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Ecological Relations

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Part I: Did I Misunderstand the American Dream?

In the formative days of these United States, an immigrant had sufficient freedom to test his abilities in the pursuit of a better physical and spiritual life than that which he had left behind. This vision of new possibilities was the embodiment of the American Dream: “If I can only get to America, I can become and have whatever I want.”

As a child I had a vague notion that it was the American Dream that made America truly great through unconditional caring for the well-being of others. But now I see a different reality. I realize, for example, that we seldom live up to the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights - founding concepts around which the American ideal is built.

I see a nation losing spiritual connection with the land, and I watch the delicate umbilicus of human morality being replaced by greed and materialism. I see banks and buildings of commerce command the skyline of major cities where churches were once the dominant buildings. And I watch as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and I am told “that’s business.”

Looking at our nation today I see not a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but rather a corporate/political machine concerned with its own agenda. I see also a government that has not safeguarded the options for our children’s environmental heritage.

Have we really become so disconnected from our feelings, from our sense of moral relationship with one another - especially our children - and with the Earth in general, that we can no longer see beyond money? Is our sense of morality based solely on the size of profit margins?

I wonder these things, because I recently attended an invitational meeting in Slovakia to help examine some major environmental problems. The meeting was one in which the Slovakian people asked for views from foreigners whom they believed to have greater experience with these problems and therefore a broader perspective than they themselves had.

Among the speakers was an American giving the Slovakian people a sales pitch for his product, a plastic with which to line landfills to prevent leakage of toxic wastes. As I listened, my feeling about his lack of interest in the well-being

of the people became confirmed when someone asked him if his company had programs to educate the public about recycling waste. His reply was to the effect: Why would I do that? My business is built on the production of waste, and it needs more and more to grow. Increasing waste is how I make my money.

Here was the epitome of the “Ugly American,” that which I’ve seen condoned and encouraged by a number of political administrations. When I mentioned this to my Slovakian host, he said, “Don’t listen to him. I’m not.” “I can’t help listening,” I replied, “he’s an American speaking English and he’s what I think the ‘American Dream’ has come to represent - individual profit at any cost, regardless of the expense to others.”

In another instance, a business man on a television program discussed American investments in Siberia. The Siberians had asked American business people to help them, to believe in and care about them as people, and to invest in their communities over the long term. The American’s reply had the tenor: The people of Siberia have the human resource and the natural resource, but we have the financial resources, and we won’t invest anything until we’re sure we can make a profit in the short term. Ours is strictly a short-term view. If something good happens in the long term, that’s fine, but that’s not our concern.

Does this mean that American investors in the timber of Siberia’s vast forests will cut and run as they have done in the United States and are still doing abroad? Does this mean that we’ve yet to learn that if we’re not one another’s keepers we become one another’s destroyers?

Is it too late to create a dream for a nation that honors people with real equality and justice? Is it too late to build a nation that is, in fact, of the people and is governed by the people for the people? Does monetary gain prevent us from seeing into the hearts and souls of people desperately in need of love, trust, and respect - none of which money can buy?

I ask these questions because we’re no longer just the “American people,” but rather part of a global society. I ask these questions because I’ve seen the technological innocence and the environmental/cultural vulnerability of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe after forty years of isolation behind the communist wall of silence. I ask these questions because I know the technological savvy and greed of the West, and I see Western business poised to take advantage of the vulnerability of Central and Eastern Europe.

I believe that if we as a nation claim technical superiority, then we must also become one another’s keepers, investing in one another as human beings first and foremost and in the products of each others’ land and culture second. Being one another’s keepers means sharing our technology with other peoples but at the same time informing those who would acquire it of the environmental and cultural costs of having it.

To illustrate, in eastern Slovakia I evaluated the condition of the native forest of Cergov, which is primarily European beech with an admixture of white fir. The native forest is being clearcut rapidly and is being replaced with plantations of Norway spruce and such non-native species as larch, and pine. The biological and economic errors of “scientific” forestry made in Germany, the United States, and Canada are all being repeated in the Cergov’s forest and for the same reasons - short-sighted, immediate monetary gain.

Among the most graphic examples of the cost of technology involved in clearcutting is the loss of topsoil. Within an hour after each thunderstorm, and there were several while I was in Cergov, all the streams and rivers fed by clearcut slopes went from clear water to chocolate brown as the forest soil was washed to the sea.

Prior to importing the technology of clearcutting, the forest of Cergov was carefully logged with horses. For centuries, horse logging led to a biologically sustainable native forest and had also become part of the economic sustainability of the small mountain villages.

Now in the villages, located in the upper valleys near the edge of the forest, the jobs once sustained by horse logging are gone like the topsoil. Instead of careful selective logging with horses, which produced continual annual employment for the village economies, the forest has been clearcut, leaving acres that do not produce jobs until plantations become of harvest age, some forty or more years hence. Along with this loss, the secondary jobs of milling logs into lumber have been moved out of the villages into the cities.

Today, because of uncritical acceptance of Western technology as a panacea for short-term economic problems, the people who once made their living from the forest must go to the cities to find work and the villages have lost - perhaps forever - part of their cultural heritage. These are but two of the costs of Western technology when it’s used blindly for short-term profit.

I previously mentioned the people of Siberia. I read in the newspaper last year about an American contingent of forestry experts headed to Siberia - including a representative of the Weyerhaeuser Company, which, according to a report in the Fall 1992 issue of *The Amicus Journal*, was the only American company trying to secure logging rights in that country. Will these experts tell Siberians that all the experts can do is help them turn a quick profit through the Western-style exploitation of their forests? Will the experts explain the long-term environmental and cultural costs of embracing such exploitive technology for a short-term profit? Will the experts explain that clearcutting the protective forest cover will cause the permafrost soils to melt and that once-forested areas will become a swamp? Probably not.

Will the experts tell the Siberians what they think the Siberians “should” do that will in turn benefit Western capitalism? According to a Weyerhaeuser rep-

representative quoted in *The Amicus Journal*, “the best thing they [the Siberians] can do is clear-cut as fast as possible - get rid of all that dead-standing timber.” The article also says that the Weyerhaeuser Company is: “Using the same arguments it has used in cutting the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest - that virgin forests are ‘unproductive’ and ‘over-mature’.” In addition, says the article, Weyerhaeuser wants to ship whole logs out of Siberia, thus maximizing short-term profit.

In Slovakia, I was reminded of my early version of the American Dream and of the thin line I, as visiting “expert” must walk. I can offer only the benefit of my knowledge and my experience of the consequences of decisions and actions, and this must be solely a gift of ideas, a gift of possibilities. It’s for the people to decide what works for them and what doesn’t and what price they’re willing to commit their children to pay later for Western technology.

There must be no judgement of how the people use the ideas. There must be no “you should do this” or “you should do that.” Such admonishments are self-serving only to the guest’s ego or to the guest’s economic interests. One enters a country as a guest and tells the host people what they should do, and each “should” has hidden within it either a favorable stimulus for the guest’s ego or a financial benefit for the guest’s business. Each stimulus or financial benefit is a point of compromise with that which is truly best for the people of the host country.

A guest must be detached from the outcome of his or her visit, because he or she must at times tell his or her hosts things for the benefit of the hosts’ children and grand children that the hosts don’t want to hear. After all, if I would live in a truly free world, I must be everyone else’s keeper so that everyone else can be mine; to me, this is the real American Dream.

Part 2: The Shinto Shrines of Japan Require Sustainable Forests

In Japan, a religious system of belief has been observed ever since the founding of the country, and later generations came to call that religious system “Shinto.” Shinto gained systematic form spontaneously from within the social life of communities. As a result, it has no specific founder or clearly defined body of scripture. But since ancient times the Japanese have transmitted the legends and myths of the deities or “kami” as a genealogy of their way of life.

Shinto, in its broadest sense, refers to the entirety of native culture, which is established against a background of hydraulic rice agriculture, a form of agriculture uniquely suited to Japan’s warm and humid climate. In short, Shinto refers to indigenous Japanese spiritual culture in contrast to Buddhism and other religious systems brought in from outside of Japan.

When used in the narrow sense, Shinto refers to the rites offered to deities - primarily those deities of heaven and earth listed in classical Japanese works of the ancient period. And the physical facility used for the performance of this worship is called “jinju” or shrine.

That Nature and natural phenomena are revered as deities or “kami” is a result of the Japanese view of Nature as a kind of parent, which nurtures life and provides limitless blessings. Shinto shrines all over Japan are surrounded by luxuriant groves of trees. Backed by the Shinto view of untouched natural scenery as itself sacred, the “forests” surrounding the shrines are themselves important elements of each shrine.

About thirteen hundred years ago Emperor Tenmu ordained the practice of removing the old shrine and rebuilding a new, exact replica next to it every twenty years. Why Emperor Tenmu stipulated that the rebuilding of the shrine should take place every twenty years is not clearly known, but it’s most likely that twenty years was considered to be the optimum period for allowing the careful preservation of the Grand Shrine of Ise, located in Ise City, considering that it has a thatched roof, wooden structures without wood preservation of any kind, and is erected on posts sunk into the ground without the benefit of foundation stones.

Twenty years is perhaps also the most logical interval in terms of passing from one generation to the next the technological expertise needed for the exacting task of duplicating the shrine. The shrine can be thought of as sacred architecture created from within the prayer and technical skills of the Japanese people themselves. Passing technical skills and the prayer embodied in the sacred architecture from generation to generation is the context within which lies the real significance of the regular rebuilding - or as the Japanese refer to it “the removal.” The cultural knowledge thus has been passed forward unchanged for thirteen hundred years and will continue into the future.

As I understood, when last I visited the Grand Shrine of Ise, about ten thousand logs (not whole trees) are required each time the shrine is rebuilt, it’s therefore necessary to have a biologically-sustainable supply of old-growth trees to accommodate the continual rebuilding, which means the forest must be selectively logged to secure the appropriate trees. The problem faced by the priests today is that the main “forest” at Kiso Fukushima from which they have gotten many of their trees is no longer a forest but a carefully manicured plantation, created through long-term selective cutting. As a plantation, it is missing such components of native forest structure as large standing dead trees and declining trees, large fallen trees rotting on the ground, large wind-thrown trees, and multiple layers of vegetation. Although the plantation may appear at the moment to be in good shape, it’s headed for trouble in the future because large wood is not being reinvested into the “bank” of organic material in the soil.

The addition of such organic material allows the chemical elements in the soil

to act as nutrients, and it creates and maintains the necessary soil infrastructure to make the nutrients available to the trees. In other words, more wood is being withdrawn from the soil bank account in the form of large logs than is being replaced in the form of large dead standing trees and dead fallen trees. Withdrawals without the balance of additions can only draw down the organic material in the soil's organic bank account over time and thus continue to impoverish the soil's long-term productive capacity.

If these plantations are to produce the size and quality of logs that the Grand Shrine of Ise needs over the centuries to replace all of the associated Shrines every twenty years, the amount of organic material that is withdrawn from the soil must be balanced with an equal amount of organic material being allowed to return to the soil, some of which must be large whole trees. This is not now happening and has not happened for at least a century or more.

In addition, after conversations with Dr. Murao, Chairman, Resources Programme and World Forestry at the University of Ehime, Japan, it seems clear that fires were once a vital part of the forest's cycle at Kiso Fukushima. The existence of early fires would explain the wide spacing among the old-growth Japanese cypress that are so valued for the reconstruction of the Grand Shrine. It's therefore reasonable to assume that, if the Grand Shrine is to have trees of comparable value into the future, fire must be reintroduced into the care of the plantation.

Fire does things to a forest or a plantation that management without fire can never do. Thus, the role of fire can't be replaced by any other management technique, and the long-term removal of fire from a forest or plantation is ecologically devastating, as we in the western United States are now learning the hard way - after eighty years of suppressing fire.

Despite the fact that the original forest of Kiso Fukushima is today a plantation does not in any way detract from the Shinto Priests' intentions of maintaining a sustainable forest into the future for the future. And I, for one, am convinced that society can, if it so chooses, heal the forests of the world, as the Shinto Priests are trying to heal theirs. To do so, however, society will need the help of its children.

Children can plant a forest because they don't know what a forest is, or how it should look, or how it should behave, or what it's good for. Children have minds that are simply open to the wonder of planting the idea of a forest with each tree or tree seed they plant. The forest can then design itself and in its own time be true to its nature. So too can the plantation at Kiso Fukushima begin to assume more of the characteristics of a forest if children are allowed to help take care of it.

Many adults, on the other hand, such as trained foresters, think they know what a forest is, how it should look, how it should behave, and what it's good for.

Having thus lost their sense of wonder, they can only plant trees and call them a forest.

While children plant a forest with their hearts and a beginner's mind, adults too often plant trees with their intellect and the knowledge of an expert. Ironically, experts can't plant a forest because they've forgotten what children know.

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