

Saving the World – One Clothespin at a Time



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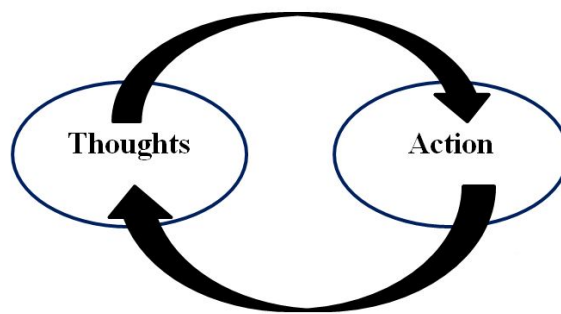
This essay was written for those of us who struggle to find hope in an increasingly chaotic and fear filled world. It employs the discipline of systems thinking to help us explore and articulate ideas relating to sustainability from both a scientific and spiritual/ethical frame.

Begin with a breath...

I start each of my classes at UMass by leading the students in a “centering breath.” The purpose of this exercise is to invite our body, mind, and spirit to be fully present. Many of us bring our bodies to class or work, while our minds are busy thinking about what we did yesterday or worrying about something that might happen tomorrow. And forget about bringing our spirit to class or to work, as that is something we reserve for more private moments (that is if we connect with our "soul-self" - the deeper self - at all. So I begin class with a centering breath because we are more likely to be fully present and receptive for learning if we bring our whole self to the experience at hand.

Changing the way we think!

As an environmental activist and educator, I believe that ***"how we think about our relationship to the non-human world will go a long way toward determining how we act."*** That is in order to change the way we behave, we must also change the way we think and vice versa. This idea is consistent with a basic principle of systems thinking, that is - thoughts create actions... create thoughts.... create actions... create thoughts....



In systems jargon, this would be called a reinforcing feedback loop because thoughts and actions build on each other until they become habitual. The idea that certain thoughts result in actions is also consistent with the fundamental spiritual understanding... *"as within - so without."* So to change human behavior, all we have to do is **"change the way we think!"** Easier said than done!

One commonly held belief that must be changed is that *"humans are separate from nature."* I believe this thought is at the heart of our environmental problems today. As long as we see ourselves as separate from non-human nature, we have no chance of creating effective laws, regulations or personal practices that address the environmental crisis we have created. The systemic idea that humans are not a part of nature is deeply embedded in our collective consciousness and is expressed by the idea that "nature" is somewhere "out there". And "out there" is really a mess. When think of environmental problems, I often picture *"the perfect storm."*



The Perfect Storm

If we are to begin to address the interrelated challenges associated with the *"perfect storm"* of climate change, depletion of easily and safely extractable fossil fuel, and the threat of biological toxins, **we need to change how we think.** "Common sense" (or our collective everyday consciousness) and the subsequent "normal behavior" that follows (you know - driving cars, shopping, turning on the air conditioning when it is hot outside, using pesticides on our lawns and toxic cleaning products in our household) is at the heart of the global environmental crisis. Our personal behavior, magnified 316 million times (the population of the U.S.), creates a meta-thought pattern that prevents us from solving the environmental crisis. We made this mess and we can either deal with it now or leave it to our children. **All we need to do is "change the way we think."**

Environmental activists have been trying to change the way we think at least since Earth Day 1970 by telling us the facts about environmental damage and depletion. Nevertheless we continue to drive our cars, shop for stuff we don't need, use pesticides and other toxins routinely etc. We know there is something wrong with all of this, but we haven't found either the will or the way to change. Knowledge of the facts has not changed our thinking or our behavior.

Knowledge is not enough

Facts and scientific data are important but are not enough to change the way we think. To solve the problems we have created, we must go beyond facts and beyond knowledge, because **knowledge is necessary but not enough**. Today we need both knowledge AND wisdom, where wisdom is defined as the awareness of what has value in life. Learning for wisdom will require the integration of mind and body, science and religion, facts and values, head and heart, action and prayer, thinking and feeling. Learning for wisdom requires our whole awareness, not just our “big brains.”

Knowledge alone allows us to avoid feeling. Can you remember a time when someone you loved suddenly passed away. Isn't it easier to talk about the facts of the person's death (how did it happen?) than to feel the pain of the loss? This is also what we do to avoid facing the pain of the *perfect storm*. We analyze, study, deconstruct, blame and explain.... but we don't feel!

Ecophilosopher Joanna Macy reminds us that we need to feel deeply before we can begin healing ourselves, our communities, or the planet. Perhaps if we allow our hearts to feel the pain caused by our “normal” behavior, pain inflicted on those less powerful and those yet to be born, perhaps then we will begin to take responsibility for our behavior?

There was a time in America when parents sacrificed for their children and grandchildren. Today we live in a time when parents seem willing to sacrifice their children's and grandchildren's opportunities for our own comfort. This selfish behavior is described in religious terms as a “hardening of the heart,” that is, using our minds to “outsmart” our hearts. Joanna Macy reminds us;



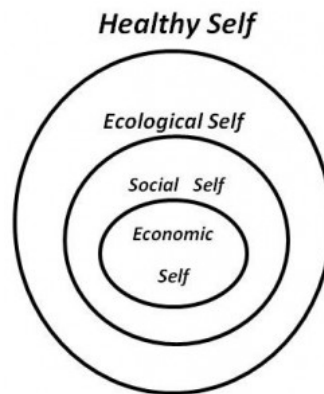
*The heart that
breaks open
can contain the
whole Universe.
- Joanna Macy*

A heart that tries to protect itself from pain can only support a very “small” person. The heart that opens to the pain of others may be expansive and support an expanded sense of self.

An expanded sense of self

When we act out of selfishness and greed, we express a very narrow understanding of the “self” that might be described “the economic self.” In fact, the marketplace would like us to think that we are little more than consumers and that we can find happiness by “buying stuff.” After 9/11 for example, President Bush did not exhort us to cry, to pray, or to comfort our neighbors, but rather to “defend the American way of life” by **going shopping**. I believe we are indeed economic beings and make many decisions based on finances and the desire for personal comfort. **But that is not all.** We are also social beings as well as ecological beings. We are a part of nature - not apart from nature!

We might see this symbolically as an economic self that is part of a larger social self, which is part of a still larger ecological self. A healthy self would be healthy at all levels of “selfhood.”



Nevertheless, as individuals today we often focus most of our time and energy on our financial well-being, our little “economic self.” We spend more time at work than at any other activity. When our work feeds our souls, this might not be such a bad thing. But many people today are engaged in unsatisfying, mind and soul numbing work to maintain an elusive standard of living that causes harm to other people and the planet. We allow our social and ecological health to deteriorate in order to maximize our economic health. This is an **unsustainable practice** for us and the planet.

If I live my life primarily as an “economic being” - a consumer – then exploiting other people or the environment makes sense. But if I think of myself as a “social being” and an “ecological being” - then economically selfish behavior causes me pain. For example, when I walk into a department store in a shopping mall (something I rarely do) I feel a constriction of my heart. Each kitchen appliance, each pair of shoes, each plastic child’s toy, and each article of clothing takes my mind to a factory in Asia or Central America. I feel physical pain when I open my heart to the awareness that my privileged lifestyle is purchased at the cost of suffering and lack of opportunity for others.



How do we respond to the pain of awareness of the suffering we cause by our “normal” daily behavior as consumers? One path is purposeful forgetting. In fact, our national pastime seems to be an addictive consumption to help us forget – we use drugs (legal and illegal), alcohol, video games, “recreational” sex (friends with benefits), mindless television, passive consumption of violent sporting events (go team), and the number one American pastime – shopping - to numb the pain. Mindless attachment to amusements that allow us to avoid dealing with what we know to be true is "normal" today. And the result is an unsustainable world and an unsustainable lifestyle that provides no lasting fulfillment for the many of us who are physically comfortable - and creates suffering for the many in need. This path is a dead end. Let’s take a look at another path... that of the quest for sustainability.

The quest for sustainability

Sustainability was defined in 1987 by the United Nations as a way of being that *"provides for all people alive today without jeopardizing future generations."* It was further described as working toward a balance among the three interdependent objectives of:

- 1) ...economic vitality, 2) environmental quality, and 3) social equity (or justice).

Since the late 1980's many people and organizations have been trying to find ways to live and work in a more sustainable manner by addressing all three objectives.



Although it is important to recognize that the quest for sustainability must include all three objectives, it remains a good short-term business practice to maximize economic vitality at the expense of environmental quality and social justice. To be economically successful, we exploit other people – within our own communities or in countries where labor is cheap. Every time we buy an appliance or article of clothing made in a sweat shop, we make the world a little less healthy. And of course, in order to manufacture cheap things we exploit the environment, either by using and misusing non-renewable resources or by generating environmental pollutants. A system that maximizes the economic health of those with political power or money by exploiting either people (society) or the land (environment) is not going to be sustainable in the long run.

When I ask students what they do that is sustainable in their own lives, they invariably point to recycling paper and plastic. And it is true that recycling is better than throwing waste in the trash. But when pushed to name one more thing that they do that contributes to a more sustainable world, students (and most of us for that matter) hang our heads and admit that "*well, I'm sure I can do better.*" Even if we are aware of the global problems and would like to live differently, it is easy to fall into "normal patterns of behavior." And when we try to change our lives to be more sustainable, we get discouraged as we realize the global problems are so big and our personal efforts feel so small.

Maintaining a commitment to personal change and a willingness to work for meaningful societal change is difficult. We may be motivated into action from time to time by guilt or perhaps fear. But these emotions only result in a short burst of activity, followed by confusion, weariness and discouragement. Neither fear nor guilt can produce a sustainable commitment to change. But there is a sustainable source of motivation..... and it is quite simple.

Starting with a clothespin

I believe the path out of this global and personal crisis is found by discovering meaning and purpose in our own lives through **service to something greater than ourselves**. This may be service to our family, community, Mother Earth, or even something divine, perhaps something the religions refer to as God. This alternative healing path may begin with small actions.

In 2008, Michael Pollan wrote a New York Times Magazine article titled "*Why Bother?*" in which he wrote the following "*...for me the most upsetting moment in the movie 'An Inconvenient Truth' came long after Al Gore scared the hell out of me, constructing an utterly convincing case that the very survival of life on earth as we know it is threatened by climate change.*" Pollan went on to write that his own personal moment of truth came when Gore asked each us...

... "what are we going to do about it?"

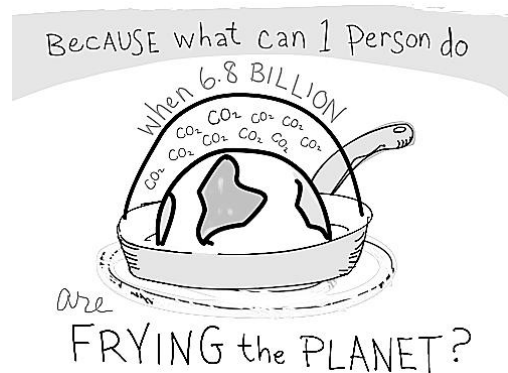
And the shocking answer to this question was that we should... change a light bulb, plant a tree, ride a bike, grow a garden, take shorter showers, or dry our laundry outside in the sun rather than using an electric dryer. Remember? He suggested that we might begin to change "with a clothespin."

But how in the world is drying your clothes outside supposed to help solve these life threatening problems? Don't we need major shifts in government policy? Don't we need a new economic order, more regulations, restrictions, tax incentives? Sure, we need all of that, but where do we begin? How do we get there? Well the former Vice-president of the United States suggests that we begin with simple personal acts that change our relationship to the world around us. Hanging our clothes out to dry is a simple but revolutionary act of uncoupling ourselves from a petroleum industry that tells us that our personal convenience is more important than climate change.

But not everyone agrees.....

Forget shorter showers

The response from the environmental community and social activists to the call for personal change expressed by An Inconvenient Truth has been mixed. One problem is the failure to recognize the popular movie only focused on environmental sustainability and did not adequately address issues of social justice. But the loudest outcry came from those activists who declared that **hanging your clothes in the sun is a waste of time** because the money-driven industrial system that has created the environmental problem is out of control and needs a major overhaul. They believe that only revolutionary government policies and radical economic change can fix the root causes of the problem and small, simple acts (no matter how good) just distract us from the real problem.



One of the most articulate of these voices is author and activist Derrick Jensen who wrote in his article Forget Shorter Showers "...would any sane person think... that composting would have ended slavery or brought about the eight-hour workday, or that chopping wood and carrying water would have gotten people out of Tsarist prisons...? Then why now, with all the world at stake, do so many people retreat into these entirely personal "solutions"?"

Others were outraged that former Vice-president Gore had the nerve to recommend prayer as a solution to climate change. Chris Hedges is one of the most outspoken critics of the failure of religious institutions to provide a moral compass for right action on behalf of the planet. Hedges writes that religion helped convince us that personal salvation was possible and that if we only behave according to certain commandments that somehow "God will save us from ourselves."

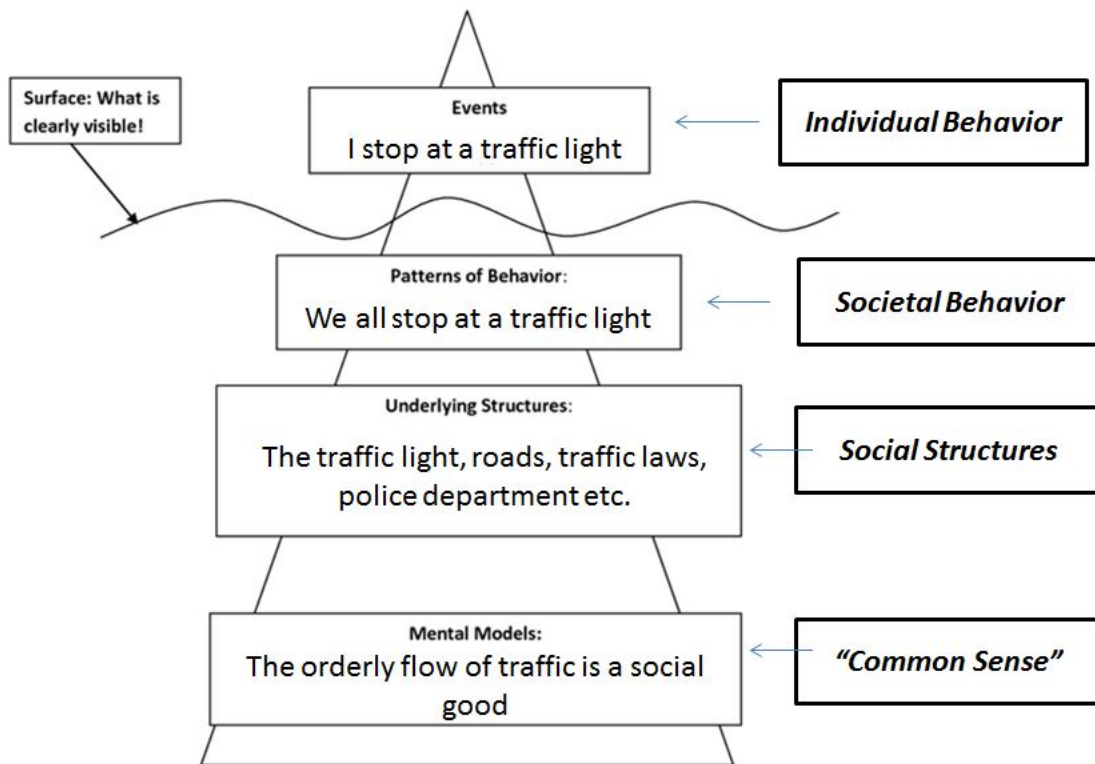
These voices represent just two of the major critics of the personal sustainability movement. One says that personal behavior (action) is irrelevant and the other claims that prayer (a form of thought) is a waste of time and energy. Nevertheless, when I'm asked "what should I do" - **I recommend taking simple actions and praying as the first steps toward the systemic change we need.** Remember thought creates actions.... creates thoughts.... creates actions?

By changing the way we behave (taking simple actions like hanging clothes in the sun) and by changing the way we think (through prayer, meditation, dialogue, and ethical thinking) I believe we can "save the world" from ourselves. It's all about systems thinking.

A systems thinking approach to personal change

To understand how actions and prayer can make a difference, we begin by asking the question "**what is the root cause of our non-sustainable behavior?**" That is, why do we continue "normal" destructive patterns of behavior when we know better? To get an answer to this question, we'll use "the systems iceberg" and a simple example of how an event (or action) is influenced by patterns of behavior, social structures, and mental models ("common sense" ways of thinking).

The systems iceberg is a tool used to uncover the root cause(s) of systemic behaviors. It is presented as an iceberg, because an "event" is quite visible but is influenced by many factors that may not be quite so obvious (below the water line). Unless we begin to "see below the water line" we will never be able to understand the root causes of behavior.

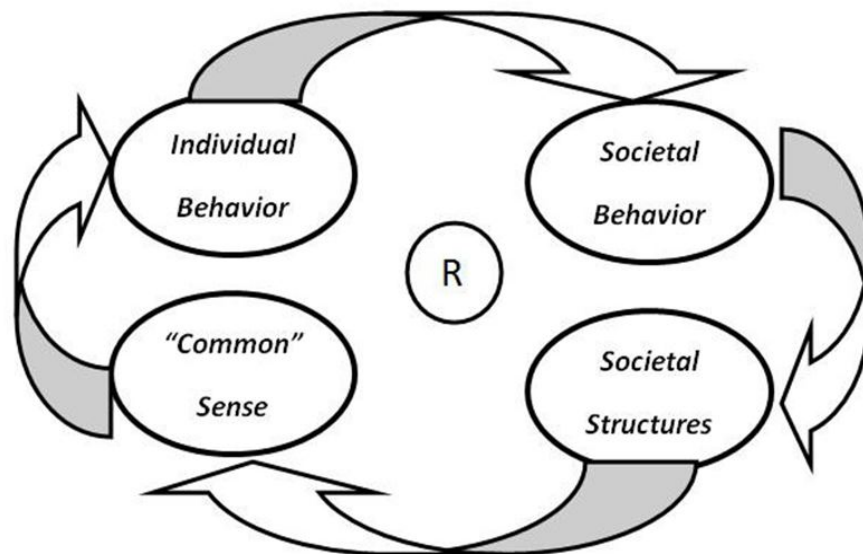


We begin with an event like *one person stopping at a red traffic light*. "Below" and supportive of any single event is a pattern of behavior that is consistent with the event, something like *everyone stopping at a red traffic light*. This is normal and expected social behavior but if we ask why we do this, we find social structures that support and encourage the pattern just "below" the pattern. In this case the social structures that support the pattern are things like *the traffic light fixture itself, but also traffic laws and the police department that enforces the law*. Structures are relatively fixed things like policies, organizations and physical things created by humans. But if we ask why do humans create social structures that support and encourage certain patterns of behavior, we find assumptions, beliefs and values (mental models) that "make sense" out of the entire iceberg.

It is at the level of "mental models" that we find the root cause(s) of behavior. In the case of "stopping at the traffic light" a widely held assumption underlying the behavior might be that *orderly flow of traffic is a social good and the small inconvenience of having to stop is worth the benefit of avoiding a collision*. There are other beliefs and values that contribute to our willingness to "play by the rules" that are so obvious that we don't think about them, they are just "common sense."

Anyway, try it out yourself! Take something you have read in the newspaper and examine it using the iceberg to uncover the root cause(s). Then examine some of your own personal behavior, like driving a car to work or school. For example; *I drive to work* (individual action) - because *we all drive to work* (pattern of behavior) – because we have created social structures that encourage this pattern (like *roads, and cars, and parking lots*) – because *driving to work or school is so universally done that it is common sense*. But what if it wasn't?

What if a few of us didn't drive to work but rode a bike or walked or took a bus? Would this matter? You bet! Small changes in the individual behavior make a difference because they can change a pattern (societal behavior) over time, which in turn generates new societal structures (like bike lanes and bike racks) that help change behavior and minds. Common sense can shift over time!



A Self-reinforcing Feedback Loop of Human Behavior

When we change our behavior, "common sense" can shift though reinforcing feedback loops! But if how we think doesn't change, nothing else will matter in the long run. Do you remember when President Carter lowered the speed limit on all national highways to 55 mph to save fuel and lives? He had the power to change the social structures (government policy) and our societal behavior changed for four years. But he did not change minds! And since our collective worldview (common sense) had not shifted over four years, as soon as President Reagan came into office those social structures (the national speed limit laws) were changed back to what we considered "normal."

In 1980, we really didn't believe that the planet had a limited supply of easily and safely extractable fossil fuel in the ground. We were also not aware of the impact of burning those fuels on climate change. So conserving gasoline by driving at a reasonable speed seemed foolish and unnecessary.

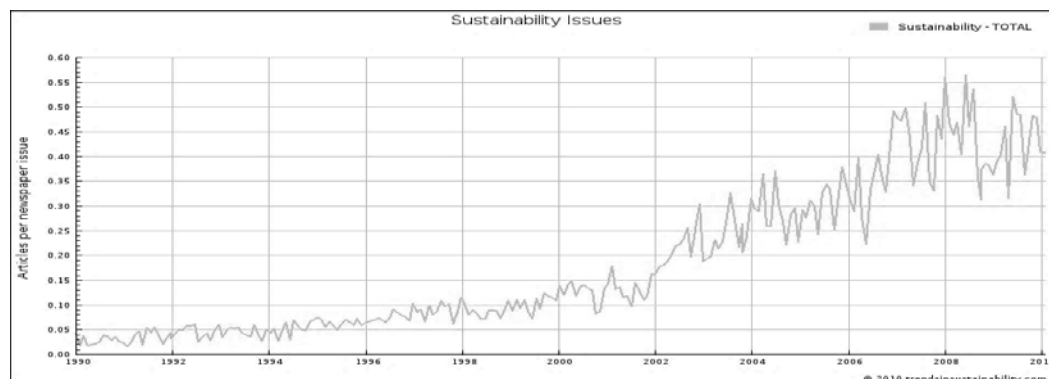


It is impossible to change patterns of social behavior and social structures in the long run without changing how we think about the world (changing what we consider common sense) because - thought creates actions... creates thoughts.... creates actions... create thoughts....

Change can happen fast when minds start to change

While I suspect most social activists would like to focus their energy on changing social behavior and social structures (the right side of the reinforcing feedback loop above) it is unlikely to be successful without changes in how we think and individual behavior, or the left side of the feedback loop. On the other hand, once common sense shifts, patterns of behavior and social structures to support and encourage those behaviors can change very quickly.

An example is marriage equality legislation in the U.S. Just 10 years ago, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same sex marriage. Today 37 states have approved marriage equality laws. This rapid change in social structures began with seven courageous couples and a landmark appellate court case in just one state. It was the same pattern with women's suffrage, civil rights, recycling, and other social changes of the past. It will be the same for sustainability. In fact, the number of newspaper articles on sustainability issues has increased markedly between 1990 and 2010. I believe that sustainable living will become "common sense" over time.



Changing the way we think with a clothespin

So the key to changing the world seems to be changing the way we think. That is why we are encouraged to "hang our laundry out in the sun." When I use solar power to dry my clothes and share that experience with others, things start to change – if not right away for the whole world, then at least for my whole world – and for my way of thinking. Taking action in service to something larger than myself can become a habit. Slowly over time, my small efforts become part of a larger pattern of behavior for me and perhaps for others – small things like bike riding and gardening and cooking. Maybe I begin to invest my time, energy and money into larger things – like insulating my home or installing solar hot water and electricity. And maybe others notice. Maybe by planting a few tomatoes I get interested in making raspberry jam when berries are in season, or building a small hoop house to capture solar energy and extend the growing season for my garden, or caring for my own backyard hens, or joining a local farm. And maybe others notice.

Slowly changes in individual behavior begin to create new societal patterns of behavior, and then proposed shifts in social structures that formerly were laughed at don't sound so crazy any longer. President Carter asked us to turn down the thermostat in our homes and put on a sweater to stay warm. He did it himself and was laughed at! Do you remember *Cardigan Carter*? But when enough of us change our individual behavior, common sense begins to shift, and what used to be crazy starts to make sense.

Today it is still "crazy" to hang our clothes in the sun. In fact, some condominium associations and apartment complexes make this simple activity illegal. The worldview (common sense) of the unsustainable world we have created says that clothes hanging on a line are unsightly. So we create social structures (condominium regulations) making the simple act of drying clothes in the sun a crime. Is this really common sense?

For me the simple act of hanging clothes in the sun is a symbolic representation of the kind of world where I want to live. While I am hanging the clothes I am not contributing to the money-driven industrial system that has created the "perfect storm." I also find hanging clothes on the line to be meditative. It is difficult to do this in a hurry. It allows me to slow down, to breathe, and to feel the sun on my face. And of course it makes me part of the natural cycle of the seasons (it's a summer time activity – in the winter the clothes are hung near our wood stove in the basement).

And hanging the clothes in the sun requires that I pay attention to the weather. Most of us can disregard the weather and wash clothes whenever it is convenient. When you participate in a natural process, you have to interact with the natural world at least to the extent that you know if it is going to rain or not. This small act of love and joy connects me with the natural world. It feels like a prayer. Drying clothes in the sun serves the "economic self" because I'm not spending money on fossil fuel. It serves the "social self" as I'm not depleting the planet's resources or exploiting underpaid workers to wash my laundry. And it serves the "eco-self" by connecting me with Mother Nature. Sustainable living can help us live our lives with awareness at multiple levels of "self."

More on the expanded sense of self

By seeing myself as part of something larger than a “body of wants and desires” (the economic self), I begin to explore the big questions, like “**what is my relationship to the non-human world?**” If we return to the idea of an expanded sense of self, we may begin to answer this question.



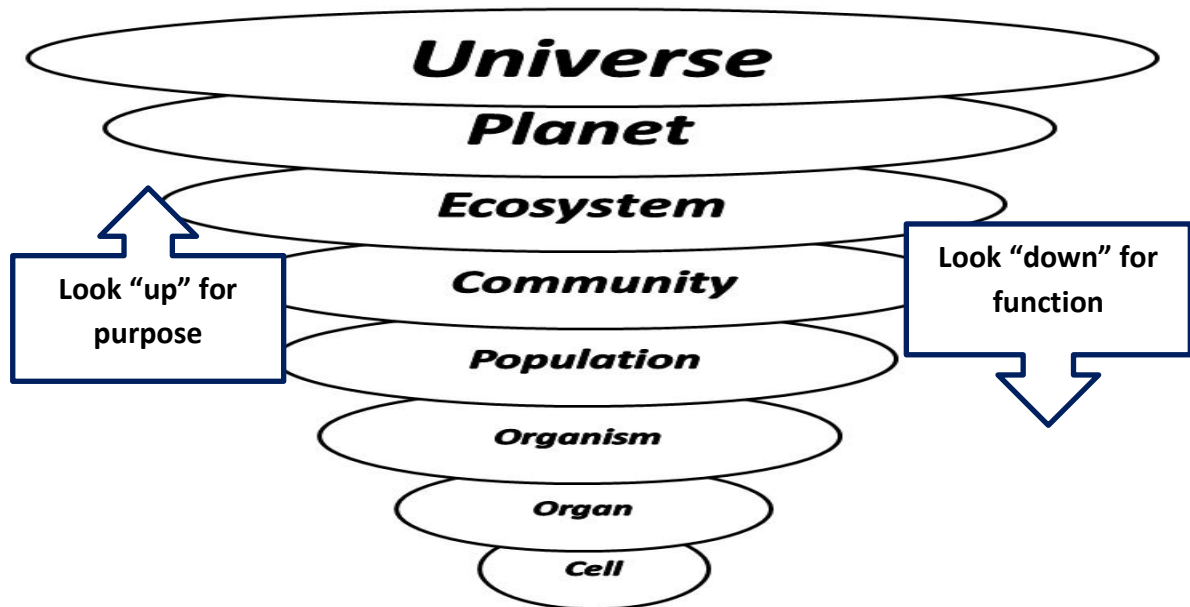
In this expanded model of the self, we can see the small “myself” is part of a larger sense of self we’ll call a “family self.” And this family self is part of a yet larger sense of “community self” which is part of an “ecological self”, which for some of us is part of a yet more expansive sense of the “divine self.” Most of us have experienced the “family self.” When someone in our close family is in pain – we too feel pain. Some of us feel deeply rooted in community and when I hang the laundry out to dry or work in my garden, I experience an awareness of my ecological self.

When I pray or meditate, I sometimes experience a connection with the “cosmic or divine self.” For me, this is a sense of the sacred. Awareness of this relationship between the smaller “myself” and an expanded sense of self helps me understand where I fit in the larger world. It begins to help me tackle those big questions humans have been wrestling with since the beginning of time, like “what am I doing here” and “does life have a purpose” and “what is my relationship to other humans, the world and beyond.” When communities of humans come together with a common story to tackle these big questions, we often call it religion.

The world’s religions (when they are at their best) may help us recognize our responsibility to each other, the non-human environment and perhaps may even give us a reason to want to live in service to the divine. But today, many of us have rejected religion. In this case, science may help us understand our right relationship to each other and the non-human natural world – but a very special form of science that we call living systems science.

An understanding of living systems

Using systems thinking we can gain perspective on the place of “organisms” (like you and me) within a natural hierarchy of complex systems. For example, an individual gazelle is an organism. A group of organisms of the same species in the same place is called a population, such as a herd of gazelles living within a particular location. Populations of organisms are part of communities (consisting of multiple, interacting populations of species - like lions and gazelles), which are in turn part of an ecosystem, the planet, galaxy and universe. *Get it?*



One of the principles of living systems is that if we look at the subsystems within an individual organism (like a gazelle, an oak tree, or a backyard chicken), we find they contain smaller subsystems (we'll call them organs like the heart, liver and kidney) which are in turn made up of yet smaller subsystems like cells, molecules, atoms etc. This is a natural hierarchy and this is how the various levels of complexity within a living system look to a systems thinker.

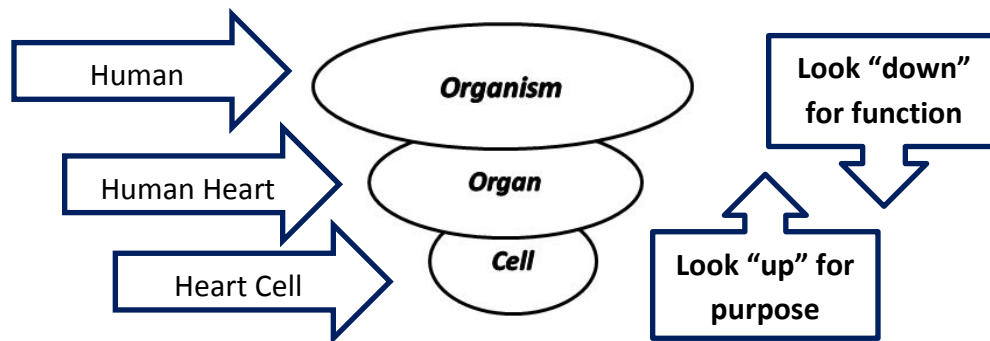
A systems thinker will see each of these stages from cells to organs to organisms and “on up” as a level of complexity within a natural hierarchy. The subsystems get more complex as we go "up" and simpler as we go "down" the hierarchy. Each level is a “system within a system” and there is a very specific relationship among these various levels. Are you still with me?

For example, when we examine the relationship among the various levels, we discover a general truth about natural hierarchies, that is... ***“we look up for purpose and down for function.”*** For example, organisms (individual gazelles) "look up" to the larger gazelle population for purpose and populations look to individuals for function (it makes the population work). Another way of saying this is that the purpose of an individual animal is to support the larger population or herd. And the function of the herd is maintained by the individual animals. Mother Nature seems to work this way.

Well what about humans?

If we apply this same understanding to the human organism we might learn much about our right relationship to the non-human natural world. Let's use the example of the relationship between an organism (a person) and an organ (like the heart muscle) and a cell that is part of the heart muscle.

When we examine the right relationship among these levels of complexity, we may learn to "*look up for purpose and down for function.*" As a subsystem of my body, the heart looks "down" to smaller subsystems like a heart valve or heart cells for function (the heart valve makes the heart work). And the heart looks "up" for purpose - that is, the heart serves the larger body. Again this is how living systems seem to work.



If we extrapolate to more complex levels, we might conclude that individuals (you and I) can find meaning and purpose in service to the "larger selves" of family, community, natural ecosystems and perhaps even the divine. That is, the human organism may look to the family and community for purpose and the community looks to individuals for function. This extrapolation ONLY makes sense however, if we understand ourselves as a part of rather than apart from nature. If we see ourselves as different from Mother Nature, then these living systems rules don't apply to us.



We must change our minds!

Thoughts create actions.... create thoughts.... create actions....

And the “big thought” that needs to change is how we relate to the non-human world. If we are to “save the planet” we must begin to see ourselves as a part of rather than a part from nature. We must understand ourselves as members of a larger living system. Both the “expanded sense of self” and living systems hierarchies guide my understanding of a right relationship. **I “look up” for purpose!**

When I see myself as a member of the natural world, I can find purpose in service to a larger self that includes other people, animals, ecological systems, and perhaps even God. I can no longer justify my behavior as a small, selfish individual but I can find motivation for changing my behavior and hanging my clothes in the sun. I can get up in the morning and let my head be guided by my heart to do work through my hands and body. And in doing so, I participate in a healing process of both my individual self as well as these larger senses of self.

When I see myself as part of this larger system, part of the sacred, I know who I am. I belong to a family, a community, the earth and something divine. When I see myself as small and separate, I contribute to the *perfect storm*.

Don’t believe it? Well, why not take a deep breath – and try it?



Of course, hanging our clothes in the sun by itself won’t change the world. But I believe we must begin the great work that needs to be done in the world with small acts of love. This one is mine. You need to find your own. And when we begin to take responsibility for our personal behavior and act as if we were members of Mother Nature’s family, expressing joy, rather than blame, we will attract others on this path. Over time we will create a parade of people marching to a different drummer. And soon the politicians and the business leaders will jump in the front of our sustainability parade (because that is what they do) and claim it was their idea all along. At that point, we may find the political will to make the radical changes in social structures (like tax incentives and regulations etc.) necessary for a huge societal shift – and we will save the world.

Political action is indeed necessary. But unless we change our personal behavior first, the politicians will be correct when they claim that we are not ready to accept the changes needed. I believe it can start with a clothespin, or by planting a seed, if these acts are done with love and joy.

So we begin.....

And on those days when we feel despair (because we will), we can be reminded of a quote from the great African-American tennis player and activist for social justice, Arthur Ashe, who when asked *“how do you keep going when nothing seems to change”* said:



And there is lots we can do....

For more essays and resources, see: <http://johnmgerber.com/>

I invite you to share your thoughts and feedback with me at:

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