GUEST ESSAY

Envisioning a Sustainable Society

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The 1992 Earth Summit at Rio popularized the goal of sustainable development. Most of the heads of state meeting there believed that goal could be achieved by developing better technology and by writing better laws, agreements, and treaties, and by enforcing them. Unfortunately, their approach was flawed and will not achieve sustainability because they do not understand the nature of the crisis in our earthly home.

Try this thought experiment: Imagine that, suddenly, all the humans disappeared, but all the buildings, roads, shopping malls, factories, automobiles, and other artifacts of modern civilization were left behind. What then? After three or four centuries, buildings would have crumbled, vehicles would have rusted and fallen apart, and plants would have recolonized fields, roads, parking lots, even buildings. Water, air, and soil would gradually clear up; some endangered species would flourish. Nature would thrive splendidly without us.

That mental experiment makes it clear that we do not have an environmental crisis; we have a crisis of civilization. Heads of state meeting at the Earth Summit
neither understood nor dealt with civilization’s most crucial problems: Humans are reproducing at such rapid rates that world population is expected to increase from 6.5 billion in 2005 to 8–9 billion by 2050; resource depletion and waste generation could easily triple or even quadruple over that period; waste discharges are already beginning to change the way the biosphere works; climate change and ozone loss will reduce the productivity of ecosystems just when hordes of new humans will be looking for sustenance.

Without intending to, we have created a civilization that is headed for destruction because we are seriously degrading our life-support system. Either we learn to control our growth in population and in economic activity, or nature will use death to control it for us. The earth itself is not in danger. But our way-of-life as a species—and perhaps in the long run our survival—as a species are in jeopardy.

Present-day society is not capable of producing a solution because it is disabled by the values our leaders constantly trumpet: economic growth, jobs, consumption, competitiveness, power, and domination. Societies pursuing these goals cannot avoid depleting their resources, degrading nature, poisoning life with wastes, and upsetting biospheric systems. We have no choice but to change; resisting change will make us victims of change.

But how do we transform to a sustainable society? My answer, which I believe is the only answer, is that we must learn our way. Nature, and the imperatives of its laws, will be our most powerful teacher as we learn our way to a new society. Most crucially, we must learn how to think about values.

Life in a viable ecosystem must become the core value of a sustainable society; that means all life, not just human life. Ecosystems function splendidly without humans (or any animals for that matter), but human society would die without viable ecosystems. Individuals seeking life quality require a well–functioning society living in well–functioning ecosystems. We must give top priority to not degrading the ecosystems that support us.

A sustainable society would affirm love as a primary value and extend it not only to those near and dear, but also to people in other lands, to future generations, and to other species. A sustainable society emphasizes partnership rather than domination, cooperation over competition, love over power. A sustainable society affirms justice and security as primary values.

A sustainable society would encourage self–realization—helping people to become all they are capable of being, rather than spending and consuming—as the
key to a fulfilling life. A sustainable society would make long-lasting products to be cherished and conserved. People would learn a love of beauty and simplicity.

A sustainable society would use both planning and markets as basic and supplementary information systems. Markets fail us because they can neither anticipate the future nor make moral choices between objects and between policies. Markets also cannot provide public goods such as schools, parks, and environmental protection, which are just as important for life quality as private goods.

A sustainable society would continue further development of science and technology because we need practical creative solutions that are both environmentally sound and economically feasible. However, we should recognize that those who control science and technology can use them to dominate all other creatures. We should not allow the deployment of powerful new technologies that can induce sweeping changes in economic patterns, lifestyles, governance, and social values without careful forethought regarding their long-term impacts.

Conscious social learning would become the dynamic of social change in a sustainable society—not only to deal with pressing problems, but also to realize a vision of a good society. Meaningful and lasting social change occurs when nearly everyone learns the necessity of change and the value of working toward it.

Ecological thinking is different from most thinking that guides modern society. For example, the following key maxims derived from the law of conservation and matter, the laws of thermodynamics, and the workings of ecosystems are routinely violated in contemporary thinking and discourse: (1) Everything must go somewhere (there is no away); (2) energy should not be wasted because all use of energy produces disorder in the environment; (3) we can never do just one thing (everything is connected); and (4) we must constantly keep asking, "and then what?"

Every schoolchild and every adult should learn these simple truths; we need to reaffirm the tradition that knowledge of nature’s workings and a respect for all life are basic to a true education. We should require such environmental education of all students, just as we now require every student to study history.

Ecological thinking recognizes that a proper understanding of the world requires people to learn how to think holistically, systematically, and futuristically. Because everything is connected to everything else, we must learn to anticipate second- and higher-order consequences for any contemplated major societal action.
A society learning to be sustainable would redesign government to maximize its ability to learn. It would use the government learning process to promote social learning. It would require that people who govern listen to citizens, not only to keep the process open for public participation, but also to cultivate mutual learning between officials and citizens.

Learning our way to a new society cannot occur, however, until enough people become aware of the need for major societal change. So long as contemporary society is working reasonably well, and leaders keep telling us that society is on the right track, the mass of people will not listen to a message urging significant change. For that reason, urgently needed change will probably be delayed, and conditions on our planet are likely to get worse before they can get better. Nature will be our most powerful teacher, especially when biospheric systems no longer work the way they used to. In times of great system turbulence, social learning can be extraordinarily swift.

Our species has a special gift: the ability to recall the past and foresee the future. Once we have a vision of the future, every decision becomes a moral decision. Even the decision not to act becomes a moral judgment. Those who understand what is happening to the only home for us and other species are not free to shrink from the responsibility to help make the transition to a sustainable society.