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NATURE AND THE GLOBAL POLITICAL CULTURE

BY BARBARA SUNDBERG BAUDOT, PH.D.

Human beings have a role to play, which each is free to play or not; each is a link in a chain and not a piece of straw to be carried away by a torrent. In the end, human dignity is not a word spoken in vain; by ignoring or refusing dignity human kind lowers itself to the level of the brute.

- Lecomte du Nouy, L'Homme et sa Destinée

Two facts that ought to be recalled:

First, in the nearly half a century since the Stockholm Conference put the “Human Environment” on the World agenda, the main indicators of the health of our Planet show continuing deterioration. There is no need to insist on this alarming fact. Reports such as those of the United Nations Environment Programme and of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are sufficiently eloquent.

Second, it is the word “environment”, and not the word “nature”, which is overwhelmingly used in the relevant debates and texts produced by the international community. From Stockholm to Rio +20, the term “Nature” rarely features in the international discourse outlining strategies for limiting the damages to the environment while promoting development. And, this is not simply a matter of semantics. Suffice to note that the World Charter for Nature, [Adopted by the General Assembly October 1982] and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth [Adopted by the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Bolivia in 2010] are ignored in the Declarations of the subsequent, respective World Summits on the Environment and Sustainable Development. It is also to be noted that the purpose of this and previous Interactive Dialogues is precisely to give some weight to the concept of Harmony with Nature in the debates on sustainable development.

These two facts are linked. The neglect of “Nature” is at the core of many problems we are confronted with; and a shifting of emphasis in our policies and actions to give greater attention to “Nature,” as such, would give humankind a better chance of survival.

The following three points support this conviction:

1. There are two political world views on the relations between humankind and the natural world. One conceives humanity apart, as the steward or master of the “environment.” The other begins with Nature and its visible and invisible manifestations, including humanity.
2. To approach Harmony with Nature it is imperative to consult other relevant sources of knowledge including philosophy, the arts and religion as well as the physical and social sciences, which currently monopolize the political focus on the “environment,” and how to sustainably develop it.
3. There are concrete examples of working in harmony with nature that demonstrate the practicality as well as the benefits of considering nature, itself, as an imperative focus of political thinking and action.

The following paragraphs examine these three points.

TWO POLITICAL VIEWS ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN HUMANITY AND NATURE

1. Nature Reduced to the Human Environment

This is the dominant world view. It puts a premium on material progress made possible by the extraordinary achievements of science and its technological innovations and applications. It institutionalizes the model of a good life, good society and good world that is essentially based on development measured in quantitative terms. It visualizes humankind as having the right, even the responsibility to enlist natural resources for its own benefit. In essence, it is a Promethean model.

In this paradigm, Nature has been re-identified in scientific terms [at least since the 1960’s] — as the Human Environment. In political economic terms the environment consists of the physical surroundings and/or the external social influences working on the individual; metaphorically it is our planetary house managed with the tools of science, technology and economics.

Reduced to the “environment”—Nature has been demystified, disenchanting and deconstructed for the convenience of scientific inquiry. As such it’s scattered and unrelated parts have been reduced to a scientific vocabulary, such as ecology, biodiversity, biosphere, habitat, raw materials and pollution sinks. Most seriously, the costs of repairing the damage inflicted on any of these parts are weighed in a scale of costs and benefits against jobs and economic growth.

2. Nature as a Whole

The world view that seeks harmony with nature perceives nature in grand terms.

“Nature” is a broad and open concept. Some associate it with the elements of the natural world, trees, rivers, animals, and the like. Others see it as the processes whereby these came into existence. Still others identify Nature with the Whole, with the sub atomic and cosmic layers of the universe and the realm of

the Spirit; as well as the earth and visible universe. Few would deny that Nature is the source and cradle of Life—encompassing those unseen and immaterial life forces that have brought us and everything else into existence. Thus for Spinoza, God and Nature were synonymous. And centuries later, John Muir discerned in nature a living whole held together by an essential love, overlying, underlying and pervading all things. In sum, Nature demands a holistic vision that encompasses both its material and metaphysical properties.

Ronald Dworkin eloquently describes the widest concept of what is called “nature”:

...the universe as a whole and in all its parts—is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder. Nature is the locus and nutrient of our physical lives. We are apart from nature because we are conscious of ourselves as making a life and must make decisions that, taken together, determine what life we have made for ourselves. Life’s intrinsic meaning and nature’s intrinsic worth and beauty ... are not convictions that one can isolate from the rest of one’s life.

As a minimum, “nature” is difficult to conceive in any simple, objectifiable way while still conveying the breadth of its meaning. Inherently, Nature remains mysterious, with many inexplicable, enchanting and disenchanting, even threatening facets. It has intrinsic value, extrinsic value, as well as instrumental value. According to this ethos, every entity, molecule and atom is an indivisible part of an all-inclusive organism:

Humbled by the uncertainties of existing scientific theories of nature and the universe, Nobel Laureate, physicist Richard Feynman remarked:

This universe has been described by many, but it just goes on, with its edge as unknown as the bottom of the bottomless sea of the other idea—just as mysterious, just as awe inspiring, and just as incomplete as the poetic pictures (of the ancients) that came before. But they see that the imagination of nature is far, far greater than the imagination of man. No one who did not have some inkling of this through observations could ever have imagined such a marvel as nature is.

If humankind continues to embrace the first world view, the one that prevails in the spirit of our times, the way to harmony between humanity and nature will remain difficult to perceive, even irrelevant. There is an urgent need for a holistic vision of Humankind in Nature that would shape public and policies consistent with a new spirit of the time.

AN IMPERATIVE: TO USE DIFFERENT SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

Assuming that thoughts and ideas are the building bricks of a society. The emotions they articulate, the attitudes they project, and the desires they embody define the spirit of the time. Even the perception of Nature in our age. Thus, to modify features of the dominant spirit of the time, it is necessary to reflect on the significance of intellectual and spiritual resources as the essential elements of social change.

Given all the interconnections between what is visible to the human senses and only conceivable to the mind, regaining and maintaining harmony with nature requires the knowledge, inspiration and wisdom not only from scientists, but also from philosophers, leading political leaders as thinkers, poets, sages and sensitive individuals whose imaginations, inspirations, as well as spiritual revelations offer insights into Nature's values.

Each of the following sources of knowledge has something to offer in the quest for harmony with nature: scientific inquiry, philosophical reflection, artistic inspiration, and spiritual insight.

Science

Mainstream modern science focusses on what the senses identify as “what is,” i.e. what is measurable and observable. Although scientific knowledge and interpretations of natural science play a role in catapulting the individual into a regime of domineering materiality, this is not the whole picture.

Physics and higher mathematics point to many more significant ideas concerning the realities of the universe and life that removes the chains binding human intentions to material circumstances and aspirations. With the assistance of enlightened reason, high mathematics, and imagination, modern science can lead humanity to a high sense of purpose that perceives value in living in rhythm with nature. Physicist Brian Greene's view summarizes this standpoint:

To open our ideas to the true nature of the universe has always been one of physics primary purposes. It is hard to imagine a more mind stretching experience than learning, as we have over the last century that the reality we experience is but a glimmer of the reality that is.

Philosophy

Philosophy has a critical role to play in the decision-making institutions and processes aimed at harmonizing the needs and aspirations of Humankind with the realities of Nature. Philosophy should again be, as it was with Plato and Socrates, an effort at marrying knowledge and practical reason with wisdom and love.

As stated by Jacques Maritain, the instruments philosophers employ include intelligible perception, abstractive intuition and judgment to distill the intelligible contents from sense experiences. Animated by the human intellect, these instruments provide legitimate sources of knowledge of a meta-physical kind. Philosophical thinking questions the primary principles of being, including identity, causality, finality and purpose.

Because philosophers dig below the surfaces of material appearances in seeking to understand the essence of 'being,' philosophy is essential to a more holistic understanding of Nature. And Philosophy sheds precious light on decision making aimed at preserving the environment in harmony with nature in essential ways.

Also, philosophers concern themselves with ethics and moral values by which people may understand how to better interact positively with nature. Most significantly, Plato evoked the necessity for love to accompany rationality to control the materialistic appetites of excessive greed, avarice, and selfishness.

In our time these appetites destroy the natural environment and reify human relations. Instrumental rationality unaccompanied by a compassionate heart, cannot achieve harmony with nature. Neither can an ethic of fear. John Locke admonished society to educate children to have compassion and love for small animals as the only way to bring about peaceful human communities.

The Arts

Artists—whether they be poets, story tellers, musicians, painters, architects, filmmakers—and their works—inspire relations between the human society and Nature in ways that enchant nature and the universe for humankind. The artist projects thoughts generated in the imaginative realm that cannot be engaged within the framework of empiricism and scientific rationality, nor satisfied by economic progress. Yet they remain essential to inspiring life styles in cadence with the imperatives of nature.

Artists and poets evoke the beauties and mysteries of Nature, or simply describe human beings in their symbiotic relations with their surroundings. They have always been the privileged “media” between Humankind and Nature. It has been through this source of knowledge that people of various cultures have traditionally kept their specific sense of harmony with nature. And it is this source of knowledge, perhaps even to a greater degree than philosophy that has been pushed aside by the modern form of scientism and materialism. The arts need to be moved from the realm of “soft values” to the realm of debates and decisions on which the future of humankind depends.

The fairy tale is an example of how poetry contributes to enlarging the affections towards nature by re-enchantment. The true fairy tale, as defined by J.R. Tolkien speaks to adults. Fantasy, a high form of art, connects the mental powers of imagination to other visions of creation and lends to these visions the inner consistency of reality. These tales can promote clear, holistic conceptions of nature by freeing its outer appearances from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity. Simple fundamental things as trees, clouds, cobwebs, and firewood take on deeper meaning for people. By definition the fairy tale ends with a message of hope.

Other works of fine art similarly widen imaginations, offer consolation and escape from mundane obsessions, and recovery of clearer visions of infinite reality. Classical music has the special function of translating the music of the spheres to the human mind with powerful waves that awaken the intellect and in the view of Aristotle and modern psychologists also build good character.

Here, I should like to mention the late Gabriel Garcia Marquez who consistently evoked the miraculous in his fiction and who gave as much of his attention to his literary work as he did to the policy issues of his time. I would also mention the second Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld for whom the arts were the *sine qua non* informants of his work in seeking world peace and reverence for life. He was profoundly inspired by the sublimity, wonder and beauty of Nature, its flora and fauna as well as its vast landscapes framed by hills and mountains.

Spirituality/Religion

The role religion plays in influencing social behavior can be critical for believers and non-believers in determining relations between Nature and humankind. Like poetic inspiration, knowledge gained from religion derives from intuitive or mystical experience, revelation as the gift of grace and spiritual insight. This form of knowing is beyond, or rather outside the frameworks of logic and science. For believers and non-believers receptivity to this way of knowing can inspire gratitude, wonder, empathy, and an ethic of caring for Nature. These thoughts and sentiments can be crucial to the development of more holistic policies informed by high values.

In summary, if one admits that Nature has metaphysical as well as material dimensions, and both intrinsic and instrumental value, is it not crucial that a holistic and interdisciplinary approach be adopted in the policies protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development? Should not philosophical thinking, poetic inspiration and spiritual reflection be added to scientific inquiry to enrich debates and decisions on the future of our planet?

CONCRETE EXAMPLES OF WORKING IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

The points made above are not mere abstractions, disconnected from the “real” world. The change of spirit advocated here has very concrete and positive implications for human health and social well-being.

As I am sure you are aware, considerable initiatives now taking place at local, county and regional levels are advancing the cause of a vibrant sustainable society in sync with the rhythms of nature. Combined, they give ground for hope.

Prominent examples are to be found in the widening spread of organic and bio dynamic farming practices, including bee keeping and animal husbandry. These examples demonstrate the type of holistic approaches being pursued locally and which ought to be supported and emulated at the global level.

On community farms, one can witness a powerful mix of love, care and concern for the collectivity as well as the efficiency characteristic of instrumental rationality. Here the concern for quantity of output is constrained by the higher priority for the organic quality of the produce. This approach to growing food has shown to be as productive per unit of land as its genetically modified hybrids and is much more labor intensive offering people the immense satisfaction that can come from interacting directly with nature and its creative processes.

The futility of taking a fragmented approach to nature and environmental problems is well illustrated by the tragic situation of the honey bee presently encountered in many parts of the world. By selectively reducing the hive to a mobile pollinating factory for human enterprises, industrial beekeepers have disturbed the harmony of the hive: the bees are stressed, their instincts all but destroyed, their food poisoned by pesticides or uprooted to make place for monocultures with their short blossoming periods. The “modern” honey bee has a much more limited and unpredictable access to pollens and nectars, than do its wild relatives in other places in the world. In the interest of business, foreign queens are hired to replace those native to the hive. Often their wings are clipped to prevent them from swarming out of the hive as an old queen would instinctively do when the hive becomes overcrowded. Their natural life span of 4 to 5 years has been reduced to an average of two years to insure frequent renewal of the

industrialized hive. Considering these and other unnatural incursions into the life of the hive it is not surprising that the immune systems of these precious insects have been vastly weakened. Ultimately, the stress caused by the imbalances and disharmonies of their unnatural lives may destroy these precious insects.

By working holistically in harmony with the spirit of the hive, hopefully the bees can be saved. Left to nature, there is order and balance in the life of the bee which thrives in symbiosis with other living creatures and forms of life. The bee promotes the continuity of plants through the process of pollination; in return the bee is richly fed by the nutrients produced by the flowers. Because bees play a key role in the food chain and natural eco-systems, many apiculturists have begun to approach their profession in ways that are wholly consistent with nature. Kirk Webster, a prominent organic beekeeper and renowned producer of the hardiest queens in New England is one such person. He describes his method as:

The model of a healthy, treatment-free northern apiary is based on the balanced production of queens, nucleus colonies and honey. Reverence for Nature and its restorative power are consulted and used at every possible opportunity. Economic success is assured by the counter-intuitive process of ignoring economic concerns and focusing on the natural ability of bees and insects to be healthy, productive and responsive to changing conditions. For me, much of the stress and worry has been eliminated and beekeeping has become more interesting and enjoyable than ever before.

Webster asks: “Should not this ‘promise’ be available to every beekeeper that can selflessly think and work and at the same time adapt Nature’s methods to his or her own situation?”

CONCLUSION

One should emphasize Vaclav Havel’s statement to the effect that a prerequisite for any effective environmental policy promoting Harmony with Nature is a radical change in heart and spirit. Havel wrote:

Only humankind’s understanding of its place in the universe will allow the development of new models of behavior, scales of values, and objectives in life and, through these means, to finally bind a new spirit and meaning to specific regulations, treaties, and institutions.

Now, imagine a world society as immersed in nature as it is in technology, where we use all our senses, where we feel more alive. “Harmony with nature” is not a mere catchphrase: it is an imperative for society. To create more amenable conditions for an ecologically sustainable future in harmony with nature demands considerably more thoughtful reflection, intellectual work, and practical initiatives by governments and civil society.