
OUR CHILDREN'S CHILDREN'S CHILDREN'S CHILDREN: DISTANT EXTERNALITY OR AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER?

A Schumacher Institute Challenge Paper

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Religion is what keeps the poor man from murdering the rich

- *Napoleon Bonaparte*

The Challenge: So, a challenge: what *other* way to organize our spiritual needs and answer life's big questions would keep the rich man from murdering the poor – and women, children, future generations, animals, trees, rivers *etc*?

1. Sustainability as the politics of survival

Sustainability is in essence about survival: the politics of who will live, thrive and produce viable young, and who will die young – or not be born at all. Sustainability with justice is about thriving without infringing the rights of others, including future generations: to live, and live well. Justice and sustainability require a potent mix of freedom and compassion. To 'do what thou wilt, an' it harm none', as an English animist would have it.

So when considering the sustainability of a current civilisation, a question: What is it that is held sacred? Where once priests and their monarchs were sanctified with responsibility to secure a public good, now servants of 'the markets' run a kind of cargo cult. But for the ordinary person keen to do the right thing, what would not be sacrificed even to government, to a monarch, to the 'Will of God' or vagaries of 'Markets'? For what would people give their lives?

Often it comes down to family, to children, friendship - and to love. Love, in whatever form it comes to each of us, weaves threads of connection between the future and the past. These ties hold us together in the (sometimes difficult) present, a re-remembering that gives beauty to life. A new baby, love affair or creative project feels magical – feels like touching the sacred. We don't know how to love, but we do it.

What would a society be like, that held most sacred the love and protection of life; that put first that spirit first? Studies have shown us that people, especially right-wing people, take a narrow view of 'family': immediate relatives and tribal group, perhaps a generation or two into the future. But scientific explorations of ecology, energy and earth systems, show that each being, species, way of being in the world is interconnected. We need each other. And all have some kind of family, loyalty, young to raise... and fair sustainable futures to plan for - if we can.

2. Can one speak for another?

When important decisions are to be made at Embercombe community in Devon, a flame known as the 'Children's Fire' is lit.¹ This flame focuses the hearts of a circle of the people on the interests of the next seven generations, as a symbolic way to bear in mind sustainability with justice for all the children of earth. There are places in the circle for men, women, youth, elders, plants, animals and others - including the joker. When speaking from these perspectives, people are invited to speak and listen from the heart. In a more head-based approach to just sustainability (for humans at least), Rupert Read's 2012 Green House report '*Guardians of the Future*'² suggests the establishment in the UK of an Ombudsmen for Future Generations. Read notes that the Welsh Assembly recently appointed a Commissioner for Sustainable Futures, and quotes the Rio+20 Summit Zero Draft official outcome document's reference to "an ombudsperson or high commissioner for future

1 See <http://www.embercombe.co.uk/>

2 Read, R. (2012) *Guardians of the Future: A constitutional case for representing and protecting future people*. Weymouth, UK: Green House. Available for download from <http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/>

generations to promote sustainable development”. Read suggests this is a way for ‘democracy’ to be extended to include the perspective of future generations. But, governments inevitably oppose the costs of a new bureaucracy, and have enough trouble making democracy work for currently living humans. And - as with with the Council circle as found at Embercombe - a question arises: who can know what an unknown person living in an unknown future will actually need or want?

Polly Higgins³ and others advocating ‘Mother Earth Rights’⁴ also aspire to give voice to beings other than humans in formal proceedings. Yet here too the question must arise – who can speak for a being other than themselves, including beings not yet born? A parent? A people? A shaman? Rivers and forests cannot vote; trees, animals and unborn children cannot set out a manifesto for themselves. If one being wants to speak for another, they had better be as loving, responsive and protective as the best parent... and even the best of parents can disagree over what’s best for their family.

3. Embodying values and reclaiming self-responsibility

So how do we - as parents to the oncoming world – better embody our own deepest values? How do we reclaim our self-responsibility and act to protect all children? Deliberating ‘from the heart’ in a ceremonial circle is very different to the ‘headwork’ involved in large scale policy and institutions. Critically minded people often view spiritual engagement, especially anything involving ritual or ceremony, with a degree of skepticism. Some prefer to measure and promote the value of non-human nature in terms of ‘ecosystem services’ to humans, ie services that can be bought and sold in the ‘market’. The more materially minded therefore assess the value of non-human nature in terms of its ‘ecosystem services’ that can be bought and sold in the ‘market’. Sustainability policy in this framework involves carrots and sticks – managing certain incentives, and trading off some costs. Especially indigenous peoples tend to feel this approach insufficient or just plain wrong; that putting all the children of earth to work in service of humans, let alone a certain culture's ‘markets’, is neither just nor sustainable. And increasingly, scientific studies suggest that such pricing can actually be detrimental to a sense of intrinsic value. The Haifa Daycare Experiment⁵ showed that monetary incentives can undermine the feelings of connectedness with, and compassion for, our fellow beings. In Israeli day care centres, staff began to fine parents who were late to collect their children – and found it significantly increased the number of parents coming late. Parents apparently found it more convenient to pay a fee than to treat key people in their community with compassion - and even when the fees were discontinued, the change in values remained.

Human business, laziness, ignorance and the need to feed families, mean few of us can think through the practical and moral consequences of our every act - for our own immediate family, let alone for others’. It is an impossible challenge for even the best intentioned institution to understand the needs of all those it affects. How much easier to place trust in ‘god’, ‘government’ or pay a market fee. Especially when the promise of a just outcome is mediated by confident priesthoods who conjure bright futures and distract us from reality today. The Bible says *‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, and whosoever shall believe in him shall not perish, but have eternal life’*. This offer of a kind of private escape for the faithful is mediated by a paternalist priesthood who claim their messiah absolves their faithful of responsibility for ‘sin’, i.e. the spiritual and practical consequences of their (unjust, unsustainable) actions. If ‘sin’ is hurting others with whom we share this life, then through religion our moral responsibility for harm can be bought off (and discounted into the future) in an imposed moral framework. To return to Napoleon’s quote, religion allows the rich to persuade the poor that responsibility can be traded through faith in an

3 See <http://www.pollyhiggins.com>

4 See <http://motherearthrights.org/>

5 Gneezy, U. and Rustichini, A. (2000) A Fine is a Price. *Journal of Legal Studies* Vol. XXIX (June 2000) pp. 1-17.

omnipotent God for a kind of karmic 'get out of jail free' card. If faith gives divine absolution, why not 'sin' again? If a pollution fee absolves me, why not pollute again? What hope for any victims of my sinfulness, if responsibility for my pollution can be traded at a price?

Debt is core to the spiritual logic of injustice and unsustainability. In Europe we have been promised for millennia that our moral sins can be bailed out spiritually by Jesus's love. Is our culture tuned to believe in a right to redemption for financial, political and ecological sins as well? Like modern gods, markets have been given the power to mediate our relationships with other beings and future generations. As a human I wonder of our greatest debt is not to a 'loving god', or 'died for our sins' messiah nor even to 'the markets', but to our ancestors, and our brothers and sisters and cousins and children both living and to come. To coin a phrase, everybody needs good neighbours, and to live well, our future generations also need good ancestors. For we are all nature, and in the worlds of a climate protest banner used in London, 'Nature doesn't do bailouts.' Maybe it is partly due to our Western religious heritage that so many of us embedded here, from politicians on down, feel we can abdicate responsibility for difficult decisions - and their consequences - to someone else, and some other time, up or down the hierarchies of unaccountable power.

4. Conclusion: lighting a flame at the centre

So what now? To start at our own beginning. As newborns, what do we each most need, to live? To thrive, to survive resiliently – to sustain?

We need protection, connection, love, nourishment and the space to grow and change.

We want to experience and enjoy, to mature, to give and to take, to make our own connections and to learn.

We desire our bodies, ourselves, our hearts to have respect from others. We experience our living as sacred. If we can.

When meeting as equals: women, men, youth and elders, in the presence of the animals, plants, ancestors and future generations, we may light a flame at the centre called the Children's Fire, to symbolically remind us of our very real responsibilities to the future.

For sustainability with justice, the voices of all do need to be considered; though we cannot put words in the mouths of others.

A flame represents the sanctity of life. A Children's Fire can remind us to at least try to consider the implications of our deliberations for ALL the children of Earth, even to the 7th generation. Not as servants, slaves or even wage slaves but as others somehow like us, with a desire for life.

When it comes to open hearted honouring of Earth and Sky, animals and plants, even fungi; for rational western minds raised on science, self-esteem and the scriptures of a jealous god, such spiritual experiments can feel odd. Plus, a naked flame is a health and safety issue. But if we are to live more sustainably at every level, maybe it's time to stop prostituting our moral compass to the promises of diverse priests. It's not easy always to hear voices from the edges, nor to consider those less willing or able to play politics with men. But one circle is what we are on this Earth, literally, and centering our human deliberations around a Children's Fire, we may find help in difficult times to refocus on this bigger picture – and do things right by the kids.

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