“There is a global spiritual revolution underway the likes of which we’ve not seen before. People across the major faith traditions are organizing, talking, thinking, singing, chanting, and praying. There is power being unleashed and it transcends any one religion and any one nation. And despite differences, there is a lot of common ground around an agenda of peace, non-violence, fairness, protection of communities, restoration of degraded places, ecological sustainability, an extended view of human rights as well as the rights of species and nature, and least, the rights of our children and those yet to live on Earth. Said differently, it is not possible for long to organize our affairs around greed, illusion, and ill will. We are called to higher things. And in silence one can hear the birth pains of a new order of things — a new enlightenment.”

Davis Orr, professor of environmental studies and politics at Oberlin College in Ohio, here develops some of the common ground of the new enlightenment. It is common ground in a double sense: a program of action which can be common to a large number of people who may be divided on other issues and a common ground (or soil) on which we all stand and for which we must care for together. “Whatever else divides humankind, we share a common dependence on the waters, air, soils, and life systems of the Earth. These are given to us as a sacred trust to be passed on to all those who will follow.” This is a political common ground, as former Czech president Vaclav Havel has written “Genuine politics — politics worthy of the name — is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community, and serving those who will come after us. Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility expressed through action, to and for the whole.”

This politics of common ground requires “us to understand the connections between how we provision ourselves with energy, food, and shelter and issues of economic prosperity, fairness, security and democracy.” Thus we must “extend and deepen our ideas of equality, positive freedom, decency, non-violence, and commonwealth — a transformation that will one day temper individualism with the acknowledgment of our obligations and responsibilities; replace the extractive/consumer economy with a truly prosperous economy that protects the natural capital of soils, forests, and biotic diversity; extend and broaden the idea of representation to include future generations and the larger web of life.”

Orr does not underestimate the dangers which humanity faces — dangers which are widely recognized but little acted upon. He cites a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report “It is time to understand ‘the environment’ for what it is : the national- security issue of the early 21st century. The political and strategic impact of surging populations, spreading disease, deforestation and soil erosion, water depletion, air pollution and possibly rising sea levels in critical, overcrowded regions...will prompt mass migrations and, in turn, incite group conflicts that will be the core foreign-policy challenge from which most others will ultimately emanate.”

In order to meet these challenges we need wider public awareness and enlightened leadership. Vaclav Havel has written that if we want a better world that now in prospect “we must as humanity, as people, as conscious beings with spirit, mind, and a sense of responsibility — somehow come to our senses.” Our senses must be sharpened to find those
categories of thought that help us to resolve, rejoin, reconcile, bind together and to render whole.

This coming ‘to our senses’ is one of the roles of leadership. As Orr writes “Never has the need for genuine leadership been greater, and seldom has it been less evident. We cannot be ruled by ignorant, malicious, greedy, incompetent and shortsighted people and expect things to turn out well. We will need leaders of great stature, clarity of mind, spiritual depth, courage and vision. We need leaders who see patterns that connect us across the divisions of culture, religion, geography, and time. We need leadership that draws us together to resolve conflicts, move quickly from fossil fuels to solar power, reverse global environmental deterioration, and empower us to provide shelter, food, medical care, decent livelihood, and education for everyone. We need leadership that is capable of energizing genuine commitment to old and venerable traditions as well as new visions for a global civilization that preserves and honors local cultures, economics, and knowledge.”

David Orr has set out in very readable form the outline of the common ground and an impassioned plea for leadership.

Rene Wadlow