

## Sustaining the Rural Community Commons<sup>1</sup>

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A community is a more than a collection of people. Historically, a community has been defined as a group of people who share similar beliefs and customs and who live in the same area. The community is among the oldest and most basic of human institutions, perhaps ranking second only to the family. Historically, people have valued communities. Members of a true community share a sense of connectedness – of belonging and of mutual obligation. They are linked by economic, social, and emotional relationships. These economic, social, and emotional relationships exist among, not within, the people who constitute the community. The connections or relationships which define true community are not owned or controlled by individual community members; instead, they are held by the community “in common” – owned by all to be shared equally by all. The essence of true community is embodied in the “community commons.”

Sociologists now talk about the replacement of “communities of place” by “communities of interest” – by groups sharing the same “interests,” but not necessarily the same “places.” Communities of interest may be formed by those sharing ethnic or racial origin, religious or political beliefs, occupations or hobbies, or other interests. But, members of interest groups typically do not share all aspects of their lives, and not for the duration of their lives, as did members of traditional communities of place. They simply share “an interest.” Obviously, the economic, social, and emotional bonds among members of community of interest are not nearly as strong as they were for communities of place. It seems reasonable to ask whether America is any longer a nation of communities, or instead, a nation of disconnected individuals – longing for community.

Many rural communities remain communities with a strong sense of place. In these rural communities, strong connections exist not only among the people of the community, but also between the people and “the place.” “A place” may be defined by its landscape, climate, or geographic proximity to other “places.” But, for most communities in “rural places,” the primary defining connection is between the people and the land. In some rural communities, connections with the land are with lakes, forests, or mines, but for most rural communities the most important connection with the land remains a connection, directly or indirectly, with farming.

“The land,” like the connections or bonds among people within a community, is distinguished by its contributions to the “common good.” Certainly, individuals may rightfully use the land for their private benefit, but land has undeniable common property aspects as well. All people have an equally shared right to clean air and clean water, to enough food from the land to sustain life and health, and to an opportunity to connect with those things of nature, which help to define our humanness. Many people also feel a sacred responsibility to protect the particular piece of

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creation with which destiny has led them to be most closely connected. Thus, all people in a community have common rights to and common responsibilities for the land which define their community of place.

A community is a living organism – it is an interdependent network of living things. Obviously, people are living beings. The land also is living – soils, plants, animals, all are living, growing things. The social, ecological, and economic problems of communities and of society today are all direct consequences of treating people, soil, plants, animals as if they were separable, replaceable, mechanistic parts of some sort of sophisticated “biological factory.” The current “biotech craze” in the scientific community is but the latest product of an outdated worldview that life is nothing more than a sophisticated mechanical process. People live, breathe, eat, think, and feel – they are alive. People also need other people and they need to believe that their lives have purpose and meaning. Building and maintaining healthy, regenerative rural communities for the future will require new ways of thinking – a new “living” worldview.

Machines are manmade; they are designed to perform specific functions to achieve a specific purpose. They may be well maintained, but all machines eventually become obsolete or wear out. Worn out and obsolete machines must be redesigned, rebuilt, or discarded and replaced. They cannot redesign, rebuild, replace, or otherwise remake themselves.

Living things, on the other hand, are “self-making.” They are born, germinate, hatch, or otherwise come to life on their own. Living things also are dynamic; they are ever changing. As they grow and mature, they gain the ability to perform various functions to fulfill their purpose in life. Although dynamic in structure, the pattern of living things, their DNA, remains unchanged. A human is always a human at all stages of life – whether it's a bouncing baby, a strong mature adult, or a feeble “senior citizen,” it's the “same” human. Finally, living things are regenerative. No matter how well nurtured, all living things eventually must die. Before they die, however, living things have the capacity to reproduce themselves – to start the process of life anew.

Living things also are holistic. If the various parts of our bodies were surgically separated and laid side by side on an operating table, our life, the essence of who we are, obviously would have been destroyed. A living organism is more than the “sum of its parts” – living organisms are inseparable, holistic. The unique functional, spatial, and temporal connections and relationships among the diverse organs of a living organism, in essence, give it life.

Communities are living organisms; they are regenerative, dynamic, and holistic. They are not machines or factories. If there is to be a future for rural communities, our ways of thinking about community must reflect their dynamic, regenerative, and holistic nature. We must have the courage and wisdom to abandon the old, mechanistic worldview and adopt new, organismic ways of thinking about community health and development.

The development of sustainable rural communities for the future will require a very different approach from that of industrial, economic development, which dominates rural community development efforts of today. The stages of developing should be patterned after the “stages of life,” not after the stages of building a factory. The stages of life include conception, birth, early development, growth, maturity, productivity, and regeneration before death – in an endless cycle.

The “conception” of the sustainable community development process occurs with the selection of a set of guiding principles. The principles by which a process is to be carried out define the basic nature of the process, and thus, determine whether it can fulfill its initial purpose. Principles provide the conceptual DNA for the development process. The DNA of living things determines what they are -- plants, animals, insects, humans, etc. – but it also defines the uniqueness of each member of each living species. Likewise, principles define the basic nature of a community development process, industrial, sustainable, etc., as well as define the uniqueness of development initiatives for a particular community.

The number and nature of guiding principles should be sufficient to ensure that, if followed, the purpose will be achieved. However, principles that are not necessary for achievement of the purpose should be omitted, to avoid unnecessary complexity and distraction. For example, the principles of sustainable development are ecological integrity, economic viability, and social responsibility. Any process which follows these principles will be sustainable, any process that does not, will not. The three principles are both necessary and sufficient to ensure sustainability.

After conception comes birth and early development. The “living systems” approach assumes that development processes require different types of support during the early phases of development than will be required at later stages. Industrial developers prefer to bring “full grown” industries into their communities so they can immediately realize whatever benefits are to be achieved. However, these “outside” industries have no “natural connections” to the community – they didn't “grow up” there. They have no commitment to contribute to the “common good” of the community, unless it contributes to their short-run corporate economic objectives. Sustainable, grassroots development must come from local people – from people who are committed to the future of the community. Their ideas and initiatives must be encouraged and nurtured, so eventually, their “infant” ventures will grow to maturity. And in the process, those who are new in the role of business and politics will grow to become community leaders with a commitment to helping others to grow and mature – to the “common good.”

The stages of birth and early development should focus on the creation and dissemination of knowledge – on empowering people to solve their own problems and to realize their unique opportunities. The “food” for the “early development of knowledge” is “information.” And, the type of information provided must be appropriate for “living processes.” Sustainable development, for example, requires a fundamentally different approach to research and education than does industrial development. Public institutions must be redirected to creating and disseminating information and technologies appropriate for sustainable self-development. Public policies should provide “protection” for the process, at least during the stages of “early development.”

The developmental stages of growth, productivity, and maturity, in living processes, require little more than encouragement. Access to financing, appropriate marketing infrastructure, accommodative laws, and facilitating regulations are a few examples of the types of encouragement that local entrepreneurs need to grow, develop, and become mature, productive members of their communities and of society. The key to success in the “living systems” approach to development is to focus on people rather than production and profits. Once people

have achieved a desirable quality of life – economically, socially, and spiritually – they will be committed to the current and future well-being of others – to the “common good.”

Mature members of “living communities” will accept the social responsibilities of caring for others as a privilege, not as a sacrifice. Mature members of “living communities” will accept the responsibilities of stewardship of nature, as a God-given privilege, not as a sacrifice. Mature members of “living communities” will accept their responsibilities to regenerate and renew their community, rather than abandon it. They will participate with others in the process of “conception and birth” of the new ideas needed to sustain new generations of people. They will contribute to the “early development and growth” of others who will grow and mature to fulfill their responsibilities in the future. They will help care for the “aged and dying” of the community, because they will know at some future time their work too will be done.

Finally, the keys to a successful “living systems” approach to rural community development are the same as the keys to a successful life: faith, hope, and love. Those who successfully pursue truly sustainable approaches to development must have a fundamental faith in the basic good of people, faith in the ability of nature to provide for our needs, and faith in a “higher order of things,” in God, to give purpose and meaning to their life.

People who succeed in sustainable development also must be people of hope. Hope is not the expectation that something good is destined to happen or even that the odds favor something good, but rather, that something good is possible. It is this possibility of something good that gives us the courage to challenge the conventional ways of thinking, to denounce the status quo, to try new and different things, because we hope to achieve something better.

The final key to success in sustainable community development is love. No one expresses the importance of a loving relationship between people and the land better than Wendell Berry. In his book of essays, What Are People For?, he writes, “if agriculture is to remain productive, it must preserve the land and the fertility and ecological health of the land; the land, that is, must be used well. A further requirement, therefore, is that if the land is to be used well, the people who use it must know it well, must be highly motivated to use it well, must know how to use it well, must have time to use it well, and must be able to afford to use it well.” In essence, he is saying, if the land is to remain capable of sustaining people, we must have people on the land who love the land. The same holds true for all relationships of people to the land, not just for farming.

Applying that same concept of love to human relationships within rural communities, we may conclude; “if our rural communities are to remain viable, they must preserve the health and productivity of rural people, their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being; rural people, that is, must be treated well. A further requirement is that if people are to treat each other well, they must know each other well, must be motivated to treat each other well, must have time to treat each other well, and must be able to afford to treat each other well. If our rural communities are to be sustainable, we must have people in rural communities who love each other.

Ultimately, the rural commons must be sustained by faith, hope, and love. All are important, but the greatest of these is love – love of the land, of each other, and of God. Through their love of the land and love of each other, rural people ultimately must learn to express their love of God.