

## CHAPTER 17

### HAPPINESS IN AN UNSUSTAINABLE WORLD

*Shakespeare is rumored to have said that all literature is about loss—a concept I struggled with and wanted to reject, upon first hearing. Preferring to write out of joy—indeed ideally, out of exaltation, bearing witness to the things I love during this brief life—it took me a while to realize that even the act of celebrating is an acknowledgement of loss, for it is the temporal nature of celebration—the awareness that a thing has not always been one certain way before, and may not always be thereafter—which most sharpens the poet’s and reader’s senses. Celebration and loss are shadows of one another in literature.*

Rich Bass, *The Space Between*

I have been suspicious of the word *happiness* since post World War II when the term increasingly became associated with drinking a particular brand of beer, owning a particular car, or, even more incredibly, wearing a particular brand of shoe. During my childhood, this word was not commonly heard except at major benign life transitions, such as weddings, births, promotions, and winning a lottery. Even then, the word was used with caution lest the hubris associated with its use jeopardize or tarnish the event being celebrated. Conspicuous consumerism would have started the wagging of tongues at that time, especially if the buyer flaunted the acquisitions. Satisfaction came from a job well done regardless of its nature, and competency was acknowledged in any activity useful to human society. Competition existed, ranging from who could hang the wash out to dry first on Monday morning to the quality of jams and baked goods at church suppers. I remember my father introducing me to his garage mechanic when I could finally afford a car of my own after World War II. I realized quickly that just having the money to pay for repairs was not enough and I was clearly on temporary trial for being one of the mechanic’s customers. A lesson exists in this previous way of life for those of us working on both theoretical and practical environmental problems. The personal satisfaction of doing something well is almost certainly the major reward; arguably, a close second is the recognition from our peers who are competent to judge our performance.

Years ago, I heard laughter as I passed one of the laboratories in Derring Hall (one of the science buildings) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Looking in, I saw some of my students looking at pictures of early biomonitoring equipment. They could hardly believe how cumbersome, unwieldy, and mammoth were what passed for computers just a decade before. Even so, a certain satisfaction comes from looking back 30 (even 50) years and realizing that one was frequently on the right track, even if in a stumbling, awkward fashion.

My *Random House Dictionary* defines *happiness* as the state of being happy (synonyms: pleasure, joy, exhilaration, bliss, contentedness, delight, enjoyment, satisfaction). Gertner (2003) discusses how Daniel Gilbert (Department of Psychology, Harvard), Tim Wilson (Department of Psychology, University of Virginia), George Loewenstein (Economist, Carnegie-Mellon Institute), and Daniel Kahneman (Nobel Laureate in economics at Princeton) have studied the decision-making process that shapes the sense of well being: how does one predict what will make one happy or unhappy, and then how does one feel after the actual experience? They concluded that almost all actions are based on one’s predictions of the emotional consequences of these events and concluded that humans falter when imagining how they will feel about events in the future. Many television advertisements for automobiles, cosmetics, and so on picture beautiful actors in exotic places that are quite unlike the urban environment. Almost always, the product is purportedly extremely attractive to the opposite sex. Rarely do these products deliver the implied delights—depending on

human artifacts for happiness is not a good idea. In short, the new “unicorn” automobile will not meet the expectations of making life perfect—traffic jams, huge trucks, drunken drivers, polluted air, and many other hazards will spoil the dream. Gilbert and his colleague Wilson (Gertner, 2003) have developed a means (called impact bias) for estimating both the intensity and duration of emotions to bias the tendency to err. Gilbert uses the term *miswanting* to describe how these mistakes of expectation can lead directly to mistakes in choosing what will give pleasure. How sad that many material possessions produce environmental damage without resulting in durable happiness.

People often ask me how I can be happy when I spend much of my life studying pollution, damaged ecosystems, hazardous substances, and species impoverishment (i.e., extinction and loss of large numbers of still surviving populations). This situation has even been exacerbated during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, significant evidence (e.g., enough to persuade mainstream science) indicates that anthropogenic environmental stress will push the biospheric life support system upon which humankind depends into disequilibrium (past ecological tipping points). Climate change will be more difficult and expensive to avoid. The “First Rule of Holes” advises: when one is in a hole, stop digging. If intelligence has survival value, humankind should be able to use Earth without abusing it. Many sustainable practices could replace unsustainable practices if human society had the will to do so.

Gould (1996) notes that *Homo sapiens* is not now, nor has it ever been, the dominant species on the planet. Bacteria among living creatures have always had dominance. As Durant and Durant (1968, p. 18) remark, the laws of biology are the fundamental lessons of history. They acknowledge that humans are subject to the processes and trials of evolution and to the struggle for existence. Possibly most important, if some individuals appear to be escaping the stresses, they are doing so because the group is protecting them either deliberately or inadvertently. Nevertheless, the group itself must meet the challenges necessary in a way leading to survival. Even though these highly regarded historians make these statements about survival, without any caveats or qualifications, human society, either by country or globally, is paying no attention to the tests that society must meet.

Durant and Durant (1968, p. 19) also remark that the second biological lesson of history is that life is selection. Presumably, some individuals and some societies are better equipped than others to meet various stresses. Inequality is not only natural and inborn, but it grows with the complexity of civilization. When inequality becomes too great, that is, the range between the richest and the poorest is the greatest, either a revolution or a governmental redistribution of wealth occurs. This redistribution also applies to, for example, the amount of energy consumed by *Homo sapiens* compared to the amount of energy remaining for the other 30+ million species on the planet.

Humankind evolved as a small group species in which survival required a high level of literacy about its habitat (i.e., environment). At present, much of humankind lives in enormous groups that are not closely associated with the natural systems that produce the resources upon which they depend. Kindness (Editors of Canari Press, 1996) was more likely to be reciprocated in tribal groups.

I remain hopeful about moving toward sustainability because some major obstacles can be markedly reduced, even eliminated, by modifying human behavior: (1) since sustainable use of the planet is essentially a social contract between human society and natural systems, the social and natural sciences need to work together far more closely than they now do, (2) eco-ethics must replace single issue compassion, which is incompatible with system-level decisions, (3) political leaders and the general public cannot dismiss the conclusions of mainstream science just because they are not congruent with their political ideology, (4) perpetual growth (except in such things as literacy) is simply not possible on a finite planet, (5) it is naïve to expect the world’s impoverished peoples to support adequately the quest for sustainable use of the planet with the present extraordinary differences in both per capita ecological footprint size and nation-state footprint size, (6) both social and environmental scientists need to communicate their concepts to the general

public as well as economists do, (7) pro-life must mean all life forms, not just individuals of *Homo sapiens*.

Arguably, the most difficult obstacle to achieving sustainability is the failure of most people to realize they are a part of the natural environment and not apart from it. Humankind must acknowledge its dependence upon natural capital and the services it provides. If natural capital and its services are placed in disequilibrium, both the human species and its economy will be severely harmed, perhaps even extinguished. Schultz et al. (2004) use an implicit association test (IAT) to measure the degree to which people associate themselves with nature. They distinguish between egoistic concerns that focus on self and biospheric ones that focus on life forms. They believe that the type of concerns developed about environmental issues is associated with the degree to which each individual feels associated with natural systems. Not surprisingly, their study showed a moderately positive relationship between biospheric concerns and implicit connections with nature. A negative relationship exists between implicit connections with nature and egoistic concerns. They conclude that connectedness is fairly stable across time and question how malleable connectedness is. Both Schultz (2001) and Dunlap et al. (1993) have provided evidence of country-level differences in attitudes about environmental issues. Their and other publications on this subject indicate both the types of future research that are needed and what approaches might be useful in applying this research to increase biospheric concerns so essential to sustainable use of the planet. Such publications, if incorporated into a transdisciplinary framework, will facilitate the monitoring of global eco-ethics and sustainability ethics, especially when guided by reason and intelligence.

My response to the disquieting aspects of human society's relationship with the environment is to devote as much time as possible in the remaining part of my life to making a small contribution to arousing biospheric concerns in the general public with the hope of increasing the number of people who wish to leave a habitable planet to posterity, including the preservation and accumulation of natural capital. If enough people adopt this perspective, humankind will have an improved opportunity to achieve sustainability.

Of course, egoistic concerns may block the quest for sustainability. Species extinctions do occur, and the quest for sustainability is based on the assumption that such an extinction will not happen to *Homo sapiens*. However, until robust evidence indicates that plan A is working, a plan B is a must. My own plan is based on personal experience. My book *Eco-ethics and Sustainability Ethics Part 1* (Cairns, 2003) and *Part 2* (Cairns, 2004) is dedicated to my companion and spouse Jean, who had both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's afflictions. Jean's communications with me began declining in 1997. We were in a "long goodbye" (Jean died on February 21, 2005). Naturally, I did everything possible to see that medical treatments slowed her decline to the extent possible, and I visited her three times daily for about an hour to continue our companionship. Applied to the biosphere, this experience means preserving, to the best of my ability, the biospheric attributes and qualities that I love as long as I can. Moreover, I should make a major effort to maintain my connections and association with nature to the fullest extent possible. The possibility of loss (or in Jean's case, the certainty that our companionship has ended) should not eliminate pleasure, joy, exhilaration, delight, and enjoyment of what is still available to me. I believe the quest for sustainable use of the planet is basically an ethical issue.

Deep pain is frequently associated with deep love. At the individual level, the pain can result from one's cherished companion suffering from an irreversible affliction. On the environmental level, anyone who loves nature is pained by species extinction, global climate change, and a depressing array of other insults to the environment. In this instance, the pain results from both the damage to natural systems and the failure to implement remedial measures that are available (e.g., reducing greenhouse gases). We should feel joy that we were blessed to have had the wonderful experience of associating with a loved person or with a loved array of natural systems, some of which have disappeared (e.g., due to such things as urban sprawl) or have been badly damaged in our lifetimes. The depth of our love is reflected in the depth of our pain.

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