

# *Sustainable Living Class*

*“Each of us is a story within stories. My youngest son’s life story is part of both my story and his mother’s story. The story of our family is likewise part of other stories larger than our own: the story of our town, our state, our nation, Western civilization, humanity, planet Earth, and the story of the Universe itself. Each of us is a story within stories within stories.”*

NOTE: for the rest of this essay, see “*Stories Within Stories*” below.

In this context, *PLSOILIN 285, Sustainable Living*, is a class designed to explore “*stories within stories*”. At a time when individual student stories seem to get lost within the larger University story of excitement and promise, violence and fear, this class encourages participants to clarify, and learn to tell and live by their own story. The University story itself exists within the context of a national and global story in which humanity is facing an unprecedented challenge to redesign nearly every major natural resource-based system on the planet. It is a story of industrial and technological systems that are simultaneously destroying or depleting much of nature and endangering human and non-human species, while offering the highest material standard of living and rate of consumption ever known. The larger national and global story is also one of excitement and promise, as well as violence and fear. In this context it is difficult to imagine another way of being, yet this is what we must do. Toward this end, we will share individual stories of our efforts to live more sustainably, while at the same time we will learn the greatest story ever told, the story of the evolution of the universe. It is this story that gives me hope.

## The Story of our Class

**Tuesday, January 29:** The story will begin with introductions to each other, the TA’s and instructor, as well as the syllabus and intent of the class. Before class, please calculate your own Ecological Footprint using this web page: <http://www.earthday.net/footprint/> Please join us on day-one and decide if this class is for you. If not, please drop the class, as there are lots of students waiting to get in.

**Thursday, January 31:** Professor David Glassberg, Department of History, will tell the story of the history of consumerism in America. In this story he will review our relationship to the natural world from pioneering days to today.

**Tuesday, February 5:** John Gerber will present a background lecture on sustainable living, using examples from his own life. He will introduce the process of recovery from the “disease” of industrial growth as one including 1) awareness, 2) acceptance, and 3) action, as he outlines a way of thinking about personal change.

**Thursday, February 7:** Mr. Chris Marano will tell his own story of trying to “*weave a more sustainable life*” and helping others to do so through and for their health. Chris is an herbalist, natural healer and teacher.

**Tuesday, February 12:** John Gerber will answer the question “*can one person really make a difference*” using systems thinking tools and stories of personal experience. This presentation will help students do Homework Four.

**Thursday, February 14:** Daniel Greenberg, Executive Director of Living Routes, will tell stories of living and learning in ecovillages around the world. He will talk about the importance of community to sustainable living.

**Tuesday, February 19:** No class. The University story is one that has made this Tuesday into a Monday!

**Thursday, February 21:** John will continue on the theme of awareness, acceptance and action by introducing the Personal Holistic Goal, decision-making tool to the class. This presentation will help you do Homeworks Five, Eight and Eleven.

**Tuesday, February 26:** Several of the Teaching Assistants will introduce the story of dramatic social change in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union and ensuing “special period”, using the video “*The Power of Community.*” This is a story of crisis, pain, transformation and hope.

**Thursday, February 28:** Lorenzo Macaluso, a leading catalyst for change in the region as well as on the UMass campus will share his story of “*turning waste into gold*” as he encourages us all to “*take responsibility for our own backyard.*”

**Tuesday, March 4:** John will tell his version of the “*greatest story ever told*”, that is the story of the evolution of the universe and how it has shaped his own story as a teacher and learner.

**Thursday, March 6:** Dan Gerber (John’s brother) will introduce the concept of holistic health and healing of the self at “three levels of self” that is; 1) the personal self, 2) the community self, and 3) the global self.

**Tuesday, March 11:** Students are invited to volunteer to tell their own stories of sustainable living.

**Thursday, March 13:** On the final day before spring break begins, John will help students complete their Personal Holistic Goal in class.

---

**Tuesday, March 25:** Upon return from spring break, we will be greeted with a story from a recent college graduate and former TA of Sustainable Living class. Danielle Connor will tell her story of struggle to “*find the perfect major*” in college and her further story trying to build a sustainable livelihood after graduation.

**Thursday, April 3:** Professor Giovanna DiChiro, from Mt. Holyoke College will tell stories of the struggle for environmental and social justice in the Pioneer Valley and elsewhere.

**Part II;** most of the second half of Sustainable Living class has not yet been planned. Our strategy is to “*build the road while walking.*” Throughout the first half of the semester we will identify areas of interest to students in the class. We will invite speakers from the Pioneer Valley to join us to tell their own personal stories of how they are working toward more sustainable lifestyles. While we have several speakers in mind, we prefer to wait and see what issues emerge in class before we make commitments. **If you know someone who has a story worth hearing, please let John or one of the TA’s know!**

## Stories Within Stories

Each of us is a story within stories. My youngest son’s life story is part of both my story and his mother's story. The story of our family is likewise part of other stories larger than our own: the story of our town, our state, our nation, Western civilization, humanity, planet Earth, and the story of the Universe itself. Each of us is a story within stories within stories.

There is a dynamic relationship between every story, the larger stories it is part of, and the smaller stories that are a part of it. Larger stories influence and add meaning to the stories that are nestled within them. For example, when my wife and I moved across the country, my son's story was affected. Similarly, if my nation goes to war, experiences prolonged economic recession, or undergoes a major spiritual awakening, my community's story, my story, and my son's story will each be affected. The destiny of every story is affected by the larger stories of which it is a part.

Importance or significance, of course, is relative. An important event in one story will be an important event in all the stories that are nestled within it, but may be relatively insignificant for the larger stories in which it itself is nestled. For example, if university that employs me and many of my neighbors’ experiences severe budget cuts, this would be a significant event in the story of my community, as well as in my story, and in my son's story. But it would not be particularly significant within the story of Western civilization. Something significant in the story of Western civilization, however, like an economic and ecological collapse, or a nuclear war, would also be significant for each of the smaller stories nestled within the story of Western civilization, such as the story of my community, my story and my son's story.

When we ask the question, "Why?" we ask about the meaning or context of something. We can understand personal meaning by using the metaphor that we are each a story within stories. The meaning of some thing or event is apparent in its larger context. A tragedy has meaning in terms of the bigger picture, or larger story. An elderly woman who dies while saving a young child's life can be said to have died a tragic, yet meaningful, death. The question, “Why did she have to die?” may be answered meaningfully by looking at the larger perspective.

When we want to know the meaning of something we are asking, "How does this fit into the bigger picture? How does this make sense in terms of the larger story? The larger the context, generally the deeper the meaning.

Adapted from: The Big Picture by Michael Dowd ([www.thebigstory.org](http://www.thebigstory.org))