

Keynote for Faith and the Common Good Conference, Victoria College, Toronto. June 2008.

I'm delighted to be here at this conference, for a group that calls itself "Faith and the Common Good". I am invigorated because everyone here knows that faith and the common good have everything in common---that one manifests itself through the other--that the common good is only ameliorated by faith, that acting in the common good is an expression of faith, and that faith, at its most active, presents itself in a public realm that is healthy and in a society that is caring.

I say this because I often speak to audiences fascinated by city building, sustainability and public realm utopias, but are lethargic to understand that spirituality,(much as it is a sore point in the secular), is the beginning and end of the societal discussion.

Though I am poet laureate of Toronto, cultural ambassador . I live on a hundred acres of farmland on the oak ridges moraine. I drive down most days to a city of wealth generation, good intentions and misguided strategies (misguided largely because most information comes to people through screens and information technology and not common sense and civil encounter, least of all through open discussions of spirituality. In a landscape of diversity celebration it doesn't dawn on us that in fact the only thing that we all have in common is that we pray in one way or another. The public discussion of that prayer, inhibited by an anti-religious media, and trends that debunk the structure of collective worship, would be our hugest resource for discovering commonality, and our greatest resource in attacking environmental issues. For what we love, namely the

goodness of creation, if not proclaimed cloaks the real issues that are wanting in the sustainability discussion; reverence and the consequent care for each other that comes from a keen sense of the sacred. The sacred, unshared in dialogue, leaves us with a bunch of levers, strategies, mechanics and political maneuvers not fired by the Eros of what is beautiful. For fear of worshipping different Gods, we keep our source of reverence to ourselves and inspire nobody. Such that appeals to sustainability always involve practical consequences, scare tactics, economic alarms or sentimental allusions to the loss for subsequent generations, when our real motive for environmental health should be our deep love for the air we breathe, that moves in us, the things in the world that are not outside of us, but in us. Just as we, as people, are implicit in each other; not connected, but implicit. For we are not discrete from our environment. Our selves are a commingling of all that flourishes and all that is contaminated.

We are one. With "other", with all we see, and can't see. We are what has been and our reverencing of the present is all the hope there is for the future

I say this because we tend to treat environment as an object, and nature as an external thing, and in fact see nature, wrongly, as that which is pastoral, green, idyllic--we think it is plants and the non-human organics that need to be saved. This is why the public is lazy in the preservation of environment, because it sees environment as outside itself. It doesn't see environment as both social and biological, emotional as well as walkable, civic as well as natural.

David Suzuki, at a conference at which we were both speaking, said it well. "We are one body, breathing the same air". This struck me as a succinct, way of expressing the

non-discreteness of self and environment. More importantly, it pointed to an essential notion about sustainability that no one makes much of because the environment as sacred is somehow seen in contradistinction to us, as tainted, imperfect, fallen, despoilers of the land, rapacious retards of an evolution wiser than us. Suzuki was pointing at an essential thing; until we see each other as one body, as one organism, as one holistic entity, not interdependent but dependent on each other, we will not save the environment. We must save each other first, as fallen egos, as civic creatures as a humane ecology that sees the principles of ecology firstly in ones own family in one's own city, one's own community. We have to care for each other enough to give environment to each other as a sacrament that further consecrates the human project to God. Even as I say this I have posited the environment as something other, outside of us to brought in. Our language is loaded with this Aristotelian position, this dipodic way of looking at things. It is not spiritual, nor mystical, nor loving to not see oneself as implicit in others first and then, in nature. I think the dualism of self and nature is useful in one way only. If you don't know how to act with people, you don't know how to act in nature. If you are selfish with people you are mindless of what kills people with pollution and wastage. If you are joyless with people, you cannot exult in the civitas of sentient nature. Who you are as a civic being is not separate from who you are taking a stroll in the countryside.

This leads me to a cliché of my own making--I have used it so often. " we will not save have sustainability until we replace an ethic of entitlement with an ethic of sufficiency". By entitlement I mean the avaricious selfishness by which we have constructed an ethic of survivalism and wealth generation and paucity of civil encounter.

I suggest to you that we have an industry of entitlement begotten of the notion that the good life is something not just to be offered, but to be taken---that happiness is a commodity of rights, consumer goods, life style, hedonisms, compensations all making up for the joylessness and distrust we have inherited from ideological wars. I suggest to you that the citizen means to have his slice, before the pie runs out, that his neighbor is likely to get what scarcity of goods there are, so why not get it first. In a climate of competition we are out to accumulate pleasures we don't need, money we can't use, conveniences that eat up the environment, because we believe time is running out, the human stage is too crazy, and there is a general disbelief in one's fellow citizen. There is a zeitgeist of withdrawal occurring in the global citizen. If you doubt it, keep in mind the pedestrian friendly environments and well design neighborhoods with surveillance cameras, gated communities and signs saying park closes at 11 pm. In this or any city, in this or any neighborhood, gentrified or otherwise, there is no one on the streets after 8 pm at night. People are preferring the screen, the internet, the ipod, the information technology, the private time, to the civil encounter that brings a sense of oneness, of similarity, of communion. We live in a world in which the government knows more about us than our neighbors do, and we are beginning to like it that way. We make forays out into the world in forums of common interest, sanctioned events, but prefer to move in a choreography of negotiated space where we know what is safe and what is hazardous. We take fewer risks, because a certain faithlessness has entered the contemporary. and this faith or lack of it, has everything to do with the common good, or the lack thereof. And we cannot save the environment until we have returned to an ecology of heart, empathic citizenship with each other, in which a measure of sacrifice and risk is taken

and recognized in inter-civic encounter. In the absence of civic communion, little wonder we do not feel as one body breathing the same air. Little wonder we revel in an ethic of entitlement where my SUV is bigger than my neighbors, where wasting hot water is a pampering of oneself along with whatever new imports the Chinese can come up with at the expense of virtual slave labour and toxic skies. Little wonder the malls are packed the way temples and churches used to be---they are sanitized, risk free environment, where the market consumes the environment and we purchased the unneeded like strip miners going after finite resources.

I am saying this ethic of "entitlement", of acquisition is, as we used to say, a substitute for love. And we don't have Kyoto strategies for that. I am saying that the notion that " enough is enough" which we call a good ecological footprint isn't coming until we find sufficiency in each other, until we have joy in each other, feeling for each other, curiosity about each other--until we see a good or bad future for the planet reflected in the eyes of someone you care for.

Sound like "fluff"? I often work with designers and planners, and I tell them a simple thing. When people like each other, they design badly. When people like each other, design becomes a gift to others. I suggest to you that there is an agenda prior to the environmental one. I suggest to you that human nature has been re-engineered away from inter-civic care. And that reverence for each other is the starting point for environmental care.

Hoping that the environment will give us a common cause is well and good. But I also suggest to you that you can have sustainability and an unlivable place. You can have

a pedestrian friendly environment, with green roofs, protected watersheds, energy efficient transport. There are places in the world that preserve the environment, but can't manufacture joy. In most places in the world, people don't preserve the environment because they can't find joy in each other. That sufficiency, that we are to each other, as locations of joy, is the only thing that could keep us from consuming for entitlement.

Certainly, joy inspires faith. And then again, faith is something that has perhaps left the civic biosphere. Faith is that thing that not only accomplishes the essentials; it is that which makes the essential worthwhile. David Crombie said to me "when we were kids, our mothers used to push us out of the house, to play, to explore, to get some fresh air, just to get out of mom's hair. Imagine how loathe we are to do that today, without neighborhood watches, without surveillance, without policing, without fear. Were there not dangers outdoors 40 years ago? Was there more to be fearful of? There was faith, the kind of faith that explored the common good, by assuming that the universe was essentially sympathetic and that there was a universe of possibility to discover in a happenstance encounter. Such faith comes before an appreciation of the common good. And we do not feel the common good, if we are afraid of common ground.

I have sounded a lot of alarms so far. Let me try and justify them by putting together a simpler equation. You cannot have communion with God or communion with the environment without first having communion with each other. And I don't mean sacramental communion, though the acts of empathy, kindness and involvement sacralize the world and make it cherishable. I confess here to an incarnational theology, not a transcendental one. To leapfrog the human condition is to end up in utopia alone, maybe. Community is the great public want these days. But you cannot have community or

commonality without "communality", the desire to risk, have intimacy, accept the random and be a pledge of sacrifice for another. If these seems obvious, keep in mind that people speak of connectedness and relationship and networking and common agendas---they want to negotiate a common good----you cannot negotiate the common good. You surrender to it, because the desire for civic communion is beautiful. And the strategies for this are all about dismantling the culture of fear around us.

It is the task of all thinking citizens to spread the gospel of civil encounter. It is easy to litter, pollute, waste, strip mine, consume and run rough shod over the environment if you don't know the people it is affecting. And often people cant seem to care about the future until they become parents. Indeed, we can't care about the environment until we become family to each other. Our cities and urban places are strategized for regulation, protocol and efficiency inimical to human intimacy. The selfishness that results is the first challenge to environmentalism.

Anonymity is as toxic to the human heart as hydrocarbons are to the atmosphere. There is a connection between the two. People spend more time in front of screens than they do with people. How can you expect them to see the common good as anything other than abstraction.

The first project of spirituality in the environmental discussion is to get people to have faith in each other again. This means civil encounter. This means deconstructing the calculated ways in which policy, systems, corporations and citizens maintain negotiated space and weaken the citizens capacity for engaging with the random. The random is a

mark of God's grace, the possibility of discovering in another citizen a landscape one loves; in that landscape we may learn to love the environment that is a haven for civic love. We may want to save the environment not just for ourselves, but for each other.

And that is a great spiritual quest. The environment is saved after we have restored ourselves to each other.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco