

*Walking Our Path Without Fear*ⁱ

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Much of my adult life has been very ordinary. After graduating from college, I took a job with a meat packing company in sales promotion and advertising. After a while, I decided to return to graduate school. Four years later, after receiving my Ph. D. degree, I took a faculty position in agricultural economics with a state university. Afterwards, I willingly moved from one university to another as I found opportunities for professional advancement. Like most Americans, I was always trying to “better myself.” I wanted to get ahead in life. I wanted to be *successful*.

We tend to define success in terms of wealth, power, or fame. To be successful, we are led to believe we have to succeed economically. We can achieve financial success through hard work or we can acquire wealth through political influence or personal popularity. The famous and powerful can always make money, even if some spend it as fast as they get it. I wanted a college education so I could get a good job, I wanted more education so I could get a better job, and I moved from place to place whenever I found an even better job. Certainly, personal and family preferences had something to do with my decisions, but not as much as becoming *successful*. I had been led to believe that economic success was the key to happiness.

By the time I was 45 years old, I was succeeding. I wasn't rich, but my income was well up into the top quartile of American workers. I had the prestige of a full professor position at a major U.S. university and the power of being the head of an academic department with nearly twenty faculty members. In addition, my wife had a professional career and my two children were doing well in school and seemed capable of emulating my success. However, I was becoming increasingly miserable and unhappy with my life. Somehow, success didn't seem to be translating into happiness, as least not for me.

Part of my job as a Department Head in Agricultural Economics was to organize educational programs to help farmers find ways to cope with the “farm financial crisis of the 1980s.” Many farmers had borrowed heavily at high interest rates during the 1970s to take advantage of profitable commodity prices driven up by booming export markets. During the 1980s, prices plummeted as the exports fell sharply during a global economic recession. Farm bankruptcies, foreclosures, and farmer suicides were almost daily event on the evening TV news programs. My job was to use the resources of my department to help farmers find some way to survive.

During a number of face-to-face, heart-to-heart talks with farm families about their financial difficulties, I began to understand that something was fundamentally wrong with the economics I

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had been taught, had taught, and was teaching. The specialized, standardized, large-scale agriculture I had been promoting wasn't working. It certainly wasn't working for farmers. In addition, the farmers in the greatest financial difficulty were those who had been doing what we so-called economic experts had been advising them to do.

Over time, I began to realize that the industrial approach to agriculture wasn't ever going to work for farmers, nor was it going to work for the people of rural communities. As farms grew larger and the number of surviving farm families became fewer, rural communities were withering and dying. Later, I came to realize that the industrialization of agriculture was also destroying the land. The large, specialized operations invariably eroded the soil and polluted the air and water with the chemical fertilizers and pesticides and biological wastes from the large "animal factories." Eventually, I realized I had spent my whole adult life learning and teaching an approach to agriculture that quite simply was not sustainable.

I had two choices: I could retreat into denial or I could confront my new reality. I chose to confront reality. Eventually, I began to understand our entire economy and society were plagued by the same basic lack of sustainability I had discovered in industrial agriculture. Industrial economic development inevitably degrades the health and productivity of the natural and human resources from which all economic value is derived. The capitalist approach to economic development is a very efficient means of generating material wealth but does nothing to ensure the fair or equitable distribution of wealth or to preserve opportunities for those of future generations. The ultimate "inconvenient truth" is that our pursuit of individual material wealth - our pursuit of success - is destroying the natural ecosystems and social system upon which the future of humanity ultimately depends. When I confronted reality, I came to understand that our relentless pursuit of individual economic success simply is not sustainable.

This new understanding changed virtually every aspect of my life. I couldn't continue promoting, or even silently tolerating, something that I no longer believed to be right and good. I knew the "agricultural establishment," including the agricultural universities, was not going to change quickly, regardless of how hard I might try to change it. It was no longer possible for me to move up within the university power structure; I wasn't going to be a Dean or Director. I had recently been elected President of the Southern Agricultural Economics Association, but I quickly lost my professional stature when I began challenging the conventional wisdom of industrial agriculture. I knew I was competent and would always be able to find a job, but my future professional and economic advancements was now limited. I was no longer *successful*.

Within the next few years, I learned firsthand why so many people fear such life-changing events as professional failure, loss of love, and ill health. I decided to move back to my home state and begin my career anew, devoting my professional efforts toward helping to create a new *sustainable* approach to agriculture. With the change in location and professional aspirations, my marriage of nearly 30-years ended in divorce - after years of struggle and frustration. My professional transition was not the direct cause of the breakup, but the stresses of recreating my academic career undoubtedly hindered my ability to cope with personal problems at home. A couple of years later, I developed heart problems which culminated my "death" - at least in my heart stopping for a couple of minutes. Luckily, I was near a "crash cart," having just completed a heart stress test on a treadmill, and a couple of jolts of electricity brought me "back to life."

After my near-death experience, I decided it was time for me to stop and rethink what my life was about. I had found the courage to break away from the relentless pursuit of wealth, power, and fame, but I had not found a new direction or purpose for my life. I believed I had been brought back to life for a reason, that God still had something worthwhile left for me to do. However, I had been shocked into a keen awareness that I wasn't going to live forever. I needed to confront my fears of whatever might come next and get on with my life. In my search for God's purpose for my life, I discovered that the guidance that I needed had been there all along; I just wasn't paying attention. God had been showing me the path I needed to take by leading me to reject the principles of industrialization and to embrace the principles of sustainability.

Perhaps most important, I had come to realize that life is not about the pursuit of material wealth, power, or fame. Life is about the pursuit of happiness; everything else is a means to this end. Certainly, some level of economic well-being is important. We are physical beings with physical needs. We need food, clothing, shelter, and perhaps some of the other things that make our lives easier or better. However, we are also social beings with social needs. We need positive relationships with other people, even if we receive nothing of individual, material or tangible value in return for our efforts. In addition, we are ethical and moral beings. We need the sense of rightness and goodness in our life that comes only from knowing, by faith, that our life has purpose and meaning. Happiness arises from a sense of balance and harmony among the physical, social, and ethical dimensions of our being.

This isn't just a personal opinion. University psychologists Ed Diener and Martin Seligman reviewed more than 150 scholarly studies relating wealth to happiness.ⁱ Their 2004 report confirmed a growing scientific consensus that beyond some very modest level of income - around \$10,000 per person, they suggest - increases in income do not necessarily bring greater happiness. A 2003 British cabinet office report also confirmed, "Despite huge increases in affluence compared with 1950, people throughout the developed world reported no greater feelings of happiness."ⁱⁱ These and other studies consistently found that personal relationships - friends, family, and community - are necessary for happiness, as is a sense of being treated with equity and justice within society. And perhaps most important, they concluded our happiness depends on our having a clear sense of purpose and meaning in life from which to derive our sense of ethics and morality.

Whenever our individual pursuit of wealth, power, or fame compromises the rightness of our relationships within families, communities, or within society, we diminish rather than enhance our happiness, even if we achieve personal "success." When our pursuit of success compromises the rightness in our relationships with the earth, our ethical and moral sense of stewardship for God's creation, we diminish our happiness, no matter much personal wealth we may extract from nature. It is not a sacrifice to care for others; caring makes our life better, not worse. It is not a sacrifice to care for the earth; caring makes our life better, not worse. Certainly we need to care for ourselves, but we also need to care for others.

This is not some new age philosophy. Aristotle proclaimed that happiness was inherently social and virtuous, a natural consequence of the *rightness of relationships* among friends, within families, communities, and society. Alex De Tocqueville in his classic book, *Democracy in*

America, of the early 1800s referred to it as “self-interest rightly understood,” in that caring for others is as important for those who care as for those who are cared for. The Dali Lama refers to the pursuit of true happiness as being “wisely selfish,” recognizing that our individual well-being is inherently linked to the well-being of the whole of human society and of the earth.

As I began to appreciate the physical, social, and ethical dimensions of happiness, I began to understand that the economic, social, and ecological principles of sustainability are also the principles of purposeful living and the keys to true happiness. I believe, by faith, that our life has purpose and that the whole of life, including our life, is meant to be good. I believe, by faith, that if we walk our path of purpose, our life will be good; we will find happiness. I believe these things because life otherwise just doesn't make sense. The basic principles of economics can guide us in meeting our physical needs. The basic principles of human relationships can guide us in meeting our social needs. The basic principles of ecology, of the earth, can guide us in meeting ethical and moral needs. As we meet our individual material, social, ethical needs, we fulfill our life's purpose, we do our part to sustain humanity, and in so doing, we find happiness.

Sustainability is inevitably linked to the natural ecosystems, from which all useful materials are extracted and within which all material wastes must be disposed. Even personal services that involve no tangible products, such as financial, legal, and other information-based enterprises, are ultimately dependent upon the tangible processes they support or facilitate, such as manufacturing, construction, and food production. In addition, all human activities require food energy, which is captured by living plants and flows through the earth's natural ecosystems. The sustainability of human life on earth depends on the earth's natural ecosystems.

The “first principle” of ecology is that “everything is interconnected,” from which are derived the ecological principles of *holism*, *diversity*, and *interdependence*. The natural environment is not simply a collection of physical and biological elements; it is an interconnected whole within which we humans and our communities, economics, and societies are integral parts. Anything we take from the environment or dump into the environment affects the environment as a whole and thus ultimately affects our individual health and well-being as well as the long run viability of society and humanity. We must consider the potential impacts of our individual decisions and actions upon the larger ecological whole of which we are a part.

Diversity, across both space and time, is essential in sustaining all living ecosystems. Diversity is necessary for regeneration and renewal, resilience, and resistance as well as adaptation and evolution to accommodate the ever-changing natural environment. The specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control associated with industrial development leads to homogenization and loss of biodiversity, which threaten the ability of living systems to assimilate wastes and to regenerate the biological energy essential to human life. Loss of diversity is one of the clearest signs that a natural ecosystem is being compromised by extraction and exploitation. We must respect and protect diversity within nature.

Interdependent relationships are necessary to transform the potentials of holism and diversity into positive ecological reality. Dependence is exploitive and independence is self-limiting, but interdependence is mutually supportive. Humans are biological beings and all human endeavors are inherently dependent on the natural environment. However, the health and productivity of the

natural environment is also dependent upon those of us who use it. If our relationships with the ecological environment are not *mutually* beneficial, neither the economic productivity of nature nor the personal benefits we derive from our direct relationships with nature can be sustained.

The guiding principles of sustainable *human* relationships are *trust*, *kindness*, and *courage*. These basic social principles reflect a set of common core values - including honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion and respect - that transcend religion, philosophy, race, nation, and culture. Different groups of people obviously have different values, but a set of *core values* are held in common to all civilized people; they reflect our common sense of rightness in our relationships.ⁱⁱⁱ People *trust* people they believe to be honest, fair, and responsible in their relations with others. Whenever trusts are established and validated, relationships grow stronger. Whenever trusts are violated, relationships grow weaker. Sustainable relationships must be built on trust.

The core values of respect and compassion, along with empathy, define the principle of *kindness*. People who are kind are empathetic are able to put themselves in the place of others, and to treat others like they would want to be treated. Kindness goes beyond impartiality, dependability, and *brutal* honesty. Kindness means showing compassion, when mercy is more appropriate than justice, and showing respect, even when it has not been earned. Sustainability simply extends the Golden Rule across generations. We must do for those of the future as we would have them do for us, if we were of their generation and they were of ours. Relationships lacking in compassion, respect, and kindness quite simply are not sustainable.

Trust and caring accomplish little without the courage to take action. The principle of courage is built upon the core values of self-confidence, discipline, and perseverance. It takes courage to form meaningful personal relationships and to persevere through times of inevitable misunderstanding and disappointment. People of courage have self-confidence. They are committed to purpose and have the discipline to live by their principles. We must find the *moral* courage to reject the deception, inequity, irresponsibility, ruthlessness, and disrespect that characterize many personal relationships today. Sustainable living requires courage.

Since economies are creations of society, some people believe that economic principles are arbitrary creations of society. However, the fundamental nature of humans in their pursuit of *individual self-interests* is reflected in the basic principles of economics. Among these principles are *value*, *efficiency*, and *sovereignty*. Economic value is determined by scarcity; people are willing to pay more for things that are less readily available or are more in demand by others. *Economic value* differs from *intrinsic value* in that the economy may place little value on things of great intrinsic value, such as air and water or ethics and friendships. To meet our material needs our efforts must produce things that are scarce and thus have economic value. Fortunately, as ecological and social integrity have become scarce, they have increased in economic value, making it easier to find economic opportunities to live sustainably.

Economic *efficiency* is a measure of the economic value created relative to the economic costs associated with its creation. Efficiency is a consequence of choices among the alternative resources and processes involved in producing things of economic value. The more effective the allocation of resources, the more efficient will be the overall production process. We must make

efficient use of our time, energy, and intellect, as well as materials from nature, if we are to meet our individual needs by means that minimize our negative impacts on nature and society.

The principle of economic sovereignty is frequently sacrificed in the name of economic efficiency or expediency but it is no less important than are value and efficiency. Without sovereignty - the freedom to choose - neither capitalism nor democracy can function effectively. Sovereign decision makers must have a wide range of alternative choices, adequate information about logical alternatives, and must be free of coercion, persuasion, or other unnecessary interference with their choices. People within a sustainable society must be free to make their own economic choices.

Perhaps most important, our relationships must have ecological, social, and economic integrity. Integrity refers to wholeness or completeness, strength or soundness and depends on the extent to which the principles of sustainability permeate all aspects of our lives. The ecological principles of holism, diversity, and interdependence must be reflected in our personal and economic relationships. The economic principles of value, efficiency, and sovereignty must be used in our decisions affecting society and the environment. And we must find the courage to be trustworthy and kind in making our economic decisions as consumers, employees, employers, colleagues, or investors. Sustainable living requires ecological, social, and economic integrity.

I sincerely believe that these basic principles of sustainability also are principles of purposeful living - the keys to true happiness. In the first chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote, "What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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." The laws of nature, including human nature, are God's laws for the universe, including the earth, its natural ecosystems, humanity societies, and economies. What can be known about God is plain to us, if we accept the basic principles of ecosystems, societies, and economies as revelations of "his eternal power and deity." The discovery and validation of these principles is the legitimate function of science at its best: not a science of domination and manipulation, but a science of understanding and respect for the creation. We must accept our purpose as a matter of faith, but we can be guided along our path by the provable, knowable principles that guide the rest of God's creation.

Knowing these things, how should we then live? First, there is a growing public awareness of the interdependence among the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of our lives. A number of excellent "how to" books with tips for sustainable living can now be easily found by searching the Internet.^{iv} In addition, there is a growing acceptance of the fundamentally spiritual nature of sustainability. Comprehensive documents and declarations, such as the "Earth Charter," provide valuable insights into the current challenges to global sustainability and the values and ethics of sustainable living.^v However, it's easy to become overwhelmed by the task of fulfilling the ecological, social, and economic responsibilities of a sustainable lifestyle. Many caring people are unwilling to even try and many others give up in frustration and despair. The basic problem is that most people see sustainability as an added set of responsibilities, an additional burden rather than fundamentally different and better way of living that transforms every aspect of life.

The principles of sustainability do not impose added responsibility on us as teachers, caregivers, poets, or entrepreneurs; instead, they provide guidance in becoming and being better teachers, caregivers, or poets. They help us become the people God meant us to be. In helping us to walk our path of purpose, the principles guide us to fulfilling our responsibilities for the sustainability of humanity but also guide us in our pursuit of true happiness. A sustainable lifestyle is not a burden; it is a blessing.

We need not, and cannot, deal with all of aspects of sustainable living at the same time. Such a task would be truly overwhelming. We only need only to respect these principles as specific situations arise in our day-to-day lives, as preachers, nurturers, musicians, or workers. As we do so, each decision we make and each action we take will reflect our consideration of the basic ecological, social, and economic principles of sustainable living. And perhaps most important, we need to be ever mindful that *all* of the principles of sustainability must permeate *all* aspects of our lives. We must strive to be persons of ecological, social, and economic integrity.

For example, most of us relate to nature only incidentally and indirectly; most of us are not farmers, loggers, or miners. However, every economic decision we make has an impact, for better or worse, on the natural environment. And equally important, when we respect the ecological principles of holism, diversity, and interdependence in our economic relationships, we are not only strengthening our economic well-being we are also acting with ecological integrity. When we consider our individual economic decisions within the context our overall, long run economic well-being, we see the fallacies of economic extraction and exploitation of nature. As we respect the need for economic diversity, we are also creating economic incentives to maintain diversity within nature. And when we insist on mutually beneficial economic relationships we are promoting an understanding of the necessity to maintain win-win relationships with nature.

The same basic reasoning holds for the ecological consequences of our social relationships. When we see ourselves as members of the whole of humanity and human society - including people of all races, religions, national origins, abilities, and sexual orientations - we see the immorality and senselessness of our continued extraction and exploitation of other species within nature. When we respect, value, and seek to protect diversity among all sustainable cultures and lifestyles, we are helping to maintain the diversity of the natural ecosystems that support those diverse cultures and lifestyles. And when we insist on mutually beneficial relationships with other people, we are fostering an awareness of the need for win-win relationships with nature.

This same type of logical and reasoning can be applied to all true ecological, social, and economic principles. The three sets of three principles mentioned here are not necessarily inclusive. It's also important to remember ecological, social, and economic integrity must be built on life's foundational principles of faith, love, and hope. Perhaps others will not see the importance of one or more of these principles or will discover additional principles that they deem more appropriate for their life. The important concept here is that the whole of nature, including human nature, is guided by a set of fundamental, inviolable principles. We are not required to understand, live by, or respect these principles, but we cannot avoid the consequences of our either intentional or inadvertent violations.

Principles define the *rightness* of our relationships with nature and society and apply to everyone, everywhere, at all times. However, each of us is confronted with a unique set of decisions each day of our lives because we are different people with different purposes for being. Principles are not rules that allow us to develop a formula, recipe, or a checklist for sustainable living. Principles are reflected in core values that we can apply as we deem appropriate to each decision and action we take each day. We live our days as politicians, artists, encouragers, or employers. Each decision we make and action we take has consequences, and by these consequences, we are guided or nudged along our path of purpose. We will never need to violate any fundamental principle of life to walk our path of purpose. As we live with ecological, social, and economic integrity, we are guided through a life of purpose.

More than ten years have passed since I “came back to life,” and each year has been better than the last. I am in the tenth year of a new marriage and have found the peace and contentment that had escaped me before. I retired from my faculty position in early 2000, after thirty years at four different universities. My wife and I are able to live modestly, but well, without spending the limited time and energy we have left working for money. Since retiring, I have continued writing and speaking about a wide range of issues related to sustainability. I believe that I have finally found my purpose in life and I have found happiness. I don't know how to describe what I do, other than I try to help people understand how the world works and their place within it. I guess I'm a teacher, some say I am a preacher, I admit to being an activist, but I am not a politician. I continue to do the things that I feel *led* to do. I try to live by the principles that I teach or preach, but I also pray *without ceasing*. I would become hopelessly lost without a continuing sense of spiritual connectedness to help guide me along my path.

More relevant to the theme of this conference, *Be Not Afraid*, a life of purpose is a life without fear. I no longer have any fear of failure. I now know that true success requires only that I remain able to meet the basic necessities of life. Beyond that, happiness depends on relationships and a sense of purpose. I have no fear of loss of love because I have learned to love. Love is an act of faith, without proof, in inherent goodness. It requires no proof or validation; true love cannot be lost because love never ends. I have no fear of ill health, accident, or even death. I've already died once, and it wasn't all that bad. Seriously, when my life's purpose is complete, I know it will be a good time for me to die, whether today, next week, or a decade or two in the future. I certainly don't look forward to being sick or disabled, but I have no fear of death. When my work here on earth is done, I will be ready to go “Home.” I'm even no longer afraid of the dark. When we walk our path of purpose, we walk without fear. When we walk our path with faith and love, there is always hope - even the most perilous of times.

End Notes

ⁱ Ed Diener and Martin EP. Seligman, “Beyond Money. Toward an Economy of Well-Being,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5 (1), 2004, 1–31.

ⁱⁱ Oliver James, “Children before cash; better childcare will do more for our wellbeing than greater affluence,” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage* (New York: William Morrow, HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 43.

^{iv} How To for Sustainable Living, Wayne Roberts and Susan Brandum, *Get A Life* (Toronto, Ontario, CA: Get A Life Publishing, 1995), Greg Horn, *Living Green* (Topiga, CA, USA: Freedom Press).

^v The Earth Charter is a widely recognized, global consensus statement on ethics and values for a sustainable future. http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/2000/10/the_earth_charter.html.