

Nature's Garden: A Model for a Healthy Human Social Ecosystem

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Theme: [History](#)

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At one point in Victor Hugo's 1862 novel, Les Miserables, Jean Valjean and Cosette lived, secretly, in a house on Rue Plumet, where a garden hid their house from passers-by. This garden had been left uncultivated for fifty years. The garden not only protected Jean Valjean and Cosette from Javert's discovery, it served to teach them how to behave more kindly, wisely, and creatively—to more deeply appreciate each other and all of Earth's living things.

Hugo's description of the Garden:

"Horticulture had departed, and nature had returned. The trees bent over towards the briars, the briars mounted towards the trees, the shrub had climbed, the branch had bowed, that which runs upon the ground had attempted to find that which blooms in the air, that which floats in the wind had stooped towards that which trails in the moss; trunks, branches, leaves, twigs, tufts, tendrils, shoots, thorns, were mingled, crossed, married, confounded. Vegetation, in a close and strong embrace, had celebrated and accomplished there, under the satisfied eye of the creator, the sacred mystery of its fraternity, symbol of human fraternity. At noon, a thousand white butterflies took refuge in it, and it was a heavenly sight to see this living snow of summer whirling about in flakes in the shade. There, in this gay darkness of verdure, a multitude of innocent voices spoke softly to the soul, and what the warbling had forgotten to say, the humming completed. You felt the sacred intimacy of bird and tree; by day the wings rejoiced the leaves; by night the leaves protected the wings.

Nature, who disavows the Mean Arrangements of Man, always gives her whole self where she gives herself at all, as well in the ant as in the eagle.

Nothing is really small; whoever is open to the deep penetration of nature knows this. All works for all.

A flesh-worm is of account; the small is great, the great is small; all is in equilibrium in necessity; fearful vision for the mind. There are marvelous relations between beings and things; in this inexhaustible whole, from sun to grub, there is no scorn; all need each other.

In the above passage, Hugo describes a healthy ecosystem, which included a healthy social component. The plants, birds, insects, and other non-human life in the garden had developed a kind and wise Social Ecosystem—marvelous interdependent relations between beings and things—that benefitted all. In their garden there was no hierarchy, no upper class or lower class, no rich or poor, no caste system, no cliques, no individualism, no isolation, no predation, no segregation, no tension. In the "inexhaustible whole" of the garden, there was "no scorn." All worked for all. All needed each other. All embraced,

celebrated, and cared for each other, as if they fully understood their interdependence and thirsted for connection. All was in harmony, “in equilibrium, by necessity”—meaning that life in this garden would not have survived, individually or collectively, without the marvelous collaborative relations among its living things. This garden symbolized a healthy Social Ecosystem, maintained by the plants, insects, birds, and other living things in the Garden. It was a thing of Social Beauty—offered for emulation by Mankind.

Have we used Nature’s Garden as a model for development of a healthy human Social Ecosystem? Have we developed a human Social Ecosystem that is fully integrated with, and fully respectful of, Nature’s ecosystems? It does not appear so.¹

In fact, it appears as though modern Human beings have been slow to even recognize that each of us lives in the context of an interdependent human Social Ecosystem—where all need each other and all need to work for all in order to survive and enjoy Social Beauty—and that the human Social Ecosystem must be harmoniously integrated with Nature’s ecosystems.

Instead of developing a healthy Social Ecosystem that is integrated with Nature’s ecosystems, what have we done? We have created what looks like a severely damaged and degraded social ecosystem. The social ecosystem in which most of us live exhibits little of the caring characteristics of Nature’s Garden. Largely because of the economic model that has been allowed to prevail (Capitalism), our social ecosystem is characterized by hierarchy, individualism, cut-throat competition, predation, exploitation, inequality, injustice, anger, scorn, isolation, tension, anxiety, depression, alienation, loneliness, segregation, and boredom—with its leadership exhibiting heartlessness, disdain for collaboration, and denial of human interdependence. Our Social Ecosystem has been harmfully subjected to a powerful economic model that is based on, justified by, gives practice to, and rewards the worst aspects of our human nature, instead of our best aspects. Furthermore, it is an economic model that shows little respect for Nature’s ecosystems, is not integrated with Nature’s ecosystems, and wantonly destroys Nature’s ecosystems. Our current social system, which is a direct product of our prevailing economic model (Capitalism), represents a Mean Arrangement of Man—certainly not a thing of Social Beauty. Our current social ecosystem looks as plundered and ugly as a clear-cut boreal forest, or the toxic tailing ponds and poisoned aquifer in the Alberta tar sands. For the sake of Nature, and for our own sakes, should we not create a better Arrangement? Have the plants, birds, insects, and other living things in Nature’s Garden been far wiser, kinder, and creative than has Mankind?

If we were to use Nature’s Garden as a model for development of a healthy human social ecosystem, what might we create? We would start by acknowledging our interdependency—that we all need each other, and that all need to work for all. We would ask, “What are the universal needs; and how can we kindly and collaboratively meet those needs?” We would create an economic model that disavows such Mean Arrangements as hierarchy, class, exploitation, supremacy, racism, cut-throat competition, profiteering, scorn, sabotage, violence, predatory debt, isolating individualism, and disregard for the environment. We would choose an economic model that is based on moral incentive (rather than monetary incentive), an understanding of the positive aspects of human nature, and a commitment to altruistically meeting the needs of others—a Public Economy with Vast Public Activity that employs all aptitudes and gives jobs to all who need work. It would be an economic model that up-regulates the best aspects of human nature and down-regulates

the worst aspects of our human nature (instead of the other way around, which is the effect of capitalism). It would be led by the most altruistic natural leaders among us, not by the most diabolic and selfish.

In short, we would create a Public Economy and a Social Ecosystem that resembles one giant public children's hospital, whose modestly salaried physicians, nurses, researchers, technicians, janitors, and other employees gladly "give their whole selves" to meet the needs of sick children. It would be a model that provides the most precious freedom of all—the freedom to enjoy widespread up-regulated expression of the human capacity for kindness—up-regulation both in oneself and in the larger society—the freedom that comes from participating in collective public efforts to genuinely look after others. It would be an economic model that is democratically regulated by the creative common sense of Nature's Garden, as opposed to the rigid orderliness of the horticulturist, or, worse, the "clear cut" mentality of authoritarian timber industrialists. Such an economic model could create a healthy social ecosystem that would be in harmony with all of Nature's ecosystems and with social ecosystems throughout the world. This would be a way to create human Social Beauty to complement and protect Nature's Beauty. "Whoever is open to the deep penetration of Nature knows this."

Postscript:

Apologists for Capitalism might accuse Victor Hugo of deliberately mentioning only the positive aspects of Nature and ignoring the ugly predatory activities in Nature—e.g. birds of prey killing innocent baby rabbits. But, Hugo was not denying the existence of violence and injustice in Nature—just as he does not deny the dark aspects of human nature. He was simply suggesting that we emulate the most positive behaviors in Nature, rather than its most ugly behaviors. Why would we want to model our economic system after the ugly predation and violence in Nature when, instead, we could model it after the "marvelous relations" exhibited in Nature's Garden? Instead of flaunting a bird of prey (the eagle) as a national symbol, perhaps the USA could choose an innocent baby rabbit, or "vegetation in a close and strong embrace" as its symbol, with a Public Economy and a healthy Social Ecosystem to go with it.

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Note

¹In human history there have been peoples who have developed a human social ecosystem that has been in harmony with Nature's ecosystems—for example, the First Nations people in North America. But, their social ecosystem and the sacred natural surroundings it respected were violently destroyed by those who insisted on a different model—a heartless, predatory, exploitative economic model and culture.

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