

Sustainability & Spirituality: Common Threads

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This paper is a brief summary of “common threads” observed between two areas of study: sustainability and spirituality. “Sustainability” in this context is taken to mean ecological as well as social equity, setting humanity in the context of the web of life, rather than apart from it. “Spirituality” is used in an almost grossly generalized way. Here I am referring to what is sometimes called “new age” spirituality, as well as a large sample of the traditions I have been exposed to from books, talks, and attendance at various spiritual centers. These span Buddhist teachings, Sufism, Siddha yoga and other schools originating from India, and a Western esoteric meditation school. Similarities across a wide variety of traditions are also gleaned from the writings and teachings of Eckhart Tolle. Mainstream Judeo Christian institutions have perhaps less in common with the seven “common threads” outlined below, but those educated in these schools of belief and thought would find notable exceptions.

It is also important to note that the division of what we are here calling “sustainability” and “spirituality” into two separate “areas of study” is itself a somewhat arbitrary division, largely attributable to the materialistic reductionist framework of modern society. In some cultural traditions, particularly Native American and other earth-focused societies, this division would be utterly impossible. Gods and other metaphysical beings or elements are embodied in the earth, plants, animals, and even in human beings themselves. In some cosmologies transgressions or misuse of natural resources incur some form of retribution by the spirit world, translated to very real material world consequences.

With these considerations in mind, the seven tenants outlined below are a starting point. Based on the many hundreds of books available today that address sustainability aims, and the many thousands that discuss spirituality, it is impossible to overstate the diversity and multifaceted nature of both. Nevertheless, these “common threads” are offered to the reader to stimulate new perspectives, a deepening of sustainability work, and as additional avenues for grounding spiritual work.

1. **Preservation of life.**

While this is obviously an aim common to all of life, sustainability and spirituality take a distinctly long-term approach to this goal. Sustainability proponents work toward a way of living on the earth that is complimentary—rather than contrary—to the conditions which support life. From Earth First! activists physically blocking logging machines, to the Global Reporting Initiative’s standardized corporate responsibility reporting protocol, the underlying aim is the same: to preserve and protect life now and for future generations.

Spiritual pursuits are aimed in part at recognizing and/or building consciousness and subtle body structures to perpetuate consciousness beyond this temporal life form. In this context, “Life” is something so beyond human definition that it cannot be contained in the mind, nor is it limited to the terrestrial earth or the material world. Cosmologies offer a context for life after death with either practical exercises to prepare for the stages that immediately follow death, or a model of non-physical dimensions one could expect to encounter following death. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a well known example.

2. Awakening.

The word “awareness” is often used in the sustainability arena in reference to “waking up” to crucial ecological realities, for example: the environmental toll taken by resource extraction, the impact of generating electricity consumed by your household and driving, and the fact that there is no “away” as in “to throw away.” There is also the overarching message touted by a large variety of organizations which lobby individuals to “awaken” to the fact that as a species humanity is utilizing resources at an *unsustainable* rate, and as such we can fully expect environmental and, as a consequence, social and economic collapse in the relatively near future. Frequently used is the phrase “Be conscious of...” which is synonymous with “wake up.”

“Awakening” is very commonly used in spiritual traditions to refer to the simple light of conscious awareness of, for example, one’s breath, or the presence of the person with whom one is interacting. It is also used to denote “awakening” to a greater, overarching level of consciousness. While the details of greater awakening or “enlightenment” differ between traditions, common aspects include cognitive functioning becoming subordinate to pure consciousness, rather than the more common human state in which pure consciousness occurs in exceptional moments and the discursive mind otherwise dominates.

3. Compulsive consumption as a disorder.

Annie Leonard’s *Story of Stuff* is an iconic example of the sustainability movement’s call to *consume less*, and drastically overhaul our mass consumption paradigm. “It’s a system in crisis...you cannot run a linear system on a finite planet indefinitely,”ⁱ she states. The twenty-minute online video has been so successful that it has led to *The Story of Bottled Water*, *The Story of Cosmetics*, *The Story of Electronics*, and others. But *The Story of Stuff* is not alone. A search for “American consumption” in Google immediately brings dozens of articles and books discussing the issue of overconsumption. World Watch Institute summarizes the problem, stating:

*Calculations show that the planet has available 1.9 hectares of biologically productive land per person to supply resources and absorb wastes—yet the average person on Earth already uses 2.3 hectares worth. These “ecological footprints” range from the 9.7 hectares claimed by the average American to the 0.47 hectares used by the average Mozambican.*ⁱⁱ

Eckhart Tolle powerfully summarizes this point from a spiritual perspective in *The Power of Now*:

*Another aspect of the emotional pain that is an intrinsic part of the egoic mind is a deep-seated sense of lack or incompleteness, of not being whole...people will often enter into a compulsive pursuit of ego-gratification and things to identify with in order to fill this hole they feel within. So they strive after possessions, money, success, power, recognition, or a special relationship, basically so that they can feel better about themselves, feel more complete. But even when they attain all these things, they still find that the hole is still there, that it is bottomless.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Indeed, some spiritual traditions are based largely on denial of desires all together as a major method of spiritual attainment. Other, perhaps more modern traditions call for summoning as much consciousness as you can to *be there* (fully present, aware) when you obtain the desired thing. But while there are differences between traditions, a key tenant is that true fulfillment is ultimately not to be found on the strictly material plane.

4. Oneness: we are all connected.

Of the seven threads included here, this is perhaps the most obvious commonality between sustainability and spirituality. Activists the world over frequently make this claim, and yet, at its heart it is a spiritual tenant. Humanity has yet to design a computer sophisticated enough to truly capture the infinite complexity of ecosystems, but most people have a sense that, in fact, the interdependency of life is way beyond the human mind's capacity to comprehend: it does seem as though all systems link up in a kind of super system called "life on planet earth." We are surprised again and again at unsuspected chain reactions; the unintended consequences.

Of course, from a spiritual perspective, the interconnectivity of life is a very tangible demonstration of "oneness." Spiritual texts abound with examples of epic experiences of oneness or "universal consciousness." These experiences were facilitated through the use of psychoactive substances, through various spiritual practices, or seemingly out of the clear blue sky. Edgar Mitchell, Apollo 14 astronaut and founder of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, had one such experience while he approached earth on his return from space.^{iv}

Many in both sustainability and spiritual areas point to quantum physics and the "discovery" that seemingly separate, solid objects are not separate or solid at all, at the atomic level.

5. Change starts within.

This is a cornerstone tenant of sustainability public relations campaigns, imploring the public to take individual responsibility for recycling, to eat less meat, drive less and walk more, shop at this store and not that, etc. "You must be the change you want to see in the world" is a popularized quote from Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi is an example of a human being who was both one of the most effective social activists of all time, and whose life was modeled by deep spiritual practice.

With regard to spirituality the focus on the individual is massive. It is the thing itself. Referencing Eckhart Tolle once again, it is via individual's cleaning up their inner space that the external world (i.e., the environment) is then made new.

The change that you want to see out there, you need to embody that. And that's not primarily what you do. There is something more primary than what you do: it's who you are. Who you are is your state of consciousness. What you do flows out of that.^v

6. In awe.

This might also be called "reverence." Indeed, without this element, people would never have bothered to set aside national parks, or possibly, to ring the alarm bell on any environmental or human tragedy. It is the sheer magnitude of wonder in the face of life's miracles that has spurred humanity to do something—anything—to protect it.

Spiritual doctrines are largely centered on “the sacred,” “the unnamable,” “the infinite.” Spiritual practices are aimed at moving one closer toward the center of this “something” that is no-thing. As one’s ability to experience this no-thing increases, so too does one’s ability to feel it in all of creation, and beyond. When an individual experiences all of creation as sacred, a monumental shift in how a person moves through and relates to creation unfolds.

7. Purity.

Most starkly related to the myriad forms of pollution or despoiling of ecosystems, “purity” is perhaps most readily grasped by an antonym, such as “impure.” After all, “perfection” and “pure” are close in meaning, and perfection is notoriously impossible to define. Today, many natural areas are impacted by human activities to such a degree that “impure” is hardly a sufficient description. Nevertheless, whether it’s human breast milk, air, or the gene pool of Mexican corn^{vi}, purity is a principle that is silently or overtly lauded.

When it comes to spirituality, this word has been used to justify untold horrors throughout human history, largely in a religious context. Nevertheless, it remains a primary, powerful principle. It is a word that by itself represents the far extreme of a spectrum from imperfect to perfect, impure to pure. Fasting for some period of days to “purify” the mind and senses, or washing one’s body before entering a temple are familiar examples of earthly applications. Depending on the context, fasting and washing can be practical or symbolic. Most powerfully, it can be invoked in reference to one’s state of consciousness, referring to a mind *free* from delusion or illusion: in other words, the ultimate form of freedom.

Many of the seven concepts covered above are intrinsic to one another. Yet exploring them individually illuminates facets common to both sustainability and spirituality, as I believe it is important to do. Opening to the vastness of creation—even and especially while at one’s desk, in front of a computer—will alter the world. Spirituality breathes life into material world structures. Only when we can rest on infinity will sustainability emerge as a real possibility. Sustainability, after all, literally implies infinity. And while “infinity” may sound like an impossible concept to comprehend—and it is for the mind—we each have a part of us that is native to infinity, and it is here we can find the resources we need to wrestle with a task that is equally daunting: the urgent need for a worldwide recovery and restoration of our planet’s life system.

ⁱ *The Story of Stuff*. Perf. Annie Leonard. *The Story of Stuff Project*. Free Range Studios. Web. 15 May 2010.

ⁱⁱ "The State of Consumption Today." *Worldwatch Institute*. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now: a Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999.

^{iv} Mitchell, Edgar. "Dr. Edgar Mitchell - Biography." *Ed Mitchell*. Web. 15 Dec. 2011.

^v *Personal Responsibility*. Perf. Eckhart Tolle. *Eckhart Tolle TV | Spiritual Teachings and Tools For Personal Growth and Happiness*. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

^{vi} Pollan, Michael. "A Flood of U.S. Corn Rips at Mexico." *Michael Pollan*. Web. 15 Dec. 2011.