

Living in Interesting Times: The Perils and Possibilities of Sustainability

John Ikerd

May you live in interesting times! This supposedly is an ancient Chinese proverb – some say a curse. In the original language, the word for “interesting times” is the same as the Chinese word for crisis that is commonly interpreted to mean both danger and opportunity. Scholars tend to agree on the “danger” half of the word, but suggest the meaning of the other half is closer to “a critical point in time” than to “opportunity.” I like Webster's definition of crisis as a critical point in time when we are forced to make choices that will fundamentally change the future, for either better or worse. Living in interesting times may be either a blessing or a curse. Regardless, we most certainly are living in “interesting times” today.

These are times President Obama described as times of “gathering clouds and raging storms” in his inaugural address. We are at a critical point in time, he said, when we must “reaffirm our enduring spirit” and “choose our better history.” Not return to our darker history of exploitation, irresponsibility, and global imperialism, but to our better history of equality, responsibility, and mutual respect. In times of crisis, we must listen to our “better angels.”

The economic, ecological, and social crises that confront us today are direct consequences of our lack of appreciation and respect for our inherent interconnectedness with the other people and other things of the earth. The environmental and social justice movements of the 1960s reflected an awakening to negative environmental and social consequences of industrial economic development. Industrial development is very efficient in extracting economic value from nature and society but it does nothing to renew or regenerate the resources that it depletes.

The natural environment had been polluted and degraded by decades of economic extraction and exploitation. The social fabric of the nation had been torn by centuries of exploitation of racial minorities and the chronically poor and oppressed. The people of the ‘60s and ‘70s pressured their elected representatives to pass legislation to protect the air and water from pollution, to prevent discrimination, and to ensure equal employment opportunities for all.

However, we soon discovered that protecting the environment and bringing disenfranchised people into the economic and political mainstream had economic costs. Rather than bear those costs, we retreated from reality during the early 1980s and have been in a state of denial ever since. Today's economic chaos is a direct consequence of thirty-years of denial and retreat.

After the energy crisis of the 1970s, instead of developing renewable sources of energy – solar, wind, and water – we returned to our reliance on fossil energy. As a result, we are now at or near a peak in global oil production, and all future sources of energy will be less plentiful and more costly to extract and to use. Global climate change is a direct consequence of our fossil energy dependence. Greenhouse gasses are added to the atmosphere with each calorie of fossil energy we use. We can't use the remaining reserves of fossil energy, primarily coal, without risking an ecological catastrophe.

This 30-year flight from reality has also had dire social consequences. At no time since the “gilded age” of the early 1900s has the gap between the wealthy and the rest of us been so great. The income of the top one-percent amounts to more than the total income of the bottom one-half of Americans, at least before the financial meltdown. In the words of Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, “The income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population has become so wide, and is growing so fast, that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism itself.”

We have been systematically eroding the ecological and social foundation of the “real economy.” Some of the economic growth of the 1980s and 1990s was real, primarily that associated with new electronic technologies. However, much of the so called boom was a product of “irrational exuberance,” which fueled speculative price increases in the stock markets. When the “dot.com bubble” finally burst, the Wall Street bankers found ways to create the financial “house of cards” of the 2000s – another retreat from reality. We now know that virtually all of the economic growth since 2000 was fueled by unethical financial practices that promoted irresponsible borrowing and spending. The house of cards has collapsed and no one knows how much of what’s left of the economy is real and how much is economic fantasy.

In our pursuit of wealth, we are destroying the ecological and social integrity of our economy. All economic value comes from either the earth or society. The economy itself produces nothing of value; it simply facilitates our individual relationships with each other and with the earth. Human imagination and creativity is worth nothing without minerals, energy, and other resources from the earth. Imagine today’s modern technological society without fossil energy and you get some idea of our dependence on the resources of nature. In addition, the people creating today’s technologies have been nurtured, civilized, educated, socialized, and organized by families and communities – by society. The current economic chaos is a direct result of extraction and exploitation of the earth and its people.

The basic problem is that economic value is inherently individualistic and thus is short-run in nature. It’s simply not possible for anyone to realize anything of economic value after he or she is dead. Since life is inherently uncertain, the economy places a premium on the present relative to the future. This is the reason people willingly pay “interest” so they can have something today rather than save the money needed to buy it later. At historical interest rates of around seven-percent, a dollar ten years from now is worth only fifty cents today, and anything 70-years in the future is worth less than a penny on the dollar. We must consider the impacts of our decisions decades if not centuries into the future, if we are to ensure long run sustainability. A society driven by economic self-interest, which is increasingly the case, is simply not sustainable.

We are at a critical point in time, as President Obama said, when we must “reaffirm our enduring spirit” and “choose our better history.” Not our history of the past 30-years, but our history of responsibility and stewardship for the resources of the earth and compassion and equality for our fellow human beings. We are at a point in time when we are forced to make choices that will fundamentally change the future, for either better or worse.

Some scholars claim the Chinese proverb about *interesting times* is the first of three curses, – or blessings – each being more severe than the pervious. The second is: *May you come to the attention of those in authority*. The ancient Chinese obviously understood that governments do not always serve the interests of their people. Perhaps they also understood that in times of crisis people are more willing to work together through their government, and if necessary, to force their government, to serve the common good.

We are living in times when we must accept the fact that government is not the problem, but instead is the only means by which we can resolve the problems that confront us today. We must force our government officials to confront the truth: an unbridled capitalist economy will continue to extract from the earth and exploit society until it destroys the future of our nation and of humanity.

We must help them resist the temptation to create another economic “bubble” to inflate through the next election. The ecological, social, and economic problems of today are a direct consequence of a blind faith in the ultimate goodness of an unbridled capitalist economy. This faith is based on a belief that humans are capable of solving any problem they create and finding a replacement for any resource we use up. We cannot afford to bet the future of humanity on this belief that has no basis in science, logic, or reality. We cannot allow our politicians – Democrat or Republican – to continue the failed policies of the past thirty-years. Government restraints and regulations are absolutely necessary to restrain continuing economic extraction and exploitation.

As President Obama said in January 2008, “Change does not happen from the top down but from the bottom up... [People] arguing, mobilizing, agitating, and ultimately forcing elected officials to be accountable... That’s how we are going to bring about change.”

We must insist that those in government “carry forward that precious gift, that noble ideal, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.” We must not allow those in government to sacrifice the well-being of the many for the wealth of a few, but instead demand they remain faithful to the ideals of our forebearers by ensuring equity and justice for all, including those of future generations.

Our society, our economy, and our natural ecosystems are all in crisis today because we have failed to work together, through government, to protect either nature or society. We must expose the myth that we can have continuing economic prosperity without taking care of the earth and caring for other people.

A sustainable economy must be capable of meeting the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. It must be ecologically sound and socially responsible if it is to be economically viable. We must come to the attention, and if necessary demand the attention, of those in authority and insist that they protect both the “good of the commons” and the “common good.” We must reestablish the consent of the governed, from which government derives its “just powers,” we must demand that it use its just powers to create a sustainable economy to support a sustainable society.

The last of the three Chinese curses – or blessings – is *May you find what you are looking for*. Perhaps the ancient philosopher was suggesting that we don't really want the things we think we want. On the other hand, he could have been suggesting that in times of crisis we have the greatest opportunities to bring about the fundamental changes we really need to create a better future. The latter is the more accurate description of these “interesting times.” There has never been a more promising time than these times of peril for the people of America to invest their time, energy, intellect, and money, in restoring the sustainability of our economy and society.

All living and nonliving things, including we humans, are part of the same matter and the same energy that make up the whole of the earth. The biological energy that fuels our bodies and the electrical impulses that stimulate our thoughts is the same energy that forms and reforms the earth's molecules, continually renewing and transforming everything on earth, including us.

We are also socially and spiritually connected with each other. Our physical connections may determine whether or not we have life, but our social and spiritual connections determine whether our life is worth living. We humans apparently have an innate need for positive relationships with other humans to give us the sense of well-being or happiness to which we all aspire.

Once our basic needs are met, the quality of personal relationships is more important to our happiness than is the quantity of our income or wealth. We need friends, families, and communities to be happy, and the better our relationships, the greater our happiness. We are social beings.

We are spiritually connected to each other and the earth by our need to have a sense of purpose and meaning in life to find happiness. Without a sense of purpose, there is no right or wrong, no good or bad. Without a sense of purpose there is no sense of responsibility for anyone other than ourselves, certainly not for someone of some future generations.

Certainly we need to meet our individual physical needs; that's what the economy is about. However, it's equally important that we meet our social needs; that's what families, communities, and governments are about. It's also important that we be ethical and moral people capable of caring for others, and for the future of humanity, as we care for ourselves. It is not a sacrifice to take care of the earth or to take care of each other; these things make our lives better.

As President Obama said, “Our challenges may be new. The instruments [and technologies] with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends – hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism – these things are old. These things are true.” These are the values upon which we must rebuild our economy and our democracy.

As we return to these old and true values, we will find what we have been looking for. We will not only help create a sustainable economy and society; we will also find our full measure of happiness.