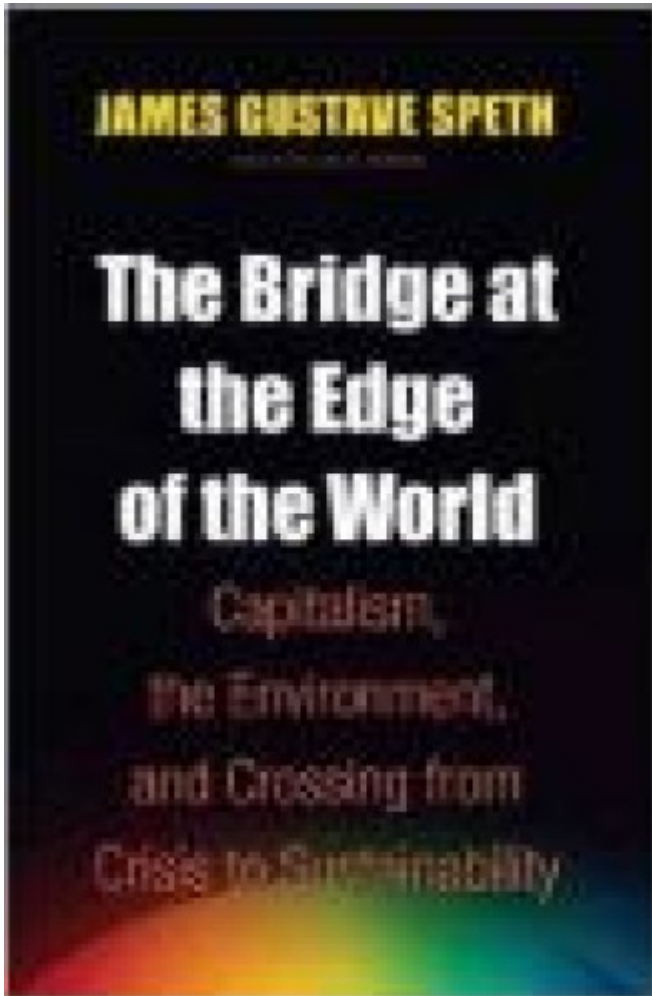


A sustainable world

By [James Halteman](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability

James Gustave Speth
Yale University Press

In some ways *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* is a confession, from someone who has been a leader in the environmental movement for many years. Although he has spent decades documenting and working for environmental change, James Gustave Speth admits that the efforts of those years are failing and that environmental problems are getting worse. Something entirely new is needed to sustain the world, he says, and that something will challenge the imagination of even those who ardently concur with his diagnosis.

One might wish that his alarmist prediction of disaster were merely a product of the youthful fervor of some uninformed novice, but Speth is nothing of the sort. Before holding his present position as dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, he was a high-level adviser to presidents Clinton and Carter and served with various research and policy groups advocating for environmental policy changes. He is highly regarded as a seasoned leader of environmental reform in both the academic and policy arenas.

In the first section of the book, Speth looks at the magnitude of the environmental crisis and examines the institutions that foster it. The most revealing portrayal of the seriousness of the problem is a set of 16 graphs that illustrate the exponential increase in various indicators of environmental destruction over the past 60 years—to levels that cannot be sustained by planet Earth. Employing a Malthusian tone of impending doom, Speth insists that these environmental problems are caused by human activity rather than by natural causes, as some claim, and that the institutional structure that encourages such damage is the pro-growth orientation of modern Western capitalism. In Speth's words, "The fundamental question thus becomes one of transforming capitalism as we know it: Can it be done? If so, how? And if not, what then?"

Thus a major portion of the book is a critical look at market capitalism. Speth understands how economists think, and he is willing to let markets do their important job of allocating resources, but he seeks to transform the present system by altering the values of the players. Right now markets are driven by the desire for growth and continual increases in living standards. That must change. The key to having a flourishing life is to increase not material wealth but the quality of one's relationships; to enhance human welfare, markets must somehow support the strengthening of communities.

Speth devotes an entire chapter to research showing that material growth not only fails to enhance human welfare but in many cases diminishes the quality of life. When workers migrate in search of higher pay and living standards, families and communities are fractured. Lonely people are surrounded by goods, the production of which has destroyed the environment. Much of this production has come from large corporations which are legally and socially constructed in ways that give them power in markets and policy circles where the interests of the wealthy are promoted first. Sensitivity to social concerns is low on the list of goals for most corporations, according to Speth. That is why it is appropriate to change the rules of the game so corporations are not privileged in their operations. But regulations that achieve this goal are not enough. Mere tinkering with incentives will have only a limited impact on the environmental crisis.

For decades the green movements and environmental organizations have promoted changes in prices and incentives so people and businesses will behave in a more environmentally friendly manner. However, those methods have failed to solve the problem because the market presupposes that more is better than less, that individual interests trump social interests, and that welfare is found in material rather than nonmaterial pursuits. The market itself is the problem.

In the final section of the book Speth proposes a new, transformed social order as the only permanent solution to the environmental crisis we face. These chapters read like a religious treatise on the transformed life. "When all is said and done," Speth claims, "the only change that will make a difference is the transformation of the human heart." In these chapters, he contrasts a society that is built on individual self-interest with one that is built on social solidarity and designed to face the environmental crisis. The transformations he recommends include moving from getting to giving, from individualism to community, from economy to ecology, from having to being, from satisfying wants to satisfying needs, and from being richer to being better. These changes will come as a response not to carefully designed incentives but to a changed heart. We are at a fork in the road. The path we are on now leads to an abyss. The alternative route will be a bridge to a sustaining, meaningful life.

There is much in this book to commend. However, two omissions are worth noting. Speth says nothing about the way in which animal-based eating habits in the U.S. contribute to global warming, and he presents no plan for resolving the energy dilemma. Furthermore, he only lightly addresses the global and cross-cultural

complications of environmental degradation. A better treatment of the causes of environmental decay would not just discuss the pro-growth culture of the U.S. and the rest of the developed world; it would focus on the self-interested nature of all humans regardless of the sort of regime they live under. This diagnosis would fit better with the solution of a transformed human heart.

Many will doubt the feasibility of transforming hearts as Speth recommends. Speth believes that religious, humanitarian and all other socially concerned people can join forces to alter the way people look at their own welfare and the way they treat others. He believes that a spirit of cooperation will arise when people see the potential for devastation similar to what might happen in a neighborhood when a tornado strikes. This is Speth's hope for the human race. But Christians know all too well that even a sincere salvation experience hardly eliminates the temptations of selfishness, so it is hard to imagine how Speth's vision of a sustainable world will come about.

Neither regulation nor heart transformation is a complete solution on its own. Speth stimulates thinking about both the specific environmental challenges we face and the nature of the human condition we all share. Somewhere in this mix of forces solutions must be found.