

Sustaining Love

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Abstract: ‘Sustaining Love’ explores education for sustainability as a psycho-cultural transformation rooted in moments of personal emotional enmeshment in Nature. It is argued that while technical and economic development provides some of the necessary conditions for meeting our collective sustainability challenge, our choices along the way must be informed by a sense of identity and shared fate with infra-human species and the natural world.

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These days, I think a lot less about sustainability, and a lot more about love. This is not a rational thing. I had my first revelation of love at the age of eleven. I wasn't conscious of what happened as the experience of a lover until some time later, but that is what it was.

This is how it was for me:

When not confined to a school desk, I spent most of my childhood rambling in meadows, hardwood forests, and along the edges of creeks and ponds. By the age of eleven, I pictured my future self as a mountain man somewhere in the Canadian wilderness. My totem animal was the wolverine. For my age, I knew a great deal about making archery equipment, knife throwing, fishing lure construction and tying flies, field dressing freshly killed animals and other things that made my mother cringe. The bush was my refuge, my cathedral, the eavesdropper on my most private thoughts, the mirror of my imagination, an environment that was both dangerous and seductively beyond parental supervision. It was the place I wanted to be most of the time. It was where I could be *wild*.

Of course these are also characteristics of a lover.

But about the revelation:

I was hiking one day through a forest I hadn't visited in some weeks. I climbed up a wooded hillside only to pass its crest and see spreading before me a vast desolation. The entire forest, perhaps a hundred hectares, had been felled and bulldozed in preparation for the construction of a new suburb. I felt like I had walked into a wall. It took my breath out of me—my life. My head spun as I imagined all the plants and animals and insects, my *friends*, who lay scraped together into a shapeless pile of debris. I recall a shriek rising in my throat but I don't remember if it escaped me. In any case, there was no one there to hear it. And that made the place even more desolate.

Where the forest had been, there were now tidy rows of surveyor's stakes marking the property lines of the stucco and gyproc starter-mansions that would soon loom over its bucolically curving streets. It was the first time I was fully conscious, not only notionally but viscerally, of how much I loved what I had just seen lost in the name of "development". It was the first time I felt drawn strongly to act in its defence. And it was the first time I tasted the bile of disgust for my own species. It would be decades before I could view this sort of damage to the natural world as a symptom of a pathological culture in addition to a personal wound.

Of course I was no more innocent than the drivers of the earth movers—only younger. At least they had the excuse of framing the damage they did as an inescapable side effect of what they thought was progress. Whereas in my own case, even as a child, I did my share of killing and maiming out of boredom, curiosity, or living out my fantasies of being a mountain man, that is, luxury killing, rather than the inevitable violence entailed in being an oligotroph. It would take me another ten years to evolve out of this behaviour.

Being eleven years old, this was also my first conscious taste of what the Greeks called *eros*. Today, we think of *eros* as sexualized desire—the stuff of romance and porn fantasies. But the Greeks knew better. *Eros* was a voltage running through all the natural order, energizing every life form, pressing for its renewal, driving change and fecundity. It was a treacherous, outward-directed energy that propelled the birds and the bees, to be sure, but could also fuel violence, lust, jealousy and revenge. Treacherous as it was, however, it was also the energy of Earth's instinct for self-preservation, survival, its own defence. In my grief and anger, I was experiencing its energy.

To this day I can't imagine anyone acting in defence of the Earth without also channeling to some degree this awesome energy. It is a felt sense of unity with the living world that is found at

the opposite pole from Disney, the Animal Planet or the metropolitan zoo. There is nothing romantic or idealized or cuddly about it. It's like fighting for your last breath.

In that same year, I discovered another face of love. I wouldn't recognize it as love for thirty years, but a man can be dense. My grade six teacher asked if I wanted to plant some trees. He owned about sixty hectares of burned out farm land—depleted from his ancestors' overly ambitious efforts to somehow extract money from sand and rock. He hired me and four of my friends to reforest his property, a task that involved planting 170,000 pine, spruce and fir seedlings over two summers. The work was back-breaking, my sunburn almost untreatable, and my appetite at the end of day voracious. But there was also something wholesome, something *good* about doing that work. Being young, my back pain disappeared in a couple of days, I spent my pay on some aquarium gear to support my burgeoning interest in ichthyology, and the sunburn faded in due course. Whereupon, I went on with my life thinking little more about it.

Thirty years later, my old teacher called me and asked when I might next be in town. He had something to show me. When I arrived, we and his dog piled into his pick-up truck and set off for his property. We turned off the road into a wall of towering conifers. The trees we had planted were now fifteen or twenty meters high. The land which had been scrub and brambles was now a shady, fragrant woodland full of birdsong and the rustle of bolting squirrels, rabbits, and other invisibles. He drove up a narrow two-track into the woods, telling me he had built three small cabins in the bush that he let for free to Gulf War vets who just needed to be—*away*. He'd also constructed a small pond which was stocked with rainbow, brown and speckled trout. At the water's edge was a tiny dock and on it, a single folding lawn chair where, he told me, he fished without hooks. A cloud of dragon flies swarmed above the pond and in the bullrushes that bordered it and red winged black birds spilled their liquid calls into the late afternoon sun.

To me, this was another face of eros—a sweetness that might off-set the bile of knowing myself as a killer and despoiler of the land. The forest we planted was eloquent witness to the fact that human beings don't *have* to be so suicidal. We can foster life as well as take it. We can leave the places we visit richer rather than poorer. It all depends on the company we keep.

I've come to recognize yet another face of love in the Aboriginal people with whom I share the treaty land I live on. One doesn't have to listen to them very long before it's obvious that we have completely different experiences of this stuff we call "land". This difference is at least partly rooted in the fact that "my" people, i.e., caucasian European immigrants, didn't occupy the land in numbers until about 150 years ago. We came from Europe with the attitude that land was an insentient agricultural resource that needed our aggressive attention to produce anything of value. In pursuit of that value we gave ourselves permission to cut, grind, slash, burn, dig, tunnel and chemically saturate the land in whatever way we thought would be expedient in producing profit. We continue to do this today.

By contrast, Aboriginal people have been in North America at least 13,500 years, and perhaps as long as 40,000 years. Given the sheer duration of their stay, there could be virtually no bit of land that would not be associated in their memory with the remains of an ancestor, a story told in some ancient time, a battle where many died, or an alder break where some clan mother gave birth. The land would be criss-crossed with the trails and trials of their ancestors, explorers, hunters, and warriors as well as all those bygone generations simply going about their living. It would be honeycombed with their graves, and soaked with the blood of their birthings. The land, or various features of the land, are what feeds them, what amuses them, what educates them, the

plants that are their medicines, and where they find spiritual guidance. During my childhood experience of wild places, I think I may have touched, however briefly and superficially, this sensibility for the land. I make no claim to special understanding of Aboriginal people or to share their experience of the land as they do themselves. Nor am I naive as to the many ways that Aboriginal people modified landscapes, harvested animals, pursued their own agricultural experiments, and may even have extinguished species. But like them, I think, I have certainly felt more in the land than a dead resource suitable only for turning a profit. I think some variety of this experience is prerequisite to a different relationship with the land—a relationship that might last, or as we say today in our Orwellian way—a “sustainable” relationship.

If my own life experience can be generalized in any way to others, it shows me that as children our relationship with the Earth is a felt experience that entangles one’s psyche and spirit with the environment in a seamless unity. As adults, it tends to be a problem we aim to solve; it’s instrumental, self-interested, abstract and distant from our immediate experience. We decide the fate of landscapes in which we have never been immersed, using technology whose consequences we scarcely understand, to obtain results that, compared to the life of the land itself, seem insane. This may be one reason why Aboriginal people witnessed the white man’s lust for gold with such bewilderment—especially when it cost them the plains buffalo. Only someone who is insane would trade real food and shelter for a few grains of yellow metal.

Today, sustainability talk is everywhere, at least partly because the effects of our profligate use of fossil fuels on the global climate are becoming obvious even to the most obdurate of deniers. Educating for sustainability is gaining prominence even as the prospect of sustaining the world we evolved from becomes more and more remote. We aren’t even quite sure what it is we want to sustain. If pressed, many would probably say they want to sustain the world they are accustomed to, that is, the world of consumerism, affluence, powerlust and fantasy wish fulfillment. But the more pressing question is, how do we prepare ourselves for a future of onrushing possibilities very few of which appear to be happy ones? And how do we cease trading the real sources of our livelihood for a few more grains of yellow metal?

I would offer two observations here: Cultures that share some version of the Aboriginal understanding of the relationship between people and the land have sustained themselves a long time, whereas our culture of hyper-technical consumerism has not. Some would say it has no prospect of doing so and is in fact assuring our own extinction McPherson (2013).

Second, it appears that some variety of psycho-spiritual enmeshment or identification with the natural world informs the Aboriginal relationship to the Earth whereas in consumer culture, alienation from the natural world is the general rule. We have more capacity for psycho-spiritual enmeshment in childhood than we do as adults, and it seems more consistent with a loving, i.e., erotic, experience of the Earth than is the alienated indifference that is pervasive in consumer societies.

If these observations are true, it is tempting to infer that sustaining human life more or less in harmony with the Earth calls for a return to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle that very few find attractive and in which fewer still would be able to participate. Education for sustainability becomes a matter of cultivating woodland survival skills and a perfect J-stroke. Such an educational project could also be viewed as a return to animism and superstition at the cost of the many benefits offered by science and technology. But is this the only response love can manifest in the face of the threats conjured by consumer culture?

I think the signs of the times are calling us toward a metamorphosis of both consciousness and culture. This transformation is not a retrograde movement to a childish experience of Nature, but rather, an experience of Nature which is warmed by a love we first discover in childhood. Moreover, this transformation does not call us to relinquish modern technology for a pre-industrial way of life, but rather to infuse our use of technology with a sensibility that perceives the Earth as a sentient, kindred being rather than a ‘system’ that has nothing to do with us. This transformation I am trying to describe is a *forward* development of consciousness and values that carries us beyond the limitations of past cultural forms while also hopefully remedying the pervasive delusions that make consumer culture so dangerously suicidal. Our sustainability predicament calls us to evolve toward a new psycho-spiritual relationship with the living world—well beyond mere green consumerism, or closed loop industrial processes, or—God help us!—geoengineering. We are the sentience of the Earth evolving toward greater sentience the prime mover of which is love.

Technology and economics and good governance and political will are all necessary conditions for lengthening our stay on planet Earth. But none are sufficient to meet the challenge of sustainability unless they are grounded in a right heart and a right spirit. All are dumb instruments that go where we point them. Where we point them depends on whether or not we love. It’s not through love that we sustain consumer culture; it’s by *sustaining love* that we avoid consuming everything that sustains us. It’s been observed that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. When we love the Earth we tend to behave in life sustaining ways. When we are indifferent to it, we seal our own extinction.

The love we need to sustain in the world is not sentimentalism for a few photogenic species, but rather love as the practice of self-awareness, insight into the origins and dynamics of our own desires, and some measure of wholesome discipline in how we live.

The role of education in this undertaking hearkens back to the Latin root of the word “education” which is *educere*—“to draw forth”. As educators, our work is to draw forth from ourselves and others mindfulness of the moments in which we feel drawn to defend life, to protect it, and to nurture its flourishing. As this consciousness becomes more stable, it can guide the development of truly appropriate technologies, sustainable economies, visionary governance and the will needed for the great work of psycho-cultural metamorphosis.

Today the contradictions in consumer culture threaten our extinction. Traditional solutions no longer work. Traditional beliefs about the good life are melting away in the heat of climate realities. Consumer culture is what is producing this crisis, not resolving it. Just like the caterpillar that can no longer continue growing and must enter its chrysalis and surrender itself to its own transformation, we are consumers who will no longer be able to consume as in the past. What then will life be about? In what will a good life consist? Even if our civilization is not lost, it must be so transformed in order to last that making our way from here to there requires something like a metamorphosis. We can no longer simply be grubs who go on eating and eating without ever changing. This is not an engineering problem or a matter of economic policy. It’s a evolutionary task with its roots in love.



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