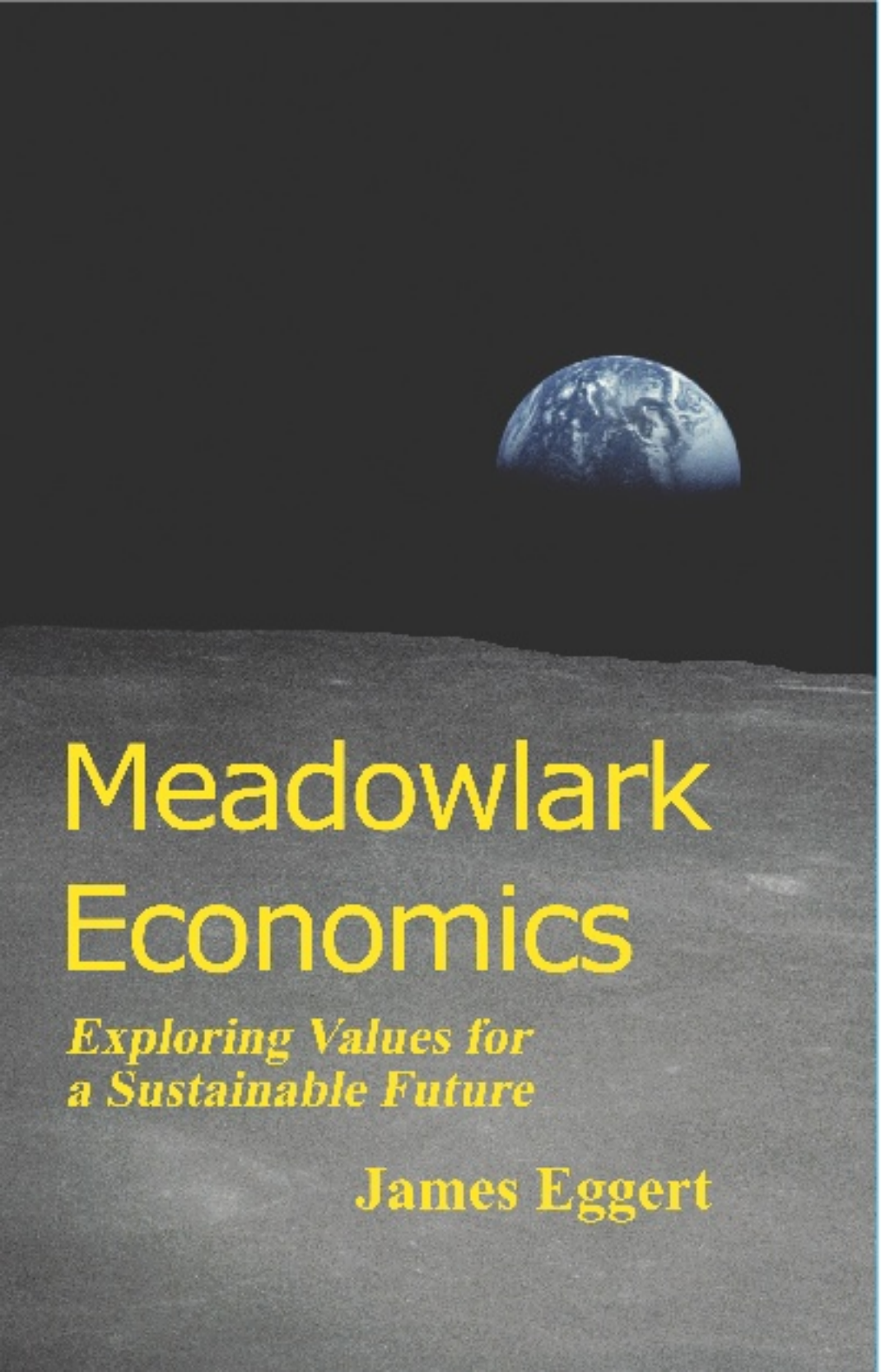
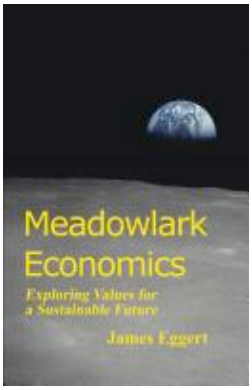

Meadowlark
Economics
Exploring Values for
a Sustainable Future
James Eggert



Alarmed by the gradual disappearance of the meadowlark from his local countryside, James Eggert began to examine both the economic and ecological factors at work. His investigation soon led him to explore alternatives to our traditional views of economics. Eggert's heartening ideas are expressed in a series of essays that offer new perspectives on education, consumption, work, our evolutionary history, and, in the end, what it means to be human.

MEADOWLARK ECONOMICS

Exploring Values for a Sustainable Future
Revised Edition

Meadowlark Economics
(Revised)

Exploring Values for a Sustainable Future

James Eggert

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Dedication

To my late brother, Richard Eggert: my inspiration into the magical word of ecological consciousness.

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I am grateful for what I am & have. My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite — only a sense of existence. My breath is sweet to me. Oh how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches. No run on my bank can drain it — for my wealth is not possession but enjoyment. — Henry Thoreau

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Grateful Acknowledgement

The following twenty essays have been culled from previous publications both in book and newspaper format. Many of the essays have been revised from earlier publications and, where appropriate, updated to reflect changing economic and environmental conditions. Additional essays have also been added over time.

My deepest thanks go to the following book publishers and newspapers:

M.E. Sharpe (1982), Mayfield Publishing Company (1993), Ten Speed Press (1999), Humanics Trade Group Publications (2004), North Atlantic Books (2009), Green Dragon Books (2013), and also the following two newspapers: Washington Post Outlook (1991, 1995), and the Minneapolis Star Tribune (20l4).

James
Eggert

Colfax,
Wisconsin

Table of Contents

Foreword

by Bill McKibben

This is an unusual and valuable book in many respects. Its author, of course, is an economist — but not one devoted to the prevailing theology of his profession. Economists mostly work with the dedication of beavers or bees toward the great goals of More. Growth, expansion, and acceleration are the sacred words of their creed. And they have been enormously successful; their faith has spread around the world, crowding out all other creeds.

And yet there is always something rather, well, dismal about the field. This comes, I think, from its disciples' firm determination to wall off certain questions. For instance, "What makes for happiness?" Or "How do I figure out what I want from life?" They can answer these only pointing to our consumer behavior. We must want what we buy. But they must sense the tautological absurdity of that line of argument.

Now comes James Eggert, one of a small school of economists who has begun to think outside the box. And it is curious that he soon delves deeply into a concept long used by his tribe: value. In his essay "Meadowlark Economics," Eggert inscribes it — marvelously — with *real* meaning, instead of the stale and transactional definition to be found in the front of the Econ textbooks. The meadowlark's "song is pleasing, his color and swoop-of-flight enchanting."

Suddenly we are using good old nouns and adjectives, the sweet and solid Anglo-Saxon words instead of the ponderous Latinate syllables of the professional journal. These things are a form of wealth and are *valuable,* he insists. And if you assign them a value in your heart, then you are in a position to begin to

assess both the positives *and* the negatives of economic growth. The so-called "efficiency," for instance, of the modern farm, which leaves no room for the meadowlarks to nest and fledge their young — is but one of many examples.

This book rambles inefficiently along — which is why it is a good and true book, full of things to talk about with your friends and family and with yourself. There are delightful discussions of craftsmanship, of high jumping and topsoil, of the art of repairing and of many other things that constitute a joyful and complete human life. The essays are lighthearted and smart, and never didactic.

Eggert's book will be of great use to all who read it. But it would be especially helpful — though subversive — to give it to anyone you know who is an economist. It will help them see, among other things, that grasping onto the conventional economic orthodoxy not only shows a certain blindness but can also, unfortunately, turn out to be tragic.

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Introduction

Without warning, a friend recently turned to me and asked a simple, yet in many ways, intriguing question.

"Jim," he asked, "What is wealth?"

Another acquaintance, knowing that I taught economics, asked me a related question: "Just how do you define value?"

Pause for a moment, if you will, and take a few minutes to think about these two questions as they apply to yourself, your family, your community, and finally, to that old, old inquiry dating back to Adam Smith's "the wealth of nations." Oddly enough, one of the best ways for me to understand the possible answers is by an analogy to a seemingly unrelated field — astronomy. Let me explain.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, in his 2014 documentary television series, "COSMOS: A Spacetime Odyssey," informs his viewers that along with the optical telescope, the greatest single advance in astronomy was the invention of detectors to analyze and evaluate light from the full spectrum of the electromagnetic field — not just the narrow band of visible light that you and I can see.

Expanding the electromagnetic spectrum into infrared on one edge of visible light and ultraviolet on the other, while continuing on to X-rays and gamma rays (higher frequency) and radio and long waves (lower frequency), has been critical to astronomers in their understanding of the evolution of stars, galaxies and the Universe itself.

Astronomy with only visible light, Dr. Tyson explains, is like "listening to music in only one octave." (If that were true, consider all the great compositions we would be missing!)

So too with economics. In your reflections on wealth and value, feel free to expand on the common monetized definition of wealth (i.e. savings, stocks and bonds, retirement accounts, housing equity, real estate, mineral wealth, precious metals). And now, like the cosmologist, explore that broader spectrum of potential and possibility.

Be playful if you will! You might consider ecological and community values or add a dose of the philosophical and political, the spiritual and scientific as you leap over the boundaries of conventional economics. The following 20 essays are my own reflections on these questions, although I confess that I sometimes deviate from the opening inquiry to explore related areas.

So what is wealth? What is value?

Early in the book we will discuss the importance of topsoil ("Topsoil Drama") and then critique the ideology of free market capitalism from an ecological perspective. We will also inquire into that philosopher and poet of the natural world when I "ask" Henry Thoreau to explain his thoughts on economics and wealth ("Thoreau As Economic Prophet").

Understanding the concept of evolution, both in the natural world and in the business world ("Darwin's Finches and Ford's Mustangs") is a topic that will be looked at from different perspectives. There are also essays on learning ("A Passion to Learn"), labor, athletics ("High Jumping"), the dangers of holding onto a rigid economics ideology ("Greenspan's Anguish"), craftsmanship ("Craftsmanship and Salvation"), and even some playful thoughts on the topic of astronomy ("Economics and the Cosmos"). We will continue our wayward journey with some reflections on life itself where in a final essay I borrow a musical metaphor ("Quartet") with reference to our species' potential.

But first things first.

Once again: what is wealth?

For myself, I would have to include, among other things, my favorite bird — the meadowlark — as described in the opening essay, “Meadowlark Economics.”

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Part I
Meadowlark Values

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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 "household." The original definition of economics therefore implied a careful stewardship of household resources, whereas ecology compels us to try to understand and appreciate the interrelationships within Nature's "household."

I believe these two households are becoming more interdependent 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 economics 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.

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Chapter 3
What's Wrong With Capitalism?

Great trouble comes from not knowing what is enough.
Great conflict arises from wanting too much.
— Lao Tzu

Despite its materialistic virtues, something's amiss in the Land of Capitalism. In addition to equity and justice issues, there is also 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.

To search for that undermining quality, let us pretend for a moment that you could pick up market capitalism as if it were a flawed gemstone. Now place that stone in the palm of your hand and, turning it over and over, inspect the gem for defects, fissures and possible flaws.

First, what would be the economist's perspective? Now angle it slightly differently; what would be the viewpoint of an ecologist? And finally, is it possible to look at capitalism from a prairie's perspective, or that of an old growth forest?

Economist's Perspective

Economists do acknowledge capitalism's imperfections, often describing these defects as "market failures." These include the many unintended impacts ballooning up beyond regular business costs into what are called *externalities*, where both consumer behavior and profit-making may have harmful spillover effects that all too often damage human health and landscapes, degrade water and air quality, endanger plant and

animal species and possibly, over time, alter the vary stability of Earth's climate.

And the remedy?

Corrective measures will, more often than not, require government intervention: first to scientifically verify damages, then initiate policies — such as a "health" tax (for example, on cigarettes), a "green" tax (on harmful emissions), or set more precise standards on pollutants (on automobiles, coal-fired power plants, municipal water supplies), or the enforcement of strict energy efficiency standards (light bulbs, refrigerators, air-conditioners). These are just a few examples of environmental regulations that have generally been accepted by the public in most industrial countries.

Other areas of intervention include the trading of pollution credits and the enforcement of endangered species laws as well as negotiating global environmental agreements (whaling, chlorofluorocarbons, carbon dioxide) enforced by protocols, regulatory oversight, and international law.

Conceptually, all of these measures can be understood in the context of motivating businesses and consumers to pay the *full costs* of their economic activities, including the costs of collateral damages to natural and human environments.

Simply put, it's a fairness issue, of playing the "capitalist game" fair and square.

Let's take a minute to examine a way the economist's perspective would, hypothetically, tackle a common urban pollution problem: childhood asthma.

According the Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), the number of childhood asthma attacks are on the rise, and at least to some degree, these attacks are exacerbated by truck and automobile pollution, including elevated ground-level ozone. Obviously there are indirect health costs associated with

transportation pollution. So why shouldn't truck and car owners pay some of these costs?

As an experiment, I once approached a friend who was also a state assemblyman and asked if he would consider proposing a modest increase in our state's gas tax (say, one cent per gallon) earmarked not for the usual highway construction and maintenance, but to try to mitigate the damages and costs of urban pollution — perhaps even to reimburse families for asthma-related expenses.

I told the representative that I was upset because I *was paying too little for my gas*; indeed, from an economist's perspective (and moral perspective as well), we should all be disturbed that we are not paying our fair share of the spillover effects of our driving. Put another way, I asked him, "Why do we force families with chronically sick children to subsidize an artificially low-cost transportation system?"

An increase in the federal and/or state gasoline tax would be a good beginning, a step towards a fair, full-cost accounting to help pay for the expensive health cost side effects of automobile transportation.

Any increase in fuel prices, whether through market forces or a pollution tax, will create some hardships for drivers, but there will be other benefits too, including cleaner air and, as economists predict, fewer traffic deaths and injuries. With higher gas prices, there also will be greater incentives to invest in biking and walking trails.

Walkers and bikers in some cities have already pressured local governments to promote more walkable and bike-friendly neighborhoods. Whereas Atlanta, for example, is infamous for its *un*walkability, Portland, Oregon, at the other extreme, has some sixteen pedestrian districts where street design, sidewalks, and traffic laws give the pedestrian priority. And in Davis, California, bikers enjoy safe, dedicated bike lanes on most city

streets. Moreover, developers in Davis are required to provide bike access to new residential and commercial development.

A pollution tax would also encourage more carpooling and, if available, greater use of public transit. Not only would urban children breathe easier, but trees and wildlife would too, while in the long run it would also reduce CO_2 emissions and help stabilize the climate. And finally, if truckers and automobile owners paid their full direct and indirect costs, it would begin to reduce road congestion while diminishing the political pressure to widen roads and highways, thus minimizing damage to local communities and to the landscape itself.

Of course, this "economists' perspective" — even with good science, economic logic, and sensible remedies on its side — is usually no match for well-funded special interests. In the case of increasing gas taxes for legitimate spillover costs, the powerful highway, oil, and automobile lobbies will often block legislation that would, as they see it, "harm their industries."

Indeed, in response to my gas tax suggestion, my assemblyman-friend told me, "I understand your point, and yes, I agree with you," but then he added, "Jim, you'd better forget about it. Politically it ain't going to happen."

Ecologist's Perspective

I dream of a day when parents, politicians, economists, CEOs, bankers, mining and logging companies and others make their decisions based upon an authentic ecological consciousness, including an understanding and full appreciation of a broad spectrum of environmental values that allow ecosystems to be sustainable, healthy and whole.

As an example, consider the issue of logging in an old-growth forest, such as the very few that still exist in the United States. In what ways would the ecologist's perspective differ from that of a for-profit capitalist?

To answer this question, I find it helpful to picture in my mind an image of a playground teeter-totter that has a basket at each end. One basket represents strict capitalist for-profit values and the other represents the universe of ecological values.

Now pretend that you are placing weights that represent the different set of values in each of the baskets.

What would you place into the Capitalist Values Basket? Benefits might include:

- the monetary value of wood products (including export earnings), incomes for loggers, truckers and sawmill workers.
- increased sales for equipment, including manufacturing jobs.
- an increase in each of these companies' short-term profits.
- a short-term increase in corporate stock prices, adding value to stockholder portfolios.

Importantly, from a for-profit point of view, there would be pressure to maximize all of these values in the short run by clear-cutting the forest.

Turning our attention to the other side (ecological values), what representative weights would you put into the Ecological Values Basket?

In some old-growth forests, such as the Menominee Indian Reservation in Wisconsin, the tribe has, for many years, engaged in logging, which provides *some* modest economic benefits while also maintaining, generation after generation, the forest's original ecological makeup. The Menominee remove a relatively small portion of the forest each year using sustainable management principles which, in turn, incorporates selective cutting based on cultural constraints laid down by tribal elders over a hundred years ago.

With this selective cutting strategy, there is some monetary value gained from lumber, logging, sawmill jobs, and some exports. The return in the short run is modest compared to clear-cutting, yet over many years, income would be relatively stable.

In addition to these long-term economic benefits, you might now add the following weights representing a broader array of ecological, scientific, and spiritual values:

- a habitat for endangered plants and animals.
- the maintenance of "living classroom" enabling students and scientists to study a healthy ecosystem.
- a source of beauty, inspiration, and spiritual sustenance.
- healthier rivers, streams, springs (compared to a clear-cut forest).
- old-growth forests protect and create new topsoil, prevent excessive run-off of rainwater and help recycle nutrients more efficiently than clear-cut forests.
- old-growth forests sequester atmospheric carbon which helps stabilize Earth's climate.

Tropical old-growth forests, in turn, can provide a sustainable supply of nuts, berries, valuable barks, tubers, mushrooms and plant-medicines for those who know how to find them. From an ecological perspective, these forests are, in a sense, "rolling up their sleeves" as they work hard to provide invisible, yet important benefits, or so-called "*ecological services*" based on the productivity of the forests' intrinsic natural capital.

When we compare the weights on one side with the other, the Ecological-Values Basket should easily outweigh the Capitalist-Values Basket.

Yet — in our current global economic environment that involves ultra powerful forces of profit, propaganda, political corruption, and an obsession with unfettered free trade — we find that the Capitalist Basket almost always wins out.

It's as if the global economy were defying gravity as well as other vital laws of nature.

The Prairie's Perspective

If I were asked to pick an analogy from nature where we could learn some essential principles for a future economy, my choice would be a native prairie ecosystem that I walk by nearly every day.

Some, of course, might think the analogy a little odd; it's not exactly global free-market capitalism, but more a living example of what might be called *local natural capitalism*.

This prairie has become a mentor for me, as if it were trying to teach its lessons to a slow-learning, yet earnest economics student. Over the years, I have discovered that this flowering grassland is not only attractive but also exceptionally diverse and, like a model sustainable economy, remarkably productive — turning sunbeams, minerals, and carbon dioxide into biotic beauty and eventually converting its plant material into rich, deep, loamy soils.

In addition, this prairie ecosystem has achieved something quite amazing: an exquisite balance between life and death — humming along, year after year, in a kind of steady-state "economic" efficiency. The prairie recycles virtually everything and unfailingly blooms anew, spring after spring and every summer too!

Prairies are resilient in severe drought, yet they can also handle a week of drenching rain. Moles, monarchs, and meadowlarks survive there. Blue stem and Indian grasses live in the prairie too, and so do black-eyed susans, purple prairie clovers, stiff goldenrods, and late-summer blooms of purple blazing-stars.

Sometimes I enjoy lying down in the prairie, accepting gravity as it were, my back stretched out along the rough ground,

my eyes taking in sunlight, clouds, flowers, seedpods — and there high above — tufts of grasses bending down and up, up and down, as if there were an invisible ocean of windblown waves.

So one might ask, "What direction, what trajectory can we follow toward a more natural, more balanced capitalism?"

Can "meadowlark values" readjust and redress capitalism's spillover effects and correct its corrosive externalities?

Can we conserve — as if an ecological consciousness were our second nature — our planet's plants and animals, its grasslands, soils, ancient forests, subterranean waters, its oceans, rivers and reefs?

Like the native prairie, can we find a more harmonic, natural equilibrium that abounds in beauty, balance, and biodiversity?

And finally, can we use renewable energies and make our economic production more durable and fully recyclable while preserving Earth's realms of amazement and it landscapes of surprise?

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Chapter 18
Life!

We belong in this biosphere. We are intimately connected to it. Our physiology, our psychology. This planet can actually be a paradise if we use our intelligence to make it so.

— E.O. Wilson

Not too far from my family home in west-central Wisconsin, a small miracle comes our way ever so rarely, rising up and out of a bed of pine needles from our pin-oak and white-pine forest soils.

I drop to my knees.

The atmosphere is quiet.

The pine-duff layer is soft and moist to the palm of my hand.

There, in the low morning Sun, is a fist-sized ring of tiny mushrooms — *Panaeolus foenesecii* — all eleven of them brightened by sunlight beaming through the pine boughs. Each mushroom is vigorous, healthy — full of mirth it seems to me.

Bending down further, I touch one of the mushrooms with my cheek: cool in temperature, rubbery to the skin, it is packed with a newborn life force.

Closer to the ground now, I'm suddenly aware of strands of spider webs rippling to my right, each fluttering in ruffled waves of rainbow color.

Consider for a moment the favorable confluence of historic and current conditions — biological, geological, meteorological — first to conceive this scene and then to make it into a solid fact: air temperature, night-time humidity, morning Sun, perfect

pine-duff moisture, plus all the necessary habitat nutrients for mushrooms and spiders.

Here was, surrounding me, a delicate combination of chemistry and biology, of DNA imperatives hereby springing up life, now spreading out before me in wind-puffed riffles of color.

Lost in wonder, as if frozen in a dilation of time, I sense old kinships in these familiar forms — an antique creativity summoning up newfound energies. From primordial conditions to such beauty, how, I wonder did the Universe do it?

And you and I as well: are we not equal partners of such processes, a species popping up out of rare circumstances, a genuine gift arising from equally improbable events?

Are we not, like the mushrooms, exquisite outcomes of evolutionary forces from a truly creative Universe cooking up new flavors of recombinant matter, its compounds heated and shaped by a kaleidoscope of chemistries and physical energies over unimaginable quantities of time?

That morning was graced by mushrooms and resplendent spider webs fluttering in the wind and a unique Earth-species consciousness invoking feelings of wonder and a sense of planetary preciousness. But there was also a feeling of dread.

Who could not also feel a deepening fear that our requisite care toward our home planet has not always been what it should, that Earth has, at times, been so ravaged by human violence, climate destabilization, and ecosystem disfigurement?

That our technologies and Earth-consuming appetites have so altered the biosphere that many of those things we hold on to with such affection are now beginning to fade, seep away, slip forever from our fingers.

Consider the planet-wide deforestation and growing number of bleached-out coral reefs.

Consider climate change, or as some refer to it now as "climate chaos," ozone thinning and worldwide shortages of fresh water.

Or recall the well-documented amphibian declines and deformities and the extinction of that beautiful, shimmering Golden Toad of the rain forests of Costa Rica.

With any extinction — such as happened with the passenger pigeon, dodo, great auk, heath hen, or dusky seaside sparrow to name a few — one should consider essayist Mark Walter's realization that although death is the end of life, "extinction is the end of birth."

Environmental writer Holmes Rolston, arguing along the same lines, writes: "Extinction kills … the soul as well as the body and that to super kill a species is to shut down a story of millennia and leave no future possibilities."

We should also consider the world's bourgeoning population — over seven billion souls with all their basic material needs plus pent-up consumer desires, which if current trends continue, will be a population half again as large within a generation.

Consider the clear-cutting of national forests, too, or Asian mountainsides or the growing severity of worldwide droughts, and elsewhere, torrential rains and tragic mudslides.

Where, one might ask, are our Earth-protecting religions, economics and politics?

Surely many of the earlier spiritual traditions were informed and enriched by a deeper level of ecological consciousness while transmitting to their followers a heightened appreciation not only of the environment, but of a deep, interconnected, harmonic chord of all life.

I think, for example, of that great prophetic vision from the Taoist spiritual classic, the *Tao Te Ching*, a vision that beautifully captures all the delicacy, fragility, and the vulnerability of the natural world:

> "Those who would take over the Earth / and shape it to their will, never, I notice, succeed. / The Earth is like a vessel so sacred that at the mere approach of the profane, / it is marred / and when they reach out their fingers it is gone."[25]

Or consider a passage in the final book of the Bible, a "revelation" startling perhaps to those who may have never considered this book as containing a forceful environmental message: "That thou should give reward unto thy servants the prophets … and should destroy them which destroy the Earth."(Rev. 11:18)

Or listen to what may be the greatest deep-ecology values proclamation of all time, when the God of Genesis paused to contemplate everything He had created and said that "It was very good."

Or the Psalmist who cried out so boisterously, (so joyfully!), his praise — not for Heaven — but for the natural world:

> "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: The Earth is full of thy riches."[26]

Consider, too, the story of Noah which, according to biologist Calvin DeWitt, is nothing more or less that the world's "first Endangered Species Act." DeWitt reminds his readers that Genesis 6-9 highlights God's command to Noah, a commandment designed to prevent the extinction of all creatures, both economic and uneconomic, no matter what the cost."[27]

And didn't Jesus suggest (as did Henry Thoreau) that we should simplify our lives while at the same time, warn us against the "love of money" and the dangers of materialism? The early

scriptures of Islam and Hinduism are equally resolute in condemning greed and the worship of material wealth.

Buddhists add an additional element of environmental awareness in their view that humans are not separate from the Earth, but intimately part of and interdependent with it. Expanding on the idea of interconnectedness, Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh asks us to:

> "Look into the self and discover that it is made only of non-self elements. A human being is made up of only non-human elements. To protect humans, we have to protect the non-human elements — the air, the water, the forest, the river, the mountain, and the animals … Humans can survive only with the survival of other species. This is exactly the teaching of the Buddha, and also the teaching of deep ecology."[28]

Our growing awareness of this Earth/human interdependence may then become a touchstone for our behavior, our lifestyle, and our day-to-day choices.

Yet, for some reason, this ancient ecological wisdom has become enfeebled, like a far-off candlelight obscured by great and growing distances — as we race forward, embracing the novelty of technology, bottom-line obsessions, and a far-ranging infectious consumerism, making all too many of us unwitting contributors to the slow but steady degradation of our home planet and its countless wonders.

So, in conclusion, who is responsible and why?

Of course I would like to point my finger outward — toward corrupt governments and greedy transnational corporations, or perhaps blame the advertising and the entertainment industries whose vision of paradise is an ever-expanding consumer culture fueled by increasing profits and exponential growth.

Yet, as I must now conclude, I too am co-responsible for some of the environmental destruction, and my finger (if I am honest) more often than not, points right back to me.

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Chapter 20
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 though 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."[34]

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.[35]

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."[36]

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."[37]

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."[38]

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."[39]

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."[40]

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.”[41]

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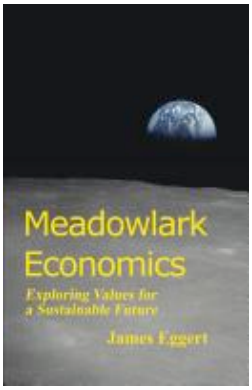

Alarmed by the gradual disappearance of the meadowlark from his local countryside, James Eggert began to examine both the economic and ecological factors at work. His investigation soon led him to explore alternatives to our traditional views of economics. Eggert's heartening ideas are expressed in a series of essays that offer new perspectives on education, consumption, work, our evolutionary history, and, in the end, what it means to be human.

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