A Tale of Two Spiritual Lakes

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Two lakes bracket my spiritual connection with lakes. On the small end is “Little Lake” – a spring pond less than a mile from our farm. When my boys were in grade school, we spent time there almost every week in both summer and winter. Through the full length of my professional career I had developed a conceptual framework based on “Eleven Necessary Conditions for Sustainability” at the personal, community, and societal levels (Klessig 2001). Little Lake contributed to eight of the necessary conditions for the sustainable happiness of our family:

• Aesthetic Opportunity – Tall white pine and mature hardwoods on three steep slopes and an inconspicuous, dark log cabin on the outlet to the Tomorrow River.

• Cultural Opportunity – In Wisconsin, ice fishing lore and practice is in the same league of icons as Green Bay Packer tailgating, deer hunting camp, and cheap beer.

• Educational Opportunity – The boys learned to count to 100 when the little perch were biting. Lessons in aquatic, terrestrial, and wetland ecology were easy to teach when the same ecosystem was visited frequently over several years. Of course, they also learned the skills of angling for a lifetime of enjoyment.

• Emotional Security – No other place regularly provided several hours of uninterrupted time for bonding with two sons – spontaneous (no planning required), easy (within walking distance), inexpensive (for just the price of digging up home-grown earthworms or buying wax worms in winter for two cents each).

• Environmental Security – The water from a tiny forested watershed and very local aquifer was clear, cold, and clean – a standard by which we judged all the other lakes we visited.

• Individual Freedom – Going to Little Lake was a choice we could make most days of the year; and “Can we go to Little Lake?” was the most common request I received as a father – and one that I could usually answer in the affirmative.

• Recreational Opportunity – “I got one!” “I got one, too!” That refrain is my most treasured memory of fatherhood and may be the most treasured memory for my boys as well. There are hundreds of reminders in family photo albums.

• Spiritual Dimension – It is hard to know when a six-year-old is having a spiritual experience – either at Nelsonville Lutheran Church or at Little Lake. However, I am confident that my reverence for Little Lake and comments about the its serenity and beauty inspired at least as much spiritually as the five-minute, five-star children’s sermon in front of the alter at Nelsonville Lutheran Church.

Lake Baikal is the macro end bracket of my lake experience. On a grand scale, Baikal contributes to nine of the eleven sustainability conditions for communities of reverent natives and international pilgrims:

• Aesthetic Opportunity – Not only of the vast lake itself, but the
rugged mountains along the shores—especially the metallic days and purple evening tides of the young Barguzine Mountain on the east shore.

- **Collective Security** – Historically, the lake provided a natural back-side protection for native people. During the paranoia of WWII and the Cold War, Soviet naval vessels patrolled the lake.

- **Cultural Opportunity** – Probably no lake in the world is as central to the culture of native people around it as Baikal is to the Buryat people. They define themselves in its imagination.

- **Economic Opportunity** – The omul fishery have long been a protein source for the local consumption and barter/sale beyond. Controversial pulp and paper mills use lake water and provide jobs—mostly to ethnic Russian immigrants. Eco-tourism has potential but access, especially after the devastation of Perestroika, is difficult.

- **Educational Opportunity** – Beyond limited environmental education for K-12, the lake is a research and training center for Russian and international natural resource managers.

- **Emotional Security** – Family and community are the main pillars of this sphere of sustainability. Baikal provides a sense of community for natives, some immigrants, and a cadre of Russian environmentalists and international limnologists/lake managers.

- **Environmental Security** – The water quality of the northern stretches of the lake is pristine and sometimes used as an international standard, but water quality along the southeastern shore is threatened by paper industry effluent.

- **Recreational Opportunity** – Local people hunt waterfowl and do some sport fishing and recreational boating. If tourism develops, much of it will be recreation-based.

- **Spiritual Dimension** – From the native Buryats to Russian nationalists to world federalists, Lake Baikal is above all, a spiritual place. It is “the Sacred Sea of Siberia.” For professionals involved in lake management, Baikal is Mecca—the most special lake with no easy access politically or geographically. My pilgrimage took 13 years—the longest planning horizon by far of any of my trips to over 50 countries.

These two lakes help provide the ten of the necessary conditions for sustainability. The only condition the sustainability condition that lakes do not affect is **Individual Security**.

The balance of this article explores what it means for a lake to be spiritual. How can Little Lake on a neighbor’s property be more spiritual than a children’s sermon in a generations-old, white clapboard church with a tall steeple on the highest hill in the village? How can the mention of Lake Baikal lift the eyes of people in every part of the planet? How can the millions of ponds, reservoirs, and lakes on the long size/spendor continuum between Little Lake and Lake Baikal provide a spiritual experience to the countless souls that see them, touch them, recreate in and on them, write about them, photograph them, and sense them in the privacy of their dens and dreams?

Spirituality is one of the most nebulous terms in our language. By definition, the root word—spirit—defies definition. Sometimes spirituality relates to elements of nature or all of nature. Sometimes it relates to the presence of physical anthropogenic things—idols, statues, altars, paintings, sculpture, mosques, synagogues, churches, cathedrals, holy water, crucifixes, Buddhas, and sweat lodges; sometimes to pageants, music, dancing; sometimes to individual soul-searching, meditation, or confrontation with the elements; sometimes to group experiences like communions, festivals, group rites of passage, speaking in tongues, and dancing.

Lakes are natural features of the landscape or become naturalized (reservoirs). My own most spiritual moment on a lake was a 24-hour long sit against a jack pine. Through a long northern latitude summer day and short moonlight night I meditated, read, and wrote from an especially beautiful vista of an unnamed lake in Ontario. For 30 years my best friend and I drove to the railroad station, took the train to an unscheduled stop, jumped off and canoed for a week (usually the best week of the year) on the lakes of Ontario. While the other forms of spirituality often include lakes as a backdrop, spirituality of lakes is experiential—a relationship to a body of water—a part of nature. Spirituality can be broken down into four generic sub-dimensions.
1. Humility before a Supreme Being
2. Awe
3. Acceptance of a set of moral principles
4. Breadth of sense of community

Humility
Without commenting on the existence of God or which God is the real God, I want to explain why I added “spiritual dimension” to my list of necessary conditions for sustainability. Spiritual dimension was added as a result of an “ah-ha” moment in a remote Berber village in the Atlas Mountains. I walked up the creek behind the village and observed a Muslim man kneeling on a large rock in the stream doing one of his five prayers of the day. It suddenly struck me that those prayers, whether or not ever heard or answered, provided an essential necessary element to social sustainability – humility.

Arrogance is a normal development of individuals (and nations). However, arrogant individuals do not interact in ways that sustain a community (or a family). The man on his knees on his little mat would leave that rock better able to relate to nature and to other people because he had humbled himself by praying – by saying “please” and “thank you” to his God.

Awe
Humility trims our egos. Awe is the corollary. It raises our awareness of the world beyond our control. The natural world provides many subjects for awe: lighting, thunder, fierce winds, volcanic eruptions, snow-capped mountains, and endless plains. The sunrises, whitecaps, reflections, mists, ice thunder, and sunsets of lakes inspire awe.

Lake Baikal.

Moral Principles
The spiritual dimension demands a third relationship – the acceptance of moral principles. Whoever and whatever is worshipped (The Trinity, Science, Lake Baikal, Buddha, Holy Cows or Buffalo), there are commandments to obey.

The commandments of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam focus on the relationship of people to one God. The first three commandments of the Ten Commandments focus on the relationship of humans to God; the last seven commandments focus on the relationship of people to each other. No commandment of these monotheistic religions is focused on the relationship of people to nature. The Old Testament may even encourage sins against nature by declaring that man “has domain over the earth and creatures therein.” There have been exceptions among Christian leaders – mostly notably St. Francis (White 1987). And other parts of the Bible and Koran direct humans to be good stewards of Creation.

Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and pantheism (many gods) focus on the relationship of people to the natural world and have elaborate rituals for transmitting their commandments regarding how to treat nature to new generations.

Beyond Stewardship to Community
Few words have as positive a connotation as “stewardship.” However, stewardship is not enough. It will not provide lakes or any other part of nature with enough love and respect. Stewardship implies a power relationship. The steward has the power – the power to take care of an object of the stewardship. The lake steward is protecting the lake for the benefit of present and future generations of humans. That is a good start, but it is a woefully inadequate paradigm because it still treats nature as a commodity to be managed for wise human use. A paradigm shift from stewardship to “interdependence and a broad sense of community” is required for families, communities, and societies to be sustainable.

Aldo Leopold (1949) is quoted so often because he said it first (in modern times) and he said it so well:

“We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

“... All ethics so far evolved rest on a single premise that the individual is a member of a community of
interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community but his ethics prompt him to cooperate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for).

“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals or collectively, the Land.”

And that’s how the tale of two lakes ends for me – a local Little Lake and a planetary Lake Baikal – two communities to which I belong in the spiritual dimension.

References


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provided education to nearly 1,000 lakeshore community in the 27 years that he was a lake management specialist for the University of Wisconsin Extension. He also taught Integrated Resource Management at the College of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He did short-term teaching in nine foreign countries. He chaired the organizing committee for the North American Lake Management Society and served on the Board for six years. In retirement he writes, farms, manages forestland, fishes, and travels.