“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.”

Vaclav Havel

David Orr is professor of Environmental Studies and Politics at Oberlin College in Ohio, and many of these short essays on the relationship between ecological action and politics were first published in the journal Conservation Biology. He does not underestimate the challenges which face us if we are to protect the planet, and through ecologically-sound development raise the living standards of those caught in persistent poverty throughout the world. Orr quotes from a 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 diseases, 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.”

He goes on to write “Accountability is a two-way street. Those entrusted with public office should intend to be accountable and they should be held accountable by an alert citizenry that demands authenticity, honesty, and transparency in the conduct of the public business.” Yet “Increasingly, we are ruled by a plutocracy, distracted by the entertainment industry, and frequently misinformed by an increasingly concentrated news media that puts the pursuit of market share above telling the whole truth. And, part symptom, part cause, we have state legislatures and a Congress with many members who haven’t read widely, thought deeply, or imagined much beyond their own pecuniary gain. The result is a leadership vacuum on the big issues of our time that is now filled with lobbyists for the rich and powerful who talk the language of populism while doing all in their power to undermine real democracy…We cannot be ruled by ignorant, malicious, greedy, incompetent, and short-sighted people and expect things to turn out well.”

Yet humanity as a whole faces real challenges with respect to energy, resources, population and the environment. We need to bring back balance, harmony, and beauty. Some forms of effective world citizenship are required to redesign political choices on the basis of ecologically-sound development. Today, all with a social conscience need to become trained amateur biologists capable of understanding how life on the planet works, how it is being destroyed, and why every struggle boils down to an attempt at saving habitat before it can no longer sustain human and most other forms of life. We need to see that the earth is a community where human and non-human life are intricately entwined, and where all species live and develop together.

We need an ecological vision and structure of thought. As Orr stresses “Never have we had greater need for categories of thought that help us to resolve, rejoin, reconcile, bind together, render whole, and finally, to be redeemed.”

Our problems are systemic in nature and will have to be solved at the system level. As Orr points out we are required to “understand the connections between how we provision ourselves with energy, food and shelter and issues of economic prosperity, fairness, security
and democracy.” We need to formulate ecological design as it applies to land use, buildings, energy systems, transportation, materials, water, agriculture, forestry and urban planning.

In order to do this, as Orr urges, “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.”

Rene Wadlow