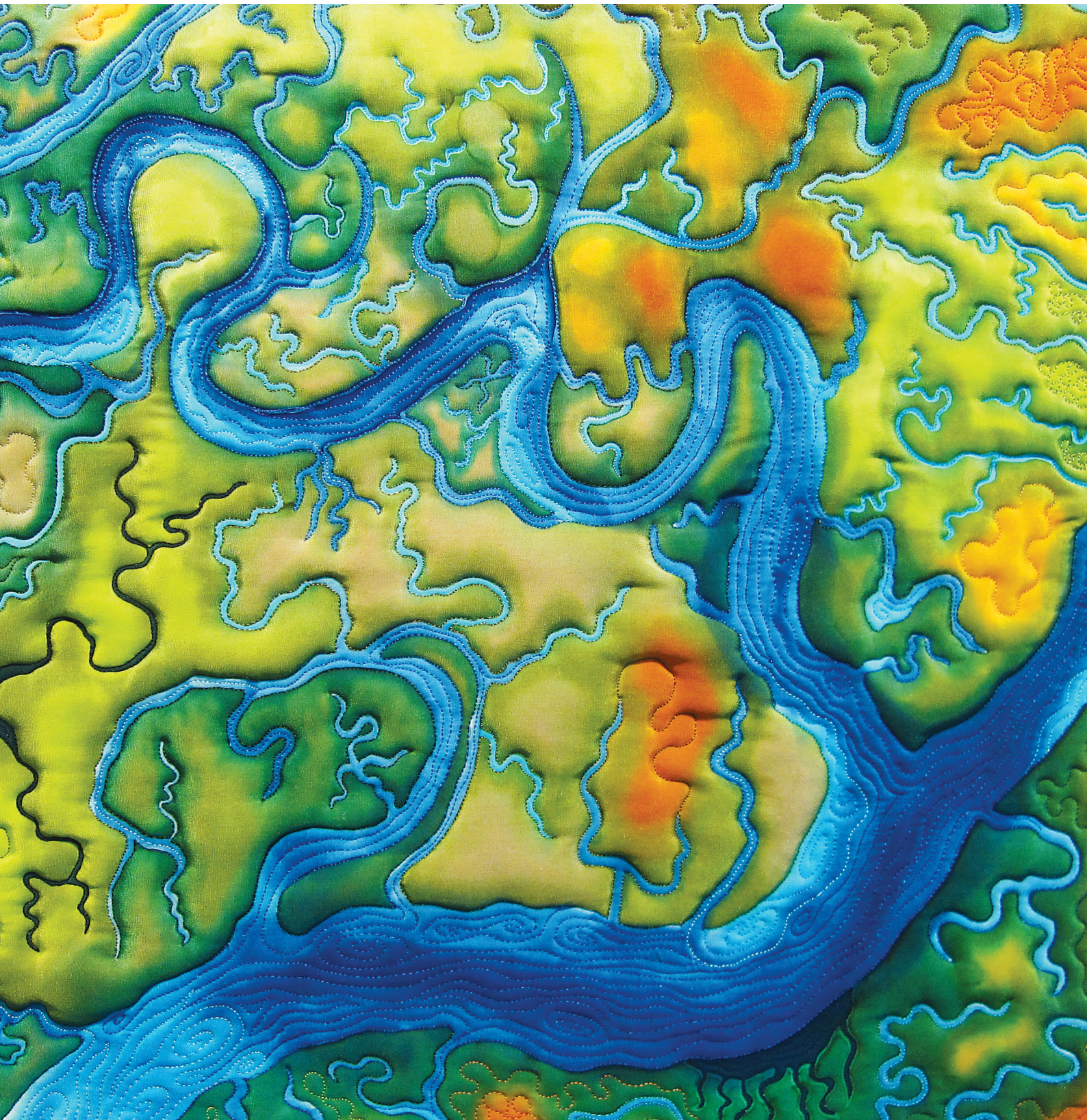


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Soil, Soul, Society

SATISH KUMAR'S NEW ECOLOGICAL PARADIGM

Interviewed by LLEWELLYN SMITH and ANNIE STOPFORD

When philosopher and writer Bertrand Russell was arrested in 1962 at age 90 for protesting against nuclear weapons, Satish Kumar was inspired to launch himself into a life of protest and activism. He was nineteen years old at the time and had already left his Jain monastery—where he'd been since age nine—to follow the teachings of Vinoba Bhave, a disciple of Gandhi who wove spiritual striving with non-violence and land reform politics. Satish began his own journey of activism and protest by walking 8,000 miles with a companion to the capitals of the United States, France, England and the former Soviet Union, serving “peace tea” to the leaders of these nuclear powers. And since that famous walk, he hasn't stopped. He's traveled the world as a tireless international champion of environmental causes, founded the renowned ecological study and research center Schumacher College at Dartington Hall, England in 1990, and today edits *Resurgence & Ecologist*, the magazine whose focus is “creativity, ecology, spirituality and frugality.”

Satish Kumar's ecologist philosophy is charged with a fierce compassion and a belief that we cannot find justice for our human societies until we are committed to justice for the earth. One of his most famous quotes captures this—a rebuff to critics insisting that radically transforming our relationship with the natural world is an unrealistic goal: “Is my approach unrealistic? Look at what realists have done for us. They have led us to war and climate change, poverty on an unimaginable scale, and wholesale ecological destruction. Half of humanity goes to bed hungry because of all the realistic leaders in the world. I tell people who call me ‘unrealistic’ to show me what their realism has done. Realism is an outdated, overplayed and wholly exaggerated concept.”



One of the things we wanted to ask you first about was how your philosophy emerged, your life as a Jain monk, and the influences that shaped you...Yes, but first may I say something?

Of course—please do. Rumi, the great Sufi poet, considered the universe as the body of God. And all the elements, like mountains and forests and oceans and humans and animals and birds, are the organs of the body of God. And I think that is a very beautiful statement of spiritual ecology. Because if the whole universe, all the other stars and the sun and moon and everything else is the body of God, then we have to revere and respect this body, and take care. And when we touch the mountain, when we touch the river, when we touch humans, when we touch animals, we are touching God. And that to me is spiritual ecology. This is the spirit of Hindu ecology and Buddhist ecology and Jain ecology. My background is in Jain ecology because I was brought up as a Jain monk.

Beautiful. And what brought you into that path? I have to give credit to my mother. She was very much close to nature. She had about three or four acres, and she grew sesame and melons and millet and many kinds of vegetables and grains. She always said to learn from nature, that nature is our teacher. Even the Buddha learned his wisdom while sitting under a tree. She did not know the words environment or ecology or sustainability, but she revered nature. And she taught me very early, when I was seven or eight years old, to be nonviolent to nature.

That, in a way, is the Jain tradition because nonviolence is the supreme principle of Jain religion. And nonviolence

begins with all plants and animals. And therefore all Jains are pure vegetarians, and they will not cut the trees unless there is a truly great need. And if you cut one tree, you must plant five trees. So that is my upbringing.

Cutting a tree or hurting an animal, those things are obvious kinds of violence. Are there other kinds of violence against nature that we don't recognize? The greatest source of violence is thinking that nature is here for our use because we humans are superior to nature. Nature as our slave or servant. So we cut down the rainforest, put the animals in factory farms, poison our soil with chemicals and fertilizers and pesticides and herbicides for agribusiness, very violent to the earth. This attitude that nature is our servant and our challenge is to subjugate nature for exploitation and human benefit—that is where the violence begins. We must see that nature has intrinsic value, not just for human use. Human species are not superior species to any other species. That is Jain nonviolence.

How much do you think the monotheistic religions have shaped this idea that we're here to subdue nature and to control it? This is a very important point. Lynn Townsend White (scholar of medieval history, 1907–1987) said that when we read in Genesis that humans have dominion over the earth, and their job is to subdue the earth and multiply, this is the beginning of the misconception that earth is only for our use and dominion. This kind of thinking is at the foundation of western civilization, industrialism, and capitalism.

But also within Christianity there have been alternative schools that have been largely ignored. St. Francis talked with animals, called them brother and sister, called sun and moon his brother and sister. So you might say he was a reverential and spiritual nonviolent ecologist! But traditions of St. Francis, St. John of the Cross or even the Celtic religions, they have been largely forgotten; meanwhile, the tradition largely promulgated by Christian churches in many denominations remain grounded in the belief that humans are superior to nature, and nature exists for subduing. Christianity must take some responsibility. The monotheistic religions have to transform their thinking.

Christianity and consumerism have flourished together. And it's spreading around the world. The first Christians wanted to take the missionary Christianity to Africa and India and China and everywhere else. Now there's a new mission of western consumerism and materialism spreading around the world.

Pope Francis has recently been very outspoken on how

“How we treat animals in factory farms. The way we cut down rainforests, and create global warming and climate change, destroying the biosphere and biodiversity. All those are acts of war against nature.”





people are relegated to being cogs in a capitalist machine—do you take heart that he may also have greater voice on the issue of world ecology as well? I hope so. I admire the new Pope very much. I think he has almost broken with the traditional way of leading the Catholic Church. He lives a simple life and says the Church should be of the poor and for the poor, and not for the rich and of the rich. He is a very radical pope. And I think Catholics are blessed to have this new change. He comes from a South American liberation theology tradition. And therefore there is a great hope.

And as he has spoken out in favor of the poor and against the corporate exploitation of the poor, perhaps he will speak about peace with nature and peace with the soil, peace with the earth. At the moment, humanity is at war not only with itself—the Iraq War, Afghanistan War, Syrian War, Sudan War, so many wars going on—but humanity is also at war against nature. How we treat animals in factory farms. The way we cut down rainforests, and create global warming and climate change, destroying the biosphere and biodiversity. All

those are acts of war against nature. Pope Francis has taken the name of St. Francis, the patron saint of ecology. If he is true to his name, perhaps he will be our new patron saint of ecology and social justice.

That would be beautiful. We hope so, too. What is the value of ecological thinking to changing the wealth disparities in this world? So many resources are controlled and exploited by so few people. What does the ecological thinking that you're discussing mean for the poor? Capitalism is the culprit of ecological disaster and ecological destruction because we view nature only as a resource. In reality, nature is the true capital. [Money] is only an illusory capital. The real capital is land, forest, animals, rivers, oceans, fishes, human communities, human skills, imagination and creativity. Money and finance are only facilitators. This make-believe capital of finance and money is the culprit of destruction of natural resources. Therefore if we want to create a new paradigm, socially just and environmentally sustainable for the



“We need new values where our relationship with nature, our relationship with other people and our communities and craftsmanship and good agriculture, workmanship, where all these are given greater value than the value of money.”

future, it must be in harmony with the economy of nature. The economy of nature has existed for millions of years; from that viewpoint, the modern economy of capitalism is a very short-lived phenomenon. When we have depleted our resources in the name of capitalist gain, what will we do then? When we have destroyed our land and built our airports and motorways and cities and shopping malls and driven nature to the end of its means, are people then going to eat dollars and pounds and euros and credit cards?

And because capitalism is only interested in accumulation of money rather than social justice and ecological sustainability, it destroys nature and turns it into a commodity to sell and buy. Land? Sell and buy. Food? Sell and buy. Forest? Sell and buy. And because

they want to accumulate capital for themselves, human beings are deprived of their share, generating poverty. So financial capital is destroying the natural environment on the one hand, and causing poverty on the other hand. We need new values where our relationship with nature, our relationship with other people and our communities and craftsmanship and good agriculture, workmanship, where all these are given greater value than the value of money.

People in the West and perhaps especially Americans seem to be afraid of any discussion about alternatives to capitalism. How do we create an alternative economy? The West needn't fear alternatives to capitalism. Instead the West should fear capitalism itself. Because capitalism is bringing anxiety, pressure, inequality, crime, and ill health. The lack of wellbeing is caused by the modern paradigm. The alternative paradigm has communities sharing and caring for each other. A new paradigm where people are healthy, going out in nature and slowing down, rather than living frantic lives,

instead of working, shopping, shopping, working, endlessly, without peace, tranquility, or happiness or healthy relationships.

So they should cherish the alternative paradigm, because the modern way of life is dreadful. If they dare open their eyes to how communities, families, relationships are all breaking down; to how global warming is reaping havoc. New York had Hurricane Sandy with all the flooding, with the flooding coming along in California and in the southern part of America. Such natural disasters are increasing. So Americans need not fear the alternative way of life. They should welcome it.

Do you see your Slow Sunday movement and slower life as an alternative to capitalist culture? I think so. If at least one day a week, Slow Sunday, you slow down, be with family, with your children, go for a walk, cook a meal together, no shopping, driving, no airplanes, no fossil fuel use—at a stroke you can reduce one-seventh of carbon emission, and on the other hand have a happier life with your family, with your children, in nature: Celebrating, writing poetry, painting pictures, going for a walk. Slowing down at least one day a week is a step in the right direction.

But what I'm really saying is we need to visualize a new way of living at ease and not frantically busy, making money. Slow Sunday is one step in that direction.

What about the role of transitional towns? What are they? Are they important in this movement toward a different sort of life? They are very important. At the moment we are hitting the peak oil. Meaning that oil is becoming more and more difficult to reach. Demand is growing and the supply is diminishing. The transition town movement is a response to this; it says that faced with this situation, we need to take responsibility for change. We cannot wait for the White House or 10 Downing Street or the Kremlin, or any headquarters of the government to act. We take responsibility now, at this moment, and make changes to create our own local energy, our local food supply; create our local transportation, our local economy.

From globalization to localization is the way of transition. In the transition town movement in Britain there are 300 towns working on this. They are creating local solar energy, wind energy, water energy: all renewable and free of charge.

You don't have to go to Saudi Arabia, no need for fracking, and plundering tar sands in Canada. The sun is coming to your doorstep and on your rooftop, and water is coming to your rooftop and your garden and your field, and the wind is everywhere. Why not harvest them and use them rather than fracking and deep well drilling in the Gulf of Mexico or wherever?

The transition movement is change from the bottom up; it is a wonderful response where citizens are taking responsibility rather than waiting for governments to change the law.

I am the founder of Schumacher College, in the town called Totnes, the cradle of the transition town movement. Totnes is where the transition town movement began. Our teachers who come to teach at Schumacher College always go to Totnes and address the transition town people. And transition town people come to Schumacher College, and we work together in marvelous collaboration.

And is the transition town movement impacting or involving people of all classes and different ethnicities? Yes. In England, there is not much manufacturing any more. Most of those in the transition town movement are farmers, gardeners, shopkeepers, and people who work in offices and so on. A lot of ordinary people. Not just middle-class or elites. This is a movement for everybody, involving everybody.

When people like ourselves in the United States and other places are looking at the environmental movement, the changes that have to happen seem enormous, and they can be overwhelming. What kinds of progress should we take heart from? There is a tremendous interest in organic food and it's more and more available. And more and more farmers are taking up organic food, and more and more gardeners—although still I would not say it's not a majority, but it's a growing movement. Food is so fundamental. Our food has become very globalized, centralized, chemicalized. It's produced in a very atrocious, very negative way. And so we see the strong progress of the environmental ecological movement in the field of food production. Also there is a tremendous growth of complementary medicine. Lots and lots of people moving away from this very allopathic, chemical-based medicine—although still a minority, but a growing minority. It's a very good thing.

And then energy. Renewable energy is growing very fast in England, and also in the United States. About five, ten years ago, renewable energy was maybe 0.5% or 1% of energy use—now 5–6–7% of energy is coming from renewable sources. In Germany they have decided to completely free themselves from nuclear energy, and by 2025 they want to have 50% of their energy coming from solar, wind, and water. That's big progress. In Italy the same; in England as well.

So renewable energy, organic food, complementary medicine. And then vegetarianism. Ten, fifteen years ago, a very small number of people ate vegetarian food. And now even vegan food is becoming very popular, never mind vegetar-

ian. And that is also a step in the right direction. People are becoming aware. In Britain, if you add up membership of the National Trust, WWF, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and all the environmental NGOs together, their membership is about 10 million people. If 10 million people are working and supporting environmental causes, that is a cause for celebration and encouragement.

Can you say more about why vegetarianism is important?

For three reasons. Number one: ecological. If you feed humans with meat, you need five times more land than if you rely on a vegetarian-based diet because you have to have so many animals, and animals need so much land. And because of the methane they release, animals add to global warming. Then so much feed is being grown on the land to feed the animals. If you have a growing population of seven billion people and more growing, and eight or nine or ten billion in the next ten or fifteen years, then where are we going to find all that land for beef and sheep to feed so many people? Vegetarian food has a small footprint. You'll need much less land to feed people.

The second reason is health. Simple, delicious organic vegetarian food is much more healthy. In the United States, in Europe, in India, in China—wherever the practice of meat-eating is growing, cancer, heart disease, depression, many kinds of modern diseases increase because of this, I think. From an ecological point of view and health point of view, we need a largely vegetarian, plant-based diet. I am completely vegetarian myself, and I advocate complete vegetarianism from an ecological point of view and from a health point of view.

The third reason is spiritual. If we are compassionate, kind people, how can we kill sentient beings just because of their taste, for the sake of our palate? This is a very selfish and unspiritual, irreligious act, in my view. And so from a spirituality point of view, from a compassion and kindness point of view, I say vegetarianism is the right course of action for everybody. So ecologically, health-wise, and spiritually, we need to have vegetarianism.

You've talked about reconsidering science and the role that it plays in our world. What do you mean? I mean reconsidering science in the sense that science is concerned with the external world. Science cannot handle what cannot be measured. Therefore, we need to reconsider science; we need to have empirical knowledge. But that's only external. We also need internal values. What are the values that guide science? The great scientist Albert Einstein said, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." He recognized this fundamental unity between science and spirituality. If you have science without spiritual values, moral and ethical values, then science can lead to developing chemicals and fertilizers and pesticides, herbicides, all these things which bring disaster to our land and water. Nuclear weapons could never be produced if the science was guided by moral and

ethical values. Science could never do research for militarism or drug companies hell-bent on making profit at the expense of people's health. Therefore science without ethical, moral, spiritual values becomes a tool of exploitation.

So that is why I say science should be reconsidered. And we have many such new scientists, like Fritjof Capra, David Bohm, Vandana Shiva, Rupert Sheldrake, and Tim Flannery in Australia. The new paradigm is to bring science and spirituality together. Governments, the military, corporations—they all use science and technology to exploit people and nature, because they have no understanding of the spiritual dimension or concern for the ethical and moral dimension.

Yet without science, spirituality and religion can become fundamentalist. Christian fundamentalism or Muslim fundamentalism or Hindu or Buddhist fundamentalism, all arise in large measure because we have suspended our intellectual thinking, our scientific rational thinking.

If we can have a marriage of science and spirituality, the best of both worlds, we can have good ethics, moral values, community values, and also good innovation and technology. I want science and spirituality to go together.

You mentioned you're the founder of Schumacher College. Could you say something about what it's doing? Schumacher College is very much a college of holistic science, where science and spirituality are brought together. Schumacher College offers a master's program, master's degree in holistic science, which brings science and spirituality together, and ecology and economy together. We also offer a master's degree in economics of transition, to bring ecology and economy together. A holistic perspective means not having one side or the other side but bringing the two sides together, the yin and yang together, masculine and feminine together, nature and culture together, science and spirituality together, ecology and economics together. Multidisciplinary study or trans-discipline study is the hallmark of Schumacher College.

And when our graduates leave the college, I tell them, "We want you to be an eco-entrepreneur. We don't want you to study holistic science and holistic economics and then take a job in the corporate world, and exploit people and destroy nature. We want you to create eco-entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, where you are creating a new kind of economics, new kind of business. Where nature is protected and people are treated justly and fairly. Social justice and ecological sustainability should be the key to your new entrepreneurship."

Is this philosophy able to reach the people in the mainstream? Are you able to have an influence now at high levels of government policy and so on? It is not any one organization or one action or one college that can have total influence on policy or corporations. It is the combined effort of NGOs, of Schumacher College, of *Resurgence & Ecologist* magazine [edited by Satish] and many others like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, WWF, and other NGOs, writers and

spiritual people: Sufis, Buddhists, Zen, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Wangari Maathai, Vandana Shiva—all those people together. The combined influence is what is going to have a change in policy. We are part of the movement.

This question that takes us back to the spiritual—you were influenced powerfully by the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. What relevance do you think he and others have for us today in terms of their philosophy and their understanding? Tagore was deeply a spiritual and mystical poet. He was in the line of Kabir, Rumi, Hafiz, in the line of the great poets, Walt Whitman, Wendell Berry. These are the kind of people who are in similar spirit. Tagore's poetry is ecological and spiritual. And he started a small but wonderful holistic university at his place in rural Bengal to teach people a holistic education, how to respect nature and how to live with spiritual values: soil, soul, society. I have coined a trinity, a new trinity—soil, soul, society.

Soil represents the entire natural world. That's part of us. We are nature. Then soul—this is our internal spiritual, ethical, moral inner values. Outer landscape is a reflection of inner landscape. If we don't take care of the inner landscape, we cannot take care of the outer landscape. We destroy the outer landscape because we destroy our inner landscape. We have become greedy, materialistic, and war mongering.

Then society. We have to see the whole of society, human community, as one community. We are all related, interconnected, interdependent. We are made of each other. We cannot say that we are Americans and you are Iraqis or you are Russians, and Russians are enemies, or Americans are enemies; or Muslims are enemies, or Christians are enemies. We have to have diversity without division, and we have to have unity without uniformity. We are one humanity (that is unity) but we don't want uniformity, which is a modern-time obsession, conformity. You go everywhere with Levi jeans or McDonald's or Coca-Cola, or it's the same architecture; any downtown looks like New York or Chicago or San Francisco, anywhere you go. We want unity without uniformity, and we want diversity without division, and have that sense of spirituality, of inner landscape reflected in our society.

So soil, soul, society. It's the new trinity for our time. And I have written a new book called *Soil Soul Society*. Tagore and Gandhi are my heroes, and they have shown me the way of integrated thinking where outer/inner are integrated, where nature and culture are integrated, where science and spirituality are integrated. In our time, we have become divided and subdivided and fragmented. We need to go from fragmentation to wholeness, and bring spirit and matter together, because matter is imbibed by spirit, and spirit is embodied in matter. If you put those two together, spirit and matter, and treat matter in a respectful and reverential way, then that is the message of Tagore and Gandhi.