

Sustaining Our Communities

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Think of your life.
Think of what you need. I mean really need.
Think of what you want.
And think of what you have.

Strawberries in the January, a power boat to use one week a year, a 120-inch liquid crystal television to watch the game, potatoes from the cellar, local perch, that trip to Bermuda, 120 channels on cable television...

Would any of your needs, wants and haves change if you knew that your grandchildren would not quite get what they need, and could not have what they want?

But I need that five year subscription to the New Yorker or Consumer Reports or Guns and Ammo, an avocado in December, that case of Coca-Cola, diet... and two cases of light beer, more ibuprofen, cheap gas - I mean, a dollar a gallon like when I was in high school, the latest Taylor Swift download...

Should you make different choices now if you knew that about your grandchildren's future?

But I need the new Ford F-150 pickup truck with the pro trailer backup assist push button feature and the 3.5-liter EcoBoost (what ever that means) V6 that's paired with the electronic six-speed automatic transmission...sweet, I mean, I don't haul anything - I'm not a carpenter or whatever, I just like the way it looks.

But wait a minute - how do you even know what choices to make? If I give up that pickup truck and my neighbor doesn't, what good is that? Well, simple math, right? No, not so simple. What we choose as a consumer matters.

You see, we may want those things. But we need food. We need shelter. We need education. We need the right to vote, a day with our kids, a warm fulfilling loving partnership, a welcoming community, elected officials that care about us and our families and our community. We need safety and peace and equality. That's what we need.

We are on a journey, and the journey is the destination. Actually this is an adventure. Our adventure has a quest. What might this be?

Imagine, you the *protagonist* in this adventure. You've got your skill set. You've got your strengths and weaknesses. You've got your toolbox of useful things. You gaze out into the morning. Out there: opportunities and threats seem to be suspended like cumulus accents above the planet's curvature. The carbonated air is humid with concern, scented with hope, and breezy with possibilities. You, the protagonist – the optimist, the problem solver; innovation is not a mirage, shimmering in the solar warmth. It is a tangible thing.

From your vantage point of the far horizon, you turn, and look to your footprints. Just down the trail, the one you used to walk to this **vertex** is your home: your town; your community - hundreds, no thousands of souls pondering the naysayers and positivists and sentimentalists.

So what is the quest?

Sustainability is about people. It is about people because of our families, our communities, are ever striving for a good life.

Sustainability. Certainly an over used word. But, still, a meaningful word.

Sustainability, as it applies to us, is the finding of balance between humans and nature so that we balance what we use with what nature can provide.

Think of how nature works. The planet is the environment, and the ecosystems are the communities, and the nutrients and minerals and water – the economy. We better understand ourselves by understanding our nature.

As I took my first steps on my journey to understand this, I found it confusing. It was too complicated to get my arms around. But as I traveled and talked to people and experienced the many intricacies of our civilization I began to understand. I could see that it was about protecting nature. That alone we call environmentalism. I could see that it was about enriching our communities; that we can call social progress. And I could see that we needed economic equitability, and this is the realm of economics. But in reality, all of these come together in a sustainable world.

Over the past twenty years I've been wrestling with the best way to bring all the elements of sustainability together in a way that is not overwhelming. But it is hard, because it is everything about us, about the planet. If we remember that we are doing this to help us understand how **we** are progressing towards sustainability, then we can minimize our impacts to the planet, and in doing so minimize impacts the ecosystems and natural resources. In doing so we move towards a natural balance, just as we find in the rest of nature.

Here's what I did. I took the sphere of the planet as the sphere of the Environment. Held within this sphere of the Environment is the sphere of the Community. Within the sphere of the Community is the sphere of the Economy. This concept is built upon the Triple Bottom Line described by Andrew Savitz and Karl Weber (2006). Like a nested puzzle, all parts are dependent on the others, and the parts together make the whole, but none individually can truly stand-alone. The Environment, the Community, and the Economy – the three spheres of Sustainability are fundamental, equal, and in the human context one cannot survive nor thrive without the other.

Within each of these three spheres are all the aspects of human civilization. Now think of that – that is a lot of things; both tangible and intangible, as well as renewable and finite. In fact within these three spheres it is not difficult to tabulate thousands of aspects of human civilization. I started lumping. I started correlating. I started aggregating. My goal was to compile a much shorter list of categories in these three spheres that would be representational human patterns of behaviors, tendencies, consumption, and beliefs that work towards a good quality of life and simultaneously impact all the nooks and crannies of nature. I settled on twenty-one categories within the three spheres, seven categories each.

By understanding our behaviors, consumption practices, tendencies and beliefs we can develop an estimation of how well we are behaving ethically, conserving resources, and providing and using services for ourselves, and those people in our communities. We can assess our human impact to the Earth's natural systems. We can recognize what we must do to modify our behaviors so that future generations have a good quality of life.

So how do we know what to do? How do we know what behaviors to adopt, or what social and moral stances to strengthen?

In developing the twenty-one categories I've pulled together the major elements that give us a good quality of life, and through this we can score how well we are doing in these areas. By doing so we can identify areas in need of strengthening in order to reach sustainability.

We know burning fossil fuels has accelerated the natural trend of global warming. We know global warming is changing our climate. We know our consumption of natural resources, such as petroleum, metals, minerals, water, wood, clean air, and others has compromised the health of our planet and our people. Our consumption has led to shortages, and climate change has led to instabilities – from which conflicts and wars, social injustices and inequalities continue to increase. We are currently failing at adequately supporting a population of 7.5 billion people on this – our only planet.

In the sphere of the Environment, therefore, we find ecology, energy, food, greenhouse gases, water, natural resources, and recreation.

We know there is still a wide spectrum of human rights issues to resolve and improve. We know we have much work to do on justice for all. And we know that there is room for improvement in how we embrace culture, historical aspects of our communities, and balance social differences and beliefs. There is still a strong need to better understand how our government can help improve the lives of all of us.

In the sphere of the Community, therefore, we find education, equity and justice, health, quality of life, municipal improvement, cultural, historical and social components, and transportation.

We know that the increasing separation of the classes through wealth is damaging the ability of many people to achieve a good quality of life. We know that many buildings are too big and energy inefficient. We know that jobs and job training is an on-going issue, as is surety in retirement.

In the sphere of the Economy, therefore, we find built spaces, business, economic, economic equitability, governance, jobs and recycling.

These categories within the three spheres of sustainability encompass all major aspects of our civilization.

Sustainability, then is our measuring of what we do and what we use towards a good quality of life, and how it impacts the environment, enriches our community, and does so with economic balance and equitability, all working towards a zero net impact to the Earth. We look at this as individuals and families, in our communities and businesses, and within our government.

Sustainability is our quest.

But it is our greatest challenge; for we are the greatest consumers the world has ever seen. The United States imports over \$347 billion in oil, \$324 billion in machinery and engines, nearly as much in electronics, and over \$261 billion in vehicles.

There are some really interesting places to visit that remind me of our impacts to the land and sea and air. The *first* visit is to a landfill site. It is eye opening to find what's being thrown away and buried in the ground - wasted. *Second*, I recall my days in a metallic mine operation – it was a copper mine, a great maw of a pit stretching nearly two miles across, from which we turned mineral into copper wire so we can turn on the lights. *Third*, I was asked to assess a recycling plant, and I must say it is a bit uplifting to

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see how waste can be handled so we can reuse it and form it into new products. *Fourth*, I worked for an engineering firm that built coal-fired power plants and wind farms – a comparison of these two energy generation systems always amazed me: I remember being so aware of the smells, the sounds, the tastes, and the texture of the air – each very different for the coal versus wind. *Fifth*, while driving through the Central Valley of California I found myself in an oil and natural gas production field. I stood amongst the pump-jacks, drills and wells. The utter magnitude of the task to recover petroleum to run our carbon economy is as breathtaking as are the unintended consequences from releasing this carbon into the atmosphere. *Sixth*, I was an elected official in Door County – a small-scale county board seat when compared to state or federal seats. But I went to Madison, and I went to Washington D.C. while the legislatures were in session to observe our government in action; and I realized all of our votes count – they are essential. *Seventh*, I visited a slaughterhouse – watching where our meat comes from is sobering – it overwhelms the senses. The average American’s diet of meat causes a carbon footprint greater than that created from the average American’s use of fossil fuel for energy. *Eighth*, I walked with a farmer on his organic farm; walking amongst the animals and the diversity of crops, and I could see a way to healthier food and lower impacts to the land. *Ninth*, a steel mill; I watched the molten material being poured into the makings of beams, and experienced one of the fundamental breakthroughs of the Industrial Revolution. And finally, *tenth*, walking into a virgin forest – one that has never known an axe or saw. Such an experience is a rare gift these days. I urge you to do this after visiting these places I’ve mentioned. Once in the forest – stand there, and observe, and breathe in the atmosphere. How do you feel?

We are amazing consumers. Is it possible for us to look beyond the easy and fast, and consider the whole and long-term when we make choices? Is it possible for us not to build something or buy something just because we can, but rather pause, and think about the implications of choices?

So, think of your life.

Think of what you need. I mean really need.

Think of what you want.

And think of what you have.

Would any of our wants change – that is, would our choices and habits as consumers change and our behaviors towards our neighbors improve if we knew that our grandchildren would not get what they need?