

“Solutions to Sustainability”
Philip Clayton
In Honor of the Community at Myra House

I dedicate this talk to the ministries of Myra House, and to its founders, Sung and Myra Sohn. During the many years that I commuted to Claremont School of Theology from my home in northern California, Myra House was my home and my haven. I was sad to leave the redwood forests that are my home ecosystem. But I was sustained by the community times at Myra House, and especially by the times of meditation and worship in the chapel as the sun cast its first rays on the mountain just to our north.

Let's open with a Buddhist incantation, called “Earth Prayer”:

We gently caress you, the Earth, our planet and our home.
 Our vision has brought us closer to you, making us aware of the harm we have done to the life-network upon which we ourselves depend.
 We are reminded that we have poisoned your waters, your lands, your air.
 We have filled you with the bones of our dead from war and greed.
 Your pain is our pain.
 Touching you gently, we pray that we may become peace-bringers and life-bringers so that our home in its journey around the Sun not become a sterile and lonely place.
 May this prayer and its power last forever.

-- Sensei Ulrich, Manitoba Buddhist Temple 3.¹

A difference understanding of “solution”

We think of “solutions to sustainability” as implying that we can fix the ecological problems and avoid the impending climate catastrophe. I no longer believe that this is true. Instead, I'm going to suggest that we think of “solutions to sustainability” in a very different way. The “solution” has four dimensions:

- understanding the fate of the earth
- seeking an inner balance, a balance among *all* systems, including the systems that constitute our own life. Herein lies the heart of spirituality and wholeness
- establishing communities that foster this balance

- cultivating ecology and spirituality together, as inseparable twins

Understanding the fate of the earth

We need to seek out, rather than being afraid of, knowledge about the climate crisis that our planet now faces. Global climate change has many manifestations, but the clearest is greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Anything above 350 parts per million (ppm) is problematic. The planet just passed the 400 ppm mark, and it's unclear whether we will reach 450, 500, or even 600 ppm before we stop.

The environmental consists of systems built on systems built on systems. Effects at one level are compounded at the next, sometimes leading to exponential changes. For example, the warming of the climate kills forests across Canada, and the dying trees release greenhouse gases, which further warms the planet. The melting of the permafrost in Alaska and inside the Arctic Circle raises similar concerns.

One more example: the melting of the polar ice cap is a result, not a cause. We expect the cap to completely melt soon, perhaps as soon as the summer of 2014. The cap is white and therefore reflects the sun's rays back outward. When it melts, those rays pass through the water and warm the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. But it's packed with stored methane, which means that it will release yet more gases into the atmosphere. The resulting rise in the water level of the oceans could reach three feet by end of this century, and perhaps more.

The scientific consensus in the "IPCC Fourth Assessment Report"² is that "Anthropogenic warming could lead to some impacts that are abrupt or irreversible, depending upon the rate and magnitude of the climate change." Extinctions are one of the greatest worry, because of the devastating and irreversible results of loss of biodiversity. The authors write that "There is medium confidence that approximately 20-30% of species assessed so far are likely to be at increased risk of extinction if increases in global average warming exceed 1.5-2.5 °C (relative to 1980-1999). As global average temperature increase exceeds about 3.5 °C, model projections suggest significant extinctions (40-70% of species assessed) around the globe."

The science is clear. There are as many as a dozen different models that predict the results of these processes. They suggest that the results will last for centuries, and perhaps for as long as a millennium.

Seeking an inner balance

There was a time when we thought our actions could change the outcome. We were conservationists. I grew up with bags of recycling throughout my home and plastic bags hanging on strings for reuse. The evidence now is clear that such steps won't be enough.

Of course, we should still act to conserve. But the reasons are now internal, not external. The evidence is fairly strong that it's too late to prevent environmental catastrophe, and that humans are not about to change their patterns of consumption. I write this just after returning from several weeks of camping in Norway with my family. The Scandinavian countries are far better than the U.S. at living in a sustainable fashion. Still, even there one sees widespread waste of electricity and other resources. The rate of increase in consumption in China and India, and indeed throughout the developing world, means that the scientific predictions are very likely to come true.

Let me put it bluntly: *What was a means/ends task — conserving resources — has now become a matter of spiritual priorities.* It's now a matter of living holistically, no matter what the outcome. To live in balance with other persons and with all living things is still valuable, even if what we don't change the course of planetary development.

Establishing communities that foster this balance

Consider the parallel between the situation of today and the practice of medieval monks and nuns. They lived in what we now call the Dark Ages. The Roman Empire had fallen, and the Catholic church was often corrupt — more like an emperor and an army than like the followers of the gentle rabbi Jesus.

The monks and nuns studied the scriptures. They kept the ancient practices alive. They lived lives of *greater* devotion in an age when few practiced. They also lived close to the earth.

That's amazingly like our situation now. The U.S. is committing waste like no other nation in the history of the planet. The government is not heeding the warnings about the facts. The global addiction to self, to comfort, and to consumption is out of all control. The neo-monastic movement in general, and communities like Myra House in particular, are the modern-day versions of the monastic communities of the medieval period.

Cultivating ecology and spirituality together

In these new communities, ecology and spirituality must exist together, like inseparable twins. The practice of one's spirituality can't be disconnected from one's own surrounding ecosystem, and from the web of life as a whole. Remember Wordsworth's immortal words in "Tintern Abbey" when we wrote of

A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

This is what the religious traditions have always taught. Christians and Jews and Muslims have taught that we're put here to care for the earth. The Buddhist notion of *pratitya-samutpada*, or Depending Arising, means that nothing is or exists except through its connections with all other things. The beautiful Jain teaching that *all* living things have *jiva* or soul.

(Beth McDuffie's talk was given at this point.)

In conclusion: Myra House

I have urged you to think of "solutions to sustainability" not as an *outcome* but instead as a *process*. That process has four central features:

- understanding the fate of the earth
- seeking an inner balance, a balance among *all* systems, including the systems that constitute our own life.
- establishing communities that foster this balance
- cultivating ecology and spirituality together, as inseparable twins. The holism of the whole person is like the complementarity of *yin* and *yang* in the ancient teaching of the Tao (the Way). Think of the interconnecting parts: part and whole, body and soul, fact and value, science and spirituality.

Myra House is a sacred place where ecology and spirituality come together. Residents and guests learn about the holism of the person — in her relationships with herself,

with those around her, and with the environment. Myra House symbolizes, and lives, a monastic response to a world rushing toward an unsustainable future.

The human species needs sacred places that allow us to band together in communities. Individuals can't do it alone. We also know that, like the medieval monasteries, communities will magnify our visibility. Remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:14-16)

Myra House is truly the community built on a hill!

The Myra House community also shows what education needs to look like today. It's not just about learning facts; it's about learning how to live well together. It's prayer and meditation ... and interpersonal skills ... and growing organic plants and raising chickens. The education that the world needs combines (a) ecological practices and simple living, (b) spiritual practices of holism, and (c) learning to live together in community.

I'd like to close with a famous poem by Rumi, which you find frequently quoted on the web:

I died as a mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?...
... Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar
With angels bless'd; but even from angelhood
I must pass on: all except God doth perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.
Oh, let me not exist! for Non-existence
Proclaims in organ tones,
To Him we shall return.³

Or, in the well-known phrase from Haféz, “Creator, pour rain from the clouds of generosity, I will become dust and get out of your way.”

Endnotes

¹<http://www.worldhealingprayers.com/3.html>, accessed August 26, 2013.

²See

http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/publications_ipcc_fourth_assessment_report_synthesis_report.htm, accessed August 26, 2013.

³http://www.consolatio.com/2005/04/i_died_as_a_min.html, accessed Sept. 17, 2013.