

Right Relationship  
Building a Whole Earth Economy

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It is a great honour to be included in this important Forum. I last had substantial contact with the Canadian Council of Churches when I was the Canadian Quaker delegate to the World Council of Churches Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in Seoul, Korea in 1990. I have recently been based in Philadelphia but have now returned to my home in Woodstock New Brunswick and am eager to get resituated in the Canadian scene. (Although, I should add that I followed Canadian politics, economics, and cultural life very closely during the time I was sojourning in Philadelphia.)

So, many thanks to Peter Noteboom and the Commission on Justice and Peace for the opportunity to be here at this focal point for Canadian faith communities as we do some hard thinking on the question; how in the world do we live now in a respectful, sacred, and sustainable manner? What does the Creator have in mind with regard to human adaptation?

Thirty five years ago the environmental crisis had become evident enough that government and business began to talk about "sustainable development." The sense was then dawning that something was wrong with business as usual, that there was something about the mode of adaptation in which we found ourselves that was not going to hold up in the long run. I knew things were beginning to change when an agronomist with the Federal Department of Agriculture said to me at a conference on long range planning, "Everybody here is talking about the next five to ten years. I want to talk about how we are going to feed ourselves when we can no longer feed our combine harvestors." But mainly, in the decades that followed, "sustainable development" came to mean keeping the economic growth machine on the road.

A few of us at that time said: Wait a minute, this *is* a finite planet; environmental limits *are* real; ecological constraints are no joke; unlimited growth is an irrational goal. What we should be aiming for is not "sustainable development," but "developing sustainability."

This is the deal in a nutshell: Sustainability means living within Earth's bioproductive and bioassimilative capacities. The developed world is deep into ecological deficit – using up these capacities faster than they are being regenerated, taking far more than a fair share. At the same time billions of people live in poverty and species are being pushed into extinction. Clearly, regions of poverty need economic growth and other species need more habitat. The logic of the case is clear: Wealthy regions must not only halt growing their material consumption and energy use, but curtail it. (This is not radical stuff. This is common sense. Think about material throughput and energy use in 1950. Life was pretty good in 1950.)

The crash of 2008 and its aftermath may provide an opening for change. And it is not just the financial and economic collapse. The indicators of ecological and social collapse, starting with

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climate disruption, are now easy to see. There is something in the air, something growing in hearts and minds, especially in faith communities, about right relationship and wrong relationship in human adaptation. In order to maintain the capital-driven growth economy under present conditions it is necessary to increasingly damage the functional integrity of earth's ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole. This is clearly a wrong relationship, whatever your intellectual or spiritual perspective. From the standpoint of science, this situation is devolutionary; from the standpoint of enlightened humanism, it is absurd; from the standpoint of religion, it is blasphemous.

So here we are, on Parliament Hill asking, within the context of Canadian faith communities and our political economy, how do we think about this situation, how do we understand it, and what should we be doing about it.

(Before offering a few thoughts along this line, I want to call attention to the recent magnificent Pastoral Letter of Luc Bouchard, Bishop of St. Paul in Alberta on the Athabasca tar sands project. Many of you may already be familiar with this courageous document, but, if not, I urge its study as a model of religious faith in action on behalf of Creation and human wellbeing.)

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A number of years ago Gregory Baum, a Dominican priest and cultural historian, in reflecting on the Second World War and the Holocaust, asked the question; "What is the primary spiritual discovery of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?" In reply he said, "Human solidarity." He saw this emerging sense of connection and responsibility growing from the trauma of the era and its aftermath.

In naming human solidarity as our spiritual compass, Gregory Baum was reaching deep into the best of the biblical tradition, and looking forward into the potential of human social and political development. Events of the last two decades may make us wonder if human solidarity is gaining ground as a spiritual compass.

The most astute analysts of the global situation tell us that the resource wars have already begun and will likely dominate the foreseeable future. This does not bode well for human solidarity. Yet, it is in facing this darkening prospect that champions of human solidarity may be able to grasp the wheel of ecological understanding and turn spaceship earth into a path of cooperation and sharing that significantly checks conflict and violence. I am convinced this is a real possibility and here's why.

The sense of solidarity that is now emerging is not just human solidarity, but the awareness of being encompassed by and embedded in earth's whole commonwealth of life, solidarity at the ecological level – the whole earth level. This creates a new inclusive reality.

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What is the connection between religion and the economy? What is the spiritual basis of our concern for how the economy works?

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In a deeply profound sense, economics and ecology are domains of relationship. Economics is about access to the means of life. Ecology is about the mutual interdependence of life communities. There is a deep sense of right relationship within a fully rounded understanding of these domains. For, example, in the right relationship of human solidarity, we see economic activity flowing from social and political relations that enhance the common good. In the right relationship of ecological integrity, we see the human economy as a wholly owned subsidiary of earth's ecology.

When we bring these two perspectives together, the lens of human solidarity and the lens of ecological science pivot into a single focus. Through this focus we can see right relationship in a more fully rounded and deeply instructive way. Right relationship then becomes the central motif in both the social design of human wellbeing and in ecologically sound economic adaptation.

Our religious traditions teach us that in right relationship, we touch the fullness of human meaning and the presence of the Divine. Our witness for peace and social justice is about elevating all areas of human policy and practice into this zone of right relationship. The economy is precisely the arena of policy and practice where religion enters most fully into the service of the world.

If the ethics of solidarity and the economics of the common good are our moral assignment, can we pose a straightforward and helpful guide to action? To answer this question we can turn to Aldo Leopold, a founding figure in conservation biology who formulated what he called "the land ethic." In his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, he wrote: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." With this simple admonition, Leopold coined a guidance statement that has entered into the foundations of the ecological worldview. It is an expression of solidarity at the level of the human-earth relationship.

In a similar way, and with respect to human solidarity, we can say; "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the human community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." In the collaboration that produced Quaker Institute's new book, *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy*, we made this ethic central to our discussion of right relationship, but combined the land community and the human community. In addition, we changed "stability" to "resilience" because it more accurately states the critical factor for ecological continuity. We came up with this formulation: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the commonwealth of life. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." This guidance, along with Albert Schweitzer's ethic of "reverence for life," anchored our exploration of building a whole earth economy.

Quaker Institute for the Future grew from an acute awareness of the conflict between the economy and ecology – the economic growth dilemma. *Right Relationship* is our first publication on this theme. In an effort to excavate the growth dilemma, the book asks and answers five questions:

1. What is the economy for?
2. How does it work?

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3. How big should it be, or how big is too big?
4. What's fair?
5. How should the economy be governed?

Using right relationship as the guide leads to some surprising answers. The economy exists for respecting and preserving life, not for getting rich. Its frame of reference must be the laws that govern the cosmos as well as the earth – not just, for example, the laws of supply and demand. The economy can grow too big for the earth's ecological limits, which means endless growth is an irrational goal. Fair distribution of the economy's benefits and burdens means it is possible to be too rich or too poor. Governing a whole earth economy will require a new set of rules and institutions that have the support of the entire global community and, at the same time, invigorate local communities, rather than stifle them. A chapter is devoted to each question and the book ends with a plan for social action.

This is thinking big about change. Despite the fact that political and business leader are now only talking about getting the economy back on the growth track, a new opening for a big change may be emerging. But this is the kind of change that will happen only if a sufficiently mobilized social movement does the strategic work that carries it through the opening. As we see it in *Right Relationship*, this work includes four steps:

1. **Grounding and clarification** with regard to understanding the reality of the human-earth relationship and what this understanding means for sustainable human adaptation.
2. **The creation of new economic models**, new social policy, new institutional designs, and pilot programmes, so they are – so-to-speak – on the shelf, ready for implementation as the openings emerge.
3. **Bearing witness** to a guidance system based on right relationship.
4. **The igniting of a social movement** of nonviolent action that changes hearts and minds toward right relationship and brings the economics of the common good into political favour and societal guidance.

How do social movements like this arise? Here is one example:

On the afternoon of May 22, 1787, nine Quakers and three Anglicans met in a Quaker bookstore and printing shop at 2 George Yard, London. This meeting was the start of a catalytic campaign for economic and social change. This small group was determined to end British participation in the slave trade and abolish slavery throughout the British Empire. They were deeply convinced that slavery was a wrong relationship between humans and the need to put it right impelled them to take action.

The organized campaign of moral suasion that Quakers and their Anglican allies launched from that meeting in the bookshop successfully challenged the “natural law” of slavery and its economic status. In 1791, a report to Parliament by a Select Committee still characterized the slave trade as having “the plea of necessity for its continuance.” Yet, the next year Parliament

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passed its first law banning the slave trade. This deliberately organized, targeted, and systematically conducted movement to end the slave trade was something new in the world of social change.

For the sake of the human future, and indeed the future of the entire community of life, we need this kind of movement to reset the moral compass of our political economy. We need to link hands with all who are now rising up to build a whole earth economy – an economy that equitably restores and enhances the integrity, resilience and beauty of life’s commonwealth.

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As a small postscript I want to tell you about an experience I recently had with a Canadian icon. As you may know, the masterwork of sculptor, Bill Reid, stands in the courtyard of the Canadian Embassy directly across Pennsylvania Avenue from the U.S. Capitol building in Washington. *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* is a 6 meter long black bronze sculpture of a dugout canoe loaded with many of the creatures that figure prominently in Haida mythology – Raven, Grizzly Bear, Eagle, Wolf, Beaver, Frog, Mouse as well as several figures that shift between the human and animal worlds. A Shaman holds a staff upright and gazes deep into the voyage ahead. Tucked along one side and helping with the paddling is a small human figure the artists calls, the Ancient Reluctant Conscript.

For three days, morning and night, I passed this spiritually luminous creation on my walk to and from the Washington Convention Center. I had long known of this sculpture, but had never seen it, and did not know it was here at the seat of overweening human empire, bearing witness to an entirely different way of being in the world.

I was stunned to see it, and spent increasing lengths of time in its presence as the days went by. “Presence” is the right word. By the last night it came to me again, full force: This commonwealth of life, this voyage of the great canoe is a sacred journey. Solidarity is the key. Right relationship is the guide. Economic adaptation that enhances life’s commonwealth and advances the sacred journey is our moral assignment and ethical responsibility. It seems reasonable to think this is what the Creator must have in mind.

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