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Becoming the New Operating System

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HR and Mission

Gary Miller and Rev. Craig B. Mousin

We dedicate this column to the topic of Sustainable Development in Catholic colleges and universities and invite you to consider how we can further that critical goal in our work within Human Resources. We are honored to have as our guest columnist, Scott Kelley, Ph.D. Scott Kelley is Assistant Vice-President for Vincentian Scholarship in the Office of Mission and Values at DePaul University. Prior to his current position, he was a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Religious Studies Department and Research Fellow at the DePaul University Institute for Business and Professional Ethics. He is a co-author of Alleviating Poverty through Profitable Partnerships: Globalization, Markets, and Economic Well-Being (New York: Routledge 2009) and various articles on poverty alleviation, Catholic social teaching, Vincentian heritage, sustainability, and moral discernment.

Becoming the New Operating System

Scott P. Kelley, Ph.D

The environmentalist Paul Hawken issued a daunting challenge to University of Portland’s graduating class of 2009: “you are going to have to figure out what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when every living system is declining, and the rate of decline is accelerating … the earth needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within a few decades.” The notion of developing a new operating system succinctly captures many of the challenges facing higher education across the globe, a challenge most often addressed to the world’s elite universities such as Harvard, MIT, or Oxford. However, Paul Hawken’s choice to deliver this address to the graduates of a relatively small Catholic College in the Pacific Northwest is quite revealing. He may have known that Catholic higher education has “secretly” been working on this new operating system for decades.

A sober diagnosis of the situation we are in today – as humans living on planet earth – is deeply disturbing. Our professional colleagues in environmental science tell us by consensus that human-caused climate change is a reality, that our climate is on the cusp of entering historically unprecedented territory, that our pattern of resource consumption is fundamentally unsustainable, and that the consequences of the “old operating system” are likely to disrupt civilization in profound and drastic ways. As the global population continues its explosive growth, it will plateau some time around the year 2050 at roughly 9 billion people. Most of that growth will come in the mega-slums of the developing world, where hungry farmers and fisherman have come to eek out an existence. Considering that India has a middle class larger than the entire population of the United States, it is not difficult to imagine that if the current patterns of resource consumption continue unabated, we will need 3 to 5 planets to sustain it. Hawken is quite correct about the need for a new operating system, but as Albert Einstein warned decades ago, “we can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” In short, we need more than technological innovation – we need a new way of thinking about our challenges, our sources of meaning, our way of being.

Before looking into the new operating system itself, it is quite revealing to look at the kinds of people who develop operating systems – Bill Gates and Steve Jobs being the most notable. The usual story of Gates’ success is familiar: bored by Harvard, a young math whiz drops out of college to start a little company called Microsoft with his friends. But that is only a small part of a larger story, as Malcolm Gladwell argues in Outliers: the Story of Success. When Gates was in seventh grade in 1968, the mothers’ club invested money in a computer terminal that linked to a mainframe in downtown Seattle at a time when few college campuses even had computers. Gates began real-time programming only three years after some of the very basic computing infrastructure had just been developed; he had years of trial-and-error experience well before he set foot on Harvard’s campus. Although not from a wealthy family, Steve Jobs grew up in Mountain View, California and would drop in on evening talks given by Hewlett-Packard engineers, often staying after for a few questions and even requesting spare parts on occasion. He eventually got a job on an assembly line building
computers, so he learned how to build them with his hands. Their stories indicate that in addition to their individual vision and talent, both innovators were exposed to and lived in communities of innovators. In short, innovation is mostly the fruit of cumulative and progressive adjustments over extended periods of time and less about the individual qualities of its pioneers.

Now back to the operating system itself. Paul Hawken’s desire for a new operating system is often captured by the umbrella term sustainable development, which has been around for some time. Concerned by the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development, the United Nations issued Our Common Future (aka, the Brundtland Report) in 1983 to explore development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Since then, many have argued that sustainable development must successfully address social, environmental, and economic growth (or people, planet, profits) without depleting natural capital for future generations.

Paul Hawken could have addressed his challenge to any of the four great shapers of culture: corporations, churches, governments, or universities. He may have chosen to address an institution of higher education because he believes, as do many of us, that higher education has the comparative autonomy, the intellectual freedom, and the necessary resources to grope its way toward a new operating system. Institutions of higher education – especially Catholic higher education - are privileged communities for this new operating system to be developed.

The notion of sustainable development is no stranger to the Catholic intellectual tradition or to the educational mission of Catholic Universities. Catholic social teaching, taken in its entirety, has long provided a coherent vision for meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. As Pope John Paul II noted in Ex Corde Ecclesiae, Catholic Universities are “called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society.” They do this, in part, by examining “a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level” (32). The intellectual vision for a new operating system, however, is not just an exercise of the imagination or a distant aspiration – it a collection of insights that come from practice.

Institutions of Catholic higher education must become sustainable learning communities themselves if they are to teach – and live out – the vision of Catholic social teaching. Toward the end of his life, Vincent de Paul began to write the Common Rules for the Congregation of the Mission long after the community had been living out its mission to serve the spiritual and material needs of the poor. He justified this pragmatic approach by noting that Jesus himself “put things into practice before He made them part of His teaching.” In the same way, institutions of Catholic higher education must become sustainable learning communities at their very CORE - through curriculum, operations, research, and engagement. As such, they also have an operational aspect to their mission that is a context for, experience of, and community witness to the vision of Catholic social teaching. Students exposed from a young age to concerns about social issues and the environment are looking for educational opportunities that will enable them to pursue meaningful careers to address them. Such opportunities are only possible in communities that live, breath, and speak the values that will form the new operating system.

Institutions of Catholic higher education are sizable economies. Collectively they employ, contract, purchase, invest, and participate in the global economy with considerable resources. Today there are nearly 220 Catholic colleges and universities with combined annual operating expenses of more than $14 billion and net assets valued at nearly $35 billion in fiscal year 2007. If such economies of scale were to carefully follow the principles of Catholic social teaching – to the best of their abilities – they could establish, test, adjust, and inspire innovation for creating this new operating system.

While operational missions cover many different activities, there are a few areas that deserve special consideration. The primary way that Catholic institutions live out their operational mission is through management practices and human resources. Catholic institutions must embody the values envisioned in Catholic social teaching if they are to educate, hire, develop, and retain the talented people who are essential for creating a sustainable learning community. The way we hire new employees, evaluate...
their work, and give them the freedom to develop new practices will not only contribute to the flourishing of each employee but will also enable management to be good stewards of institutional resources, all of which is consistent with Catholic Social Teaching and sustainable development. Like the forward thinking Mother’s Club that bought a computer for Bill Gates’ school or the community of HP engineers that inspired Steve Jobs - the new operating system will only be developed in a community that values developing one. In addition, by acting as contractors, institutions of Catholic higher education can influence the development of new forms of the management-labor partnership that will preserve and enhance their sizeable workforces.

Just as worship space conveys the importance of liturgy and ritual, so too can buildings become public symbols of sustainable development and smaller carbon footprints without sacrificing function or utility – “the garages” within which software developers innovate. Resource conservation – from energy to water to paper – should be a hallmark of the sustainable learning community, where a renewed commitment to living simply should be a common experience for students, faculty, staff, and guests. The problem of climate change-induced displacement should serve as a stark reminder that the developed world’s massive carbon footprint stands on the necks of the poor.

Procurement is another important aspect of a Catholic institution’s operational mission, where purchasing choices – from coffee to computers – are important instances of a preferential option for the poor and for the creation of a just society in a globalized economy. Individually and collectively, institutions of Catholic higher education can make a significant impact on global supply chains by establishing consistent markets for things like Fair Trade products.

Lastly, investment strategies should reflect a commitment to the principles of Catholic social teaching. Recent research indicates that there is no trade off between socially responsible investing and financial performance, an argument that has long prevented endowment managers from considering it seriously.

Developing anything “new” – especially an operating system – rarely involves the discovery or creation of something totally foreign by a single visionary. More often than not, innovation is merely the identification of new applications and new uses for well-established concepts in a community that nurtures and cherishes them. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs exercised incredible imagination, but the intellectual spark and the physical material for their innovation already existed in their communities. The new operating system that Paul Hawken imagines should not be viewed as something adventitious to the mission of Catholic higher education, or some radical new innovation. Instead, the new operating system of the sustainable learning community should be viewed as a 21st century application of the Church’s best kept secret. As sustainable learning communities, institutions of Catholic higher education can serve as the garages where communities of innovators grope their way toward a sustainable future.

The opinions expressed in this column are the authors and do not represent the opinions of DePaul University.

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We encourage your feedback to begin our collective attention to these issues. We would like to post links to your mission statements as well as HR and compensation philosophy documents if you would like to share them with our readers. This will permit a fuller discussion of how mission and CST enter into the employment process. Please let us know if you would like us to link to any of your institution’s documents.