



sustainability



Editorial

The Trouble with Sustainability

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The Roles of Culture and Values in Sustainable Development

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Editorial

The Trouble with Sustainability

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Abstract: The term “sustainability” and the conceptual framing that it provides for society must be substantially refined and clarified, if not outright replaced, if the interconnected social and ecological goals the concept is meant to espouse are to heal the world, our home. Sustainability has become a *status quo* concept held captive to market logics that quantify and appropriate places and creatures alike, rendering them but commodities without intrinsic value, thereby failing to inspire the love that is crucial for the nurture and care of a world wounded by us. Drawing on insights from indigenous and spiritual traditions, this essay makes several recommendations for better ways of speaking, thinking, and acting.

Not long ago, I was invited to guest-teach a class on the spirituality of eating. It was a course on humanities and social science approaches to sustainability and was hosted by Duke University’s graduate professional school of the environment. Since it was an evening class, most of the students brought their dinners to the class. I knew several of the students to be committed environmentalists and was looking forward to our conversation.

As we began, I asked if any of them paused to say a grace or blessing before they ate. Most did not, or at least not that I could see. Some appeared to be embarrassed by the question. They wanted to know why I asked. So, I described how across a diversity of cultures, we often find rituals or verbal expressions of thanksgiving that accompany mealtimes. To fail to give thanks for the food one eats is, at least in some indigenous and religious traditions, to show disrespect for the food one eats and for the land and creatures that provide it.

I could not fault these young people, since they had grown up in a fast-food culture that characterizes food as a commodity or fuel. The goal of the food industries they knew was to make food as tasty, convenient, and cheap as possible, while maximizing profits for corporate shareholders. Because none of them had intimate or practical knowledge about growing or harvesting food, they did not understand that for people to eat, even if it is a vegetarian diet, other creatures have to die. I asked the students, “How does an eater honor, and become worthy of consuming, another creature’s life?”

The class discussion that followed was fantastic. It turned quickly to a conversation about the kind of world we inhabit, and what the best way is for people to live within it. We asked about the meaning and value of life itself and considered how people can know if their living is praiseworthy. I discovered that these were matters of great interest to the students, and that they rarely had occasions to engage them in a rigorous and thoughtful manner. They discovered that they had been taught to think that the natural world consists of a stockpile of natural resources, and that the work of sustainability centers primarily on ensuring that these resources are managed in ways such that future generations could enjoy them too.

Once again, I could not fault the students. The logics of commodification and appropriation have so shaped our thinking about the world that even those committed to environmental work have difficulty imagining other ways to *see* and to *be*. These logics, many of which took their contemporary form in the era of colonial expansion,



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are so ubiquitous and dominant that we have a hard time imagining other ways to *name* our world and *navigate* our way through it. Of course, not all environmentalists think or speak in this way. Even so, it is hard not to be struck by the prevalence of the market-inflected language—“units of production/consumption”, “natural capital”, “no net species loss”, “carbon offsets”, “biodiversity credits”—used at major international climate change or biodiversity summits. Can we expect people to critique and correct a rapacious and ever-expanding economy if we do not at the same time interrogate its vocabularies and grammars?

As the class continued, I asked the students, “What would it be like to imagine this world—its diverse places and creatures, along with the many geobiochemical processes that move it—as a gift, perhaps even as a *sacred* gift?” I proposed that we take Robin Kimmerer’s much admired book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* as our initial guide. In her chapter “The Honorable Harvest”, she describes how the harvesting of food is no simple matter, because there is an inescapable tension between honoring life and taking it in order to live. People need rituals and ceremonies through which they can reflect together on the principles that govern their use and consumption of the world. Kimmerer notes that these principles can be formulated in a variety of ways, but in her formulation, they are:

“Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.

Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.

Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last.

Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

Never take more than half. Leave some for others.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.

Share.

Give thanks for what you have been given.

Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.

Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.” [1].

These principles presuppose a logic and way of being that differ radically from what the students knew. As Kimmerer describes it, the natural world is not populated by objects and commodities but by living beings that are sentient and, at least potentially, our kin. They are creatures imbued with awareness and spirit and are enmeshed within dynamic, vibrant, mutually facing and mutually responding communities of life. Far from being dead or inert stuff that does not really matter until human beings assign a price or market value to it, the world that sustains us is animate and sensitive. It is inherently valuable because it is the life-nurturing home that in its profuse, beautiful, and delectable gifts communicates that life is to be gratefully received and generously shared. This is a world to be loved and cherished rather than simply quantified and managed.

The more we talked, the more it became clear to the students that there was something deeply compelling about Kimmerer’s position. Who wants to live in a dead world in which the only value that matters is the (instrumental) value that others assign to things? Does not such a world entail that the people who live through and from it are similarly without inherent value and, thus, susceptible to being (eventually, if not inevitably) captured by an instrumentalizing logic that appropriates and mines whatever and whomever it meets?

Several students expressed their yearning to give themselves to the protection of nature. They said that somewhere along their life’s journey they fell in love with a particular watershed or forest, some special mammal or bird, and so wanted to learn the professional skills of conservation. What troubled them is that there was little opportunity for them,

whether informally or in their curriculum, to reflect upon and hone the skills of the love that brought them to their fields of study. By failing to attend to the tension between honoring and taking life, they now saw that their love risked sentimentality.

The students were especially struck by Kimmerer's account of an Algonquin ecologist who told the elders of her tribe that she planned to attend a conference on sustainability. The elders were curious. They wanted to know what the term sustainability really means. The ecologist gave a standard definition: sustainability is the management of natural resources so as to ensure the ability of present and future generations to satisfy their needs. The elders were not impressed. One replied that this definition sounded like an excuse for continued taking (as in cases when wood pellets are lauded as a "sustainable energy source" but depend on the exploitation and pollution of indigenous lands). Another said that the first and the most important question is not, "What can we take"? but "What can we give to Mother Earth"?

The Honorable Harvest rests on reciprocity, a constant giving back in response to what has been given. Without reciprocity, people subvert and diminish the flows of life that are constantly circulating through and around them. Reciprocity is the key because, as Kimmerer says, "it helps resolve the moral tension of taking a life by giving in return something of value that sustains the ones who sustain us. One of our responsibilities as human people is to find ways to enter into reciprocity with the more-than-human world. We can do it through gratitude, through ceremony, through land stewardship, science, art, and in everyday acts of practical reverence" [2].

The logic of reciprocity that Kimmerer describes, along with the idea that this world and its living beings are sacred gifts to be nurtured and cherished, finds expression in multiple spiritual traditions. If we turn, for instance, to the Garden of Eden creation story of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, we discover that human beings, along with all plant and animal life, are soil-birthered, soil-dependent creatures animated by divine breath: "then the Lord God formed *adam* from the dust of the ground (*adamah*), and breathed into the *adam*'s nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). Far from being inert, valueless matter, each creature is precious because it is the fleshy (and sacred) site of a divine desire that creatures should exist and flourish. The task of humans is not to sit idly by and naively pluck the fruit of God's creation. It is, instead, for them to give their love and skill to the nurture of the world that nurtures them: "The Lord God took the *adam* and put the *adam* in the garden of Eden to till and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Put another way, human beings are called to participate in God's gardening ways with the world, for in doing so, they not only provide for themselves and fellow creatures, but they also experience—most viscerally through tasting, breathing, touching, hearing, and smelling—life as a precious and vulnerable reality that must be received gratefully, shared generously, and tended carefully.

I have mentioned this garden creation story because it stands as a necessary supplement to the much quoted and mischaracterized biblical injunction given in Genesis 1, where humans are said to be created in the image of God and then instructed to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Many people have spoken this verse as a justification for human appropriation and control of the world. This is a great mistake, because the Jewish and Christian scriptures affirm throughout that life is not an individual possession to be hoarded and exploited but a sacred gift given by God to be tended for the flourishing of all creatures [3].

When reading these scriptures, it is crucial to appreciate that these people lived within agrarian communities that drew their sustenance from arid, often hilly lands that, if not carefully tended, were easily eroded and wasted. They understood that they do not control the processes of life and death but must, instead, align their desires and expectations with what the land recommends. The birth of animals, the germination of seeds, the provision of foods—these are all gifts that must be honored and cherished. As the prophets clearly and repeatedly stated, the great transgression is to violate the land or abuse its human and non-human creatures. Their hope was that people might learn to live peaceably and justly

with each other and with the land. As the prophet Hosea described it, they worshipped a God who said, “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety” (Hosea 2:18).

The witness of Kimmerer and the Jewish and Christian scriptures indicate that it is anything but obvious or inevitable that people should accept the modern, capitalist logics of commodification and appropriation. For these logics to work, a radical revisioning of the meaning of the world and humanity’s role within it had to be established (and, as environmental historians have taught us, often violently enforced). The crucial question, now, is whether or not indigenous and spiritual traditions can make a practical difference in the way we imagine the work of “sustainability”.

As a way of inviting further reflection and conversation among professional and lay environmentalists, let me propose six recommendations for shifting our language and our ways of being in the world:

- Drop the language of “natural resources”. This designation assumes that living creatures and vibrant places are collections of objects that are without value until we assign them one. Recognize that an exercise such as tabulating “ecosystem services” in terms of monetary value, while perhaps somewhat illuminating, risks violating the sanctity of life. People do not live among an assortment of mere things. We live only because the world we live in and the creatures we live with are profoundly and mysteriously alive. As such, we move within varied, complex, and morally/spiritually charged communities of life.
- Replace “environment” with “home”, since this is the more accurate description of where people and creatures, in fact, live. An environment is simply what “surrounds” us and, thus, is not integral to who we are and what we can become. Homes, by contrast, are essential, dynamic (though not always pleasing) places of nurture that require our respect and care if they are to be sources of nurture for us. Recall that the word “ecology” has the Greek root *oikos*, which means “home”.
- Recognize that a world of gifts requires that people think carefully about what it means to *receive* and *welcome* another’s life and *share* in it with others. An appreciation of our world as constituted by and populated with sacred gifts does not put an end to exchange, even market exchange. Instead, it means the primary task, always, is to nurture the sources of life that nurture us and frame our work by asking what we can *give* rather than what we can *take*. Insofar as people commit themselves to this work, the character of appropriate “use” will become more apparent.
- Offer degrees in environmental/home “cultivation” alongside environmental/home “management”. Recognize that a managerial focus has been overtaken by the ambition to extract from the world (however equitably), whereas a cultivating framework keeps the focus on developing the practical skills and the economic/political systems that heal, repair, and nurture communities of life.
- Honor and cultivate the love that brings people into nature and keeps them there. Appreciate that a loving disposition shifts a *contractual* way of relating to others to a *covenantal* way of relating. A contractual mind performs cost–benefit analysis and accepts too many material trade-offs. It is prepared to discount the value of the future. By contrast, a covenantal heart mourns damage and loss and is dedicated to protecting and enhancing life. To be in a covenantal relationship is to accept responsibility for another’s well-being and to join in one’s hope for an honorable life that is always life *with* others. The idea of human beings flourishing alone or at the expense of other creatures is a contradiction in terms.
- Affirm, again and again, that the essential work is not to create a “sustainable” world but a more “beautiful, healthy, vibrant, diverse, clean, fragrant, delicious, and just” world. The language of sustainability is uninspiring and far too vague. It is prone to misuse and is readily deployed to continue business as usual. Though in use for decades now, it has not, for example, prevented the extinction of plant and animal

species while placing their habitats under “protection”. What we need is a vision that inspires us to cultivate a fertile and verdant world and a corresponding vocabulary that does not mask the ugliness, disease, languishing, homogeneity, dirtiness, stink, blandness, and injustice that have characterized (and continue to punctuate) so much of modern “development”.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the terms we use derive their meaning, sense, and, their compelling force from a practical form of life. This means we cannot simply switch terms and expect the world to change. The better way is to teach the skills, cultivate the habits, and create the economic and political systems that will make words such as receiving, sharing, nurturing, cherishing, and honoring come alive and resonate with our being. We live in a deeply wounded and abused world. The transformations we need go deep into human hearts and extend across the diverse places of our shared, creaturely life. Our goal should be to foster natural and social worlds that inspire our love and dedication. It should be to help each other imagine and then create cultures that celebrate and give their care to the goodness of this life. To achieve these ends, we need sympathies and affections but also economic priorities and policies that the language and frameworks of sustainability seem to be unable to provide.

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2. *Ibid.*, 190.
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