

# **A Spirituality for Sustainability: Heart and Soul for the Long Haul**

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## **What is spirituality?**

It is a steepening, like soaking tea leaves. It is a steepening of the mind and heart, body and soul. We are the leaves, the bodies immersed in a broth of mystery, absorbing the way of Nature and the way of Transcendence.

Spirituality is a way of living. It is an attitude, a motivation, a feeling practiced and a practiced feeling. A feeling practiced becomes a habitual way of feeling. And a practiced feeling points to the recurrence as well as the deepening that comes with a process of valuation, recurrent integration, and sustained conviction.

Spirituality is not the end or purpose of living, the goal for which one lives. It is a manner, a style, process or method by which one lives in light of the goal. It is the stuff of character by which one creates character. Spirituality shows itself in the seasoning, which accompanies one's way of being.... like tea, one can be steeped! It is the steepening which gives character to one's spirituality. How are you steeped? Are you steeped into some tradition, a way of life and being which has informed your thoughts, your words, your choices and actions? How have you steeped yourself? Lightly or thoroughly?

One can be steeped deeply or weakly as tea can be. Steepening is a matter of the mind and heart, body and behavior. It is a deepening, like a descent into a cool, refreshing spring. It is a thickening, like the fashioning of a community. A community can be profound as well as superficial, it can be intimate in its deep ecology and deep economy or it can be all surface. Community is the achievement of common meaning...what meanings (feelings, symbols, worldviews) are shared among the congregants? Are they developed and fashioned into a depth or are they undeveloped and only surface...like strangers passing in the night? Like a veneer that is removed with ease, that doesn't get absorbed for longevity and sustainability. Some people when they move give up church. How deeply grounded have been their convictions and belief systems?

### **A spirituality of sustainability**

We are not alone in our endeavors. This, I believe, is the truth of our existence. We are not alone, atoms. We are part of a community. The poet John Donne wrote: "No man is an island, no man stands alone. Each man's joy is joy to me, each man's peace is my own." Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote: "I am a part of all that I have met." We are not alone. We are participants in a communal venture or search. That search for direction in life is something that may be found or missed.

I propose that our finding is one where we discover that we have partners along the way. The search for direction is a partnership: with the energetic rhythms of the

cosmos, or with the transcendent measure drawing us, luring us, to attunement with itself. So the deepening is a thorough and grounded finding.

(For Christians this is the world-transcendent measure incarnate, crucified, and raised from the dead, where the search for the truth about existence finds the searcher becoming the one searched for.) ("You would not be seeking me had you not already found me." Saint Augustine)

A spirituality is a being-in-love. Being in love with nature. Being in love with God. Loving our neighbors as ourselves and including in the circle of friendship animate and inanimate life.

The cosmological way is the way of the earth, the way of kinship with the earth, with the springs, the fountains, the water courses; with the flowers, birds, two and four footed creatures. This is the way of an original blessing, a partnership with the cosmos by which we are part of the garden and learn to "care for and to tend the garden." (Genesis) We are part of all creation which itself "groans for its completion." We are one with the biotic community: "No less than the trees and the stars, we have a right to be here." Such a way is at one with the Transcendent Being: authentic partnership with Nature is partnership with God. We are one in the web of life! (This section is adapted from Robert Doran's "Theology and the Dialectic of History" written when he was at Regis College, Toronto)

The transcendent way is the way of going beyond the senses, the imagination, concepts, judgments to a realm beyond, mystery properly so called. The cosmological way and the transcendent way are not contradictory.

Transcendence can encompass the cosmos without disruption. The cosmos is God's word just like the scriptural Word of God it befriends us. There is a discourse about sustainable development these days that talks about various capitals. From the ground up one might talk about natural capital, built or manufactured capital, human capital, social capital, cultural capital, and less frequently, but in my mind and perhaps in yours, religious or spiritual capital. One dimension sublates, goes beyond and includes what preceded it like those Russian dolls that are found one inside the other. So, a perspective that includes explicitly religious capital talks about the gift of grace, or the dimension of being in love with a transcendent source that is the source of our loving. This is perhaps the mystical dimension to our politics and policies, what provides the motivation for the long term, it is first of all a matter of the heart that the mind and behavior strives mightily to act upon.

Can you tell, I grew up in the country? Many the day I would walk (or run) well worn paths through ancient New England woods, sit by quiet flowing streams, wonder about the sounds and smells of these terrestrial events, allowing myself to be absorbed by them, perhaps in a way we might speak of as a "nature mysticism"

Today, when I find my way to work, I wind my on bus and subway, noticing the natural landscape as I move, flowers, trees, green lawns and bushes. Our early habitats create our lifelong habits. Here is an example of the nurture of nature. The ground of my being is a love of earth and earth's creator. Earth is like a scripture, the original Word.

Such absorption and love of nature at one point gave rise to a poem that spoke itself through me, reflecting my struggle to integrate mind and heart, body and spirit, being in the world with the world of Being :

### **Song for a New Creation**

I am earth, brown, orange and black. I am red clay.  
The grass is my mantle, Lillies form my bridal bouquet.  
I want to sing a wedding song, a song of a new creation.

I am earth, mother of all the living.  
Spirit, Great One, I desire you.  
In our abiding together we can give birth to Beauty.  
The energy that flows through me drives also the stars.

Spirit, Great One, seek not only the heights.

Come with me from mountain tops, into the cracks and crevices of creation,  
among the poor ones, long forgotten.

Come into my unsettled depths.

I will show you the friendliness and companionship of earth.

I am earth, humble, neglected, bruised and broken.

I am your lover, Spirit, though you fear me.

I want to be your companion. Together we can live one full life.

The energy that drives the stars flows also through me.

Come with me, Spirit, join with Humilis, the earth.

Come, Great One, abide with me.

Let us build together a home.

Broadly speaking, I understand religion as a conscious orientation by human beings toward an incomprehensible, gracious and saving mystery which in our cultural context we usually call "God," but which others may call by different names. Muslims call it Allah, Hindus Brahman, Buddhists nirvana or dharma, Lakota Indians wakan, Taoists the Tao. My own preference is to think of religions generally as ways of orienting us toward the inexhaustible, enlivening, and liberating depth of reality that we may call by the name "mystery." Here is the context of steepening. There is in the world a charged field of love and meaning

which we enter through some such steepening process. For some of us, the contemplation of nature is God's silent communion with us. So that the cosmos becomes a portal for mystery, while retaining its own beauty and attraction. Our care for creation is linked to the Creator's care for the community of the cosmos that is Habitat, home. We Christians speak of a sacramental vision of the universe. A sacramental perspective is a sustainable perspective. "Natural and social ecologies belong together." The web of life is one. Partnership with nature and partnership with God are related elements in an integral spiritual vision. A vision that can be deepened over time and that can sustain us for the long haul as we seek, as Tennyson said "a newer world" One way of doing congregational analysis is that developed by the late Jim Hopewell (Dr. James Hopewell, "Congregations: Their Structures and Stories", 1983) It is based on the great work of Canadian literary critic, Northrup Frye, from his "Anatomy of Criticism". The cycle of the seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter are aligned with the cycle of human development: childhood, youth, maturity and old age. These are aligned with morning, noon, afternoon and night. They are all connected with categories of stories: comedy, romance, tragedy and satire. The fundamental question becomes: "What kind of story are we in?" So too the cosmological cycle of the indigenous becomes the symbolic universe of humanity, a resource for ethical reflection.

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher at McGill University has written a book about secularity. He explores the possibility of religious conviction in a secular

age...where the fundamental conditions of faith are questioned. He has a significant insight into motivation that I think is relevant to our interest in sustainable spirituality, especially for those of us in the field of answering human hungers or heart's desires. His book, *A Secular Age*, addresses what he calls the notion of "fullness."

On Fullness: p. 5, *A Secular Age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2007

I believe this can be said about us, those of us here today.

"We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be." This is true in lives of generous service, in the place where spiritual provisioning is the goal, especially providing hope for the long haul. We enter the griefs and longings of our fellows—including plants and animals. We have heard here the experiences of Leigh Sinclair, Elaine Kowpur and Ruth Robertson, who in their workshops show us how entry into suffering is redemptive and life affirming. They are wonderful examples of resilience at work amidst decline and shock. As Charles Taylor says:

“This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on the level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, when we feel ourselves there.”

“The identification of fullness may happen without a limit experience .... (It can be felt as an undertow, that only occasionally breaks through to consciousness)...There may just be moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Our highest aspirations and our life energies are somehow lined up, reinforcing each other, instead of producing psychic gridlock. P. 6”

“The sense of orientation has also has its negative slope; where we experience above all a distance, an absence, and exile, a seemingly irremediable incapacity ever to reach this place; an absence of power; a confusion, or worse, the condition often described in the tradition as melancholy, ennui....What is terrible in this latter condition is that we lose a sense of the place of fullness is, even of

what fullness could consist in; we feel we've forgotten what it would look like, or cannot believe in it anymore. But the misery of absence, of loss, is still there, indeed, it is in some ways even more acute. P. 6"

"There are other figures of exile as well, which we can see in the tradition, where what dominates is a sense of damnation, of deserved and decided exclusion forever from the fullness; or images of captivity, within hideous forms which embody the very negation of fullness...." Examples of this have been provided by Dittman, in his story of captivity in Canada.

"thirdly, there is a kind of stabilized middle condition, to which we often aspire. This is one where we have found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness. We come to terms with the middle position, often through some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us; for instance, which contribute to our ordinary happiness, or which are fulfilling in various ways, or which contribute to what we conceive of as the good. So often, in the best scenario, all three: for instance, we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practicing a vocation which we find fulfilling, and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare. P. 7" I think this motivating fullness characterizes a spirituality of sustainability. The more we enter into the complexities involved in our efforts, the more deeply we move into the desires and fears associated with the contexts of our service. The more we recognize the fullness inherent in our

intentional quest, even without the realization of a satisfaction. We don't live always in the pleroma, the fullness, but we do have glimpses from time to time and that sustains us.

### **Spirituality for Sustainability**

Some of the elements of spirituality for sustainability then, include the following:

**Long term perspectives:** a spirituality of sustainability looks toward the long term as the focus of one's perspective. Such a consciousness can be immersed in the here and now, but only for the time being, it's general orientation is for the long haul, and the perspective is generational. Striving that the next generation should benefit from earth's and the community's generosity as have previous ones.

**Self-Transcendent:** a spirituality of sustainability is oriented to personal and communal growth, toward self transcendence and group transcendence, not the exponential growth of markets, but the growth that allows insight and emotion to shift with the broadening perspective of what is for the common good.

**Communal:** communion with nature, communion with God. The rhythms of cosmic process lose our allegiance completely when our partnership with them is

transmuted beyond recognition by our passion for mastery, control, and instrumental exploitation. We need to nurture a meditative spirit, a spirit that balances calculating reason's will to power with the soul's innate abiding in the beauty that is already bestowed as gift: with friends, family, our garden, our land.

**Gentleness:** this is captured in the notion that we should walk lightly upon the earth, or live simply so that others may simply live.

Such a spirituality of sustainability can inform our perspectives on agriculture, development and community, as the Bishops of the rural region called Appalachia in the U.S. wrote (At Home in the Web of Life):

**Sustainable communities:**

"In our present times, we believe,  
the mighty wind of God's Spirit is stirring up  
people's imaginations  
to find new ways of living together,  
based especially on the full community  
of all life, including  
  
love of nature, and  
  
love of the poor.

We call these new ways

The rooted path of sustainable communities.

These sustainable communities will

Conserve and not waste,

Be simpler but better,

Keep most resources circulating locally,

Create sustainable livelihoods,

Support family life,

Protect the richness of nature,

Develop people spiritually,

And follow God's values.

Sustainable Development:

In the judgment of many people,

A sustainable society would build primarily

On the rooted informal local economy,

All in communion with the local ecosystem.

In sustainable development,

All businesses new or old,  
Local or from the outside,  
Need to respect the divine order  
Of social and natural ecology.

Sustainable Agriculture:

While agriculture should protect nature,  
It should also protect humans.  
We believe that agriculture needs  
To follow social ecology as well.  
So agriculture needs to be

Not only ecologically sustainable  
But also socially sustainable.

We can learn to be partners with nature and God; with a spirituality steeped in an integral communion that sees no contradiction between the wedding of Spirit and Earth, a spirituality of sustainability—of communion. This is a good space, for us, to be in.

Thank you