

# ECOLOGY OF THE GRAIL

## SUSTAINABILITY AND THE HUMAN QUEST

BY PROFESSOR GREGORY URBAN



MATTHEW LEAKE / DIANE PIZZUTO

Human beings are goal-oriented creatures, and over the past 200 years, one goal has come to dominate the planet—the quest for material wealth. That quest has had enormous benefits, producing prosperity for greater numbers and helping to integrate the planet into a single social system. It has also produced the sustainability problem—the consumption of resources that threatens to exceed the capacity of the Earth to support our species.

The solution to the sustainability problem, from the perspective of culture, seems obvious. If the problem lies in the dominant goal—the acquisition of material wealth—then we need to reshape it. But what goal should we want? And how can that goal be put into place?

I am not proposing that we get rid of material-wealth acquisition as a goal, but I am proposing a shift in the dominant goal, the grail of human existence, from acquisition of the most material wealth to pursuit of the best quality of life. To be successful, a shift of this sort would have to take place in the orientation of individuals, nations and especially business corporations. It would also have to make sense in terms of religious belief systems concerned with the meaning of existence, and it would need a metric of success as transparent and powerful as the metric of money.

At any given moment, there are various dominant goals at play around the world, from political and military power to social status or religious salvation. The current grail of human existence, the quest for material wealth, can teach us about the kind of goal we should want precisely because it has done so much good. It facilitates the construction of a field of competition with a clearly defined metric of success—money—and the contest does not necessarily lead to violence. Unlike systems of hereditary social status, it is open to all, and the grail of material wealth facilitates the organization of a global society, integrating distinct social systems and cultures. Any dominant goal should be open ended, making room for the restlessness of human questing and the inevitability of change. It should also ensure that human beings live within the carrying capacity of the environment. Pursuit of the best quality of life is a reasonable candidate for fulfilling all of the above, with the question of a clear metric for measuring success being most doubtful.

How might it prove possible to rearrange human priorities to shift the grail of human existence?

As goal-oriented creatures, humans spend their lives pursuing goals that individuals find meaningful and satisfying. If the dominant grail of human existence were the pursuit of best quality of life, we would have to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of meaningful human ends: wood-working, plumbing, pursuit of knowledge, healing and so forth. The

ends themselves will be diverse, but their common theme will be the grail of human betterment. The media, our educational institutions and community organizations could serve as important resources for shifting attention from wealth as the dominant goal and elevating life quality and the diversity of meaningful ends.

National governments would need to make their dominant goal the maximization of the quality of life, not the maximization of GNP or GDP. Much current research suggests that wealth accumulation is not the same as the pursuit of happiness or a quality life. This is where cultures need to intervene, as they have in the past, to define the meaningful quests of human life. Governments can initiate conversations about the different quality lives their societies should envision, but

the collective grail of a better life needs to be linked to the culturally defined set of life goals that motivate people and make their lives meaningful and fulfilling.

The recent push to conceptualize modern business corporations as “citizens” can go a long way toward

reprioritizing. Corporate citizenship means not just acting in the interests of shareholders or even the surrounding communities but also in the interests of employees. The challenge for visionary business leaders is to combine the profit motive with citizenship.

Citizenship would mean acting in accord with quality-of-life goals laid down by nations based on conversations across boundaries—within the United Nations, for instance. Such a debate harkens back to philosophical discussions in Ancient Greece about how to lead a “good life.” These are conversations we have largely set aside, but I am suggesting that they need to re-emerge. A quality life is led by pursuing meaningful human ends, made meaningful in part because they are recognized as worthy by collectivities and, hopefully, by humanity in general.

Among the goals for betterment must be a concern for future generations. An improvement in the quality of life is no improvement at all, if it cannot last. The Iroquois Indians considered the impact of every decision not only on the present generation but also on the next seven generations. If this could become an acknowledged quality-of-life desideratum for corporations and governments, we would go a long way toward ensuring sustainability. ♦

---

*Gregory Urban is the Arthur Hobson Quinn Professor of Anthropology. “Ecology of the Grail” is based on a talk he gave at the 2009 Oslo Sustainability Summit.*