

The Precautionary Principle: Building a Better Society Through Our Shared Values.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen it is good to be in the presence of what I believe to be kindred spirits. But by the time I finish here some of you may be saying I don't know what ever gave him the idea I had anything in common with him!

All jokes aside I am delighted to be here with you today as we talk about effective ways to address, promote and protect the common good. I love that term, for me it embodies an affirmation of connectedness and of a higher purpose that serves the best interest of all the elements that make for a harmonious existence with both nature and with each other.

In that I'm trying to cover such a broad and complex subject as shared values I believe it only fair that I share with you some of my deeply held beliefs and values. I guess one of those beliefs is: when one presumes to talk about values you should be willing to reveal some of yourself because we bring ourselves to everything we do. Objectivity is as relative as time, light, energy and matter. My first revelation about my values and beliefs may help some of you decide if you care to stay and hear the rest of what I going to say:

I am and unabashed, unreformed, happy and proud liberal

I am a fierce defender of freedom of speech (expressions)

There is nothing humans can do to save the earth; what we can do is save our kind

One of the purposes of government is to improve the human model.

There is but one Environment.

Every human is born with the inalienable right to clean air and clean water irrespective of his or her passageway to existence.

I believe wilderness is another word for freedom

I believe each preceding generation owes its progeny a world no less habitable than the one it inherited. **Intergenerational equity: The principle that the present generation should pass on to generations an environment that is not impoverished and degraded, and which will reduce the quality of life for future generations.**

I believe there is enough for all

Those of us who work on progressive issues share a fundamental world view that reflects our core values. We might not always agree on every issue or strategy, but we fundamentally agree that the progress that we make as a society is dependent on the choices individuals have and the socio-political and economic environments within which they make those choices. We recognize the interconnection between individual actions

and the settings and circumstances surrounding those actions. We understand that we share a collective obligation to the greater good. Those of us who embrace the Precautionary Principle as a way to manage the impact of human activity on the natural ecology and environment where humans exist implicitly or explicitly believe in certain values. I have singled out the following list of shared values to talk about:

Voice

Transparency

Inclusiveness

Fairness (Equitable treatment?)

Courage

Diversity

Connectedness.

When I say Values, I'm talking about social principles, goals or standards held or accepted by an individual, class, society or other that reflects the relative importance of those principles. Let's be clear values are learned and like beliefs and convictions they can be derive at by rational analysis, by empirical observations or by simply accepting some thing to be true without any factual data substantiating it to be so.

There are probably many more values we could list that would be important for our purposes but these are the ones I've chosen to talk about today. Note I listed seven values I believe we share in common; one for each day of the week. As you go about this very important work that we do keep one of these values in mind each day and seek ways to explicitly use it in managing you programs, attainting your goals or in your outreach efforts. You will be surprised by how bringing these values to conscious awareness will influence you decision making on a daily basis.

If I had to further refine this list of values through some prioritization scheme I would say Voice, Fairness and Courage are paramount. It is impossible to affect meaningful change without Voice; and Fairness gives rise to Transparency, Inclusiveness, and Diversity; Courage is the energy for change; it give change momentum.

When I say Voice, I mean clearly articulating a principle for the protection of the greater good and especially for the defenseless, disenfranchised and oppressed in a venue where articulating that principal makes a difference. "Speak truth to power," as Shirley Chisholm would say. Voice and Courage are closely related but Voice is representative and courage is action. Voice is the intellectual philosophical underpinning for action and Courage is the strength of character that impels individual action. Voice speaks a truth while Courage impels action. Courage is taking responsibility for change. Most great leaders for social justice embraced both values; Jesus, Lincoln, John Brown, Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Mandela to name a few.

Courage is acting on the strengths of one convictions; I don't need to say more, if you believe it act on it!

Fairness (Equitable treatment) is intuitive balance; freedom from injustice. I know it seems inconsistent for me to say values are learned and then talk about intuitive balance in describing Fairness. But Fairness has a “feel” to it; you look at a situation and you feel the scales are not balanced in one direction or another. There is something that is very visceral about Fairness; we talk in terms of something not smelling right when it is unfair; or something is “hard swallow” when it is not fair.

Watching small kids interact with each other is a wonderful way to learn about fairness. Most of the time, absent adult interference, kids negotiate their differences based on their perceptions of fairness. One kid might unfairly take the ball from the group and sulk off alone. Three things happen; 1. one kid immediately announces that what the kid with the ball has done something this is unfair 2 another kid will go over to the kid with the ball and console him then return to the group and 3, the kid with the ball sense of fairness will overpower him and he will contritely return to the group with the ball. Now this only applies to kids up to the third or fourth grades past that point we have taught them to be as selfish as we are as adults and they want what they want irrespective of how it affects others.

Transparency; is conducting public business in a public forum; making decisions in a manner where all the facts are put on the table for everyone affected by that decision to see and evaluate.

Some years ago when I was working with the Everglades Restoration Project in South Florida a rather innocuous notice came across my desk at 3PM afternoon. My office was on Brickell Avenue in Miami and this was the notice of a meeting to be held in Tallahassee some 400 mile away the next morning at 8:00 AM. The title of the meeting was the Soils Testing Evaluation Standards Forum. I had an important presentation to make the following morning so it was impossible for me to make the meeting but I intuitively knew something wasn't right. First of all, it was the lateness of the notice; second, why me? And, third, was the site where the meeting would be held in Tallahassee.

If they really wanted me to be there they would have given me two or three days notice or at least apologized for the late notice. In addition at the time we were the only minority firm working on Everglades issues so I knew the invite was to say we invite “them.” Lastly I knew by the address where the meeting was to be held was not in one the government building downtown Tallahassee but some miles outside the city in a closet. Thanks to my wife and a wonderful woman who is a tireless warrior and crusader for environmental justice named Leola McCoy they drove all night reading all they could about the Soils Testing Evaluations Forum as they exchanged driving shifts.

When they arrived at the small out of the way room where the meeting was being held there were three or four bureaucrats from the state with five or six lobbyist representing the farmers, the pesticide industry, the fertilizer industry, and major food distributors. The bureaucrats and lobbyists were so shocked to see these two black women one of them just had to ask how they knew about the meeting. Ladies and gentlemen this was a formal

hearing to determine the permissible levels of pesticides and fertilizer to be permitted in our food. This is not an example of the transparency we value; but it is an example of why transparency is so important.

Diversity; respecting differences; we value and appreciate the variety and differences in phenomenon at all levels of existence. Biotic diversity, cultural diversity, spatial diversity and ethnic diversity are a part of a larger universal pattern that is Gestalt like in that all existence must be considered as a whole and regarded as amounting to more than the sum of its parts.

Inclusiveness: Belonging to the whole. The fact of the matter is we all do belong to the whole of existence here on earth but in the more discrete effort to change the way we treat our environment we have not enlisted all of the affected constituencies we need in order to be successful.

On that point I am always amused when I hear some governmental official standing next to a mega-development project waxing eloquently about sustainability as they proudly point to a rendering that clearly reveals that the poor and disenfranchised neighborhoods are going to be gentrified. I doubt the government official the developer has ever read the 1984 Brundtland Commission Report where the term sustainability was created. The very first principle of sustainability is that nothing you do will be sustained unless you first deal with the needs of those on the lowest level of the socio-economic scale. I take that to mean being inclusive.

Drawing the connections between the system we live in and the outcomes for individuals is at the core of our value system which allows us to connect across various issues. We see the connectedness of behavior actions and effects.

To some extent most values are judgments and here is where problem begins. For us working on environmental and conservation issues it is at the nexus of the Human/Ecological footprint, Ecology and Social Psychology that gives rise to different values regarding the principles of how we use the land and how we treat the natural elements. From our perspective, using the land in a manner inconsistent with our core values leads to a degraded environment.

The Human Ecological Footprint means the land and water that is required to support indefinitely the material standard of living of a given human population using prevailing technology. It is here at this nexus that the Precautionary Principle may lead to a more enlightened approach to resolving environmental conflicts. It is also at this nexus that another concept we highly value comes to play; it is the concept of the common good. It reflects a conscious effort to make a choice in a manner that takes into account the impact on the surrounding environment as measured against the satisfaction derived from any personal gain produced by that choice.

Embracing, acting upon and promoting our shared values are critical because Western Civilization presents us with a false choice whereby we pit individual success against

group cooperation. Unfortunately this plays out on the landscape in ways that are detrimental to our collective best interests. As most of you know the Wingspread Statement defines the Precautionary Principle as: “When an activity raises the threat of harm to human health or the environment precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.”

I describe the precautionary principle as respect for what we do not understand in nature; understanding that we will not know everything and despite our not knowing we acknowledge that everything is invariably connected. We could also describe the Precautionary Principle by paraphrasing the Judeo-Christian in maxim “Do unto the earth as you would have it do unto you.”

Those who oppose progressive values see the world differently. The primary reason for society’s advancement, they believe, is personal initiative. They see behavior and perception as simply the sum of individual stimuli and response. Consequently, anything that inhibits that initiative is bad; anything that fosters it is good. Progressives certainly don’t eschew personal initiative, but we understand that it is constrained, or bolstered by the world around it.

Without the constraints imposed by our core values those who oppose us see Economic Determinism as the means to solve all our problems. This in turn leads to a commodifying nature as only a consumable resource. The quality of our life support systems on earth are being destroyed because of unbridled market forces that place individual economic rights above collective human rights and protection of the earth and all living creates as part of an interconnected web of life.

Sometime back I heard a lawyer out in the out Oregon speaking passionately about why trees had to pay for themselves. That as a part of the economic reality of a capitalistic economic system the trees highest and best value is reflected on a balance sheet.

I thought about what the lawyer said and then I thought of the song of the great Gospel Singer Sister Shirley Caesar about an issue a mother was having with a teenager son or daughter when she asked them to do something for her. And the teenager’s response was to the effect only if you pay me to do it. The mother in the song then determines to do an accounting and she says: for carrying in my womb for nine months, no charge; for sitting through the night wiping you feverish brow, no charge; for fixing you food everyday of you life , no charge; for loving with every fiber of body, no charge.

I wish Sister Shirley Caesar could sing for those trees that the lawyer said must pay for themselves and song would go something like this: for the clean air I provide you, no charge; for the clean water I provide you, no charge; for controlling flooding and reducing drought, no charge; for creating healthy soil from by decaying limbs and leaves, no charge and do all this because I am a part of you.

In closing I submit to you that behavior is more powerful than technology and we change behavior by promoting our values. Thank You. End.

