SKY FOR SALE:
THE FRAGILE FUTURE OF THE COMMONS
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A few days ago I was at the Public Library in Copley Square looking for nourishment for my sermon-writing process. Early in the summer, a friend had sent me a 2003-2004 report called "The State of the Commons." I had been energized by reading it and thought, "This is important. This is something to share with the congregation." So here I was at the library, trying to learn more about the subject.

After delving into the book stacks I had found several wonderful books (none of which, admittedly, had anything to do with my topic). But I took the books and my laptop and cup of coffee out into the colonnaded courtyard between the old and the new library buildings. Claiming one of the benches that overlook the garden, I struggled to begin writing this reflection on the social and spiritual meaning of the Commons.

After several frustrating false starts, I looked up from the computer screen, and sighed with pleasure at the sight around me: People of every age and color, from the Latina mother with her toddler, to the old Chinese man with his cane, to students and tourists, all peacefully enjoying this common space, talking, reading from the riches of the library, sipping their drinks, enjoying the fountain and the patch of vivid blue sky revealed above the stately buildings.

The Boston Public Library is a good place to start if one wants to begin to "see" the commons. Public spaces and resources like libraries, parks (our Boston Common is a great example), and main streets are the easiest to recognize. Like our Boston Common, they're the spaces where anyone and everyone can come and enjoy. From the CEO to the homeless person, all meet on equal footing, because, in fact, the space literally belongs to everyone, to all of us, and has been designed for collective sharing.

But far from these clear, tangible examples, the commons also includes a great variety of other commonly held resources, many of which are harder to see or to grasp.

The commons is a broad generic term. It's as old as the earth, and, as a concept of public right and access, it goes back at least to Roman times. The commons embraces all the creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and freely, and which we hold in trust for future generations.

It includes

- The gifts of nature, like air and water and large ecosystems,
- The sum of evolutionary process as expressed in the diversity of life forms, natural seed strains, and the gene sequences that structure life.

The commons includes

- The sum of all human knowledge and experience, including science and culture, literature, music and tradition.

- It includes assets that have value in the market, such as radio airwaves, timber and minerals on public lands, and the internet.

- It includes commonly held wealth and property, like public spaces, community gardens, state and national parks, and land trusts.

- The commons includes gift economies. These are whole networks of exchange for mutual good that do not involve monetary payment, but rather open sharing of knowledge and resources, as in volunteerism and bartering. Gift economies create wealth, but are not part of the market.

The "Common *Wealth"* refers to the overall *value* of the commons in their capacity to support life, prosperity, and well-being. The "common wealth" may increase or decrease depending on how well it is managed.

So the commons really form the *entire* basis of humanity's capacity to breathe, drink, create and trade!

But, just like the air we breathe, we tend not to recognize the commons or think about them. We take them for granted and have largely abdicated our responsibility to act as rightful owners or stewards of these common inheritances.

Conventional thinking divides the economy into two categories: the market and the state. The market creates productivity. The state is responsible for oversight and regulation, in the service of the common good. But conventional thinking about the economy doesn't include the commons, all those shared resources that precede and surround and infuse the market—the ultimate source of everything that is produced, and the sink that ultimately absorbs all the wastes.

The state's job is to nurture both the commons *and* the market, and to manage a balance between the two. Managing the balance between private gain and common trust keeps humanity from devouring its own nest. But, more and more, the state is losing sight of this balance and has become a champion of the market at the expense of the commons.

Truth is, our commons are threatened in a way they never have been before. Some are being ruined, drained, or run into the ground from neglect or unmanaged use. Others are being swallowed up, enclosed, as private property.

In the early days of the settlement of this land by Europeans, the land was a vast commons. The original inhabitants lived off the commons while sharing it with one another and with other species. They took what they needed to live and left the rest alone.

Although they felt an ancestral claim to territory, they did not have the concept of private ownership that the settlers had. The idea buying and selling the earth, the water, the trees, of carving up the land into little parcels, each piece owned by a single person, was absurd and incomprehensible to them—as absurd as selling a piece of sky, selling rainfall or wind or sunlight.

In their incomprehension, they lost their commons. The landscape *was* carved up and sold for pennies. In exchange for trinkets, they lost the incalculable worth of their former existence and were relegated to impoverished corners of the land.

We are in a position to be similarly duped by unawareness.

We're all familiar with growing ecological problems. We know that clean water is growing scarce, that rivers are running dry, that the atmosphere is being compromised, that whole ecosystems are being degraded to the point where they cannot properly support life.

We tend to be less aware of the laws that govern use of the commons of air, water and other natural resources.

For example, for eons, societies considered water a common inheritance that could be used, but not owned. In English common law, "the riparian principle" stated that no one could exploit water use to the disadvantage of others.

But in the settlement of the American West, the riparian principle gave way to the right of "prior appropriation." This meant that whoever was the first to claim a water source would have perpetual rights to it.

The result was that America became the most reckless water-using nation in the world. Cities flourished in the deserts. Industries consumed water as if it were without limit. Indeed, it seemed to be.

Today, industrial and agricultural water use in the US continues to exceed that of other developed nations by a staggering rate. In the year 2000, US water use per person equaled 1, 688 cubic meters, while in Germany the figure was 712 cubic meters per person, and in England, only 201. That's 1, 688 cubic meters per capita in America—201 in England.

As water becomes scarce and highly valuable, the drive for privatization will become fierce and the stakes extremely high. State and national governments are supposed to be the stewards of our water, but we citizens have to step up and become aware of how the these commons are being managed and the laws that govern water rights. And we have to hold the state and market accountable.

I called this sermon "Sky for Sale" because the commons of the sky also faces jeopardy. As absurd as it seemed to the Native Americans, the sky is already up for sale.

There are two main ways in which the sky can be privatized. One is through the selling or auctioning of radio bandwidth to broadcasting companies (a key example of the state's failing to protect the common good). The other aspect of privatizing the sky is around the issue of air pollution and the selling of polluting credits.

These inevitable processes can happen in ways that will protect and benefit the human and social commonwealth for the long term. Or they can happen in ways that will diminish the commonwealth for the profit and benefit of a powerful few. Which it will be will depend upon our vigilance, our grasp of the issues, and our engagement as citizens.

Another area of the eroding commons is in the copywriting or private ownership of genetic strains of plants and animals or of genetic material itself. For example, seed strains of certain beans or rice that have been freely and traditionally grown for centuries in India or South America are being laid claim to by companies that now want to patent them, own them, and sell them back to the people for profit.

In a book called "Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth," author David Bollier makes a strong case for protecting the commons for the sake of health, justice, and future generations. He makes the case that the commons represent forms of wealth, creativity, beauty and social integrity that cannot even begin to be measured.

The silent, invisible loss of the commons reminds us of the old question: If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is around to hear it, did it make a sound, did it really fall, does it matter?

The commons are ultimately priceless. They are what make our existence rich in beauty, in culture, in meaning, and in the joy and nobility of sharing and giving. When they are lost through neglect and abuse, or by being turned into market commodities for private gain, there is a spiritual loss to the human community, there is a loss in human dignity, and there is a diminishment to the whole community of life.

As we go about our lives, let's remember that we are all stewards of these common inheritances—those which are close and tangible like our neighborhood main streets and parks, and those which are vast like our water and sky.

The more we participate in the creation and protection of our commons, the more we are fulfilling our calling as true citizens, and building a world worthy of our children.