



*An article from
Catholic Rural Life Magazine
Fall 2002 volume 44 number 2*

SUSTAINABILITY AND SPIRITUALITY

John Carroll, Ph.D.
Professor
University of New Hampshire

“Sustainability” is an all too common word describing a condition which these days hardly exists. Indeed, the extremely common usage of the word may be symptomatic of a deeper realization that the condition of sustainability, which most people would posit as both necessary and good, is virtually non-existent. In fact, almost all usage of the word “sustainability”, whether by institutions or by individuals, refers to a superficial and cosmetic form of sustainability which is both inaccurate and dishonest. Can true sustainability, for example, be based on a foundation of non-renewable natural resources such as fossil fuels? Not likely, and yet fossil fuels underly virtually everything we do, the entirety of the way we live and the value system we live by. Can true sustainability be based on an energy intensive profligate wasteful lifestyle such as the world has never before seen? Not likely. Can true sustainability be based on a value system which, at best, concerns itself with miles per gallon in a vehicle but never questions how or for what purpose a vehicle is being used, who or what it is transporting, and why? Not with any application of honesty. Can true sustainability be related to a consumptive lifestyle that knows no limit, a lifestyle predicated on growth for its own sake (the disease of “growthism”, which is what unrestrained capitalism is all about)? No, not if we are rational.

Sustainability, therefore, that is, any honest use of the word, requires far more than the cheap, shallow, superficial and inherently dishonest measures in our behavior toward the planet which we commonly call examples of sustainability, whether in sustainable agriculture and food systems, sustainable usages of energy, and in other ways we utilize and/or relate to the Creation. Sustainability, in fact, requires a change in our fundamental values, it requires us to be fundamentally counter-cultural and revolutionary, at least as to the common culture and its evolution since the Second World War, if not earlier.

A monk of my acquaintance in Minnesota once remarked to me that sustainability is a conversion experience. The secular world might scoff at this, figuring that a phrase like “conversion experience” might be what one would expect from a monk, a priest, a clergyman. And yet, when one thinks about it, is not such a “conversion experience” precisely what is called for if we are to meet the expectations even of our own rationality? Surely, a true change in our system of values, if that is indeed what is called for, could only occur

as a conversion experience, for it would necessitate a fundamental change from deep within us. Not simply to alter how we do things but to change the value presupposition of why we do things is a conversion of the deepest kind.

If, therefore, we argue that sustainability of necessity is a conversion experience, if it is and must be predicated on a deep change of values themselves, and not a half-hearted patch-it-up enterprise, then its expectation cannot be lodged in the prevailing value system, the dominant paradigm as it is called. It must needs come from a deeper place.

With these things in mind we might ask where we might find models of real sustainability. The location of such models should correlate to places, locations, people who put their faith in places other than within the dominant value system. They should be found among people who have developed a deep spirituality, a transcendent spirituality. They should be found among people who place their faith in something bigger than they are, in contrast to those who commonly place their faith in things smaller than they are (including, for example, the mall, shopping, consumption, the car, science, technology, the “techno-fix”, economic growth, growthism, money, power, etc., any or all of which might readily become gods or idols in people’s lives). In contrast, those who place their faith in things bigger than they are, things that transcend them, things that were there before them, things that will be there after them, things beyond their ability to encapsulate or comprehend, or know or de-limit, whether one God, multiple gods, mystery, nature, the cosmos, etc., might demonstrate a greater ability to recognize, to demonstrate, to practice, to truly know sustainability.

Where might we have hope of finding such counter-cultural behavior, such sustainable behavior? One such place might be among people of faith. Not necessarily “people of faith” in the narrow reduced way the world too often defines such people, i.e., members of churches, baptized persons, persons who make claims about faith, though the phrase can include them. But people deeply spiritual (whether that spirituality shows itself or not) who do have faith in mystery, in something which is not them, and which transcends their being. A possible place for the evolution and maturation of true values of sustainability, therefore, might be in communities of such people, in “faith communities”, but would not likely be inclusive of all people in such communities, for such communities are part of the same corrupt unsustainable culture in which all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, live our lives.

Some such people might call themselves Christian. (If one follows Jesus Christ to the crucifixion, one might argue a lack of sustainability, but then there is the resurrection - a very different story.) No doubt Jesus Christ was a practitioner par excellence of counter-cultural behavior, of radicalism, of revolution. And capital punishment was a natural response by the society of His day. That society knew an enemy, a trouble-maker of serious proportions, when it saw one, and acted accordingly (albeit while running the risk of creating a martyr, which it did and which has been done since). So, sustainability might be found within or among some groups of Christians, for Christians claim to believe in a transcendent God, and also believe in immanence, of the Creator in the created, of God in all, and, therefore, ideally, of the sacrality of all things. They believe in the Great Chain of Being, to quote Richard Rohr.

Monastics of all stripes, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, are by definition (and at their ideal) also counter-cultural. For the Christian-related reasons already alluded to, and for other reasons, one might hope to find some

true sustainability among them. However, in addition to being human, they are not totally removed from our culture or the times in which we all live, so they might not always yield good models. But the potential is there.

Indigenous peoples, with their earth-centered reverence for the Creation, for the sacrality of all, with creation-oriented traditions evolving over many centuries, might also be a place to seek models of sustainability, models which are spiritually based. In addition to being part of the anti-sustainable, anti-ecological corruptions of our own times and our world, however, indigenous peoples often have an additional heavy burden, the yolk of many generations of oppression and of destruction of their culture which leaves so many of them incapable of carrying leadership responsibility. They are just too weighted down. But counter-cultural as they are, we should not ignore them as models.

There are undoubtedly other places to look for true models of sustainability. Our own ability to contemplate and reflect will undoubtedly help us to find more such models and to help others do likewise. Let us not, however, underestimate the task at hand. Let us not be tempted to accept false models as we so readily fall into the trap of adoring false idols. Let us strive to understand that sustainability is indeed a conversion experience. Faith, prayer, contemplation and action are all necessary elements in our finding, learning from and putting into practice real sustainability. Let us persevere until we find the truth.



National Catholic Rural Life Conference
4625 Beaver Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199
(515) 270-2634
email address: ncrlc@mchsi.com
website: www.ncrlc.com

This article was published in the spring 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life[®]. No portion of this article may be reproduced without written permission from The National Catholic Rural Life Conference. To purchase the spring 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life, please contact The National Catholic Rural Life Conference office at 4625 Beaver Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199, call (515) 270-2634, or e-mail NCRLC@mchsi.com. The cost is \$2⁵⁰ an issue plus postage and handling.
