

The Three Faces of Sustainability

A new model explores the relationship between self and sustainability.

BY SENIOR COLUMNIST CARL FRANKEL

Big news from the home front: I, your humble columnist, have had a baby. Not the bawling, squalling sort: a book baby. And quite a pregnancy it was—five years, four titles, and eight drafts in gestation. The book is called *Out of the Labyrinth: Who We Are, How We Go Wrong, and What We Can Do About It*, and its contents form the tableau from which these snapshot columns have been drawn.

For over two years now, I've been sharing my thoughts about business and sustainability in these pages. If these musings have had a common theme, it is that, in the usual view of things, much goes unsaid

traire: I have a distinct aversion to the “A, not B,” “my dad’s bigger than your dad” game. Sure, elks lock horns, but at the end of the day, all that gets you is a sore head. I don’t want to reject “A” for “B,” I want to find out how “A” and “B” can work together. There’s even a term for this point of view: it’s called “integral thinking.” I want to take what’s in front of the curtain and what’s behind the curtain, I want to take figure and ground, and have them dance together.

I guess you could say I’m not partial to partiality.

This bias extends beyond sustainability. I have my inner life, my personal life, my intellectual life, my civic life and my professional life. I want to find the common threads that underlie them all. I want it all to cohere.

There’s nothing especially unusual about this. If I’m not crazy (and the consensus, by a hair, is that I’m not), a great many people suspect, as

meta-strategy, that can enable us to brake the western industrial train before it tumbles us all into the abyss?

- ▶ Why do progressives have such a talent for tripping over their own feet?
- ▶ Is there a relationship, on the grand scale, between personal growth and social progress—and if so, what is it?
- ▶ Do spirituality and activism converge, and if so how and where?

I date the book’s conception to March 11, 1999, when I had a passing thought that, over the subsequent months, evolved into a model whose essence is as follows.

Each of us engages in three types of activity during our lives. We pursue end goals, we interact with other people and the natural world, and we search for meaning. Each of these three activities constellates into a subpersonality with its own unique values, attitudes and gestalt. These three subpersonalities are called the “strategist,” the “citizen” and the “seeker,” and they inhabit the “objective domain,” the “social domain” and the “depth dimension,” respectively. (This is the “who we are” of the subtitle.)

The strategist, citizen and seeker are like children in a family. Sometimes they quarrel, sometimes they get along. And sometimes the self that “contains” all these subpersonalities—the “parent” in the family, as it were—plays favorites. The self privileges the strategist and devalues the seeker, or vice-versa. It’s Cinderella déjà vu: two favored sisters, and a third one in the cellar. (This is “how we go wrong.”)

These three value systems—identity systems, really—are basic design patterns that we project into our social and political relationships, our institutions and our broader culture. The triad, this three-part model, is

“We live in a fragmented world, and we do so as fragmented individuals. Many of us, perhaps all of us, long to tie things together, to make things somehow cohere. We all long for integrity—the quality of being whole or complete. This is the territory *Out of the Labyrinth* explores.”

that needs saying. I see it as my role, or maybe the word is compulsion, to pull back the curtain and say what I see behind it. For instance, sustainability is typically thought of as a state that will be brought about by superimposing various policy solutions on our techno-economic structures. I say that doesn’t quite capture the reality: sustainability also has interiority and depth. Another example: words are usually viewed as descriptive of reality, not as actually shaping that reality. I say no, the words we use—the words we *choose!*—have magical, world-creating power.

It is not that I am a contrarian. *Au con-*

I do, that something fundamental is missing from the standard way of viewing things. A great many of us hanker to uncover the unifying structures that underlie the fractious diversity of our everyday lives. It’s a spiritual quest, I suppose, but it has a secular aspect as well. We want to shuck off that annoying sense of fragmentation.

This is the itch that *Out of the Labyrinth* scratches. It probes for answers behind the curtains, at the level of “deep structure” where all that fragmentation starts to fade. Along the way, it addresses a great many questions, including the following:

- ▶ Is there some sort of strategy, or

a “fractal” that shapes our created world.

Playing favorites causes dysfunctionality—in ourselves, in our organizations and in our broader culture. As people, as managers and as citizens, it thus becomes our challenge to equitably balance the needs and interests of these “children.” I call this the “integral way,” and it is, as per the subtitle, “what we can do about it.”

Western industrial culture favors the strategic, objective domain at the expense of the meaning-oriented depth dimension. This is the *tyranny of the objective*. It is a tyranny, a dysfunctionality, that a great many people feel in their souls, even if not consciously. Think of the movie *American Beauty*: it’s the story of how a man is emotionally and spiritually restored by journeying into the depth dimension, and then murdered—sacrificed, really—on account of his transformation.

So that’s the model, in a very small nutshell. Its value, in my experience, lies in its explanatory power vis-à-vis the unarticulated “deep structures” underlying sustainability and—hey, why stop there?—quite a few other issues in our lives. For example (and it must be added that the descriptions of the triad and integral way have been so condensed here that their explanatory power must, to some extent, be taken on faith):

Why are corporations so widely distrusted and, in some quarters, reviled?

Over the years, many corporations have done their share to earn people’s animosity. But that is not the only reason why so many people are angry. Corporations are the quintessential “objective domain” institution—they are all about strategy, all about achieving their goals as quickly and effectively as possible. To some extent, they are on the receiving end of all that hostility because they are proxies for people’s rage at the tyranny of the objective, which suppresses their sense of wholeness and authenticity.

Does the conventional understanding of sustainability accurately capture its true dimensions?

No. Sustainable development is generally

understood to be the state that is achieved once economic development, environmental protection and social equity have been harmonized. There’s much merit to this view, but it misses an essential point.

Modern environmentalism is generally agreed to have been born with the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. For the next 20 years or more, environmental challenges were generally viewed as being mostly susceptible to technical solutions. If a factory was emitting too much pollution, you put a filter on the pipe, and that was that. This was Sustainability, Stage 1: it was essentially a linear, analytical, objective-domain approach to environmental challenges.

During the latter half of the 1980s, another view took hold—“sustainable development.” Under this view, the challenge was deemed to have a social as well as environmental dimension. Terms like “social equity” and “triple bottom line” came into widespread use. It was now understood that the challenge included such issues as the income gap between rich and poor and the social empowerment of women. This was Sustainability, Stage 2: it included the social domain.

With this new insight, it was assumed that the discourse about sustainability had come to an end. We now knew what sustainability was all about. Or did we? Actually, no. Virtually the entire focus was on external structures—techno-economic, social and ecological. The depth dimension—the internal, meaning dimension—was almost completely neglected. And so it remains to this day.

From one perspective, this is no surprise: it recapitulates the tyranny of the objective, which is tyrannical precisely because it devalues the depth dimension. But something critically important has been left out of a conversation when meaning, and the related subjects of consciousness and mental models, are not on the agenda. Until we integrate inner into outer in our shared understandings of concepts like sustainability, we will continue to feel fragmented and not whole.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Well, actually, the triad does not provide insight into this most basic of philosophical questions. But it does illuminate many other life issues, including ones relating to self-knowledge, organizational strategy and development, national (and progressive) politics, spirituality and activism, leadership and, of course, sustainability.

A couple of years ago, I spoke about the triad at a corporate conference on sustainability. At the end of my remarks, Nicholas Eisenberger of Ecos Technologies raised his hand and commented that he found my views “orthogonal.” It turned out that this two-dollar word meant “having to do with right angles.” Eisenberger was saying that my view was 90 degrees skewed relative to the usual one.

It was a fair observation. Once you bring meaning and consciousness into the equation—and once, beyond that, you propose that our institutions and culture are a function of consciousness, which it is within our power, within limits, to change—then that has enormous implications not only for issues of selfhood and social responsibility, but also for issues of strategy. (It suggests some other things as well—social institutions as art forms, and sustainability as having an esthetic dimension—but that’s for another column.)

We live in a fragmented world, and we do so as fragmented individuals. Many of us, perhaps all of us, long to tie things together, to make things somehow cohere. We all long for integrity—the quality of being whole or complete. This is the territory *Out of the Labyrinth* explores. It explores the triple worlds of the seeker, the citizen and the strategist, and how they can birth a better world (both inner and outer!) by dancing beautifully together. @



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