



The President's Monthly Perspective

November 2007

BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY: UNITY 2020

The Whole Earth Catalog

I went to college in New York City in the late 1960's. At that time New York University had a campus in the Bronx. Every Friday afternoon, after class, I would take the subway to Greenwich Village so I could visit the 8th Street Bookstore, a wonderful independent bookshop. Of course there was no internet then so the best way to keep up with all the exciting new books and publications was to roam bookstores and newsstands. I used to love *Crawdaddy* magazine, the equivalent of a rock and roll blog. I was also a regular reader of *Ramparts*, a progressive magazine that was bold and visionary. There were dozens of new environmental books and publications as well. It was an incredibly exciting intellectual time.

One day, I noticed an oversized book with a picture of the Earth on the cover—the *Whole Earth Catalog*. I picked the book off the shelf and flipped through it. I was immediately engaged by its unconventional layout. It reminded me of the “things to do” puzzle books I used to enjoy as a child. Instead, the “things to do” were about living well on earth. I noticed the subsections—whole systems, land use, soft technology, craft, community, politics, nomadics, communications, and learning. What an interesting way to organize how to think about the earth! I bought the book, took the subway back to my apartment, and buried myself in its pages, feeling I had discovered a kind of holy grail.

The *Whole Earth Catalog* was the “holy grail” of my career. It provided me with a focus and a vision for what I wished to study, what I wanted to learn, how I aspired to live my life. It provided an inherently interdisciplinary, hands-on, ecological approach to learning and lifestyle. It was intellectual and gritty, serious and humorous, grounded and visionary.

Almost forty years have passed since I first opened the pages of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. What seemed like an incredibly distant future has arrived. We are staring down the seemingly alarmist environmental predictions of 1968. The world we warned against has arrived. The challenges of climate change, habitat fragmentation, global population growth, and species extinction are on our doorstep.

Real-Time, Frugal Sustainability

The very good news is that we are witnessing an unprecedented, imaginative, innovative, and dynamic resurgence of interest in the original vision of the *Whole Earth Catalog*—the spirit of sustainability. Concepts like endurance, resilience, craft, and community, in service of ecologically sound planning and living are penetrating everyday awareness. What's particularly striking is the extraordinary interest that corporations and businesses are showing in these concepts. There is a brilliant merging of urgency, common sense, innovation, and profit. Add “ecology” and “legacy” to the equation and you have the new sustainability movement. This is a global movement of historic proportions.

However, let us not be sanguine about the resurgence of sustainability. The infrastructure of the international political economy rewards short-term profit and the rapid exploitation of natural resources. But getting away with that approach will not be as easy as it used to be.

What does all of this mean for Unity College? Although we are a small “environmental college” in rural Maine, we have an important voice in the global movement. We can be advocates of “real-time, frugal” sustainability. Real-time means that we do it everyday, right here, right now. We avoid carbon offsets and if we must use them to get to zero carbon, we will invest in the local community. Frugal means that we stress economic efficiency and demonstrate that sustainability involves both ecological and economic efficiency and wisdom. Our task is to demonstrate that sustainability is more than just virtuous (which it is!). It’s affordable and every family and workplace in America can get it done.

We can demonstrate that sustainability is a means to an end. It’s a way to build enduring relationships with the landscape, with the local community, and amongst ourselves. That’s why wellness and participatory governance are intrinsic to our approach to sustainability. We wish to live well in the community, in the bioregion, and as planetary partners. It seems to me that this is the essence of an environmental college, to live what it teaches, to be a hands-on laboratory for the best thinking about ecology, lifestyle, community, wellness, diversity (both the ecological and cultural forms) and governance. This is simultaneously a curricular and operational approach.

Sustainability is a wonderful organizing principle for an environmental college. First and foremost, it builds character and virtue. Yes! I really do believe this. There are moral and ethical reasons to pursue sustainability, not the least of which is that it teaches reciprocity, gratitude, and citizenship. Second, it is a perfect blend of theory and practice. You can try out all of the concepts you learn by applying them to the place where you live. We have an ideal blend of place-based, hands-on, experiential learning. Third, sustainability teaches legacy. Can we think about our college in the time frame of ecological time and space? And if we do, what might our campus and community look like in ten years, fifty years, one hundred years, and beyond?

Good Planning Comes First (Unity 2020)

To achieve sustainability with legacy in mind requires both good planning and improvisational excellence. And good planning comes first. This just makes common sense. If we aspire to achieve sustainability excellence, we have to look into the future. Ultimately we must ask the question—how do we wish to live? Not just today and tomorrow, but many years from now. Can we make every decision with this question serving as our operational conscience? To do so you need a plan. To get a plan you need a good process for getting one.

On the last weekend of September 2007, about sixty faculty, staff, students, trustees, and friends of Unity College gathered at the Unity Centre for the Performing Arts, to engage in a participatory master planning workshop. Led by PDT, an architecture firm in Portland, Maine, in partnership with Terrence J. DeWan and Associates, a landscape architecture firm (also from southern Maine); we had a wonderful “visioning” session. The first lessons of good planning were clear. Get as many people as possible involved, engage their imagination, find out what they care about, and trust their wisdom. Following the workshop PDT and friends returned to their workplace, compiled the data, and presented the college with several “template” scenarios for additional refinement and revision.

During Thanksgiving week, I met with PDT and picked up their scenarios. As I perused their three alternative plans, studying the maps, letting my imagination run wild, I remembered that *Whole Earth Catalog* vision. I was simultaneously daunted and delighted by the prospects. I’m daunted by the scope of the challenge and the firm knowledge that these plans are the first step of a long journey. I’m

delighted by the prospects of moving forward, nourished by the community wisdom that will support and propel the process. Surely it will take a full community effort to move this project forward.

A first glance at these preliminary plans inspires you to think about time and space. Where will things go? And how long will it take to get them there? Can we blend our use of this landscape (a college) with our best thinking about sustainability? How much must change for this to occur? How much will it cost? Who will support us? Can we restore and revitalize the landscape with each new community function? What year should we strive for?

Initially I considered 2050. That would support the necessity of long-term thinking. It would challenge us to consider the incredible planetary changes of the twenty-first century. But then I thought, “whoa,” that’s really a long time! I reduced my time scale to 2020, far enough into the future to signify long-term, but conceivable enough to allow us to plan for tangible, phased change. And then I liked the pun—Unity 2020—a sense of integrated vision!

I wish to share this awesome responsibility. I’m thrilled to facilitate and guide the process of planning, to help empower the manifestation of the vision, to cultivate interest and investment, and to gather spirit and enthusiasm. But I want to share my excitement and spread these maps out, lay them on a table so everyone can see them. We can’t explore, extend, and implement this vision without a community of effort.

So the next step is to form a committee. Volunteers have already declared their interest. The Leadership Council will convene a committee, to be organized through the President’s Office, and the first meeting will be in January. We will err on the side of inclusiveness. I’d rather our working group be too big rather than too small. We’ll go over the plan, lay out the maps, make suggestions, and meet again with PDT (sometime in April). Then they will take our best ideas and turn them into a Master Plan—Unity 2020.

Improvisational Excellence

The best way to implement a good plan is through flexible governance and intellectual liquidity. That is, conditions change, ideas meld and morph, and opportunities come and go. How do you move with the times without feeling that you have to grasp at every opportunity that’s placed before you? How do you have the collective wisdom to stay true to your vision, values, and planning, yet avoid rigidity? You start by asking the questions.

A plan for 2020 has phases, stages, and scenarios. We will decide what is most important. What are our most glaring needs? We will distinguish big-ticket items (capital campaign kinds of things) from inexpensive great ideas that will be short on cost but long on value. Planning will be ongoing, not just a pretty map that sits on the wall (although it will be pretty and it will be on walls), but an alert, flexible process that is built into strategic planning, governance, curriculum, and budgets. Above all, we will strive to stay alert to the everyday life of daily needs while we think about the big picture. Planning merges the moment with legacy, the present with the future, the realistic with the visionary. It is both fun and stressful. It invites consensus and controversy. It involves anyone who cares about Unity College, central Maine, and our planetary future.

I hope you are as ready as I am!