

Where Climate Change and Philosophy Meet
Rev. Linda Simmons
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As many of you know, I recently went to the International Conference of Unitarians and Universalists in the Netherlands. Their featured speaker was Klaas van Egmond, who is the Faculty Professor on Geosciences at Utrecht University in the Netherlands with the Utrecht Sustainability Institute. He is the author of the book, *Sustainable Civilization*. His talk was based on that book.

Egmonds begins with these words, "To preserve civilization, both a new ethical framework and a new interpretation of 'sustainability' are need."¹

He names what he calls the three-fold crisis that the Western world has come to as: our ecosystems that are collapsing, economic growth which has reached its limits, and our financial system that have become an end in itself through increasing loans and debt.²

The consequences of these crises we hear about everyday: mass migration, world wide drought, poverty, starvation and in the West, unemployment, protectionism, social conflict, and the global increase of policies that support isolationism as a solution.

The 1987 report 'Our Common Future' by the United Nations' Brundtland Commission offered some interesting suggestions that remain relevant today. The commission proposed a 'sustainable development' that would simultaneously meet the needs of present and future generations. How to create sustainable development that meets the needs of present and future generations was never solved however.³

Most importantly, how does one define needs and 'quality of life'? This is what Egmond tackles in the model I will be presenting to you.

He began by defining needs as that which apply to the human being as a whole, and express the constant tension between what people would like to realize and what they can actually achieve and determined that needs beyond the most physical are generated based on value orientations about the good life.

Definitions of the 'good life' Edmonds determined, depend on subjective considerations about 'what matters' and this refers to images people have of

¹ Klaas van Egmond, "Sustainable Civilization Extended Outline," 1.
<http://www.klaasvanegmond.nl/english>

² Ibid, 2.

³ Ibid, 3.

themselves and the world that surrounds them. ⁴ Think of this in your own lives. How we you experience yourself and the world shapes what you value.

So when trying to define what 'quality of life' that should be pursued for present and future generations, he went about asking people what they value and charting it all in circular model.

At the top of the circle is the non-material with qualities like giving noted from the respondents, at the bottom of the circle is the material with qualities like taking, to the right is the individual, to the left is the collective.

In the middle of the circle is an inner circle that is called balanced. Balanced people he found give more or less equal weight to matters along the two axes: the material and non-material, the individual and the collective.

All together, these world views represent what Egmond and his team call the 'integral world view.'⁵ The most important orientations formed by the integral world view are the contrast between the more non-materialistic/idealist attitudes and the materialist ones, and the contrast between the individual and the collective.

The world views in the non-materialistic or idealistic half of the circle are subjective idealism associated with romanticism and absolute idealism symbolized associated with religion. In the materialistic half of the circle are absolute materialism associated with science and subjective materialism associated with nationalism and fragmentation.

Egmond's thesis turns on this theory which I find compelling: When any of these world views becomes extreme and is pushed beyond its limits, it leads to a single truth that corrupts and destroys and contributes to unsustainability in ourselves and the world around us. Indeed creates conditions in which human dignity cannot be supported.

For Egmond, the good is in the center, the hub of the wheel where to exist one must take responsibility for oneself and one's values, views and relationships. Truth is contextual in the center and lives recognizing other truths.

Evil for Egmond is when an idea or value is pushed beyond the limits of the circle or what humanity can sustain. Within the limits of the circle lives the possibility of human dignity whereby each value system knows itself as existing in a fine balance in relation to another. Outside of the circle is where single truths prevail, where there can be no human dignity and therefore, no civilization.

For example, absolute idealism associated with religion in the upper half on the non-materialistic part of the circle, when pushed to its limit became the Inquisition. In

⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵ Ibid, 10.

today's world we can see this push beyond the limits of contextual truth again with proclaimed single truths of variants of Christianity, Judaism and Islam seeking dominion over others.

In the lower half of the circle in the materialistic end, absolute materialism associated with science and modernism saw its extreme in Nazism. Today, we see this with ecological degradation and a return of various ideologies that a withdrawal from the world into a purer kind of state can return us to greatness.

For Egmond, the reason these extreme expressions occur is multi-faceted. They can occur because we begin to identify with certain roles or positions too strongly and then legitimate these with our world views that must become ever more intransigent to support our status.

The other force that Egmond defines that pushes values beyond their limits of sustainability is fear of the center, of balance itself where each must be responsible for him or herself. The identities on the periphery are easier to occupy as they are more fully defined by other institutions. Egmond, using the work of Carl Jung, said in his lecture that we tend to seek ready made securities that allow us to avoid the hard work of taking responsibility for our own values, for balancing our views within the sphere of so many other views, for living the lives we live.

Egmond defines the center in the middle of the circle as *reconciliation* when reconciliation is the action of making one view or belief compatible with another.

In our culture, there are many forces working against reconciliation. Our media is one when it focuses obsessively on extreme and polarizing expressions at the exclusion of other expressions.⁶

In Egmond's model freedom also exists in the center. It is defined with reconciliation and balance. Egmond writes, "Freedom is created by making a step from the egocentric self toward the other. In doing so, one is freed from the deterministic forces of the ego. One is also freed from the one-sided fixation on physical and material things, thus maintaining the balance between mind and matter,"⁷ or between the spirit and the physical or the self and the non-self.

This all comes down to avoiding one-sidedness. During his presentation, Egmond said, "No one gets to claim the ultimate truth. As soon as they do, they should be declared as outside of the law."

He also said, "When one value becomes an obsession for you, you enter the terrain of the fundamentalist."

For Egmond, there are ways to keep us from traveling to the periphery, that include

⁶ Ibid, 9, 10.

⁷ Ibid, 9.

a more diverse curriculum in our education system including the arts, universal health care, sane environmental policies, and accountable and balanced financial systems. At the top of Egmond's list is personal development.

Egmond maintains that "there is a strong correlation between the balanced psychological development of the individual and the sustainable development of society."⁸ We must continue to work through different value orientations, to stay awake, to traverse from the known to the unknown, to seek self awareness.

How can we learn self awareness or the ability to see from outside of ourselves? One of the tools I use is therapy. I recently began working with a Jungian Therapist. I believe in therapy as a tool to build and support strength, wisdom, resiliency and self awareness.

So my Jungian therapist uses the word constellation a lot. He asks: who else is in that constellation, what else can we bring into this constellation, where are you in this constellation, where do you want to be in that constellation?

A constellation is formally defined as a region of the celestial sphere which is an imaginary sphere of an arbitrarily large radius with boundaries laid down by the International Astronomical Union.

What I like so much about that definition is that a celestial sphere, defined as an imaginary sphere of an arbitrarily large radius, can have boundaries at all, and that when it does, the definition admits that they too are constructed.

The way this definition is laid out makes it a perfect example of one that is balanced, takes responsibility for how it was named and how it operates, from where it comes.

It is conciliatory by its nature, and when one operates within a constellation, one has to accept responsibility for being there, for having created the boundaries that define it, and the boundaries that keep it in tack.

Here's the kicker for me, Egmond's circle model, with a balanced core that defines goodness and the edge outside of which defines evil and within which exists the very possibility of human dignity, is a constellation, a celestial sphere, a theater in which we exist.

This does not mean we can choose everything that is in it. We come into our families, cultures, timeframe, genders, ethnicities, class, abilities not of our own choosing.

But when we can see that the pieces of our lives belong to us uniquely and we to them, we can birth the insight which grants the freedom to see beyond our

⁸ Ibid, 11.

limitations into the possibilities of other lives and look at how the constellations of our lives exist in relationship to other constellations, where we intersect, how this intersection might affect, sustain, deplete, nurture, encourage, and/or diminish another.

Therapy is not the only tool of course. Being awake in the world is another that we practice here as Unitarian Universalists often. There are many more tools that we can all name, that we do name together.

We cannot control everything. Thank goodness! But we can control our willingness to broaden our sight, our understandings, build our courage to see ourselves from another angle, open our doors and hearts to hearing our names spoken in another tongue, and listen to other cultures and philosophies and ways of being in the world until they matter to our identities.

Egmond's conclusion is that in order to simultaneously meet the needs of present and future generations, the question raised by the United Nations' Brundtland Commission in 1987, one must focus on human dignity.⁹

So, as we vote and put pressure on political and financial systems and take responsibility for the way we use and share resources. And Edmond invites us to look at ourselves in relation to each other and the world.

Sustainability is about human dignity and how we position ourselves in relation to our own lives and the world right here and now. When one's values are balanced and able to hold as worthy other values, the dignity of others, and the mutual freedom of others is possible. From here, we are occupying a world view that is sustainable and we begin to create a world that is sustainable.

One of the ministers at the conference from India, Darihun Khriam with whom I made a special connection as I lived in India for a year when I was a young woman and because she is the only female Unitarian minister in India and she is so at peace in her identity, told us that in the East, freedom is defined by the ability to exist in communities of meaning that offer worth and hope. Perhaps Egmond's condition of freedom, that we learn to step away from our egos to see the other, may be harder for us in the West, but I think the outcome is the same as the one Darihun suggested. We are most free when we know our own and each other's worth and live our lives committed to the maintenance of both.

May this work continue my friends. May we lean on each other well, we who so often play the role of mirrors for each other, we who lead each other into new insights and understandings and build each other's courage and capacity with our love and gentle wisdom.

⁹ Ibid, 14.

Here's to the human dignity in this room, on this island and on this world. May we devote our lives to its sustainability. Amen