

Twenty-one essays that explore values for a sustainable future, our role in the cosmos and evaluating true wealth. James Eggert is one of a small school of economists who think outside of the box.

Meadowlark Economics: Collected Essays

By James Eggert

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Meadowlark Economics

Collected Essays

James Eggert

(Foreword by Bill McKibben)

From Kirkus Reviews

This collection of thoughtful essays weaves together economic and ecological issues.

While Eggert is an economist by trade, he is struck by the relationship between economics and ecology.

“I believe these two households are becoming more interdependent,” he writes, “and their futures more and more intimately linked.” Indeed, each of the 21 elegantly written essays in this revised collection, has a strong eco-conscious component.

The unusual title is derived from the author’s concern over the Midwest’s loss of meadowlarks; somewhat esoterically, he translates this occurrence into “meadowlark values,” suggesting that a “meadowlark economist” must “seriously try and incorporate an ecological consciousness and ecological values along with market thinking and market values.”

Eggert’s essays are as soaring and aspirational as they are instructional and practical. For example, in “What’s Wrong with Capitalism?” he notes there is “a destructive quality in capitalism that often violates the ecological laws that can and should ensure life’s beauty, balance, health and long-term continuity.”

In “The Coming Repair Age,” Eggert cautions about energy: “Common sense tells us there simply must be an end to our wastefulness, and that we cannot continue our gross consuming habits for the long run.”

In perhaps his most novel essay, “Wal-Mart Pond,” Eggert cleverly combines ecology and economy by imagining a conversation with Henry Thoreau. The fictional dialogue moves from the famed naturalist’s concerns about modern society — “Believe me sir, you don’t need shopping malls” — to Eggert’s financial counsel about tax deductions: “You might argue that anything a poet, a philosopher,

anything a writer like yourself purchases is part of what one might say: ‘operating their business.’”

His final essay, “Quartet,” is most worthy of contemplation: “what is our part in the ‘music’ of the cosmos, what is our role in the harmony of nature’s variations on a theme?”

Erudite, well-wrought, and finely expressed in short bursts of creativity; at times poetic and philosophical, even as the author remains firmly planted on terra firma.

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958891-22-3

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-608-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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Booklocker.com, Inc.

2024

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Eggert, James

Meadowlark Economics by James Eggert

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023920835

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Chapter 1: Meadowlark Economics

By the power of our imagination we can sense the future generations breathing with the rhythm of our own breath or feel them hovering like a cloud of witnesses. Sometimes I fancy that if I were to turn my head suddenly, I would glimpse them over my shoulder.

— Joanna Macy

Considering the problems we face in our immediate and long-run futures — and the slow evolution of economic values we are seeing in response — I sometimes wonder about the relevancy of my fellow economists. Among our shortcomings is our limited understanding of the many *ecological* consequences of our *economic* decisions.

Note that “economics” and “ecology” have the same prefix — *eco* — from the Greek *oikos*, which literally means “house-hold.” The original definition of economics therefore implied a careful stewardship of household resources, whereas ecology compels us to try to understand and appreciate the interrelation-ships within Nature’s “household.”

I believe these two households are becoming more inter-dependent and their futures more and more intimately linked. When we fail to calculate ecological values or see the connections, we pave the way for losses that are both unintended and unwanted.

One example (on a small scale, to be sure) is occurring in and around our dairy farming region of the upper Midwest. We are losing our meadowlarks!

Those of us who walk, bike, or jog along our rural roads enjoy the few meadowlarks that are left. Their song is pleasing, their color and swoop-of-flight enchanting. The complete disappearance of meadowlarks would, plain and simple, be ethically wrong, and would also diminish the quality and richness of our lives.

Why are we losing our meadowlarks?

One explanation involves farmers moving to a more efficient haying method called “haylage.” Farmers today tend to “green-cut” their hay much earlier in the spring for the purpose of maximizing feed value. Years ago, most farmers let their hay grow longer — perhaps four to six weeks longer — before cutting the hayfield. It was then dried and raked into windrows before baling. This method gave the field-nesting birds (such as the meadowlarks, bobolinks, and dickcissels) sufficient time to establish a brood and fledge their young before the mower arrived on the scene.

Haylage, in turn, is an offshoot of improved farm “efficiency,” of substituting machinery and fossil fuels for labor, and of minimizing time and costly rain delays that characterized the old cutting/drying/baling method. These changes took place with the blessings of agricultural economists, university researchers, and on down the line to government agencies.

But in the meantime, who was valuing the meadowlarks?

Despite their sweet song, these birds have no voice economically or politically. They represent a “zero” within our conventional economic accounting system. We don’t even buy birdseed or build birdhouses for meadowlarks. Their disappearance would not create even the tiniest ripple in the Commerce Department’s spreadsheets that are supposed to measure our standard of living.

In truth, there are “meadowlark values” (as opposed to strict monetary values) everywhere — in estuaries and sand dunes, in wetlands and woodlands, in native prairies and Panamanian rain forests. The quality of your own life is, to some degree, dependent on these values. They are on every continent; they can be seen upstate and downstate. Just look around and you will find them (like our meadowlarks) on your road, or next door or perhaps in your own backyard.

Meadowlark values are underrepresented in the clear-cutting of old-growth forests to maximize short-run profit, or when politicians attempt to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or exploit the tar-sands of Canada or drill deeper and deeper for oil in the Gulf of Mexico.

Meadowlark values were shortchanged when economists pointed out that the 2010 BP oil spill temporarily *increased the gross national product* by pouring billions of dollars into the cleanup effort and by paying off fishermen and other affected businesses.

Perhaps it is time we economists begin to rethink our strict adherence to dollar and GDP values. We should not, of course, discard our traditional skills and tools of analysis: the importance of pricing, respecting the power of incentives and pointing out trade-offs, of evaluating policies to mitigate poverty and the ravages of recessions. But we also must broaden ourselves to seriously try and incorporate an ecological consciousness and ecological values along with market thinking and market values — a true “meadowlark economist” if you will.

And why not encourage other professions to follow suit? How about a “meadowlark engineer,” or a “meadowlark politician,” a “meadowlark lawyer” or, in regards to grassland birds, a “meadowlark farmer?”

I am ashamed to admit that I took my first elementary class in ecology after teaching economics for more that two decades. I still have a ways to go. In addition, I am now beginning to appreciate some of the earlier economic writers who represent this broader approach to the economics discipline: Ken Boulding, Hazel Henderson, Herman Daly, Lester Brown and E.F. Schumacher to name a few.

In addition, I hope that more and more prominent economists of today will feel comfortable not only with traditional market/growth economics, but will also know something of ecological relationships, and value the integrity of the environment along with the “bottom line” — who will know how to promote development, but will also know how to protect the standard of living of the other organisms with whom we share the planet.

Perhaps future economists will devise, like today’s Environmental Impact Statements (EIS), what might be called GIS or “Grandchild Impact Statements,” making sure our kids and their kids will have sustainable quantities of biological and other resources, helping to preserve our soils and waters, our fisheries and forests, whales and

bluebirds — even the tiny toads and butterflies — so that these entities will have their voices represented too.

So all you CEOs, you National Association of Business Economists, government advisers, bankers and newspaper editors, and yes, those of us who are teachers too: let's dedicate ourselves to a new standard of — what? — of meadowlark economics, if you will, of protecting and sustaining for the future a larger, more expansive, and comprehensive set of durable values.



Chapter 2: Topsoil Drama

The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope.

— Wendell Berry

Topsoil, we know, makes human life possible on this planet. Yet how many of us realize that creating topsoil is a slow, slow process and losing it can be dishearteningly swift? Surely these are important facts for all of us to learn, and especially important to impress upon young people.

With this thought in mind, I felt that a natural history of soils might be a useful, even fun topic, when my wife asked me to do a project for her Girl Scout Day Camp. Starting with a suggestion from Del Thomas, a local soil scientist, we decided to create a “Topsoil Drama.” In addition, we tried to make our little play relatively simple so that others might try it with a minimum of cost and preparation.

Here is an account of what we did.

We first gathered some twenty girls, aged seven to twelve, for a one-hour activity. I began with the suggestion that they pick up some soil and ask themselves: “How important is this in keeping us all alive?”

The question created an opportunity for everyone to think about the essential nature of what we often refer to, in a negative way, as “dirt.” Of course, all our vegetables, our fruits, and our grains are directly dependent upon topsoil, and most everything else we eat is indirectly dependent upon it as well.

“How about pizza? How do the ingredients, including meat and cheese directly or indirectly depend upon topsoil? What about lumber for our homes, paper for books and writing, cotton and wool to keep us

warm? What about butterflies and bumblebees, foxes and meadowlarks?”

Yes, virtually all land-dwelling animals depend upon a food chain that begins with the miracle of water, sunlight, and seeds, combined with this dark crumbly substance that’s ever-present beneath our feet.

Next question: “Where does our soil come from?” Here I brought out a jar of water with a tablespoon of alum mixed in. (The alum, which can be purchased at a grocery store, helps separate the various soil components.)

We then put a handful of our collected soil into the water, screwed the lid tight, and let everyone give the jar a shake. Within a minute it became obvious that the soil had at least three components: first, the small stones and sand that lay on the bottom; next, the silty or fine clay particles in the middle; and finally, the decomposed vegetable matter floating on top. After observing this, I asked the girls if they would like to be in a play in which we could “make” some topsoil.

“Yes!” they shouted.

“OK, let’s begin at the beginning — that is, with rock from an ancient mountain or volcano, which over time, is broken up by the steady erosion of wind and water. Who wants to be a volcano?”

Many hands shot up.

I chose a volunteer and placed a prepared VOLCANO sign around her neck. From our son’s rock collection, I had brought a sample of volcanic rock in the form of a hand-sized piece of lightweight pumice. We passed it around and then gave it back to the person designated VOLCANO.

“Anyone want to be WATER?”

We got a couple of volunteers and gave them WATER signs.

“Now who wants to be WIND?”

I explained that wind and water acted on these rocks over billions of years, to break up the large boulders into smaller pieces of stone and eventually into sand. I also pointed out that these sand particles were moved about by water and eventually came to rest. There they sat, with more and more sand coming in, compressing the bottom layers to the point where they were literally cemented together. This newer, compressed rock is called “bedrock sandstone.” (In our area of

Wisconsin, we have many outcroppings of Cambrian sandstone dating back about five hundred million years.)

I pulled out a piece of local sandstone and asked, “Who wants to play the part of BEDROCK?”

I chose a half-dozen BEDROCKS, put signs on them and asked the girls to huddle together on the ground.

When we start our Topsoil Drama, WIND and WATER will “wave” and “blow” through the BEDROCKS, breaking the rock back into individual sand particles.

Next, we needed someone to become GLACIER. (Here in the Midwest, glaciers came through at various times in the past two million years, ripping up bedrock, grinding the pieces down, and carrying the soil-making material to our area. Some of the sand in our jar probably came from hundreds of miles north of us.)

GLACIER, in our drama, had the job of crunching and grinding and moving rock and sand across the landscape.

The rest of the girls (except one, who would be MOTHER TIME), were given signs representing PLANTS or small to microscopic ANIMALS (including moles, worms, mites, insect larvae, nematodes, and, of course, bacteria).

As PLANTS, the girls would fall on the ground, wriggle up, fall down, wriggle up, again and again in imitation of the year-to-year cycle of plants growing, dying, and growing up again and again.

At this point, we briefly returned to the jar of water and soil. We noted that the girls acting as PLANTS would eventually “become” the floating humus (decayed matter) floating on top of the water, while the finer particles would be in the middle, and the crushed bedrock would end up as sand at the bottom of the jar.

Finally, the one remaining girl played MOTHER TIME. Her job was to hold up her hands and hover over the topsoil drama activity.

We could now begin the play. And what a scene it was!

VOLCANO’s pumice was thrown up again and again. WIND and WATER broke up the BEDROCKS while GLACIER came through moving the BEDROCKS even more. Meanwhile, PLANTS grew up, died, grew up and died again, at a steady pace as ANIMALS also did their important work. After a few minutes, I asked the girls to stop

everything while taking a moment to appreciate how much time it took to “make” soil.

“Once bedrock is broken up, it takes approximately five-hundred years to make one inch of topsoil!”

“Let’s now pretend that every ten seconds is a hundred years of time. Everyone freeze and consider all the things that are happening. MOTHER TIME will hold her hands over the scene, and we will call out every one hundred years (every ten seconds). Remember, nobody can move.”

“One hundred years ... two hundred years ... three hundred years...”

Frozen kids.

Each ten seconds seemed unbearably long.

“Four hundred years ... and finally five hundred years. And after all this work, this is what we have.”

I pulled a towel off a pie pan and on the bottom was one inch of soil. It was a grand achievement.

“But,” I asked, “it is enough to grow a tree?”

“No.”

“Could it grow corn?”

“No.”

A small seedling — at best — might grow in this one inch of soil. We would obviously have to make much more if we ever wanted to grow a tree.

While we were discussing this last point, a gust of wind came through, creating an opportunity to demonstrate wind erosion. Picking up some soil from the pan, I let it blow out of my hands. Another handful, and suddenly most of the soil was gone.

I was beginning to sense an element of frustration, even anger. All that work! All that time put into making our little inch of soil, and now it was so easily, so quickly lost to a few gusts of wind. We looked down at the pan. It was a depressing sight — a little bit of soil but mostly spots of bare, polished aluminum.

Now we couldn’t even grow a seedling.

We then walked over to a worn path that went down a bank to a nearby creek. The path was bare of vegetation and had begun to show signs of erosion.

“Why is the path losing its soil?”

We noted that the vegetation, which contributes to the making of soil, is also important in keeping the soil from washing away, especially on a steep slope. I then put the last of our topsoil on the path and asked the girls where they thought it would eventually end up.

It was obvious that the next rain would carry this loose soil down to the stream below. We mentally followed its inevitable trip to the west into our local Red Cedar River, then into the Chippewa River, the Mississippi and finally into the Gulf of Mexico. (Here it would be helpful to have a large map of the United States.)

Then, with all of us standing still, I once again asked them to remain quiet for a moment and think about what we had learned.

The long geological and biological processes of soil building plus the depressing feeling of losing it to erosion; these were the things I wanted the girls not only to know but also especially *to feel*. I am hoping, then, from our Topsoil Drama experience, these girls will be more understanding, more respectful, indeed more vigilant in preserving the wonderful topsoil we still have — a resource so amazing, so precious, and as we witnessed this day, so very vulnerable too.

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Chapter 21: Quartet

We are like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind, but not clearly enough to play it through.

— Thomas Berry

Like the meadowlark's role in the natural scheme of things, or the mushrooms, or the web-weaving spiders, have you ever wondered: what is our part in the "music" of the cosmos, what is our role in the harmony of nature's variations on a theme? How might we describe our special music in the ensemble of life on Earth?

If you will allow me to indulge in one final metaphor, I suggest that our species' format might be likened to a quartet involving four equal interlacing voices representing our past, present, and future possibilities.

For inspiration, I pull out some of my favorite recordings: the string quartets by Beethoven. How amazing these works are, how entrancing! Four players, four instruments, four tonal lines weaving in and out, intertwining harmonies, disharmonies, now floating heavenward, now Earthward and back again. Eventually the musical moment deepens until, after a variegated journey through time and space, the voices settle into a peaceful resolution.

In Beethoven's fifteenth quartet, the listener can enjoy a "Song of Thanksgiving," a musical psalm as it were, composed in 1825 to celebrate the composer's recovery from a long and debilitating illness. In this movement, Beethoven walks the listener through a variety of tonalities; his mood is joyous, awake, and, above all, supremely grateful for the forces that give him a sense of life, health and revitalization of his creative powers.

"With a sense of renewed strength," he wrote on the original manuscript, and later near the end he writes: "with the most intimate feeling."

So if our species' metaphor is a quartet, what do the four voices represent?

Perhaps one of the melodic parts might represent that dimension of our species' cosmological and biological past. Each of us contains atomic structures formed in the life-and-death rhythm of countless stars. In addition, each of our cells' DNA is packed with deep-time animal histories — from Cambrian chordates, to amphibians, from reptiles to fist-sized mammals, from arboreal apes to savanna-dwelling *Homo erectus*. Evidence of our common past is contained in our shape, our organs, our limbs, our “animal” senses — in the very structure of our brains.

Surely this part of our “music” is still with us and even today plays an important role in our psychological and physical well-being. Those people, for example, who live in bubbles of man-made technologies may find it difficult to reconnect to this part of themselves, to experience what biologist E.O. Wilson calls *biophilia*, defined as an innate attraction to and psychological need for bonding with nature, its landscapes, ecosystems, and its communities of plants and animals.

Cocooned in our cars or cooped up in our classrooms or office cubicles, or simply consuming hours of our waking day wandering through an unnatural wasteland of prepackaged electronic entertainments, we may be allowing our vital connection to nature to atrophy, and thereby suffer from a peculiar loneliness, a vague unsettling or alienation, or even a form of depression.

Children, especially, need large chunks of unprogrammed, spontaneous time in nature to discover landscape niches, to engage in the “practice of the wild,” as poet Gary Snyder calls it.

Author David Abram expresses so well the depths and delights of this neglected component of fully using our fine-tuned sensory system in his book *Becoming Animal*, while essayist Dian Ackerman highlights the healing aspects of immersing ourselves in the natural world:

“We need a lively, bustling natural world so we can stay healthy ... We need it to feel whole. We evolved as creatures knitted into the fabric of nature, and without its intimate truths, we can find ourselves unraveling.”

Biophilia is perhaps but a new term paralleling older themes in writings that go as far back as second-century naturalist Pliny the Elder, who, for example, believed that the only virtuous life was one lived in balance — ratio — with nature. Writers such as William Wordsworth, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and as we noted earlier, Henry David Thoreau, parallel those themes as well.

Recall, for instance, Thoreau's comment that "there could be no black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still." And what better definition of Wilson's *biophilia* than Thoreau's description of an inner musical counterpoint between himself and his feathery neighbors in the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*:

"Instead of singing like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune. As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest ... I am no more lonely than a single mullein or dandelion in a pasture, or a bean leaf, or sorrel, or a horse-fly, or a bumblebee.

Consider Wisconsin teacher and naturalist Aldo Leopold, too.

Despite Leopold's training as a "bottom-line" forester, his understanding and appreciation of the natural world would eventually evolve toward values beyond economic utility, even beyond the aesthetic dimension: "Our ability to perceive quality in nature" he wrote, "begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language."

Like Thoreau, Leopold would become more and more critical of an economic system geared to short-term gain only while tragically out of balance with ecological values.

As a writer and conservationist, John Muir also dedicated his energies to "do something for nature and make the mountains glad," and like Thoreau, Muir could dissipate despondence and depression by taking periodic pilgrimages into the wild. My own favorite quote however is not from Muir's legendary mountain or glacial hikes, but

from a moment of relaxed repose while sitting between two rivers and a flowering grassland:

“Here is a calm so deep, grasses cease waving ... wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The Sun shines not on us, but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing.”

In the same spirit as these American naturalists, major Judeo-Christian figures — Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus — apparently felt that same urge to seek spiritual nourishment in wilderness settings, including pilgrimages to sites connected to rivers, lakes, mountains, and deserts.

For the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Bartholomew I, any destruction of the natural world should be considered a sin. Bartholomew, in the spirit of the poet-naturalists, says that “human beings and environment form a seamless garment of existence, a complex fabric that we believe is fashioned by God.”

This brings us to the second musical line in our quartet: our capacity to realize a spiritual potential, that is to experience, as Christians might define it, the “energy of the Holy Spirit,” or, as Martin Luther King Jr. reminded his followers: the practice of offering unconditional love — even to your “enemies” — no matter what the consequence to yourself. Or the Taoist’s concept of experiencing the supreme Tao: “Wonderful, perfect ... All life comes from it. It wraps everything with its love as in a garment ... I do not know its name.”

In Buddhism, it might be described as “Great Love and Compassion” (*mahakaruna*), while in Islam, “the infinite mercy of Allah.” Related to this is Islam’s “Golden Rule” (“No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.”) a variation on a familiar theme that can be found in Christianity and Judaism as well as in the writings of Confucius.

“While we know not definitely what the ultimate purport of life is,” wrote the Zen Buddhist, D.T. Suzuki, “there is something in it that makes us feel infinitely blessed in the living of it and remain quite contented with it in all its evolution.”

The spiritual component is also the mystical awareness ballooning up and around American poet Walt Whitman described in his poem, “Song of Myself”:

“Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and
knowledge that pass all argument of the Earth ... And I
know the spirit of God is the brother of my own.”

Next, consider another quality of our species: *the role of traditional culture*, the third musical line of our quartet.

Our cultural heritage is the learned social sphere that surrounds us from birth, influencing us day to day, year by year, while informing each of us not only how to survive, but how to enjoy a richer existence.

Assuming that much (but not all) of the culture’s influence is positive, it can also assist us in diminishing our ego while making it possible to grow through family and friendship intimacies as well as through wider circles of social belonging.

Traditional cultural practices are often finely tuned to local landscapes. Similar to the time-tested ecological fit of native species in their unique habitats, traditional cultures also fit into their specific landscapes, and, over time, evolve sustainable economic practices.

For thousands of years, horticultural and hunter/gatherer cultures integrated ecological ethics through ceremony, cosmologies, mythologies, taboos, stories, songs, dances, food sharing and other customs. This is how we discover unique and sustainable *culturescapes* in all their variations and richness.

Consider, for example, the traditional horticulturists and herders of Ladakh, a district in northern India, beautifully described in Helena Norbert-Hodge’s study, *Ancient Futures*. In reading her book, one discovers a way of life that has maintained an exquisite balance between a population and their available local resources, a balance that

has been informed by Buddhist practices: the principles of interdependence, co-responsibility, and a reverence for life.

As a professional economist, I was therefore impressed with Ladakh's unique form of social and economic wealth as its particular culture demonstrated adaptive skills honed over many generations. These time-tested skills, in turn, have resulted in an impressive success in solving humankind's age-old economic survival problem. The example of Ladakh has become for me a useful, indeed, an inspiring touchstone to compare and contrast with my own consumer-driven, free-market economy.

Ladakh is not a growth economy, but a *stable* economy, successfully fitting into the natural limits of its boundaries without radically altering the land or destroying its resource base. Ladakhians live in an environment that provides not only basic economic sustenance, but also a landscape where one can find plant and animal teachers as well as time-honored sacred sites — storied places of love and belonging.

In contrast, global capitalism tends to reshape the land, without a sense of the sacred, without the love and belonging. Not fitting into a local landscape, large-scale industries may reconfigure landscapes based on the dictates of unlimited growth and profit — giving rise to industrial farmers, strip miners, stream straighteners, road wideners, wetland drainers, and forestry clear-cutters, to name a few.

Within the modern urban sectors of Ladakh, the author of *Ancient Futures* describes some of the tragic environmental and psychological consequences of the impact of Western globalization, education, and even tourism. In the span of only a couple of decades, Norbert-Hodge witnessed a perplexing increase in relative poverty, social isolation, greater levels of air and water pollution, disempowerment of women, and an increase in ethnic tensions between Buddhists and Muslims, especially in Ladakh's capital city of Leh.

As once-traditional cultures are undermined by the seduction of modernization that's beamed out by the ubiquitous global media — billboards, movies, radio, TV — young people feel that irresistible tug toward Western consumptive lifestyles. Shunning traditional ways, this generation is, unfortunately, not well adapted to the modern economy

as they lack the incomes to keep pace with Western material desires. These drifters are floating, like “Hungry Ghosts,” (as they are called in some countries) in a kind of no-man’s land. They tend to be *unsuccessful two-worlders*, stuck somewhere between traditionalism and Western “middleclassism.”

Without roots in either world and without a reliable religious/cultural infrastructure of meaning and belonging, yet eager for the fruits of consumerism, many become resentful, and not surprisingly, may fall prey to scapegoating and militant propaganda.

After reading Norberg-Hodge’s account of Ladakh’s recent stresses and struggles, I felt that we, too, while seemingly integrated into a modern consumer economy, may also suffer from some of the same social and psychological symptoms of land and culture uprootedness, and therefore experience similar symptoms of alienation:

“And so we have before us the spectacle of unprecedented prosperity,” poet Wendell Berry once wrote, “... but in a land of degraded farms, forests, ecosystems, and water-sheds, polluted air, failing families, and diminishing communities.”

In fact, any society that trades in a balanced ecological and spiritual ethic for one fueled by economic discontent will find itself severed from its roots and can easily lose that vital “sense of place.”

Perhaps it is not too late to begin to rediscover our own cultural and ecological rootedness, to become intimate with our landscapes and watersheds; to learn, if we can, the land’s histories, its stories, and songs and to be acquainted with its geology, its plants and animals. And revive, if possible, the local crafts and folklore, the rituals to help us become “native to our place,” to feel nourished, like the traditional people of Ladakh, by the land while enjoying a sense of love and belonging.

In his book, *Miracle Under the Oaks*, William Stevens describes some of the accomplishments, disappointments, and joys of a Chicago-based prairie restoration group. In reading about their experiences, I can make out the beginnings of a true local culture, informed by

common purpose and group solidarity, united by rituals (for example, the burning of the prairie in the springtime), and guided by “elders” (those who’ve mastered the art and science of ecological restoration).

In a revealing comment, one member of this group said:

“What’s happening here is that Europeans are finally becoming Americans. We are developing an intimate relationship with this continent, and the landscapes of the continent, and we’re doing it using the science of ecology, a product of our own culture.”

There is no reason why one cannot strive to become what might be called *a successful two-worlder*, by not only becoming rooted in one’s locality, but also by embracing the fruits of past and present human accomplishments: the sciences, literature, music, arts, languages, medicine — the fourth element in this chapter’s musical quartet theme.

Let’s call that part of our quartet the *liberal learning dimension*.

This “modernity” theme would also include the following: a tolerance of differentness, the spirit of free inquiry, plus an appreciation of democracy as well as the selected use of technologies which have proven to be democratic, humane, ethical, and sustainable.

These contributions — comprised of the fruits of past and present civilizations — is our species’ relatively new source of kinship and belonging, shining brightly, as it were, through both time and space. Despite human greed and destructiveness, despite unpardonable violence, the great achievements of humankind make me glad to be a member of that quirky tribe, *Homo sapiens*.

The recording of the Beethoven quartet is now finished.

Time for bed.

For a few minutes, I linger — feeling strangely happy — happy for the music and also happy to have heard the song of a meadowlark earlier in the day and also for the bluebird who dove into the grass outside my window; happy for the lowly mushrooms and the towering pines, for the sound of raindrops or, in the early morning, for the

virtuosity of sunbeams — photons speeding through space, soon warming me up and brightening the landscape.

Happy too for my own consciousness, and now, stepping outside into the cool, fresh, night air — happy to see a half-Moon beaming softly into the night from behind a distant pine.

May I, too, learn to sing and to listen well, to treasure our music's intertwining and to be thankful for each of its variegated voices.

May I also enjoy a deeper connectedness to this existence, its pulse and mystery and to its everlasting ensemble — to keep humming along, mindful of the music — indeed a “song of thanksgiving.”

Surely Beethoven must have sensed this. Even the Old Testament Psalmist agrees: “that I may publish with the voice of thanksgiving and tell of all thy wondrous works” (Psalm 26:7), and the Zen master who wrote so simply, so powerfully: “When my life opens up very clearly, I can't help from the depths of my heart, wanting to bow.”





About the Author

James Eggert is a writer and emeritus faculty member at the University of Wisconsin — Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin, where he taught for thirty-three years.

He studied economics at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and later served in Kenya with the United States Peace Corps (1964 – 1966). His graduate work took place at Michigan State University.

The author has published other books including, *What is Economics?* (Fourth Edition); *Invitation to Economics*; *Low-Cost Earth Shelters*; and *The Wonder of the Tao*.

Eggert was the recipient of the university's outstanding teaching award. For many years, he advised the student environment club. He also has served on the Town of Colfax's plan commission.

The author and his wife, Pat, have two adult children, Anthony and Leslie, and four grandchildren.



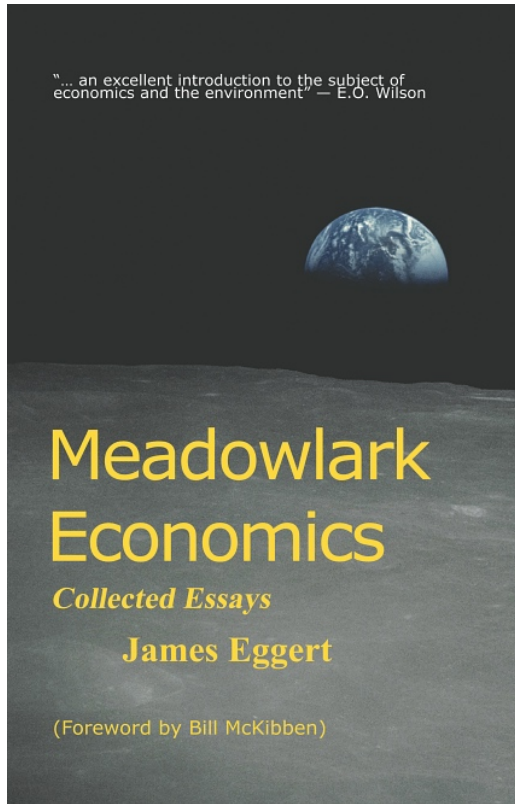


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