

## Book Review

### **The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability**

Speth, James Gustav. 2008. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

Review by **Jan Inglis**

This book is a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and hopes that lie amidst the interconnections of the environmental movement, the growth economy, consciousness, and democracy. Author “Gus” Speth is former administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, founder of both the World Resources Institute and the Natural Resources Defence Council, and currently Dean of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University. In his earlier book, *Red Sky at Morning*, Speth focused on global environmental threats and international responses. By contrast, in this book he considers underlying structures of issues and solutions at more local and national scales. Although written from an American perspective the observations and conclusions appear transferable to a broad audience.

In reading this book I appreciated his vulnerability in detailing the enormity of the challenges we are dealing with, while at the same time stepping off his well-deserved expert’s podium, stating he did not have any easy answers to offer. I resonated with his naming of the resistance that arises when even talking of such things.

It is easy to push these challenges out of one’s mind. Life for many of us is comfortable, and dwelling on such disturbing material is painful. Indeed, one still hears with regularity that it is a mistake to stress these gloomy and doomy realities if one wants to motivate people. In *The Death of Environmentalism*, Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus remind us, for example, that Martin Luther King, Jr., did not proclaim, “I have a nightmare.” My reply to them was that he did not need to say it — his people were living a nightmare. They needed a dream. But we, I fear, are living a dream. We need to be reminded of the nightmare ahead. Here is the truth as I see it: we will never do the things that are needed unless we know the full extent of our predicament. (p. 234)

Speth not only names our entwined environmental, economic, social, and political predicament, but also describes how this predicament was built and is maintained. He attempts to help us step outside of the system, or systems, in order to adequately critique the complex interlocking nature of their dysfunctional patterns. Having surfaced these challenges, the book leads us into his and others’ insights into dismantling them and building something new. Details of this new story, or dream, which can be created only after the nightmare has been acknowledged, make up the last part of the book.

**In Part One, Systems Failure**, Speth describes the abyss we are facing: climate disruption, loss of forests, land, freshwater, marine fisheries, and biodiversity. He talks of a growth economy that lacks self-reflective and self-correcting capacities and is therefore on a collision course with



the environment and species sustainability. He digs deep into the root causes of how this collision has been created and politically entrenched, analyzing the structures of capitalism. He goes on to analyze why the environmental movement, although successful in many ways, has failed to produce effective action. He concludes that this resulted from working within a system without the benefit, in my words, of being able to bump up the perspective in order to create a metavision adequate to transform the systems within systems.

**In Part Two, The Great Transformation,** Speth uses specific examples to outline what it would take to shift markets, pricing, corporate dynamics and our preoccupation with growth towards something more sustainable. He lays out how a functional relationship could occur between government regulations, entrepreneurial new technologies, public values and a new form of green economy. Instead of just the GNP, the health of people and nature could finally be placed as a significant indicator on a national barometer of well being. He unpacks our addiction to consumerism and desire for happiness, examining what has allowed us to merge the two. This reveals a cultural blind spot since research has repeatedly proven that beyond a certain point an increase in earning and spending does not correlate with an increase in the satisfactions of life.

**In Part Three, Seedbeds of Transformation,** two drivers of transformative change are offered: a new consciousness and a new politics. Speth indicates that underlying the necessary changes to public policy and behaviours lies the requisite changes in values, worldviews and ways of relating. He advocates for a new environmental politics for transforming capitalism, consumerism, and social inequities, which would include increased participation through deliberative democracy.

For someone like myself, feeling compelled to learn more about responses to the climate crisis but being overwhelmed by the abundance of books and articles available, Speth provides a high quality one-stop shopping experience. Not just tapping into his own experience and viewpoints, he also is prolific in quoting and integrating many other experts in many fields such as Milton Friedman, Paul Hawken, Herman Daly, Max Weber, Donella Meadows, Paul Ehrlich, Howard Gardner, Peter Senge, and Bill Moyer, to name just a familiar few. He does not attempt to find quick easy solutions to that which is very complex. He does, however, move beyond the propensity of many other authors who stop short at proclaiming vague and often unexamined prescriptions of what we “should” do. Although indicating that he too was once part of the “us and them” framework that has coloured the environment versus economics battle for years, his writing has clearly transcended this structure of thinking.

Speth’s language and field of work do not reflect the usual parlance of the integral and developmental world. However, to me this book indicates his inherent recognition of the need to work with the many factors necessary to understand and adequately work with the whole. He includes some reflections on the changes and natural progressions he has noted not only in himself over time but also in the environmental and economic systems. These understandings frame his projections of what steps are needed for a sustainable future. The observations in the book include analysis, and comparisons of the structures, limitations and interactions of several metasystems and in hierarchical complexity terms indicate a paradigmatic stage of performance.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Commons, M. L. & Ross, S. N. (2008). What postformal thought is, and why it matters. *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution*, 64(5-7), 321-329.

There is also anticipation, although not quite creation, of a new field that could coordinate a new political, ecological, and economic paradigm. I can project scenarios of what might happen if these considerations were combined with those of developmentalists such as Bill Torbert in his use of action inquiry to transform power and politics, and Sara Ross in her research of integral approaches to respond to complex public issues. This could make for one awesome cross paradigmatic, world influencing, new field and new approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century issues!

Several times, Speth mentions that the impetus for breaking the gridlock that consumerism and capitalism has on the environmental movement and our consciousness might require some form of dramatic collapse. The multifaceted recipe he lays out is:

...a calamity or breakdown (or, ideally, the public anticipation of one brought on by many warnings and much evidence), occurring in the presence of wise leadership and a new narrative that helps make sense of it all and provide a positive vision, urged on by a demanding citizens' movement that fuses social and environmental causes, informed and broadened by well-conceived social marketing campaigns, joined by a contagious proliferation of real-world examples that point the way. (p. 215)

This book was published early in 2008, several months before the economic collapse and American election. These recent occurrences therefore beg for an epilogue as there is, for me, this tantalizing question left hanging: Does Speth think that this is the collapse and the new leadership that will stimulate a new consciousness, a new politics, and a bridge to a new world?

**Jan Inglis** has written for *Integral Review*, specifically in the area of climate crisis. She specializes in developmental and integral approaches to complex social issues. She is the director of the Integrative Learning Institute, [www.integrativelearninginstitute.com](http://www.integrativelearninginstitute.com), which offers coaching, consulting, and training to individuals and organizations committed to comprehensive social change. Her background includes community development, adult education, psychotherapy, and art. She is a board member of ARINA, Inc., and lives in Nelson B.C.

Email: [janinglis@telus.net](mailto:janinglis@telus.net)