

“What Hope Requires of Us”
An Address by Steven C. Rockefeller
“Prosperous Lowcountry, Flourishing Planet”
South Carolina Coastal Conservation League Conference
8 – 9 May 2013

It is an honor and privilege to be part of this celebration of the Coastal Conservation League’s 25th anniversary. I would like to extend congratulations to Dana Beach and the board and staff of the Coastal Conservation League for the outstanding, inspiring, environmental leadership they are providing South Carolina. It is a special honor to be on this opening panel with Gus Speth and David Orr.

Keeping in mind Dana’s charge to the conference speakers to illuminate the larger challenges facing South Carolina’s environmental movement, I would like to focus on one important piece of the complex environmental puzzle – the ethical and spiritual dimension. What does “Prosperous Lowcountry, Flourishing Planet” mean as an ethical and spiritual ideal? It underscores the increasing interconnection between the local and the global, and I will argue that it challenges us to recognize that caring for people and caring for Earth are two interrelated aspects of one great task. It is our destiny in the 21st century to have to take this truth to heart and create a way of living that conforms to it.

Ethical values define what a society considers to be good and bad, right and wrong, fair and just in human conduct. They clarify our social responsibilities and obligations in relation to others. Our ethical values are a product of our interdependence. We cannot survive and flourish alone. Community and cooperation are essential. Cooperation requires common goals and shared ethical values. Further, as human beings we have the capacity to identify with the suffering and aspirations of others. Empathy awakens compassion and deepens our sense of responsibility. The history of humanity’s

ethical consciousness has been a story of ever greater inclusion as the human sense of community and social responsibility expands. In an increasingly interdependent world where all peoples are linked socially, economically, and ecologically, there is a need for globally shared values.

When the UN World Commission on Environment and Development issued its report Our Common Future in 1987, it put the concept of sustainable development on the international agenda, emphasized the eradication of poverty as fundamental to the goal of sustainability, and highlighted intergenerational responsibility as the ethical imperative at the heart of the concept of sustainability.¹ The good news is that we are in the early stages of a sustainability revolution that, if successful, will reinvent industrial-technological civilization, reform and renew our democracy, and protect and restore the health and beauty of Earth's ecosystems.

Reflecting the way the spirit of the worldwide sustainability movement has come to South Carolina, the chairman of the Charleston County Council, Teddie Pryor, Sr. recently wrote in the Post & Courier: "As we celebrate Earth Day 2013, Charleston County can be proud of the great strides we have made in greening our community and promoting sustainability for our children and future generations." There is much of which Lowcountry citizens can be proud. Mr. Pryor highlighted the success of Charleston's sophisticated new recycling program. The ACE Basin is a national treasure, and the way its unique natural beauty and wildlife habitat have been preserved for future generations is a model of private, state, and federal collaboration.

The Coastal Conservation League's Sustainable Agricultural Initiative, which promotes small scale farming, sustainable livelihoods, poverty eradication and

environmental protection, is an outstanding example of the kind of sustainable development envisioned in Our Common Future. Sustainable development requires fair, transparent, accountable government that inspires public trust, and the recommendations in the report of Governor Haley's Ethics Reform Commission should be fully implemented. Private sector and government leaders in South Carolina are improving energy efficiency and beginning to focus on the great potential in the Lowcountry for development of solar energy and offshore wind energy, which would be a win-win for both the economy and the planet. With farsighted leadership and citizen support the Lowcountry could become an inspiring model of sustainable development for the nation.

The bad news is that the opposition is well organized and funded and the most dangerous planetary trends, such as global warming, have not been reversed. When one adopts a global perspective and considers that our generation is in the process of leaving to future generations worldwide an ecologically degraded, resource depleted, over heated, over populated planet suffering major losses in biodiversity and beauty and facing rising seas and more violent weather, one has to conclude that present generations are failing seriously in their responsibility to future generations. To leave to future generations a world in this condition is a grave injustice, a violation of basic human rights, and those who will suffer most are the poor who have done the least to cause the harm. Part of the problem is that our economic system in its current form prioritizes short term growth and profits above all else, often ignoring or denying the harmful, long term, ecological and social consequences.

However, underlying the problematic relation of industrial-technological society to future generations is a deeper issue involving the nature of our relationship to Earth

and to the greater community of life, of which we are all an interdependent part. An ethical and spiritual perspective can help to illuminate what is fundamentally wrong in this regard. Spiritual and ethical development is all about being more, not having more, leading to right relationship – right relationship with oneself, other persons, nature, and the great mystery that is the sacred source of all life. Finding ourselves as individuals and communities in relation to nature has become a fundamental spiritual as well as economic challenge at this pivotal moment in the evolution of human society.

The major obstacle to right relationship with the larger living world is a set of attitudes and ideas linked to the anthropocentric worldview that guides thinking and action in industrial-technological society. Modern civilization does not really believe in the principle of respect for nature as a fundamental guideline. Respect means recognizing that the other has intrinsic worth and one has responsibilities and obligations in relation to the other. Here in the Lowcountry many individuals do know and love their bioregion, and that bond is celebrated in the art that fills Charleston's museums and many art galleries. However, when one looks at the dominant patterns of production and consumption, one is forced to conclude that modern society as a whole does not understand itself to be an interdependent part of the greater community of life. Human culture is thought to be separate and apart. Nature is viewed as basically a stage set for human history or as just a warehouse of resources that exist to be exploited for human purposes. In this outlook, nature has instrumental or utilitarian value only. The tendency is to think of the human species as the center of everything and of other species and the planet as just means to human ends, and not also as ends-in-themselves worthy of moral consideration.

Many decades ago, Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish theologian and one of the great religious thinkers of the last century, wrote the following in a book entitled God in Search of Man:

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation.²

It is not my intention to dwell on the negative. Rather I want to focus on what can give us hope and on what realization of that hope demands of us. A change in the worldview that has dominated modern society is underway. First of all, human beings have not always had the attitudes toward nature so prevalent in our society. Many indigenous peoples have lived with a deep sense of belonging to nature and with admiration and respect for Mother Earth. Over the centuries various prophets, mystics and scientists have recognized the idea that the universe revolves around humanity as a delusion like all forms of hubris and egocentricity. The world's great spiritual teachers have consistently emphasized caring, compassion, and community, not having more, as the path to enduring happiness and fulfillment. Further, there are major forces at work in our world that are causing a dramatic shift in the awareness and values of millions of people, especially among the young, leading to emergence of a bio-centric and eco-centric worldview, which emphasizes being more and which integrates a vision of social justice with what some theologians call "creation justice."³

Every great civilization in the past, each in a different geographical region, has produced its own distinctive form of spiritual and ethical consciousness, leading to formation of the world's religions. Modern industrial-technological civilization is often

viewed as hostile to religion and supportive of secularism, materialism and atheism. However, as economic globalization and the information revolution create for the first time an interdependent planetary civilization, these forces are generating a new global consciousness, an awareness of the world as one interconnected whole. The new science is contributing to the emergence of this new global consciousness by providing us with an understanding of Earth, our planetary home, as one interdependent, self-organizing ecosystem that is interconnected with a vast, evolving universe. Further, this new global awareness is producing its own distinctive form of ethical and spiritual consciousness – a vision of universal values for the planetary phase in the development of civilization. In and through the ethical and spiritual dimension of the new global consciousness, industrial-technological civilization is seeking its spiritual center and in the process beginning to transform itself. Here are some examples of what I have in mind.

Over the past sixty years, a vision of widely shared values inspired by the new global consciousness has taken form and has been clearly articulated in a number of international declarations. After two world wars, the great work and most urgent ethical challenge facing the human community was to build an international system to promote peace and equitable development in the midst of great cultural diversity, and toward that end to instill in all peoples an awareness that as human beings we share a common identity with every other human being and should respect the equal dignity and rights of every person regardless of their gender, race, religion or nationality. These values and principles are set forth in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1947. Human rights have evolved to include the right to a safe environment that supports human health and well-being. The concept of

environmental justice for people has been a bridge linking the social justice and the environmental movements. To put it simply, the vision of universal human rights reflects a growing, worldwide, ethical realization that in the midst of great diversity, we are one human family and should strive to build a democratic, just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful world.

A new global ethic of respect and care for the community of life as a whole has also been taking form, but not without strong resistance. In an essay, “The Land Ethic” published in 1949, which is now regarded as having inspired development of the field of environmental ethics, Aldo Leopold, an American forester and ecologist, articulated the essential principle in a simple statement.

A Land Ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.

Leopold adds dryly: “in human history we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating.” The extension of a sense of ethical obligation from the human community to the larger community of life, Leopold argues, is “an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.”⁴

During the 1960s, in the international environmental conservation community, a small group of leaders and international law experts began to think about a universal declaration on respect for nature that would complement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their efforts led to the adoption of the World Charter for Nature by the United Nations General Assembly in 1982. In the preamble, the World Charter for

Nature takes the radical position that non-human species have intrinsic value. The World Charter states:

Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and, to accord other organisms such recognition, man must be guided by a moral code of action.

The World Charter for Nature challenges us to recognize in the words of Albert Schweitzer, that “life, as such, is sacred.”⁵ Or as Thomas Berry put it, we are one Earth community and all life forms and ecosystems have certain basic rights.⁶ The first principle of the World Charter declares that “Nature shall be respected and its essential processes shall not be impaired.” Leopold’s land ethic had won international recognition.

However, even though the US was the only nation to vote against the World Charter for Nature at the United Nations in 1982, state governments quickly backed away from support for the World Charter’s recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, no reference was made to the World Charter for Nature in the Summit’s Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, and efforts to draft an Earth Charter that reaffirms the new ethic of respect for nature and integrates it with the concept of sustainable development failed. This led to a worldwide civil society initiative to draft the Earth Charter that developed into the most open and participatory process ever associated with the creation of an international declaration.

The Earth Charter, which was launched in 2000, is a declaration of global interdependence and shared responsibility with fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global community in the 21st century. Its first principles are the imperatives to “Respect Earth and life in all its diversity” and “Care for the community of

life with understanding, compassion, and love.”⁷ As Jacques Cousteau once commented: “We protect what we love.”⁸ The Earth Charter includes sections on Ecological Integrity, Social and Economic Justice, and Democracy Nonviolence and Peace. It has been endorsed by over 5,000 organizations, including UNESCO, the World Conservation Congress of IUCN, and over 800 organizations in the US. The Earth Charter movement is one prime example of the worldwide awakening in civil society of a new global ethical consciousness rooted in a life affirming, relational spirituality.

There are those who want us to believe that the Lowcountry and civilization at large can achieve sustainable development without an ethic of respect, restraint, and care in relation to the community of life as a whole. We have been conducting that experiment for decades, and all the evidence indicates that the idea of sustainability without formation of an ecological conscience in the public mind is unrealistic. Our best hope for a just and sustainable future is for civil society, business and government to work together collaboratively guided by long term planning and by the vision that, in the words of the Earth Charter, “we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.” This principle should be applied locally in each bioregion like the Lowcountry and globally. This is possible. It will take extraordinary innovation, humility, and courage, but the choice is ours. It is what hope requires of us.

In the US today, the most creative and effective leadership for change is occurring in places like the Lowcountry, at the state and local community level. The religious traditions, the arts, including architecture, the schools, and the media, including the social media, as well as agriculture, business and government all have vitally important roles to play. As we seek the way forward in the Lowcountry, there is wisdom in the saying:

“We do not think our way into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking.⁹ It is a complex process of transformation with many dimensions from spiritual to political.

One additional thought regarding appreciation and respect for the Earth community: it is well to remember that it took three billion years to form the community of life that has generated and sustained the human species. Further, as far as we know, the biosphere on Earth is something very rare, if not unique, in the universe. We should honor our planetary home as a true wonder, an awesome reality, something fragile, precious, and sacred. The spirit of caring for Earth as well as one another is strengthened by reverence for and trust in the mystery of being present within us and all about us. (In a quiet moment, ponder this metaphysical question: Why is there something and not nothing?)

In conclusion, the struggle for the future of life on Earth is a contest between two distinct worldviews that support very different values and visions of the good life. One is anthropocentric and emphasizes having more as the path to happiness and social progress. The other is bio-centric and promotes being more, an awareness of global interdependence, and an inclusive ethic of care as the path to well-being.¹⁰ As the spreading damage to Earth’s life giving capacities reveals, the anthropocentric worldview is fundamentally flawed and puts the human future at risk. The promise in the vision of “Prosperous Lowcountry, Flourishing Planet” is linked to a bio-centric worldview that recognizes our responsibility to the greater community of life as well as to one another and future generations. Advancing this worldview and the practical changes it requires is

all part of the great work that lies ahead for the Coastal Conservation League and the Lowcountry.

¹ Our Common Future (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

² God in Search of Man; A Philosophy of Judaism (Philadelphia: Meridian Books and The Jewish Publication Society, 1959), p.46.

³ Larry L. Rasmussen, Earth-Honoring Faith; Religious Ethics in a New Key (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 17, 154-56, 192-94.

⁴ A Sand County Almanac (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 203-204.

⁵ Out of My Life and Thought; An Autobiography (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), pp.158-159.

⁶ For Thomas Berry's understanding of the Earth community and the rights of nature, see The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), pp.6-12, 66, 79-82; The Great Work: Our Way into the Future (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), pp. 4-5, 136-37; and Evening Thoughts; Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), pp. 107-12, 149-50.

⁷ For the text of the Earth Charter and information on the worldwide Earth Charter Initiative, see: www.earthcharter.org

⁸ As quoted in Jennifer Nolan and Jim Abernethy, Sea Turtles Up Close (Ocean Education Publishing, 2013).

⁹ Center for Action and Contemplation, Principle 8. For more information, see www.cac.org

¹⁰ For an insightful analysis of the having and being character orientations and their social implications, see Erich Fromm, To Have or To Be? (New York: Harper & Rowe Publishers, 1976).