

A Natural Step for Earthlings: Sustainable Outcomes in Unity and Love (SOUL)

— Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove — Cedars UU Church, Bainbridge Island, WA — April 25, 2010 —

READING — From *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability* by Paul Hawken, 1993

Author and activist Paul Hawken is a prophet of our time, whose well-reasoned and well-researched writings have become touchstones for much of the ecological movement, especially as it partners with the business community to have even greater impact on the shift required of our *entire* society.

Almost 20 years ago Hawken offered a profound “Declaration of Sustainability” in a very provocative book titled “The Ecology of Commerce.” Those are two words and realms, Ecology and Commerce, that seem rarely to dance together in collaboration, and yet, as he argues quite compellingly, they must be partnered, increasingly so, if we are to make a dent in the dilemmas that threaten to engulf us.

Hawken’s analysis and vision still resonate vigorously today, suggesting that we’ve been rather slow on the uptake in the sustainability field. Witness this helpful thrust, from *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability*:

A cardinal principle and practice of any...business *should* be to perform tasks and services that are sustainably produced and/or promote sustainability in society as a whole. The word “sustainability” can be defined in terms of *carrying capacity* of the ecosystem... (as in) an economic state where the demands placed upon the environment by people *and commerce* can be met *without* reducing the capacity of the environment to provide for *future* generations.

(Sustainability) can also be expressed in the simple terms of a...(four-part) *golden rule* for the restorative economy: Leave the world better than you found it, take no more than you need, try not to harm life or the environment, make amends if you do. [pg. 139]

...Our personal values, which have become so distant and removed from the juggernauts of commerce, must become increasingly important and, finally, integral to the healthy functioning of our economy. Business offers us rich and important ways to improve the world. Every transaction in the scheme of things is small, incremental, *seemingly* inconsequential, but each moment has the potential to create real change...

Business can provide meaning for workers and customers but not until it understands that the trust it undertakes and the growth it assumes are part of a larger covenant... For most people meaning is derived from (the ways) in which one gives more than one takes, where one’s life is intricately bound to the promotion of the common good... [pg. 136]

Hymn #317 (Brian Wren):

We are not our own. Earth forms us, human leaves on nature's growing vine,
fruit of many generations, seeds of life divine.
We are not alone. Earth names us: past and present, peoples near and far,
family and friends and strangers show us who we are.
Therefore let us make thanksgiving, and with justice, willing and aware,
give to earth, and all things living, liturgies of care.
Let us be a house of welcome, living stone upholding living stone,
gladly showing all our neighbors we are not our own!

SERMON:

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By Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove

Earth forms us, fruit of many generations. And the Earth, in turn, was formed in a cosmic crucible billions of years before Homo sapiens appeared. Journey with me now, in your mind's eye, back to that earliest stage of planetary formation, when the Earth's atmosphere was an emerging swirl of chemical compounds, such as cyanides, carbon dioxide, methane, ammonia, etc.—certainly an envelope not ready for prime time life as we know it today.

A billion years or so later, very gradually, in the early oceans, the first plant cells developed. These simple cells also began a long, slow task of detoxifying the harsh atmosphere, for a couple more billion years.

Then the ancient algae initiated a miraculous process called photosynthesis, which continued to work its magic through green-leafed agents on land, now adding the life-giving element oxygen into the atmosphere. Ever so slowly, the Earth perfected an ability to capture sunlight and transform it into plant energy, the basis for all life on this planetary sphere.

About 1 billion years ago, the first animal cells appeared and consumed some of that plant energy to further diversify the range of life forms that were inhabiting the Earth's surface, which could support this growth because of the steadily detoxified atmosphere. The past 500 million years have witnessed an accelerating evolution to create an astoundingly rich biosphere that finally included human life forms, which arrived only about two million years ago.

The scope of this time scale is informative and humbling. To help grasp the numbers here, try this analogy: If we compress all this planetary history into one week's time, just seven days of evolution, and if the Earth were first formed that one full week ago, Homo sapiens didn't show up until, oh, 30 seconds ago. Less than two seconds ago, our ancestors shifted from hunting and gathering to agriculture. The Industrial Revolution was a 40th of a second ago, and we discovered oil only 200th of a second ago.

The genius of our Earthling species has been to accomplish much in that most recent moment after an entire week's planetary evolution. Great things, to be sure, but more to the point—and a sharp point it is—we have also been able to generate a phenomenal amount of non-biodegradable waste and atmospheric RE-toxification, all of which is accumulating in ways that now severely threaten our little 30 second test drive of what could be called the human experiment.

As one pioneer in sustainability has described it:

“If we continue in this way, we can expect to see our habitat blighted more and more by a deadly combination of both visible and molecular garbage: rusting car wrecks, mercury fumes, sulphurous acid, greenhouse gases, freons and so on. Although the visible garbage is certainly an eyesore, it is the *molecular* refuse that poses the most danger to all life on Earth, for it acts as an irritating gravel in the sensitive machinery of the ecosystem.”

[*The Natural Step* founder, Karl-Henrik Robèrt, quoted in *The Natural Step for Business*, pg. 38.]

After the Earth spent billions of years detoxifying the harsh chemical stew of our original atmosphere so that life could thrive, we are now, relatively quickly, returning the atmosphere to a potentially toxic state. And much if not most of this pollution is a direct by-product of “business-as-usual,” which has generally meant commerce without concern for ecological impact, at least during the past 40th of a second since the Industrial Revolution.

The net result of this path is illustrated in “The Resource Funnel” diagram.

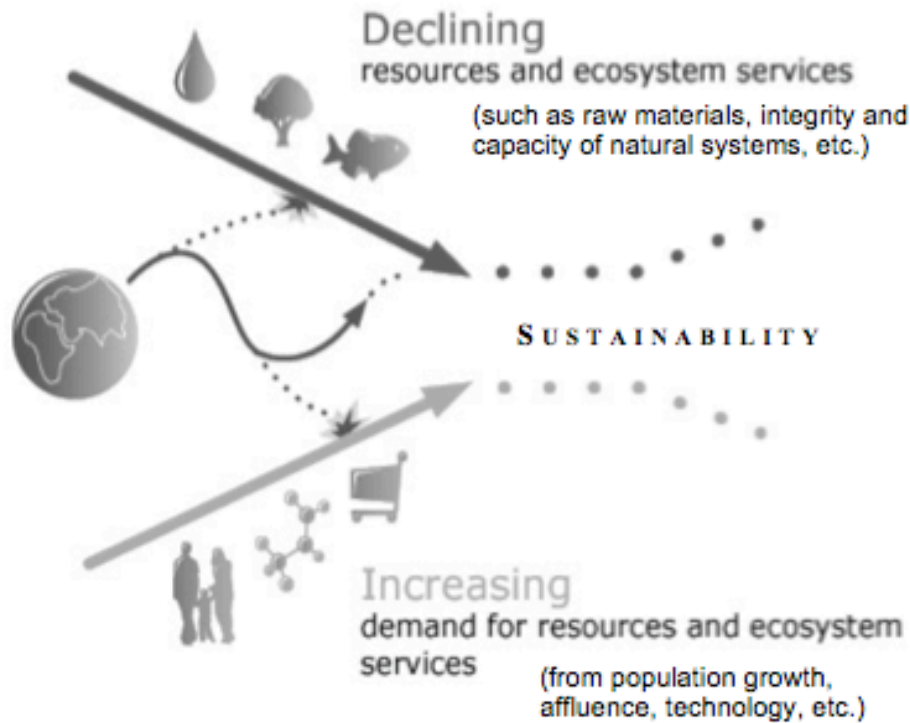
THE RESOURCE FUNNEL



From **The Natural Step** website:

www.naturalstep.org/the-funnel

Adapted slightly by Jaco B. ten Hove



It simply but graphically describes our current dilemma. You can see that, over time, the thick upper arrow, which represents the measurable reality of *declining* resources, is converging with the thick lower large arrow that shows an equally measurable reality of increasing *demand for* resources. If these two trends meet, guess what happens? Probably not a pretty picture.

Instead, we, the current generation of Earthlings, are called to actively change the angle of both arrows so that the progression flattens out into a pace of more sustainable balance, where demand equals supply. Then and only then can we navigate toward a subsequent future of

restorative growth. Our dilemma, however, is heightened because much, if not most of our commerce is still based on an old model of perpetual growth that does not concern itself enough with the upper half of this diagram.

But the tide is shifting, and not a moment too soon, it would seem. “Sustainability” as a rising, guiding global ethic is likely to be an animating factor for the rest of our lives. I certainly have heard a call to throw my lot in with this movement, such as it is, or will become.

And I want to lift up ever so briefly this morning, one particular calling card of this emerging global ethic, called *The Natural Step*. I invite and urge you to pay attention to this hopeful framework of principles that both businesses and communities can use to creatively reposition our human experiment in the organic flow of an effective planetary system. It’s no panacea, to be sure, and it suggests some very challenging shifts in both consciousness and behavior.

But, frankly, my friends, this *is* the challenge of our lifetimes, which either we meet head-on, or we abdicate the future to “molecular refuse” run amok. There has been enough foot-dragging, denial and escapism—all of which continue apace, of course, but alongside all that arises a vision and a call, for people of good will who care about the common good to bring their good minds and hearts to this good work.

Here’s how I humbly propose we Earthlings take such a Natural Step. First, we take a crash course to learn what we need to know about global realities and the many sustainability tools that are increasingly available. Then we honestly assess our particular, local situation, which will lead us to articulate a compelling vision that then inspires us to act directly.

Those four process steps—learn, assess, envision and act—are what’s called the “compass” of *The Natural Step*, which itself is a framework of four “first order principles” to guide us on this journey. Four steps in a process, based on four guiding principles.

First order principles are the bedrock of any movement, the baseline core without which there can usually be no coherent, effective movement. Our [Unitarian Universalist Principles \[http://www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml\]](http://www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml) are printed each Sunday on the back of your Order of Service. These are what guide and focus our particular religious orientation.

For the past 20 years or so, a set of global first principles has been percolating out of Sweden, from the work of a leading cancer researcher there, Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt. I've been learning about all this from the Natural Step websites and from two good books, *The Natural Step for Communities*, and *The Natural Step for Business*. Each covers the same basic introduction, but then branches into examples and particulars in those two fields, communities and businesses.

Both these books explain the four “system conditions” you see below, in the left column.

PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABILITY



From **The Natural Step** USA website:
www.naturalstep.org/en/usa/principles-sustainability
Adapted slightly by Jaco B. ten Hove

<i>The Four System Conditions...</i>	<i>...Reworded as The Four Principles of Sustainability</i>
<i>In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:</i>	<i>To become a sustainable society we must...</i>
1. concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust;	1. eliminate our contribution to the progressive buildup of substances extracted from the Earth's crust (<i>for ex., heavy metals, fossil fuels</i>);
2. concentrations of substances produced by society;	2. eliminate our contribution to the progressive buildup of chemicals and compounds produced by society (<i>for example, dioxins, PCBs, & DDT</i>);
3. degradation by physical means; and	3. eliminate our contribution to the progressive physical degradation and destruction of nature and natural processes (<i>for example, over-harvesting forests and paving over critical wildlife habitat</i>); and
4. in that society, people are not subject to conditions that systemically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.	4. eliminate our contribution to conditions that undermine people's capacity to meet their basic human needs (<i>for example, unsafe working conditions, not enough pay to live on</i>).

And these are not new or shallow offerings. They have been vetted by scientists the world over for almost two decades, and have held up as first principles of sustainability in many varied contexts. Nonetheless, they sound a bit clunky, so recast in the right column is a somewhat smoother statement.

The first three principles speak to our impact on the natural cycles of planetary life and the fourth to our shared human culture, all of which, of course, are interdependent. Karl-Henrik Robèrt even suggests that the first three will never be sufficiently achieved without the fourth [*Business*, pg. 41]. Basic human needs are just that—basic.

The “system conditions” and principles are purposely written without any specific actions or programs, but rather to set the broadest minimum boundaries possible that will still ensure sustainability. That way everyone everywhere can locate themselves in there, creating many possible scenarios, customized to specific settings. It’s also, by design, an almost indisputably scientific platform, with few explicit or even arguable political implications.

What there are, however, are serious implications for communities and businesses, and that is where the most essential attention needs to be. As Paul Hawken has written,

Before the Industrial Revolution, commerce and culture were powerfully regulated by natural energy flows... but once the process of industrialization commenced, the economic life of culture shifted from working *with* natural forces to working to *overcome* them... (H)uman beings are no longer living in synchronization with natural cycles and have accepted, however reluctantly, industrialism’s shadow—waste, degradation, and dehumanization. [*The Ecology of Commerce*, pg. 131.]

Hawken also notes [in his Epilogue to *The Natural Step for Business*] that in this 21st century (barring, say, a cataclysmic catastrophe), our human population will likely double and the resources available per person will shrink to less than half of what they are now. So a rather radical transformation is in order, and the business community can lead the way, *must* lead the way. Some leaders are already stepping out on the front edge of this kind of change, but many more will need some coaxing, and soon.

Some communities are also getting on board, by reorganizing their own systems into eco-municipalities, for instance, and by helping local businesses redesign their work holistically and sustainably. Certainly the big resources are in industry, as are the big drains on the environment. The innovative power of human commerce is an essential player in this picture.

When the *Natural Step for Business* was written, in 1999, it profiled a quartet of large, cutting edge companies that were employing these framework principles, namely Scandic Hotels and IKEA out of Sweden; Interface and Collins Pine in America. (Interface is the world's largest producer of commercial carpet and Collins Pine operates 300,000 sustainably-managed acres of prime forestland.)

Ten years later now, many more companies are also demonstrating how to effectively apply *The Natural Step*. I recently checked out of our local library an inspirational video called "A Passion for Sustainability" that profiles a dozen Portland, Oregon, companies, large and small, that have made substantial gains using *The Natural Step* framework as their guide.

These and other model companies help to prove the wisdom of what's called the triple bottom line, by which a company's success is judged not only on financial profit, but also by its impact on people and the environment. Some call this the 3 Es: Economy, Ecology and Equity (or 3 Ps: People, Planet, Profit).

That, by the way, is a big part of the teaching philosophy of our own Bainbridge Graduate Institute, BGI, which trains business professionals in this revolutionary triple bottom line. Also locally, last December the Bainbridge Island Chamber of Commerce courageously and ambitiously endorsed *The Natural Step*. I very much want to learn more about how our local community might act to uphold this forefront but demanding framework of principles.

I suspect it will not be easy, by any means. Alongside all the other dimensions of the sustainability challenge—scientific and economic, social and political, local and global—I think this is also *a spiritual quest*.

I propose that the path toward sustainability is worthy of our spiritual discipline. To effectively orient one's life and behavior to any set of chosen guiding principles is the work of a religious life, and we UUs have an explicit connection to the path of sustainability.

Our 7th Principle affirms "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," which aims us directly at the achievement of both awareness and behavior that supports a fundamentally interconnected planet. It will truly take, I think, significant spiritual discipline to

do the personal inventory required of us, if we want to align our lives with an ethic of sustainability.

I invite you to reflect personally on all this material and locate yourself and your own spiritual path in relation to the challenges before us, assuming, of course, that, like me, you'd rather be more a part of the solution than the problem.

I once had a weekly three-hour radio show on a community station, playing music from a variety of genres, as I like to do. It was a mid-day shift, so I hit upon a fun format for the lunch hour segment of that shift. I would put on a long track of some natural sounds, such as birds, landscapes, rain or other weather, whales and/or waves, etc. Then I would overlap that natural soundtrack with a series of solo musical voices, such as a single instrument, unison chanting, etc.

And I called this lunchtime segment by a special name: "Noon to One with Nature." I recorded some of those shows and still refer back to these tapes for spiritual sustenance. Whenever I can experience *both* music *and* nature, live or otherwise, my soul is activated at a deep, abiding, unnamable level. I've been to some amazing outdoor concerts over the years. Somehow, those moments are a ticket into the Earthly sphere, where I can appreciate music and apprehend my oneness with all of life.

Such experiential moments tend to be rather passive, however, even as valuable as they are. They are satisfying to my soul, but they don't feel like a discipline, per se. I know I also need to be actively engaged in some kind of committed movement, in a direction that also reflects my spirit's connection to the wider community of life, the interdependent web of all existence of which I am a part.

And I know I'm not alone in this urge. I am inspired to hear of all the ways my fellow UUs and other friends are intentionally addressing the need to improve our sustainable human presence, embedded as we are in a sacred, if stressed ecosystem. However you perceive this to be a calling and/or a spiritual discipline, I invite you to lift it up, honor it, extend it in your own ways.

Sustainability that is more than superficial will require change in pretty demanding ways, some easier than others. But I think, in the days ahead, it will help a lot to have a religious underpinning to our effort. And so I ask, “What aspects of sustainability speak to your SOUL?” “How does sustainability inform your spiritual discipline?”

Further, I ask for your help. We are part of a community here in North Kitsap that is increasingly aware and ready to move in this direction, with new ideas and resources coming online almost weekly. I am barely keeping up with developments, but I’m trying. Some of you know I have taken a bit of leadership in this realm, as part of the B.I. Energy Challenge Alliance. I’m also becoming connected in various other efforts and am steadily impressed by the work and potential of the “big tent” group called Sustainable Bainbridge.

There will continue to be opportunities for more hearts and hands to help with projects and possibilities, and I perceive a distinct role for Cedars people to play, explicitly as part of your UU spiritual discipline. In fact, I’ve come up with an acronym to help augment our Green Sanctuary Team, which is already involved in some of these areas.

Our collective effort toward Sustainable Outcomes in Unity and Love, looks like SOUL work to me. Sustainable Outcomes (S.O.) are what we want to see and encourage; Unity and Love (U.L.) are the baseline values of Unitarian Universalism, which we certainly, unequivocally can bring with us as advocates for this guiding ethic of our era and the future. It is S.O.U.L. work for Cedars.

And there is no time left for dilly-dallying, my friends, or soft-pedaling, or distractions. We have meaningful contributions to make, thinking globally but acting locally, and I invite your SOUL to join mine. There are or will soon be roles for all kinds of skills and people, from leadership slots to worker bees. For instance, we need more leaders to help steer the evolving Energy Challenge Alliance.

There will also be on-the-ground campaigns that cover both neighborhoods and business establishments, to directly encourage and track energy efficiency. The Zero Waste initiative is fast gaining momentum and needs help retraining event planners. I suspect Poulsbo has various efforts toward sustainability that are looking for help as well. Who knows what the Chamber’s

endorsement of *The Natural Step* is going to unleash, but it will probably need volunteers to make more inroads.

Some of us are envisioning a local community that is a beacon of sustainable successes. It can happen but it needs our help.

I also envision a *SOULful Cedars* contingent making an important impact in this arena, explicitly encouraging Sustainable Outcomes in Unity and Love. It can be a very active embodiment of our UU values in the world around us. It is part of my spiritual discipline to contribute time and energy toward the common good and I urge you to do the same through this avowedly religious thrust of our congregation.

Don't be shy. If you want to stay connected to this *SOULful Cedars* thrust in any way, please register your interest with me or Leslie Marshall, leader of our Green Sanctuary Team. Thank you in advance.

Another pioneering doctor, Jonas Salk, described the opportunity before our kind well, when he wrote:

The most meaningful activity in which a human can be engaged is one that is directly related to human evolution. This is true because human beings now play an active and critical role not only in the process of their own evolution but in the survival and evolution of all living beings [from Anatomy of Reality: Merging of Intuition and Reason, 1983].

We are indeed participating in the evolution of the Earth, as the latest co-creators in a lifeline billions of years long, with a future ahead that beckons us to bring forward all the religious fervor we can, as we serve justice with compassion and contribute to the common good that is and will be.

“Respect the water, land and air which gave all creatures birth;
Protect the lives of all that share the glory of the Earth.”

[Hymn #175, *We Celebrate the Web of Life*]

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