed that businesspeople - butchers, bakers, brewers - pursuing their individual self-interest, by competing with each other, also served the greater good of society. Competition transformed their pursuit of self-interest into the public interest, as if by an "invisible hand."

Admittedly, capitalistic competition is a very impersonal form of conflict. In order for competition to serve the economic interests of the larger society, buyers and sellers must be sufficiently large in number and small in size so that no individual buyer or seller can have any measurable impact on his or her competitors. In other words, any buyer or seller could double his or her sales or purchases, or drop out of the market completely, and it would have no noticeable effect on other competitors. However, even this impersonal kind of competition can

be destructive. Perhaps more important, economic competition invariably leads to the concentration of economic and political power among the few at the expense of the many. Competition then becomes blatantly aggressive, oppressive, and destructive. Corporate exploitation of both nature and society eventually becomes accepted as necessary business practices. Disharmony becomes an essential characteristic of a growing economy.

Today we Americans are seeing the consequence of our continuing conflicts. We are in the midst of the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s with little sign of recovery to previous levels of economic prosperity. The U.S. remains bogged down, militarily and economically, in war and post-war activities in the Middle East, with little hope of permanent resolution. We are confronted with the prospect of declining global oil supplies extending indefinitely into the future. We are not out of fossil energy, at least not yet, but remaining fossil energy will be more difficult and costly to extract and refine and thus smaller in quantities and higher in prices. The most abundant alternative sources of fossil energy - particularly coal - present unacceptable risks to the natural environment in a time of growing concern about global climate change and other threats to the natural environment. All sources of renewable solar energy combined - wind, water, photovoltaic, - will be less plentiful and more costly than fossil energy. Each time the global economy begins to recover it will hit a wall of rising energy prices at lower and lower levels of economic activity.

There is little more the government can do to cope with the current crisis. A complete economic meltdown in early 2009 was averted only by major tax cuts and massive government spending programs, but there few signs of real economic recovery. In the meantime, the national debt continues to spiral out of control. Interest rates for large borrowers have been virtually zero since 2009, but most businesses apparently see little prospect for the future profits needed to repay loans. The Federal Reserve Board isn't proposing any new actions because there is simply nothing more they can do. Skyrocketing costs of health care and looming increases in the Social Security and Medicare claims of "baby boomers" add urgency to the budget crisis. In short, there is little prospect for resuming of the rate of economic growth that both Democrats and Republicans are counting on to bring the federal budget deficit under control.

An economy propped up by government debt that American taxpayers are unwilling to repay is no more sustainable than the previous economy that was propped up by housing loans that homebuyers couldn't repay. The growing gap between the ultra-rich and the rest of us has grown so wide that the American middle-class no longer makes enough money to sustain an economic recovery. Those who are not concerned about the future of America don't understand, or perhaps don't want to understand, the gravity of today's situation. This is not just another economic recession; this is an economic crisis. After winning battle after battle against nature and against other nations of the world, the American economy and society stand on the brink of disaster. Yet, we are told we must simply fight harder. How many more battles can we afford to win?

Quite logically, a growing number of people are losing faith in man's ability to conquer or subdue nature. They are logically concerned about losing the battle with the next pest, next flood, or next disease that we have created in our efforts to control the last one. They are concerned with their own safety, health, and economic well being. They are concerned also about the long run sustainability of human civilization. To sustain humanity, we must needs of

the present without diminishing opportunities for those of the future. Increasingly, people are beginning to understand that we humans are a part of the same nature as the things we are trying to destroy. They are searching for ways to live and work in harmony with nature in order to sustain the natural world, within which our society and economy exist and of which are critically interconnected parts.

America is at a crossroads in history. We can continue on our recent road of denial and retreat from reality or we can seize the opportunity created by the current economic crisis to fundamentally reshape and rebuild the American economy and society. Regardless, we ultimately will be forced to face the reality that all real economic value must be derived from either nature or society. If we continue to degrade the health and productivity of our natural and human resources through continuing conflicts, there will be no source of economic value.

All things of economic value - our houses, cars, clothes, computers, cell phones - are made of materials that come from the earth, from nature. Society provides the labor, creativity, and entrepreneurship needed to bring forth value from the things of nature, as well as provide intangible personal services, such as healthcare, education, and entertainment. Each time energy is used to do anything useful, some of its usefulness is lost - the physical law of entropy. We simply cannot sustain economic growth by extracting natural resources and exploiting human resources. The resources of nature and society are fragile and finite, but nature has the ultimate capacity and power to fight back. In arguments with nature, nature will always have the last word. This is economic reality. If we are to survive the current economic crisis in America, we must learn to live in harmony with nature and with each other.

The road from a world of conflict to a world of harmony must begin with an understanding that economic relationships are fundamentally different from social or ethical relationships. Economic relationships are individualistic, instrumental, and impersonal. Economic value accrues to individuals, not to a community or society as a whole. An economy is simply a collection of individual enterprises. Economic value is instrumental in that economic decisions are always predicated on the expectation of receiving something of greater economic value in return. An economic relationship is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Economic value is impersonal in that economic value is determined through trade or exchange among different individuals. The specific individual or person involved in an economic relationship simply doesn't matter.

Social relationships are also instrumental, in that something of personal value is always expected from a social relationship. Unlike economic relationships, the expectations from social relationships often are not precise with respect to what is expected or when something is expected in return. However, if we want to have a friend we must be a friend in return. Social value is fundamentally different from economic value in that social value is clearly personal. The value of a social relationship is always dependent on the specific individuals involved in the relationship. Spouses are not interchangeable and neither are true friends. Thus, purely social relationships produce nothing of economic value because they cannot be exchanged among different people - they can't be bought or sold. Unlike economic relationships, once social relationships end, there is nothing left that can be sold or traded to anyone else - only the personal memories.

Social relationships are interpersonal, in that social values accrue to individual persons rather than communities or societies. However, social values naturally evolve into cultural and ethical values. Social and cultural values recognize and respect the shared or common values that arise within families, communities, and societies as wholes, making them something more than collections of individuals. As reciprocal expectations from social relationships become less personal and less precisely defined, social values become linked with communities, societies, or nations rather than specific individuals, resulting in feelings such as community pride and patriotism. Eventually, the recognition of value and respect spreads to those of other nations and to humanity as a whole, including those of future generations. This is the process by which social values evolve into cultural values, which are a key aspect of ethical values.

Ethical relationships are different from economic and social relationships in that they are neither instrumental nor personal. People who do things for purely ethical reasons have no expectation of receiving anything in return, at least not in their lifetimes. They do it simply because they believe it is the right and good thing to do. Ethical relationships are not means to ends; the realization of ethical value is immediate. The ethical act is its own reward. Ethical values are clearly impersonal. Ethic values are communal rather than individual. What is right for one person is right for another; what is wrong for one is wrong for all - including those of future generations.

Certainly, there may be economic value associated with relationships that also have social and ethical dimensions. It's easier and more economically efficient to do business with people we know and trust. In economic jargon, "social capital" reduces economic "transactions costs." Also, many people would rather deal with someone who has a reputation for ethical business practices. Businesses can "do well" financially by "doing good." However, relationships that are purely economic have no personal or ethical value and relationships that are purely social or ethical have no economic value. It makes no more sense to try to translate ethical values into economic values than to try to translate economic values into ethical values.

There are no economic incentives to invest in anything for the sole benefit of a community, society, or for the future of humanity. The only rational reason for doing something solely for the benefit of someone else, particularly someone of some future generation, is because it has ethical value - because it is "the right thing to do." The act of true stewardship expects nothing in return; it is its own reward. The cultural ethic of stewardship that is necessary for sustainability must emerge from a realization that our ethical relationships with those of future generations should reflect the same basic values as our social relationships among friends and within families, and communities today.

Thus, sustainability is ultimately an ethical concern because that we have no economic or social incentives to do anything solely for the benefit anyone else, certainly not someone of some future generation. Sustainability would seem to be a major concern of organized religion, which for many Americans is their primary source of guidance on matters of ethics and morality. There are sustainability movements within virtually all of the major religions, however, most churches seem far more committed to the gospel of economic prosperity than to the ethics of ecological

and social sustainability. “God didn't create no losers, right?” Jesus said: God will give you anything you ask for, right? Become a Christian and reap the reward of economic prosperity!

Did God really create the earth to meet the needs of man or did he create man to help meet the needs of the earth? What do Christians really believe about such matters? What is God's will for our lives? I grew up attending a small country church in the state of Missouri. In my early teens, I made my public confession of faith, was baptized into the church, and moved up to the “adolescents and young adults” Sunday school class. I had a lot of questions and was eager to learn more about life and faith from the teacher and the more mature members of my new class. I wanted to know where I fit within God's plan or to find my place within the higher order of things. I was excited about the new possibilities of my spiritual awakening; unfortunately, my early church experiences were a bit disappointing.

The printed Sunday school lessons invariably would include examples of situations that come up in day-to-day life - questions, temptations, problems, fears. The lessons would ask how we as Christians should deal with these issues. I listened eagerly to the teacher and the older class members, so I could decide how I should respond to such challenges. Regardless of the question, the unanimous response seemed to be that as Christians we should listen to the preacher, read our bibles, pray to God for guidance, and then do “God's will.” This universal answer wasn't wrong; it just wasn't any real help to me. I already knew *that* answer; I wanted and needed something more.

I wanted to know how the Bible stories applied to my life, not just as a Christian in Sunday school, but as a farm boy, a high school student, a son and brother, as a young person starting out in life. I wanted to know *how* God provided guidance. Did “He” (God was always a He in those days) always answer your prayers by giving us what we ask for or by denying our request when we ask for the wrong things? The Bible didn't seem clear to me on such matters. How would I know what God wanted me to do? If I wasn't sure what God wanted me to do, how could I know if I was doing “God's will”? Unfortunately, I would have to wait a lot of years to find *my* answers to these questions, and even then, I didn't find them in church.

I stopped going to church during my college years. However, after I got married and had small children, my wife and I decided we needed to raise our kids in the church. When we started going to church, the whole family went to church and Sunday school virtually every Sunday for close to ten years. We started attending a Baptist church that believed in studying the Bible, “religiously,” and I learned a lot from that experience. Over the years, we attended various churches, and various denominations, but the churches' answers to life's most important questions didn't seem to have changed much over the years. When confronted with life's challenges, Christians should listen to their minister or priest, look for answers in the Bible, pray to God for guidance, and then do God's will.

I eventually quit going to church in the early 1980s. My religion was getting in the way of my spiritually. In all my years as a regular church member, I don't recall ever hearing a sermon on the responsibility of Christians for stewardship of the earth. I heard plenty about our responsibility for dominion over the earth, about subduing the other things of the earth so we might benefit from the earth's bounty. We gave thanks to God for the food that came from the

earth and for the farmers who sowed, cultivated, and reaped, but I don't recall hearing anything about what we should give back to the earth in return. I have met with a number of religious groups and spoken at a number of religious events since then that have dealt directly and effectively with issues of sustainability. However, I still question whether stewardship of the earth is reserved for the Sunday of Earth Week, or perhaps summer retreats, or instead is a regular Sunday message from the pulpits of Christian churches in America.

It seems to me that organized religion is still far more committed to the passage: *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moved upon the earth* (Genesis 1:28) than to the passage: *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and those that dwell therein.* (Psalms 24:1) Does the earth belong to us humans, or does it belong to God? If it is God's earth, then it seems to me that we have a responsibility to care for it, nurture it, to sustain it, not to exploit, degrade, and destroy the “fish, birds, air, and every living thing upon it.”

If the earth is the Lord's, what should organized religion be doing to encourage stewardship of the earth? The first chapter of Romans in the New Testament has become a popular reference for condemning the acts of other people, but perhaps the most important passage in the chapter is rarely mentioned. The apostle Paul wrote: *Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So [we] are without excuse.* (Romans 1; 20) Paul appears to be saying there is no excuse for not knowing what God would have us do, regardless of our religion or lack thereof, because the basic nature of God, and how God would have us live, is clearly visible in God's creation - in the basic nature of the things of the earth. In other words, if we are to do God's will, we must learn how to live in harmony *with* nature, *from* nature.

This is also the basic message of sustainability. Like the other living things of the earth, sustainable human societies ultimately must rely on solar energy for their sustenance and survival. This is the only sustainable source of energy for renewing and regenerating the natural and human energy from which we derive everything that is of use to us, including everything of economic value. Thus, our economy and society must function as living organisms within living ecosystems, which in fact they are, rather than inanimate mechanisms that can be manipulated for human benefit. Living organisms have the capacity to capture and store solar energy to offset the inevitable loss of usefulness of energy in the process of productivity. This is the basic function of green plants. They have the capacity to be useful to other species - to be productive - while devoting a significant portion of their energy to renewal and regeneration. Living organisms can meet the needs of the present without diminishing the opportunities of the future. They have the capacity for sustainability.

We humans also are capable of capturing and storing solar energy, by using windmills, water turbines, and photovoltaic cells. We also have an inherent tendency to produce and reproduce, even when we have no economic incentive to do so. Otherwise, few of us would choose to raise children. To create a sustainable economy, we must reflect on and respect the basic nature of these basic human capacities and tendencies. Obviously, an individual life is not sustainable because every living thing eventually dies. But living communities clearly have the capacity to

be productive while devoting a significant part of their life's energy to conceiving and nurturing future generations.

Sustainability will require that we devote a significant portion of the earth's energy from our individual economic uses to renewal and regeneration of nature and society. It will take energy to rebuild and redesign the windmills, water turbines, photovoltaic cells, and other solar collection systems needed to sustain future generations. And perhaps most important, it will take human energy to renew and regenerate the healthy families, communities, and civil societies needed to ensure that whatever energy is available in the future is put to constructive rather than destructive uses. Of what use is abundant energy if we use it to continue our hopeless battles with nature.

To ensure sustainability, we must balance our self-interest with our common-interests as members of society and our moral responsibility for the future of humanity. To ensure the common good, we must work together through government; we must make government work as intended: for the common good. Together, we must create a moral and just society within which our economy can meet our individual, impersonal, instrumental needs without degrading or destroying the integrity of either society or nature.

Our ways of life must reflect the "invisible nature of God." We must learn to live by the basic principles or natural laws that govern healthy natural ecosystems and healthy societies. In reality, this admonition for sustainability is completely consistent with the most fundamental principle of all major religions and enduring philosophies. We must do for others as we would have them do for us, including those of future generations. We must treat earth as we would have those of future generations treat the earth, if we were of their generation and they were the caretakers of the earth today. We must look beyond our individual economic self-interest to the interest of others; we must live "as one with the earth."

As Christians, we should internalize, teach, and preach the gospel that it is not a sacrifice to care for others or to care for the earth because acts of kindness and stewardship make our lives better, not worse. Certainly we are material beings and we need the economic essentials of life - food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and such. We need to care for ourselves. But, we are also social beings and we need to care and be cared for, to love and be loved. It is not a sacrifice to care for others - relationships add quality to our lives. We are also spiritual beings and we need to feel a sense of rightness and goodness in what we do. It is not a sacrifice to care for the earth - stewardship gives purpose and meaning to our lives. In finding harmony among the individual, social, and spiritual dimensions of life, we learn to live "as one with the earth." We find peace, contentment, and true happiness. We become as one with "the invisible nature of God."