

Chapter 5 A Radical Notion of Sustainability

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into the tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

—*Rabindranath Tagore, Songs of Kabir*

Missing almost completely from the problem-oriented activities of today is a vision of a world that is sustainable—even a definition of sustainability is missing. No wonder that we move forward only occasionally, instead drifting mostly sideways or backward. Perhaps it is because the very distinction, sustainability, is fuzzy and linguistically complex. Is it a property of a system? Perhaps, but even then one would need more information to understand its meaning. What is it about the

system that is being sustained? For how long? Considered as a property, sustainability, like all “-ities,” is not very satisfying. One always needs some other criteria to decide how much of the “-ity” is there. What makes flexibility flexible? The “-ities” almost always start as coined words describing some qualitative property of a system. Later our modern way of thinking reifies these terms and converts them into quantities we can measure and, ultimately, try to manage. The “-ities” are the reified aftereffects of qualitative assessments that have become so familiar that they seem to be things. It is not only the “-ities” that have become reified; many important qualities, such as love and happiness, also have become frozen and objectlike.

Even vision—foresight—has taken on thinglike properties. We now routinely create visions in formulaic processes as part of common strategic planning procedures. George H. W. Bush talked about the “vision thing” in this way. How can we avoid the same fate for sustainability? It is too important to be put into the same category as the other “-ities.” To be a powerful force for redesigning the present, hurting world, sustainability needs to avoid becoming just another thing to measure and manage, and instead become a word that will bring forth an image of the world as we would hope it to be.

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

Happiness is the absence of the striving for happiness.
—Zhuang Zhou

I define sustainability as the *possibility* that humans and other life will *flourish* on the Earth *forever*. You will notice some circularity here since I use one “-ity” to define another. But *possibility* is perhaps the only “-ity” that cannot be made into a thing. It is just the opposite: possibility is *no-thing*. Possibility has no material existence in the world of the present. Possibility is always only a word. It means bringing forth from nothingness something we desire to become present. Possibility may be the most powerful word in our language because it enables humans to visualize and strive for a future that neither is available in the present nor may have existed in the past. Possibility is like a time warp, allowing one to escape from the limits of our past experience into an unshackled future. One

might interpret Ortega y Gasset's words from Chapter 1 as the essence of possibility.

There is no plural for possibility as defined here; the idea of possibilities (plural) is a manifestation of the reification of which I just spoke. Most talk about possibilities in common conversation is better couched in terms of probabilities, the chances that something missing at the moment will show up in the next. In this way of thinking, the idea of chance suggests that the future, even if uncertain, is tied to the past. Even the concept of future is flawed. Our way of thinking about time has us believing that we can create it like the next frame in a motion picture. Of course, that is not so; we live only in the present. The past is nothing more than a story we tell ourselves about what has happened, incorporating everything we have ever experienced or heard about.

When one holds the idea of possibility as I have described it, future is a different concept. Future in this mode of living is a story of what one would want based on what has yet to be satisfied. Philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schutz wrote, "Our actions are conscious if we have previously mapped them out 'in future perfect tense.'"¹ Future is the possibility out of which one lives and acts in the present. The future as possibility arises and transforms your Being now. Aliveness shows up when future is a possibility coming from nothingness. And what is a better image of being alive than flourishing? Flourishing is the metaphor that brings life to this definition of sustainability and enables everybody to create their own image of what their flourishing world would be. Flourishing does not collapse into a thing or numerical measure of well-being to be managed.

Every culture and every age have conjured up images and sounds of flourishing. Even the ancient Greeks had a word for what I have called sustainability: *aephoria*, which is derived from *ae*, meaning forever, and *phoria*, meaning to bear fruit or to flourish. Flourishing is behind the acts and lives of great leaders like Gandhi, King, and Mandela. Flourishing is in the poetry of William Blake and e. e. cummings. It appears every time an infant first smiles. It unfolds in the blooming of a rose. It comes in the taste of water from a country spring or after a deep breath in the forest. All humans have had at least a moment when their senses revealed flourishing, but all too few live in circumstances where those precious moments reemerge over and over.

For living species other than humans, flourishing is about survival and maintenance of their species. It might mean more, but we cannot access the thoughts of these other species to discover what they are thinking. If we could, I imagine they would be speaking about air, soil, trees, water, or roses in much the same way we would talk about our place in the world. But flourishing means more to human beings. Human flourishing goes beyond our sense of belonging to and thriving in the natural world. It also involves the attainment of a few very special qualities that have come to be recognized as constituting our species as different from these other life forms. Hans Christian Anderson said, “Just living is not enough. . . . One must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower.”

Dignity is one of these qualities. The earliest philosophers recognized dignity as something special and essential to the “good” life. Speaking of the good life is another way of talking about flourishing peculiar to the human species and our own unique way of Being. Dignity is about living one’s life according to one’s values, free from domination. Dignity often manifests itself in negative situations, however, when one is forced into ways that belie those values. History is full of stories about people who have found dignity among the worst of dominating circumstances. Nelson Mandela survived decades of incarceration but emerged whole. But a world that requires everyone to become a Mandela certainly could not go by the name of sustainable. Social critics like Lewis Mumford have spoken eloquently of the danger that technology may erode dignity.² Jokes about the demeaning process of programming a VCR make light of the loss of dignity that technology can and does cause. The cultural voices impinging on our ears shout that we need more and more technology even as we feel a more than vague sense of loss. There is a strange sense of inevitability that drags us along.

Flourishing also consists of other distinctions of human origin that relate to the collective state. Justice, fairness, and equity come from our historical sense that flourishing has to do with more than our own selfish attainments. We accept, but fail to act accordingly, that there is a social dimension to living that recognizes in some way that all humans are interconnected and that the state of our individual lives is tied to the states of others with whom we share our only world.³ Exploring these aspects of flourishing is the subject of philosophers and theologians. Even in a postmodern world, where many believe we cannot

Table 3. Maslow’s attributes of Being

Attribute	Detail
Wholeness	Unity, structure
Perfection	Just-right-ness, suitability, completeness
Completion	Justice. Fulfillment
Justice	Fairness, oughtness
Aliveness	Spontaneity, non-deadness
Richness	Complexity, intricacy
Simplicity	Honesty, nakedness, essentiality
Beauty	Rightness, perfection, honesty
Goodness	Rightness, oughtness, honesty
Uniqueness	Individuality. Novelty
Effortlessness	Ease, absence of striving
Playfulness	Fun, joy, humor, exuberance, effortlessness
Truth, honesty, reality	Nakedness, simplicity, purity
Self-sufficiency	Autonomy (but not being alone in the world)

ground the meaning of these qualities on any absolute foundations, we still accept that they are critical to flourishing.

I have focused on the developed world in this discussion of flourishing, but I believe it also applies to the rest of the world as well, with these exceptions. Clearly those humans who do not have enough to eat, or who suffer from endemic illness, or who are forced to lead undignified lives, do not flourish. But poverty alone, as a relative measure, is not a barrier to flourishing.

The eminent psychologist Abraham Maslow turned to an examination of Being in his later years after establishing a seminal foundation for “need.” Maslow’s discussion of Being has the sense of flourishing that I portray here.⁴ Table 3 presents his attributes. The items in the table can help reveal the presence of flourishing amid everyday activities.

I have been purposely vague in defining the attributes of flourishing. One reason is that flourishing is technically an emergent property of a complex living system. Such properties, like beauty, always emerge within the context of the observers or actors in the system and take on characteristics determined by that context. A second, related reason is that flourishing is treated differently by many of the disciplines that make up the humanities, the study of what makes us human

as opposed to mere animals. Psychologists such as Maslow look for the kinds of signs shown in Table 3. Phenomenologists such as Heidegger probe the unique ontology of humans. We shall see that his primary tie to flourishing is the authentic satisfaction of a set of cares for oneself, other human beings, and rest of the world. Spiritual leaders offer very similar sets of attributes.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, writing from his concern for one of the fundamentals of Judaism, *Tikkun Olam* (healing the world), offers the following description of what I would call flourishing: “Recognize that people hunger for a world that has meaning and love; for a sense of aliveness, energy, and authenticity; for a life embedded in a community in which they are valued for who they most deeply are, with all their warts and limitations, and feel genuinely seen and recognized; for a sense of contributing to the good; and for a life that is about something more than just money and accumulating material goods.”⁵ My point is that flourishing is the subject of the most central thinking of scholars and the public about what it is to be human. I believe that the vision of flourishing is the most basic foundation of human striving and, if properly articulated, can be the strongest possible driver toward sustainability.

Adding “forever” to this definition lends it the timelessness that is found in virtually all conversations about sustainability. Sustainable development is based on the idea that our generation’s use of the resources left to us by our forebears will not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs. But is this not just a more complicated and indirect way of saying that flourishing is something that should go on forever? Sustainability makes little sense except as an everlasting condition. For those who would quibble with the use of “forever” as unrealistic or naïve in the face of evolutionary changes, and with the ultimate heat death of the world predicted by thermodynamics, its use here is connotative and metaphoric. It means simply that our actions need take account of the future in a meaningful way beyond the mere discounting of some economic calculus.

Consider again this definition: *Sustainability is the possibility that humans and other life will flourish on the Earth forever.* Doesn’t this way of speaking raise a very different image and feeling from the notion of sustainable development? It doesn’t say much about how to get there and it doesn’t say how we will ever know that we are indeed

there. Sustainability is only a powerful vision humans can use, individually and collectively, to design the world in which they live and act so that the possibility of flourishing is never closed off. As long as the door to the future remains open, even if only by a small crack, then that possibility exists.

But, as I have noted, our conversations about sustainability almost always take a negative tone. We can recognize many unsustainable aspects of the way we live in today's world. We can measure unsustainability and, through modern science, can even make predictions about it. And because we can observe unsustainability, we believe that we can make the world sustainable merely by mitigating or removing the conditions that cause it. This approach is like the story told about a fledgling artist with an assignment to make a horse out of a large piece of marble. After much struggle about how to start, she asked her master for advice. The response was, "Just remove everything that is not a horse." Having no idea of what a horse should look like in stone, the apprentice was just as stymied as before. The same goes for sustainability; without a vision, removing what is not sustainable will not work.

Not surprisingly, virtually all suggestions by the most powerful institutions of the modern world for solving the sustainability problem involve technology in some way or another. This is a great error and a sign of our unconsciousness and cultural immersion in modernity. Sustainability is *not* the obverse of unsustainability. They are not just two sides of the same coin. They are categorically different. And, as I have already said, reducing one does not automatically produce the other. Unsustainability is real and tangible and can be sensed, measured, and reduced to theory. Flourishing is real, although it may take metaphors to bring it to our consciousness. It is a qualitative, linguistic construction that describes the emergent properties of a living system as a whole. But sustainability is not real in the same sense. As noted above, flourishing, whenever we may see it in the moment, could also be found in the next moment, and the next, and on and on forever. Sustainability is a container for the highest set of human aspirations and associated cultural values.

From time to time psychology shifts away from its roots in explaining behavioral abnormalities and toward the positive. Maslow turned from a focus on deficiency and need to a positive psychology

of Being, recognizing the presence of what he (and others) called peak experiences.⁶ Since about 2000, psychologists have become explicit about examining life through a positive lens, calling their work positive psychology.⁷ I found the title of the introduction to the book just cited particularly relevant: “Human Flourishing—The Study of That Which Makes Life Worthwhile.”

I add this reference here for several purposes. I believe that flourishing is not definable or measurable in the sense that scientists ascribe to the objects they study. To me, flourishing is the emergence of a set of desirable, healthy qualities from one’s Being in the world, simply living every day. One of several recurrent themes in the text cited just above is that of “flow.” Flow is a condition in which an actor becomes deeply engaged in some activity and experiences a sense of fulfillment and deep satisfaction. By pointing to this particular field within a major social science, I argue that flourishing is not some mere philosophical curiosity nor idle dreaming. Distinctions, such as “positive psychology,” that name a field aiming to understand how to produce flourishing are evidence per se of a collective awareness that this quality is generally missing in mainstream cultural life. (The idea of engagement, or involvement, will reenter the discussion of everyday products and artifacts in later chapters.) I have already argued that the particular form of technology that has emerged in our modern era produces opposite effects: alienation from the world and self, and loss of ethical competence.

In the title of this chapter I describe sustainability as radical. In terms of exceeding the norms of sustainable development, it certainly is radical. Its ontology is strange. It is far different from sustainable development. It raises political issues. But another meaning of radical without such political overtones fits this definition of sustainability. The etymology of “radical” is closely tied to the meaning of “root.” In this sense sustainability is radical but related to the sense that we have become separated from our human and natural roots and need to find our way back.

ARE ALL SPECIES EQUAL?

In defining sustainability as the possibility that *humans and other life* will flourish on the planet forever, I have introduced a number of philosophical and moral questions. And because of the philosophical

and moral nature of humans, there is room for different interpretations and beliefs. It is important to understand the context out of which this definition arises. Central to the notion of sustainability is that the human species is merely a single species among the millions that populate the Earth and form a complex ecosystem that supports the biological survival of all. (I claim this last sentence to be true as a fact, not as a statement of the value of any particular species.) This argument does not presuppose that all species live forever either. It is consistent with a dynamic, evolving world where species emerge and disappear. Other than the human species, the evolutionary process seems immune to any species' superiority and right to exist at the expense of any other. But clearly some do dominate others and maintain themselves while others wither and disappear.

Only the human species, with its unique cognitive and linguistic capability, has invented the notion of rights or superiority. Again this is a fact and must be reckoned within any discussion of biological survival. The very existence of a conversation about survival or flourishing derives from human speakers and their concerns about such survival or flourishing. This conversation, by the very nature of language, is subjective, focused on the speakers as distinct entities. And being subjective, the conversation is likely to make comparisons to other living entities and to assess how they impact the humans' survival. But being subjective and immersed in the linguistic context of being, the human speakers tend to lose sight of the fact that they are also part of the living system and depend on it.

If we overlook this dual place for us in the world, we are likely to make errors in our efforts to protect ourselves from natural phenomena that are threatening, or to produce outcomes we believe are going to produce satisfaction, the good life, and all other normative aspects of human Being. We do and will continue to ask whether we are more valuable than other species. We certainly do this implicitly when we use them in a positive sense in our daily life. And we do this in a negative sense when we seek to destroy or isolate ourselves from those species we deem to have pathological impacts, whether they are viruses or man-eating tigers.

The definition of sustainability presented here does not presuppose any absolute scale of importance, including one where all species are deemed to be equal. But since only humans can express the idea of

sustainability, I take it for granted that it is self-referential, and some judgment will be made. How that judgment is to be made and by what criteria is a matter of argument. My own way of dealing with the arguments of those who take the polar positions of anthropocentric and biocentric bases for choice is that neither can be proven to be correct and that the pragmatic choice is somewhere in between. I think sustainability as flourishing can come forth even if, for example, we as a dominating species wipe out pathogens.

When it comes to other species that are part of the world but that seemingly serve no instrumental end for humans nor are pathogenic, my response is pragmatic. Believing that the world is a complex system in that it behaves in strange and unpredictable ways, I would assert that prudence is a critical value in making choices that affect the place of species. What is important to our own sustainability is that the whole system flourish. It cannot when our species acts as the often-destructive force it has become. Ecosystems can survive when perturbed, but only by so much. Since we don't really know how much is too much, it again seems prudent to move slowly and observe the results before continuing to plunge blindly forward.

If this pragmatic model is unsatisfying and begs the question of who makes decisions about human encroachment of natural habitats, I would again invoke prudence and precaution and argue we should move very slowly, if at all, to continue to displace species from their habitats. There is plenty of Earth we have already damaged enough to threaten our own culture. This condition leads to a key challenge to the technological modern world: how to maintain the mode of living under this constraint. I am not at all confident it can be done, but that seems to be the most likely way to balance the problematic choice of sustaining flourishing in both the natural world and our human cultures.

I also leave the issue of pathogenic species unresolved. The definition here is not intended to be a philosophical conclusion, following a set of questions about man, nature, or deep ecology. It is rather a vision of the kind of future to which our species can aspire, and that can draw humankind forward day after day toward that vision. It may be that flourishing will involve a conversation about conflicts among living species, but that possibility should not significantly reduce the power of this way of talking, especially when contrasted to the limits of sustainable development as a call to action.