

Quality, Sustainability and the Lasting Relevance of W. Edwards Deming's Ideas
H.T. Johnson's remarks on receiving the ASQ Deming Medal in Houston on May 5, 2008

About twenty years ago Dr. Deming helped me go beyond the mechanistic thinking that caused me to view accounting, finance, and other modes of financial abstraction as indispensable to explaining and analyzing business activity. His writings and his personal encouragement helped me see beyond the narrow, specialized view of business that had trapped my thinking and writing for nearly thirty years. As an economist and as a management accountant, I had been focused on tools such as return-on-investment analysis, performance budgeting, and activity-based cost accounting. And then Dr. Deming introduced me to his concept of quality, a concept that went far beyond quality management as such. His concept of quality led me to think in wholistic and systemic terms about business, to realize that business encompasses people – customers, employees, suppliers, communities – and that managements' primary task is improving concrete, tangible, processes, not manipulating abstract financial results.

In the 1990s, after Dr. Deming's death, I was privileged to make dozens of research visits to the Toyota Motor Corporation's facility in Georgetown, Kentucky. There I saw Dr. Deming's concept embodied in actual practice. I came to understand that Toyota successfully enacted Dr. Deming's quality concept. My next epiphany occurred when I realized that the company's operations embodied principles found in nature. Toyota's practices corresponded to the principles that modern science observes in nature's systems throughout the universe, especially in living systems on Earth. This realization awakened in me a sense that Dr. Deming's insight into the systemic processes essential to quality resides in an even wider context, the systemic context of life itself. This awareness

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explains why my writings in the past decade or so have concentrated on how to conduct business to achieve sustainability. By “sustainability” I mean, following the definition of my friend John Ehrenfeld, “preserving the possibility that all life on Earth, human and non-human, will flourish forever.”

I am forever grateful to Dr. Deming for helping me discover the pathways to quality and sustainability that I have travelled in the past twenty years. I believe that were Dr. Deming still here, he would also view the pursuit of sustainability as the logical, necessary next step demanded by the pursuit of quality. Indeed, I think he might say, today, that quality is sustainability and sustainability is quality.

Finally, for this honor I am receiving today, I want to extend a special thank you to Diana Deming Cahill, Willam J. Bellows, Edward Baker, Gipsie Ranney, Terry Begnoche, Larry Smith, Peter Senge, Jane Seddon and Jan Gillett. I would also like to acknowledge the endorsement of my nomination by the NY/NJ Metropolitan Section of the American Society for Quality.