

Progressive Religion ... Is Not an Oxymoron

Of *Collapse*, Compassion & Sustainable Communities

By David E. Roy

This summer I had the opportunity to teach a brief course on spiritually-rooted compassion for Northern Arizona University's masters program in sustainable community.

This visionary graduate program, at a state university no less, is the result of an extraordinary effort by Prof. Sandra Lubarsky, department chair, who is joined in the program by her husband, Prof. Marcus Ford.

Sandra says they are training scholar advocates ... thoughtful troublemakers, in other words.

***Collapse* by Jared Diamond**

The course included a section on UCLA Prof. Jared Diamond's book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*¹ where he analyzes about 15 ancient and contemporary societies to determine the factors that contribute to survival – or collapse.

The major focus in this column will be on *Collapse* because, as with many, I see our world as facing cataclysmic environmental challenges that, if left unmet, eventually will lead to regional collapses and quite likely a global catastrophe.

Regardless of how one feels about spirituality, religion, and the Divine, this is an issue we all need to address.

Distorted Worldview=Bad Religion

I don't think, though, that spirituality and religion are irrelevant. In fact, I feel strongly that religion based upon a seriously distorted view of reality has only made things worse.

If we can correct our worldview and see the fundamental nature of reality differently, religion can be transformed from a force that supports the destructive status quo into a force that promotes life. And spirituality, which is the experience of being connected to a deeper and wider universe, can be a means for that transformation.

Survival Requires Sustainability

But first, *Collapse*: Diamond, who has spent decades doing studies around the globe, demonstrates repeatedly that the capacity for a society to endure for centuries depends significantly upon its ability to achieve a sustainable harmony with its environment.

While there are some environments that would be a serious challenge to even the most attuned society, invariably it was how the society responded to environmental damage that determined the outcome.

50,000 Years of Damage

Diamond is pointed in his conclusion that in every instance over the past 50,000 years when humans migrated to a new area the environment eventually suffered serious damage. The destruction was unwitting, at least at the start.

Fortunately, there are examples of societies, both old and current, that have managed to seek a sustainable balance once aware of the environmental damage. There were others, however, that woke up to the problems too late to make the necessary adjustments.

Then there were those that had obvious evidence of serious problems but chose to avoid responding in any effective way by denying, minimizing, or ignoring, guaranteeing collapse.

A Collapse is Ugly and Deadly

Diamond's book describes vividly what happens when a society collapses: extreme violence, starvation, and cannibalism. Well-to-do citizens might delay the inevitable a bit longer than most, but not by much.

To avoid this being our future, individuals and local communities, national governments, and especially corporations need to come to terms with the fact that if we continue to despoil the world's environment on the scale that exists today, let alone with the expansion that is taking off, the world will spiral into a collapse of catastrophic proportions.

Decision Makers Need this Book

This book should be on every policy maker's desk, local, state, and national – not just sitting there, but read, underlined, and used to guide policy decisions. It contains an enormous amount of information, much of it hard data, to support his conclusions. It certainly has relevance to the environmental debates that are raging currently in the Central Valley.

This book is not a polemic. Diamond's style is low-key and personal. His approach to the subject matter is intentionally "middle of the road," in part because he has extensive experience with major environmental organizations and with international corporations. He takes wry satisfaction in having been condemned by both camps.

Not All Corporations are Bad

While he is unsparing in the details of the ruthless and devastating actions by some companies and nations, he also shares in-depth information on international corporations that have decided it is in their best interest to protect and sustain the environment so that it will support their industry over several decades.

A prime example he gives, based upon personal experience, is with Chevron's Kutubu oil fields in New Guinea.

He was sent as an investigator by World Wildlife Fund to assist in WWF's efforts to put together and implement a large-scale conservation and development plan that covered the whole watershed, a plan requested by Chevron.

Diamond is candid that he came expecting Chevron would be doing a horrible job: "Like much of the public, I loved to hate the oil industry...."

Corporations, he asserts, have tremendous power on the international scene to accomplish good works, if they so choose. If they are, or can be persuaded to do so, Diamond advocates helping and praising them.

Where to Apply Pressure for Change

For some unresponsive industries, he advocates ignoring the companies responsible for direct production and the resulting damage and recommends instead putting pressure on the companies that *retail* the products (e.g., Home Depot for wood from sustainable forests, etc.).

Diamond includes detailed suggestions for what individuals and groups can do to push for change. This is critical because, as previously stated, of the five factors involved in the collapse of a society, the human response is always the most important in the long run in determining success or failure and is the only one truly under our full control.

The Human Response: Critical

Two brief and illuminating examples: On Easter Island, instead of adapting to the ecological crisis, the chiefs did even more damage toward the end by demanding still larger statues to ward off pending doom. This resulted in resources being further depleted: more food for the workers and more trees for the rope to drag the enormous heads into place.

In Greenland, the Vikings attempted to import their European culture. The early animals wrecked havoc, the lush grasses took years to re-grow instead of a season, and the settlers' devotion to outfitting churches deprived people of necessities. Strangely, they did not eat fish and when the end came, those left starved to death.

By contrast, the Inuit, who arrived in Greenland 500 years after the Vikings, adapted to the demands of the environment. They were skilled at fishing. They continue today to live in the region in a sustainable manner.

Besides the human response to eco-disasters, the other four factors are the environment, natural climate change, hostile neighbors, and trading partners when they stopped bringing essential goods from the outside. All five factors are interactive, though environmental damage is usually the precipitating cause of collapse. If there is no good water or the soil is ruined, people will starve to death, for example.

Tikopia as a Sustainable Community

Perhaps the greatest example of a sustainable community that Diamond found is on the tiny Pacific island of Tikopia. As I mentioned in a previous column, the Tikopian civilization has endured for more than 3,000 years.

Part of what aids their collective ability to live within their environmental means is the fact that they all literally see the same environment. Because the island is less than two square miles in size, the ocean is visible from nearly everywhere.

Their responsiveness to their environment has to have been helped by this common point of view. In today's world, however, it is an understatement to say that such a common perspective cannot be as easily developed on a global basis.

Barriers to a Shared Viewpoint

Part of the blame for this inability lies with *how* we look at the world. For centuries, we have been shaped by Plato and those who followed him to see reality as inert matter in motion, devoid of purpose, mentality, free will, and spirituality, lacking any form of connection except external.

This perspective, in other words, emphasizes separation and differences. This easily leads to using people and the natural world as a means to an end while simultaneously denying the intrinsic value of the other. To maintain this requires strenuously avoiding any sense of being intimately connected with anyone or anything else, especially to those who are different or out of sight.

Feeling Deep Connection Leads to Compassion

Whitehead's cosmology emphasizes exactly the opposite. It explains the world as made up of *subjective processes that are internally related to each other*. My subjective experience of you is a part of me and in the same manner I am a part of you – on the *inside*. This is the basis of our profound connection, so often not recognized.

Compassion enters the picture when we are attuned to this deep, real, and fundamental connection because the most basic nature of this connection is *conformal*: I feel your pain painfully; I feel your hunger with my own hunger pangs; I feel your fear as my own; likewise, I feel your joy joyfully, your enjoyment adds to my own enjoyment.

The Sacred Call to Care for the Well Being of All

The spiritual dimension of this is a conformal response to the Divine care for the well being of all. When we are attuned to this, then we not only feel another's agony, but we are moved to act in a way that will relieve that distress.

There is no limit to this compassion except what we impose upon it due to our capacity and prior beliefs. We can and must learn to be compassionate with a wide range of human beings *and* our natural world. If enough of us can learn how to do this and to live out of this perspective, our species might just survive.

¹Viking Press (the Penguin Group), New York, NY, 2005.