

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

“Sustainability” is an all too common word describing a condition which these days seems to hardly exist. Indeed, the extremely common usage of the word may be symptomatic of a deeper realization that the condition of sustainability, which most people would posit as both necessary and good, is nearly nonexistent. In fact, most usage of the word “sustainability,” it could be argued, whether by institutions or by individuals, refers to a shallow superficial and cosmetic form of sustainability which does not reflect sustainability at all and is inaccurate, perhaps even dishonest, in its usage. Can true sustainability, for example, be based on a foundation of nonrenewable natural resources such as fossil fuels? Not likely, and yet fossil fuels underly virtually everything we do, the entirety of the way we live, and the value system we live by. Can true sustainability be based on an energy intensive profligate wasteful lifestyle such as the world has never seen before? Not likely. Can true sustainability be based on a value system which, at best, concerns itself with miles per gallon in a motor vehicle but never questions how or for what purpose a vehicle is being used, who or what it is transporting and why? Not with any application of honesty. Can true sustainability be related to a consumptive lifestyle that seems to know no limit (and refuses to consider any concept of limits), a lifestyle predicated on growth for its own sake (the disease of “growthism,” which is what unrestrained capitalism is all about)? No, not if we are rational.

Steven C. Rockefeller has written that an activity is sustainable if it can be continued indefinitely. According to Rockefeller, “Patterns of production and consumption are considered to be ecologically sustainable if

they respect and safeguard the regenerative capacities of our oceans, rivers, forests, farmlands, and grasslands. . . . (S)ustainability includes all the interrelated activities that promote the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities."¹

Sustainability, therefore, according to the true sense of the word, requires far more from us than the cheap, shallow, and superficial measures commonly taken under the guise of sustainability, measures such as those in agriculture and food systems, in energy and in other ways we utilize and/or relate to the Creation. True sustainability requires a change in our fundamental values, it requires us to be fundamentally countercultural and revolutionary, at least as to the common culture and its evolution since the Second World War, if not earlier.

A monk of my acquaintance in Minnesota once remarked to me that sustainability is a conversion experience. The secular world might scoff at this, figuring that a phrase like "conversion experience" might be what one would expect from a monk, priest, or clergyman. And yet, when one thinks about it, such a "conversion experience" is precisely what is called for if we are to meet the expectations of our own rationality. Surely, a true change in our system of values, if that is indeed what is called for, could only occur as a conversion experience, for it would necessitate a fundamental change from deep within us. Not simply to alter how we do things but to change the value presupposition of why we do things is a conversion of the deepest kind.

If, therefore, we argue that sustainability of necessity is a conversion experience, if it is and must be predicated on a deep change of values themselves, and not on a halfhearted patch-it-up enterprise, then its expectation cannot be lodged in the prevailing value system, the "dominant paradigm" as it is called. It must come from a deeper place.

With these things in mind we might ask where we might find models of real sustainability. The location of such models should correlate to people who put their faith in values other than those found within the dominant value system. They should be found among people who have developed a deep spirituality, a transcendent spirituality. They should be found among people who place their faith in something bigger than they are, in contrast to those who commonly place their faith in things smaller than they are (the latter including, for example, the mall, shopping, consumption, the car, science, technology, the "techno-fix," economic growth, "growthism," money, power, and so forth, any or all of which might readily become gods or idols in people's lives). In

contrast, those who place their faith in things bigger than they are, things that transcend them, things that were there before them, things that will be there after them, things beyond their ability to encapsulate or comprehend, to know or to de-limit, whether one God, multiple gods, mystery, nature, the cosmos, and so forth, might demonstrate a greater ability to recognize, to demonstrate, to practice, to truly know sustainability.

Where might we have hope of finding such countercultural behavior, such sustainable behavior? One such place might be among people of faith. We might find such behavior not necessarily among “people of faith” in the narrow reduced way the world too often defines such people, that is, members of churches, baptized persons, persons who make claims about faith, though the phrase can include them. But we might find it in people deeply spiritual (whether that spirituality shows itself or not) who do have faith in mystery, in something which is not them, and which transcends their being. A possible place for the evolution and maturation of true values of sustainability, therefore, might be in communities of such people, in “faith communities,” but would not likely be inclusive of all people in such communities, for such communities are part of the same distorted unsustainable culture in which all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, live our lives.

Some such people might call themselves Christian. (If one follows Jesus Christ to the Crucifixion, one might argue a lack of sustainability, but then there is the Resurrection, a very different story.) No doubt Jesus Christ was a practitioner par excellence of countercultural behavior, of radicalism, of revolution. And capital punishment was a natural response by the society of his day. That society knew an enemy, a troublemaker of serious proportions, when it saw one, and acted accordingly (albeit while running the risk of creating a martyr, which it did and which has been done since). So, sustainability might be found within or among some groups of Christians, for Christians claim to believe in a transcendent God, and also believe in immanence, of the Creator in the created, of God in all, and, therefore, ideally, of the sacrality of all things. They believe in the Great Chain of Being, to quote Thomas Aquinas.

The oft-quoted biblical directive that God has given humankind dominion over the Earth is taken by all herein to mean humankind collectively, not individually, and for all time over all coming as well as past generations. This allows human beings no claim that the Creation is simply here for our use to do with as we will.

Monastics of all stripes, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, are by definition (and at their ideal) also countercultural. For the Christian-related reasons already alluded to, and for other reasons, one might hope to find some true sustainability among them. However, in addition to being human, they are not totally removed from our culture or the times in which we all live, so they might not always yield good models. But the potential is there.

Indigenous or aboriginal peoples, with their earth-centered reverence for the Creation, for the sacrality of all, with creation-oriented traditions evolving over many centuries, might also be a place to seek models of sustainability, models which are spiritually based. In addition to being part of the antisustainable, antiecological corruptions of our own times and our world, however, indigenous peoples often have an additional heavy burden, the yolk of many generations of oppression and destruction of their culture which leaves so many of them incapable of carrying leadership responsibility. They are just too weighted down. But countercultural as they are, we should not ignore them as models. Likewise, one can look to the wisdom of classical civilizations, to the wisdom of science, to the wisdom of women, as Thomas Berry, in his books *Dream of the Earth* and *The Great Work*, has done.

There are undoubtedly other places to look for true models of sustainability.

This volume suggests that:

- The way to achieve environmental sustainability is through ecological living. The way to achieve ecological living is ultimately through spirituality.
- The changeover to ecological living requires a conversion away from the dominant paradigm or value system of our culture, and the active development of resistance to that value system.
- Such changeover requires rejection of that value system, the rejection of consumption and waste as a lifestyle, and the embrace of frugality as a core principle.

As to spirituality, the word refers to the condition of being of the spirit. The spirit is that part of us which animates us, which gives us life. It is that part of us which seeks transcendence, mystery, the other, that which seeks the BIG picture. It provides an essential faith in the future, a grounding for hope. It gives us the determination to persist and prevail. It

has been said that when we lose our cosmology, our relation to the whole, to that BIG picture, we get small and settle for shopping malls.

This volume seeks first to gain a handle on a clear and undistorted meaning of the term “sustainability,” as informed by faith belief. Chapter two presents parameters of the possible meaning of the term “sustainability.” In Chapter three, five outstanding examples of spiritually-driven and faith-based community models of sustainability in five states are presented to the reader. The important philosophical foundation of the thought of Thomas Berry, fundamental to many of the models of sustainability presented in this book, is then described and discussed in chapter four. Chapter five presents the application and actualization of this thought, as carried out in the work of the Sisters of Earth network. The role of the long-established and countercultural system of monasticism, in its Christian or Western form, and the relationship of that system and its Rule to the land and to ecology, are discussed in chapter six. An understanding of the interpretation of science as practiced by spiritually grounded and creation-centered religious and their lay colleagues, is important. Chapter seven is devoted to this subject. The seminal role of social justice and its modern day evolution into eco-justice as basic to both the practice of ecological thought and to Christianity justifies the attention given in chapter eight. A word on where this work is evolving and a description of the establishment, as an outcome of the ideas developed in this book, of the world’s first “Ecozoic Monastery” (chapter nine) concludes the volume.

The many models described in this volume not only represent the tangible link between ecology and spirituality, a survey of what is, but, more importantly, they represent a vision of what could be. We can use all the vision we can get, and a broad integrated focus on such models of eco-spirituality is what this work is all about.²