

Toward a Psychology of Sustainability

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I think we are all here because we are concerned that the global issues of sustainability are not being addressed at the most fundamental level. We're gathered together to look for some of the deeper levels that are, if not fundamental, at least causative. What we are calling global problems are really global symptoms. They are expressions, projections, either of individual or of collective states of mind. Our technology at this time is so powerful that we have managed to shape the world into a greater image of ourselves, writ large upon the earth. That image is clearly distorted, painful, distressed, as are our individual and collective minds and societies.

I would like to outline a psychology of sustainability as I see it. I would also like to outline a general strategy for contribution and finally to suggest a project for our group.

A psychology of human survival is going to involve five components: examining the nature of the problems we're facing; examining the causes; identifying principles for effective responses; examining the effects that the problems are having on us; and finally, coming down to the bottom line, identifying what we can do.

Human beings are incredibly complex creatures. There are, within psychology, many competing schools, all with their own views of human nature. I would like to suggest that an effective response will be inclusive and will use a variety of different schools. Let me pick out a few of these. I will offer them as examples of the ways one can view our crisis and come to understandings, principles of response, and implications for us as individuals.

Let us start by looking at the role of beliefs in the creation and possible alleviation of our problems. Let me start with the opening lines from the teachings of the first cognitive psychologist of note, two and a half thousand years ago, the Buddha.

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make our world.

It is useful to look at our beliefs about ourselves, our beliefs about our relationships to other people, and the beliefs that we have about the nature of our world. In terms of beliefs about ourselves, we can look at disempowering beliefs about who we are, such as "There's nothing I can do." "It's not my responsibility." And then there are more fundamental beliefs, not about who we are but about what we are. What is our fundamental nature as human beings and creatures in society?

There are a couple of key beliefs about our relationship to other people. First, there's the belief that sets up duality of any kind between us and them, that sees others as less than we. In subtle ways, we see that permeating our entire society. We see it in issues of gender, race, and class. The extreme form of this belief is evidenced in the process of demeaning by what is called "pseudospeciation," viewing groups of people as virtually another species.

Then there is the belief that blames others for their own suffering, the assumption that many of us make as a way of reducing our own pain at seeing the suffering of others; that this is a fair world, and if these people are suffering, it is because they're lazy, not willing to work; it is because of their own deficiencies. In the West, it is called the "fair world syndrome;" in the East, it takes the form of superficial beliefs in the doctrine of karma.

Then there are views of relationship as a zero-sum game: there is only so much to go around. When I win, you lose; that's the way it is, so how do I get mine? The most extreme form of this is the Manichean world view, which sees the world as a stage on which the forces of light and dark forever battle, and we, by a strange coincidence, always happen to be on the side of the light.

Beliefs about the world, such as "There's not enough food to go around," and "It's hopeless," are also incredibly important. I am sure a lot of us have wrestled with those beliefs.

If you push the question of beliefs far enough, you end up in philosophy. For example, the deep ecologists point to the sources of our problems of sustainability in the anthropocentrism:

that we as human beings think we are privileged with this almost divine status. As Genesis says, we have had dominion over the fishes of the sea and the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth. Of course, there have been very critical assessments of Christianity by people like Lynn White and Arnold Toynbee. There are other key beliefs here. Charlene Spretnak has pointed to the complementary belief in androcentrism, masculine superiority. One can work down to very deep beliefs. We may have to work through massive education to counter these and to create the paradigm shift that Dana Meadows emphasized was so crucial at this point.

We can take other schools within psychology, such as the psychodynamic school, which emphasizes the conflicting forces within us. Here the role of fear and anxiety is crucial. Our world is, in large part, an expression of fear: fear of loss of our economic situation, fear of violence. Of course, the problem with fear-based motivation is that whatever you are unwilling to experience runs your life. It's a self-perpetuating, self-fueling mechanism, the arms race being the classic example. We create these incredibly destructive weapons to guard ourselves against our fears and, of course, escalate our fears in the process.

Another key element is the role of defense mechanisms, which Daniel Goleman so eloquently outlined in his book, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*.¹ Defense mechanisms are strategies for handling anxiety in which we distort or reduce our awareness. Clearly, this lies at the base of denial, the unwillingness to acknowledge our problems or to face them; projection, in which we place the blame on others instead of looking within; and intellectualization, in which we just talk about these things in abstract ways. There is a wonderful quote of Confucius: "If names be not correct, then language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success."

Another important framework is that of behavior modification and reinforcers. Our electoral and economic systems reinforce choices that yield immediate gratification, even at the cost of long-term disaster. How do we shift reinforcers? We can avoid the question of people being evil, or malevolent, or lazy if we appreciate that they do what they are reinforced for.

Related to this framework is the crucial role of modeling. In psychology, we are coming to

appreciate just how much we learn from seeing what others do. We learn particularly from people who have high status whom we see being reinforced and rewarded. The classic example of dysfunctional modeling in our society is the media. Our media heroes are cultural and ecological disasters.

Other cultures' psychologies have a great deal to offer us. It is clear that we have underestimated the wisdom contained in some of the non-Western psychological, spiritual, philosophical, and religious traditions. As far as I can see, they are gold mines of wisdom about the origins and possible corrections of nonsustainable contemporary systems; for instance, classical Buddhism. Buddhism would say that all our problems can be seen as the expression of three so-called root causes: addiction, aversion, and delusion.

Addiction is the root of greed. Our culture runs largely on greed, in part because we only recognize a limited spectrum of motives. Our culture is not aware of the crucial importance of higher motives, of motives toward social contribution, and self-actualization, and self-transcendence. Our lives are lived in a frantic pursuit of fulfillment, but a fulfillment through substitute gratifications, the material things that our culture emphasizes. The only trouble with substitute gratifications is that you can never get enough of what you do not really need. So we see the sensational, ever-increasing consumerism. We also see what Abraham Maslow pointed to as the meta-pathologies. Meta-pathologies are the pathologies that arise when the higher-order needs are not satisfied. They are silent, and they are usually not recognized for their true nature and origins in our culture. So they result in things like existential crises, social malaise, anomie, etcetera. Gandhi said it very nicely: the world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.

The mirror image of addiction is aversion. Addiction says, "I must have this in order to be happy." Aversion says, "I must not have this experience in order to be happy." Both are compulsions which drive us and shape our lives. The Buddhists say that aversion is the basis of anger, aggression, conflict, and so forth.

Now the net effect of all these things that I have been discussing—the fear, the defenses, the faulty beliefs, the addiction, the aversions—is a distortion of awareness, of consciousness. How can we expect to know ourselves and the world clearly if we are seeing through this incredible filter? The Asian psy-

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chologies say that we cannot, and we do not, and that in point of fact we live in distorted illusion, in which we do not recognize the illusion because defenses are self-masking. In fact, they would say that we are asleep, that we are lost in our collective dreaming, illusion, *maya*. This has been called a shared hypnosis, a virtual reality, a consensus transfer, a collective psychosis.

The net result is: we suffer from a case of mistaken identity. We are not who and what we think we are. The fundamental message of the Asian psychologies, of the great religions, of the perennial wisdom, is: you are not who you think you are; you are not an alienated individual, cut off from the universe. Our true nature is one of unity, interconnection, interdependence, in fact, identity with all that is. Separation is an illusion. Inasmuch as we live in this dream, the central message of the Asian traditions, and of the great religions, is "Wake up!"

The Asian traditions also offer a remedy. That remedy is a training of the mind to cultivate clearer states of mind.

One of the greatest shocks in my life was the moment that I realized that, contrary to my lifelong beliefs, the world's religions were not the opiate of the masses, but, at their core, they were road maps for training the mind to induce transcendent states of consciousness. That shifted my entire world view very, very dramatically. It let me look at the yogas and practices of contemplation and forgiveness as mind-training disciplines. One of the central tasks that I think that we face is to re-interpret those disciplines so as to legitimize them, make them sensible to our culture, and show people that these are a way of maturing beyond our conventional limitations.

This issue of maturing is a matter for developmental psychology. I think it is becoming clear that what we have taken to be normality is really a truncated form of development. Our true potential lies considerably beyond what we have taken to be our norm.

There are so-called trans-conventional, trans-rational, trans-personal levels of development available to us all. But our culture only brings us up to a certain level. There is a process called "coercion to the biosocial mean," which means that society tends to compress people toward the norm. As you know, being a sage has been a very hazardous occupation throughout history, with a great risk of ending up on a funeral pyre, or a crucifix, or drinking hemlock. Societies do not tolerate transformational development very well because it calls into question the assumptions of the reigning paradigm.

We can see how to approach our problems of sustainability through many of these lenses. My hypothesis is that long-term, really curative action will require this level of understanding, addressing this level of the issues, as well as dealing with the symptoms. This leads into the question of the principles underlying the types of responses. For each cause we can identify, we can come up with a principle of response. Let me suggest a few.

First, we obviously need inclusive responses. Skillful *actions* will work on both symptom and cause, inner and outer, us and them, and can be both theoretical and practical. As Aldous Huxley says in his book, *Island*:

Where do you start?

We start everywhere at once.

Next, we need skillful *beliefs*. It is going to be crucial for us to remember that beliefs operate as self-fulfilling prophecies and that it may be really crucial for us to choose our beliefs very, very skillfully. For example, I think it is going to be essential for us to choose to believe, as a kind of existential act of faith—in the face of the fact that fundamentally we do not know if these problems are solvable—that we can handle these problems, that humanity can survive, that we can set up a sustainable culture. Secondly, in beliefs about ourselves, it is crucial for us to believe, and to educate others to believe, that each of us can make a *strategic contribution*. One of my favorite quotes is the one by Henry Ford, that great American psychologist: "Those who believe they can do something and those who believe they can't are both right."

As Dan Goleman and many others have said, education is crucial: education about ourselves and others, inner and outer. As H. G. Wells puts it, "Human history increasingly becomes a race between education and catastrophe."

The hypothesis I want to suggest is this. In the long run, I think it might be more effective to appeal to people's positive motivations, rather than to browbeat and threaten them. As such, I think effective, skillful actions will acknowledge the reality and urgency of our situation and, at the same time, try not to raise people's defensiveness. So we want to do things like avoiding threat, condemnation, and attack. We want to be strictly ethical in our actions so that people can trust us as much as possible. Skillful responses will search for areas of commonality and shared purpose, acknowledging the shared superordinate threat—that we are all in this together—and effective solutions will require acknowledging our interdependence.

Finally, to come back to the Asian perspective, I think the deepest responses will require the acknowledgment that, fundamentally, our problem is one of a shared collective mindset, a worldview, and that any treatment is going to have to address this as well as any symptoms. These are just a few principles that I think evolve from the examination of the psychological causes.

Moving to the question, What are the effects of the problem on us? is a topic in and of itself. Clearly, the issues of sustainability touch every aspect of our lives. There is no way that we are going to continue living as we have. This is going to be a great threat to individuals and to their societies. It is going to be a time of great stress. Times of great stress are traditionally times of high gain and high risk. I think that our society can go either way. It is possible that we will get locked into a vicious cycle of fear and defensiveness; or apathy and despair; or anger and aggression.

One of the fundamental questions we face is: how can we leverage this crisis to move in a more positive direction? I think there are opportunities here. The very fact of this grave threat to our well-being, to our survival, may be a catalyst for encouraging us as individuals and collectives to look more deeply at our lives. We may confront some of the fundamental existential questions that we usually spend our lives avoiding. To the extent that we can look, for example, at the omnipresence of death, the very real possibility of the loss of cultural survival, we may be able—as so many traditions such as existentialism and Buddhism suggest—to use death as an advisor; to use death as the most potent catalyst to really look deeply at ourselves and our world.

As one wag put it, we've finally discovered

the missing link between the apes and civilized humans: it's us! Inasmuch as we are suffering from a case of collective immaturity, the global threat might act as a catalyst for acceleration of the collective maturity. This is what it is going to take. I don't think we are going to develop a sustainable society short of some pretty radical individual/collective psychological changes.

There is an exquisite paradox here, if you look at the big picture. Given the fact that it takes a superordinate threat for people to cooperate, we just happen to have set up this global threat affecting all of us. In other words, we may have set up just the situation we need, one that requires us to acknowledge our interconnectedness and interdependence, and catalyzes an accelerated rate of maturation. Whether we can do it, we don't know. But it may be necessary.

This all comes back to the fundamental question that faces each of us: What can I do? How can I do it most effectively? What is the most strategic contribution that I can make? How can we help others to find their strategic contributions, and to be motivated to make them? I frankly have found these questions to be the most difficult of all. I have spent a long time sitting, not knowing, and thinking that there was something wrong with me for not knowing, before I understood that not-knowing was part of the answer. These are the most incredibly complex questions humankind has ever faced. Yet somehow we have the idea that we should be able to come up with the answers just like that. It's painful for us not to know. We have an intolerance of ambiguity. So we defend ourselves against this not-knowing by shutting the concerns out of our awareness or, alternatively, acting with a kind of pseudo-certainty. Clearly, many of our global problems are caused by people who think that they know.

Several of the world's spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of acknowledging our fundamental ignorance. The lions that guard the Eastern temples are sometimes said to represent confusion and paradox, and the person who would have true wisdom must be willing to pass through both. In Zen, they speak of "don't know mind." There's a wonderful story about a rabbi who lived in Russia around the turn of the century. One morning, as he was crossing the village square to go into the tabernacle to pray, he ran into the village Cossack, who was in a lousy mood. The Cossack said, "Hi, Rabbi. Where are you going?" The rabbi said, "Don't know." The Cossack

said, "Every morning for twenty years you've crossed this square to go into the tabernacle to pray, and you're telling me you don't know where you're going?" And he grabbed the rabbi by the collar and hauled him off to the village jail. Just as he was about to throw him into the cell, the rabbi said, "See? You just don't know."

I want to suggest that the first principle in finding our strategic contribution is to acknowledge that we don't know, that nobody knows, that we're working in the dark and that's the way it is. In the spiritual traditions, you learn that the deepest insights do not involve a sense of knowing, as I had thought; they involve a sense of radical mystery.

Fundamentally, all we have is our own experience, our own intuition. We can trust our intuition, as long as we remember we could be wrong.

How, then, do we find the deepest contributions that we could make? This is the part all of us wrestle with. I think that there are three steps. One is information gathering. The second is letting in the reality of our global situation, not just as an idea but as lived experience. The third is looking at our unique situation and our possible contributions. The second step, letting in the reality, the extent of suffering in the world, being exposed to the suffering, is transforming. The question is: How do we facilitate people letting go of their defensiveness? It is the opening to suffering that allows the birth of compassion.

The third step, then, in determining our unique contribution, is looking at our situation and discovering what contributions we would like to make. There is a trap that a lot of us fall into of thinking that a real contribution has to entail suffering for us. But we are in this for the long term, and if it's not reinforcing we are going to burn out.

Clearly, we need all types of contributions. Inasmuch as our crises reflect psychological roots, we need to address these roots. We are really trying to become global therapists. If that sounds like hubris, so be it. I do not think anything else is going to be effective. The unique feature of such therapists is that they are trying to change minds: to change the limiting, distorting beliefs and world view of our culture and to substitute a more accurate, skillful, awakening, compassionate thought system and vision, working, I would suggest, at a very deep, creative level. To do this, optimally, may require becoming what Carl Jung spoke of as a "gnostic intermediary." Gnostic intermediaries are people who imbibe

wisdom so deeply into their own experience that they can speak directly out of their experience to other people and translate into other people's languages. They are able to translate from one tradition into another, through the mediation of their own experience.

To become an effective gnostic intermediary, as I see it, requires four steps. The first is developing wisdom. Wisdom comes from reflection on our experience: developing deep wisdom requires some sort of practice. It might include being in nature, periods of solitude and prayer, meditation practice, journal keeping, yoga—some sort of discipline which fosters reflection on one's experience and an opening, beyond one's defenses, to the deeper emotional-spiritual core. As the Buddha said, to straighten the crooked, you must first do a harder thing: you must straighten yourself. Inasmuch as the problems that we are facing have psychological roots, our capacity to contribute is a function of the amount of inner work done. This is effectively a new world view, a new understanding of self, of mind, of world. To the extent that one has cultivated wisdom, this vision will be deeper, more encompassing, more integrated, less conflictual, and more uplifting. We need this vision because, as Gregory Bateson said, "The world comes to be as we imagine."² He suggested that it's not possible *not* to communicate one's vision and belief system, so you might as well have a good one.

We go into ourselves to work more effectively on the world, and go out into the world to work more effectively on ourselves, until inner and outer are no longer seen as separate. This process is the one Arnold Toynbee found as a common feature among all the people that he saw as making the greatest contributions to human development throughout history: this cycle of withdrawal and return, going into oneself to find a source of wisdom, then coming back out into the world to share it. This, of course, is Joseph Campbell's hero's return. In Christianity, it is the fruitfulness of the soul. In Zen, it is entering the marketplace with help-bestowing hands. In Plato, it is re-entering the cave. There are lots of metaphors for this process.

The second step in becoming a gnostic intermediary is detribalization, a stepping out of the limiting and distorting belief systems of one's tribe, freeing ourselves from the largest cult of all: culture. This is the process by which a person moves from a parochial to a global world view, from "my country right or

wrong" to "our planet" and develops an identification with the larger group: our society, our planet, our species. Such a person is no longer looking through the distorting beliefs of the culture and being blinded by them, but has stepped back, is able to look through them, and can work to transform them.

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The third step is learning the language and belief systems of the people that you want to communicate with, as well as acquiring an understanding of their belief systems and defenses so that you can, in the fourth step, translate most effectively so as to give them an "Aha!" experience. We help people grasp that, *of course*, it makes sense to get involved in work in the neighborhood, or to reduce consumption. We are shifting understanding so that the paradigm that we are suggesting is no longer a thear but a natural thing.

It is clear that, if we need to disentangle and awaken ourselves in order to become more effective contributors, it would make sense to use our work in the world as a way of cultivating our awareness and wakefulness. In fact, there is such a tradition. In the East, it is called karma yoga. In the West, it is called service learning. Karma yoga is the yoga of work and service in the world, of using one's work in the world as a vehicle for both relieving suffering and for awakening self and others. Each and every action, each and every undertaking, is used as part of the awakening process. here is the kicker: it is an approach in which you work as skillfully and effectively as possible to relieve suffering and, simultaneously, to release attachment to the outcome. That's the kicker that makes it a radically transforming experience for oneself because one is radically shifting motivation. One is releasing attachment, reducing addiction. So the aim is optimal service and awakening of self and others. It is an integrated, comprehensive program that serves to relieve both symptom and cause, psyche and world, self and other.

Gnostic intermediaries have always been important for maintaining spiritual tradi-

tions. They are going to be crucial for maintaining our planet. So it is true: Uncle Sam does need you. Become a real G. I. Become a gnostic intermediary. Recent research on service and altruism suggests that helping is reinforcing. There is what is called a "helper's high." It is intrinsically satisfying. We need to get that message out to our culture. Robert DeRopp, author of *The Master Game*, says, "Seek, above all, for a game worth playing. Play as if your life and sanity depend on it, for they do." Human survival and sustainability are a game worth playing. Clearly, we are involved in trying to get people to play this game, to realize it is a rewarding, reinforcing game, a game by which we can regain our sanity, our survival, our sustainability, and our Self, our true Self.

Let me point to the final goal of karma yoga and service as described by the world's spiritual traditions. Through the reduction of attachments, through awakening, through practice, one comes to know one's own true nature. The different traditions put it into different words: In Christianity, it is that the kingdom of heaven is within you. In Buddhism, it is "look within: thou art the buddha." In Hinduism, it is the idea that Atman, individual consciousness, and Brahman, universal consciousness, are one. In the Upanishads, we read that, by understanding the Self, all this universe is known. Siddha yoga says that God dwells within you, as you. Mohammed tells us that he who knows himself, knows his Lord. And from Albert Einstein:

A human being is part of the whole, called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all creatures and the whole of nature with its beauty.⁴

NOTES

1. Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).
2. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature—A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1979).
3. Robert S. DeRopp, *The Master Game* (New York: Dell, 1968).
4. Albert Einstein as quoted in J. Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987).