

## Food, Faith, and Earth: A Matter of Connections<sup>i</sup>

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The celebration of Earth Day should serve as a reminder that all living and nonliving things, including we humans, are part of the same matter and the same energy that make up the whole of the earth. The molecules that make up our bodies are the same molecules that have been on the earth since its beginning. These same molecules of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, iron, zinc... have made up everything in the past and will make up everything in the future. The biological energy that fuels our bodies and the electrical impulses that stimulate our thoughts is the same energy that forms and reforms the earth's molecules, continually renewing and transforming everything on earth, including us.

We are also socially connected with each other. Our physical connections may determine whether or not we have life, but our social connections determine whether our life is worth living. We humans apparently have an innate need for positive relationships with other humans to give us the sense of well-being or happiness to which we all aspire.

Most psychologists believe that some people are genetically or culturally predisposed to be happier than others; they say we have different biological "set-points." The conditions of our life, including race, gender, age, and political and cultural environment, also affect our basic level of happiness. Beyond these physical and external conditions, scientists and philosophers agree that our happiness is pretty much up to us.

Once our basic needs are met, the quality of personal relationships is more important to our happiness than is the quantity of our income or wealth. We need friends, families, and communities to be happy, and the better our relationships, the greater our happiness. We need to trust and be trusted, to care and be cared for, to love and be loved. We are socially connected with each other.

Primitive civilizations understood the importance of connectedness. They didn't have the advantages of modern ecological and social sciences to organize their thoughts and validate their insights, but they had intimate relationships with the earth and with other people. They went into nature everyday to search for the food that sustained their physical well-being. They depended on their families, tribes, clans, or communities for personal protection and for security during times of illness or in old age. In return they respected both the bounty and limits of nature and cared for others as they hoped to be cared for in return.

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Their interdependence was not purely physical or material. They felt a cultural and social connectedness with other members of their families and communities and often valued the respect, approval, and affection of others more highly than they valued their own well-being. They felt a spiritual connectedness with nature and considered stewardship of the animals and plants from which they derived their physical sustenance as a sacred trust. They were socially and spiritually connected with the earth and its people.

Modern societies have gradually come to ignore this connectedness. Social and ethic relationships apparently seem too abstract or esoteric to be of interest to most people today; so, they have just ignored them. Today, however, we are confronted with the reality of our ignorance and neglect of our interconnectedness with the earth and with each other.

The economic, ecological, and social crises that confront us today are direct consequences of our lack of appreciation and respect for our interdependence with the other things of the earth. The high gasoline prices in 2008 awakened many people to our continuing dependence on the earth for fossil energy. Even the major oil companies now admit that we are at or near a peak in global oil production. The remaining oil reserves will be more difficult and costly to retrieve and thus will be more scarce and expensive. Fossil energy from other sources is expected to follow a similar pattern, peaking and dissipating over the next few decades.

Global climate change has awakened people to our ability to destroy the livability of the earth. Greenhouse gasses are released into the atmosphere anytime energy is released from a biological source, including the fossil energy in oil, natural gas, and coal. So, we can't use the earth's remaining stocks of fossil energy without exacerbating the challenges of global warming. Pollution of the natural environment with industrial chemicals – the soil that grows our food, the air we breathe, the water we drink – also threatens human health and the survival of humanity.

In our pursuit of wealth, we are destroying the ecological and social integrity of the foundation of our economy. All economic value comes from either the earth or society. The economy itself produces nothing of value; it simply facilitates our individual relationships with each other and with the earth. Human imagination and creativity is worth nothing without minerals, energy, and other resources from the earth. Imagine today's modern technological society without fossil energy and you get some idea of our dependence on nature. In addition, the people creating today's technologies have been nurtured, civilized, educated, socialized, and organized by families and communities – by society. The current economic chaos is a direct consequence of extraction and exploitation of the earth and its people.

The environmental and social justice movements of the 1960s were sparked by sense of disconnectedness with the earth and with each other. The natural environment had been polluted and degraded by decades of economic extraction and exploitation. The social fabric of the nation had been torn by the lack of economic opportunity for racial minorities and the chronically poor and oppressed. Legislation was passed to protect the air and water from pollution, to prevent discrimination and to ensure equal employment opportunities for all. People were accepting greater responsibility for the earth and for each other; they were reconnecting.

However, we soon discovered that protecting the environment and bringing disenfranchised people into the economic and political mainstream had economic costs. Rather than bear those costs, we retreated from reality during the early 1980s and have been in a state of denial ever since. Today's economic chaos is a direct consequence of that retreat.

Some of the economic growth of the 1980s and 1990s was real, primarily that associated with new electronic technologies. However, much of the so called boom was a product of "irrational exuberance," which fueled speculative price increases in the stock markets. When the "dot.com bubble" finally burst, the Wall Street bankers found ways to create the financial "house of cards" of the 2000s – another retreat from reality. We now know that virtually all of the economic growth since 2000 was fueled by unethical financial practices that promoted irresponsible borrowing and spending. The house of cards has collapsed and no one knows how much of what's left of the economy is real and how much is economic fantasy.

This 30-year flight from reality has also had dire social consequences. At no time since the "gilded age" of the early 1900s has the gap between the wealthy and the rest of us been so great. The income of the top one-percent amounts to more than the total income of the bottom one-half of Americans, at least before the financial meltdown. In the words of Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, "The income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population has become so wide, and is growing so fast, that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism itself." A socially disconnected democracy is not sustainable.

Our society, our economy, and our natural ecosystems are all in crisis today because we have failed to respect our interconnectedness with the earth and each other. We simply cannot continue extracting from nature and exploiting society in our pursuit of greater individual wealth. The industrial paradigm of economic development is fundamentally incapable of meeting the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future of humanity. It quite simply is not sustainable. Continual denial and retreat is no longer an option; we must confront our ecological, social, and economic reality. Times of crisis are times of great danger, but they are also times of great possibilities. Crises are critical points in time when people are forced to make decisions that can fundamentally change the future, for either better or worse.

The principles that must guide us toward a better future are the same basic principles that guide all other elements of the universe. We must create a new economy and a new society that respects the basic ecological, social, and economic principles that define healthy, productive, sustainable relationships. Sustainable economies must be capable of meeting the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. They must renew and regenerate the earth's natural ecosystems and human societies from which they derive their economic value. Sustainable natural ecosystems must be holistic, diverse, and interdependent. We must respect these ecological truths. Sustainable human relationships must be based on trust, kindness, and courage. We must respect these social truths. Sustainable economies must create economic value efficiently without sacrificing individual sovereignty. We must respect these economic truths.

To sustain human life on earth, the same basic truths must permeate all aspects of humanity; we must have social and ecologic integrity in our relationships with the earth, we must have economic and ecological integrity in our relationships with each other, and our economic

relationships must have ecological and social integrity. Everything is connected with everything else, thus the same truths must permeate the whole.

Ecological, social, and economic principles are subjects of continuing scientific inquiry; science at its best is a continuing search for fundamental truth. However, the most important truth cannot be proved or disproved by science; they must be accepted by faith. Our concern for the future of humanity is a concern rooted in faith. We have no economic self-interests in the well-being of future generations because economic value is inherently individualistic; we cannot benefit economically after we are dead. We have no social interest in distant generations; we don't know anyone who will be alive then and may not even have any descendants.

The only sense in which we feel any responsibility for the stewardship of nature or society for the benefit of future generations is our ethical or moral sense of responsibilities as members of humanity. We know we owe a debt to those of the past that we can only repay to those of the future. With each payment, however, our lives are made better, not worse, because we are not just physical and social beings, we are also spiritual beings. Our happiness depends not only on our meeting our basic material and social needs, but also on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. The clearer our ethical and moral sense of purpose, the greater our happiness.

We can't prove that life has purpose. We accept it as a matter of faith. Today's scientific thinking, which is dominated by the philosophy of "scientific materialism," asserts that everything that happens is the result of interactions of matter and motion that occur automatically and unavoidably in accordance with an inviolable set of natural laws. Human life is nothing more than a sequence of chemically induced changes in the physical substances and electrical charges that defines the functioning of our bodies and minds. Science doesn't recognize the existence of human intellect, self-will, or feelings, in any sense of their being different from physical functions of the body. If there is any sense in which our life has purpose, science assumes we are predestined to pursue it because our bodies and minds simply follow the basic laws of matter and motion.

We must accept, by faith, that our life has purpose and that we are responsible for pursuing that purpose during our time here on earth. If we were not meant to do anything in particular, anything we did would be equally right or wrong, or we could simply choose to do nothing. Without purpose, it would make no difference what we did – or didn't do. We could do neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong. Murder, war, or even genocide would not be wrong because the lives lost would be utterly without purpose or meaning. We label people who believe such things as social psychopaths. A life without purpose just doesn't make any sense.

If life has purpose, we know that there must be a higher level or organization or order, an order beyond our direct observation or complete comprehension. The purpose of anything is always determined at the next highest level. Our purpose is derived from a higher order – from God. Our only possible connectedness with higher order – with God – is our sense of spiritual connectedness. Our connectedness with the other elements of the universe – including all living and nonliving things on earth – is not just physical and social but also is spiritual.

Through this spiritual connectedness, we know we are responsible for our actions, which science would deny. Lacking the will to act, our words and actions would be inevitable consequences of changes in energy, matter, and motion in accordance with the laws of the universe. We could not be held responsible for our words or actions. Every civilized human society in the world attempts to hold people responsible for their words and acts.

We know we ultimately are accountable for our words and actions. Chip Ward, an environmental activist, wrote in his book, *Canaries on the Rim*, “The most direct link you have with your environment is your own body and its health. Your body is composed of more than a trillion cells that are constantly renewed. Every year of your life, you have a new liver, new marrow, new stomach lining, and so on. Breast cells turn over monthly. New cells have to come from somewhere and they come from the foods we eat, the fluids we drink, and the air we breathe. Our environment becomes us as soil, plant, animal, water, and air are processed into our flesh and blood.” We know we are responsible for the things we allow to enter our bodies.

The food we eat, the air we all breathe, and the water we drink all come from the same earth. What we are willing to eat, breathe, and drink affects the natural environment from which others must eat, breathe, and drink. What we choose to eat and drink helps to define our social relationships with others and affects the economy in which they must buy things to eat and drink and must earn a living. Respecting the reality of our interconnectedness ultimately must change virtually every aspect of our lives. Since we all breathe, drink, and eat, choosing locally-grown, sustainably produced foods is a good place to start.

The natural, organic, and local foods movements of today are being driven by a renewed sense of our connectedness with the earth and with each other. Virtually all of the food items in supermarkets and franchise restaurants today are produced by same basic industrial methods which exploit both nature and society. By eating local, we can buy foods that are superior not just in freshness, flavor, or other physical qualities but also in the ecological and social consequences for society and the earth.

The average fresh food item in supermarkets travels about 1,500 miles from its point of production to final purchase. Buying food from local farmers not only saves on transportation but also cuts fossil energy use, a major source of our current economic vulnerability and contributor to air pollution, particularly carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses.

We don't pay the full cost of food when we shop in the supermarkets. Through our food choices, we are forcing those with less economic and political power, including those of future generations, to pay much of the ecological and social cost of our food. By eating local foods, we can choose to pay the ecological and social cost of our food. Greater freshness, flavor, and nutritious are just the bonuses of eating foods grown with ecological and social integrity.

Farmers who sell their food products directly to local customers, receive the full retail value, rather than the 20-cents most farmers receive today. Farmers who use natural, organic, or other sustainable methods also avoid the cost of fertilizers, pesticides, and other inputs. This leaves more money to compensate them for the superior labor and management skill required to care for the earth. It also allows more money to circulate through the local economy.

Obviously, preparing local foods, which typically are raw or minimally processed, requires additional time and effort. However, home preparation saves money – particularly compared with convenience foods – which makes good food affordable for almost anyone who can and will prepare foods from scratch. Equally important, preparing and eating meals at home provides opportunities for families to share quality time together in the creative, productive, and rewarding activities of preparing and eating good food. Eating local helps reconnect families.

Farmers markets can also be important community social events, bringing people together to make and renew acquaintances – to build community. Local Slow Food groups bring people together through a shared commitment to “good, clean, fair” food. Restaurants that feature food from local farms foster closer personal relationships among like-minded community members. Our common interest in food provides a natural and logical means to restoring our sense of community.

As Pennsylvania farmer Don Kretchmann puts it, “Observing firsthand the connection between our physical world and our own sustenance... gives citizens a sense of peace, security, and well-being. The practice of [sustainable] agriculture models the characteristics in the human spirit that are worth encouraging in the citizenry – hard work, honesty, connectedness, thrift, adaptability, inventiveness, recognition of the divine, artistry in the aesthetics of place and responsibility.”

By reconnecting with the earth and with each other through food and farming, we discover again, within ourselves, a deeper sense of responsibility for the living and nonliving things of the earth. We gain a deeper understanding of our responsibility to the creator of the earth and everything upon the earth – to God. By respecting basic ecological and social truths, we reconnect spiritually with the higher order – the absolute truth from which we derive our purpose and meaning. It all begins with a renewed understanding that the truths of earth, faith, food are interconnected and inseparable dimensions of the same truth.