

Sustainability and the Sacred

by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

The following article was originally published in 2013

Recent droughts, hurricanes and floods have made us more and more aware of the reality of climate change, and the disastrous environmental effect of our industrialized, materialistic civilization. As our world stumbles to the brink of ecological collapse — the “tipping point” of irreversible climate change — sustainability has become a vital issue. But before we can respond we need to recognize what Earth we are trying to help, what ecosystem we are working to sustain.

Does sustainability refer to “sustained economic growth,” and an environment that is able to sustain our present human civilization, with its energy intensive, consumer driven needs, and image of economic progress? Or does sustainability refer to the whole ecosystem, an interconnected web of life with its vast and amazing diversity of species? Which world are we trying to sustain: a resource to fulfill our desires of material prosperity, or an Earth of wonder, beauty and sacred meaning? To quote Thomas Berry:

There is now a single issue before us: survival. Not merely physical survival, but survival in a world of fulfillment, survival in a living world, where the violets bloom in the springtime, where the stars shine down in all their mystery, survival in a world of meaning.

If we are to sustain this world of wonder, what is essential in our response is not just action but a shift in consciousness, a shift away from seeing the Earth as something separate from ourselves, as a resource to be used and abused. Real sustainability is not the sustainability of our present lifestyle — our image of progress and economic growth — but the sustainability of a sacred Earth, rich in biodiversity and wonder.

In order to change our present global predicament we need to go to the root of the attitude of consciousness that created it. Otherwise we run the risk of trying to solve the problem with the same conditioning, the same thought process, which created it. It is essential at this critical moment that we understand the origins of our present mindset that sees the Earth as a resource, the “environment” as something separate from our self. Some say this attitude is rooted in the Age of Enlightenment and a Newtonian consciousness that sees the Earth as an unfeeling mechanism separate from us and which we can control and master. And certainly the developing tools of science and technology have seemingly given us this ability. But in order to more fully understand this sense of separation it is necessary to go deeper, back in our Western consciousness to when early Christianity persecuted the pagan and Earth-based religions, cut down their sacred groves, and slowly began the process whereby the Earth became no longer something

sacred, in a way unthinkable to an indigenous person. We are the inheritors of this culture that banished the relationship to the sacred from the Earth.

Much of our Western civilization has now forgotten the sacred nature of the Earth, and we are unaware of how this forgetfulness crucially affects our relationship to the environment. If the Earth is just a resource then there is no real responsibility. We can use and abuse it, as we are doing at the present time. If it is sacred then how can we justify our present attitude towards the environment, our acts of ecocide?

Because of this there is a pressing need to reclaim this primal relationship to life and all of creation. If we are to sustain a living, sacred Earth that nourishes our souls as well as our bodies, we need to reconnect with this ancient knowing. It is not something new to be learned, but something essential to be remembered, something that has always belonged to us, only forgotten or censored by our present culture.

The “sacred” is not something primarily religious. It belongs to the primary nature of all that is. When our ancestors knew that everything they could see was sacred, this was not something taught but instinctively known. It was as natural as sunlight, as necessary as breathing. If we embrace the sacred within all of life, we will find that life will speak to us as it spoke to our ancestors. A veil will be lifted and this innate knowing will be present again. This is the ancient wisdom of the Earth itself, the Earth which has evolved and changed over millennia, whose wisdom we desperately need at this present time if we are to avoid an even greater ecological disaster. Again to quote Thomas Berry:

We need not a human answer to an earth problem, but an earth answer to an earth problem. The earth will solve its problems, and possibly our own, if we will let the earth function in its own ways. We need only listen to what the earth is telling us.

We still carry this primal relationship to the Earth within our consciousness, even if we have long forgotten it. It is a primal recognition of the wonder, beauty and divine nature of the Earth. It is a felt reverence for all that exists. Once we bring this foundational quality into our consciousness, we will be able to respond to our present man-made crisis from a place of balance, in which our actions will be grounded in an attitude of respect for all of life. This is the nature of real sustainability. To quote the Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki:

The way we see the world shapes the way we treat it. If a mountain is a deity, not a pile of ore; if a river is one of the veins of the land, not potential irrigation water; if a forest is a sacred grove, not timber; if other species are biological kin, not resources; or if the planet is our mother, not an opportunity — then we will treat each other with greater respect. Thus is the challenge, to look at the world from a different perspective.

For more on a Spiritual Response to our present ecological crisis, see www.spiritualecology.org