

Fall 2009

The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, The Environment, and Crossing From Crisis To Sustainability, by James Gustave Speth

Peter Wayne Moe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Moe, Peter Wayne. "The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, The Environment, and Crossing From Crisis To Sustainability, by James Gustave Speth." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 116–18, doi:10.25148/clj.4.1.009116.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

*THE BRIDGE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD: CAPITALISM,
THE ENVIRONMENT, AND CROSSING FROM CRISIS TO
SUSTAINABILITY.*

JAMES GUSTAVE SPETH. YALE UP 2008.

Reviewed by Peter Wayne Moe

James Gustave Speth's recently published *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* provides a staunch critique of capitalism through an environmental lens, convincingly arguing that the economy expands at the great cost of the environment. In what is distinctly divided into a three-part problem/solution/how-to text, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* expounds the connections between economic growth and environmental decline, proposes reforms (some fairly radical) to the current capitalistic society in which we live so as to preserve what is left of the environment, and concludes by offering suggestions for how to enact such change. Although *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* primarily addresses readers concerned with either the economy, the environment, or both, Speth's progressive prescriptions for social reform have wide community literacy applications as well, both inside and outside the classroom.

The first section of *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, "Part One: System Failure," expounds the primary problems facing the environment, the economy, and the environmental movement so that readers can fully appreciate the gravity of the situation Speth addresses. Opening *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* with a series of graphs showing a correlation between rising gross domestic product and rising levels of pollution, population, water use, fertilizer consumption, paper consumption, CO₂ concentration, average surface temperature, species extinctions, and ozone depletion, Speth argues that "One can only conclude that [economic] growth is the enemy of the environment" (57). While Speth does note in the preface that *The Bridge at the Edge of the World's* "premise is one of hope, not despair, and of faith in the American people" (xi), Part One paints an unflinching, but necessary, portrait of the large issues facing the world today. Speth justifies these candid chapters for the simple reason that "confronting the truth about environmental conditions and trends is the first step" (17) toward addressing these seemingly overwhelming problems.

"Part Two: The Great Transformation" is the "solution" section of *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, addressing specific changes that need to happen in six areas of Americana: the market, economic growth, real growth, consumption, corporations, and capitalism. In each of these six arenas, Speth offers ideas for reform in order to shift American culture from its "strongly materialistic, anthropocentric, and contempocentric" values (62) to values which are sustainable. It is in Part Two that Speth begins to challenge some of the bedrock assumptions of the world economy and capitalism, the biggest, perhaps, being Speth's assertion that growth is not always good.

Because of the great strain put on the environment by economic growth, Speth suggests limiting economic growth for “the planet cannot sustain capitalism as we know it” (116). Because many of the reforms for which Speth calls rely upon hefty government intervention, Speth recognizes that “those favoring minimalist government” may demur, and he counters by arguing “our country is in deep trouble on several fronts, and if we want to cure these ills, some strong medicine must be taken” (xiii). In addition to national and world-wide reforms, Speth also asks individuals to reevaluate what constitutes “happiness” and whether or not a capitalistic model built on consumption of products can truly satisfy human desires (Ch. 6). Furthermore, Speth calls for reform in business practices, stressing corporate responsibility. The common trait in the transformations Speth champions is a focus on the community, not the individual, and a focus on the future, not the present.

The final section of *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, “Part Three: Seedbeds of Transformation,” functions to describe how the social and economical changes previously addressed in Part Two can occur through creating “a new consciousness” (199) and “a new politics” (217). Describing transformations necessary to the value system girding the American psyche, Speth suggests, “today’s problems cannot be solved with today’s mind” because the “dominant worldview is simply too biased toward anthropocentrism, materialism, egocentrism, contempocentrism, reductionism, rationalism, and nationalism to sustain the changes needed” (204). Regarding politics, Speth promotes a transformative change to create “a vital, muscular democracy steered by an informed and engaged citizenry” (217). The impetus necessary to enact such reforms, Speth argues, is a fundamental paradigm shift in the American consciousness toward sustainability. Speth closes his book on a hopeful note, returning to the bridge metaphor the title employs. Suggesting that humanity is on a path, Speth posits we have reached a fork in the road where one trail leads toward the abyss of environmental desolation and the other to a bridge at the edge of the world (237). While what is on the other side of the bridge is not visible, Speth writes that “we are carried forward by hope, a radical hope, that a better world is possible and that we can build it” and implores readers to join him in crossing the bridge to a new world (237).

Given its treatment of economic, political, social justice, and ethical and moral issues, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* is a highly malleable and interdisciplinary text aimed at a primarily academic, civically engaged audience. Speth’s specific mention of “the young people returning to campuses across America” (xi) as an audience for his book suggests many pedagogical applications of this polyvalent text in academe, perhaps as a campus reader, a course textbook, a book club text, or a text casually shared among friends and colleagues. For instance, in the classroom Speth’s book could be examined by composition instructors for Speth’s keen and rhetorically sound construction of his well-researched and heavily cited argument; by economics instructors for Speth’s proposed reforms to

capitalism, including his thoughts on limiting growth and alternatives to capitalism as it exists currently; by environmental science instructors for Speth's analysis of the issues facing the ecosystem as well as Speth's critique of the environmental movement as a whole; by political science instructors for Speth's diatribe against Washington, government, and democracy, and his proposals for political reform. Regardless of what discipline adopts Speth's text, any instructor concerned with literacy can use *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* as a means through which to explore information dissemination and literacy issues, solidifying the link between literacy and a students-as-citizens classroom agenda.

In terms of fostering a students-as-citizens agenda, Speth's text has applications outside the classroom as well, for Speth largely calls for civic engagement as a means by which to address the formidable problems facing the environment and the economy. Community literacy hinges upon citizens having the rhetorical skills necessary to analyze their communities, ascertain what change is needed, and enact that change: in order to meet the challenges Speth exposes and implement the reforms Speth proposes, a new literacy is needed—an environmental literacy. Although many readers may be initially unaware (and thus illiterate) of the magnitude of the environmental and economic problems Speth addresses, Speth convincingly argues that the environmental hurdles coming our way impact all of humanity, and his text provides the first steps toward the literacy necessary to clear those hurdles. The reforms Speth suggests, while worthwhile and needed, are prodigious and sweeping, appearing somewhat idealistic and perhaps naive due to their grandiose aspirations. However, given the current economic recession, Speth's call for economic reform is all the more relevant and potent, and *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* promotes the nascent literacy necessary to enact the shift away from an anthropocentric, contempocentric worldview to one that is sustainable, future-oriented, and ecologically cognizant.