

Evolving towards Unity: Sustainability and Interconnectedness

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The essence of sustainability is sustaining life. The ultimate question is, sustaining life for what purpose?

This is a baseline question; a question that ought to be driving all architectural deliberations on the direction of sustainable design. Yet, in general, it is a question that is feared, considered unanswerable, isolated to the realm of religion and philosophy, or classed as irrelevant in the name of pragmatism.

We environmental designers, architects, and clients believe we know what to do to address sustainability in whatever project we are working on – “Just do it; let’s not waste time with too much thinking.” It is, after all, easier to say, “Let’s make the air conditioning equipment more efficient,” than to ask if our design can better adapt the mass and orientation of our building to its climate. We make assumptions. Instead of asking how big the new house can be, maybe we should ask: “Can it be made smaller?” or “Do we need the new house at all?” These are basic questions for a sustainable earth.

The reasons to embrace sustainability run the gamut, from self preservation, sustaining our life support systems, and offering the chance of quality of life for future generations to sounder economics and cleaner air and water for better human health. Are these good enough reasons? Sure. They are motivating reasons from a variety of perspectives.

However, most of us spend so much energy worrying about day-to-day living, reaching a certain quality of lifestyle, or lengthening our lives, that we divert our thoughts from the *obvious*. As a friend’s mother said, “*For living such a short time we make a pretty big, damn deal about it.*”¹

So I have to ask: Is the purpose of life to live a certain length of time, or, to learn certain things?

I’ve found that the very process of stretching my mind to reach towards sustainability has opened new perspectives. Sustainability has become more than the efficiency or effectiveness of daylighting techniques or reducing toxics in building materials. It has become, for me, a design process *that acknowledges that all things are connected*; that the systems of commerce, building, society, geology, and nature are really one system of integrated relationships and, therefore, that these are co-participants in the evolution of life.

¹ (From Bob Kobet)

This understanding of unity has led me not to worry so much about the outcome but to value the process of discovery; the process of becoming. Becoming what?

Knowledgeable. Yes. Aware. OK. But for what purpose? To teach. To help others understand. To earn a living. Yes. Is this enough? It might be, but it gets better. In the process of discovering the connections of living systems I have also discovered joy, a remarkable level of peace, and a pervading awareness of love. For lack of a better word, I like to think I'm becoming 'more' – not necessarily better, just more. More complete; more aware of the multiple relationships that interact to create and support life, more whole.

From where did this awareness and peace come? How does learning about and practicing this new vision we call sustainability bring this about? I'm not sure – and there's the mystery. Is this a corollary of getting a bit of a take on how life works? Can it have resulted from living as long as I have and learning to pay attention? Is this peace an indication of something good? Is it simply a product of aberrant neural activity? Is it the glue that holds existence together? Is it spirit?

Perhaps, yes to all. I'm not sure it really matters what it is and from where it came. Composer Peter Schickele quotes Duke Ellington about music, "If it sounds good, it is good." I, and likely many of us, test the waters of understanding the same way. If it feels right, then it is something worth pursuing. Connectedness feels this way.

Ultimately, ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence.

Fritjof Capra, the Web of Life.

My experience resonates with Capra's statement though there is scant "rational" evidence to substantiate it. Perhaps aggregating a sampling of other's experiences and perceptions may add some credibility to the idea that awareness of connectedness is related to spiritual awareness:

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Xenophanes complained in his old age, that, look where he would, all things hastened back to Unity. . . . The fable of Proteus has a cordial truth. A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature; Addresses and Lectures*, Ch. 5, Discipline

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one.

The Bible, New Testament, John, 17:22

So is the knowledge that all things are connected enough of a core purpose to give meaning to life? I'm not sure; but it is an exciting personal discovery: all things exist in a mutually supportive and reciprocal relationship to all other things. It means that a tree,

the soil, the river, a caring human, or a decaying one offer something to the interconnected process of life on earth. One of our obligations, if we choose to think of sustainability at any level, is to understand the pattern of relationships we engage when we make choices in our activities. We then can be prepared to ask how our actions can potentially support an even richer, healthier web of relationships.

This is the beginning of reaching towards unity. Yet the concept seems abstract and not especially motivating on the surface. My experience is that the energizing force that makes this exciting is the spiritual connection Capra refers to. Accompanying this spirit, or perhaps a component of this spirit, is the element of love. Is this an over-the-top observation? To some it may be; to others it's obvious. An important question for me is why we relegate the ideas of spirit and love to the metaphysical sidelines and believe that the human-centric empirical perspective is the most useful and acceptable framework for understanding.

Western culture generally lives in a conceptual world of either/or logic and simplistic cause and effect thinking. We isolate, bifurcate, and package complex issues – humans and nature, science and religion, things and spirit – into those that can be analyzed by reduction and others into categories we do not yet have the tools to address. As a result we separate understanding into realms of mind and heart, realism and idealism, logic and intuition, quantity and quality.

Those on the rational side have difficulty taking the spiritual perspective too seriously and leave this awareness of life to the religious theorists. This is unfortunate, since traditional religion of any flavor more often than not leaves the rational and scientific aside. Those in the middle of the apparent science and religious dichotomy are left with sound bites of logic or religion – empirical rationale without emotional connection or religious symbolism without honest experience.

Somehow we need to become whole again – connected and integrated. The concept of sustainability is moving us into a serious relationship with our life support systems. For me, this has opened the gates of communication with various sub-systems, hydrology, geology, plants, and animals in a way that has caused me to move from the disinterested observer condition towards awareness of the linkages between all of these pieces and me as a human being. I find I am energized by this awareness.

None of us exist in isolation. Breaking down the philosophical separation between humans and nature has been the most important step towards unity for me. Like many of us, I had no idea that a barrier existed. I didn't know enough to ask the question. If we don't expect to see something, it is unlikely we will. Until we are ready to formulate a question and ask it, it is unlikely a new perspective can be observed and embraced.

Years ago I experienced a sort of vision (I don't know what else to call it – “connection,” perhaps?) that seems to address the apparent paradox of polarity and unity. It may have planted the seed to be receptive to the question of why we struggle to break

down the wall between mind and spirit, why there are people who embrace unity and others who live in one realm at the expense of the other.

After opening an unexpected gift from a friend, I sat, reflecting on how thoughtful and caring it was. Then, in a flash, just for a second, I felt the universe open. For the briefest moment, I glimpsed the power of creation. I have no idea why it occurred. I felt a “fullness of power”, not describable just in terms of strength. It seemed the kind of power that never needs to use strength of force; the power that God might have.

Along with this, another bit of information was conveyed in an instant realization. *Love is not only just a feeling; love is a thing, a substance.* It is both energy and particle with mass. (Could love = light?)². I saw that this combination of energy and particle as the ultimate foundation, the building block of everything in the universe - the smallest, irreducible point of existence and smallest physical/energetic entity. From it comes not only the love we identify as a spiritual connection, but also the physical realm as well. The only way to define love is to reference love. It links all things and it is the foundation of all things.

Love and faith are more than a good feeling and religion. These are the basics required to bring the poles of the mind and spirit together, reconciling them, making them whole. Love is the unifier of our existence. Faith is the force behind the will to try.

Truth, and the joy that accompanies it, from my perspective, is found and experienced anytime we begin the process of reconnecting to those relationships we have lost. The joy of rediscovering the connections that create life and make life possible seem remarkably similar to the joy of reconnecting with a long lost friend or child. It seems remarkably like love. Might this be the literal source of potential and the endpoint of our journey towards sustainability?

End

² Physicist Don Aiken cautioned that this mass may be light's equivalence fleetingly expressed in mass.