

Chapter 5 An Unconscious People

"Sustainability is a question rather than an answer," as the late Robert Rodale was fond of saying. Sustainability is a direction rather than a destination, like a star that guides the ships at sea but remains forever beyond the horizon. The question of sustainability can be asked of any ongoing activity or process: Is it sustainable? Asking the question need not, and should not, presuppose the answer. Reaching agreement on the goal of sustainability will not be simple, but it should be achievable. First, we must agree on what is to be sustained, for whom and for how long. If we can agree on the answers to these questions, we should be able to move forward toward the common goal of sustainability.

I believe most of those who support the sustainable agriculture issue are working to sustain agriculture, for the benefit of humanity, forever. Agriculture, by its very nature, is an effort to shift the ecological balance to favor humans relative to other species in the production of food and fiber. Thus, if we sustain agriculture we are sustaining it for the ultimate benefit of humankind. I believe there is a general consensus also that we want to sustain agriculture for the well being of people both of this generation and for all generations to follow, forever. I have seen no definition of sustainable agriculture that places a time limit or horizon on how long agriculture should be sustained.

We cannot prove through empirical studies that one approach to agriculture is sustainable or that another is not. It would quite literally take forever to collect the data for such a study. Thus, we must rely on the logic of common sense rather than scientific empiricism to judge sustainability. What are the logical prerequisites for agricultural sustainability? The answer is found in a growing consensus that a sustainable agriculture must be (1) ecologically sound, (2) economically viable, and (3) socially responsible. Furthermore, these three dimensions, in so far as they relate to sustainability, are inseparable. All three are essential, and thus, all are equally critical to long run sustainability.

Sustainability will not be possible if we continue to pursue our individual, short-run economic self-interests. It is imperative that we recognize ecological soundness, economic viability, and social responsibility all as essential and thus equally critical to long run sustainability, and thus, we must make choices and act accordingly.

By John Ikerd, from "What is sustainable agriculture?" published in "Farmers Weekly," Effective Farming Publications, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, March 24, 1995.

The post-industrial era in America typically is labeled the *information age* or the *new economy* – suggesting that information rather than capital has become the new basis for economic development. However, this new post-industrial era eventually will be defined by new social and economic paradigms rather than new technologies. A paradigm is a mental model, a structured way of thinking about things, which we use to define the fundamental nature of a process – such as economic development. New technology may provide the means of carrying out the process, and new resources, such as information, may provide the raw materials to be used in the process. But new paradigms will provide the new models or patterns for using technology and resources for the benefit of humanity.

Any paradigm must do three basic things. First, a paradigm must define the goals and objectives of the process – define what needs to be accomplished in order to be successful. Second, a paradigm must establish boundaries – define what is considered to be a part of the process and what is considered to be outside or external to the process. And finally, a paradigm must spell out the rules – define what can and cannot be done in pursuit of success.

Joel Barker, in Paradigms – The Business of Discovering the Future, uses the game of tennis to illustrate the nature of a paradigm.¹ In tennis, the objective is to strike the ball, serving or returning the ball across the net, in such a way that your opponent is unable to return the ball to you. In tennis, the boundaries of the court are clearly defined. Your serve or return must strike the court within those boundaries on your opponent's side of the court, or it is declared out of play, and you lose the point. The game of tennis has numerous rules, which spell out how the game is to be played. You must strike the ball with a racket, you can strike it only once per return, you can't allow it to bounce more than once on your side of the court, etc. The goal in tennis is to win enough points to win sets, and to win enough sets to win the match.

The goal in the game of corporate industrialization is to make profits and to grow – if the corporation makes profits and grows, it is successful. In the industrial economic paradigm, the social and natural environments define the boundaries. Things that are economic in nature are considered a part of the process, and things that are social or ecological in nature are considered as external or outside of the realm of corporate decision making. The rules of the industrial paradigm are those defined by

existing laws and by available technology. Anything that is technically possible and legal is okay, as long as it leads to profit and growth.

The most promising alternative to the industrial paradigm is the newly emerging paradigm of *sustainability*. Sustainability is defined by a paradigm that is fundamentally different from industrialization. The goal of this new paradigm is to sustain a desirable quality of life – economically, socially, and spiritually. To ensure sustainability, society, the environment, and the economy, must all be considered as parts of the process – all are within the boundaries of decision making. The rules of sustainability are the fundamental laws of nature, including human nature. Sustainable development must be carried out in harmony with nature, regardless of what is considered legal or technologically possible.

I first became aware of the new paradigm of sustainability in the late 1980s, through the concept of sustainable agriculture. I had decided that I didn't have much of a future in administration by that time, and I was looking for an opportunity to get back to Missouri. There was a new program in USDA called LISA, Low Input Sustainable Agriculture. I had heard about the program from Buel Lanpher, an old friend at USDA who had helped us with grant funding in Georgia. He said they had \$4 million and had no idea of how they were going to spend it. If I could come up with a good proposal that would employ my professional talents for a couple of years, it just might be my ticket back to the University of Missouri. MU wouldn't hire people for tenure track positions who had received their Ph.D. from MU, a common practice among universities. But, universities can always find places for people who bring their own salary money with them.

My world had changed dramatically during my four years in Georgia. I had been elected President of the Southern Agricultural Economics Association the year after I arrived in Georgia, and I thought my professional career was pretty much on track. My presidential address had led to an article in Choices, a national publication of the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA). I thought I had a good shot at being elected to the Board of Directors of the AAEA. But the nominating committee put two of us who were strong extension candidates on the ballot; we split the vote of the meager extension membership and both lost. The same year, I was a finalist for the position of Chairman of the Agriculture Economics Division at UGA, which included teaching and research as well as extension, and again I lost.

My personal life also was in shambles at the time. My wife didn't necessarily make friends easily, but she had really been treated shabbily by the folks in Georgia. She couldn't get a teaching job, in spite of her

many years of teaching experience, because she didn't have any special influence with the people who did the hiring. She took a fill in position with a problem kindergarten class, shaped it up, and got glowing commendations from the parents and strong positive evaluations from her immediate supervisor. But the permanent position the following school year went to someone else. My wife didn't fit in with their team concept, I was told. I argued, to no avail, that the kids learning something and pleasing the parents with their progress should be more important than whether their teachers were all stamped out of the same mold.

My wife's ego was devastated. She quit teaching and started studying to become a Licensed Practical Nurse. She did well in her training, but once again encountered numerous conflicts and suffered constant humiliation at the hands of younger instructors who were offended and threatened by her direct communication style. My wife wasn't happy in Georgia, and I had become a part of that unhappiness.

Our twin daughters had come to Georgia to escape the teenage cliques of Oklahoma, but they found more of the same in Georgia. The Georgia schools were even more class conscious – divided by race and historic social status, as well as by current income status. But the schools also were larger and more diverse. My daughters coped by hanging out with the kids with whom they were most comfortable – not those at the top, not those at the bottom, but somewhere in between – the red necks, as my daughters called their group. That was fine with me – although I was so preoccupied with my own troubles that I really didn't pay much attention to what was going on either at school or at home.

I didn't realize until much later that the only kids that were really educated in Georgia public schools were the kids considered to be worthy of educating – which usually meant those with money, social status, or both. I learned later that most people in the South who were actually concerned about their children's education, and who could afford it, sent their kids to private schools, at least at that time. But, there were so-called honors classes in the public schools for the upper middle class kids whose parents really wanted them to learn.

Our kids were placed in these honors classes, based on their grades in Oklahoma. They protested, saying the classes were too hard, that only the super smart kids were in those classes, and that they weren't super smart. So, we let them go into the classes for normal kids. We didn't realize normal kids in the public school didn't get much of an education. If they had chosen to learn, they could have learned, but no one at school seemed to worry about it one way or the other. I wasn't paying enough attention to know if my kids were getting an education or not, until they took the

SAT exams for college. They had made good grades in high school, but their education had been marginal, at best.

In retrospect, they probably learned far more of what they needed to know to succeed in life in their public school than they would have in a private school. The students were mostly African-American and the rest were a fairly broad cross-section of the white community – rural, urban, middle class, and poor. My kids knew more about race and class when they graduated from high school than I knew at fifty. They weren't going to get scholarships to good colleges, but they were prepared for the cultural diversity of twenty-first century America.

As things at home got more and more rocky, I buried myself deeper and deeper into my work. I was having problems at work, but I was a glowing success at work compared with my status at home. I became a certified workaholic. I kept working harder and expected more and more from myself, and from those who worked for me. We were doing great work, but we weren't being rewarded for it. That's one of the characteristics of bureaucracies. They are incapable of either rewarding superiority or penalizing inferiority – they encourage mediocrity. Nothing seemed to be working for me. Something had to change.

One day, Gerry told me she was going back to Missouri with or without me. I needed to make something happen, or I was going to lose my family. I asked her to give me a year. In less than a year, I had \$150,000 in funds committed by Dixon Hubbard, a rare *free spirit* in USDA who had been tapped to head up the new LISA program at USDA. I would provide leadership for a project to build a computer-based decision support system that would help farmers balance economic and environmental considerations in farm planning. I allocated enough money in the project budget to pay my salary for a year, which was all I needed to get my foot in the door at the University of Missouri. UGA grudgingly granted me leave without pay – meaning I could come back to Georgia, if necessary.

In December of 1988, we headed to Missouri. The girls had asked to take a year off between high school and college, and we had agreed. I was afraid they would flunk out of college just to spite us, if we refused. They promised to go to college after their year off, but they wanted to stay in Georgia until the year was up. My wife and I said no – they had to come with us. The arguments that followed created resentment that lingered and festered for years. We eventually coerced them into coming along. The family was falling apart, but we all headed back to Missouri to see if we could somehow keep it together.

The only really positive thing in my life at the time was my newly found interest in sustainable agriculture. At first, the interest was mostly because there was money in the LISA program, and I needed money to get back to Missouri. But the more I learned about sustainable agriculture, the more sense it made. I began to find answers for many of the questions I had about my work, particularly about what, if anything, I as an economist had been contributing to society. Sustainability most certainly is related to economics, but it is much more than economics. Economics alone wasn't enough – this, I now understood. If my work were to be of real value, I would need to become something more than an economist.

Most definitions of sustainability are consistent with the definition adopted in a 1987 report of the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development, commonly called the Brundtland Report, which defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present generation while leaving opportunities for future generations to meet their needs as well.”²

Actually, sustainable development is a pretty common sense concept – it asks the question, can development be sustained over the long run? I like to think of sustainability as a question of intergenerational equity – as applying the Golden Rule within and across generations. We should treat other people as we would have them treat us, and we should have the same consideration for those of future generations, as we would desire of them, if they were of our generation and we were of theirs. The Golden Rule doesn't require that we deny self-interests, only that we show concern for others as well as ourselves. We should find ways to meet our needs today while leaving equal or better opportunities for those around us and for those of the future.

Concerns for long run sustainability reflect a growing concern that we are using up the earth's resources at rates far in excess of rates of natural regeneration. Nature is nothing short of miraculous in its ability to resist our abuse, to absorb our punishment, and regenerate and restore itself to health after we have exploited it. Until recently, in fact, humans had not been capable of doing anything to the earth that it couldn't endure. We harvested its forests for shelter, mined the soil for food, and fouled its streams with our wastes. But, we could always move on to other forests, fields, and streams; given time, nature would recover, regenerate, and renew its resources. Today, as we continue our relentless degradation of nature, there is no unspoiled place on earth left for us to move on to.

Some of our ecological sins can be attributed to ignorance. The word “environment” didn't even enter the vocabulary of most Americans until

Rachel Carlson wrote her book, Silent Spring, in the early 1960s. She wrote about the potentially devastating impacts of agricultural chemicals on wildlife and human life, and foresaw the day when there might be no birds left to sing. People had gained some awareness of the potential for humanity to destroy itself with nuclear energy during the 1950s. But nuclear annihilation was considered to be a product of war – not of day-to-day business. Somehow, it hadn't sunk in yet that we could destroy ourselves while trying to feed ourselves – or while trying to create any number of things that otherwise might make our lives better.

The energy crunch of the 1970s, when OPEC cut world oil production, gave us a glimpse of what life might be like as we begin to run short of fossil fuels, and encouraged us to get more serious about conservation. The environmental movement became a global issue as we realized that clean, fertile places to *move on to* were being rapidly eliminated by exploding population in lesser-developed nations and exploding per capita consumption in the developed nations. We needed to learn to be more careful about *fouling our nests*.

Eventually, people began to understand when we poison the earth we are poisoning ourselves, we are using up the earth resources far faster than they can be restored, and we are doing things to the earth that could make it unfit for human life. We are now capable of destroying our natural environment and thereby capable of destroying ourselves.

If development is to be sustainable, we must conserve nature's resources and protect the natural environment. It is not just a matter of either limiting population growth or limiting consumption – both are inseparable parts of the same problematic whole. We must somehow bring consumption, population, and resource regeneration into balance to insure the well-being of ourselves, including all of us, as well as those of future generations. Sustainable systems of development must be ecologically sound if they are to be socially responsible and economically viable over time.

Development that is based on the exploitation or degradation of people is no more sustainable than is development based on the exploitation or degradation of nature. Many people, even some who are vocal advocates for the environment, fail to recognize the importance of people in the development process. The fundamental purpose of all activities we label as development is to improve the quality of life of people. Improvement in the quality of life of some that is achieved at the expense of others is not sustainable. Sustainable development must enhance the quality of life for all – in some reasonably equitable fashion.

Starving people will *eat their seed corn* rather than save it to plant a crop that they may not survive to harvest and eat. People who feel deprived of the basic necessities of life and are desperate will exploit their environment for their short run benefit, even if they realize they are putting future generations at risk. People in many parts of the world today are turning their fields and forests into deserts as they deplete the fertility of their soil and turn trees into firewood in their daily struggle for existence. People who are chronically oppressed and are treated inequitably by the society in which they live eventually will rebel and will destroy the society that oppresses them. An economy based on human exploitation is ever vulnerable to social revolution. Thus, a society that denies social justice to many of its people is not sustainable. Sustainable systems of development must be socially responsible if they are to remain ecologically sound and economically viable over time.

Sustainable development also must be economically viable. Once people move beyond self-sufficiency, begin specializing and trading, they need some means other than barter to facilitating the efficient exchange. They also need some means of deciding who gets to use scarce natural resources and for what purposes. They need an economy. The economy – regardless of whether it is socialistic, communistic, or capitalistic – determines who gets to make the decisions regarding how resources are used. If any system of resource development is not economically viable, it will not be used, regardless of how ecologically sound and socially responsible it might otherwise be. If it's not profitable, at least periodically, it's not sustainable. Sustainable systems must be economically viable if they are to be ecologically sound and socially responsible over time.

The concepts of sustainability are easier to understand when applied to something specific, like agriculture – as I learned while working on the LISA program. A sustainable agriculture must be capable of maintaining its productivity and usefulness to society over the long run – indefinitely, forever. If we think about it, our common sense then tells us that agriculture cannot maintain its productivity and usefulness over the long run unless it is ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. All three are necessary and no single one or pair is sufficient.

If a system of agricultural production allows the soil to erode, poisons the water with chemicals, or otherwise degrades the productivity of its natural resource base, eventually it will lose its ability to produce; it's not sustainable. So a sustainable agriculture must be ecologically sound. If a system of farming fails to return a reasonable profit for those who farm

the land, the farmers eventually will go broke and lose control of the land – it's not sustainable. A sustainable agriculture must be economically viable. Finally, if an agricultural system fails to provide an adequate supply of safe and healthful food at a reasonable cost to consumers, it fails to serve its fundamental social purpose – it will not be sustained by society. But, *man does not live by bread alone*. So, any system of farming that fails to provide opportunities for people to lead productive successful lives, as producers as well as consumers, will not be sustained by society. Agriculture must be socially responsible – to consumers, to producers, to people in general, or it will not be sustainable.

Ecological integrity, economic viability, and social responsibility are all necessary for long run sustainability. They are not substitutes; an abundance of one cannot compensate for the lack of another. Instead, they are complements; an abundance of one requires an abundance of the others.

It all began to make sense to me. The problems in agriculture that had been weighing on my mind all stemmed from the fact that the kind of agriculture I had been promoting was not sustainable. Industrial systems of agriculture – based on specialization, standardization, and centralization of control – were inherently unsustainable. We knew that this way of farming was degrading the natural environment – it eroded the soil, polluted the water, and poisoned living things, including those who worked on farms. We knew this way of farming wasn't economically viable, at least not for farmers. Farmers had suffered one financial crisis after another, and thousands of farmers had been going broke year after year. Our common sense would have told us an industrial agriculture was not sustainable – but we hadn't been listening to our common sense.

We justified the ecological and social costs because we were building a socially responsible system to meet the food and fiber needs of people at the lowest possible cost. We knew that this way of farming destroyed the lives and livelihood of farmers and people in rural communities, but this was necessary in bringing down the cost of food and fiber to consumers. Even if industrialization succeeded in one dimension of social responsibility, feeding people at a reasonable cost, it failed in the other – it didn't provide people an opportunity to lead successful lives. Industrial agriculture obviously was failing the overall test of sustainability – ecological, economic, and social. I had been helping to develop an agriculture that quite simply was not sustainable. That was the problem. The solution was to help build a more sustainable agriculture.

It all seemed obvious to me now. It was just common sense. Why couldn't I see it before? In our efforts to pursue our narrow self-interest,

we were destroying ourselves. The things we were telling farmers to do to serve their self-interests were the very things that eventually would drive them out of business. The things we were telling consumers were necessary to keep down the cost of food and fiber were creating tremendous ecological and social costs and eventually would even destroy our ability to feed and clothe ourselves. We were destroying our quality of life in pursuit of short run self-interests.

The things we were doing in agriculture were no different in principle from what we were doing all across society. Our industrial systems of development were polluting the natural environment, using up non-renewable resources, and otherwise degrading and depleting the resources upon which future humanity ultimately must depend. Growing social inequities, disintegration of families and communities, and a general weakening of the social fabric of society were all symptoms of the industrial system of economic development. These symptoms would later be documented by Harvard University political scientist, Robert Putnam, in his landmark book, *Bowling Alone*.³ We were doing these things to achieve a higher standard of living, but I was already beginning to see, we were destroying and diminishing the quality of our lives. It didn't make sense.

I began to understand; we needed a new paradigm for development. We needed a paradigm with a goal of sustaining a desirable quality of life, rather than just producing more *cheap stuff*. We needed a paradigm that considered nature and society as a part of the process, not something outside to be exploited for profits and growth. We needed a paradigm that recognizes that there were fundamental laws of nature, including human nature, which we cannot violate without suffering the consequences, regardless of what is technically possible or legal. Why wasn't this obvious to everyone?

It wasn't obvious to everyone then, and isn't obvious to everyone now, because we are living in an *unconscious* society – a society in which most people quite simply are not conscious of what is happening in the world around them. This is not a condition inherent to humanity. This condition has been carefully developed and cultivated in order to perpetuate the ongoing process of industrial corporatization.

Admittedly, the country has not been at war, at least not most of the time, and people have not been rioting in the streets, at least not most of the time; so there has been little to force people out of their complacency. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the continuing *war on terror* have only served to distract people even further from the growing crisis in our day-to-day lives. Everyone is just too busy, too tired, or too scared to

pay too much attention to the ordinary things happening in their day-to-day life.

But the main reason people are not concerned is they are told every day, in a multitude of ways, that they have no reason to be concerned. The economy is strong and getting stronger, we are told. The stock market may be up or down this week, or this year, but we are told that the long run trend is certain to be upward. The economy may or may not be growing and at any particular time, but the vast majority of the people always have a job, a house, a car, and money to spend. After all, five percent unemployment means ninety-five percent employment. These are the messages that come through the corporately controlled media in thousands of subtle ways every day. I am not suggesting that all news is corporate propaganda, but I am suggesting there is a persistent bias toward overvaluing our economy and undervaluing our society.

From time to time, someone will point out that most people are working longer hours for less hourly pay. But, the emphasis seems to be on rising household incomes, rather than the increasing numbers of people in each household who must work each year, just to make ends meet. From time to time, someone will point out that we are now spending more money for doctors, hospitals, and medicine than we spend for food. But the emphasis seems to be on extolling the miracles of modern medicine and increasing life spans, rather than exploring the causes of growing physical and mental illness. Occasionally, someone will complain that we have been spending more money each year for lawyers, courts, prisons, and police protection. But, the emphasis seems to be on limiting lawsuits, reducing budgets for police, and privatizing prisons, rather than exploring underlying causes of civil conflict and crime. People who are seen as asking too many questions or complaining too much are quickly labeled as pessimists – always seeing the glass half-empty instead of half-full.

Most people seem afraid to complain about the economy. Perhaps, they are afraid they will appear ungrateful. After all, we live in one of the richest countries in the world. Maybe they're afraid they will be labeled as ignorant, because everything they hear and read tells them that they are blessed with the strongest economy in the world. Or maybe, they fear if they ask too many questions someone might take it all away from them – as my daddy warned me someone might do. So, most people keep their mouths shut and keep on working and hoping.

Sometimes people do ask questions. President Jimmy Carter, in his infamous “crisis of confidence” speech in early 1980, openly questioned the sustainability of contemporary American society. He called on

Americans to restrain our greed – for the good of ourselves as well as future generations. That fall, the American voters soundly rejected President Carter at the polls. The people chose Ronald Reagan instead. Reagan told us the thing most likely to create a crisis was a lack of confidence. Reagan understood that consumer confidence drives the demand for more and more *stuff*, and in turn, creates jobs and drives the economy to ever-higher levels. No serious presidential candidate since has dared to hint of a “crisis of confidence” in America.

This *don't worry, be happy* theme of American public life has been carefully orchestrated, if not controlled, by the corporations that profit and grow whenever people – consumers, workers and investors – don't ask too many questions about the sustainability of the economy. Economic growth requires an insatiable consumer demand for more and more *stuff*. So people have to be convinced that having more and more *stuff* is the key to a more desirable quality of life. Thus, quality of life must be peddled to the American consumer as something that they can buy. If you aren't happy, it's because you don't have enough *stuff*. You just need to work harder so you can buy more, and that will make you happy. The fact that more *stuff* hasn't made you happy yet just means that you don't yet have enough *stuff*. Quality of life is measured by your standard of living, and the economic standard for the good life is always rising.

If too many of us were to decide to spend more time on other things, and less time earning and spending, we just might create an economic recession. For example, if we don't all go out and max out our credit cards during the Christmas season, spending money we don't have, to buy presents that people don't need or even want, the economy will suffer. In other words, our economy is based on our spending money we don't have to buy things we don't need, and if we don't, a lot of people will be out of work. We have to keep buying things so we will have a job to earn the money to pay the bills for the things we have already bought. Anything that causes us to work less or buy less is a threat to the economy. Now, does that make any sense?

Corporations also are caught up in self-perpetuating cycles of destructive behavior. If too many companies spend too much money on fringe benefits for their workers or on environmental protection, their costs of production will be higher than necessary and the economy will suffer. Costs of raw materials, operating costs, wages and salaries, and employee benefits will all be higher than necessary, if a company exploits less and pollutes less than the law will allow. Widespread corporate compassion and stewardship are threats to economic health. Corporations must keep their costs down *at all cost*. If they don't use up the things

they must rely on for their long run productivity, they won't be able to compete. Does that make sense?

The government is portrayed in the corporate media as the greatest threat to our economic well-being. All social programs are treated as a drag on the economy. Even such popular programs as Social Security and Medicare are portrayed as dangerous steps toward Socialism – in spite of their undeniable popularity. At the very least, they need to be *privatized*, we are told.

Welfare programs, such as Food Stamps, Aid to Dependent Children, and Medicaid, are labeled as counterproductive. The emphasis is on explaining why attempts to ensure economic opportunity for all only succeed in destroying incentives for all people to work. We are told that social programs such as minimum wages and unemployment insurance only succeed in raising labor costs to employers and eliminate jobs that might otherwise be available to willing workers.

The government's environmental programs are labeled as unwarranted infringement on private property rights as well as wasteful government spending. Resource management is considered as good for the economy – as long as managing resources for the public interests are interpreted as the public's *economic* interests. Preservationists, on the other hand, who want to protect wildlife or keep natural resources in their natural state, deprive private industry of access to potentially productive resources that could provide jobs and income for people.

Increasingly, the environmental agenda of the '60s and '70s is portrayed as radical and unrealistic. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Clean Air Act of 1970, and Clean Water Act of 1972, are seen as having added, unnecessarily, to corporate costs of production. In addition, they are infringements on private property rights. Costs of pollution control ultimately must be passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices for which there is no offsetting improvement in tangible product quality. Higher prices can also reduce consumption and cause economic stagnation. What's good for the environment is bad for the economy.

Most economists help reinforce the *don't worry, be happy* message. A fundamental, but unstated, premise of neoclassical economics is that humanity can find a solution for any problem it creates and a substitute for any resource it uses up. We will develop safe nuclear energy and hydrogen fuel cells, for example, if we need replacements for fossil fuels. We will learn to grow food by using hydroponics, maybe even in the ocean, if we allow all of our topsoil to erode away. We will find ways to eliminate harmful chemicals by replacing them with biological

technologies. If we will just quit worrying so much about the environment, we are told, we would have the economic development necessary to solve our environmental problems.

Competition is another thing economists tell people not to worry about so much. We still have the strongest economy in the world, so our free market economy must be working. Many economists now seem to believe market structure – the number of firms in an industry and the share of the market they control – is an outdated concept. Those of us who worry that too few firms control too large a share of too many industries are seen as being out of touch with the modern economy. If we have three or four strong firms in an industry, that's enough to ensure competition. The concept of market conduct – whether firms engage in collusion, price fixing, and such – is also outdated, according to the most current economic thinking.

All that really matters to most economists today is market performance. Market performance, in economic terms, is measured in terms of quantity, price, and innovation. With inefficient markets, the quantity of production will be less, prices will higher, and there will be less innovation than with efficient markets. For the most part, the U.S. economy has experienced consistent growth, relatively modest price inflation, and unprecedented product innovation. So, economists reason, our markets must be performing efficiently.

We are not supposed to worry or even think about what will happen when only three-or-four significant firms are left in an industry, as we are approaching today in financial services, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and mass media. We are not supposed to worry about what will happen when one giant retailer, such as Wal Mart, controls the market for virtually everything sold locally in most communities across the country. As long as the economy is producing lots of cheap *stuff*, we shouldn't worry. Antitrust lawyers are just wasting the taxpayer's money when they take high-profile corporations to court for antitrust violations. Thus, economists tend to reinforce the message of the corporately controlled media; big government is the major threat to the American way of life, not big business.

When I returned to Missouri, and attempted to start a new program in sustainable agriculture, I came up against this same attitude of *don't worry about it*. To the agricultural establishment, sustainable agriculture was just another fad they hoped would soon go away. The USDA's LISA program had been instigated by a handful of organic farmers in the Northeast – a bunch of *hippie holdovers* from the 60s, who knew nothing about real farming. They were worrying about nothing. The prevailing

opinion was that if agriculture, as we are doing it now, was not sustainable, we couldn't still be doing it this way. And, maybe there was some reason to be concerned about the profitability of agriculture, but *if it's profitable, it's sustainable* – period.

When I tried to point out that there was reason to believe that agricultural chemicals were polluting the environment and endangering the health of farmers, I was told there was no *good science* to support such allegations. Perhaps traces of pesticides and nitrates had found their way into drinking water, at some places at times, but there was no proof of illness and death linked to agricultural chemical in the water supply. High nitrate levels had been linked to *blue baby syndrome*, but this is a rare occurrence and can be prevented by giving babies bottled water. The EPA's bans or restrictions of a few specific agricultural chemicals were based on politics rather than *good science*, they said. The EPA is being unnecessarily cautious; there is no proof that pesticides are harmful to people. In short, I was told, there's really nothing to worry about.

When I raised questions about the environmental risks of a chemically dependent agriculture, I was seen as siding with the environmental radicals against the agricultural community. I was called naïve by some of my colleagues; the environmentalists were simply using people like me to support their radical agenda. I was told it was unrealistic to believe that farms didn't need to get bigger and fewer to keep agriculture efficient. It was only wishful thinking, they said, to believe that driving family farmers out of business and depopulating rural areas wasn't necessary for the greater good of society. I was told I was getting people needlessly worried about things that they shouldn't be concerned about; I should stop agitating.

It was considered permissible to deal with environmental issues such as soil erosion and pesticide use, but only if I could show how soil conservation and pesticide management would improve production and profits. It was made explicit, if I was going to talk about environmental programs or policies that were going to cost anybody anything, the agricultural establishment, including the University, was going to oppose me rather than support me. I could deal with social issues, if I insisted, but only if I could show how producing more and making more money was good for the local community. If I was going to talk about social programs and policies that actually valued people more than production and profits, the establishment was going to oppose me rather than support me. I shouldn't be worrying people about things that they couldn't do anything about.

The first couple of years back in Missouri actually were very good for me personally. My marriage was better than it had been in years – Gerry and I were both free from many of the pressures we had been under in Georgia. The kids still weren't overjoyed about leaving Georgia, but they both found jobs and moved into an apartment. They finished their year off, and both enrolled at Southwest Missouri State University. I was relieved to have them in Missouri and in college. They had both worked in food service businesses – restaurants, delis, and supermarkets – since high school, so they decided to major in hospitality management. I really didn't care what they majored in, as long as it was something that interested them – so hopefully they would learn something in the process of getting a degree.

One of the best things about returning to Missouri was the opportunity to spend more time with my mother during her last years. It's common knowledge that most of us don't appreciate how much our parents have really meant to us until they are gone. My mother wasn't always the most pleasant person in the world to be around, particularly in the years just after my dad died. For years, I wrote her a letter nearly every month, and sent her a small check to help with expenses, but I didn't really consider it a sacrifice to be living too far from home to allow frequent visits. Eventually, however, I learned to overlook my mother's faults, as I know she must have overlooked mine. We all have faults. In the latter years, I learned to appreciate her as a unique person who had given far more to me than I could ever possibly give to her. None of us is self-made.

After I returned to Missouri, I visited my mother on all special occasions, and I took every opportunity to stop by for a short visit anytime I was traveling in her part of the state. My mother had been very sick for quite a while before I returned, and within less than two years, she was dead. I thought I was ready for her to die – I knew she was ready. But, I wasn't. It took a long time for me to recover from my mother's death, but I shall always be grateful for the time we had together during those last months of her life.

After a year and a half as a visiting professor, I was able to work out a more permanent arrangement with the University of Missouri. The University gave me a five-year contract to be renegotiated every three years. They made a commitment to pay a little more than half of my salary and benefits. I would have to raise funds to cover the other half of my salary and all the money I needed for programming, through contracts and grants. I joined the growing ranks of non-regular faculty members.

With my five-year employment commitment in hand, we bought a piece of land outside of town and built a new house in the woods – in the middle of three-plus acres of oak and hickory forest. We enjoyed the new house and, most of all, the quiet and privacy – it was like living in a state park. However, the marriage needed a lot more than a new house to keep it alive. After five years back in Missouri, we decided to divorce. We had been married for twenty-eight years, some good years and some bad, but neither of us wanted to live the rest of our years the way we had lived most of the last twenty-eight. We had lost any ability we might have had earlier to break out of the destructive patterns of actions and reactions that we had developed over so many years. I was mentally exhausted and no longer willing to try.

In nature, some things have to die so that other things may live and grow. I felt that way about my life at that time. We had to let our marriage die, or neither of us was ever going to have a chance to live. However, I certainly didn't realize just how close to death I was at the time. Physically, I had stayed in good shape. I had been jogging for twenty years and was still putting in close to twenty miles a week. I hadn't smoked in twenty years. I still drank, but no longer excessively. After accounting for all of the positive risk factors associated with my healthy habits, my risk of a heart attack appeared to be negative.

But individual risk factors don't tell you when there is something fundamentally wrong with the system as a whole. A life of constant mental and emotional stress – from conflict at work and at home – was clogging my arteries faster than my otherwise healthy lifestyle was capable of sweeping them clean. The stress of my divorce almost certainly contributed to the clogging, and probably helped trigger to my brush with death. However, without the divorce and without the heart problems, I would never have found the strength and the courage to change. Some things in my life had to die before other things could find new life and grow.

American society is in the midst of its own *bad marriage* and is destined for a societal *heart attack*. The marriage between capitalism and democracy has had its ups and downs, but is now caught in a destructive pattern of action and reaction that can lead only to disaster. Corporatism, the bad marriage, is destroying both capitalism and democracy. Capitalism requires competitive markets, but corporatism demands market power. Democracy demands social equity, but corporatism demands political domination. The *arteries* of American society are becoming hopelessly clogged with ecological and social waste generated by industrial corporatism.

Physically – economically, that is – American society may appear to be healthy. All of the long run economic indicators may be positive. If we consider only the positive economic risk factors, the probability of a catastrophe might appear negligible, or even negative. But individual risk factors are incapable of detecting many critical diseases of the system as a whole. Corporatism is eating away at the very fabric of America – socially, ecologically, and economically. Corporatism is destroying the very things that ultimately must sustain the economy and society. The system as a whole is sick and dying.

The American people, like most people in a bad marriage, are in denial. We are an unconscious society, largely oblivious to fact that our union is falling apart. We may have to be shaken out of our attitude of *don't worry, be happy* by some sort of crisis – be it an economic collapse, a lingering global conflict, or an eruption of civil disorder. It may take something this traumatic to shake us into rejecting the daily barrage of corporatist, free market propaganda. But we can break the bonds of corporatism, any time we choose, by simply relying on our common sense.

Our common sense tells us that our working so long and so hard that we have neither the time nor the energy to enjoy spending what we earn is not necessarily better than having more time and less money. Our common sense tells us that we can't spend and consume our way to perpetual wealth. Our common sense tells us that jobs and income generated by crime, sickness, and pollution are not good for society – no matter how much they contribute to economic growth. Our common sense tells us that quality of life requires more than a high standard of living – more than just having a lot of *cheap stuff*.

Our common sense tells us that we can't afford not to be concerned about the welfare of other people, and that the rising tide of economic prosperity often sinks many boats so that a few may rise. We must do for others, as we would have them do for us – not just for their benefit, but also for our own sense of well being.

Our common sense tells us that the future of humanity on earth depends on our taking care of the earth's resources and our natural environment – not just for the benefit of others but also for our own sense of well being. Our common sense tells us that economic efficiency should be about more than just quantity, price, and endless innovation – that it should be about the economy meeting the real needs of people. We must regain consciousness from this *don't worry, be happy* hypnosis before it is too late. We must find the courage to reject the corporatist propaganda and return to our common sense.

Some things must die if other things are to have a chance to live and grow. Corporatism must die if America is to have any hope for sustained life and growth. It may take something as traumatic as a *national* divorce or heart attack to awaken this unconscious society, but if so, eventually it will happen. One way or another, fundamental change must come.

Trends, such as industrialization, never continue; each era passes and invariably is replaced by another. A few years back, a couple of scientists proposed a list of the *top twenty great ideas in science* in Science magazine,⁴ one of the two most respected scientific journals in the world. They invited scientists from around the world to comment on their proposed list. Among the top twenty were such ideas as the relationship between electricity and magnetism, and the first and second laws of thermodynamics. The top twenty also included the proposition that "everything on the earth operates in cycles" – everything physical, social, biological. The planets revolve around the sun, the seasons come and go; people are born, live, and die; politics swing from liberal to conservative; the economy goes from boom to bust, budgets from deficits to surplus; women's hemlines go up and down and men's ties get wide and then narrow. Everything on earth operates in cycles. In reality, it's just common sense – everything that goes up eventually comes down, everything that goes around eventually comes around.

Some scientists responding to the article proposed a slight revision to the theory of universal cycles, suggesting that everything *tends* to operate in cycles, but they left it on their list of the top twenty great ideas in science. In essence, the theory of universal cycles claims that no trend continues forever. Trends are nothing more than phases on longer-term cycles. Industrialization was a trend that replaced the previous trend that had run its course. Industrialization, likewise, will be replaced with something else, now that its course has been run. No matter how improbably it may seem, the corporate industrial era is nearing an end, the question is not if, but when and how. And, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "When change is happening, we need to get involved in it; otherwise you may sleep through the revolution." It's time for Americans to wake up.

The skeptics will be many, but history is filled with examples of people becoming dominated by some central authority – be it a warlord, chief, emperor, central government – from which escape or restoration of freedom seemed impossible. Invariably, people find some way to break free from oppression and to restore some sense of freedom and independence. In Medieval times, it must have seemed impossible that the serfs would ever free themselves from their feudal landlords, but

eventually they did. During the days of American slavery, I suspect most slaves had little hope of escaping permanently from their owners, and their owners most certainly were not going to give up their *property* without a fight. Yet, the slaves were freed – even if their descendants are still struggling to achieve equality.

I can remember hearing convincing arguments that the Russian people could never free themselves from the bonds of communism, because they had given their rights and freedom to the state. Yet the Soviet people freed themselves from the yoke of a communist dictatorship – with hardly a shot fired. One man, Mikhail Gorbachev, opened the door to reform by introducing the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* (meaning, restructuring and openness). It was Gorbachev, not Reagan, who brought down the Berlin Wall and he did it with words rather than might. Similar policies of *openness*, freeing people to criticize corporate domination, and *restructuring*, vigorous enforcement of corporate responsibility to serve the public interest, just might be sufficient to encourage Americans to free themselves from the yoke of corporatism. It's just a matter of time.

However, no revolution can succeed unless the people have a positive vision of a future – a vision for which they are willing to fight. This vision is already emerging from the hearts and minds of multitudes of common people who are marching under the many banners of sustainability. They are pursuing a higher self-interest that leads to better quality of life for themselves and for others, both now and in the future. While only a few seem conscious of the fundamental flaws in our current system, these few are creating a shared vision for a better future. Through these people, I have come to see a new vision for the future of America.

¹ Barker, Joel. 1988. Paradigms. The Business of Discovering the Future. Harperbusiness, Harper-Collins. New York, NY.

² Gro Bruntland, Editor. 1987. Our Common Future. The World Commission on Environment and Development, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford England.

³ Robert Putnam. 2000. Bowling Alone. Simon & Schuster. New York, NY.

⁴ Elizabeth Culotta. 1991, March 15. Science's 20 Great Hits Take Their Lumps. Science. Vol. 251. (pp 1308-1309).