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The Community of Life

Response to Brendan Mackey's Essay,
"A Reflection on The Earth Charter Project and its Mission in the Anthropocene"
2017

I was very moved and inspired by Brendan Mackey's eloquent essay, and I found myself in complete agreement with his reflections and suggestions. In the first part of my response I would like to highlight two issues that are implicit in the essay but, in my view, deserve to be made more explicit in subsequent dialogues: the need for systemic thinking and the importance of community. In the second part of my response I would like to add a few comments to Mackey's suggestion of updating the Earth Charter.

Systemic thinking

In recent years it has become ever more apparent that the major problems of our time — energy, the environment, climate change, economic inequality, violence and war — are systemic problems, which means that they are all interconnected and interdependent. As Mackey observes (on p. 4), "Recent events have laid bare the root causes of these regressive developments and *the compounding interconnections that feed and drive them*" (my emphasis).

The recognition of the systemic nature of our global problems is critical because they require corresponding systemic solutions — solutions that do not solve any problem in isolation but deal with it within the context of other related problems. To find such solutions requires the ability to think systemically, in terms of relationships, patterns, and context.

Indeed, the authors of the Earth Charter were guided by systemic thinking, and thus the Charter's values and principles are all interconnected. To show some of these interconnections I have designed a conceptual map of the Earth Charter (attached), in which the 4 groups and 16 principles are shown in bold face, while key words from the text are written in smaller print.

The systemic nature (fundamental interconnectedness) of the Earth Charter's values and principles is another reason why it is the appropriate ethical framework for solving our major global problems. In my view, this should be made explicit in all three areas of action discussed

by Mackey — education, government, and activism — together with the critical need to learn and practice systemic thinking.

The importance of community

Our current economic system, motivated by an irrational obsession with perpetual growth and driven by energy-intensive and fossil-fuel-based technologies, has resulted not only in rapid and extensive deterioration of the natural environment, but also in rising social inequality, a breakdown of democracy, and increasing poverty and alienation. To counteract these harmful tendencies, it will be vital to strengthen and mobilize communities around the world, many of which have been threatened by global capitalism.

The emphasis on community lies at the very core of the Earth Charter, beginning with the admonition to “respect and care for the community of life.” There are many reasons why community is of paramount importance today, all of which should be emphasized when we promote and use the Earth Charter, in my view.

Sustainability is not an individual property but a property of an entire web of relationships. It always involves a whole community. This is the profound lesson we need to learn from nature. The way to sustain life is to build and nurture community. A sustainable human community interacts with other communities — human and nonhuman — in ways that enable them to live and develop according to their nature. In other words, community is also the basis of justice and peace.

Today, one of the greatest obstacles to moving toward sustainability is the persistent illusion, maintained by economists and politicians, that unlimited growth is possible on a finite planet. Economic and corporate growth are pursued relentlessly by promoting excessive material consumption. A continual barrage of advertising tells us that buying more goods will make us happier. The most powerful antidote against this corporate onslaught is to find happiness in human relationships — in other words, in community.

The destruction of communities and alienation of individuals, especially young people, is the root cause of the current opioid crisis. In the United States opioid overdoses have quadrupled since 1999 and are now the biggest killer of Americans under the age of fifty. The official responses, unaware of the systemic nature of the problem, have been to blame addicts, doctors, and pharmaceutical companies, rather than the disintegration of communities.

Our bodies produce opioids naturally to protect us from anxiety and pain, but their effects are mild compared to those of synthetic products, designed to mimic their function.

Recent studies have shown, moreover, that our natural opioids are involved when we feel safe and trust each other. In other words, community support enhances the calming effects of naturally produced opioids, while lack of community and alienation lead to increased use of synthetic pain killers, or heroin, and consequent addiction. This is a striking example where the lack of systemic thinking prevents our politicians and healthcare professionals from solving a major crisis.

Updating the Earth Charter

I fully agree with Mackey that the Earth Charter should be updated with the help of several “Addenda” to deal with new issues that have arisen and new language that has evolved since the publication of the original text. In fact, when I designed my conceptual map of the Earth Charter, I used some terms that are not found in the original text but seemed appropriate to me for making connections with ideas by other thinkers and activists.

In the conceptual map I printed those terms in italics. Here are some examples: deep ecology (first group of principles), Earth Democracy (principle #3), ecological economics (principle #7), ecodesign (principle #7), food sovereignty (principle #10), LGBT rights (principle #11), ecological literacy (principle #14).

I also believe that it would be useful to add a clear definition of ecological sustainability. This concept was introduced in the early 1980s by Lester Brown who defined a sustainable society as one that is able to satisfy its needs without diminishing the chances of future generations. Around the same time, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, known also as the “Brundtland Report,” used the same definition to present the notion of “sustainable development”:

Humankind has the ability to achieve sustainable development — to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

These definitions of sustainability are important moral exhortations. They remind us of our responsibility to pass on to our children and grandchildren a world with as many opportunities as the ones we inherited. However, they do not tell us anything about how to build a sustainable society. This is why there has been much confusion about the meaning of sustainability, even within the environmental movement. What we need, in my view, is an operational definition of ecological sustainability.

The key to such an operational definition is the realization that we do not need to invent

sustainable human communities from zero but can model them after nature's ecosystems, which *are* sustainable communities of plants, animals, and microorganisms. Since the outstanding characteristic of the "Community of Life" is the fact that it has sustained itself for billions of years, we can conclude that a sustainable human community must be designed in such a manner that its ways of life — its businesses, economy, physical structures, and technologies — do not interfere with nature's inherent ability to sustain life. I would like to propose a statement along these lines as one of the Addenda to the Earth Charter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to respond to Brendan Mackey's daunting question (on p.5): "Is there no room for optimism in the era many now call the Anthropocene, and will history view the Earth Charter's grand vision as just a wistful expression of a passing optimistic movement in human history?" Over the last fifteen years I have often reflected on this kind of question. The most inspiring answer I have found comes from the great Czech playwright and statesman Václav Havel, who turns the question into a meditation on hope, distinguishing clearly between hope and optimism (Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 1990):

The kind of hope that I often think about...I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation... Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

