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Moving to a New Paradigm: a Reflection on Ethics

Sara Bajor

On January 17, 2014 I not only celebrated twenty-one years on earth, but also made the decision to commit my post-college life to volunteer work as a resident of Avalon Organic Gardens and EcoVillage, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the development of sustainable building, living, and farming practices. At the time, I had spent the past 21 years of my life in a way familiar to many people: I grew up in an average middle class suburb and had average middle class problems; I did well in high school and made plans to, in short, do all the things I saw my peers doing and that the larger society was telling me would grant me a life worth living. For me, this pressure imposed aspirations of graduating college, getting a nice lucrative job, and maybe even acquiring a suburban house and average, middle class problems of my own someday. The decision I made on my birthday was a steep deviation from that trajectory I was well started on. After a week and a half of an agricultural internship at Avalon, I felt compelled towards a way of life not by social pressures or status-quo expectations, but by a very personal understanding of what would be, for me, a fulfilling life. I will be living in shared housing, working 40+ hours a week between maintaining the gardens and developing farm-management software, and making \$0 a year while enjoying a standard of living I am convinced would be impossible to achieve through any other means.

Of course, such a life-altering change of course doesn't come without careful deliberation. In my personal and immediate future, I would have to figure out how to fast-track my degree, pay back my student loans, and explain to friends and family that I was abandoning my technocratic dreams of Silicon Valley-living to go serve on a farm in the Arizona desert. The unwavering conviction I felt that I had found a comprehensively fulfilling lifestyle and career opportunity for myself was more than enough fuel to overcome these ultimately minor hurdles. What I remained caught on, however, was a bigger picture question in regards to my future ability to effect change. I realized that what is acquired along the conventional trajectory – in addition to the job, and the material goods, and the family – are the two things that make an individual most capable of effecting change in today's bureaucratic and institutionalized systems and that I was basically giving up: status and affluence. I needed to be convinced that my new life plan, no matter how attractive it was to my personality, wasn't compromising my likelihood of making a difference in the world I had grown up in and that I felt so desperately needed to change.

The way this issue came to be framed in my mind was whether or not I could be an agent of change to what is colloquially referred to as "the system" while living completely outside of it. I critiqued myself, demanding that I find a logical argument for how life with Avalon would better serve my long term goals of working towards social justice, appropriate technology¹, and food security. *Is this just a cop-out?* I asked myself. I worried that my flight response was being triggered by an overwhelming sense that society's problems were too deeply rooted to be overcome. I worried that retrospect would someday show me that my choice had been a response of cowardice rather than courage. I considered the fact that I was so fortunate to have had the educational opportunities that could make a life of affluence and status more than possible – could make it *likely* – for me. The answer I arrived at extends from a set of ethics that is fundamental to what I believe constitutes a life worth living and that, from what I've observed in my own life, cannot be fully realized in the predominately control-, greed-, and fear-oriented society in which most of us live.

¹ "Appropriate technology is technology that is designed to be "appropriate" to the context of its use. The most appropriate technologies are: sustainable, small, and appropriate to the environmental, ethical, cultural, social, political, and economical context." (http://www.appropedia.org/Appropriate_technology)

I began struggling with society's values and procedures in a strong sense about a year ago after taking an introductory environmental studies course. What began that semester, and what has continued ever since, was a dramatic increase in my understanding of the linkage between ecological abuses and social justice issues. I learned about the Alberta tar sands, a large bitumen deposit in northeastern Canada that is extracted and processed to produce oil, and how their development has negatively impacted the well-being of the indigenous population in the surrounding area². The following semester's study of environmental issues in a global context opened my eyes to the fact that the residents of Fort Chipewyan, Alberta are only one of numerous communities throughout the world that are becoming victims of systematic injustices as a consequence of large scale changes being made to the environment to produce the abundance of energy and materials that are the hallmark of the modern age. It was clear to me that corporations played a predominant role in causing these injustices, and that my role as a consumer was miniscule in relation to today's globally-scaled supply chains. Yet every time my purchases contributed to corporations, I felt that my needs as a consumer were being exploited to uphold the systematic injustices I knew they caused. The unavoidable next steps for me were a reevaluation of my own consumer behavior, and a consequent reform of my purchasing decisions.

I recognized a number of generalizable trends, each one demonstrative of an underlying ethic resulting from the capitalist globalization of materials and energy production. For one, it is increasingly difficult for consumers to have a real understanding of how goods are produced and from where their raw materials come from. To reduce my personal contribution to this trend, I began to make purchases as much as possible from locally owned businesses rather than widely distributed corporations. By shopping local I am able to personally interact with the person supplying the goods I am purchasing, counteracting the increasingly globalized ethic of impersonalization in the transaction of goods and services. A second trend I responded to was the unceasing production of materials that are sold in retail stores despite the abundance of gently used goods that are too often disposed of despite still being functional. I began frequenting second hand stores any time I needed clothing, household goods, or furniture. This was not only frugal, but also enabled me to demonstrate disagreement with the ethic of resource waste perpetuated by retail stores. I recognized the ethic of compromising nutrition and ecological stability in favor of increasing production while decreasing labor that is demonstrated by conventional agricultural practices of monocropping and overuse of nitrogen-rich fertilizers. To combat this, I reformed my diet to rely predominately on fruits and vegetables – which have less ecological impact than meats – and also began purchasing organic as much as possible.

These changes in my personal behavior emerged from wanting to lessen my dependence as a consumer on corporations that compromised individuals' well-being in their pursuit of profit. They are predominately an effort to live my own life ethically, and I don't harbor illusions that they will effect change on any larger scale. Yet the changes I made left me feeling half-accomplished at best. I still had plans to pursue a technical career, and found that technology companies, when corporatized, demonstrated ethics entirely contrary to the worldview I was refining. I was still paying taxes on my income and purchases that I knew would end up supporting government-led causes that I fundamentally disagreed with. I felt stuck, thinking I had no way to make a living without making what felt like huge, yet passive, ethical compromises. Meanwhile, I was constantly struggling against a society that encouraged me – through its values, advertising, and product availability – to buy from corporations, shop retail, and eat McDonalds. I certainly failed my new ethics at times (although my McDonalds boycotting is still going strong), and this kept me yearning for a way of life that would be absent of such antithetical influences and unavoidable compromises.

² "In 2006, unexpectedly high rate of rare cancers were reported in the community of Fort Chipewyan. In 2008, Alberta Health confirmed a 30% rise in the number of cancers between 1995 -2006." (<http://www.ienearth.org/what-we-do/tar-sands/>)

What I found in Avalon was exactly that: a completely functional, albeit small-scale, alternative society composed of more than one hundred individuals that were already living – and had been living for more than two decades – a lifestyle wholly inclusive of the same ethics I had been cultivating for the past year. They were living proof that I could make a living without compromising my ethics (and it was just my luck that they were seeking aspiring software developers). Witnessing the ease with which they all lived and worked together in cooperation to maintain a functional and resilient community in harmony with Earth’s natural systems, I was amazed to feel more at home than I had ever felt in my past 21 years spent amid conventional society. I sought to understand what made their society successful and what I have finally come to understand are two overarching principles that together define Avalon’s ethic of living. The first of these principles defines individuals’ relationship to the land, while the second defines individuals’ relationship to other people. They intersect and branch out from the community’s understanding of the relationship between life in all its forms, and of the human’s role in a highly complex and interconnected universe.

The concept of the land as something deserving of human stewardship was most famously articulated in Aldo Leopold’s 1949 *Sand County Almanac*³ in which he stated, “That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.” Leopold’s now popularized land ethic recognizes that the well-being of human-made systems is extremely dependent on the well-being of the environment from which those systems are created and maintained. It follows that preserving the availability of resources is the best method of assuring continued functionality of the systems humanity depends on. Avalon approaches this fact from two directions: first, they design their physical and social infrastructure in such a way that creates the least impact on the surrounding environment; second, they apply knowledge of natural systems to maintain such systems’ productive potential. In practice, the former manifests as shared living spaces, the utilization of alternative building materials such as papercrete⁴ and straw-bale, and careful consideration of energy and water use. The latter manifests as an agrarian lifestyle, through which they produce most of their own food, as well as the purposeful renovation of the natural environment to increase the land’s resilience against flood or drought. They build swales and berms to control the flow of rain water, manipulating it into watering their farm lands and accumulating in rain gardens that serve as natural water treatment facilities. They construct grey water systems to direct household wastewater to flower-bearing planters. To put it generally: they do more with less, and engineer the land into serving their needs while respecting the land in its own right as a thing whose well-being is as precariously placed as their own.

The close relationship each member of Avalon feels to the land is embedded in a larger spiritually-based understanding of the “state of our fragile Mother Earth, and the ever-growing need for each one of us to assume responsibility for her care”⁵. But a strong conservation ethic need not be rooted in any form of spirituality; today, the ecologically restorative effects of urban and small scale farming throughout the world are evidence that a close dependence on land as a productive entity contributes to the realization of Leopold’s ideals. Individuals are simply more likely to be mindful of conservation if they have a vested interest in the land or use the land for productive or recreational purposes⁶. All members of Avalon rely on their gardens and pastures for subsistence: this serves to ensure continual stewardship of the land, since each worker knows that their work is directly

³ Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.

⁴ “Papercrete is a construction material which consists of re-pulped paper fiber with Portland cement or clay and/or other soil added.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papercrete>)

⁵ <http://avalongardens.org/ecovillage>. (2014).

⁶ Dearborn, Donald C., and Salit Kark. “Motivations for Conserving Urban Biodiversity.” *Conservation Biology* 24.2 (2010): 432-40. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1523-1739.2009.01328.x/full>

contributing to the availability of the eggs, meat, and produce that will end up on their dinner plate the next week. What results is a self-perpetuating conservation ethic wherein each individual has a firsthand understanding of how important it is to maintain the land's resilience. The underlying principle that defines how Avalon relates to the land is therefore tantamount to Leopold's assertion that land is a community to be loved and respected.

As important as pursuing physical sustainability is in their buildings, farms, and infrastructure, Avalon puts just as much importance on harboring emotional sustainability through "honest, loving, and respectful communication"⁷. This pursuit of "non-physical" sustainability governs interpersonal relationship within and outside of the community and, just like their land ethic, is deeply rooted in a spiritual belief in the interconnectedness of life. By fostering close personal relationships, the community is strengthened by relying on one another. In dealing with conflict, residents of the community practice "care-fronting" rather than confronting to maintain a stable level of understanding between all people. One thing that results from this ideology is a total equality among all members regardless of age, race, ethnicity, or religion. Any such differences are considered superficial distinctions in what is fundamentally a commonality in personhood shared by all humans and in spirituality shared by all who recognize and respect the interactivity of life on a cosmic scale. Specific races, ethnicities, and creeds are merely variations of what is fundamentally the same; none is better or more right than another.

Immediately after my visit to Avalon, I interpreted their cooperation and willingness to share as actualizing the concept of brotherly love. It was clear from watching the community live, eat, and work together that they viewed each other as members of an extended family. I would still argue that they strive to fulfill the Golden Rule – the duty to "love thy neighbor as thyself"⁸ – but I would further suggest that the philosophical underpinnings of their interpersonal relationships run deeper than exhibiting humanity and compassion towards others as brotherly love calls for. Members of Avalon are called by their philosophical text, the Urantia Book, to act out *fatherly* love. The call to fatherly love is a call to action through which, even in the face of persecution, individuals are "empowered to show mercy, promote peace, and to love even unlovely mankind."⁹ Fatherly love is the principle that ultimately defines interpersonal relationships in Avalon's worldview; the essence of father love is "delight[ing] in returning good for evil – doing good in retaliation for injustice."¹⁰

With Leopold's ideals as their land-ethic, and fatherly love as their people-ethic, Avalon has refined an entire life-ethic from which their sustainable, alternative society emerges. I had come from a world that bombarded me with temptations to consume, exploit, and cheat in order to achieve affluence and success. One five-hour plane ride transported me to a 185-acre world without billboards, fast food, or the incentive of moving up a corporate hierarchy. Competition had been replaced by cooperation; individual ownership with community-wide sharing; domination of nature with stewardship; resentment with fatherly love. I was experiencing first-hand the contrast between a society driven by profit motive and a society driven by service motive. In returning to conventional society I could clearly see the effect of the profit motive, which benefits a few at the expense of many, as degrading humanity's ability to live sustainably. Here, too, the Urantia Book provides guidance: "Present-day profit-motivated economics is doomed unless profit motives can be augmented by service motives. Ruthless competition based on narrow-minded self-interest is ultimately destructive of even those things which it seeks to maintain."¹¹ In my own experience, the profit motive had been so

⁷ <http://avalongardens.org/ecovillage>. (2014).

⁸ Leviticus 19:18

⁹ The Urantia Book. 140:5.5 (p1573).

¹⁰ The Urantia Book. 140:5.5 (p1576).

¹¹ The Urantia Book. 71:6.6 (p805).

ubiquitous that it excluded alternative ways of thinking; prior to my visit to Avalon I could not fathom functionality without monetary incentive. Avalon showed me that it is possible.

I am convinced that Avalon is a successful experiment in generating a new paradigm defined by service rather than profit. I have confidence in their resiliency because I have confidence in the power of a network of people united by a common cause. But they took the easy way out of profit-motivated society by leaving it completely. Avalon cannot quite provide a step by step guide to how the world at large can transition to a new paradigm; the task is much harder when so much labor and so many materials have already been invested into systems that uphold the profit motive. The Urantia Book advocates that “profit motivation must not be taken away from men until they have firmly possessed themselves of superior types of nonprofit motives for economic striving and social serving – the transcendent urges of superlative wisdom, intriguing brotherhood, and excellency of spiritual attainment.”¹² If we are to succeed in living sustainably – cooperatively and as stewards of the earth – then we must construct for ourselves a worldview that lends itself to being sustained. There can be no panacea in our world of immeasurable complexity, but if Avalon is to serve as model of functional sustainability, then recognition of the restorative potential of the Leopoldian land ethic and of fatherly love is a good place to start.

In the face of rapidly accumulating environmental stresses leading to unpredictable climates and resource scarcity, fortifying the resilience of the earth’s productive systems on which we rely is fast becoming our most important challenge. It will take cooperation on a global scale to succeed, and I view the profit-motive and its associated ethic of competitive, narrow-minded self-interest as dangerously contradictory to that goal. My understanding of the profit-motive as a direct cause of social injustices around the world makes anything short of complete revocation of it unsatisfactory. That I understand the Leopoldian land ethic and fatherly love as being effective methods of healing the world and each other from the suffering the profit-motive has so far imposed necessitates my finding a way to live those ideals in my daily life. This is what Avalon will provide for me, and this is ultimately what convinces me that I am making the right decision for myself. If I am to live by my ethics, I must dismiss the profit-motive completely; if I am to work towards social justice, appropriate technology, and food security, then I will be most successful when my ethics are supported by my society, and when I when I can work with a network of people who share a similar vision.

I left Avalon yearning for a service-motivated reality so genuinely that I was willing to abandon the profit-motive to achieve it. Yet I agree with the Urantia Book’s suggestion that human society as a whole is not yet prepared to abandon the profit-motive completely. Having seen the light and love that fills the homes and hearts of Avalon’s community, I view their pursuit of the “transcendent urges” of wisdom, brotherhood, and spirituality as a keystone in their evolution beyond the profit-motive. Let us each be mindful in our search for opportunities towards these, or similar, transcendent urges and if at any point we hesitate in our conviction of pursuing them, let us trust our human capacities of love and compassion to guide our intuition. Let us not compromise our ethics if they are incompatible with the profit-motive, since there is evidence that we can progress beyond it. The impending environmental crisis leaves us with less and less time, but if we have confidence in the restorative power of cooperative work then our only worry should be in achieving it. Drastic, positive change can happen quickly, but we must be open to that change, and we must believe in it so fully that nothing can hold us back. I made a promise to devote myself to cooperation towards the goal of sustainability less than two weeks into my visit with Avalon. In my experience, finding my path felt like an unequivocal call to destiny – and through this reflection more than two months later I have found that those two weeks were, in fact, more than

¹² The Urantia Book. 71:6.6 (p805).

enough time to decide whether or not to accept my destiny. I am lucky to have my decision bolstered by understanding friends and family, as well as timeless wisdom from Paulo Coelho¹³:

“When we least expect it, life sets us a challenge to test our courage and willingness to change; at such a moment, there is no point in pretending that nothing has happened or in saying that we are not yet ready. The challenge will not wait. Life does not look back. A week is more than enough time for us to decide whether or not to accept our destiny.”

...although, sometimes, it might take two.

¹³ Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.