

BUSINESS LESSONS FROM A RADICAL INDUSTRIALIST

RAY C. ANDERSON
WITH ROBIN WHITE



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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the people of Interface, Inc., the company I founded in 1973 and which has prospered and grown to dominate its field—carpet tile production—globally.

Carpet tiles, often called modular carpet, were new in America in 1973 and had hardly dented the market, though they were well established in Europe. But at that moment a revolution was taking place in the design of American office interiors. The “Open Plan” was being adopted: Interior walls were disappearing; the private office was giving way to systems furniture that came with its own partitions; and power and telecommunication wiring, with no walls to house them, were being routed beneath the office floor. This interior demanded modular carpet to provide an acoustical treatment of the floor that also permitted easy access to the wiring beneath the floor.

Interface was a start-up from scratch—from just an idea to produce carpet tiles in America for the emerging “Office of the Future.”

After a harrowing experience raising the initial capital, I brought on four very special people: Joe Kyle to head up manufacturing, Don Russell to lead sales and marketing, Don Lee to head up administration, and Albert Ayers to assist Joe in building a factory and installing production equipment. Soon after, they were joined by Graham Scott, who moved to Georgia from England with some of the first European technology that we acquired.

This was our first nucleus of people. Without them, I feel safe in saying, there would be no Interface today.

Thirty-six years later, the numbers have grown to some four thousand people (at one time eight thousand, before a series of divestitures of acquired businesses). When I published *Mid-Course Correction* (Chelsea Green) in 1998, the number stood at approximately five thousand.

Mid-Course Correction was dedicated to environmentalists everywhere. This book is dedicated to the four thousand environmentalists of Interface, without whose commitment, one mind at a time, to the vision of a sustainable Interface, this extraordinary journey to the symbolic top of a very high mountain—Mount

Sustainability—would not be happening.

Yet it is happening, and my heartfelt appreciation goes to each of my fellow “mountain climbers.” Without them all, this radical industrialist would be out on a thin ledge all by himself.

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Acknowledgments

Patricia Adams Anderson (Pat), my wife of twenty-five years, leads this list for so patiently supporting me in my personal mission to tell the Interface story far and wide. I can't count the nights I have spent away—leaving her alone at home—over the last fifteen years as I have given more than 1,300 speeches and interviews. Those have provided much of the substantive content of this book. So, thank you, my dearest wife and best friend, for your sacrifices that made this book possible.

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These people, along with the people of Interface to whom this book is dedicated, are the reason this book exists. Without them, I could never have come close.

Thank you all.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the primary source of my motivation for pursuing sustainability for Interface: my daughters, Mary Anne Anderson Lanier and Harriet Adelaide Anderson Langford, and their children (my grandchildren), James Augustus

Lanier III (Jay), John Anderson Lanier, Patrick William Lanier, Harriet Melissa Langford Heflin, and Cameron McCall Langford. Assuring a healthy future for them and their progeny is what this book is about.

Foreword

As I sit down to write this foreword, I have a lot on my mind. My company, Interface, Inc., has just marked an important milestone—ten years until our target year for Mission Zero, for zero environmental footprint, a goal for which we have set 2020 as our deadline. I’m immensely proud of Interface, and encouraged about our future. At the same time, I have spent the last year dealing with cancer, thankfully holding my own—barely.

You may be familiar with my story (before cancer)—the epiphany I experienced in 1994 when I read Paul Hawken’s book, *The Ecology of Commerce*, seeking inspiration for a speech to a task force that was organizing at Interface to answer customer concerns about the environment. That change of worldview led me down a road I had never imagined for myself or my petroleum-intensive company—eventually to get off oil.

Distancing ourselves from the wellhead requires that we reimagine the antiquated, linear, take-make-waste industrial system of which we are all a part. And instead, to become part of a thoughtful, cooperative, cyclical system that mimics nature in the way that we design, source, manufacture, sell, install—and eventually reclaim and recycle—our products. This ambitious undertaking requires new technology, new inputs, and new thinking. It is intensely complicated and, at the same time, completely liberating to think outside the traditional confines of design and manufacturing. Somewhere along the way, the idea that what we were doing was so right—so right, and so smart—emerged to propel us forward. At Interface, this new way of thinking is working—our products are better than ever, our employees are more engaged than ever, customers are extraordinarily loyal; and, importantly, costs are down, not up, dispelling the myth that sustainability is expensive. That’s the story you’ll find in more detail in this book.

I’ve always believed that there was something nagging at the back of my mind in 1994—something that caused me not only to pick up Paul Hawken’s book, but also to be taken so forcefully by his ideas. I was, at the time, sixty years old. Ego may say that the nagging sense was a search for my personal legacy, but maybe it was actually

conscience—the thing in us that inherently knows right from wrong. Can it possibly be right that we humans are burning up more than a cubic mile of oil each year, as well as mountains of coal, to power our homes, our cars, our offices, and our factories; fuels that took millions upon millions of years to create, and only a few hundred years to exhaust? Inherently, we must know that this is wrong—and stupid. A wise farmer would shake his head and say we were eating our own seed corn. Some capitalists would say we can't afford to do it differently.

But what if those capitalists took into account the value of the services that nature provides? What if the balance sheet and profit-and-loss statement required that we account for the cost of creating air; water purification and distribution (the hydrologic cycle); soil creation and maintenance, thus food; energy and raw materials (at their full costs); climate regulation; pollination; seed dispersal; nutrient cycling; an ultraviolet radiation shield; flood and insect control; and net primary production, the product of photosynthesis? Surely, even the capitalists will know that without any of these, there would be no economy in the first place.

At Interface, the pursuit of sustainability has opened our eyes, not only to how wrong we had it before, but also to the enormous opportunity that new thinking provides.

As we begin the next leg of our journey, looking at the ten years to go and the path before us, one thing is even more clear to me. If we capitalists intend to go on, if we aspire to thrive in a carbon-constrained world and to put down multiple threats—global climate disruption, species extinction, resource depletion, and environmental degradation—we need a new way, a better way, of thinking and acting. Wrong thinking got us into this mess. Eating our own seed corn, as it were, is unsustainable.

The unrepentant capitalist might say, “Business can't afford to have a conscience.” But I am here to tell you, the farmer was right, and business can't afford not to have a conscience.

So we have the business case—which I detail in this book—and we have our collective conscience: society's need to distinguish right from wrong on a local and a global scale.

If that's not persuasive enough, let's get personal. Cancer is no fun. If you don't receive the right treatment, you die; and even with the very best treatment, you can still die. I seem to be receiving the right treatment; though the very best results one can hope for, complete remission (which I am nowhere near yet), leave one knowing it can recur, maybe in a different part of the body as a metastasis, or maybe in a mutated form. It's difficult not to let cancer take over your life.

As you can imagine, I find some interesting analogies in this experience.

In cancer, it's often not clear whether the original cause was hereditary or environmental—nature or nurture. My mother was one of seven siblings. My father, too, was one of seven. Not one of those fourteen people who were the generation

before mine had cancer. In my generation, my two brothers, one of our first cousins, and I have had cancer. One would tend to think that the probable cause is nurture—something in the environment, not inherited, that got to us. And, of course, “the environment” is, in this case, paradoxically, nurture, not nature. Nurture is what we are exposed to that, perhaps throughout the branch of human evolution that led to us—my generation, our forebears—were never exposed to, at least not in deadly amounts. My forebears, therefore, never had the need to evolve immunity to cancer; so my generation has no inherited immunity—we have the cancer.

But these are not intended to be comments about *my* cancer. These comments—and this book—are about the “cancer” that is attacking the earth, for lack of the right treatment: sincere exercise of responsibility from those responsible for the industrial system. And like human cancer, industrial cancer can take over our lives.

Like my siblings, our cousin, and me, life on the earth is “seeing,” i.e., being exposed to hazards it has not seen in the earth’s entire existence: man-made substances—chemical compounds—that are completely unnatural. Even substances the earth put away in its crust millions, even billions, of years ago through sedimentation and sequestration, allowing a sweet environment conducive to life to evolve up here, are being dug up or drilled up, processed and reintroduced into our surroundings. And the earth’s fragile ecological balances are constantly abused. By whom? By *homo sapiens*—modern man, doubly wise man, man who knows and knows he knows, and who ought to know better. Conscience again—we cannot afford to ignore its nagging.

So this brings me to the central point of this book; I’ll make it now and flesh it out in the book. Irresponsible business—the diggers, the drillers, the processors of poison, all of whom ought to know better—they and their abusive industries—are a cancer on society. Humankind cries out for responsibility to be taken seriously by them and, in fact, by all of industry. To me sixteen years ago, that meant starting with my own company. This book is our story, our response to the imperative: Start here.

It’s high time we all started the right treatment of this hateful disease that is inflicted on the earth by us humans before it takes us all down. It’s time for the public—the revered marketplace—to say to the institution of business: “You think you can not afford to exercise responsibility and remain competitive. The truth is, you can no longer afford *not* to act responsibly; stop your companies’ crimes against nature, for we will run you out of business if you don’t. That’s the “stick.”

I’ll end on a positive note, with an update on Interface’s climb up Mount Sustainability—the latest metrics on our eco-odyssey (as of year-end 2009), and a restatement of my central thesis. This is the “carrot”:

- **80 percent** reduction in the landfill waste per unit of production since 1996
- Water intake, down **80 percent** per unit of production since 1996
- Total energy, down by **43 percent** per unit of production since 1996

- With changing energy mix to include renewables, fossil fuel intensity reduced by **60 percent**
- With verified offsets, net GHG reduced **94 percent** (absolute)
- **30 percent** of global energy is from renewable sources
- **36 percent** of total raw materials (by weight) is recycled or bio-based materials
- **100 percent** renewable electricity in Europe (89 percent worldwide) in our factories
- **111 million square yards** of climate-neutral carpet produced since 2003: “Cool Carpet”
- **100,000 tons** (200 million pounds) of reclaimed product via Re-Entry, our reverse logistics carpet reclamation program
- **200 million** airline passenger miles offset by some **106,000 trees**
- Overall footprint reduction, more than **60 percent**
- Cumulative avoided waste costs totaling **\$433 million** since 1994—costs down, not up—waste elimination paying for the entire mountain climb

If we can do it, anybody can. If anybody can, everybody can. That includes you.

RAY C. ANDERSON

Prologue

This is a book about the future of business and industry, a future driven by a new and powerful idea: sustainability. Specifically, it deals with what it takes to run a profitable, modern business with the environment in mind, doing no harm *to* the earth and taking *from* the earth nothing that cannot be renewed naturally and rapidly *by* the earth. It is about a new business model that can generate not just bigger profits, but better, more legitimate ones, too.

But as I sit here today, October 10, 2008, writing while I vacation in the ancient town of Brugge, Belgium, a global financial meltdown seems to be under way, putting into question whether the economic system can survive.

Here's a snapshot at this moment in time. While it's 7:05 P.M. in Belgium, it is 1:05 P.M. in Atlanta, where I live. The Dow Jones Industrial Average is down 345 points, following seven consecutive days of decline. It appears to be moving toward 8,000, or lower. The Federal Trade Commission has just approved Wells Fargo's acquisition of Wachovia for \$11.7 billion. Venerable Merrill Lynch is in the process of disappearing into Bank of America, a route Countrywide Financial has already taken. Lehman Brothers, a longtime pillar of stability in the investment banking world, has failed; only its brokerage and mutual fund businesses survive under the banners of Barclays of the United Kingdom and Neuberger Investment Management, respectively. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac have gone into federal government "conservatorship." Washington Mutual, the largest savings bank in the United States, is being gobbled up by JPMorgan Chase, out of the receivership of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). Bear Stearns, the first really big shoe to fall, is already being absorbed by JPMorgan Chase in a deal brokered by the U.S. Treasury Department over a weekend.

Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, for so long dominant forces in the investment banking world, have opted to change their very nature and become regulated commercial banks. They were the last of the mega-investment banks once Bear Stearns, Merrill Lynch, and Lehman Brothers were gone. Mitsubishi UFJ, a Japanese bank, is taking a \$9 billion equity position in Morgan Stanley to shore up MS's capital

structure and prepare it for the role of acquirer in the turmoil ahead, portending more consolidation to come. American International Group (AIG), said to be too big to be allowed to fail, is being propped up by the Federal Reserve to the tune of more than \$100 billion.

And the U.S. Treasury Department is trying to determine just how to “invest” \$700 billion of taxpayers’ money to jump-start the “clogged up” (Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson’s term) American credit markets. “Clogged up” means banks have stopped making loans, even among themselves, and credit is drying up, even for borrowers with impeccable credit standing. Meanwhile, European central banks are undertaking their own forms of rescue with capital infusions of more than a trillion dollars.

A year ago the Dow Jones Industrial Average was above 14,000. The Dow is an important number on Wall Street. It is an important number on Main Street, too. Wealth worth trillions of dollars has evaporated, taking with it the savings of millions of people. While the much-touted benefits of a “trickle down” economy have always been hard to document, the trickle-down hurt of a freeze in capital, in short-term lending and in mortgages and auto loans, is now painfully apparent to just about everyone.

I look into my laptop’s screen and see a financial industry in turmoil. It seems as if the financial world we have known for three quarters of a century is changing before my eyes. The underlying culprit is said to be the bursting of the subprime home loan bubble in the United States, which precipitated a whole new set of consequences: many trillions of dollars lost in arcane derivatives that few people even understand.

Watching this unfold from afar is truly surreal. Personal, too, as I watch my own investment portfolio shrink. I think that all my holdings are in sound companies, but who really knows? Even those who have the responsibility of running those banks don’t seem to know what to do or where to turn. One wonders who or what is “running” whom.

However, another kind of sustainability is on my mind. My company, Interface, has become nearly synonymous with corporate environmental sustainability. But can we sustain sustainability, or will the economic storm sweeping over the world force us to put our efforts on the back burner?

I answer myself: No way! We *will* continue. You see, while environmental and financial sustainability have often (and mistakenly) been seen as opposite goals, they are, in truth, one and the very same. We have seen that for ourselves. We know it to be absolutely true.

Oil’s price is down today to less than \$80 a barrel, the lowest in a year. Not long ago oil was \$147 a barrel and reaching for more. Down \$67 a barrel! Is that good? Or bad?

The book that follows this introduction was largely written while the Dow was

falling from around 13,000 to around 10,000, oil's price was rising, and gasoline was topping \$4 a gallon in the United States. But concern for the future of the American banking system, and the unprecedented entry of government institutions into the world of private finance—to rescue it, no less—never once entered my mind, though smart people I know and talk with regularly have been saying financial upheaval was coming.

Yet, quite intentionally, I was writing about the future, the future of the real economy—the place where real stuff gets made and sold, and real services are rendered. It is quite distinct from the financial economy, with its stock market and its various indexes, altogether a sort of imperfect analogue of the real economy.

The point of my story is deceptively simple. Business and industry—not just American business and industry, but global business and industry—must change their ways to survive. Some people have been saying this for a long time. Many more are saying it today.

I make no claim to prescience, only to conviction. And by survive, I do not mean maintain identity and integrity within the context of a financial system in meltdown, either. By survive, I mean business must be steered through a transition from an old and dangerously dysfunctional model to a far better one that will operate in balance and harmony with nature—thrive in a carbon-constrained world, and put down the threats of global climate disruption, species extinction, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. In a word, develop a business model that is *sustainable*.

Even as I write this introduction I have not yet settled on a title for the book. But I think it should somehow mention “hubris.” (It probably won't because it's not catchy enough.) For there's nothing quite like staring apocalypse in the eye to humble oneself or a society. To know that nobody has control over events puts the limitation of power into a new perspective. Puffed-up hubris is run out of town on a rail by something just as useless: unthinking fear.

What we need instead of hubris or fear, and what this book offers, is a new and better way forward. And yes, hope, a hope learned from my own, personal experiences running a company that is reaching for sustainability.

There is a chance that on the other side of this financial meltdown a new sanity will overtake the world of business, industry, and finance, and its analogue, the stock market. Then this book can assume relevance for newly opened minds and become a map for change.

Therefore, I am altering as few of the words already written as possible, though it is tempting to rewrite some passages that are predicated on high prices for oil. But I take the view that the upheavals in finance will be followed by slowing business and declining demand, therefore falling oil prices—for a while. Then this too will pass away, but the fundamentals of supply and demand will still be there. So I let stand unchanged those passages, in the conviction that their relevance will become clear on

the next leg up of the real economy.

The story you will read has grown out of real-life experiences—mine and those of the people of my company, Interface, Inc. We're not some small, boutique manufacturer of green widgets. We make and sell carpet tiles—more than a billion dollars' worth in the most recent year. We also make broadloom carpets—about a hundred million dollars' worth in a year. Our sales force covers the world, selling our products in 110 or more countries in any given year.

Almost all our products are made for commercial and institutional interiors. A relatively small but growing portion is made for home use. Interior designers and architects are extremely important to us. It is their choices of our products for their projects that keep the wheels turning in our factories in six countries on four continents—with more to be built in time, always close to their markets, not for cheap labor, but for sensitivity to customer needs and to shorten transportation pipelines.

We are a company that is highly dependent for our raw materials on petrochemical products produced by big chemical companies. We use a lot of energy, too. All of it used to come from burning fossil fuels. Not so anymore. But I get ahead of myself.

In 1998, I published *Mid-Course Correction*, an autobiographical account of my formative years and some forty-two years (at that point) in the business world. The last twenty-five of those years had been invested in the founding of my company, its growth and development and survival. But the last four of those twenty-five years were the primary focus of *Mid-Course Correction*.

Those were the four years that followed my 1994 epiphanal reading of Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce* (HarperCollins, 1993), four years that had seen the literal “mid-course correction” of Interface away from the extractive, abusive path of business as usual and toward a renewable, cyclical, and benign business model—a model of sustainability. The plan for executing our course correction—a wide-ranging and astonishingly successful program we now call Mission Zero—was the heart of *Mid-Course Correction*.

Ten years have passed since *Mid-Course Correction*'s publication. A lot has happened at Interface during those ten years, but Mission Zero is still the plan. Given the progress we have made in executing it, I thought it was not only time for an update but for a how-to manual to more clearly show others the way.

For the reader who has not read *Mid-Course Correction*, I have rewritten its essential story, so you need not feel something important is missing from this account. For the reader who has read *Mid-Course Correction*, you may read some passages that seem familiar, but they are expressed more expansively here. I hope not to bore anyone with repetition. As with *Mid-Course Correction*, I make no effort to prove anything. This is not an academic book. It is a real life story of real people doing real, if extraordinary, things.

Today, as many CEOs are wondering how they will weather the financial storm,

the step-by-step plan that we crafted at Interface assumes greater importance than I imagined when I set out to formulate it. As you read this book, you will see that the choices—the trade-offs—we are told we must make between financial success and environmental success, between doing well and doing good, are just plain false.

I began by saying that this is a book about the future of business and industry; I should say it's about the *necessary* future of business and industry, if we are to choose the survival option and lead humankind away from the environmental abyss toward which we are rushing headlong. Conversely, if the institutions of business and industry fail in their own mid-course correction toward ecological survival, the financial meltdown I am observing from Brugge will seem like a tea party by comparison.

That is a very large burden for the institutions of business and industry to bear. This book is about lightening that burden. It offers a template for a better, more benign business model. It also makes the business case for sustainability in pure business terms.

If you have better ideas, I hope you will share them with me; for as long as I live, I will be looking for a better way. That's what sent me and my company on a quest to achieve the very sustainability that some really knowledgeable people said was just plain impossible.

Of course, many of those same people were the ones who brought us subprime mortgages, overleveraged hedge funds, and credit default swaps, and a traditional framework of financial "values" that appears to be collapsing before our eyes.

Meanwhile, the value of nature's services to all of humanity—clean air, fresh water, arable land, pollination, seed dispersal, and climate regulation, just to name a few—has not lost a cent. They are, they will be, and always were the real gold standard. Investing to conserve and protect them has been a winner for us. As you read this book, I think you will see that investing in the earth's future—the earth that all business, all life, utterly depends upon—can be a winner for you, too.

RAY C. ANDERSON
October 10, 2008
Brugge, Belgium

I would not give a fig for simplicity this side of complexity; but I would give my right arm for simplicity on the far side of complexity.

—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR. (1841–1935),
American jurist

Cicero spoke and people marveled. Caesar spoke and people marched.

—CATO THE YOUNGER (95–46 B.C.),
Roman statesman

1 | Mission Zero

I am Ray Anderson, and in addition to being a husband, a father, and a grandfather, I'm an industrialist. Some would say a radical industrialist. *Time* magazine called me a "Hero of the Environment." *U.S. News & World Report* said I was "America's Greenest CEO." *Fortune* magazine was kind and astute enough to include my company, Interface, in its annual list of the "100 Best Companies to Work For"—twice. The GlobeScan (2007) Survey of Sustainability Experts listed Interface, Inc., as leading the list of global companies with the greatest commitment to sustainability. Following Interface, in order of ranking, were: Toyota, GE, BP, and DuPont.

But I've also been called a hypocrite and a dreamer who pours his time, energy, and stockholder money into lofty ideas about ecology and sustainability instead of the bottom line. Yet I would reply that I'm as profit-minded and competitive as anyone you're likely to meet.

I grew up in a small Georgia town during the tail end of the Great Depression and the Second World War. My father worked in the post office. My mother was a retired schoolteacher. I attended college on a football scholarship, graduated with highest honors, and spent seventeen years in industry working for someone else.

Then, in 1973, I took the entrepreneurial plunge and founded a company, Interface, with nothing more than a good idea, my life's savings, and the faith of a few brave investors. We grew that company from scratch into the world leader in carpet tiles (modular carpet) with annual sales of more than a billion dollars.

In 1994, at age sixty and in my company's twenty-second year, I steered Interface on a new course—one designed to reduce our environmental footprint while increasing our profits. I wanted Interface, a company so oil-intensive you could think of it as an extension of the petrochemical industry, to be the first enterprise in history to become truly sustainable—to shut down its smokestacks, close off its effluent pipes, to do no harm to the environment, and to take nothing *from* the earth not easily renewed *by* the earth. Believe me when I say that that goal is one enormous challenge.

But as I said, I'm profit-minded and extremely competitive. I thought "going

green” would definitely enhance our standing with our customers and maybe give us some good press, too. But I *also* thought it just might be a way to earn bigger profits from doing what was right by the earth. No one had ever attempted that kind of transformation on such a large scale before. We aimed to turn the myth that you could do well in business or do good, but not both, on its head. Our goal was to prove—by example—that you could run a big business both profitably and in an environmentally responsible way. And we succeeded beyond my own high aspirations.

Not everyone at my company was happy with this in August 1994. It had been a very good year at Interface. We had weathered a deep recession, we were growing again and very profitable. Why should we conduct this grand experiment when nobody, not even I, knew how it would come out? It was a reasonable question.

We caught plenty of flak from outside the company, too. Wall Street heard “environment” and thought “costs.” Even after we showed them how reaching for sustainability could take a big bite out of waste and save us real money, even after we discovered that running a billion-dollar corporation with the earth in mind was a terrific new business model, there was still a lot of skepticism. There still is some, even though we now have over a decade of hard numbers that prove—beyond a doubt—that our course was both right *and* smart. Why, then, all the resistance?

I think it’s because our transformation flew in the face of all the old rules that still drive the “take-make-waste” economy, old rules that we inherited from the steam-driven days of the first industrial revolution and (many of us) unthinkingly accept as true. That old way of doing business seemed to work just fine when we thought the earth could provide endless resources, endless energy, and endless room to throw away all the stuff we make and waste.

But those rules don’t work anymore. Daniel Quinn, in his book *Ishmael*, said that they’re like those badly designed wings of the early aircraft at the dawn of human flight. Our civilization is like that would-be “aeronaut” who jumps off a high cliff in his misbegotten craft. He’s pedaling away, wings flapping like mad; the wind is in his face, and the poor fool thinks he’s flying when he’s really in free fall. Though the ground seems far away at first, his flight is doomed because the design of his wings has ignored the laws of aerodynamics.

Like that high cliff, the vast resources available to our industrial civilization—the oceans, forests, fossil fuels, even the air we breathe—make the “ground” seem far away to us. But as sure as gravity, it’s rushing up fast. Our flight will end up no better than his. Why? Because our industrial civilization has ignored the laws of sustainability, laws that would enable humanity to pull out of our terminal dive and “fly.”

Whichever way we look, from global warming to deforestation, from empty water reservoirs to vanishing species, to the price of a gallon of gas at the pump, the evidence is all around us. The earth is finite and fragile, and we ignore these plain