

Natural Systems: Demonstrating the Interdependencies between Sustainability and Democracy

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The Basis of Natural Systems for Self and Society

I take the title of the 50th International Society for the Systems Sciences conference, "Complexity, Sustainability, and Democracy," very seriously. It quite succinctly sums up my passion and my work to both save and savor our world.

At [Attraction Retreat](#), a non-profit organization using natural systems for personal healing and empowerment, societal transformation, and planetary sustainability, we refer to the foundation of our work as Rational Spirituality. It is based on self-evidence of the web of life and remembering--and learning to trust--other ways of knowing that are denigrated, ignored, or downplayed in modern Western culture. Rational Spirituality helps people remember at a conscious level that they are natural systems, and sensuously experience their connection within this unified web; that they are created and sustained by the same natural systems principles as any other ecosystem; and that they are but one interdependent aspect of the web of life.

Life works by creating attraction relationships that fulfill natural expectations. This is an evolutionary activity and a biological inheritance. Humans can maximize their ability to realize their unique potentials by allowing all of their sense groups--mechanistic, chemical, emotional, rational, intuitive, and spiritual--to self-organize in creating the mutually supportive attraction relationships that best support the web of life, and thus the individual.

Based within the discipline of ecopsychology, Rational Spirituality lays an epistemological foundation for an explicit natural systems paradigm. The core principles of natural systems--mutual support and reciprocity, no greed, no waste, and increasing diversity--are exhibited by a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable ecosystem. This natural systems paradigm provides the models and metaphors humans need to inform lifestyles, family and social relationships, the creation of sustainable cultures, and our bond to the other that isn't other. The web of life that supports and sustains, that we can not separate ourselves from, is as much us as our conscious awareness of self, and we are constantly interconnected in this web in a multitude of direct and subtle ways.

Rational Spirituality has its roots in Dr. Michael J. Cohen's Natural Systems Thinking Process. Cohen, founder of Audubon Society's Expedition Institute, has formulated and refined this system over forty years of facilitating a reconnecting with nature process that works by remembering, strengthening, and integrating the (at least) 53 senses humans share with the rest of the natural world.

With our modern predilection to emphasize and concentrate on just two of these senses--rationality and language--and by compartmentalizing, caging, and separating a third--spirituality--we've created a dysfunctional social growth and development pattern that at worst threatens to end the experiment of life on this planet, and at best keeps us from fulfilling our desires and creating the world we'd all like to live in and leave to our children.

By not using, or fully benefiting from, all of our senses, and by allowing our sense of rationality to be controlled by manipulative and dominating cultural stories, the majority of the senses that support our lives and enable us to enjoy life fall into disuse, and addictive substitutes are found to fulfill the natural expectations these senses seek in order to remain in balance. Being disconnected from any of our multiplicity of senses also removes possibilities and constrains one's ability to maximize potential.

The Triumvirate of Disconnection: Separation, Dualism, Transcendence

In the following sections, using the term triumvirate is really little more than a beginning taxonomy. In any complex system, limiting the number of variables and confounding factors under consideration will always underdetermine full understanding. It does, however, provide a starting point for seeing the necessity to examine any system as a web of relationships--because nothing exists in isolation. This structure is also intended to help people become aware that there are almost always at least three major factors to consider in any complex system.

The case can be made that personal, social, and environmental problems stem from the difference between the way people think and act, and the way that natural systems work. The situation the world finds itself in today is a global economy that is unsustainable because it leads to destruction of the environment and abuse of people's inner nature. Infinite growth requires the Earth to be both an endless supply of resources as well as a bottomless pit for waste. Furthermore, no community can exist in isolation, or fail to be affected by global problems such as climate change and the rapidly approaching end--due to the peak of global oil extraction--of a growth economy based on a steadily increasing supply of cheap and abundant fossil fuels.

Due to the interconnected nature of reality, any solutions to these problems must be systemic, and not merely another band-aid on one of the myriad symptoms. The natural systems foundation of Rational Spirituality addresses the root causes of these problems and provides effective, systemic solutions.

It is becoming more widely accepted that environmental problems and social injustices are really a problem in attitude, or perception. The majority perception in the Western world is that we are apart from, and not a part of, the natural systems that give us life and sustain us. We are taught to see ourselves as outside, and in control, of nature itself. This disconnection then spreads to all of the other relationships--interpersonal and social--that define who we are as well as how we define reality. Reconnecting with nature and building responsible, mutually supportive and empowering relationships lays the foundation to holistically improve personal well-being in order to improve ecological integrity and create the possibility for a democratic and sustainable future.

The causes of our disconnection are deep, enforced by religion and science, and tend to reinforce one another. One of the causes of our disconnection is the idea that wilderness exists as something separate. Western civilization based on Judeo-Christian doctrine uses wilderness as the object of projection for many a dark shadow. The word wilderness is mentioned about 300 times in the bible, and in each instance the meaning is derogatory. Deeply seeded in the Western psyche is the image of wilderness as evil darkness--both the wilderness within and the wilderness without.

Another disconnecting idea is classic mind/body Cartesian dualism. The core idea here is that the mind can be separated from the body and that either can be completely understood without considering the other. A major aspect of this concept is that nature follows strictly mechanistic laws and is just a nonfeeling machine, as well as the idea that we are "in here," nature is "out there," and there is no connection between the two.

The third major disconnection is transcendence, the idea that spirit is separate from the body; that the soul transcends upward, and is incompatible and opposed to Nature. This idea took hold during the neolithic era with the subjugation of the Earth Goddesses of creation and nurturance to the Sky Gods of war.

Rational Spirituality recognizes that every individual is biologically, psychologically and spiritually part of Nature's nonpolluting, intelligent ways. The Earth itself is a living system, and the psyche is an emergent quality of and exists within this larger system.

Leading thinkers say that our attraction to nature is a deep, biological need rooted in over two million years of evolution of our species. This need for the natural world is known as biophilia, a genetic urge encoded in human nature to maintain the balance and harmony needed to preserve our psychic and physical health. Excessive indoor living and a lack of conscious, heartfelt bonding with the Earth actually causes a disconnection of many of the senses we have inherited from nature to keep us naturally fulfilled and in balance with the rest of the web of life. This disconnection causes psychological pain we obsessively try to tranquilize, and a void we never seem able to fill. Society's 'fixes' are often temporary and destructive. Even as we indulge our addictions, we experience a deep, pervasive longing for something that we sense is missing from our lives.

Our very life-styles are making us ill! Our efforts to succeed in our nature-disconnected world are taking a toll on our psychic, physical, and spiritual well-being. And we think this is normal--until we experience the wholeness of reconnecting with the web of life. Unfortunately, we have a difficult time seeing or admitting that our ill-health and dis-ease is self inflicted.

Ulcers, stress, depression, spiritual angst, feeling lost or like we don't belong are not the result of a biological disease, or of not being able to adapt to social expectations. In fact, just the opposite is true. These unhealthy symptoms and conditions are actually lifestyle disorders that spring from constantly trying to adapt to an unnatural and disconnected system. A large percentage of the individuals that Western society considers to be normal, well-adjusted citizens are suffering from chronic stress, depression, anxiety, and addictions. These disorders are the result of the demands of our fast paced, non-stop urban lifestyles. This Western-based lifestyle is in direct conflict with our true human biological, psychological and spiritual nature.

Many people realize that they aren't sick or mentally ill in the traditional sense, so rather than turning to traditional therapists and mental health practitioners who try to make us feel sane about living in an insane world, they turn to lay coaches to help them do a better job of doing even more of what they're doing now that is making them sick. Quite often these motivationally inspired coaching 'solutions' only make our problem worse--because the problem isn't that we're not good enough at our hectic and frantically paced lives. The problem is actually our schedule driven, deadline enforced modern lifestyle itself. Our very way of life is making us sick, and the better we get at it, the more at risk we are.

Rational Spirituality provides a way to rationally, emotionally, and spiritually reconnect strands of the web of life, both within and without, using all of the natural senses our species has repressed for millennia. This sensory reconnection helps bring nature's integrity--and a sense of deep, natural fulfillment--into conscious thought. The result is improved physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. This, ultimately, improves relationships at all levels, including with the planet.

The Triumvirate of Collapse: Peak Oil, Global Warming, Economic Growth

A major disagreement today seems to be over whether society is heading full speed into a brick wall, or resolutely marching over the edge of a cliff. The other area of disagreement isn't over whether or not Peak Oil is real, or over whether global warming is real and has a major human caused component, but over how quickly they are occurring and how devastating their effects will be.

The same can be said for the dire consequences of an economy based on infinite growth on a finite planet. This is sometimes called a doomsday economy, because it is using natural resources faster than they can be

replenished and creating waste faster than it can be assimilated. This combination is turning the raw materials necessary for life into a toxic stew. In an interconnected and interdependent world, the proof of this toxicity is measured by our body burden.

The modern industrialized world has built its entire infrastructure and way of life under the assumption that the energy supplied by fossil fuels would always be cheap and plentiful. The main issue of Peak Oil is not one of "running out" so much as it is not having enough to keep our economy running. Demand continues to increase, as production and supply continues to decrease.

Unless a miracle occurs, global economic growth may be coming to an end. Since our entire financial order -- interest rates, pension funds, insurance, stock markets -- is predicated on growth, the social and economic consequences may be cataclysmic. The world has never faced a problem like Peak Oil. Without massive mitigation and the creation of an alternative energy infrastructure more than a decade before the fact, the problem will be pervasive and will not be temporary. Previous energy transitions were gradual and evolutionary. Oil peaking will be abrupt and revolutionary.

The economic paradigm of growth itself is a global debt-based usury system that creates paper-based wealth that feeds itself in a runaway positive feedback loop. Paper wealth has nothing backing it of real physical value, and provides little more than bragging rights to those who amass the most of it. The whole system is merely a numbers game that supports a global Ponzi scheme.

The central bankers who fund our Industrial Growth Society (IGS) have been aware of this all along. They lend more money than they have on the assumption that tomorrow's growth will provide adequate collateral for today's debt. The growth is based on the overconsumption of finite resources as feedstock to an industrial, agribusiness, and medical model energized by fossil fuels. Nothing else packs the energy punch to sustain the IGS at its current size and growth rate. But the decline of fossil fuels, the underlying resource of economic growth, undermines the validity of that collateral which in turn erodes the valuation of most entities quoted on global stock exchanges.

The problem with living a fantasy is that it is addictive. The cheerleaders for the IGS will do everything in their power to keep the reality of Peak Oil from sinking in for as long as they possibly can.

The triumvirate of collapse are intimately intertwined. The main contributor to global warming is the burning of hydrocarbons--our storehouse of ancient sunlight--for industry, transportation, and energy production. Resource extraction and a growing population create negative feedback loops into our life support system's ability to provide sustenance and sustain life. Deforestation and desertification are but two results of this, and they also contribute to the effects of global warming.

It should be readily understood that our major economic drivers are unsustainable from the perspective of continuing the experiment of life. The maintenance of the growth paradigm is the usurpation of democratic principles by the corporations that front for the IGS and fund the propaganda campaign that is modern advertising and corporatism's control of the electoral process. The legal framework that has arisen to support the myth of corporate personhood is a direct affront to the principles of democracy.

The foundation for the triumvirate of collapse is a dominator paradigm. This paradigm is best explained as force-based ranking hierarchies that exercise control through fear and force. Humans are ranked over nature, one gender over the other, and cultures and races are thusly ranked as well. The "other" in every case is seen as inferior. Dominator hierarchies hone exploitation, greed, destruction, and competition by manipulating a story that this is human nature and no alternative is possible, let alone available. Creation, compassion, nurturance, and cooperation are all conveniently ignored.

The Triumvirate of Self: Body, Mind, and Spirit

The only thing I intend to point out in this section is that humans are also systems of relationships. As with any other living organism, it's not nature versus nurture, but the unique combination of the genetic contribution of the seed and the nurturance of the environment that allow an organism to be best understood as a nexus of causal pathways or a zone of interaction.

The aspects of the self that most people readily recognize are the physical body, the rational and emotional mind, and the spiritual awareness of our connection to the web of life. All of our senses reside in these aspects of the self, and they all need to be integrated, exercised, and allowed to inform one another in order for any individual to have any reasonable expectation of reaching their potential.

The Triumvirate of Rebirth: Relocalization, Partnership, and Democracy

Developing a systemic response to a systemic problem provides the opportunity to put systems science to work. Developing and maintaining healthy, responsible, mutually supportive attraction relationships provides the foundation to transition away from a doomsday economy.

When talking about relocalization as a dynamic planning process to create a sustainable future, it's helpful to have a working definition of these terms. We can then show how they are supportive of natural systems principles.

Sustainability entails integrating our economic and social lives into the environment in ways that maintain and enhance it rather than degrade or destroy it; it's a moral imperative to pass on our natural inheritance not necessarily unchanged, but undiminished in its ability to meet the needs of future generations; and it requires finding the balance point among population, consumption, and waste assimilation. Further, it requires dispelling a myth--sustainability is **NOT** an environmental movement; it is a community movement.

Relocalization is a dynamic planning process to create a sustainable future in a post-petroleum economy that includes: close proximity of jobs and housing, local businesses using regional supply sources; community cooperation, mutual support and resource sharing; organic agriculture; bioregional steady-state economic systems; and local renewable energy production and distribution. All of this is based on using natural systems principles to overcome our separation from nature--which includes our own and other's inner nature--and staying within regional carrying capacity in order to create or rebuild cultures and cities that are ecologically wise and socially just.

Most people today realize sustainability is the only rational goal for our future. But, it's a "goal," which makes the obvious point that we're unsustainable now. If a sustainable future is indeed our goal, we need to ask ourselves, "How do we get there?". An honest answer must begin with an examination of what brought us to this stage, and a realization that a transition is needed for which a process, a strategy, a plan must be developed and put into action.

Sustainability doesn't just mean becoming more energy or resource efficient, or non-polluting, or having a low impact or lighter and smaller footprint on the Earth. Being sustainable is more than just organic gardening, getting rid of your lawn in favor of a perennial native edible landscape, taking the bus to work, and buying local. All of the above are among the necessary steps, but they must be coordinated and have the will of individuals who cooperate in community and assume their joint responsibility to implement a comprehensive, systemic plan of action.

Relocalization is such a systemic action plan. It addresses the root causes of the widening wealth gap, the loss of sovereignty to corporate globalization, the Industrial Growth Society and its culture of domination,

materialism, and waste. Relocalization does more than just point out the problems of Peak Oil, global warming, agribusiness, unrestrained growth, and central government control: It provides a systemic and effective response. It's the alternative we're told doesn't exist to business as usual.

There are other concepts that relocalization builds on that are being applied toward the transitional shift to sustainability include bioregionalism, new urbanism, and permaculture. What these concepts have in common is their adherence to natural systems principles, overcoming our disconnection from the natural world, and recovering our sense of place.

The systemic cure for the systemic disease of domination is partnership--developing mutually supportive attraction relationships that further the activity of life and creation. We can move from a system of power-over to a system of power-with by focusing on those aspects of human nature that are conducive to life--cooperation, nurturance, creativity, and compassion.

This leads directly into the relationship between sustainability and democracy. Decentralization and bioregional wisdom councils provide one promising hope for governance that is democratic. A democracy based on natural systems principles is one that is consensus-based instead of relying on authoritative hierarchies and rule by majority. However, it is important to be aware that consensus doesn't mean that everyone agrees, only that there are no blocks to a decision.

Group decisions that support the whole need to be aware of the applicable natural systems model. In a healthy ecosystem, nothing takes more than it needs, and everything gives back to help maintain the health of the overall system. Diversity increases, and this diversity is free from judgment. Diversity is one sign of the systems' strength and resiliency. The hummingbird doesn't judge the vulture for its attraction to carrion, nor does it attempt to block the vulture from fulfilling its role.

Participatory democracy is a necessary aspect of the fulfilled self for a social species. It is one way for an individual to be a responsibly contributing member of their community. Among our natural senses are those of community, belonging, and inclusion, and these senses yearn to be fulfilled in the same manner that our sense of thirst does. By becoming active in community self-governance, each person maximizes their potential and can keep isolation, alienation, and apathy at bay. These feelings are all negative attractions that are signals that we don't have natural support in the moment and should be seeking positive attractions elsewhere.

Conclusion

The time has come when we can no longer put off planning and developing strategies for a sustainable future. The main reason for this is that the cultural path we're on is heading for a catastrophic conclusion. We're hopelessly intertwined in an economic system based on limitless growth fueled by non-renewable natural resources that are running out and getting more expensive--both of which are detrimental to the mantra of economic growth. Plus, burning these resources is a major variable in the global warming equation, and securing them requires the largest defense budget on the planet.

We must begin addressing the systemic root causes instead of putting all of our efforts into applying band-aids to specific symptoms--clipping the branches instead of digging up the roots. This entails developing a more holistic strategy for achieving social and environmental justice; one that involves moving from locally reactive actions to more regionally proactive approaches. Developing a systemic approach within a framework of sustainability and applying it to community planning and economic development is the goal of relocalization. This systemic approach is one we can all participate in and realize our uniquely effective roles in the creation of a just, equitable, and sustainable future.

Through the process of relocalization, becoming sustainable in the environmental, social, and economic realms

provides a direct and effective manner in which we can become resilient and thrive through the undeniable looming crises of Peak Oil, global warming, and loss of sovereignty to corporatism.

By developing ways for everything to work together to support the whole--our self-organizing attraction relationships of mutual support--Rational Spirituality and natural systems help clarify the connections between democracy, peace, justice and why they're necessary for a sustainable future.

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