

From Ego to Eco: A New Worldview

Our problem

Climate change is occurring because we misperceive ourselves and our world. By not accurately understanding who we are and our relationship with Mother Earth, we act in ways that are damaging to our own welfare. Climate change is a watershed in human history. It requires fundamental shifts in our ideas, relationships, and practices.

We currently assume that we humans are separate from nature, we have a right to overexploit natural resources, nature has no intrinsic value, and nature's machinery is comprised of interchangeable parts. By separating from nature, we seek to conquer and subdue nature. Feminists see many parallels between our subjugation of nature and women. Mother Nature has been repressed and almost deleted from our anthropocentric and patriarchal world, which is shutting down our life support system. The historical developments of Abrahamic religions have strongly influenced our modern views of patriarchy and Mother Earth.

Current discussions about climate change are based on our prevailing worldview. We are attacking this crisis with the same kind of thinking that created the problem. While our understanding of climate change has been powerfully enhanced by modern science, science has also accelerated our sense of separation from nature. Newtonian science gave us a worldview of nature as mechanistic, fixed, reductionistic, deterministic, and dualistic.

Lastly, there are important psychological and political-economic dimensions to our current crisis. The 18th Century Enlightenment Era gave rise to a powerful new human philosophy of individualism, which encourages people to focus on maximizing their self-interest. In the short-term, economics and politics manage our competition for power, wealth, comfort, and security, in a context of natural resource scarcity. In the long-term, economics assumes we can sustain continued economic growth on a finite planet. The wealthy and powerful often ignore that the world's extreme inequalities in wealth are socially produced by these same economic and political systems. To resolve all of these problems we need to shift to a new worldview.

An Ecological Worldview

A worldview includes all the domains of our life and determines our way of being in the world. Our 20th century scientific knowledge provides the basis for a new ecological worldview that we can deeply integrate into our culture. Science describes our ecological world as unpredictable and open, relational, holistic, interdependent, and communal. This is precisely what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. predicted: the arising archetype of the beloved community.¹ In this view, the world is understood as a network of interaction, a web of mutual dependencies. This holds true for the subatomic particles of quantum physics to planet-wide ecological processes.

In the 1970s, James Lovelock contended that populations of living organisms grow and decline in ways that generate planetary homeostatic feedback mechanisms. The result is that life on Earth is responsible for regulating key planetary conditions, such as the quantity of oxygen in the atmosphere. As a consequence, Lovelock describes the planet as a self-regulating living organism – Gaia (after the Greek Goddess). The accumulating scientific evidence indicates that the Earth's self-regulating mechanisms can be disrupted, forcing the Earth's climatic systems, and all life on Earth, to undergo rapid, nonlinear shifts. Greenhouse gases and consequent

climate changes could force the Earth into a catastrophic positive-feedback loop of ever warming global temperatures. To avoid this calamitous future, we must undertake a fundamental paradigm shift to an ecological worldview.

If humans are interdependent participants in nature, we should devote greater effort toward conserving and protecting Earth's ecosystems. The economist Robert Costanza estimated that nature produces \$33 trillion, while the formal economy produces \$17 trillion, of services.² By degrading natural systems to expand economies, we end up impoverishing our future. For example, conserving fresh water supplies is cheaper than desalination; natural systems of flood control are cheaper than engineered systems.

Humanity has been living in its caterpillar stage of development. We have been very busy devouring resources to feed our hungers. We are now at the precipice of a global transformation. As caterpillars, we grow increasingly aware of our clumsy feet. We have begun to measure the size of these footprints and are alarmed to learn that our collective footprints have grown large indeed. We despair that we lack the abilities to shrink all these footprints. This despair stems from our attachment to serving our individual egos. It is clear that if we do not shift our worldview and our behavior, catastrophes are inevitable.

Our task is to shift the focus of our awareness from ego, "I" as the center of the world, toward our ecological Self. With this shift, we begin to focus on harmonizing and balancing our own individuality with the requirements of Gaia, Earth as living planet. It is already becoming harder to separate our personal welfare from the quality of our food, water, and air. Our well being depends on the health and vitality of humanity and other species – birds, bees, fish, mammals, plants, trees and other forms of life. These expanded sets of interrelationships extend to Mother Earth and beyond.

In Freud's book *The Ego and the Id*, he acknowledges borrowing the concept of the Id from a colleague – Greg Goddeck whose theory of the Id (Das Ich) related to a positive spiritual healing force in Mother Nature. Freud's inversion of this concept turned this positive healing force of Mother Nature into something chaotic, destructive, primitive, and impulsive.

The ecological Self is therefore a path of our individual and shared emotional development. We replace our emphasis on male domination with a greater appreciation for the power of love and nurturance within society and toward other species. Be attuned to how your hope inspires others and how your love brings out the love in others. Help them to inspire and love. This path allows our energies to rise. It allows us to connect with the spirit of the butterfly. For us humans, the transformation from caterpillar will not be morphological, but it is a shift in consciousness and spirit. This sounds idealistic only because our culture remains committed to domination and using warfare as a means of solving problems. Yet today's weapons of war are so ghastly that we must learn to abolish warfare, or we will destroy ourselves as a species.

This shift in consciousness involves balancing our left-brain, rational logical, empirical type of cognition with a post-patriarchal, right-brain, soul-centered, matricentric mode of cognition which involves compassion, empathy, nurturance and egalitarianism as key components of cognition. Those cultures that have remained nature-based and soul-centered understand,

welcome, and appreciate this paradigm shift. It involves the integration, validation and respect of the right-brain, intuitive-analogical-apperceptual modes of consciousness which nature-based, soul-centered cultures employ as their main mode of cognition and knowing of reality.

In addition to these emotional and cognitive shifts, an ecological worldview also transforms our understanding of spirituality, which involves aligning with our ultimate nature and purpose and becoming free of ego-driven concerns and preoccupations. Our spiritual path takes us toward discovering our true self. Soul/spirit is our inner essence. Here's one interpretation of soul: the unified field of energy in and out of which we all have our being. Everything manifested comes from this invisible Ground of Being and ultimately returns to this Ground of Being.

Over its billions of years of existence, the Earth has developed her own ways of being and doing that can serve as learning experiences once we are willing to listen. From Earth we can learn to: enhance the whole Earth community; remember that humans are but one part of the whole; strengthen ecological diversity and productivity; respect each being for its intrinsic worth so that it may fully express its role and mission in the Earth community; develop conscious awareness of our interdependence with all life and its importance to our survival; and embrace nature with a deep sense of reverence. We do not consider this list exhaustive but rather invite you to listen to Earth to learn what she has to teach.

This shift allows for a re-integration of the Divine Feminine back into the concept of Deity. How else can we develop the proper relationship to Mother Earth? The anthropocentric view of the divine right of men to control, exploit and dominate Her as misinterpreted in Genesis of the Bible would be obviated. We can integrate Dios with what the Greeks called –Endios-- God(dess) Within. The anthropocentric religions have an obligation as some of the more repressive forces of the sacred feminine to un-repress Her. Self-healing movements are already underway in many of the anthropocentric churches to reexamine historical, theological and eschatological distortions in scripture and to improve attitudes, ideas, values and behaviors through dialogue and education.

How else do we begin this comprehensive process of global mind shift from being ego-centered to eco-centered? The shift will require openness to guidance from a source to which many of us are blind because of what Willis Harman calls our “cultural hypnosis” - the socialization processes that teach us to misperceive our world.³ Our Earth is a living system of which we are all members, just as the cells of our bodies are members of a larger whole. Living Earth has a consciousness, just as we individuals have a consciousness. That collective consciousness is the collective unconscious to which Jung referred. Individually we may be unconscious of the collective, but it can communicate with us through our intuitions -- and the channel of communication through which we all can communicate is Spirit.

Willis Harman and others suggest that we can be open to guidance from the consciousness of our “global mind” by “listening to” our intuition. Through intuition we open to Mother Earth's guidance. Modern cultures are not very attuned to intuition. For example, many illnesses have clear physiological causes. Dr. Mona Lisa Schulz, in her book *Awakening Intuition*, however, argues that some chronic illnesses have other origins. These illnesses are the body's way of trying to get our attention - to change our diet, our relationships, or our stress. Illnesses persist or

get worse because of our reluctance to hear what our bodies have to say. Our climate crisis is no different. We have an ecological affliction, but we ignore all the symptoms and go about our business; we don't want to listen to the message from Mother Earth. Tuning inward and listening to intuition/Spirit is a step toward healing – for both our bodies and our planet.

That answer is likely to frustrate readers who seek a clearer statement on how we should solve the climate change crisis. Hundreds of competing solutions are marketed by individuals and institutions. The scale of these solutions ranges from the individual to transnational collaboration. How do we evaluate and synthesize this information which grows in quantity at an exponential rate? It is important to read, listen, and discuss these ideas. Dialogue is healthy for society, and we need to invite more— especially marginalized - voices into the dialogue. But we miss something very important, perhaps the most important “place” for answers if we do not also give ourselves time to listen (and learn to listen) to our own intuition. Intuition, after all, is just another pathway toward self discovery, the Socratic injunction to “Know Thyself!”

In *Person/Planet*, Theodore Roszak wrote that as we each find the courage to follow this inward path and:

We draw into ourselves in search of solid ground, a fissure opens between us and the authorities we are expected to endorse and obey. A gap appears where there is supposed to be automatic and immediate acquiescence. And in that space an act of life-affirming rebellion breaks out. Herbert Marcuse has called it ‘the great refusal’ – the refusal of people to will their own alienation and to serve the tyranny of the economic performance principle.⁴

As we continue down this path of personal growth and self discovery we will create new institutions that allow for the liberation of people and planet.

The challenge that lies ahead is to shift the terrain of discussion. Mainstream concerns with jobs, growth projections, and profits are all defined by the erroneous assumptions outlined above as “the problem.” Jobs, growth projections, and profits were never ends unto themselves. They are means to greater human welfare and happiness. Yet the available evidence strongly suggests that these economic measures are no longer effective. The evidence from psychology is that once basic human needs are met, continued increases in material affluence generate only temporary increases in human happiness. Since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, efforts have accelerated to redefine human development using new frameworks, such as sustainable development, and new metrics, such as the *Genuine Progress Indicator* and ecological footprints.

From this brief overview several important conclusions emerge:

1. We need a large cultural shift focused on meeting basic human needs. One major impediment is that 1% of the world's population owns 40% of the wealth.
2. We need a large cultural shift toward ecological cognition and ecological living as our most effective strategies for addressing climate change.
3. These conclusions pose a threat to existing centers of power, like governments and private corporations, who continue to resist these conclusions. New institutions must form and rapidly grow to meet these urgent human needs.

In *Earth Democracy*, Vandana Shiva writes that, “globalisation is often presented as a process of new interconnections between societies...But the real project of globalisation is colonization and commodification of the very resources and processes that give us life – our biodiversity, our food, our water.”⁵

An ecological worldview will lead us in a very different direction, where we learn to harmonize human and ecological integrity. Shiva writes that, “Earth democracy protects the ecological processes that maintain life and the fundamental human rights that are the basis of the right to life, including the right to water, the right to food, the right to health, the right to education, the right to jobs, and livelihoods.”⁶

Now we need specific strategies and personal commitments to break free from today’s pathological addictions to a deeper democracy, encouraging social entrepreneurs to focus on sustainable futures and fair trade cultures. The remainder of this chapter discusses strategies for implementing these conclusions.

Ecological Practices: Confronting Our Climate Crisis

The modern hero is typically male and typically someone who conquers problems. An ecological world will need new heroes and heroines; people who strive to heal and mentor with a psycho-spiritual and scientific mindset. These leaders are cultural creatives - nurturant agents of change with deep commitments to social, environmental, and spiritual values. We are the architects of our own future through the choices we make – and these choices produce a cascade of effects through our interdependence with each other and the whole of life. The new heroes and heroines lift our spirit into awakened creative potential, compassionate interaction, and a connection to the unfolding wholeness of our world. Our self-destructive impulses generated by isolation, fear, and competition are healed and released by an emerging culture of peace and our reawakened inner wisdom. What follows are some suggestions for discovering this power within ourselves and manifesting this power in the world we inhabit.

There are many different practices for improving our connection to self, Earth, and the larger universe. It may involve simple engagement with the natural world – walking, watching, listening, touching, and smelling. Or, it might involve gardening, data collection, conservation, or an artistic practice. Others deepen their connection to Earth through meditation, prayer, contemplation, nature based rituals, or just being in the moment. All of these practices help to calm our busy minds, lower our stress, soften our sense of attachment and entitlement, and reconnect us to Mother Nature. These practices help us to slow down and experience the world with more gratitude and compassion. Buddhists, for example, counsel that compassion is a powerful tool for both training the mind to loosen its attachment to ego and to find greater happiness in life.

Personal and institutional changes are dynamically linked processes. It is our expectation that the positive feedback loops connecting personal and institutional changes will accelerate in coming years. All of the major institutions in our society will be affected by the transformative shift to an ecological worldview – governments, military, religions, private corporations, and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In this brief paper we can only discuss a few examples of institutional change. But we urge all institutions to reflect upon the Great Law of

the Iroquois, “In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation...even if it requires having skin as thick as bark of a pine.” Our comments on institutional transformations to address climate change are grouped under three themes: mitigation, adaptation, and education.

1) *Mitigation* involves reducing greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In 2007, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere had risen to 384 ppm (parts per million) and was increasing 2 ppm each year. NASA scientist Dr. James Hansen argues these concentrations need to quickly decline below 350 ppm.⁷ Climate change mitigation requires dramatic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from wealthier industrialized countries over the next twenty years. One possible strategy is for these citizens to reduce their consumption. Today this strategy is impractical because consumer values are reinforced every day by the mass media and other mainstream institutions: dramatic reductions in consumption would have major negative economic impacts.

If the choice is long-term dislocations to all of the planet’s major ecosystems or short term dislocations to the economy, most people would choose short-term dislocations. But information is generally presented to the public with a bias toward protecting the interests of dominant institutions and their value system – what Lewis Mumford called the “megamachine.” While changes in the world can be hard to discern, we offer four specific examples of how citizen and industry practices will shift in coming decades.

First, buildings are responsible for a large percentage of greenhouse gases in industrialized nations. In these countries, it has been the norm in recent decades for homes to increase in size, while the number of people in each household has declined. Yet billions of people currently live without adequate access to food and shelter. Crises are increasing the world’s refugee populations. Nevertheless, important reforms are emerging. Architects are designing zero carbon buildings. ZED (Zero Energy Design) is one popular acronym for this new building style. In 2008, Al Gore proposed that the United States provide 100% of its electricity from non-carbon-based sources within ten years.

A variety of authors are drawing deeper connections between inner reflection and material consumption, including Joanna Macy (*The Great Turning*), Duane Elgin (*Voluntary Simplicity*), and David Korten (*Earth Community*). Various nongovernmental organizations and international networks promote reductions in carbon and ecological footprints and advocate simpler living. New forms of community are emerging under various frameworks such as ecovillages, cohousing, sustainable neighborhoods, permaculture, and intentional communities. We expect these trends to accelerate in coming years.

Second, agriculture is another major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Livestock are a particularly potent source of greenhouse gas emissions. Meat has historically been more expensive than other foodstuffs and therefore acquired higher status. From an ecological point of view, meat would become a lower status food because its impacts are too large. Producing 1 kg of California feedlot beef requires 26 kg of grain and 20,000 liters of water.⁸ The costs of these practices – in natural resources and pollution – are too high. We must also consider the rights of the animals involved and end abusive practices.

Third, new industrial models are needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Swedish oncologist Dr. Karl-Henrik Robè has developed the *Natural Step* framework to reduce human ecological impacts. This framework emphasizes systems thinking and consensus-building to ensure that the built environment functions in accordance with nature's laws. Corporations that have followed the *Natural Step* have become more profitable and sustainable. Similarly, William McDonough and Michael Braungart call for a "cradle to cradle" system of resource recovery that would eliminate waste, transforming our linear economic models into circular flows of resources that minimize harm to human communities. Biomimicry is a new applied science that tries to apply nature's solutions to human problems. For example, the *Ultracane* uses bat's echolocation strategies for navigating in darkness to help the blind. Scientists are exploring what can we learn from spiders to improve silk (and other textile) manufacturing.

Fourth, we can augment greenhouse sinks – ecological and technological processes that absorb greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. The world is losing healthy and ecologically diverse forests at an alarming rate. Wangari Maathai's *Green Belt Movement* in Kenya has planted over 40 million trees, providing countless ecological and human benefits.⁹ Wangari, "The Tree Mother of Africa," provides a shining example of aligning personal, social, and Earth practices.

2) *Adaptation* refers to actions taken to adjust to changing temperatures; changing precipitation, disease, and ecological patterns; rising sea levels; and other climate changes. Adaptations will vary considerably around the world because each place on the globe will experience different impacts. The Pacific Island of Tuvalu is the first nation to plan its population's evacuation because of rising sea levels. Mount Kilimanjaro is losing its glaciers – a fresh water source for local populations. Adapting to future changes will require strengthening our preparations for small climatic shifts as well as disasters – getting food, water, shelter, and medical supplies to needy populations.

There will be a large emotional and spiritual toll on populations affected by disasters. Grief can lead to despair, what Victor Frankel called an existential vacuum; life becomes meaningless, empty of purpose. While disasters pose extraordinary challenges, they are also critical opportunities for reflection and learning – what are we doing wrong and what should we be doing differently? Without minimizing the difficulties that populations will face in coping with these disasters, an ecological worldview represents our best hope for responding to these challenges. This new worldview can give people a deeper sense of meaning in their lives and a deeper understanding of our interdependence; we are one people living on one ecological, geophysical planet.

3) *Education* refers to ways of facilitating our understanding of climate change, its causes and effects, and what we can do stabilize our environment. The ecological worldview is emerging because it is a more accurate and honest depiction of our world than the current worldview that still dominates mainstream culture and educational institutions. Educational institutions have a particularly important role to play in coming years. Ecology should continue to be a subunit of high school biology courses. It must, however, become much more: the foundational philosophy of the 21st century curriculum. There are now schools at every grade level that have incorporated environmental ethics into school mission statements and core curricula. Some have gone much further. For example Schumacher College in England is committed to "Transformative Learning

for Sustainable Living.” The college seeks to promote the human values which E.F. Schumacher so powerfully expounded in books like *Small is Beautiful*.¹⁰

In the future we see education shifting from a mass production, factory model to more individualized curricula, which will help students discover their authentic selves and their innate multiple intelligences. When children’s creativity and imagination are supported through innovative learning approaches, their genius flourishes. The challenge is to quickly move these kinds of curricula from the margins to the center of education.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the climate change crisis can be perceived as both a danger and an opportunity. It is a danger in the many ways this Report and other people have described, but, more importantly, it is an opportunity to shift from being ‘ego-centered’ to ‘eco-centered’ – and letting intuition or Spirit guide us through the danger to the opportunity of becoming “a world that works for all.”¹¹

Many individuals and institutions are working hard to create a new eco-centered world. In *Blessed Unrest*, WiserEarth.org founder Paul Hawken emphasizes that while the scientific data paints a pessimistic picture of our future, the individuals who comprise, what he calls, the largest social movement in history, inspire tremendous hope and optimism. The movement to integrate science, spirituality and healing, bridges the gap between the great minds of history and our present evolutionary state. In order for man to keep up with the Earth's democratic system we must reach for a higher human potential.

The magnitude, complexity, and urgency of the climate change crisis require shifts in our views of who we are and how we relate to the Earth. The prevailing worldview focuses on our self-interest and is a major impediment in understanding and responding to our current climate change crisis – the threats are too complex, too widespread, and too urgent to rely on our old ways.

Mother Earth has been repressed and almost deleted from anthropocentric, patriarchal worldviews which encourage us to degrade our planet’s life supporting systems. In 2005, the United Nations’ *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, prepared by 1,360 scientists, reported that 15 of 24 major ecosystems that support life on Earth are being pushed beyond their sustainable limits or are already degraded. "Human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted."¹²

A society without spiritual values is like a river without a source. The greatest asset we can bequeath the coming generations is an Earth rich with holistic clusters of cosmological connections. Through consistent daily care of conscience, we the people can create and maintain a planet of abundance for all. As we return to our intrinsic source, we can interact with a reinforced respect and new found consciousness, in balance with our Earth and its natural ecosystems. If each of us does this collectively, our Earth can heal and eventually thrive; we are the leaders we have been waiting for. So, be the love you wish to see in the world.

Endnotes.

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