

Whole Places + Whole People and the Approach to Sustainability

I prefer to direct attention and effort to the approach to sustainability rather than to *going green*. That's because the latter represents no more than a departure, some number of authority- or marketer-defined steps (that they are so defined is not the main problem). The former is more congruent with beginning with the end in mind, and it is inclusive; *going green* generally requires cash on hand or the reasonable expectation of it, and not everyone enjoys possession of those. They, tragically, if not immorally, are privileges.

My preference required me to define sustainability, the end to have in mind during the approach. Hoping to maximize both acceptance and retention, and to minimize controversy, I strove for a formulation that is concise, memorable and yet meaningful enough to serve as a handy decision support tool. I settled on *Whole Places + Whole People*. In what follows I *unpack* the two to complete an introduction.

The whole person paradigm that Dr. Stephen Covey presents in his recent book, [The 8th Habit](#), is both the principal inspiration and the rationale for including *Whole People* in my concise definition¹.

For many years I have believed that the public conversation (North American) about respecting the life of earth seriously suffers from expecting too much from technological developments and deployments, and too little from human beings. There has been an unshakable, almost fatalistic sense that contemporary ease, comforts and employments would never, ever be sacrificed by ordinary people for environmental quality. Recall the chants of "Drill, baby, drill" at the 2008 Republican National Convention? **The whole person paradigm changes the subject.** Thanks to Covey², we finally see with precision what common people have been missing, and longing for, throughout (Western) history, and we learn that they finally can *have* it. Because permission is not required and spending money is optional, this is a realistic moment for the birth of a movement to inspire every person, everywhere, to wholeness, to *voice*, to a way of being aligned with their birthright. This objective represents an enormous section of the approach to sustainability. Except by stretching Dr. Covey's descriptions of complementary teams to the breadth of community, we cannot very well imagine daily life in such a world, but the hints are that it will be glorious -- and sustainable. *If the people lead, the leaders will follow.*

I assert that whole people, those who have found their voice and are intent on living, learning, loving and leaving a legacy, have very high potential for, if not actual, appetites considerably less demanding of natural resources than those of people who are without voice. This is consistent with the observation "The best things in life aren't things." It is possible because of whole people's characteristic productivity (qualitative as well as

¹ The eighth habit is *find your voice and inspire others to find theirs*. Covey uses the term voice to represent *unique personal significance*.

² In truth, not only Covey. There is considerable literature, but his book is the most accessible and begins with *The Pain* and *The Problem* as chapters one and two.

quantitative) and focus, and their corresponding delight in *hearing* the *voice* of any other. On the other hand, living and working without voice, even if profitably, inevitably draws people into distracting, compensatory, resource-depleting, health and fitness compromising, ecosystem-destroying and dehumanizing activities and ways of life. Wants become confused with needs, expectations of people at large fall a long way and appropriate scale is forgotten. Much cleverness is invested in those activities and ways, but the results are finite and, even worse, arbitrary, amounting to a poor substitute for organic arrangements that are meaningful and appropriate to living beings of our size, versatility, agility, endurance and spirituality.

I have not found a single source for the whole place paradigm, but through a range of explorations I've learned a lot about how I'll recognize it. For purposes of this introduction, a whole place is one that reliably and efficiently meets the needs for uncomplicated, all-inclusive well-being of the people who call it home. Thus, whole connotes *fundamentally complete*; both unbuilt and built features and amenities satisfactorily engage, protect and nourish the body, mind, heart and spirit of each person. Whole places vary in size; soil types, precipitation patterns, topography, length of the growing season and more make the difference. The built environment of a whole place includes a vibrant economy; what comes from afar is what some want, not what is needed by all. Whole also connotes that contamination and pollution have vanished from practices and, to the greatest extent possible, from air, soils and waters, all of which, therefore, teem with the beings necessary for optimum ecosystem function and maintenance³. In a whole place, precipitation does not become stormwater the instant it makes contact, and soil is built faster, with human participation, than it is eroded. Physically, a whole place is a watershed. This fact will become increasingly apparent as fueled/powered transport becomes more precious and less common. Our vehicles remove most watershed divides from our experience of land, and many waterways become merely scenic amenities, if noticed at all as we rush around.

In a whole place, a partnership that recognizes *all life comes from life and depends on life* is at work. Whole places are not possible until there are whole people, or, at least, people who intend to be so and who go to work on their places in anticipation of full partnership. These complementary strivings for wholeness constitute the approach to sustainability.

The infinitude of each unique human being, combined with the uniqueness of each place, makes this **a way without limits**.

Today we can approach interdependence with new confidence. Thus we can make ourselves *too big to fail*.

³ We really don't know if our living life support system can continue as such, indefinitely, when any are absent. Logic says *no*.