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Sustainability Trajectory and Possibility

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There was a time in our prehistorical past when we as a species were subject to the forces of nature in much the same ways as all other living beings of the time. Our technology was only moderately protective. We human beings were a blend of instincts and common sense. Although communities among us could overshoot our resources, we managed to live within the biosphere relatively well. We were no noble savages—consider our genocide of the Neanderthals and our contribution to the North American mega fauna extinctions—but neither were we capable of affecting the entire global system of life as we knew it.

Our common sense was also roughly ecological, given that we lived exposed to the wild. We sought food as needed and became food when our cleverness failed us. We were driven by the forces of nature to find water in droughts, to seek shelter in winters, and migrate in search of food in famines. For the most part, we were resourceful and maintained a certain resiliency and adjusted to our environment through acute situational awareness. Slowly we recognized patterns. Knowledge of these patterns allowed us to prepare for seasonal changes, seize opportunities for harvesting, and improve our successes for hunting. We had relatively good know-how about how to live within the natural systems of our world, and we adapted fairly well, albeit with some exceptions that did not threaten our species as a whole.

But we are intelligent, technological animals. Gradually our creative brains guided us to form increasingly more complex social organizations and gain advantage over other species through increasingly more clever and powerful tools. Our growing safety helped us to shape our environment. Our ability to forecast and predict made us less vulnerable to nature's vicissitudes. We learned to use our free time to reflect, forecast, and build beneficial systems.

Alongside our technological advancements, we developed our cultures through increasingly complex ideological systems that allowed us to revolutionize what we took to be common sense. We created myths and stories of our own power and capacity to relate to the powerful beings we thought animated the world, and we placed ourselves in the center of our stories, as perhaps is natural for an intelligent being who seeks to relate to and comprehend the world around it. Our ideologies began to create the idea of the human world as a place strangely different than the immersed wilderness of our origins.

Ideology and technology fed each other, further differentiating us from the formerly seamless whole to which we belonged. As our power and our understanding grew more complex, we domesticated animals, cultivated crops, built economic systems and complex societies—cities, empires, systems of trade. We developed systems with inertia and scale, and began to have an increasingly large impact on our local environment in ways that served our intentions and in ways that were also negative. The rise of agriculture at the dawn of recorded history is a case in point. When environmental changes limited our species' resiliency, we moved to other locations if we could. For example, poor sewage and increased disease meant relocating to a fresh river valley or an uninhabited land where a social group could have a fresh start. Complex civilizations rose and fell everywhere, here in North America too.

At the core of our new power was the search for energy. As we learned to take energy from the wind, the water, and fossil fuels, our technological capabilities grew and our negative impacts on the natural systems increased. Strangely, as we became capable of insulating ourselves more from our surroundings, many of our cultures also developed ideologies that made our environment less and less a part of our intimate life—a wild out there to be controlled or shunned. Our stories about our technological power surged ahead while our spiritual connection to all things natural diminished. The natural world was a world to be subjugated and controlled.

What could come of this? We became capable of laying waste to entire ecosystems without ideas for reviving them. We sought ways to preserve pristine and yet unspoiled ecosystems as a way to atone for the harm we had caused. The problem of truly reversing the spoiled areas was beyond our capabilities and frustrated us. We had built economic systems that required consumption and growth all the while increasing our negative impact on the natural systems. Now, too, we threatened these systems at regional, even sometimes planetary scales, and we threatened not just some of us but the

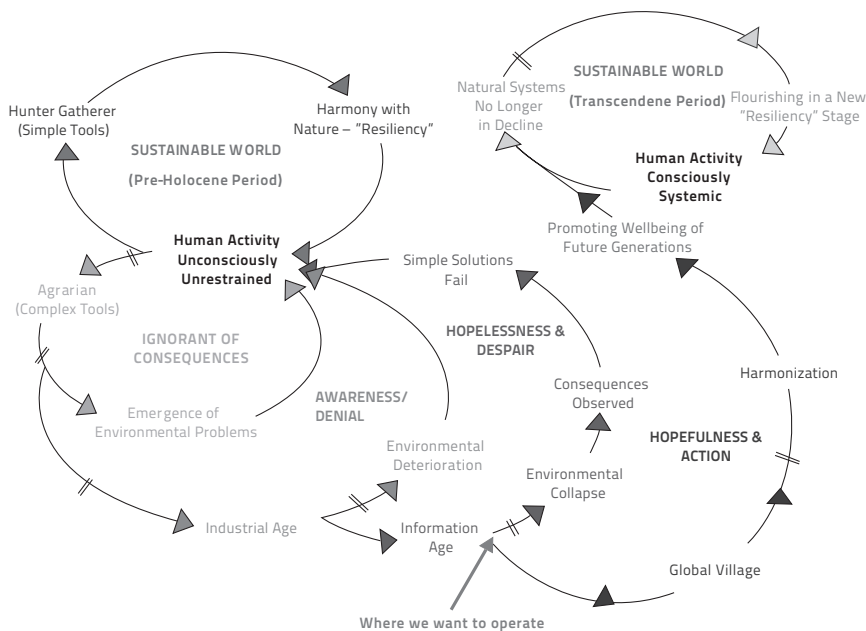
web of life as a whole—future generations, even the survival of our species if a mass extinction were to occur. Those who wanted to reverse the damaging trends were not only met with resistance but began to feel hopeless and fell into despair, which engendered a feeling of helplessness. We had drifted far from a connection to other species and the nourishment that comes from using our minds and our power to remain connected to the entire system of life as a kind of extended family.

But we have started to think of ourselves increasingly as “the family of (hu)man(s).” We have progressed to the state where our technological advancement has led to the creation of the Internet. This technology offers the possibility of placing all mankind instantly in closer connection. This is also true for our connections to all our living natural companions on the planet. We have more knowledge and predictive ability now than ever before, even though we lack ecological common sense. For the first time in our history, although we are capable of changing the course of the Earth’s evolution, we also are becoming capable of thinking and acting like a planet.

We are at a crucial stage in our development. Daily, we unconsciously confront each other with the shortcomings of objectification, perpetuating a dehumanizing and thoughtless world. Perhaps we can learn to personalize others in our human networks and other species through the power of electronic systems, but the question is how. Blood and cry, and body and feeling, are not electronic. Our strong entry into the information age does allow people to challenge the systems we have built and have depended upon. More importantly, people throughout the system can now reflect deeply on our mental models—if only virtual life doesn’t fritter away our time with trivialities and vanities. Can we see how mental models have led to intentions, and then to designs and on to artifacts and ultimately systems? Faced with the results of the changes we have wrought on the biosphere as a whole, we need to select patterns of thought that will over time allow us to shift to healthier systems.

We will never be able to restore lost natural systems to their original state existent in the Holocene period, although some geologists are now jumping—perhaps rashly—to speak of the advent of the Anthropocene age. But there is the possibility that we can arrest the global decline in the natural systems and establish an entirely new balance with the natural world. Oddly, to some environmentalists, this is a modern project never before seen in our species. Yet it eschews the arrogance and utopia of past modern projects. It is humble and based upon the idea of maintaining an openness to life all the

Image 1: Evolutionary track to flourishing



way down into our infrastructures, rather than a project for encapsulating, dominating, and exploiting life.

The systems diagram shown here is a conceptual representation of humanity's impact on natural systems and our response. Clearly much work needs to be done to establish a new balanced relationship with natural systems. Where we are today is addressing the possibility for the evolution of widespread participation in structures and practices that promote holistic thinking.

A new state of resiliency—an open, flourishing state—will take time and the conscious effort of global cultural change to achieve, the kind of thing that cannot come from an “international” platform or from a political platform but, more deeply, only from within the convergence of many different cultures, mindsets, institutions, and agencies welling up toward something more worthy of the infinitely open and mysterious being that is the “human.” We will have to challenge our myths of superiority in the domain of spirituality and consciousness and learn to play a different role—a transcendent role—where we occupy a niche that supports the whole. We could then experience ourselves as a part of the natural world without seeing other

living beings as inferior. This state of humble participation in the spiritual domain would allow us to transcend our dependence on technology and the power that comes with our physical creations. We would draw strength from spiritual balance and be intimately and wholly linked to all life in all its many forms flourishing anew.

Note

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