

## Chapter 8 Pursuit of Enlightened Self-Interests

*We seek to maximize profits as a natural consequence of our pursuit of individual self-interests. This is perhaps the single most appealing premise of conventional economic thinking. Pursuit of self-interests is a fundamental characteristic of being human. However, concern for others also is a fundamental characteristic of being human. We are social animals – we need positive relationships with other people, not only to be successful but also to survive. Thus, positive relationships with other people contribute to our quality of life, regardless of whether we consequently receive anything that contributes to our individual economic self-interests. Ethics and morality also are fundamental characteristics of being human. Almost all of us believe in some higher power, or some higher order of things, from which we derive purpose and meaning for our lives. Thus, moral and ethical behavior, including stewardship of the natural environment, contributes to our quality of life, regardless of whether such acts contribute to our individual economic self-interests.*

*Conventional economic thinking has led us to believe that we best serve the interest of society by pursuing our individual self-interests. At some time in the past, this probably was a reasonably valid proposition. However, the conditions necessary for this proposition to hold true are no longer evident in today's society and economy. There is no longer any logical or rational reason to believe that pursuit of our narrow, individual self-interests will somehow serve the broad, collective interests of society in general.*

*In today's world, if we are to be socially responsible, we must make conscious, purposeful decisions to build positive relationships among people. Thankfully, over the centuries, humans have learned that their lives are made better by their acts of sharing. A socially responsible life is a quality life.*

*In today's world, we must make conscious, purposeful decisions to take care of the environment – for the benefit of ourselves and for the benefit of those of future generations. We will not conserve and protect resources for the benefit of future generations unless we realize that stewardship is a moral or ethical responsibility – something that gives purpose and meaning to our lives. We must learn that an ecologically responsible life is a quality life.*

*The first principle of sustainable economics is the pursuit of “enlightened” self-interests – self-interests that recognize the individual, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions of self. The three cornerstones of sustainability – economic viability, social responsibility, and ecological integrity – are but reflections of the individual, interpersonal, and spiritual*

*dimension of our quality of life. The overall goal of sustainability is to achieve and sustain a higher quality of life through harmony and balance among things economic, ecological, and social.*

By John Ikerd, from a paper presented at the Holistic Resource Management of Texas Annual Conference 2001, Systems in Agriculture and Land Management, Fort Worth, TX, March 2-3, 2001.

Obviously, I don't have solutions for all of the problems confronting today's society. I have had as many problems in my life as has anyone else – perhaps even more than most. By the mid-1990s, I was in my mid-fifties, and I had worked hard all my life and had achieved a measure of financial success. I wasn't exactly a millionaire, but my ex-wife and I had been able to divide what we had accumulated without leaving either of us under any great financial stress. We had always lived somewhat below our means, so once I was single again, my income exceeded my wants as well as my needs. In addition, I was assured of continuing at this level of income until I was ready to retire and would have an adequate retirement income for the rest of my life. I was independently wealthy, at least in the sense of having more money than I needed, but I also was miserable. And, I realized that I wouldn't be any happier even if I had a few million dollars. I had spent my whole life working for the wrong things.

When I was a kid growing up poor on the farm, I wanted to *amount to something* – I didn't want to stay poor. When I was an undergraduate student, I prepared myself for a good job – I wanted to make money. After working with Wilson Packing Company for a while, I decided that money wasn't everything, but I still wanted to *be somebody*. I still wanted to make money, but I also wanted to have influence and to be respected by other people. I recalled from some survey taken in the '60s that university professors were among the most respected professionals. In graduate school, I prepared myself to become a university professor, and afterward, I worked to become a respected member of my profession. I succeeded in doing nearly everything that I had really tried to do professionally; but in the process, I had made myself miserable.

I hadn't been stumbling along the path of life. I had pretty well planned each step of the way and had worked hard to achieve the goals I set for myself. I had listened closely to the advice passed along by those who had gone before me – in education, in business, and in my profession. I had left home to find a better world – somewhere off the farm and outside of the rural community. I had gotten a good education, because that was something that

*they couldn't take away from me.* I was successful in school, and when I got out, I got a good job. I had worked hard and had been loyal to the company, even though that loyalty eventually had compelled me to leave it and return to school. I knew I could have been even more successful in industry if I had chosen to stay. I had worked hard in graduate school and had become a good economist. I had left my home state and my extended family to pursue my best professional opportunities, regardless of where they might lead me. I became well known and respected as an agricultural economist. And, I could have gone even further in university administration had I been willing to ignore the nagging questions of relevance and usefulness. I had faithfully followed a course that I had charted for my life, and it had taken me nowhere.

Something was fundamentally wrong about what I had been led to believe about the nature of success. I needed to rethink my life. I had tried to do some fine-tuning along the way, but fine-tuning simply was not enough. Fine-tuning hadn't saved my professional career, fine-tuning hadn't saved my marriage, and as I grew increasingly short of breath, I knew that fine-tuning wasn't saving my health. I needed to rethink what life was about – from the ground up.

I began my search for personal enlightenment by reading everything I could find that related to the *big questions* of life – who are we, why are we here, what are we supposed to be doing? What is the purpose and meaning of life? The philosophies that underlie most of contemporary thinking on these issues are philosophies that arose during the Age of Enlightenment.

The French are credited with being the intellectual leaders during this period, with the most noted advocate being Voltaire, the French playwright, poet, and writer – although other Frenchmen did far more of the thinking than did he. The French philosopher, Charles de Montesquieu, was one of the earliest advocates, but Jean Jacques Rousseau is credited with being the best thinker of the group. Germany's, Immanuel Kant, England's David Hume, and America's Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson also were contributors to the critical thinking of this time. Thomas Paine's thesis, The Age of Reason, was his contribution to the age of enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, the most important assumption underlying the philosophies of these times was an unwavering belief in the power of human reasoning. The general belief of this era was that God had made the universe, put it in motion, and then had stepped aside, leaving “man” to fend for “himself.” The universe, including the earth and everything upon it, was believed to function according to a set of immutable, unchangeable laws that governed everything, including natural ecosystems and human societies.

However, the rationalists believe that logical thinking and human reasoning could lead to unending human progress – not only progress in human understanding, but in unending technical achievements and even perfection of human moral values. “Man” didn't need to know God – “he” only needed to understand God's laws. The new scientific methods of human reasoning eventually would unlock the mysteries of the universe, they proclaimed, revealing all of God's secrets, and “man” then could be “his” own God.

The rationalists believed that true knowledge could come only through sensory experience and systematic observations of natural occurrences. They believed that “man” could learn to manipulate nature for “his” own benefit, and that even human nature itself could be altered and improved through greater understanding and proper education. They accepted a Deist concept of God, the existence of some higher or natural order of things, but soundly rejected Christian theology. Human efforts should be centered on improving current life, not on some promise of life hereafter in heaven. Worldly happiness was the purpose of life, not religious salvation. It is significant to note that the scientific method, contemporary economic thinking, and the industrial paradigm of economic development all are rooted in this age of human reasoning.

The philosophies of the Age of Enlightenment probably made sense given the state of human knowledge of the time – as did the economic principles discovered by Adam Smith. However, the state of human knowledge and understanding has evolved a good bit since the late 1700s. The mechanistic worldview proposed by Newton and Descartes no longer stands alone as the only logical hypothesis for how the world works. As mentioned previously, Einstein's theory of relativity, the various theories of quantum physics, and chaos theory seriously challenge the mechanical worldview and these new theories can no longer be ignored.

The rationalists never spoke of a world in which reality exists only as a potential and is ultimately dependent upon relationships, as in quantum reality. There is no way to discover concrete reality, when reality isn't concrete. They never conceived of an interconnected world of organized chaos where nothing is precisely predictable and the only order underlying the chaos is periodically mutating pattern. In a chaotic world, errors in observed relationships are not random, but are the product of complex precision. There is no systematic way to acquire true knowledge in a world that is not systematic.

In summary, the philosophies of the Age of Enlightenment are no longer enlightened. They may not be completely wrong, but they clearly are not adequate to address the pressing issues of today. The philosophies of the Age of Reason are no longer reasonable. Unfortunately, the purpose of science, to create knowledge and discover truth, has become subservient to the process of science, the scientific method. And, the scientific method is incapable of revealing the mysteries of living systems. It's time for a more enlightened approach to acquiring and using knowledge.

I am not suggesting that we simply substitute quantum physics for mechanical physics and chaos theory for statistical theory and then proceed anew to solve the mysteries of the universe. I am suggesting that scientific developments of the past century only serve to verify what common sense should have told us all along. People are certainly capable of learning, but they cannot be their own God.

We can continue to seek and gain insights into answers to questions as to how the world works, but we can never be certain that what we have found is the ultimate truth – even about the smallest of things. After each theory, there will always be another theory, and today's facts eventually will be replaced by tomorrow's facts. Each new theory and each new fact may improve our understanding of the universe, but we will never know all that we need to know to gain control over the world, or even control over our own lives. We may increase our understanding of *how* the world works, but science will never bring us any closer to answering the questions of *why*. We must continue to rely on our common sense in answering questions that relate to *first principles*, including the purpose and meaning of life. To do so is truly more enlightened. The purpose and meaning of life is determined at some higher level or organization – people cannot be their own God.

In many respects, the hypothesis of a Deist God still seems reasonable. It seems reasonable that some fundamental, immutable, unchangeable laws of nature, including human nature, govern the universe – including the earth and everything on it. But, it is not reasonable to believe that if humans were sufficiently intelligent or cunning that we could make the universe work according to our desires or preferences. The true laws of nature are inviolate. If human nature is a part of nature – it cannot be changed through greater understanding or education. It seems reasonable to believe that we must act in ways that conform to the laws of the universe or suffer the consequences of our violations. The rationalists were unreasonable in their assumptions regarding the potential of human reasoning. Common sense tells us that human reasoning has definite limits.

It is reasonable to believe that we can continue to learn about the laws of nature, and thus, can learn to reduce conflicts in our lives and to live more in harmony with nature and with other people. But, it is not reasonable to believe that humans are capable of fully understanding these laws, nor of using these laws somehow to manipulate the universe. By now, it should be obvious to all but the most egotistical that the working of God's universe is far more intricate and complex than imagined by the eighteenth century rationalists. Our common sense tells us that the universe is even far more intricate and complex than most scientists can imagine today.

When two people observe the same phenomena and see something different, perhaps neither is in error. Maybe they are simply observing different dimensions of the same reality. Perhaps light exists as both particles and waves, and scientists can observe only one dimension or the other at any given time. Perhaps the universe exists in four, six, or eight dimensions, as new *string theories* of physics suggest. How well would the most enlightened theories of the 1800s, or even of today, fare in such a world?

How could we separate causes from effects in universes that exist in parallel dimensions of time and space? Perhaps the apparent logical conflicts between such things as free will and predestination are resolved in a dimension of time that we simply do not yet understand. Perhaps God designed the universe so there is no rational means by which prayers can be answered, but nonetheless, prayers are answered. The eighteenth century rationalists were unreasonable in the limits they placed on God's ability to design complexity into the universe. Today's scientists are only beginning to scratch the surface of that complexity. Common sense tells us that we humans will never truly understand but a small fraction of all there is to know.

In the world of the 1800s, it may have been reasonable to discard superstitions and dogmatic religious beliefs in favor of a more science-based approach to understanding the functioning of the universe. However, time has proven that the enlightened thinking of two centuries ago is completely inadequate for the world of today. Today, it seems far more reasonable for humans to rely far less on reasoning and to rely far more on their common sense.

Common sense tells us that human beings will pursue their self-interests. I believe this to be one of those fundamental, immutable laws of human nature. If so, it cannot be changed, and thus, we must reconcile ourselves to it rather than attempt to change it. Common sense also tells us that God would not have created a universe in which humans by nature would exploit

each other, exploit the earth, and exploit all other forms of life. So why is our pursuit of self-interest degrading the natural environment and destroying the dignity and productivity of so many people? The answer is simple. We have been pursuing the wrong concept of self-interest.

The contemporary economic concept of self-interest is derived directly from the philosophies of the age of reason. The *economic man* is assumed to be a rational *being*, in that “he” values only those things that benefit him individually and personally. If the economic man does something that benefits another person, it is only because he expects to get something of greater value in return. If he chooses to act in some way that is considered to be moral or ethical by the standards of the society in which he lives, he does so only because he expects to realize some tangible benefit or personal pleasure or to avoid some tangible cost or personal pain. He always behaves rationally – even in a sometimes-irrational world. In economics, acts of true altruism are irrational.

On the other hand, the economic being need not be a parasite on society – although for most economists this doesn’t seem to be a major concern one way or the other. Economists assume that people should expect to take care of themselves, and that expecting one person to care for another is irrational. Fortunately, however, in many cases the pursuit of one’s narrow self-interest often results in benefits, rather than costs, to others. Adam Smith observed that such relationships seemed to be the norm, rather than the exception, at least in his day. But in the world of rational economics, a person would never do anything for the sole purpose of benefiting anyone other than him- or herself.

In economics, there is no recognition of any higher order of things. Nothing exists other than that which exists in human consciousness; and the ultimate achievement of human consciousness is to think and act in completely rational ways. There is no meaning of life beyond life itself, and the only purpose for living is the rational attainment of individual success and happiness. Individual success and happiness is assumed to arise from personal sensory experiences. These experiences include productive work, which is necessary to free “man” from the constraints of his environment and constraints imposed by other people. Productive work also provides income, which allows man to pursue his self-interests.

In the world of rational economics, one person cannot benefit from another person’s success or happiness. In economics, a family, community, economy, or society is nothing more than a collection of individuals. There is no economic concept of well being of the whole apart from the collective well being of individuals that constitute the whole. Pleasure and pain are

personal experiences of individuals, not experiences shared in common. And since personal experiences can only occur while a person is alive, no one can possibly benefit from anything that happens after their death. A person might do something for their children, or their grandchildren, because a child or a grandchild can return some personal pleasure while the parent or grandparent is still alive. But, it is completely irrational to do anything for the sole benefit of those of future generations. There is simply no logical reason for such acts since one cannot possibly reap a rational, personal reward.

Of course, most economists don’t really believe all of these things. A prominent agricultural economist supposedly once said, he “certainly wouldn’t want his daughter to marry an economic man.” Economists realize that most people are not heartless and soulless. However, the pursuit of narrow, individual self-interest remains a cornerstone of contemporary economic theory. Most economists somehow compartmentalize their disciplinary life and separate it from their personal life. Economists are real people, but the economic man has no sense of human compassion or stewardship.

Our practice of rational economics has brought us to a rational, logical destination. We are not a nation of purely economic beings, but we have moved far in that direction. We have achieved a world in which most people seem to be preoccupied with working as hard as they can, to earn as much as they can, to experience as many things as possible that results in their personal sensory pleasures. Many people seem willing to help other people only if they expect to get something of greater personal value in return. Many people give their time and money to charities because it enhances their status within the community, resulting in more lucrative business deals or more opportunities to be involved in occasions that bring personal pleasure. Many seem to behave in moral and ethical ways only as a means of creating an image of honesty and integrity so they can get the clients, followers, or votes they need to reap some personal, tangible reward.

Of course, there are notable exceptions to this generalization. Many people have never abandoned their common sense, and thus, have not accepted the dominant values of our rational economic society. In addition, a growing number of people, in America and around the world, are rejecting economic materialism as a way of life, and are returning to a more common sense approach to defining quality of life. The authors of a new book, [The Cultural Creatives](#), estimate that more than one-quarter of the adult American population, those who place a premium on relationships and ethics, are in the

process of creating a new American culture.<sup>2</sup> However, this new culture remains a distinct minority in America.

Nearly all Americans will perform acts of compassion and charity when confronted with some national or local emergency or disaster. Some of the *selfless* responses are obviously motivated by the media publicity that surrounds such events. They give of themselves because it will bring recognition – it will enhance their public image. Many others, I believe, are truly altruistic during times of crisis because the crisis gives them permission to be *irrational*. These people want to do something for someone else, even if there is no possible personal, tangible recognition or reward. They give because it enhances their quality of life to give, because it helps give their life purpose and meaning. Many would like to make such acts of caring and compassion a routine part of their everyday life. But for them, to do so would be irrational and illogical. They can't give of themselves like this every day, because the economic costs are too high, they believe. So after the crisis, they return to the logical and rational pursuit of their narrow, economic self-interests.

Through our reasonable, rational pursuit of self-interests, we Americans have achieved material success such as the world has never known. But in the process, we have systematically destroyed human relationships by converting them into economic relationships. And, we have systematically destroyed any true sense of ethics and morality by converting them into economic assets. But still, our common sense tells us that quality of life is not a simply matter of tangible, sensory experiences – it is much more. As humans, we will pursue our self-interest; but humans can be misled into doing things that are contrary to their true self-interest, as clearly is evident in all of today's industrialized societies. Our systematic pursuit of individualistic, tangible, sensory pleasure is diminishing our overall quality of life.

To reverse this perverse trend, we need to pursue a *broader* concept of self-interest, which recognizes that we humans are social animals – that we need positive human relationships with other beings. We must learn to value the role of human relationships in enhancing our quality of life, regardless of whether these relationships result in tangible, sensory rewards. We must learn to pursue a *higher* concept of self-interest, which recognizes that humans are spiritual by nature – that we need to live ethical and moral lives. We need to value the role of human spirituality in enhancing quality of life, regardless of whether our ethical or moral acts result in any personal, tangible rewards.

We need to pursue a more *enlightened* concept of self-interest – one that recognizes that humans are unique among God's creation. Our uniqueness is not just a matter of our ability to reason, nor to pursue rationally our animalistic pleasures. Our uniqueness is our ability to make conscious, purposeful decisions that reflect an understanding that we are but a part of God's creation. We have the ability to understand that our own well-being is integrally related with the well-being of a universe far larger than our little piece of the world – a universe that spans both time and space. Everything we do affects other people, which in turn affects the whole of society, and eventually affects us. Everything we do has meaning and purpose within some higher order, which in turn eventually affects us. In our pursuit of a more enlightened self-interest, we must recognize the social and spiritual implications of everything that we do.

I am not attempting to start some new school of radical thinking. Such thoughts have been around for a long time. For example, Alex de Tocqueville, in his *Democracy in America*, wrote of a similar concept of self-interest in the early 1800's – he called it “interest rightly understood.”<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville believed that survival of the American Democracy was critically dependent on deeply rooted religious beliefs, which constrained early Americans' pursuit of self-interests. He reasoned that if these strong religious beliefs were ever to erode, they would have to be replaced with a strong sense “that man serves himself in serving his fellow-creatures, and that his private interest is to do good.” He wrote of early Americans who believed strongly “that men ought to sacrifice themselves for their fellow-creatures... that such sacrifices are as necessary to him who imposes them upon himself as to him for whose sake they are made.” Tocqueville believed that “self-interests rightly understood” reflected the fact that people benefit from fulfilling their proper role in the larger society in ways that could never be linked directly to one's narrowly-defined, individual self-interest.

Pursuit of a *higher* self-interest does not imply a return to mysticism and superstition. It is a sensible theory concerning the functioning of the universe that has been supported by philosophers, scientists, and common people throughout the whole of recorded human history. Humans have practiced religion since the beginning of civilization. Newton, Descartes, Voltaire and Paine, all believed in the existence of a Deity. The early economists, including Adam Smith, gave great attention to issues of equity, justice, ethics, and morality. Only within the last few decades, have we been told that it is unreasonable and illogical to believe in anything that exists outside of our personal, sensory experiences. Scientists cannot prove that

God does not exist. Atheism is simply a belief of convenience in a society that has chosen to worship rationality and logic, instead of God.

Pursuit of a *broader* self-interest is not the teachings of some radical cult movement. Throughout human history, people have sought out other people to form families, tribes, communities, nations, and civilized societies. It should be obvious to any observer, whether philosopher, scientist or ordinary person on the street, that people benefit from their relationships with other people. Certainly, some of these relationships are based on mutual sensory benefits – symbiotic relationships. However, there is clear and compelling evidence that people need other people for reasons that are not sensory, tangible, or even individual, in nature. Love is one of the most thought-about, talked-about, written-about, and sought-after things in the world – and for good reasons. Love may not actually make the world go round, but it sure makes the ride worthwhile.

Perhaps most important, our common sense would tell us that humans are multidimensional – we are body, mind, and soul – even if there were no human history or philosophy to support our sense of truth. To understand this, it's critical to understand that our common sense is our sense of first principles, the foundational principles upon which all other human understanding is built. We use these principles to test the truth of knowledge – to decide whether we believe what we have read or been told. We use these principles to test the morality of actions – to decide whether we believe something to be good or bad. As Thomas Reid, nineteenth-century philosopher wrote, “All knowledge and science must be built upon principles that are self-evident; and of such principles every man who has common sense is competent to judge.”<sup>4</sup> Lacking first principles as a starting point, all logic and reasoning become circular, and thus, useless.

For example, first principles of algebra, called axioms or laws, are the foundation for all mathematical proofs. One such axiom is,  $a$  times  $b$  equals  $b$  times  $a$ . This may seem obvious, but that's the point. First principles are just common sense. However, one can always challenge first principles, because they are beliefs, not facts. For example, if a number is somehow more important if comes first rather than second, then  $a$  times  $b$  would not be the same as  $b$  times  $a$ . But, we conclude, for purposes of mathematical reasoning, the proposition,  $a$  times  $b$  equals  $b$  times  $a$ , makes sense. We simply accept it as valid. However, it's important to realize that all mathematical *proofs* are based on a set of *unproven* first principles or axioms.

In issues related to quality of life, we first need to decide if we are going to accept someone else's first principles, or instead, are going to use our own

common sense. If we are willing to rely on our own sense of what is true and right, then we then need to decide what we believe to be true and right regarding quality of life. If a person is willing to let someone else decide for them, the rest of this book will be of little interest or use to them. If a person is willing to decide for him or her self, they may well find the rest of this book to be interesting and useful. I firmly believe the first principles of quality of life are self evident, for all to see if they are willing to rely on their common sense.

We know that we are multidimensional; we don't need to be told. Our body is our physical being, our mind is the thinking being, and our soul is our spiritual being. The physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of humans are not separate parts of people, but instead are inseparable dimensions of whole people – like height, length, and width are inseparable dimensions of a box. We simply cannot understand the essence of a person if we ignore or neglect any one of these three dimensions.

If we accept the first principle that we have these three dimensions, it should be no mystery that the quality of our life is three-dimensional. The tangible, sensory aspects of our life are physical in nature. Thus, our individual personal quality of life, the quality arising from economic self-interests, is related to the physical dimension of our being. Values that arise from human relationships are mental and emotional in nature. The sense of well-being that arises from positive relationships with another being is not something we can see, touch, hear, taste or smell, but is clearly something that affects one's mental and emotional well-being. Human values that arise from ethical and moral behavior are fundamentally spiritual in nature. The sense of well-being that arises from doing the *right* thing is not something tangible that can be sensed physically or even something that we can rationalize mentally, but is something we somehow sense deep within our soul. The personal, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions are inseparable, and together, determine our overall quality of life.

My older brother, Tom, and I have talked a lot about the dimensions of life. In fact, he will probably claim that I have learned most of what I know about the subject from him. I would agree, if he said I have learned much of what I know about the subject *as a result of our conversations*. Tom says that all human problems would be solved if we only “put the soul in control.” He claims that our refusal to listen to and to follow what our soul leads us to do is not only the “root of all evil” but also is the basic source of every human problem. In one sense, I agree, but I don't think it is quite that simple. I believe that God gave humans a body and a mind for some positive reason – not just as temptations for the soul. I agree that people should listen

to their soul, that's what I call using our common sense, but I believe that we are also expected to think about what we are doing, and to heed our physical instincts as well.

I believe God has a specific purpose in making us as whole people. If we were to be solely spiritual beings, there would be no purpose for the mind and body. I believe if we are to function as purposeful whole people, we must function in ways that result in harmony among the physical, mental, and spiritual – among the body, mind, and soul. When a scribe asked Jesus, “which of the Ten Commandments is the most important,” Jesus answered, “the first, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30). Jesus said, we are to love God with all of our being – with our body, our mind, and our soul. But, He quickly added that we should love our neighbor as ourselves – meaning that we should love both our neighbors and ourselves. In addition, I find it difficult to believe that Jesus would have excluded those of future generations from being considered as “our neighbors” in his admonishment for us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

These general admonitions are not unique to Christianity, but are a part of virtually every enduring, organized religion. All religions are based on a belief in a higher order of things – in some form of God, even if only the inviolate laws of nature. All religions also have some version of the Golden Rule – to treat others, as we would like to be treated. In all enduring philosophies of the world, we find the same three dimensions of life; ourselves, others, and some higher order; the physical, the mental, and the spiritual; the personal, the interpersonal, and the intergenerational; the body, the mind, and the soul.

Economics focuses solely on the personal, self, body, or physical dimension of our lives. The American preoccupation with economics, with the promotion of this single dimension of self-interest, has become a *religion* – in every sense of the word. It has a specific worldview, a well-defined value system, a set of guiding principles, a set of institutions devoted to its promotion, a discipline and group of scholars dedicated to keeping and protecting its principles, and a host of devoted disciples – including some very powerful, non-human organizations. But like any religion, it is based on beliefs, not facts.

No one knows for sure how the universe actually works; we are learning new things about it every day. The Age of Reason was based on a specific set of first principles. And all first principles are beliefs, not facts. Thus, the scientific method also was built upon beliefs, not facts. Industrialization was

built upon a foundation of beliefs, not facts. And, contemporary economic thinking is based on beliefs, not facts. Economics as religion is a very new concept in terms of human history. The conceptual roots of economics go back several centuries, but economics as science is only a century or so old and economics as a secular religion has been in widespread practice for only a few decades. It has not stood the test of time, over thousands of years, as have many of the other religions of the world. The religion of economics is based on beliefs, not facts, and its foundation seems to be crumbling.

When we reject conventional wisdom because it no longer makes sense, we need not go back to the conventional wisdom of before. We need instead to move ahead, with something that makes sense – to something better. However, some true principles are timeless. Thus, accepting basic social and ethical principles from past centuries that still make sense is no more regressive than is accepting that the earth revolves around the sun or the laws of gravity. They have stood the test of time as well as the test of common sense. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that this new religion of economics is at the root of many of the problems of society today, and that finding solutions to those problems must begin with its rejection. We need a new age of enlightenment to bring us out of the darkness of economic oppression and into the light of a new era of human progress.

A society built upon a foundation of *enlightened self-interest* offers the best hope for a sustainable future. The three cornerstones of sustainability, economic viability, social responsibility, and ecological integrity are related directly to the three dimensions of self. Economic viability is necessary for sustaining the personal, physical self. Social responsibility is a reflection of the necessity of sustaining the interpersonal, mental self. And to sustain long run ecological integrity we must necessarily express our ethical, spiritual self. However, for sustainability, the multiple dimensions of quality of life must be reflected not only in people as individuals, but must be an integral aspect of families, business organizations, communities, civic organizations, national economies, governments, and in all natural ecosystems. We need to give conscious, purposeful consideration to the economic, social, and ecological implications of everything we do.

Some argue that one or another of the dimensions of sustainability is more important than are others, most commonly, that economics is most important – if something is profitable, it's sustainable, period. Obviously, profits are a *necessary* part of economic viability, and economic viability is a necessary dimension of sustainability. But it's just as obvious that profitability is not a *sufficient* condition for long run sustainability. If it were, there would be no reason to be concerned about sustainability. But,

long run economic viability is impossible without ecological integrity and social responsibility.

Some people argue that ecological integrity is the most important – that the ecological laws of nature cannot be changed, thus we must adjust our economic system and social values to accommodate the natural ecosystem. It's true that human society is but one element of the global ecosystem and that the economy is but one element of the human society. The ecosystem is higher, hierarchical, because it contains the other two subsystems. However, hierarchy does not necessarily imply superiority or authority.

It's obvious that people, a part of the natural ecosystem, now have the ability to seriously damage the natural ecosystem, if not destroy it. And, there may be fundamental laws of human nature that are just as inviolate as nature's ecological laws. We know that starving people will eat their seed corn, rather than save it for planting, if they fear they will not survive long enough to see another harvest. I suspect also, that people will continue to destroy their natural environment unless they are convinced that they will be able to meet their basic physical needs while protecting it. Ecological integrity is impossible without economic viability and social responsibility.

One could argue that social responsibility is the most important, since society ultimately makes the decisions concerning what type of economy we are going to have and whether or not we are going to even try to protect the natural environment. However, such arguments would be just as fruitless as the other two. Social relationships are important, but they are not sufficient to ensure sustainability. A socially responsible system ultimately must be economically viable and ecologically sound as well. No one is any more or less important or critical to sustainability than are the other two. All three are necessary and no or two is sufficient.

The key to a sustainable, quality of life is balance and harmony – for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. There may be times in our lives when it makes sense to spend more time and effort on one dimension than on the others. For example, it may make sense to spend more time at work when building a career, more time at home when the kids are small, or more time contemplating spiritual matters when dealing with a mid-life crisis. But, any disproportionate emphasis at one point in time should be seen as but a part of the natural, healthy ebb and flow of life that must have balance and harmony over time. Each note and chord of life should fit together with the others to form a life of quality. Life is a dynamic, ever-changing process. But, we should always maintain a sense of balance among the dimensions of our lives, so that all contribute positively to the overall quality of our lives.

To achieve a life of harmony, we must bring all of the dimensions of our lives together. We must hear all of the notes at once, even though the notes are different. When we live our life in little airtight compartments, never bringing our work home, never taking our home life to the office, and never taking work or home life to church, or taking church to the office or home, we don't have a chance. We are whole people and we must be willing to live whole lives – not parts of lives that we somehow manage to paste together. We can never make up for the deficit in one dimension of our life by taking time and energy from that dimension to spend on another. Life is all interconnected. We can't do one thing without affecting everything else. Everything we do affects the balance and harmony of our lives. We have to work on it all together – all at the same time.

The same principles apply at all levels of organization and aggregation. Sustainable families, communities, business organizations and nations all require balance and harmony among the three fundamental dimensions: personal, interpersonal, and ethical – economic, social, and ecological. A family that spends so much time building interpersonal relationships that no one has time to earn a living is no more sustainable than one where everybody works all of the time and no one has time to care about anyone else. The family that prays together stays together only if they also take time to care about each other and take care of their physical needs as well. A business that focuses solely on the bottom line is not sustainable, but is no less so than is a business that is so bound by social and ethical principles that it can't turn a profit. A community that sacrifices everything else for *economic* development will not be able to sustain development of the *community*, but neither will the community that refuses to develop its resources, fearing that any economic use will result in exploitation.

Harmony and balance also are necessary for national sustainability. One might think that the most spiritual nation would be the most sustainable. If so, then we should bet on the Islamic Republics, such as Iran and Syria. Their laws are a reflection of their national religion. However, there is little evidence that governments controlled by spiritual leaders ensure socially responsible, economically viable, or ecologically sound societies. If we think a nation dominated by social concerns is the most sustainable, then we should bet on Communism. But, communist nations have had a hard time providing for the economic needs of their people, and their record of ecological protection has been equally dismal, for the most part. Finally, if we think that the most economically prosperous nations have the best chance for sustainability, we should bet on those with market economies – such as the United States. That seems to be where most people are placing their bets

today, as the U.S. model of free market capitalism is rapidly spreading around the world. But, the odds for long run success are no better for corporatist capitalism than for Islamic Fundamentalism or Marxist Communism.

The United States is a strong nation today, not because of its preoccupation with economics, but because of its history of relative balance and harmony. This nation was built on a strong foundation of spirituality – it’s clearly a part of the historical record of the country, from the Constitution, to our social customs, to the symbols on our currency. The United States also was founded with a strong sense of social responsibility – even though it took nearly a century to abolish slavery. In the Declaration of Independence, the founding fathers didn’t say that people were entitled only to whatever they could earn, but that all had an equal right to life, liberty, and the *pursuit* of happiness.

Obviously, the United States also was founded on principles of economic freedom. Most of the original functions of the U.S. government were related in one way or another to the protection of private property rights. But, the United States has been a successful experiment in democracy because it was firmly rooted in a commitment to balance and harmony among the spiritual, social, and economic dimensions of life. The United States claimed that its victory in the cold war with the USSR was a victory for capitalism over central planning. It was not; it was the collapse of a communistic system that had become preoccupied with issues of community and society at the expense of ethics and economics. If the U.S. fails to restore balance and harmony, it too risks suffering the same fate.

Tocqueville credited the “manners” of the American people – their habits, their opinions, and their religion – as being more important than their vast physical, geographical advantages or their system of laws, in accounting for their success as a democratic nation. He warned that if their moral and ethical principles were ever to loosen the constraints on their pursuit of narrow self-interests, the American democracy would be in peril.

It’s only in the past few decades that the United States seemingly has drifted afar from its original commitment to spiritual and social principles. Ethics and morality, equity and justice, all are now being sacrificed for the sake of financial prosperity and economic growth. Environmental regulations are being relaxed or discarded because they interfere with economic growth. Private property rights are being given priority over public use of land because profits are considered more important than social responsibility. Labor unions that fought for decent wages and working conditions are being dismantled to keep costs of labor competitive with other

countries where workers have no rights or claims to dignity. The disparity between the rich and the poor continues to grow, but we are told that the only way to help the poor is to let the rich get still richer. The list goes on and on – the social and moral values that made this country strong are being systematically dismantled in the name of economic prosperity. The imbalance and disharmony grows stronger each day. Tocqueville was right, our democracy is in peril, and such a society quite simply is not sustainable.

We don’t have to be philosophers, religious scholars, or rocket scientists to understand these things. The problems and promises of today’s society are all matters of common sense. During the Age of Enlightenment, people were admonished to abandon the mysticism and superstitions of the past and to rely on logic and reasoning instead. It made sense at the time, but reliance on rationality, logic, and reasoning has been taken too far. Everything that is not physical, tangible, or sensory in nature has been discarded as being unreal – or at least as irrelevant. Rationality and reasoning certainly have important roles in human well-being, but our common sense tells us that other things are important as well – things that we cannot see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. Rationality and reason will not yield scientifically verifiable solutions to the social and ethical dilemmas of life. But, we can still use our common sense.

I began to rebuild my life the day I decided that I had to bring all of the pieces of my life back together. I couldn’t continue working on things that I didn’t believe were ethically correct or socially responsible. I couldn’t continue a life with the rest of my family not knowing or caring about what I did each day to make a living. I couldn’t continue living with a work environment and family life that resulted in my having no extended family or friends. I couldn’t continue hiding the spiritual dimension of my life either at home or at work. I had to make some major changes, but without sacrificing the financial security necessary to sustain the economic dimension of my life. Eventually, I had to make some major changes in my work, my family, and myself. My personal transformation is still a work in process. I still get *out of balance* and *off key* fairly regularly, but at least the healing process has begun. At least now, there is hope.

When I talk now about a new revolution, I’m certainly not talking about going back to the Dark Ages. In those times, people had common sense but most common people didn’t have the means of thinking for themselves. They didn’t have schools, books, computers, and all of the things that we have today that empower individual people to learn and to think. In the Dark Ages, the philosophers and clerics were considered the source of all wisdom

and knowledge; people were told what to think, or not to think. Rulers back then were absolute monarchs; people were told what to do.

Today nearly all people everywhere have freedom to think and to do things that were unimaginable a few centuries ago. The opportunity for people to shape their own destiny is greater than ever before in human history. But, people still have a tendency to look to others for direction and guidance – others presumably more adept in reasoning and rationality. Today, people don't think for themselves, only because they have not been challenged to do so.

Common sense tells us that our lives have important physical, mental, and spiritual needs that must be met to achieve a desirable quality of life. Common sense tells us that we need balance and harmony among these dimensions of our lives. Common sense also tells us that we can have a sustainable human society, with lives of quality for all, only if we find balance and harmony among the economic, social, and ecological dimensions of our businesses, communities, and nations. And today, we do not have to sit idly and see our lives, our families, our communities, and nations systematically destroyed through out-dated, unenlightened thinking and actions. We have the power to shape our destinies. We have the power to build a better world. But it must be built upon a foundation of common sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Paine, 1936. The Life and Major Works of Thomas Paine. Edited by Philip S. Foner. The Citadel Press. New York, NY.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Anderson and Sherry Ray. 2000. The Cultural Creatives. Three Rivers Press. New York, NY.

<sup>3</sup> Alex de Tocqueville. 1835. Democracy in America, reprinted on 2000 by Bantam Books, New York, NY.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Reid. 1863. Works of Thomas Reid, Edited by William Hamilton, Thoemmes Continuum Press, Bristol, UK (p. 422).