

***Listening to the Softest Voices:  
Finding Hopefulness on the Path with Heart***

**Plenary Address to the Pathways to Sustainability Conference,  
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*The path to your door  
Is the path within:  
Is made by animals,  
Is lined with flowers,  
Is lined by thorns,  
Is stained with wine,  
Is lit by the lamp of sorrowful dreams:  
Is washed with joy,  
Is swept by grief,  
Is blessed by the lonely traffic of art:  
Is known by heart,  
Is known by prayer,  
Is lost and found,  
Is always strange,  
The path to your door.*

Michael Leunig, 1993.

Sitting in my garden, looking up at the moon and the stars and feeling peaceful.

I feel a sense of acceptance for the great, sprawling city where I live. Sydney. Not that I deny the problems. They are everywhere. Pollution, tangled freeways, cars everywhere and people tearing around like cut snakes. I fear for Nature, for the Earth. And yet I feel encouraged--for the first time in a long while. Sitting in my garden. Looking up at the stars.

I think the prospect of this Conference has something to do with it. Because it's about Sustainability. And Pathways.

Don't misunderstand me. Of course, I'm afraid for the Earth. For Nature. And the more I read the more fearful I become. My fear for Nature is alive inside me. Every newspaper and journal I read--every book about the environmental crisis--convince me that I should be afraid for all of us. I'm working on it every day. But, for the present, my fear is not struggling with me. I am feeling grateful.

Why feel grateful? I hear you ask. The Earth is dying? Yes, I believe that the Earth is dying. **And** I believe that we can still make a difference. The reason is that, reluctantly, I am becoming *hopeful*. I can't explain exactly why. It has something to do with caring. With teachers. With sustainability. And with Pathways.

I've had a circuitous journey to this Conference and the views I now hold about sustainability and hope. I have come from town planning practice, having cut my teeth on Australian social planning issues for nearly three decades. Long time in the trenches.

I think things really began to change about seven years ago. In October, 1990, I was invited to speak on a conference on local government and the environment in Adelaide. Some of you probably attended that Conference. The night before, the organisers invited the two interstate speakers to dinner: myself and Peter Newman. It was the first time I had met him. Peter was talking about Hope with an openness and enthusiasm I found quite alarming. He was explaining how his wife was about to give birth to their third child. Sam--the energetic outcome of that hopeful decision--is now in his first year of primary school. Peter was sparkling with the delight of it all. His

hopefulness was contagious. Having a child a little late in life was, for Peter and Jan, a great statement of Hope. Hope that Sam would have a world to grow up in.

My first contact with Newman had a profound impact on me. I tried to find hope in my despair. But it was difficult. When I wrote up my paper after the conference, I called one section *Confronting Despair*:

*There are now well established ways of addressing despair about global environmental issues. Simply cramming more **information** into our already overcrowded heads is not the solution. Concentrating on "being optimistic" is not the solution, either. Before we can embrace empowerment, that state where we believe deeply that collectively local actions can make a difference, we must discover how to express this unfathomable grief. This work can be done in protected and supportive environments; it will release, strengthen and focus us for our greater tasks. I sense most strongly that only by openly and unashamedly acknowledging our grief **and** our commitment will we pledge ourselves to effective collaborative environmental work at the local level. Only then will we truly be prepared to work. For all our sakes.*

Actually, my concern had been growing for some time, beginning about seven or eight years before: the late eighties. About the time that everyone was talking about *sustainable this* and *sustainable that*. By 1990 or 1991, I was deeply despairing. I felt it was all talk and no action. Within my profession, town planning, however, it was actually worse than all talk and no action. There was a lot of talk, a lot of denial, some skulduggery and deceit and a lot of cynicism. Those of you with really green hearts would weep if you heard what a group of planners told me in 1992 about ecologically sustainable development. Just for a taste:

*I see you quoted saying something rude about cars. My belief is that the car is such a liberating invention that technology will soon make private transport less polluting and accessible to a wider age / physical ability range.*

*Someone (you?) should establish whether local food production is good or bad for ESD. I suspect it's certainly not beneficial and may even be the reverse.*

Well, questions of sustainability got me started on this journey. I tried to understand what it was-- and where I fitted in with it. My planning colleagues weren't in the least interested. I was a *social* planner. Stay with what you know, they cautioned me. This is not your affair. Leave sustainability (and the environmental crisis) to the experts.

In 1992 I made a list of the reasons that Australian planners were using to avoid being honest with themselves about sustainability. It went like this:

1. VALUES CONFLICTS: There is a basic conflict of values operating: developers are pro-development by definition; planners working for them are their paid employees or consultants whose jobs are not to question whether development should take place but to make it happen quickly and efficiently.
2. FEAR: Planners and other members of teams may be experiencing a core fear of the future, feeling despair and powerlessness and feeling that they need to appear confident despite their inner conflicts about the impact of environmental problems on this and subsequent generations.
3. SHORT TIME FRAMES: Despite our commitment to planning and "developing communities", we are used to operating within relatively short time frames; we rarely evaluate their projects after they have been occupied twenty years; post-

occupancy evaluation is virtually unheard of among planners; approval comes from peers, not from those using the environment or evaluating it in terms of ESD. This tradition of short-term thinking does not predispose us to inspect the long-term ecological consequences of development choices.

4. UNRELIABLE DATA: Data on the ecologically responsible choices to make in site development are not always easily come by in a form which can be readily translated into guidelines for site development. Often the concerns are invisible (like the hole in the ozone layer; Greenhouse gases; some forms of soil, air and water pollution). It is difficult to find trustworthy information sources.
5. DISCREDITING "THE COMMUNITY" AS AN INFORMATION SOURCE: Concerns about environmental issues often emanate from "the community". Because of their experience with "top-down" planning, most planners have learned to mistrust "the community", treat them as an unreliable source, discredit the content of their concerns and do not know to handle them. Further, information from "the community" is frequently communicated to other planning team members by the social planner, who often does not understand technical or scientific data and is unable to do more than communicate it.
6. NOT UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: We don't understand the problem, the urgency of the imperatives. We simply do not have adequate access to information to provide them with the capacity to ask the questions. (The recession contributes to this, making it less likely that we will undertake further study, attend conferences, even subscribe to journals and buy books; few planning firms now undertake research, as it is seen as too costly.)
7. NOT KNOWING HOW TO FRAME THE QUESTION: Planners and developers simply don't know how to formulate questions or address ecological problems. Either we have developed as narrow specialists or are generalists who are incapable of understanding scientific and technical arguments.
8. SEPARATION FROM THE LAND: We rarely get close enough to the land on development sites to understand the ecological constraints. It is rare that all members of a development team visit and inspect a site thoroughly and discuss its potential problems (including those problems which are of such a grave nature that the project could be at risk of not continuing). Development of CAD and other systems further separates planners from the land. Most site-planning decisions are made some distance from the site.
9. PREVIOUS ANTI-ENVIRONMENTAL STANDS: Many older planners have taken public positions over the years discrediting "alternative" approaches, especially with regard to solar power, natural drainage systems, and other low-impact approaches. They have been outspoken advocates of efficient technical solutions to development problems. Backing down from these often entrenched positions can be very difficult, especially in times of economic stringency, where keeping up a consistent and confident image is important for credibility.
10. PLANNING AS A "DISABLING PROFESSION": Our professional bodies have failed (with few admirable exceptions) to provide leadership or guidance to use to encourage holistic thinking, team-work approaches, to support radical approaches. We are a conservative bunch who have difficult breaking out of traditional ways of doing things.
11. NOT ENOUGH TIME: Particularly in recent times with severe economic restraint in planning, smaller budgets, staff cuts, fast-tracking, we do not have the time to

evaluate read, reflect. We are doing things "on the run". To think through something from first principles takes time which we do not have.

12. AESTHETIC CONCERNS: Some of us seem to be operating on the assumption that implementing 'ecological' approaches will result in "unsightly" solutions with negative impacts in urban design terms: banks of solar water heaters, vast wind farms, odd-shaped buildings designed for solar access, intrusive "technology" marring the landscape.

The environmental philosophers among you will probably laugh at my list. I didn't know anything about philosophy when I wrote it. Now I would add anthropocentrism, utilitarianism, rationalism, and something about alternative epistemologies. But in those early days, in terms of my journey, that was the best I could do.

By mid-1991, my frustration had reached crisis point. I was travelling all the time, hearing endless pronouncements about ESD. Writing to the ESD Secretariat about the frightfully botched community consultation held in Darwin, where I had been working as a consultant, I exclaimed: "in all my years working as a planner, your Darwin workshop was one of the poorest examples of community consultation I have ever participated in." Further, I implored the organisers to let me help. For the following reasons:

*I really do want to be involved in your process. It's my planet too and I want to be consulted. I want to work in partnership with you to heal the planet. I really want to learn about and contribute to ecologically sustainable development. As a planner I have a lot to share and a lot to contribute. I am willing to direct you to books and articles and people who would be able to help you design a real participatory process which honestly listens to the voices of Australians about this important topic.*

I was crying out for help. But nobody, except my environmental activist friends, would listen. Others simply could not hear my words. I tried to find allies within my profession who were willing to embrace ESD. But I was met by cynicism and mockery. "Back in your box, dear." Back to social planning.

Ten months later, I wrote from the bush to these same people about their draft ESD report. It wasn't as bad as the consultation, but it wasn't good, either. This time I sounded like this:

*. . . I cannot tell you how disappointed I am with the result. I desperately hope that you will consider my comments and those of the other people who have been able to comment on the Draft Strategy. I am certainly eager to enter into a discussion about my concerns. I do hope that you will take them seriously. . . .*

*It feels as though there is no "heart" in your report And yet if we love this planet and work to save it, we will have to do it with our hearts, won't we? You must know that your report lacks heart. It glimmers solely in the "gender" section. As I yawned my way through your report, I struggled to find the passion and commitment which could lead us to save our dying planet. If you have it, why not let it show? If not you, who? If not now, when?*

*. . . It sounds like you believe we're dealing with a **technical** problem. I don't want to see all the ESD research and development*

*money spent on scientific studies. I believe that "listening to communities" will help you chart a course for us out of the current problem. There is great wisdom in the Australian community. We are ready to lead the leaders. . . .*

When it came to the Australian sustainability debate, I was not a happy camper.

About a year after the conference where I met Peter Newman, I began a different journey: a Ph.D. in midlife. And in environmental ethics, what's more!

In November, 1991, I closed down my consulting practice, managed to score a government scholarship (thank you, Mr. Keating), and went bush. I was led to wonderful teachers and strange acquaintances. I learned a new language: philosophy. And I found a place in my heart for this living Earth. Along the way, I touched the depths of that sorrow for our Earth I could only taste in 1990. And I experienced, at a palpable level, the Earth's compassion, forgiveness, nourishment and support. I struggle with the constraints of urban life now as I remember the nourishment I experienced in a small patch of eucalypt forest outside Darwin. That's why I'm sitting on my porch staring up at the stars.

I lived in a small house in the tropical bush near Darwin. (It was almost worth it for the postal address: just me, Humpty Doo Post Office, Northern Territory.) A hand-made house of 69 trees. No walls. A dirt floor. One solar panel. Bore water. Very, very hot and very, very humid. Rough conditions for an urban person whose idea of construction was hanging a picture! Sitting there, staring up at the stars, I thought about despair. And about Hope. I read everything I could put my hands on about environmental ethics and sustainability. And I tried to figure out what my profession could do about it.

Writing a conference paper for the biannual conference of the Royal Australian Planning Institute to be held in April, 1992, I penned the following despairing message from the bush:

*I firmly maintain that our urban planning and development practices lack a holistic ecological perspective. Little more than lip service is currently being paid to principles of ESD in most major housing projects. In interdisciplinary planning teams, great confusion reigns about ESD, its application, the reliability of the information which underpins (or seeks to underpin) its principles. Confusion about who should have responsibility for the ecological consequences of decisions about destruction of native vegetation, road widths and materials, use of rainforest timbers, natural drainage systems, density issues and the like.*

*In my experience, the residential planning process looks something like this. A team is formed by the client (a private or government developer or joint-venture consortium) of consultants who have some or all of the following characteristics: they have worked well and efficiently for the client in the past; they are compliant and do not make a fuss about issues which cannot be easily resolved on the site; they work well together; they are well connected politically, especially with the local council or State government; they have expertise which is necessary for this particular site (hydrology, marine ecology, etc.).*

But they do not care for Nature.

About this time, I started asking myself why planning in Australia had so few heroes, so few leaders. And why so many planners seemed antagonistic to all this hopefulness emanating from Western Australia. From Peter Newman. Why was there such a furore over cities and automobile

dependence? Why, indeed! Any fool could see that cars were bad for cities and modern cities were bad for life. And what was bad for life was truly bad.

I lived alone quietly in the bush for thirteen months. I read and thought. And looked up at the stars. I read about sustainability. And I decided, finally, that I was dealing with ethics. Not literacy. Not knowing the answers. But being in possession of a few good questions.

Not surprisingly, I had a whole set of new questions after a year of reflection. I concluded that an ethic of caring for Nature was what it was all about. Caring for Nature with a capital "N". Rich, green and juicy Nature. Not "the environment". *Nature*

Sometimes, I could barely speak for the wonder of the bush as it captured and infused my spirit. Here's a letter dreamed part way through my sojourn.

*We've had an amazing two weeks of storms and rain, as a result of a cyclone off the coast. For a while it was acting exactly the same as Cyclone Tracy in 1974, but then it dissipated north over the Arafura Sea.*

*It has given me back my creek.*

*If the fire has been the process of my transformation, the creek has been the substance of it. Does that make any sense? I have always felt the source of my inspiration, my strength and my healing, reside in this little creek. Daily I experience its rejuvenating qualities.*

*And so, when it was returned to life--like a gift--last week, I was overjoyed.*

*I feel blessed, pardoned, forgiven. . .*

*I am getting a second chance to participate in its life, its transformation.*

*It's a miracle! One day dry creek, sandy and dead. Then suddenly tiny fish nibble my hip. Laughing, I spill my morning cup of tea. A water goanna lumbers by on the bank, ignoring me. The birds are rapturous.*

*I can't begin to explain what it means to live on a creek here. It's microcosm of everything, seen and unseen. It's habitat and drinking place. Wallabies drink at sunset: I discover fine filigree of paw prints in the soft morning earth. Frogs launch cadence competitions. Water weeds astonish me with new fluorescence. Wherever did they come from? Wherever do they go in the Dry?*

*Creek is celebration, joy, exuberance. Up to my neck in clear water, I sit for hours. Canopy of *Carallia*, *Melaleuca*, *Lophostemon*, *Pandanus* just let in light, like diamonds, glancing off sharp fronds. Fire-blackened *Pandanus* spirals from sandy banks. Bending down to creek, bending to look at me, my house. I speechless with delight. Need nothing more. Have water, birdsong, peace.*

*And all around life bursting out.*

*Upstream, spring contributes to creek, just above footbridge, meeting muddy water rushing down the firebreak. By the time it's here, at house, clear again, singing past me.*

*It's source of life. Our aquifer. We drink it downstream. Creek is a landmark. Shared symbol of our common purpose. Runs through common and private land. Boundary between sacred and profane. Creek is sacred, birthing place. Protection. Creek is shelter, food. . .*

*It's life. It's surrender. When fire rages I immerse in creek. Dig in creekbed. Tunnel into creekbank. Deepening, I become creek. I am coterminous with creektime. Creekcels dance in mine, reciprocating. Creek is source, lineage, flowing into future.*

*Creek is hope.*

Listening to the creek. Looking up at the stars. Reading about ethics. It was a hard life. The more I read about ethics, the more I began to realise that most of the really painful times in my professional life related to disagreements about ETHICS. I began to understand the paradoxes and dilemmas in professional life as ETHICAL QUESTIONS. And the bush was teaching me on another level, too. I began to listen to its softest voices. And they certainly had a lot to tell me. The undifferentiated "green wall" of the surrounding forest began to unravel before my eyes and reveal its colours. And all sorts of other things happened--about compassion, forgiveness, freedom--too many and too deep to talk about here. But real, nevertheless.

Sitting on my porch looking up at the stars in the tropical sky, I reflected on all those social planning battles. And I thought again about Newman. Wondered how he was doing with the cities I'd temporarily abandoned. Everybody I read seemed to cite this Newman person and his offside, Kenworthy. Why was everyone so up in arms about this auto-dependence stuff? What was he really on about, anyway? From my detached perspective in the tropical bush, I decided to find out. There was an easy way, of course. There was a post office at Humpty Doo. Even phones and a fax at the Bush Shop.

But I had to do it the hard way: I transferred my candidature from Adelaide University and enrolled as Peter's Ph.D. student at the Institute for Science and Technology Policy (ISTP) at Murdoch University. Back full circle to learning about Hope. At ISTP. (The initials form the acronym which ISTP insiders mostly prefer: *The Institute for Saving the Planet.*)

I've been associated with ISTP for nearly five years now and expect to continue forever. Learning to celebrate action; delight in change; be nourished by fruitfulness and the blossoming of commitment. Kind of learning about Hope, really. (When I wasn't learning Excel!) And I've struggled mightily with it. I've stormed around the Institute in indignant, feminist rages. Had my heart touched. Learned heaps. Learning about Hope. We've debated it in corridors and cafes, Newman and I. As student and teacher, teacher and student. Earth Mother and the preacher. Debates on Christianity, Buddhism, ecofeminism, alternative epistemologies, ontologies, all sorts of "ologies" and philosophies of every description.

We've had arguments about gender, spirituality, writing my resume, high-density housing, spatial inequality, blowing the whistle, urban villages, getting your work published, ESD, and radical action. About collusion and selling out. About despair. And Hope.

This bloody Hope. Always coming back to this bloody Hope. I've wrestled with this bloody Hope. Sometimes it feels so male, so "objective", so neat. Always this bloody Hope. I can tell you, I've been a **very** resistant student. But you know what they say, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." Or is it the other way around? In any case, I found in this teacher the embodiment of Hope. And funny though it may seem, it's taken coming back, quite reluctantly, to the only place in Australia I swore I'd never inhabit again to make me feel hopeful. Sydney. The *Big Smoke*. I'm not kidding. What a name for Pollution City! Seven hours of rush hour per day!

But I now understand something about Hope that I did not understand before. Hope does not imply agreement, condoning, approval, acceptance, satisfaction, collusion or inaction. It's about something altogether different. In fact, to have it, we have to be alive to *possibility*. Hope requires embodiment for it to be palpable. That's what the creek taught me. At some level, it's got to be juicy. It's got to be in our bodies, embodied. A body of Hope.

And it requires listening. To the softest voices: inner voices, wild voices, angry, critical and provocative voices, ones with a hundred different points of view. Poles apart: like Peter and Wendy on a bad day. And listening to even softer voices: the voices of Nature. Taking time. Creektime.

Listening is a skill that needs teaching, I discovered. I discovered that a teacher is a valuable ally. A good teacher--or two as I had at Murdoch with the double blessing of the incomparable eco-philosopher, Patsy Hallen--can guide the student to listen. And help her learn how to walk. Walking well, a good teacher can reveal the Path with Heart.

Why the Path? The Path with Heart that invites us to move more deeply into a connection with the source of our Life. Please don't turn away when I say that. We all know this Way. The Path with Heart is comforting a child who has fallen. Ringing a friend from whom we feel estranged. Finding a loving gift for Mother. Glimpsing a familiar mountain or a harbour. Reaching over to touch the face of a loved one. Seeing the stars swirl at night. At those moments, wherever we are, we are on that Path and we are that Path. Further, it is inside us and we are inside it. Amazing, eh?

Which brings me back to this Conference and my incommensurable delight at knowing we stand for the same thing. All of us assembled folk here. Knowing that wholeheartedly, listening to the softest voices, we seek to walk the Path with Heart. One Pathway to Sustainability.

So, at the risk of sounding like an American evangelist or management guru, I'd say that we must *Walk our Hope*. Newman's Own. Get up and strut our stuff. The way we're doing at Michael's fine Conference. Walking the *Path with Heart*.

But, I hear you say: One woman's journey at midlife. Gone green. Heard the Earth speak. Not for me. Not like me. Pretty "New Age" and not very rigorous. (Could be her age.) Certainly not for me, sitting in the creek and listening to the trees. I live in the real world. Have responsibilities. Real problems. Back at the office: no creeks or tree houses in the bush. The *real* world.

Good questions. What lessons could we all take from my experience? Where can we go with this?

Back to sustainability. How might we be sustained while we seek this Path? I've thought a great deal about sustainability in the past few years, watching my colleagues and fellow students at the *Institute for Saving the Planet* struggle with this concept. In my bewilderment, I have been tentatively weaving a fabric of understanding. Here are some of the threads I have discovered and some I have woven, among numberless threads you could discern. Perhaps among them you will find a lesson or two to apply to your own situation.

1. *Don't travel alone*: The Path with Heart should not be a lonely path. At least, not all of the time. While some parts of the journey cannot be shared, it's nevertheless wise to find good company for the parts that can be shared. As your values change, you may find that you have outgrown your friends. Find new ones. Keep faith with like-minded others. Find courage in the support of people committed to finding pathways to sustainability. Seek them out. They are waiting for you.
2. *Don't be ashamed of your fear or despair*: It's understandable to feel pain for our Earth--for what we have done to harm her. Find ways of expressing your pain. There are many ways to say "thank you" and "I am sorry" to the Earth. Plant

trees. Stand for Council. Upgrade your composting system. Teach children. Share your wonder. Make it your daily meditation to perform acts of care for Life.

3. *Find a teacher (or be a teacher):* Admit that others have travelled farther along this pathway to sustainability than you may have. Find ways to learn from them. Accept them (with all their foibles) and seek the jewels of their teaching. Open your heart to their lessons. Affirm them for their courage. Support them when they falter. And pass the learning on.
4. *Keep an eye on your cosmic account:* With regard to caring for the living Earth, it's often wise to use a different mode of accounting to measure your caring, your service. Think in terms of the *Cosmic Account*: you help someone, they help someone else. So long as you are generally "in credit" with Life, doing your share, it doesn't really matter what the "individual" accounts look like. To keep Earth in balance, strive to keep your relationship with her in balance. But don't agonise over individual "paybacks" and one-to-one relationships. Some people and causes may need a lot of help. From others, you may receive blessings in incommensurable ways.
5. *Speak up:* Some modern critics are calling our society an "unconscious civilisation". Others are worried about "cocooning"--about the ways we choose to be silent and separate from each other and the web of Life. We're worried about our jobs. Should we speak up and make ourselves unpopular? Just when the baby's due, the extensions are only half-finished and the mortgage is being re-negotiated. That quiet chap in the corner office seems to be getting on very well with management and he never voices an opinion on anything.

But wait a moment! Think about it! To preserve what we have for the future of all beings (including the creek and the baby on the way), requires acts of courage and fierce commitment. It demands that we speak up. Further, no planet, no jobs--for anyone, including the mild-mannered chap in the corner office.

6. *Take time to reflect:* How can we make wise decisions that affirm Life when we're always on the run? How wise and valuable are our decisions about the Earth made in a terrible hurry, wedged between meetings, appointments, the day-to-day pressures of life? Is there not a moment we can find to reflect on our place on Earth? Ten minutes a day for Life? Reflection is much maligned in modern society. And yet, without reflection, I can't see how we can allow our wisdom to speak forth. A little solitude: that's all I'm talking about.

These are my tentative offerings. The beginning of our conversation. I hope the conversation will continue throughout this Conference and beyond.

Thank you for joining us here today. By bringing yourselves to this brave Conference, you demonstrate your Hopefulness. You joined us with Hope singing through your cells. We've breathed it in and back to you, closing the circle. And now we are one.

I bow in acknowledgment to you, fellow travellers.

And to the teachers, human and nonhuman, who encouraged me to join you.

As one, let us bow to Michael Leunig's hopeful prayer:

*We pray for the fragile ecology of the heart and mind. The sense of meaning. So finely assembled and balanced and so easily overturned. The careful, ongoing construction of love. As painful and exhausting as the struggle for truth and as easily abandoned.*

*Hard fought and won are the shifting sands of this sacred ground, this ecology. Easy to desecrate and difficult to defend, this vulnerable joy, this exposed faith, this precious order. This sanity.*

*We shall be careful. With others and with ourselves.  
Amen.*

Michael Leunig, *Common Prayer Collection*, 1993.