

The Nature of College: College Students, Consumer Culture and the Environment

Waking Up to Nature

The first chapter focuses on the rituals of waking up. It begins with alarm clocks and the nature of time, showing how different cultural conceptions of time set us in different relationships with nature. Then it examines the purging and purification rituals of college students. It responds to the call of nature, and considers what exactly happens when “shit happens.” And finally it looks at the nature of cleanliness, considering the ecological impacts of a morning shower

The Nature of Stuff

U Joe and Jo College wake up in rooms that are crammed with stuff. College dorm rooms and apartments are furnished with beds and desks and dressers and lamps, but they often include futons, lounge chairs, couches, and carpets. Electronic and electrical devices abound—TVs, stereos, computers, game consoles, refrigerators, clocks, phones, and iPods. Snacks and Easy Mac and ramen noodles are stacked on other shelves, complemented by drinks in the refrigerator. Athletic gear—balls and gloves and a Frisbee—waits for the afternoon. The walls are papered with posters, artwork, photos and other assorted images. All this stuff is common sense, and it’s how we do materialism in college. But it’s not the only possibility—we could consider an ecological materialism that would treat materials more carefully.

The Nature of Clothes

It focuses, especially on clothes, which are a cultural way of using nature to cover human nature. Probing the social construction of clothes, it looks at the lenses we use for making sense of clothes, and on the ways that our cultural perceptions hide the nature of clothes. It traces the environmental impacts of blue jeans, T-shirts and athletic shoes. And then it does the laundry, considering how this chore embodies our values and attitudes toward the natural world.

The Nature of Food

Food is nature converted to culture by preparation and presentation. In this chapter, we tour the college cafeteria, looking first at how students experience the food choices they encounter, and then at the meanings—cultural and natural—of those choices. We’ll explore the nature of food, and the food chain for a few of our favorite foods, to see how we get chained to environmental and social practices we might not find so digestible. We’ll look at the cultural patterns of cafeteria eating, and at the cultural work that’s performed in the cafeteria. Forks and knives and spoons are agricultural implements, and when we consume cafeteria food, we help to produce a food system with environmental effects that literally change the world. All along, we’ll be facing up to the moral ecology of feeding our faces. Finally, we’ll consider the possibilities of eating as if nature mattered—how we might feed our faces without facing all the harmful environmental impacts that implicate us now.

The Nature of Screens

Today’s college students are people who have been socialized in a world of screens. They watch TV and play video games. They “google” to surf the internet, downloading music and sharing clips from YouTube. They send countless e-mails, and check in on Facebook. As a result, they average more screen time than “green time”—more than six hours a day. To these “screenagers,” electronics are virtually as natural as nature. So, in this chapter, we look at the visions of nature that they derive from television, movies, computers, video games and cell phones, considering the ways that e-mail, IM, iPods, and other audiovisual technologies keep them connected—but often screened from the natural world.

The Nature of Cars

There aren't many cars in college classrooms, and most colleges and universities don't teach driver's education or automotive repair. But cars drive a lot of the environmental and cultural patterns at America's institutions of higher education. As we institutionalize the benefits of liberal education, we also institutionalize the costs and benefits of cars. As we celebrate the life of the mind, we're usually not mindful of the vehicles parked and passing outside our classrooms. They're almost part of the landscape. So this chapter looks at the nature of cars, asking why we drive on and off campus, and what driving means to us—individually, socially and ecologically.

The Nature of Fun

College students always say that they work hard and play hard. Some of them do. But many students work harder at recreational play than they do at intellectual play. Like other Americans, they chant their culture's one interdenominational prayer: "Thank God it's Friday." In this chapter, therefore, we consider the nature of parties, the nature of beer and other intoxicants, and the pleasures of sex. In the process, we explore the cultural work—and environmental impacts—of fun, as well as the deeper possibilities of fulfillment—on college campuses and in American life.

The Nature of Sex

In this chapter, therefore, we'll look at the moral ecology of sex on campus. We'll examine the nature of sex. We'll consider the environmental dimensions of romantic love. And we'll counterpoint the common sense of college with some examples of uncommon sense in love and relationships, including the extensive pleasures of love.

The Spirit of Nature and Vice Versa

You would never know it by reading newspapers and magazines, or by watching movies about college life from *Animal House* to *Van Wilder* to *Old School*, but most college students have a spiritual life. Many of them practice their religion faithfully on campus, and others affiliate not with denominations but with a more generic spirituality. Even the campus agnostics ask cosmic questions: What are people for? What am I good at? What am I good for? What in the world is my education good for? And how is my education good for the world? In this chapter, we consider the relationship of the natural world to the supernatural world, the spiritual dimensions of ecological issues. We look at the nature of this spiritual life, and consider its environmental implications, including the possibility that religion is a natural resource for environmentalism.

The Nature of Politics

As we'll see in earlier chapters, many of the environmental choices of college students (and colleges) are constrained by politics and policy. This chapter looks at common conceptions of politics, at the meanings of the common phrase, "I'm not political," and at the politics of culture on campus and in American society. It examines the difference between "citizenship"—the act of sitting around and bitching about politics—and citizenship—the activism that makes politics productive. Reviewing the politics of nature in America, it shows how a politics of practical idealism might be possible.

Conclusion: The Real World and the Nature of Hope

After graduation, students think, they enter the real world. This is false—they've been in the real world all along, and they've missed a lot of opportunities by thinking otherwise. This last chapter explores the nature of the real world, and offers readers natural (and cultural) resources for changing the real world, both on campus and elsewhere.

The Nature of Education

Think about the kind of world you want to live and work in. What do you need to know to help build that world? Demand that your teachers teach you that.

Paul Goodman

All education is environmental education.

David Orr

No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We have to learn to see the world anew.

Albert Einstein

Ecological design requires the ability to comprehend patterns that connect, which means getting beyond the boxes we call disciplines to see things in their ecological context. It requires, in other words, a liberal education.

David Orr

I want my students to keep asking the difficult, perennial questions. But when they ask if there is hope for the future, I want them to be able to answer Yes, with confidence in their own powers, with complex knowledge of the world, with eagerness for the healing work they may do.

Scott Russell Sanders

The time and expense of higher education is most often excused on the grounds that it increases lifetime earnings, a crude but useful measure of the amount of carbon the scholar is able to redistribute from the earth's crust to the atmosphere. It is somewhat rarer for education to be extolled on the grounds that it reduces the graduates' impact on the biosphere or because it hones their skills in living simply.

David Orr, *Earth in Mind*

Meaning, like the sacred, is present if you look for it, but absent if you do not.

Alison Deming, *Writing the Sacred into the Real*

A genuinely liberal education will produce whole persons with intellectual breadth, able to think at right angles to their major field, practical persons to act competently; and persons of deep commitment, willing to roll up their sleeves and join the struggle to build a humane and sustainable world.

David Orr, *Earth in Mind*

Wonder is our erotic affiliation with all of life.

Stephanie Mills, *Epicurean Simplicity*

The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world more habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture defined it.

David Orr

If God had wanted us to live sustainably, She would have given us brains.

Jim Farrell

The Nature of Hope

The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed.

Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*

I want my students to keep asking the difficult, perennial questions. But when they ask if there is hope for the future, I want them to be able to answer Yes, with confidence in their own powers, with complex knowledge of the world, with eagerness for the healing work they may do.

Scott Russell Sanders

Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. . . . Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.

Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*

Whatever its source, Creation is a marvelous feat of generosity, an exuberant outpouring. I see that outpouring in Ruth's face, in the wren pecking for bugs on my windowsill, in the October rain bringing down yellow leaves from the tulip tree in our front yard, in the pumpkin glowing orange in our neighbor's porch. The outpouring never ceases, but only changes form. We honor this continuing gift by our own acts of charity and compassion. We honor the Creator by cherishing every parcel of Creation, especially those living things that share the planet with us, the beetles and bison, the black-footed ferrets and black-eyed Susans. . . . The price of hope, in other words, is responsibility.

Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope*

The nature of hope is human nature learning to be more human by being more natural. The nature of hope is that nature's consciousness and nature's conscience, which is us, applies our education and our ethics and our aesthetics to the good work of making ourselves at home in creation.

Jim Farrell

Sustaining St. Olaf: Environmental Principles

Mission

In its mission statement, St. Olaf College claims that it "provides an education committed to the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian Gospel, and incorporating a global perspective. In the conviction that life is more than a livelihood, it focuses on what is ultimately worthwhile and fosters the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit. . . . Through its curriculum, campus life, and off-campus programs, it stimulates students' critical thinking and heightens their moral sensitivity; it encourages them to be seekers of truth, leading lives of unselfish service to others; and it challenges them to be responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world."

In the 21st century, the liberal arts, the Christian Gospel and a global perspective all require that students consider their lives in the context of other lives and life-supporting natural systems. An educated person isn't just someone with a lot of knowledge in her head; it's someone who understands relationships—social, intellectual, institutional and environmental. And it's someone who tries to create and maintain good relationships in culture and in nature. As Aldo Leopold said, describing a land ethic, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

As seekers of truth and critical thinkers planning to be responsible citizens of the world and its biosphere, students and other members of the college community (faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and associates) need to know how the world works, and how our work at the college complements what Thomas Berry calls the "Great Work" of the universe. We also need examples of responsible action in the world. St. Olaf College can offer such an example, as the college community works to sustain and enrich the many communities—cultural and natural—we encounter every day.

What is sustainability?

In many American children's stories (and other stories too), the characters live "happily ever after." Sustainability is the art of "ever after," the art of assuring that people in the future will have what they need to lead fulfilling lives. In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (chaired by Norway's Gro Harlem Brundtland) defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It's a way of assuring that that our pursuit of happiness doesn't compromise the pursuit of happiness of future generations.

St. Olaf's current ecological footprint is not sustainable. We're spending the earth's natural capital without sufficiently replenishing it. We intend to begin the work of living more creatively and regeneratively in our place.

Some principles

We've assembled a set of principles to guide us in the journey toward sustainability. Some of these principles relate primarily to new ways of thinking. Others relate primarily to new ways of acting. Obviously, they're interrelated. We're hoping for thoughtful action.

1. Cultivate virtues appropriate to a culture of permanence

Sustainability isn't just a technical problem or a material problem; it's also a cultural problem involving the fulfillment of human needs—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. In short, it involves virtue. David Orr asks, for example, "What virtues in our lives would produce actions

that were harmonious in a larger commonwealth of plants and people? And what sort of communities must we create in order to encourage the harmonious action that we expect from individuals?" Orr suggests that we could learn something from cultures that preserve the virtues of humility, simplicity, moderation, prudence, frugality, hard work, neighborliness, and family stability. And he insists that, although individuals practice them, these virtues are not just individual values. They're social values, and institutions and societies must nourish them to keep them. At St. Olaf, therefore, we'll practice thrift, frugality, prudence and sufficiency. We'll nurture virtues of care and cooperation, trust and commitment. In an age when the word "virtue" sounds old-fashioned, we'll re-fashion it for a sustainable future.

Think and act globally and locally

"Think globally and act locally" is a common slogan of today's environmental movement, and it's worth remembering. At St. Olaf, we intend to maintain a global perspective in our encounters with the natural world. In our American lives, we operate by remote control, as our everyday decisions trigger environmental impacts around the globe. We'll pay attention, therefore, to the sources of our resources, and try to assure that we care for other environments as lovingly as we care for our own. As much as possible, we'll procure products that protect or preserve the environment in processes of extraction, production and distribution.

But we also want to think locally and act locally, studying this particular place for its ecological lessons. We'll nourish a new sense of place and a college culture attuned to the nature of its place. We'll invite students to understand the diverse landscapes of our campus by encouraging a sense of place that is sensual—experiencing the land and the landscape through sight and sound and taste and touch and smell. In the process, we'll embrace and embody a sense of wonder and a love for nature. We'll also cultivate a new common sense of the natural resources of Manitou Heights, and of the ways in which we can become native to this place.

Finally, we also want to think locally and act globally. We intend to use our experience on Manitou Heights as an example, good and bad, for other colleges and institutions. With other colleges and universities, we hope to create a set of standard benchmarks to measure our environmental progress (or regress). We hope to use our procurement practices to affect businesses in Minnesota and around the world. And because we intend to teach our students by our own institutional commitments, we expect to graduate young adults with designing minds who will make a substantial difference in the world.

Cultivate long-term thinking.

In addition to thinking in space—locally and globally—we'll practice a new way of thinking in time. We'll counter the prevailing "now-ness" of American culture by cultivating the art of long-term thinking, considering future generations in making today's decisions.

2. Expand the teaching of environmental literacy.

Because we are a liberal arts college, we'll apply liberal arts perspectives to all of the environmental issues confronting us. The main product of a liberal arts college is thoughtfulness, embodied in people (faculty, students and staff) who are thoughtful in two ways: they know how to think carefully, and they know how to care about other people and places. At St. Olaf, we'll teach and learn the meanings of environmental literacy across the

different disciplines, and we'll ponder the implications of knowing how nature—including human nature—really works. Outside classrooms, too—in offices and dorm rooms and the bookstore and cafeteria and the power plant and on the grounds—we'll teach and train each other how to make the college—and eventually the world—more sustainable. Mindful of campus ecology, we'll consider every moment a teachable moment, and every space a potential classroom.

3. Explore the spirit of nature in religious study and practice.

Because we are a college of the church, we'll also apply our religious perspectives to these issues. We'll explore the roots of environmentalism in the gospel, and in the scriptures and spiritual practices of the world's religions. Individually and collectively, we'll practice our own religion as an art of connectedness. We'll strive to integrate environmental stewardship with the religious commitments to social justice, recognizing the interconnectedness of caring for the Earth and caring for our fellow human beings. In the words of Larry Rasmussen, "Redeeming the planet means embracing its distress. Christian theology 'insists that environmental justice is also social justice and that all efforts to save the planet begin with hearing the cry of the people and the cry of the earth together.'" Indeed, the word "religion" comes from the Latin "religare," and it means "to bind together," so it's meant to bind people to God, people to each other, and people to the creation. In Genesis, God creates the earth and declares that it's good. Because the earth is good, because it embodies the intentions of God, we are called to be good stewards of this garden. And at a place like St. Olaf, we can be religious about that calling.

4. Rely increasingly on sustainable energy flows

As the Hannover Principles suggest, "Human designs should, like the living world, derive their creative forces from perpetual solar income." The college will move in that direction. We will conserve energy in offices, dorm rooms, computer labs, the cafeteria, etc.; reduce dependence on fossil-fueled cars and trucks; look for cleaner energy sources; consider generating our own power

5. Eat food that nourishes farmers and the land.

As Wendell Berry says, eating is "inescapably an agricultural act, and . . . how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, the way the world is used." The cafeteria is intimately connected to farm fields around the world. In our food service, we will try to serve meals that support local agriculture, reducing transportation costs (financial and environmental); support practices that reduce soil erosion, and herbicide and pesticide use; support re-sourcing of food—like fair-trade coffee—that guarantees the livelihoods of growers.

6. Build for the future

As David Orr suggests, architecture is pedagogy. The college can build on a fine and frugal tradition of long-lasting architecture, building only what we need, and building it well. Future buildings should incorporate "state of the shelf" (and sometimes "state of the art") ecological design into their planning and construction. They should exemplify ecological design in siting, structure, materials, lighting, utilities, etc. And they should be designed as teaching machines so that the lessons of good building are communicated to all who enter the spaces.

7. Stop generating waste and stop wasting it

"In nature," says architect William McDonough, "there is no such thing as waste, so the first thing we must do is eliminate the concept of waste." We need to use less stuff, and we need to be more creative in disposing of it. To McDonough, today's waste should be food for

tomorrow's regenerative projects, both natural and industrial. Working from the Hannover Principles, we will work to optimize the full life-cycle of products and processes, emulating natural processes to minimize our waste. We will become very materialistic, respecting and conserving the materials of nature through programs of refusal, reduction, recycling and repair to decrease the amount of waste manufactured and disposed of on campus.

8. Restore natural landscapes for both practical and aesthetic reasons.

St. Olaf College rests on land that was, at one time, sustainable. The college will work to restore a dynamic landscape that is regenerative, incorporating the cycles of nature into the cycles of campus life. We will continue our work to "recreate" the prairies and woodlands that existed in this area before European settlement. We'll continue to restore wetlands and to incorporate them into the water cycle of the campus. We'll continue experimentation with sustainable agricultural practices on our agricultural lands.

9. Put our money where our values are.

In purchasing stuff and paying bills and investing the endowment, we'll put our money where our values are. In procurement, we'll look for green alternatives to paper, copying materials, cleaning supplies, etc. In investing, we'll look for socially and environmentally responsible alternatives. In all of our economic operations, we'll try to practice full-cost accounting, taking into account the real costs—social and environmental—of the products and services we use. We'll put ourselves on an energy budget, and we'll stick to it.

10. Create and maintain a transparent planning process, and give an honest accounting of our successes and failures.

We'll include the whole St. Olaf community—students, staff, faculty, alumni, friends of the college, and neighbors in Northfield—in our conversations, planning, and activities. Sustainability isn't something that can be imposed on a community—it's something that must grow from the conversations of a community, both internally and externally.

Finally, we will share our stories of success and failure so that others may learn from our example (good and bad). As we turn our attention to the arts of sustainability, we will learn a lot from other institutions that are making the same turn. With any luck, we'll also have lessons to offer. In a collegial spirit of cooperation and collaboration, we'll offer our story—on the website, at conferences, and in publications—as an object lesson for people with common concerns.