

# Introduction

At a time of confusion in my own life, I was thumbing through the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center Library, when I came across a slim volume by E. F. Schumacher entitled *A Guide for the Perplexed*. I instantly felt attracted to the title. It was a book for me. At that time, I was involved in a sort of mental debate in which was trying to articulate something that was very important, but was that wasn't really able to put my finger on. It was a very frustrating process. In my conversations, ships seemed to mostly pass each other in the night: it seemed that whomever I talked to didn't really seem to understand what I was trying to get at. Conversations seemed to skirt around some crucial topic, but one that was never mentioned. But what was it?

The discussion at Zen Center was, by most measures, relatively advanced. We were it was concerned with sustainability the one hand, and enlightenment, or spiritual growth on the other. The connection seemed to me rather tenuous. Through spiritual growth, one could develop more compassion for living things; through organic agriculture and taking part in local economies, one found a more rich life, strengthened community and cared for the earth. This was seen to be the crux of sustainability. It was all acceptable for me as far as it went, but I felt still that something was lacking. So I rummaged through the library and found *A Guide for the Perplexed*. This is how it begins:

“On a visit to Leningrad some years ago I consulted a map to find out where I was, but I could not make it out. From where I stood, I could see several enormous churches, yet there was no trace of them on my

map. When finally an interpreter came to help me, he said: 'We don't show churches on our maps.' ...It then occurred to me that this was not the first time I had been given a map which failed to show many things I could see right in front of my eyes. All through school and university I have been given maps of life and knowledge on which there was hardly a trace of many of the things that I most cared about and seemed to me to be of the greatest possible importance to the conduct of my life. I remembered that for many years my perplexity had been complete; and no interpreter had come along to help me. It remained complete until I ceased to suspect the sanity of my perceptions and began, instead to suspect the soundness of the maps."

E.F. Schumacher opened a large door and let a nourishing breeze fill the lungs of my heart. He told me that what I was feeling was legitimate. This was an enormous relief. However, knowing that there was nothing wrong with me by thinking that some important matter had been omitted did not solve the task of discovering exactly it was that had been omitted. In that sense, my story is a little different than Schumacher's. But what he was saying to me was, there is something that you are experiencing that is valid, and yet is not being represented on the maps of reality.

I seemed to be going into uncharted territories, or ones that were at least unknown to me, and to the people I knew, and the going was slow. I have since learned that this is itself an important fact. That's the way it is with evolution. We fumble and experiment, go beating up blind-alleys, only discovering the blindness of the alley after considerable work. Change comes slowly, bit by bit, with thousands, millions of little changes along the way. So it was with me. It is said that one of the ways that the Buddha described enlightenment was to name all the things that it is not. My progress was sort-of like that, a slow process of inching along, asking myself, is this it? Is this it?

This process did lead me on, and the most important clue I had was that whatever it was, it had to do with *me*, with my own experience. The first time that I was profoundly aware of it was when I was about ten, when I visited Yosemite National Park, and then did not experience it again until I went off to a boarding school located outside a small town deep in the mountains, a hundred miles from Los Angeles. Just beyond the boundary of the campus, was an immense river-gorge overlooked by a rock that towered above it, offering a breath-taking view, which we called The Point. At The Point, I found a place to sit that comfortably overlooked this marvelous vista, and there I sat, mostly motionless, sometimes for hours at a time, taking in the view. What was happening? Somehow that place was feeding me in a very important way. Without knowing it, I had taken up the timeless practice of contemplating in the context of nature. My mind became calm. I felt myself becoming mysteriously more whole, more myself, more complete. It seemed that nature automatically brought me back to my true self, a self that didn't need to be altered or improved, but was simply sufficient just as I was.

Some years later, I became a Buddhist monk monk, and lived on the rural campus of Green Gulch Zen Center. I spent many weeks at a time meditating for hours a day, walking occasionally to the beach, but never driving anywhere. This gave me an unexpected insight. My daily contact with computers, cars, telephones, and the other technologies of modern life had been fairly continuous. For most of us, they form part of our everyday existence, and we rarely have occasion to leave them behind for than a few days. At Green Gulch, I didn't get into a car, nor go anywhere other than with my feet for about nine weeks. I lived in a converted barn, mostly of wood, lit by soft lights, and often

with candles. Even inside, nature was quite close, and made up the materials of my surroundings. There was something very sustainable about that way of life. By this I mean, it sustained me; it nourished me in a way very much like the natural world did.



*The residence-hall at Green Gulch*

At the end of my nine-week retreat, a friend invited me to go with her on a five-minute drive to the local beach in her car. It was a shocking experience. The car was nothing unusual, a completely average car, all made of plastic and synthetic materials on the inside. It was the first time in nine weeks that I had been surrounded by such an artificial environment, and it was also the first time that I was moving faster than my legs could carry me. It felt deeply unnatural, fundamentally alienating. It was as if, by having only contact with natural materials and forms for only a few weeks, I had inwardly transformed. I had come more into tune, as it were, with the natural world. Stepping into a car, I was now aware of how unnatural it was. I started to realize that sustainability was about me. I could feel sustained, nourished, supported, or not, and this was *in some way* connected to this bigger thing, out there, in the world, that we call sustainability.



### *Car interior made of artificial materials*

The point was driven home for me by the experience of a short stint living in Los Angeles. Even with an only dim environmental awareness, I knew somehow that Los Angeles was a place in which man was attempting to deny the laws of the Universe. The environment was unsurpassingly ugly: mile after mile of concrete, metal bars and soulless apartment buildings. They seemed to be so un-genuine, so removed from that wholesomeness I had felt in nature. One had to somehow be very cut off from that wholesomeness to build such hideous cheap apartment buildings and give them cynical names like “Ocean chalet”.

Los Angeles, in its massive vacancy, was characterized by another important aspect: its non-place-ness. A famous study by one of urban planning’s most important spokespeople, Kevin Lynch, dealt with Los Angeles, contained a quotation which described this well:

“It’s as if you drove for a very long time to get there, and when you got there, you discovered there was nothing there after all.” (this quote is as I remember it, and needs to be checked). The reactions of the people interacting with this environment were actually quite natural, given the circumstances. Those who could afford it, sealed themselves off from it in their cars. Those who could not, who were forced to live in the concrete streets were sick, mentally ill, poor, sometimes violent. This was the effect of the concrete jungle.

Just as the mountain-top seemed to be supporting me, making me whole, so this was environment robbing its inhabitants of their basic humanity.

One day I got into an argument with someone about Los Angeles. I said Los Angeles was an ugly city. He got quite irate. He told me about how beautiful the view could be when you're driving on the freeway and you have the view of the city with the mountains behind it around sunset. I was sitting at dinner with a room full of architects all thirty years my senior, and no one came to my rescue; I fell silent; I didn't have a good reply. Now I can see that he was telling me about how beautiful it looked, as a sort of picture, a movie, viewed from behind the screen of the car-windshield. This was the ultimate Los Angeles description, a description of a world that has so thoroughly lost its way that truth and fiction are indistinguishable. Los Angeles, after all, is, if nothing else, unsustainable. It is characterized by enormous and needless waste and pollution, environmental degradation, and consumption.

There seemed to be a correlation between on the one side those natural, wholesome, self-sustaining spiritually enriching places on the one hand, and those artificial, fragmented, unsustainable and deadening urban-scapes on the other. What was it? This is a fundamentally important question. It is not just that one is natural and the other is man-made. The Green Gulch barn was a very nurturing place, and there are many built environments that likewise are deeply nourishing. It is in fact, possible to create an environment that nurtures the human soul, and that are also very sustainable. Moreover, an environment that nurtures the human soul will almost certainly *be* sustainable, because, somehow, they are one and the same thing.

When I decided to leave monastic life, I naively thought that creating such

sustainable environments must be the domain of Architecture, and went optimistically off to visit architecture departments at universities. I was dismayed by the models and design. The talk everywhere was of sustainability, and there were many good examples of buildings that were sustainable by all sorts of measures – outfitted with double-paned windows and solar panels, water collectors, and so on. But They were soulless. They didn't seem to *nurture* me at all.



*The ecologically sustainable house, covered with solar panels, but without a soul.*

This was a very perplexing experience. I was tempted to feel there must be something wrong with me. After all, I was not an architect. Surely it was the job of the architect not only to have good taste, to be able to design a beautiful building, but also to attend to that special relationship that human beings have to the built environment? I had felt it at Green Gulch. I had also felt it in the gothic cathedral in Cologne for example, and in little Italian hilltop towns. In these places, I felt instantly at home, calm, in awe. What is it that makes these buildings special? I didn't know. But what is most extraordinary about these buildings and towns is that *they* are the true sustainable buildings and towns. They have already stood and been cared for, for many centuries. Today's architecture has turned its back on these kinds of structures, I believe

mistakenly. The buildings being produced now very rarely give us that feeling of wholeness that we so desperately need. In fact, they are moving further and further away from being able to. They are ugly, they make us uncomfortable, and they separate us from our inner-most selves. In discovering these things, I had started to put my finger on what it was I had been searching for but couldn't articulate, namely the sustainable relationship between the human being and her environment.

Sustainable human settlements are nothing new. What is a mystery, that is in danger of dying out, is the understanding of how such structures came into existence, how the sustainable human-environment relationship actually works, and how it can in the future. This, I argue is the issue that stands before us as we try to create a sustainable world. We must learn to understand what that process is – what Christopher Alexander calls the “timeless way” of building - and learn the competences that are needed now to create a sustainable world that is in accord with that “timeless way.”