

Sacred trust

Don't fool with Mother Nature, warns His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales

The Globe and Mail, Wednesday, May 31, 2000

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By His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales

The idea that there is a sacred trust between mankind and our Creator, under which we accept a duty of stewardship for the Earth, has been an important feature of most religious and spiritual thought throughout the ages. It is only recently that this guiding principle has become smothered by almost impenetrable layers of scientific rationalism. I believe that if we are to achieve genuinely sustainable development we will first have to rediscover, or re-acknowledge a sense of the sacred in our dealings with the natural world, and with each other. If literally nothing is held sacred any more -- because it is considered synonymous with superstition or in some other way "irrational" -- what is there to prevent us treating our entire world as some "great laboratory of life" with potentially disastrous long-term consequences?

Fundamentally, an understanding of the sacred helps us to acknowledge that there are bounds of balance, order and harmony in the natural world that set limits to our ambitions, and define the parameters of sustainable development.

We know that trying to graze too many sheep on a hillside will, sooner or later, be counterproductive for the sheep, the hillside, or both. We understand that the overuse of insecticides or antibiotics leads to problems of resistance. And we are beginning to comprehend the full, awful consequences of pumping too much carbon dioxide into the Earth's atmosphere.

Yet the actions being taken to halt the damage known to be caused by exceeding nature's limits in these and other ways are insufficient to ensure a sustainable outcome. In other areas, such

as the artificial and uncontained transfer of genes between species of plants and animals, the lack of hard, scientific evidence of harmful consequences is regarded in many quarters as sufficient reason to allow such developments to proceed.

The idea of taking a precautionary approach, in this and many other potentially damaging situations, receives overwhelming public support, but still faces a degree of official opposition, as if admitting the possibility of doubt was a sign of weakness or even of a wish to halt "progress." On the contrary, I believe it to be a sign of strength and of wisdom. It seems that when we do have scientific evidence that we are damaging our environment, we aren't doing enough to put things right, and when we don't have that evidence, we are prone to do nothing at all, regardless of the risks.

In this technology-driven age, it is all too easy for us to forget that mankind is a part of nature and not apart from it. And that this is why we should seek to work with the grain of nature in everything we do, for the natural world is, as the economist Herman Daly puts it -- "the envelope that contains, sustains and provisions the economy, not the other way round." So which argument do you think will win -- the living world as one, or the world made up of random parts, the product of mere chance, thereby providing the justification for any kind of development?

This, to my mind, lies at the heart of what we call sustainable development. We need, therefore, to rediscover a reference for the natural world, irrespective of its usefulness to ourselves.

Above all, we should show greater respect for the genius of nature's designs, rigorously tested and refined over millions of years. This means being careful to use science to understand how nature works, not to change what nature is, as we do when genetic manipulation seeks to transform a process of biological evolution into something altogether different. The idea that the different parts of the natural world are connected through an intricate system of checks and balances, which we disturb at our peril, is all too easily dismissed as no longer relevant.

In an age when we're told that science has all the answers, what chance is there for working with the grain of nature? I believe that if a fraction of the money currently being invested in developing genetically manipulated crops were applied to understanding and improving systems of agriculture that have stood the all-important test of time, the results would be remarkable.

St. Matthew, in his wisdom, emphasized that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as the lilies of the field; Rachel Carson eloquently reminded us that we don't know how to make a single blade of grass. Faced with such unknowns, it is hard not to feel a sense of humility, wonder and awe about our place in the natural order.

So do you not feel that, buried deep within each and every one of us, there is an instinctive, heart-felt awareness that provides -- if we will allow it to -- the most reliable guide as to whether or not our actions are really in the long-term interests of our planet and all the life it supports? This awareness, this wisdom of the heart, maybe no more than a faint memory of a distant harmony, rustling like a breeze through the leaves, yet sufficient to remind us that the Earth is unique and that we have a duty to care for it. Wisdom, empathy and compassion have no place in the empirical world, yet traditional wisdoms would ask, "Without them, are we truly human?" A good question. It was Socrates who, when asked for his definition of wisdom, gave as his conclusion, "knowing that you don't know."

In suggesting that we will need to listen rather more to the common sense emanating from our hearts if we are to achieve sustainable development, I'm not suggesting that information gained through scientific investigation is anything other than essential. Far from it. But I believe that we need to restore the balance between the heartfelt reason of instinctive wisdom and the rational insights of scientific analysis. Neither, I believe, is much use on its own. So it is only by employing both the intuitive and the rational halves of our own nature -- our hearts and our minds -- that we will live up to the sacred trust that has been placed in us by our Creator, -- or our "Sustainer," as ancient wisdom referred to the Creator.

While there is no doubt that globalization has brought advantages, it brings dangers, too. Without the humility and humanity expressed by Sir John Browne in his notion of the "connected economy" -- an economy that acknowledges the social and environmental context within which it operates -- there is the risk that the poorest and the weakest will not only see very little benefit but, worse, they may find that their livelihoods and cultures have been lost.

Only by rediscovering the essential unity and order of the living and spiritual world -- as in the case of organic agriculture or integrated medicine or in the way we build -- and by bridging the destructive chasm between cynical secularism and the timelessness of traditional religion, will we avoid the disintegration of our overall environment. Above all, I don't want to see the day

when we are rounded upon by our grandchildren and asked accusingly why we didn't listen more carefully to the wisdom of our hearts as well as to the rational analysis of our heads; why we didn't pay more attention to the preservation of biodiversity and traditional communities, or think more clearly about our role as stewards of creation? Taking a cautious approach or achieving balance in life is never as much fun as the alternatives, but that is what sustainable development is all about.

Adapted from HRH's Millennium Reith lecture.

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