

Chapter 1

Introduction

Overview

As a high school student in the early 1990s I was entering adulthood at the same time that the environmental movement was gaining traction. The word had reached even me: a young person residing in a small, rural town in Northern California. A key message of the environmental movement is that commerce is conducted in ways that are horrifically antithetical to life, both human and non-human, and that we must act to change this, fast, or we will drive ourselves—and countless other species—into extinction. This message dovetailed well with adolescent angst and my deep dissatisfaction with the world around me. What, I wondered, is so wrong with human beings that we are driven to destroy the planet, and even our very own species? I still remember where I was standing in a particular high school classroom when I decided to study psychology: shouldn't a study of the human mind reveal why and how we are malfunctioning to such an extreme degree?

A bachelor of arts in psychology, however, did not get me any closer to the answers I sought. A master's in business administration in sustainable enterprise helped me to see the vast potential for business to contribute positively to ecological and social well-being, but it did not answer the question that was driving me: *what is wrong with us?*

When in 2005 I embarked on a spiritual path (previously having had virtually zero religious or spiritual background), I did not initially realize that this avenue would reveal the incredible complexity of the inner world of human beings far beyond the scope of

modern psychology. Rather, I fell into the work of meditation and personal “deconstruction” as if guided by some higher self that knew better than my thinking mind. As my “shadow,” complexes, and all manner of unresolved issues surfaced, I began to see how my personal baggage wasn’t doing the planet any favors. The global impact of my life, as it turns out, is much more subtle than I had guessed. Whether or not I recycle, eat a vegetarian and organic diet, or even (as I did for two years) consult with corporations to help them to use fewer resources, are only of relative importance. Rather, the most important and direct impact I have on the world has more to do with my inner state of well-being or distress. From this inner place emerges my lifestyle and career choices, and yet, these tangible outcomes remain just a fraction of my contribution. Through spiritual training, I glimpsed life from a much broader perspective than I had ever guessed possible, and gained an understanding that while humanity is in fact crippling life systems on Earth, Life is ultimately a principle that exists far beyond the human mind’s ability to grasp, and something we could never truly vanquish. As a species, we are big on a relative scale, but in the context of the evolution of the universe, we are truly minuscule.

Through formal study of mythology and spiritual and religious traditions I have gained an appreciation for how human consciousness has evolved across time and across cultures. How humanity understands and relates to what we consider divine or sacred shapes our very consciousness, and informs how we understand and relate to the whole of life. As stated by William E. Paden in his summation of the “comparative” religious interpretive frame, “From religion come conceptions of history, time, space, cosmology, nature, and human nature...religion generates what might be called enduring, even

timeless models of reality” (70). This implicates mythology, religion, and spiritual traditions as keys to understanding the human psyche, and to answering my question.

Though my question began “What is wrong with us?” that is not where it has ended. Through personal and academic experience I have come to see the other side of the coin—“What is right with us?”—and to thus gain the holistic perspective enabled by a view of both sides. Further and perhaps most importantly, details have emerged, and this dissertation is an avenue through which to map those strengths and weaknesses, and in the summary chapter, to begin to apply those learnings to the field of sustainability. Those learnings, as it turns out, are the insights of deep spiritual exploration into the psyche of humanity; again, across time and across cultures.

Chapter 6

Summary

As stated in the introductory chapter, I have so far identified seven common threads shared by both sustainability and spirituality. Those not covered in-depth in this dissertation include awakening, awe or wonder, and preservation of life. Before moving on to summarize findings and draw conclusions, these three are covered briefly below.

Additional Common Threads

The three principles that follow—awakening, awe and wonder, and preservation of life—complete the seven common threads put forward in the introduction to this dissertation. Each section is supplied with only a few examples from various spiritual and religious traditions for brevity's sake. Leaving a tradition out of a section does not indicate the absence of, for example, awe and wonder in Judaism. If these three principles were not afforded their own full chapters, it is because they are perhaps more challenging to identify in all traditions covered. However, it remains that they are discoverable across a wide selection of traditions. For the most part the brief examinations that follow will leave aside the additional step of high and low-mode analysis, with the understanding that a more complete exploration would very possibly reveal the life-degrading aspects of the low-mode version of the main principle, and the life-supporting aspects of the high-mode version of the opposing principle. The exception to this is a brief look at the life-degrading aspects of low-mode preservation of life.

Awakening

Awakening versus sleep or unconsciousness is one of the main messages of spiritual teachings. While sleep is conventionally understood to be an obvious state of

non-wakefulness, characterized by lying prone with one's eyes closed and sometimes snoring, spiritual traditions teach that sleep is, in fact, also the norm of most people walking around and talking. The walking-talking version of sleep is contrasted with what is said to be humanity's destiny: complete *spiritual* awakening. Tolle succinctly summarizes the awakening principle from both a spiritual and sustainability perspective, saying "...humanity is now faced with a stark choice: Evolve or die" (Tolle, *A New Earth* 21). The sustainability implications in Tolle's message clearly point to the necessity for a quantum leap in consciousness, which goes well beyond, but also entails, awareness of how one participates in material reality and the rest of life on Earth.

The majority of people in post-industrial societies conduct their lives as if current manufacturing, consumption, and disposal patterns are normal and acceptable, when in fact they are deeply problematic and cause large-scale harm. Sustainability advocates—perhaps especially ecological economists—rail against the conventional economic model of perpetual growth. The obvious question is: how can we keep talking about “growth” on a finite planet? Moore and Rees summarize the problem and suggest a glimmer of hope. After painting the grim picture of global irrationality regarding economic growth and poverty, they summarize:

Discouraging, yes, but let us recognize that the notion of perpetual growth is just a social construct, initiated as a transition strategy to reboot the economy after World War II. It has now run its course. What society has constructed it can theoretically deconstruct and replace. The time has come for a new social contract that recognizes humanity's collective interest in designing a better form of prosperity for a world in which

ecological limits are all too apparent and the growing gap between the rich and the poor is morally unconscionable. (49)

With the words “a new social contract that recognizes humanity’s collective interest,” the authors are asking for awakening to this global misperception. Synonyms of the word “recognize” include understand, acknowledge, comprehend, and see. The authors go on to briefly delineate the worldview implications of this request, saying, “The major challenges to sustainability are in the social and cultural domains. The global task requires nothing less than a rewrite of our prevailing growth-oriented cultural narrative” (49). This relates to their claim that “the time has come” to recognize that “the growing gap between the rich and the poor is morally unconscionable.” In other words, this is a matter of both awakening and care: of *recognizing* that as a global society we are failing to adequately and appropriately care. Kimmerrer also joins together awakening and care, saying, "If we are fully awake, a moral question arises as we extinguish the other lives around us on behalf of our own" (177).

It is challenging to identify a religious or spiritual tradition that does *not* hold awakening to be a focus; that is, as long as the mystical branches are included in the survey. What follows is a brief sampling of where this principle appears in wisdom traditions.

Nasr states, “Not everyone wants to awaken from that daydreaming we call ordinary life, but there are those who do...Sufism is meant for such a person...It provides the means to awaken us from the dream of forgetfulness of who we are and allow us to enter into and remain in the remembrance of the Divine Reality, which is also the heart of our selves, the Self of all selves” (6). Judaism and Christianity are a bit tricky in this

regard, because the Lord inflicts some with sleep, as in this passage in Romans 11 (I am making the assumption that the quotation originates in Hebrew literature):

...as it is written:

“God gave them a spirit of deep sleep,

Eyes that should not see

and ears that should not hear,

down to this very day.”

Later, in Romans 13, Paul links love of neighbors and wakefulness. In 13.8-9 he briefly recapitulates the commandments, ending by saying in 13.10, “Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.” In 13.11 he says, “And do this because you know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep.” The implication is that there is a direct link between one’s ability to fulfill the commandment to love thy neighbor, and wakefulness. In a repeated theme of pointing out the failings of the Jewish people, and that the Lord is unhappy with them, in Deuteronomy 29.3 Moses is apparently scolding the people, yet attributes their shortcomings to the Lord at the same time, saying, “Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” Oneness is linked to awakening in the following notation about a thirteenth century Christian mystic: “...Mechthild of Magdeburg said that the day of her spiritual awakening was the day she saw—and knew she saw—all things in God and God in all things” (Swan 83).

In Buddhism, the root of the Sanskrit word *budh* means “to be awake” (J. Z. Smith 8441). Easwaran provides a narrative for the moment when the Buddha, having received enlightenment, meets with others for the first time. They ask, “Are you a god?”

and “Are you an angel?” and finally, “What are you then?” “The Buddha smiled and answered simply, ‘I am awake’...” (*The Dhammapada* 42).

Awakening is a major theme throughout many Hindu traditions. The *Katha Upanishad* provides just one of many descriptions of the enlightenment process, or awakening:

The truth of the Self cannot come through one
 Who has not realized that he is the Self.
 The intellect cannot reveal the Self,
 Beyond its duality of subject
 And object. Those who see themselves in all
 And all in them help others through spiritual
 Osmosis to realize the Self themselves.
 This awakening you have known comes not
 Through logic and scholarship, but from
 Close association with a realized teacher. (1.2.8-9)

This selection relates awakening to oneness, and discounts “logic and scholarship” (which can be seen as simply the use of language) as viable methods for realization.

Hanegraaff et al. characterizes awakening in a Gnostic context: “Living in ignorance is often compared with a state of drunkenness or a sleep haunted by nightmares, and the attainment of knowledge is compared with becoming sober again and awakening in the bright daylight” (409). The Sufi poet Rumi provides a complementary point to this summation:

When our spirit is not awake to God, our wakefulness is like being shut up behind doors.

All day long the kicks of imagination, worry over profit and loss, and fear of extinction leave the spirit

No purity or gentleness or splendor, nor any way to travel to heaven.

He is truly asleep who has hope in every image and converses with it.

(255)

Most people alive today could be said to be living in “a state of drunkenness or a sleep haunted by nightmares,” or worrying “over profit and loss,” and placing hope in and conversing with “every image.” In fact, while the natural opposite of awakening as a common thread would be sleep or unconsciousness, Tolle at times employs more radical terms: “The mind-identified state is severely dysfunctional. It is a form of insanity. Almost everyone is suffering from this illness in varying degrees” (*The Power of Now* 190). But rather than this being a largescale damnation of humanity, Tolle links it back to care and heart, saying, “How can you resent someone’s illness? The only appropriate response is compassion” (*The Power of Now* 190). It is the challenge of now to reconcile and live the paradox of compassion for those who lack compassion; to consciously hold a space of non-resentment in the face of global unconsciousness. Paula Green speaks to awareness of unconsciousness from the sustainability angle, saying, “A ‘cultural trance of denial’ impedes the capacity to awaken to increasingly pervasive and obvious environmental destruction. Through the defense mechanism of denial, barely articulated primal fears lie below the level of consciousness, providing a false sense of reassurance...” (365). There is an opportunity here for sustainability advocates to access

the thread of awakening within spiritual and religious traditions to appeal to the sense of the sacred latent in target audiences, and perhaps most importantly, to transform our own inner state from being flabbergasted, indignant, and down-right mad into a state of compassion for those with the illness of insanity. Not as a judgment, but rather, a genuine state of beholding the reality of the other. Perhaps that will unleash the real transformative power that is necessary for the widespread social and economic reorganization that needs to take place immediately.

Awe or Wonder

This is a brief overview of the common thread “awe and wonder,” which is framed as life-supporting, while the opposing principle, “apathy or indifference,” is framed as life-degrading. Awe or wonder is an experience at the core of the ecology movement, particularly as framed by early American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir. Capra and Luisi note the presence of awe and wonder in the sciences, saying, “...many of our great scientists have expressed their sense of awe and wonder when faced with the mystery that lies beyond the limits of their theories”(278). Kimmerer adds, “Doing science with awe and humility is a powerful act of reciprocity with the more-than-human world” (252). Emerson, one of the first Transcendentalists, had this to say about our present topic: “It is fatal to spiritual health to lose your admiration. ‘Let others wrangle,’ said St. Augustine; ‘I will wonder’” (Emerson).

As well as being an environmental activist in other ways, the inspiring photographs of Ansel Adams were effective in helping to promote the idea of national parks, as his artistic genius successfully captured the transcendent beauty of natural landscapes and communicated this grandeur to people who had never seen such places or

dared to imagine they existed. In this speech he gave voice to the spiritual dimension of his artistic approach:

The curse of all art is the patina of sentimentality. When the artist is confronted with some awesome vista of the world, or with some fragile reminder of the infinite variety of life, or with some significant aspect of society he must respond according to his training, experience, and intuition. (Perhaps intuition comes first!) He can see only through his eyes, and his vision can only be as effective as his spirit. (Adams)

This “patina of sentimentality” is perhaps not precisely the opposing polarity I list for awe and wonder—indifference and apathy—but rather, is a vapid version. One might justifiably wonder if there is, however, a difference.

Tolle points to the spiritual core of awe and wonder with the statements, “Beauty arises in the stillness of your presence,” and “Presence is needed to become aware of the beauty, the majesty, the sacredness of nature” (*The Power of Now* 96). Adams’ work embodies this stillness and presence. On many occasions he made it clear that his art was not happening only on the material level: “One weakness in our appreciation of nature is the emphasis placed upon scenery, which in its exploited aspect is merely a gargantuan curio. Things are appreciated for size, unusuality, and scarcity more than for their subtleties and emotional relationship to everyday life” (Turnage). Adams thus critiques the surface level approach that many take to artistic appreciation. There is a natural “goes with” between his sense of the spiritual and his sincere love for and efforts to preserve natural areas. This depth of profound appreciation is echoed in Rumi’s line, “I was asleep and Thou awakened me so that I might sing of Thy eyebrow’s curve” (162). “Thy

eyebrow's curve" could be any number of Adams' breathtaking images of Yosemite Valley or other landscapes he captured with his art.

Though the *Upanishads* do not speak directly to awe and wonder, it would be hard to dismiss the sense of awe and wonder that the scriptures evoke, and have evoked in the hearts and minds of readers for centuries. Here is one awe-inspiring selection from the *Mundaka Upanishad*:

Imperishable is the Lord of Love.

As from a blazing fire thousands of sparks

Leap forth, so millions of beings arise

From the Lord of Love and return to him. [...]

Fire is his head, the sun and moon his eyes,

The heavens his ears, the scriptures his voice,

The air his breath, the universe his heart... (Easwaran, *The Upanishads*

1.11.1, 4)

Similarly, Buddhism does not provide much in the way of Sanskrit or Pali material translated into the English words "awe" and "wonder," yet various strains of Buddhism have produced teachings that are awe and wonder-inspiring, and thus it does not make intuitive sense to suggest that awe and wonder are absent from Buddhism. For example, this passage from *The Vimalakirti Sutra* clearly aims to inspire a sense of great awe and wonder: "The Buddha then pressed his toe against the earth, and immediately the thousand-millionfold world was adorned with hundreds and thousands of rare jewels, till it resembled Jeweled Adornment Buddha's Jeweled Adornment Land of Immeasurable Blessings" (Watson 29). One can gain an in-depth sense of the presence of

awe and wonder in Buddhism from this excerpt of *Old Path White Clouds*, in which Thich Nhất Hạnh characterizes the Buddha's teachings about the nature of life:

But suffering is only one face of life. Life has another face, the face of wonder. If we can see that face of life, we will have happiness, peace, and joy. When our hearts are unfettered, we can make direct contact with the wonders of life. When we have truly grasped the truths of impermanence, emptiness of self, and dependent co-arising, we see how wondrous our own hearts and minds are. We see how wonderful our bodies, the branches of violet bamboo, the golden chrysanthemums, the clear stream, and the radiant moon are.

Because we imprison ourselves in our suffering, we lose the ability to experience the wonders of life. When we can break through ignorance, we discover the vast realm of peace, joy, liberation, and *nirvana*. (*Old Path White Clouds* 232)

This remarkable passage relates wonder to heart, to oneness, to awakening (*nirvana*), and by implication, to simplicity: the simple and fulfilling beauty of the creation, including our own bodies.

The opposing principle, indifference or apathy, is an exceedingly insidious state that undermines an individual's ability to relate to the world in a healthy way. The counter principle can be viewed as a reaction to trauma and over-stimulation, as well as a state issuing from the modern chronically nutritionally impoverished diet. To adequately frame indifference and/or apathy as the polar opposite principle of awe and wonder would require a deeper dive into the meaning and implications of these words, and

perhaps a wider array of considerations. Suffice it to say for the moment that the presence of awe and wonder in one's life, whether in the face of a wild landscape, a single leaf, or the note of a bird song, invokes a sense of life-affirming openness. The "opposite" of this might be said to be complete unawareness of the vista or the leaf, or perhaps an actual closing off to awe and wonder; not just not opening, but some degree of active closing. These and more—in addition to the rich panoply of the presence of awe and wonder in a greater survey of sustainability literature and spiritual traditions—would be necessary to form a more complete picture of this principle and a possible polar opposite.

Preservation of Life

Preservation of life is naturally framed as life-affirming, while destruction of life is life-degrading. At first glance preservation of life has much overlap with care and heart: perhaps too much overlap to serve a useful purpose as a distinct principle. Much of the motivation behind, for example, religious charities, is to support and preserve the lives of the underprivileged. However, within schools of mysticism preservation of life quickly takes on an esoteric nature. For example, Vaughan-Lee says of Sufism, "...the Sufi aspires to 'die before death,' to transcend the personal self and experience our transcendent divine nature" (ii). This is the paradox within the preservation of life principle: both a surrender to death and a negation of it; at least, a negation of the commonly understood notion of death. It also relates to oneness, in that a key feature of the experienced as described is "to transcend the personal self" and enter realms divine.

As delineated in the introduction of this study, sustainability work aims not to extend the lives of individuals past the normal lifespan, but rather to create the conditions that sustain the ongoing cycles of life, as well as maximizing the quality of life while

alive. The aim is what might be referred to as relative immortality, meaning that individuals are born and die in accordance with cycles that support the ongoing existence of the species. Extinction of a whole species is considered a loss (and is demonstrably disadvantageous to remaining species in the long run in the form of diminished biodiversity), and increased numbers of a species formerly on the brink of extinction is clearly a gain. (However, an overabundance of one species within an ecosystem can prove a threat to other species, to the ecosystem, and ultimately to itself.) While these details may seem minutia, those who work for a more sustainable world are well served by close examination of what precisely is meant by “sustainability” and “preservation of life.” (Advocates have a collection of somewhat divergent ideas of what precisely the terms mean.)

The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* is just one of many *Upanishads* that deal extensively with immortality as a goal: “To know the unity of all life leads/To deathlessness; to know not leads to death” (Easwaran, *The Upanishads* 5.1). The following quote from the *Bhagavad Gita* unites several common threads: “They alone see truly who see the Lord the same in every creature, who see the deathless in the hearts of all that die. Seeing the same Lord everywhere, they do not harm themselves or others. Thus they attain the supreme goal” (Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita* 219). Oneness, care or heart, awakening (“the supreme goal”), and preservation of life can be easily discerned in this passage.

The resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to the structure of Christianity. Aslan states, “It was precisely the fervor with which the followers of Jesus believed in his resurrection that transformed this tiny Jewish sect into the largest religion in the world”

(*Zealot* 175). This is underpinned by the belief in reward in the afterlife for the faithful, and damnation of the soul for sinners, as in Matthew 10: “And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both the soul and body in Gehenna” (28), and “Everyone who acknowledge me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father” (32). Meister Eckhart links evil to death and good to life, saying, “God shows us that our evil-doing leads to death and the good which we do leads to life” (44), and that the most elevated “certainty of eternal life” (24) is in “those whose love is perfect”: “This happens to those whose love for and intimacy with their God is so great that they trust him completely and are so sure of him that they can no longer have any doubts, their certainty being founded on their love for him in all creatures without distinction” (25). Thus Meister Eckhart repeats the theme of a relationship among the principles of care and heart, oneness, and the experience of god in all, or oneness.

A fragment of a Hermetic text states simply, “Death, if understood, is immortality; if not understood (it is) death” (Salaman et al. 117). One modern spiritual school, the Clairvision School of Meditation, defines a particular goal of their work on cultivating subtle bodies. The “body of immortality...refers to vehicles of consciousness that do not undergo a shattering after death and in which individual consciousness retains a continuity of existence, purpose, knowledge and memory from one life to another” (Sagan, “A Language to Map Consciousness –”).

Cancer as Low-Mode Preservation of Life

One can immediately see the perverse effect of the low-mode version of preservation of life in the modern epidemic of cancer. This is a somewhat dubious

framing on my part, as the principle remains “preservation of life” and not “rampant multiplication of life.” However, as an example of the life principle gone out of control, cancer naturally fits this slot, though the fit may not seem exact. Cancer is a perfect example of short-term, rapid growth that frequently results in a much shorter lifespan for the individual.

The National Cancer Institute states the following:

Normally, human cells grow and divide to form new cells as the body needs them. When cells grow old or become damaged, they die, and new cells take their place.

When cancer develops, however, this orderly process breaks down. As cells become more and more abnormal, old or damaged cells survive when they should die, and new cells form when they are not needed. These extra cells can divide without stopping and may form growths called tumors.

(National Cancer Institute)

The point that “old or damaged cells survive when they should die” helps to mend any conceptual gap in my selection of cancer as an example of low-mode preservation of life. Treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation work to “kill” the cancer (which one might frame as high-mode destruction of life). This condition is the expression of a paradox: the life of one’s own body mutating in such a way as to cause suffering and premature death.

The metaphorical nature of cancer must also be acknowledged in that the description of the disease provides a remarkable parallel to the behavior of humanity at

present, and specifically, the modern Western version of capitalism—“extractive” versus “regenerative” ownership—that is absorbing resources at an extreme rate and causing unprecedented harm. The parallel between becomes uncanny when considering that while all cells in the body create exosomes, a type of vesicle (vesicles being a typical container-like structure within cells), which among other functions enable the cell to dispose of waste (Ledford), “cancer cells crank out more exosomes than normal cells” and the exosomes of cancer cells have been shown to infect nearby healthy cells with cancer (Ledford). The metaphor with the current dominant capitalist paradigm is that the most aggressive businesses—cancer cells—also create the most waste, and in so doing further corrupt the environment and human health. Add to this these further facts:

Cancer cells are also often able to evade the immune system, a network of organs, tissues, and specialized cells that protects the body from infections and other conditions. Although the immune system normally removes damaged or abnormal cells from the body, some cancer cells are able to “hide” from the immune system.

Tumors can also use the immune system to stay alive and grow. For example, with the help of certain immune system cells that normally prevent a runaway immune response, cancer cells can actually keep the immune system from killing cancer cells. (National Cancer Institute)

The metaphor I am employing here is that of government regulations equating to the immune system, and the corruption of the government/immune system when infected with the agenda of our current form of global capitalism/cancer. The result is a

proliferation of massive numbers of cells in the short-term that are wildly out of proportion to the overall organism and its health, leading to otherwise unnecessary suffering and premature death.

In *Owning Our Future*, in a section titled, “The Sickness of Growth,” Kelly profiles the current mainstream goal of all economic activity:

In extractive ownership design, the operating principle is that the continuous growth of financial income is the ultimate good... Over the years, I’d seen that imperative lead to the ethics crisis at Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia, and other companies... The same mentality led investment banks to push expansion into subprime mortgages, for they were loath to admit that all the appropriate lending was finished. (121)

To summarize, cancer provides an apt metaphor for the current form of capitalism at work in the extractive economy (to refer to Kelly’s term discussed earlier in this study): a model that sees growth as the “ultimate good,” completely aside from any consideration for the long-term consequences, and which has been shown to result in life-degrading consequences.

Vision and Other Findings

An unplanned outcome of this study was that by reviewing literature from a wide range of mystical schools, I found a small collection of themes to be in common across schools. These are fire, truth, nous (or intelligence of a different order), language as inadequate for expressing experiences, the primary importance of one’s state of consciousness over and beyond one’s actions, the presence of paradox, and love of others through recognition of the One in all. One theme, however, stands out and in some ways,

pervades this list: vision. Specifically, vision as a method of inquiry that transcends materialistic limitations conventionally placed on communication and knowing, and that both occurs spontaneously and can be enhanced with training.

Vision is one way of talking about experiences of the supernatural, but includes *knowing* in a more direct sense than is implied with words such as “psychic” and “clairvoyant.” This includes vision as in spontaneous waking impressions, or full-on cosmological experiences, such as Dante’s visions in his *Divine Comedy*. Vision is also very much at odds with a scientific worldview, which elevates science to the ultimate ontological authority, leaving no room for non-physical vision. This is a tragic loss because scientism requires dismissal of these exquisitely rich traditions—traditions that together encompasses the entirety of known human history—together with insights that are dispensed with at our peril. Gnosis, as employed by Corbin in chapter five, “Care and Heart,” gets to the crux of this different order of intelligence; an order that facilitates the “new thinking” that we require.

Conclusion

Sustainability is as much about inner transformation as it is about outer transformation, perhaps more. This study began with a quote from Eckhart Tolle, and the task as framed at the outset has been to proceed from this basic understanding: “The pollution of the planet is only an outward reflection of an inner psychic pollution: millions of unconscious individuals not taking responsibility for their inner space.” I cited figures from scientific sources to demonstrate that the human project is flawed, perhaps fatally. Our societies—by which I primarily mean the dominant modern West—are currently configured around values and practices that degrade, rather than renew, life on

Earth. “New thinking” is indeed required, and spiritual and religious traditions hold the wisdom or the keys to the wisdom—the new thinking of an entirely different order—that is indispensable to the realization of sustainability. To demonstrate that spirituality and sustainability already share core values, I provided an in-depth review of four of seven “common threads and common threads,” supplying examples of instances in which they appear in both fields.

Taking responsibility for my inner space *is* a spiritual path. Tolle does not insist on the necessity of mysticism *per se*. Nevertheless, there is crossover between Tolle’s statement and these findings. This is what Tolle says about mystical traditions:

“Throughout history, there have always been rare individuals who experienced a shift in consciousness and so realized within themselves that toward which all religions point. To describe that nonconceptual Truth, they then used the conceptual framework of their own religions” (*A New Earth* 16). This is a subtle but fundamental point: that there is a distinction to be made between the “nonconceptual Truth” of experience, and the “conceptual framework” that religions provide. Repeatedly throughout this dissertation mystics were quoted who made a related point: that language does not adequately capture the essence of the spiritual experience. Spiritual experience remains a “nonconceptual Truth.”

Tolle names examples of mystical schools within world religions:

Through some of those men and women, “schools” or movements developed within all major religions that represented not only a rediscovery, but in some cases an intensification of the light of the original teaching. This is how Gnosticism and mysticism came into existence in

early and medieval Christianity, Sufism in the Islamic religion, Hasidism and Kabbala in Judaism, Advaita Vedanta in Hinduism, Zen and Dzogchen in Buddhism. (*A New Earth* 16)

Tolle explains that these avenues of spiritual exploration and cultivation were “iconoclastic,” that they “did away with layers upon layers of deadening conceptualization and mental belief,” which led to “suspicion and often hostility by the established religious hierarchies” (*A New Earth* 16). Armstrong notes about Christianity specifically, “...the Christians would develop a particular yearning for intellectual conformity that would not only prove to be unsustainable but that set it apart from other faith traditions” (*Fields of Blood* 151).

How can spirituality, being ultimately an interior phenomenon, *really* and practically inform sustainability, which is all about the quality of life in the tangible world? How can mysticism, largely relegated to the fringes even by the religious bodies that gave birth to these schools, be translated into relevant and actionable steps to achieve more efficient use of resources and creative solutions to pollution and habitat loss? Can my inner reality *really* impact the wider world?

This question comes down to immediate experience. My personal experience is that Tolle is correct. Even aside from quantum theory and the presence of the observer mysteriously influencing the behavior of waves and particles, the quality of my consciousness informs my experience of the world, which in turn influences how I react or respond to the world (or avoid the world). Matthew Fox provides a definition of mysticism that is radically simple, and brings the conversation back around to the Earth: “Today I like to tell people that mysticism is about ‘not taking for granted.’ An ecological

awareness is therefore a mystical awareness—not taking health or healthy air, water, forests, soil, for granted” (52). By Fox’s definition, mysticism and presence are mutually entwined, and inform “ecological awareness.”

If we are to accept Tolle’s assertion, the majority of people alive today fail to take responsibility for their inner space, and this is reflected in “outer” space: the quality of our community and environment. I am convinced by Armstrong’s argument in *Fields of Blood* that transferring religious-like faith from religion to the nation-state (and ethnic identity) has been the real dynamic at play in the most extreme displays of what is *wrong* with humanity, that is, the instances in which hundreds of thousands or millions of people have been tortured and murdered by others; sometimes their own community members. Could it be that this same dynamic is the culprit behind widespread, unsustainable behavior? I believe it is, but the power base is shifting again, and this time to corporations.

Could it be that those who have grown weary of the failed promises of the nation-state have transferred this allegiance to the promises of capitalism? It is obvious that, for example, the CEOs of fossil fuel companies are more loyal to their shareholders than the nation-states in which they operate, much less being loyal to religious values, much less religious values. A “transnational” corporation has little or no national allegiance, almost by definition. That is not to say that all fossil fuel CEOs are, or have been, horrible people, though it is easy to fall into condemnation. Short of true sociopathy, one would expect these individuals to genuinely care for their employees, even if that care does not extend beyond the home office, much less to the people who occupy areas of the world that their operations impact. Tolle provides a necessary check for those of us who

presume to hold the moral high ground: “When you confuse the ego that you perceive in others with their identity, it is the work of your own ego that uses this misperception to strengthen itself through being right and therefore superior” (*A New Earth* 73).

Each common thread examined in this study shows itself to be most readily evident in the mystical sectors of each tradition. This is a key finding of this study. I will here give mysticism a broad definition, calling it simply personal spiritual experience. An individual may have a punctual mystical experience in his or her life—perhaps several—or may undergo training as a student of a mystical path. The latter ideally facilitates genuine mystical experience, but there is no guarantee. So, for example, while oneness may be spoken of as an intellectual understanding and a moral value within or without a religious context, unless and until an individual has this experience for him or herself, oneness remains theoretical. The same is true of simplicity. While a person may choose to follow the strictures of a given tradition, unless the motivation for a life of simplicity is internalized, especially within the consumer society of today, going against the tide of compulsive consumption can be a form of suffering. Purity can likewise be a damning aspiration without the support provided by genuine firsthand spiritual experience, and in any case, remains purely theoretical at a mental level, and requires an operational definition at the material level. Finally, care, heart, and love (to combine them into a single principle for the moment), as we have seen, has a superficial modality that shows itself thus with the ease by which it dissipates or is corrupted from the start by selfish or simply inauthentic intentions. It also has a modality that far transcends human description, yet remains a core favorite subject of humanity due to the paradoxical combination of power *and* evanescence.

An analysis of the relationship between sustainability and spirituality necessarily invokes the relationship between science and religion: a very sticky topic if ever there was one. However, this seeming conflict between the two is a product of fundamentalism on both sides of the issue: “scientistic” rather than “scientific” proponents on the one side, and equally blinkered religious dogma on the other. This dynamic constitutes a game of tug-of-war, with the same stuck views pervading both sides, leaving no room for spirituality. The current study does not address this debate head on, but rather, focuses on the wide and rich territory that is not compatible with fundamentalist dogma, avoiding both scientistic and fundamentalist religious perspectives.

This systems approach to highly siloed subject matter, examining and exposing sometimes hidden threads—and threats—links various aspects of sustainability together with a wide variety of spiritual traditions. Today, the topic of spirituality is treated with the same suspicion in mainstream rhetoric that sustainability was treated with in the 1970s and 80s: interesting, curious, but not whole-heartedly embraced due to inexperience and the taint of superstition and religion. Just a few short decades ago, corporations openly addressing environmental concerns were the oddity. Today, the “triple-bottom line” of sustainability is nearly an expected agenda item, even if the substance of the matter is highly questionable. Now, with the faint but discernable rise of “mindfulness” and related concepts, spirituality is making headway.

The ground gained by spirituality as an openly discussed topic is in some ways being called for by the modern Western public. Increasing numbers of respondents to polls claim the “spiritual but not religious” category (Oppenheimer). I believe that this segment is perhaps larger in the younger generations, and growing. Indeed, it is the

category in which approximately 90 percent of my friends and family would fall, including myself. However, the current media climate is one in which religion is covered as a topic far more often than spirituality, leaving a gap where those who neither subscribe to religion nor dismiss spirituality are not spoken to.

Consider that a search today of the world's largest online library database, WorldCat, for non-fiction, English publications in all media, including articles, containing the keyword "religion" renders 2,636,131 results, including 673,530 print books and 1,020,109 articles. An identical search with the keyword "spirituality" results in 235,630 hits, including 65,303 print books and 87,973 articles. While this brief survey is not precisely scientific (one would have to include variations on search criteria, search terms, and consider the historical use of the terms to do a more complete analysis), nor are the results surprising, except perhaps regarding the size of the gap between the two. Also, my brief analysis necessarily separates "spiritual" from "religious," which is problematic. Ideally an analysis would include criteria that includes categories for "spiritual *and* religious" as well as "religious but not spiritual," in addition to "spiritual but not religious."

Presuming that it is only now in the modern age of "enlightenment" that we have come to see the world clearly, that is, without the delusions of religion, requires massive hubris. Hubris requires blindness: blindness to the intimate interweaving of the whole of creation, including one's self as a part of, rather than apart from, the universe. Only if I perceive myself as a separate individual with some level of autonomy is it possible for me to believe that I am more righteous, worthy, and fundamentally important than other people. While some a degree of autonomy is required for individuals to take

responsibility for their actions, so too can this same virtue turn into its opposite. The Homeric heroes in their quest to gain immortality through *kleos* and *tîmê* (generally translated as glory and material rewards) represent the dawning of the capacity for individual striving. Referring back to Anderson's heart-felt speech in *The Corporation*, in which he explains that to many he is considered a modern-day hero—and that “plunderer” is a more accurate term—then one can say that today's transnational corporate executive represents the degradation of that heroic value. Immersed in the milieu of a purposefully crafted market economy that continually send the public messages of not-enoughness, the “responsible” business person cynically proclaims the virtue of their products and services while simultaneously working to cut costs by dismantling or avoiding human health and environmental regulations.

Based on the findings of this study, I suggest that individuals who genuinely care about humans, plants, animals, and landscapes must overtly and out loud align their lives with spiritual principles—within or without religion—to access the spiritual power necessary to effectively meet this survival challenge, and to more effectively speak to the spiritual core of so many whose hearts are at present not readily reflected in the media available. This is not to suggest that “belief” could or should replace the materialistic reductionist worldview that is the current baseline of public discourse. In fact, professing a belief in God does nothing—not one thing—to prevent that same person from taking actions that break the social contract: an ideal upheld even by at least one group of Satanists. Rather, religions are the keepers of spiritual knowledge that far outweighs in depth and importance the dogma of doctrine and belief. The “depth” is constituted by the extremes of human experience: pushing the known limits out past what we thought

possible. The “importance” is constituted by the opportunity to change one’s self from within. One might call this a form of conscious evolution. As we have seen throughout the course of this dissertation, it is in mysticism—first-hand spiritual experience—that we humans truly discover simplicity, purity, and care, heart, and love. It is in first-hand spiritual experience that we awaken to a vision of the wonder of creation that can, perhaps, preserve life on Earth.

There is, however, a final “common thread.” You and I have run across it time and again, across many spiritual and religious teachings, as well as any number of articles, books, and public talks on human and animal rights and the environment. It is the call for a shift to a collective moral high ground: it is a call for peace.

What follows are a very few of perhaps hundreds of thousands of examples of writings in which the author or speaker calls for humanity to change from within to best improve the world without. From the Tao De Ching: “Knowing the eternal is called enlightenment/not knowing the eternal is being ungrounded/and being the cause of one’s own calamity” (Tzu 16). From Chief Oren Lyons: “The spiritual side of the natural world is absolute. The laws are absolute. Our instructions, and I’m talking about for all human beings, our instructions are to get along... We were told a long time ago that if you do that, life is endless” (24). From Capra and Luisi: “...if we have the deep ecological experience of being part of the web of life, then we *will* (as opposed to *should*) be inclined to care for all of living nature. Indeed, we can scarcely refrain from responding in this way” (15). From Václav Havel, former President of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic:

What indeed could change the tendencies of today's civilization? It is my deep conviction that the only option is for something to change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience, in the actual attitude of man... Inventing new machines, new regulations, new institutions will not suffice. Whenever I encounter a deep civilizational problem anywhere in the world -- be it logging in rain forests, ethnic or religious intolerance, or the brutal destruction of a centuries-old cultural landscape -- somewhere at the end of the chain of causes I always find one and the same first cause: a lack of accountability to the world and responsibility for it. (Havel)

In the preface to *Radical Ecology*, Roger S. Gottlieb reflects on the tendency of revolutions to turn into the very thing they were revolting against: "Some of the worst failures came, in short, not from not being radical, but from not being radical enough: not inclusive enough, not honest enough... Awareness of these failures reminds us that revolutionary thought cannot limit itself to critique of the larger society, but also requires self-criticism" (xvi). In a speech on moral and ethical relativism, Martin Luther King, Jr. criticizes the tendency to claim that "anything that works is all right if you can get by with it. We don't talk much any more about the Darwinian survival of the fittest, it is now the survival of the slickest" (King, Jr). He continues, saying, "And I am convinced that if we are to be a great nation, and if we are to solve the problems of the world we must come out of this mountain. We have been in it too long. For if man fails to reorientate [sic] his life around moral and ethical values he may well destroy himself by the misuse

of his own instrument” (King, Jr). In a speech during the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, the Theosophist William Quan Judge urged listeners to practice the Golden Rule:

It is not God who is to damn you to death, to misery. It is yourself...Live with each other as brothers; for the misery and the trouble of the world are of more importance than all the scientific progress that may be imagined. I conclude by calling upon you by all that humanity holds dear to remember what I say, and whether Christians, Atheists, Jews, Pagans, Heathen, or Theosophists, try to practice universal brotherhood, which is the universal duty of all men. (Judge)

In the afterword to *Fields of Blood*, Karen Armstrong supplies many examples of religious and spiritual figures and traditions throughout time who have worked to bring disparate groups together in peace:

One of the most ubiquitous religious practices was the cult of community. In the premodern world, religion was a communal rather than a private pursuit. People achieved enlightenment and salvation by learning to live harmoniously together. They devised meditations that deliberately extended their benevolence to the ends of the earth; wished all beings happiness; taught their compatriots to revere the holiness of every single person; and resolved to find practical ways of assuaging the world’s suffering. (*Fields of Blood* 399–400)

And finally, the practical voice of Robert Engelman, president of the Worldwatch Institute:

Our predicament at least presents us with an opportunity. In the words of poet W. H. Auden, “We must love one another or die.” In order to survive, we may find ourselves dragged kicking and screaming into ways of relating to each other and the world around us that humanity has been aspiring to achieve since the emergence of the great ethical and spiritual traditions many centuries ago. (13)

The theme repeating in all of these voices—and so many more—is the man or woman in the mirror principle: to change the world, change yourself. But as Armstrong points out, this is not *just* a personal task. It is a task for society as a whole. That is, indeed, a paradox. We utterly and completely require a much deeper level of self-reflection and culpability. The circumstances we face requires those of us who wish to do something substantial about it to become mystics and enlightened beings. But as Tolle teaches, this is “not some superhuman accomplishment,” “it is simply your natural state of felt oneness with Being”; it is simply necessary for sustainability to be realized. We are required to ask much more of ourselves: much more being rather than doing. *And*, my community must also, as a system, evolve. Tolle warns, “There's only one thing worse than the egoic 'me,' and that's the egoic 'us'” (*Living a Life of Inner Peace*). If this is true, then perhaps the reverse is true: that the only thing better than being fully awake, fully present, is to be fully awake and present in a community of others who share this aliveness. What might our world look like if we were to become more alive?

A Fable

A group of children is sent off to school for the first time. Upon arrival, however, they don't recognize the school as a place of learning, they don't recognize the teacher as

a teacher, and they don't realize the books are repositories of wisdom. Shortly they begin building forts with the books, disassembling the desks, and basically making a mess of the place. When the teacher protests against this rude behavior, they kill her. When the kitchen begins to run out of food, they kill and eat the cooks. A bird's eye view reveals that within a short time the carefully cultivated grounds have been trampled, the buildings largely disassembled, the adults killed or captured, and children scurrying around their walls of books, forming factions and allegiances and scrounging for food. And no one has learned anything.

This fable is meant to caricature the behavior of the European immigrants to the "New World"; to set up their behavior (and legacy) against the backdrop of the state of the North American continent upon their arrival. Those who fled Europe did so in the hopes of a bright future. Unfortunately, their desperation and worldviews were simply imported, resulting in a fall into animalistic practices, and genocide.

In *Tending the Wild*, Anderson documents examples of a way of being in the world that embodies an abundance of aliveness. She is documenting the methods Native Californians developed to interact sustainably with the world. This relationship required exquisite powers of observation and a massive body of ecological knowledge:

Events were timed with the coming and going of animals and the ripening of culturally important plants...Even the conception of a baby might be planned around specific seasons marked by animal births and the sprouting of plants. [...]

The time of the day, for instance, was estimated from the length of one's own shadow. The round of the seasons was a circular continuum—solidly

connected to complex biological phenomena such as the annual flights of waterfowl, the migration of whales, and the ripening of the acorn crop.

(60)

And communications with the supernatural world were key to knowledge of how to best work with the natural world:

According to various California Indian narratives, humans were given specific instructions through the spirit world to protect the earth's self-replenishing character. To carry out this directive, the people conducted world renewal ceremonies to drive away sickness, prevent natural disasters...and tap the abundance of salmon, acorns, and other foods...Some of these traditions are still enacted today. (61)

What I am suggesting with this fable and these details from Anderson's book is that European immigrants completely missed an opportunity to learn sustainable and abundant ways of living with the animals, plants, and landscapes of this continent. Hundreds of years later the schoolyard has been trampled nearly beyond recognition, and few teachers remain alive. And further, the worldview that gave rise to extraction and extinctions rather than reciprocity as a primary orientation toward the world has been visited out across lands beyond this one, first undermining then infecting the worldviews of whole nations of people who had some measures of reciprocity intact up to and until Western colonialism. "What colonization was about was the commodification of everything. That's what colonization means," says John Mohawk ("Re-Indigenization Defined" 259).

In the midst of the modern concrete and technological world, tracking the length of your shadow as the sun moves through the day seems preposterous. But with the help of Tolle and other spiritual traditions, we can recover the presence and stillness required to do so, metaphorically and literally. Ask a person living in a suburban setting to build a relationship with the plants and animals that lie beyond the boundaries of his or her yard, and most people will have little clue where to begin. But this is what is called for. “I think that when we talk about re-indigenization, we need a much larger, bigger umbrella to understand it. It’s not necessarily about the Indigenous Peoples of a specific place; *it’s about re-indigenizing the peoples of the planet to the planet*” (Mohawk, “Re-Indigenization Defined” 259). Kimmerer contributes, “For all of us, becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your children's future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it” (9).

In *The Systems View of Life*, Capra and Luisi define sustainability in the following way: “Since the outstanding characteristic of the ‘Earth household’ is its inherent ability to sustain life, a sustainable human community is designed in such a manner that its ways of life, business, economy, physical structures, and technologies *do not interfere with nature’s inherent ability to sustain life*” (353). Looking back on centuries of interference with, and destruction of, “nature’s inherent ability to sustain life,” and moreover, looking forward to a looming precipice, one can see the sanity of this approach. But it is only half of the story, and we require a whole story. Anderson presents a different definition:

For indigenous cultures, intimate interaction with plants and animals comes from the rituals of prayer, of offerings, songs, and ceremonies, and through keen, long-term observation, communication, stewarding, and

judicious use. Native elders repeatedly remind non-Indians that we will not learn to live compatibly with nature simply by locking up lands and large tracts of restored wilderness. (338)

One illustration of this principle in action is provided by Carl Safina in *Beyond Words*. He criticizes the laws that have been enacted in the United States and Canada that prohibit interacting with wild whales, contrasting it with a program in Baja, Mexico:

The whales have plenty of privacy [in this sanctuary] if they prefer it. Some, though, choose to approach boats with their babies besides them. In the United States or Canada, stroking a whale could land you a conviction. But in Baja, if you *don't* stroke the whales, they'll leave you, looking for more interesting and interactive humans...Laws making it illegal to play music or whistle to whales does nothing to prevent humans from crowding them out of existence. In fact, in this strange new time when animals need human political constituency in order to survive, such enforced alienation may only hasten their demise. (377)

As quoted earlier from Kimmerer, herself a scientist, "Doing science with awe and humility is a powerful act of reciprocity with the more-than-human world" (252). Remarkably, it is not only a much wider and deeper interaction with spirituality that is required; so too must we enact a much wider and deeper engagement with science; science as in simply watching, witnessing, and adjusting according to our careful observations, just as human beings have done for millennia. But somewhere along the way, we lost sight of the wider world, of the plants, animals, and landscapes, and our

relationships with them. We became preoccupied with economics and stifled versions of religion. We cut ourselves off from life.

Go into your own religion, to the mystical aspects of it, to the heart of it, to the alive parts. Go into nature, deeply. Go into your own Self. The *Katha Upanishad* says, “To him who sees the Self revealed in his own heart belongs eternal peace—to none else, to none else!” (Prabhavananda and Manchester 23). There was a time when simplifying one’s life in order to better facilitate awakening to the Self in one’s heart, when “taking responsibility for one’s inner space,” was an optional practice. That time has come to a close. Peace among human beings and between human beings and the rest of Earth is no longer optional, it is a necessary precondition for life on Earth to continue. A new relationship between peoples, a new relationship with other forms of life, and a renewed relationship with Spirit, can be our bridge to wild and joyful peace.