

Cortesian Consciousness: Deepening the Art of Sustainability

by
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What we see happening today in the world is truly mind-boggling. The transformational clash between the old Cartesian-mechanistic worldview and an emergent compassionate worldview is shown in a paradox of behaviors within the arena of conscience, cultures, and the natural environment. We are witnessing an era that is self-destructive yet curiously self-preserving, reactionary yet curiously innovative, exploitive yet curiously caring, hate and anger discharging yet marvelously and bravely peace-driven and compassionate. And through it all, there continues to be a growing number of people who are investing their energy and ideals toward a *Lifeview* and *Earthview* that affirms the value of life for all species on Earth, and more importantly who are desiring to *sustain* this vision through peace, cooperation, equality, renewed spirituality, human and animal justice, social and ecological responsibility, and overall sanctitude for this planet.

As visionary tinkerers, we have evolved a host of ideologies that are casting for supporting roles in our new myth, our new story and cosmology of life. What are we ultimately to make of Gaia theory, deep ecology, environmentalism, ecofeminism, chaos and general systems theory, the Green movement, bioregionalism, re-emergence of Goddess? Are these the role models which will sustain our expanding vision? If they are, I would ask one simple question: What central idea, concept, metaphor, ideology, theme, or word can serve to string these pearls of scientific, philosophical, naturalistic, and spiritual wisdom together? Any act that constitutes a motive of sustainability (whether we talk about sustainable agriculture, forestry, spirituality, culture, wellness, whatever) in our new Lifeview/Earthview must pour first from a reified chalice of essence. What is that essence?

That essence, I believe, is something deeply perennial, deeply personal, and universal in scope. We are talking about a sustained heart-felt feeling and mental attitude of deep respect, courtesy, love, and awe and wonder that has permeated all of history through a perennial wisdom, often exemplified by native cultures, religions of the East, and radical Occidental philosophers, naturalists, scientists, and theologians. Probably no one better than Thomas Berry has spoken about this Lifeview/Earthview essence when he suggested that, "We have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality." Truly, if we are to deepen the art and science of sustainability, we must recognize that it pours forth from a great need for respect, courtesy, and maintaining a sense of awe and wonder, as reverence, about the sacredness of all interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent species and natural forces on Earth, if not within the universe.

After years of struggling to conceptualize our new (and perennially re-emerging) perception of life through meditation and scholarly study, I came across an ancient French word used quite sparingly almost 1000 years ago, only because within it evokes a quality of character reserved for only a few worthy of it. Fittingly so, however, I believe it is a word which best describes our deepening consciousness today, and perhaps represents that key metaphor or ideological theme we have been struggling to find or develop in our emerging new cosmology, myth, and story.

The word of which I speak is **Cortesia** (pronounced *cortesia*). The most obvious English translation for **Cortesia** is "courtesy," but courtesy today has a more superficial meaning than it did at the time Saint Francis was alive, and to whom has been ascribed the deep convictual use of the term. The original use of the word was to describe nobility of character and conduct, and at its deepest philosophical point **Cortesia** described the recognition of rights, duties, gifts, and privileges as they exist in reciprocal relationship (once again, one is reminded of St. Francis's deep sense of integrity and respect for all creation as brought forth in his enduring veneration for addressing every form of life as Brother or Sister). I believe that it is in **Cortesia** that we can call up once again that gesture of noble courtesy that allows us in a simple, humble, and conscious act to praise and give thanks to that which we revere. In fact, so intertwined are the meanings of *cortesia* and reverence (ancient French dictionaries speak of *cortesia* in terms of reverence), that for all practical purposes they are one and the same and may be spoken of in terms of a **Cortesian Consciousness**.

I do not question the uncanny similarity between the two words, the old Cartesian worldview and the new **Cortesian Lifeview/Earthview**. In fact, the very likeness of the two words may be more ironical than we think, a historical testimony to both the dramatic and subtle change possible in consciousness and conscience, and thus a testimony to the changing course of history on Earth today. Indeed, the mere changing of an "a" to an "o" in these two words must constantly be a reminder of the difference between an army of soldiers or an army of sages and stewards, between the darkness of our ignorance and the light of our wisdom, between the interplay of duality---hate and love, greed and selflessness, power and compassion, abuse and respect---and the lack of understanding which has always hounded the motives of humanity.

It is truly the shift in symbolic context of these two words, Cartesian and **Cortesian**, which will continue to provide dramatic proof of their bipolar content. For example, the Cartesian position of human mastery and dominance over nature gives way to a **Cortesian** stewardship promoting an interconnected and reciprocal relationship between cultures and nature. A Cartesian instrumental rationalism/interpretation of life gives way to a **Cortesian** heightening of intuition and reason both of which lead one to creatively explore life with a sense of discriminative wisdom. A Cartesian mechanistic assumption gives way to a

Cortesian organic/biocentric systems perspective. A Cartesian patriarchal and male-God dominance gives way to a **Cortesian** gylanic (male/female partnership) and perennial divine (God/Goddess/Ground Consciousness) sacredness and wisdom. A Cartesian split in mind and body gives way to a **Cortesian** integration of bodymind bonded by the forces of spirit.

Cortesian Consciousness, in summary, celebrates a Lifeview and Earthview founded on deep respect, noble courtesy, and abiding reverence within reciprocal relationship. In **Cortesia**, I believe, is echoed the compassionate plea of many who affirm: "I want an Earth that is healthy, a world at peace, and a heart filled with love. I want my life and every life to count. How can I serve toward this end?" **Cortesia** may indeed be the sacred sustainable chalice from which to pour forth our essential need to serve life (and be served by life) with respect, courtesy, and reverence. It may be the key concept that allows us to explore new realms of old familiar areas in life, such as Cortesian politics, Cortesian economics, Cortesian ecology, Cortesian science, Cortesian relationships, and so on.

A Model of Service

It has been my perception, as an environmentalist, psychologist, and wellness practitioner that many people desire to embrace this **Cortesian Consciousness**, but lack a viable model from which to activate their need to serve. Whereas **Cortesia** may provide the overarching foundation upon which to serve with respect, courtesy, and reverence, it must be translated into actual behavior. What follows is a very brief conceptualization of this important service model, and hopefully clarifies the key role sustainability plays within it.

My perception is that a sustainable model of service to other beings and to oneself, embraces three distinct and interrelated processes. These processes are **restoration**, **regeneration**, and **sustainability**. To grasp this model, let's think of it as a process of ever widening concentric circles emanating from a common core. The nucleus represents the central unifying philosophy of our new **Cortesian** Lifeview/Earthview: respect, courtesy, and reverence for interconnected/reciprocal relationship. This powerful nucleus of service speaks for all matters of relationship: between individuals and cultures, cultures and nature, species within nature itself, and one's personal relationship with an overarching Divine Force. It also speaks for what may be called that balance or equilibrium state within which species may interact and carry out their unique characteristics in general harmonious flux.

Any attempt to evoke a foundation of respect, courtesy, and reverence for life must first invoke a process of restoration, the first concentric ring around our compassionate core. The existing chaos or disequilibrium of our forests, waters, air, and soil; our homeless, underclass, and culturally deprived and discriminated; our diminishing natural and animal species resource base --- all these natural and human systems can be sustained, to be sure, but only if their dignity and value is upgraded or restored to a more desirable equilibrium

point, either through human or natural efforts or healing. Therefore, to that person who compassionately asks, "How can I serve to enhance and sustain the well-being of myself, others, or nature?", the response is through some effort that helps to restore respect for the interrelated systems in question.

Perhaps the clearest example of this restoration process can be seen in the sudden acceptance in the last two years of the role and need of **restoration ecology**. The specific function of restoration ecology is to restore a natural area to some state of equilibrium that takes into consideration the breadth and balance of diverse needs within the biotic communities of that area. Restoration often is invoked and measured by its overt, if not janitorial, processes, i.e. the actual doing and witnessing over time the results of one's respectful efforts (it should be added that wisdom may dictate that no-effort is necessary in the restorative process; this was dramatically demonstrated in the natural restorative power of the Yellowstone area after the devastating fires of 1988, and in its previously unknown capacity to regenerate itself). On a purely human level, restoration ecology is an attempt to right a wrong on a natural area which has been degraded by human exploitation. In the words of Peter Berg of Planet Drum Foundation, restoration is like adding a birthing room to a hospital that had only a trauma center.

Whether one is attempting to restore the diversity and integrity of a forest clearcut, the watershed which is a spawning ground for salmon, the organic structure of agricultural soil saturated with petrochemicals, the quality of air we breathe and water we drink, even a bit of greenspace within an urban setting, the very process of restoration ecology is an attempt to heal our relationship to the place or bioregion where we live, to the culture we live in, to some deeper sense of spirit or conviction that life has more than human worth. Restoration simply moves us deeper into our motives, deeper into our conscience, deeper into a belief that something's life ultimately *is* worth sustaining through an ongoing and heart-felt gesture of respect, courtesy, and reverence.

At a cultural level, the process of restoration is also the first matter of consideration in restoring a relationship of respect and reverence. The plight of Native Americans in this country especially addresses this process. There is absolutely no way these people can sustain their deep cultural and spiritual heritage in relationship to their sacred geography if the American government and key exploitive corporations do not make sincere attempts to restore the Indians' bond with the land. More broadly, we have recently seen worldwide dramatic success by citizens to restore unique cultural autonomy, for the only way people can hope to sustain the diversity of their cultures and regions has been to cry out for respect within freedom of choice, autonomy, equality, and peace.

Similarly, at a purely individual level, the only way one can help to sustain a sense of dignity, health, and financial well-being in another, is to help them in a process that first *restores* a level of dignity, health, and low financial risk. Several years ago, my wife formed

a non-profit organization, **The Garden Stewards Project**, to teach low-income people in our county how to garden organically at their residence. Each household is provided, free of cost for one year, all necessary organic materials, wood, loam, seeds, starts, monthly classes, and a trained Master Gardener volunteer. The project's overall intent is to restore a sense of dignity, nutritional integrity, confidence, and some sense of control to the participants --- something that hopefully they can regenerate and sustain for years to come. In fact, the project's motto speaks to the whole **Cortesian** process I am sharing: "Plant a seed of hope, Respect the Earth, Harvest your good efforts."

There are many more examples to be made in this critical restorative process, but perhaps none speak so broadly and dramatically as the need to re-sanctify our spiritual relationship to life and Earth. The whole thrust of deep ecology, ecofeminism, and process theology is to call forth or restore once again a spiritual relationship that is based upon deep respect, noble courtesy, and abiding reverence for all beings within the sacred web of life. Thus, has been the noble attempts to re-affirm the Goddess role in life and the Gaia divinity of Earth. Similarly, the mergence of metaphysical concepts of East and West have clearly been part of the "birthing room" atmosphere of a type of restoration spirituality.

In summary, the process of restoration attempts to evoke respect, courtesy, and reverence for one's sense of right place, right relationship, right work/service, and right devotion/commitment to self, others, and the natural environment. Restoration is a paramount requirement on the road to deepening our sense of sustainable service.

If restoration is the birthing room of ecology, culture, or spirituality, regeneration is the "re-newing" of life itself from within that room. This is because regeneration speaks to the valuation of internal inputs or processes. It is one thing to restore a sense of equilibrium within a system (wetland, forest, at-risk household, species habitat, indigenous culture, relationship, one's health or spirituality, etc.), and it is a further commitment to be part of the regenerative process of that system's new "steady-state."

Indeed, if sustainable agriculture and sustainable forestry are to be correctly promoted and characterized, especially in ways the chemically dependent farmer and the profit dependent timber industry see it, an emphasis and education is going to have to be made concerning these very internal regenerative processes. That is, an understanding of the ways in which the natural system restores through regeneration the integrity of its soil structure, species and predator balance, and relationship with other life forms. Similarly, in order to restore health and wellness, within the holism of bodymindspirit, to an optimally functional level, individuals must learn self-empowering regenerative processes that are not dependent upon costly reparative services and products beyond their ability to afford, understand, and/or use them. Additionally, to restore a sense of dignity to impoverished persons, they must be engaged in regenerative processes that give meaning to their life. In my wife's gardening project, over and over again families and individuals have been observed rediscovering a new

harmony within themselves and their reciprocal nurturing relationship with Mother Nature. The fact that they can easily provide \$20-40 per month of fresh produce in a 100 square foot space is a testimony to a reaffirmed sense of worth and self-empowerment, and may aid in ever-increasing confidence about how to do something about their life condition. On another level, an individual may restore a sense of sacredness within their life, a type of life-affirming philosophy very much **Cortesian** in nature. But this sacredness, to have meaning, must be regenerating in scope. Thus, one would expect to engage in types of regenerative processes unique to them, processes which invoke perhaps ritual, ceremony, religious study or worship. One may practice meditation, prayer, journal writing, yoga, tai chi, or engage in vision quests, nature retreats, even perhaps environmental restoration projects, or other artistic regenerative efforts. Finally, there is love. We all know how difficult it is to sustain consistent expressions of love in relationships, but when we look at the process in which to restore love to a relationship, it is always one of regeneration, a renewing, a little "re-birthing" of kindness, caring, courtesy, respect, awe and wonder, if not reverence through thoughtful deeds.

I am sure the reader can reflect on many more ways in which regeneration plays an important role in the overall process of restoring respect, courtesy, and reverence within cultural and natural relationships. Let me conclude now by bringing the final concept of sustainability within this **Cortesian** model of consciousness.

It is my belief that the art, science, and purpose of sustainability centers around this one question: "How can one sustain those attitudes and behaviors symbolic of deep respect, noble courtesy, and abiding reverence within the reciprocal nature of relationships?" This question is the driving force behind what we have come to call sustainable culture, sustainable agriculture, sustainable forestry, sustainable spirituality, and so on. The answer to this question brings us back into the cyclical nature of the model I have just presented. The only way we can sustain a **Cortesian Lifeview and Earthview** is to become active participants in the restorative and regenerative processes of life. We cannot sustain personal wellness unless we know how to wisely restore and regenerate our bodymindspirit through life-enhancing behaviors. We cannot sustain another culture's wellness if we cannot understand and aid in their unique means to restore and regenerate their autonomous connection to geography, artistry, and life-affirming spirituality. We cannot sustain the integrity of a species within the web of life if we do not aid in restoring and regenerating that very web of interconnected life itself. We cannot sustain this planet's unique self-regulatory (restorative and regenerative) processes unless we become conscious and conscientious participants in limiting our technological and consumptive exploitation of the natural environment. We cannot sustain our relationship to some aspect of Divinity if we do not see clearly those attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors necessary to restore, sustain, and revere that Cosmic Force within all of life, not just our human self.

A Covenant of Reverence

It goes without saying, one of the major characteristics of our new cosmology is an emphasis on building qualities founded upon respect for interrelatedness, interdependency, interconnectedness, and partnership at all levels of existence. I perceive our new **Earthview** and **Lifeview** to have a deep compassion for knowing that its underlying foundation or essence brings this wounded Earth back into connectedness. Surely, it is this need for interconnectedness, or what Riane Eisler calls "partnership," which bonds people to this new level of consciousness. But meaningful relationship in and of itself just does not happen as a matter of chance. Rather it is a choice, and it is a choice that must come from a clear vision, not merely within the mind, but from within the heart. As the Greek novelist, Nikos Kazantzakis suggests, "The new earth exists only in the heart." It is thus that people's deep yearning today is to find heart-felt reflective meaning in life that restores a sense of dignity to it, and they want to discover this dignity in a new vision of Earth --- beneath the skin of nature, beneath the mind of humanity.

I know of no better word to describe this deep sense of desirable respect than that of **Cortesia**. It is in a covenant of **Cortesian** reverence that people want to inhabit this "new earth." They want to feel it breathe and to inhale its breath; touch its countenance and be touched in return. They want to know that life, be it man, woman, child, animal, plant, mineral, in whatever form, is given a chance to feel and inhale its own breath-like existence, and touch and be touched by the compassion of others. In short, people want to bond to life in a way deeper than any experienced before on Earth. They want to bond to life in a noble way which embraces the restorative, regenerative, and sustaining powers of respect, courtesy, and life-affirming reverence.

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