

WHAT IS THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION FOR PLANNING A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?

PICTURE yourself at the moment of death. After a long life, you know that you're on your death bed and have only a few minutes left.

You don't know if death is the end, so the trauma of the moment forces you to look back on your life. What are the memories and achievements you cherish the most and will take with you — if you can — on your journey from this world?

Will it be the promotion to head of department 10 years before your retirement? The BMW you bought when you turned 50? The house you built? Your yacht? Your weekender down south? The money you'll be leaving for your wife and kids? The year your goal won the premiership for your team?

Chances are, in the final reckoning, you'll look back on less tangible achievements. The places and people you have loved the most. The beauty of a sunset or the view up in the mountains. The moments of breathtaking kindness and sacrifice. You will be filled with enormous gratitude for the bounties you enjoyed and maybe you'll feel some regrets at the things you didn't do or realise.

Now, at this moment of departure, you are stripped of all the money, possessions and status that once gave your life such meaning and brought you such pleasure. You definitely can't take any of this with you. The important things of life, you finally realise, are the things that possibly will go with you on the most spectacular journey of all — things like love, joy and beauty. Things of the soul.

But the soul is such a hard concept for most of us. In an age of unrelenting materialism, when our senses are constantly battered by demands to buy stuff and to adorn our bodies, we don't have enough energy left to tackle questions about the soul.

It's too hard. Let's stick with building ever-bigger homes and scaling the economic peaks of life.

Trouble is, we can't permanently escape spiritual confrontation. At some point we have to face up to it. Do we really want to leave it to our death beds, the place where so many people finally start searching for God?

It may sound odd but the State Sustainability Strategy is as good a place as any to start a spiritual search.

Contemplation of this Strategy is recognition that resources are finite and we have to tread carefully — something we haven't really done for the last 30 or 40 years.

But when it comes to considering the long-term impact of developments and drawing lines in the sand — yes, you can go ahead, or no, it's unsustainable — will the economic imperative continue to exert most influence, as it does now?

Will our sustainability rules be bent by economics? Will governments continue to favour development projects because they equal jobs, economic prosperity and votes at the next election? Tangible things. Runs on the board.

"Sustainability is the simultaneous achievement of environmental, economic and social goals," the State's definition of sustainability says, but the three do not have equal clout. What hope does the environment have when pitted against economics and a growing population's drive for amenities?

It's a battle of brute force and expediency with no real moral imperative on which to build more substantial terms of engagement.

Remembering the death bed scenario, it is surely tragic that we, as a society, allow materialistic thoughts to pre-occupy us, and put questions of spirituality and ethics into the too-hard basket.

Sustainability — nebulous and hard to define — raises more than environmental, economic and social concerns. It is a supreme test of our basic human decency and virtue. These are the sorts of qualities we will look for and treasure the most at the end of our life.

They are qualities which are nurtured when we address our spiritual existence and so discussion of sustainable development needs a spiritual component as well as economic, environmental and social components.

A series of statements by the Bahá'í Faith outlines an ethical foundation for a more sustainable future.

At the beating heart of the Bahá'í vision is the essential oneness of humanity. In a paper titled Sustainable Development and the Human Spirit, based on the statement The Most Vital Challenge presented at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the Bahá'í International Community writes:

“The fundamental spiritual truth of our age is the oneness of humanity. Universal acceptance of this principle — with its implications for social and economic justice, universal participation in non-adversarial decision making, peace and collective security, equality of the sexes, and universal education — will make possible the reorganisation and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind.”

Acceptance of this means that WA cannot look in isolation at its own backyard and nor can we view sustainability as separate from other facets of life. Think what a mindset of oneness might look like when applied to development and government decision-making.

For example, if a project would be good for the WA economy but bad for global warming, there would be no possibility of shirking our global responsibilities.

This approach requires a fundamental redefining of all human relationships to make them relevant to our modern world. With regard to this, the Bahá'í International Community writes in its 1995 statement, The Prosperity of Humankind:

“Present-day conceptions of what is natural and appropriate in relationships — among human beings themselves, between human beings and nature, between the individual and society, and between the members of society and its institutions — reflect levels of understanding arrived at by the human race during earlier and less mature stages in its development.

“If humanity is indeed coming of age, if all the inhabitants of the planet constitute a single people, if justice is to be the ruling principle of social organisation — then existing conceptions that were born out of ignorance of these emerging realities have to be recast.”

The BIC goes on to say that movement in this direction have barely begun but will lead to huge changes in, for example, the role of work and economics. “Its effect in reordering people’s relation to the work they do and their understanding of the place of economic activity in their lives will be sweeping,” it says.

The Universal House of Justice, world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, says in its 1985 statement, The Promise of World Peace, that acceptance of the oneness of mankind is a spiritual principle.

“It is in the hunger for something more, something beyond ourselves, that the reality of the human spirit can be properly understood,” the Bahá'í International Community says in Turning Point For All Nations, a statement released on the 50th anniversary of the United Nations in 1995.

“Although the spiritual side of our nature is obscured by the day-to-day struggle for material attainment, our need for the transcendent cannot long be disregarded.

Thus a sustainable development paradigm must address both the spiritual aspirations of human beings and their material needs and desires.”

The Bahá’í International Community writes further about this in its 1996 concept paper, *Sustainable Communities in an Integrating World*, shared at the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II).

“In the long term, however, community-building efforts will succeed only to the extent that they link material progress to fundamental spiritual aspirations, respond to the increasing interdependence among the peoples and nations of the planet, and establish a framework within which all people can become active participants in the governance of their societies,” the BIC writes.

“Human nature is fundamentally spiritual. Communities are unlikely, therefore, to prove prosperous and sustainable unless they take into account the spiritual dimension of human reality and seek to foster a culture in which the moral, ethical, emotional and intellectual development of the individual are of primary concern.

“It is in such a milieu that the individual is likely to become a constructively engaged, service-oriented citizen, working for the material and spiritual well-being of the community, and that a common vision and a shared sense of purpose can be effectively developed.

“It follows that the material aspects of community development — environmental, economic and social policies; production, distribution, communication and transportation systems; and political, legal and scientific processes — must be driven by spiritual principles and priorities. Today, however, the substance and direction of community development are largely determined by material considerations.

“Our challenge, therefore, is to redesign and develop our communities around those universal principles — including love, honesty, moderation, humility, hospitality, justice and unity — which promote social cohesion, and without which no community, no matter how economically prosperous, intellectually endowed or technologically advanced, can long endure.”

Let’s think about that. It is saying our community can’t survive for long without basing its behaviour around universal principles such as love, honesty, moderation, humility, hospitality, justice and unity.

How much love goes into government decision-making?

How honest are the various proponents fighting for or against something?

How moderate is our language in the heat of political battle?

How humble is someone who stands to make a lot of money out of a development?

How hospitable and welcoming are we of diverse opinions?

How easily can justice be bought or hijacked?

How united are people who have different opinions?

In many ways, these questions challenge the whole *modus operandi* of humans in WA and throughout the rest of the world. To suggest that we can be in unity with political opponents or that love is an important part of decision-making is to call for a move towards a much more exalted level of behaviour.

Some may say it is idealistic and unattainable, and maybe we won’t reach the ultimate level of behaviour, but how can we improve unless we aim higher? Perhaps the key is if we can move beyond self-interest and focus instead on the common good.

In its Earth Summit statement, the BIC says that “ . . . the spiritual dimension of human nature can be understood, in practical terms, as the source of qualities that transcend narrow self-interest.”

These qualities include the ones previously mentioned and the BIC adds compassion, forbearance, trustworthiness, courage, co-operation and willingness to sacrifice for the common good.

Take courage. Sir Humphrey Appleby, in the TV series *Yes, Prime Minister*, used to frighten Jim Hacker by suggesting a “courageous” decision would be political suicide, and indeed most of us fear the consequences of going against prevailing thought. It gets lonely making a courageous stand.

But isn’t it interesting that we love courageous heroes on the movie screen — Indiana Jones and James Bond, for example. In real life, people such as Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela come to mind and capture the public imagination.

Why can’t we demonstrate some of their courage? Perhaps it’s because we don’t live in an environment that encourages us to be brave. We say that we welcome a diversity of opinions and want to live in inclusive communities, but we, as a society and often as individuals, pour scorn on views that are “different” instead of considering them with a mind that is open to learning and embracing difference.

The BIC describes the qualities that transcend narrow self-interest as “qualities of an enlightened citizenry, able to construct a unified world civilisation”.

It goes on to say that we need to turn to those universal values which alone can empower individuals and peoples to act in accordance with the long-term interests of the planet and humanity as a whole.

“Once tapped, this powerful and dynamic source of individual and collective motivation will release such a profound and salutary spirit among the peoples of the earth that no power will be able to resist its unifying force,” the BIC statement concludes.

The Earth Charter — not a Bahá’í document although the Bahá’í Faith is among the many organisations which took part in the drafting process — puts it succinctly: “We must realise that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.”

The Charter goes on to say that if we are to live sustainably, we must realise that “. . . We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

“The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

“We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community.”

I hope the State pursues such a shared vision in its Sustainability Strategy.

-- Submission written by Keith McDonald, a Perth journalist and Bahá’í. He has covered the environment and science for 11 years and has been a Bahá’í for 29 years.

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