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The nine ecological virtues

Rich Heffern | Feb. 7, 2011 Eco Catholic

When I was a kid in Catholic school I memorized a list of virtues out of the Baltimore Catechism. The three theological virtues roll right off the tip of my tongue still -- faith, hope and charity. These three were followed by the cardinal virtues -- prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude -- that when cultivated led to a moral stalwartness fortified by the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, courage, knowledge, and fear of God.

These virtues were the goal and focus of our spirituality. They were resources to not only get us through life, but to enable us to flourish as citizens, as workers, as parents. Above all, they planted in our hearts dispositions to resist temptations and to do good.

Those afternoons memorizing the catechism took place, for me, in the late 1950s, while the Cold War was raging. Now it?s early in the 21st century.

Though these older virtues still abide, perhaps we need resources, vision and strength for completely new challenges, for the world is a very different place now.

Then the Cold War loomed and the battleground for the future of all that was good seemed far off in remote lands, far off from me and my catechism. Now the struggle for the future seems as near as my own backyard. It will be fought in the ways we shop and travel and recreate, in adjusting our wants and needs to fit within Earth?s limits, even in the ways we imagine God and God?s connections with us.

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Pat Mische, who gives workshops and retreats on ecological spirituality, says: ?Our search for life in God must be worked out now in a global context, in the midst of global crises and global community.? The struggle for the future will be fought in the midst of our lives, in adjusting our wants and needs to fit within Earth?s limits.

Our task in the years ahead will be healing a world that is badly out of balance. What will help us to live and flourish as citizens, workers, parents, seekers after God in this new context? Recently I ran across a list of nine ecological virtues, suggested by Christian ecologist James Nash. One by one, I will describe each virtue.

Adaptability: My stepson when he was a teenager wanted a car. His request for help put me in a bind. Though convinced excessive driving is environmentally destructive, I knew that he needed some breaks in a life filled with mishaps and trials. I decided to give him a loan. Though I?d like to report that this deliberation proceeded with great-souled equanimity and grace on my part, alas, that was not the case.

?Life is the great balancing act,? said the late Dr. Seuss. Sorting through these difficult dilemmas, working out the necessary compromises and finding practical solutions to knotty problems is true prayer, encounters with God working in our lives. It is unheroic, not glamorous, and very holy.

Sustainability: A TV comedienne talks of visiting the mall to buy a wastebasket for her new apartment. The

clerk put her wastebasket into a sack. She carried the sack home, then threw it into the wastebasket she?d just bought. ?What am I doing?? she yelped. Convenient, yes, but is it not an unnecessary waste of resources and an insult to the Creator to behave in such a way? Her story is an apt parable for the wastefulness that characterizes so much of our living today.

Our food distribution system is a good example of unsustainable practices, offering us vegetables and fruit grown thousands of miles away in the dead of winter. Such processes depend on the use of massive amounts of imported oil and harmful chemicals and, because this way of doing things dumps the costs of cleanup, repair of the damage and replacement of topsoil onto future generations, it?s massively unsustainable.

Often sustainability is the touchstone when trying to make decisions about technology. An electric back massager or can opener are probably inappropriate and wasteful uses, whereas a microwave oven or canning kettle actually conserve energy and resources.

Frugality: ? T?is a gift to be simple.?A friend reuses her bath and dishwater, hauling it out to the garden for her vegetables. It?s a lot of bother, but she says she doesn?t mind; she gets exercise and cuts down on her water bill, while at the same time deriving rich satisfaction from this way of living lightly on the Earth.

Living a sane, ecologically responsible life doesn?t mean self-sacrifice and austerity. On the contrary, it should mean a richer, more interesting, more creative, fuller, longer and healthier life. It is a paradox, but all manner of good things emerge from the practice of thrift and frugality.

Relationality: At the very heart of ecology is interdependence. The universe and the planet from which we come are woven-together fabrics made of interconnections, mutual dependencies, and relationships. Nature is not a hierarchy, with God at the top, humans in the middle, penguins, ants and rocks at the bottom. Rather it is a living web. Just as the environmental threats we face are interrelated, so are the solutions.

Equity: Restoring justice and restoring ecological balance are directly linked. It?s no coincidence, for example, that toxic waste incinerators are nearly always constructed just upwind from low income neighborhoods, since it?s much easier to manipulate public policy and ordinances in such places where the poor have little political leverage or money. People who are concerned with ecological balance must also be concerned about justice, about equal rights and about grassroots democracy. Justice and earth care go hand in hand.

In developing countries, it is the majority of the dislocated poor who are stripping the rainforests, not the elite few who control power and money. Surely a more equitable distribution of resources would go a long way toward easing the pressure on the environment. Domination and pyramid-shaped power systems seem to go hand-in-hand with the world view that sees nothing wrong with exploiting the natural world for short-term gains.

How we share power and control with one another relates directly to how we will treat the Earth, and the reverse is also true. Democratic power-sharing reduces exploitation, both of humans and the environment. Achieving democracy is a true spiritual path. A saner, more ecologically responsible future, one where our spirituality and living are integrated, for example, will probably bring more cooperative, democratic, worker-owned companies and businesses as we bring our institutions more in line with how the rest of the Earth works, and, in a sustainable way, succeeds and flourishes.

Solidarity. Iroquois peoples dwelt in the Eastern forests for thousands of years before they discovered Columbus and his ships. They would not make a decision until they had deliberated how it would affect the next seven generations. Our ecological behavior today, due to the far-reaching effects of our technologies, can harm the next thousand generations. In order to make sound and wise decisions, we need solidarity with future generations, a future focus ? and we need solidarity with the place where we live.

We all live in some geographical place. And these places are alive. They are bioregions, unique life places with their own soils and land forms, water sources, climates, native plants and animals, and many other distinct natural characteristics. Each part affects the others and is affected by them, as in any living system or body.

Bioregions are all different from one another. My home is in a large river valley on the Midwestern plains. If you live in southern Arizona or in northern Maine, you are in the midst of a very different place. When you look out your window you will see different kinds of trees and flowers, birds, ground cover, even very different weather, from what I will see and experience. Your drinking water will come from a different source than mine. You probably don?t pour maple syrup on tortillas.

People are also an integral part of life places. What we do changes them and we are in turn affected by them. The lives of bioregions directly support our own lives, and the way we live is crucial to their ability to continue to do so. Achieving a practical, workable, non-destructive harmony with the place we live involves a major shift in our way of looking at things to a strong sense of solidarity with the places where we live.

On a farm in the country or a city apartment, we?re all completely enmeshed in the web of life. We can?t know all the details of the connections. It?s a vast mystery. But probably the wisest thing we can do is recognize and keep connection with that mystery in mind, so we can stop tearing the web apart and consciously build a role as partners in our home place.

When we ponder current threats to the Earth's life support systems, it overwhelms, But when we try to imagine living more responsibly in the midst of our bioregion, the task becomes at once more understandable and manageable. It is easier to see what needs to be done and undone. Optimism is a realistic option. This kind of solidarity also can cut right through our varying political or religious points of view to the very heart of the problem.

A Native American elder, reflecting on the widespread environmental efforts on the part of us immigrants, commented: "Looks like they are finally beginning to learn how to belong here."

(Continued tomorrow ...) [2].

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