

THE More Beautiful World
Our Hearts Know
IS Possible

CHARLES EISENSTEIN

Author of

Sacred Economics and The Ascent of Humanity

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gift principle by which I make my work freely available. Thanks to your generosity, I am able to continue writing and speaking as I support four children.

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Separation

Sometimes I feel nostalgic for the cultural mythology of my youth, a world in which there was nothing wrong with soda pop, in which the Super Bowl was important, in which America was bringing democracy to the world, in which the doctor could fix you, in which science was going to make life better and better, and they just put a man on the moon.

Life made sense. If you worked hard you could get good grades, get into a good college, go to grad school or follow some other professional path, and you would be happy. With a few unfortunate exceptions, you would be successful if you obeyed the rules of our society: if you followed the latest medical advice, kept informed by reading the *New York Times*, got a good education, obeyed the law, made prudent investments, and stayed away from Bad Things like drugs. Sure there were problems, but the scientists and experts were working hard to fix them. Soon a new medical advance, a new law, a new educational technique would propel the onward improvement of life. My childhood perceptions were part of a narrative I call the Story of the People, in which humanity was destined to create a perfect world through science,

reason, and technology: to conquer nature, transcend our animal origins, and engineer a rational society.

From my vantage point, the basic premises of this story seemed unquestionable. My education, the media, and most of all the normality of the routines around me conspired to say, "Everything is fine." Today it is increasingly obvious that this was a bubble world built atop massive human suffering and environmental degradation, but at the time one could live within that bubble without need of much self-deception. The story that surrounded us was robust. It easily kept anomalous data points on the margins.

Nonetheless, I (like many others) felt a wrongness in the world, a wrongness that seeped through the cracks of my privileged, insulated childhood. I never fully accepted what I had been offered as normal. Life, I knew, was supposed to be more joyful than this, more real, more meaningful, and the world was supposed to be more beautiful. We were not supposed to hate Mondays and live for the weekends and holidays. We were not supposed to have to raise our hands to be allowed to pee. We were not supposed to be kept indoors on a beautiful day, day after day.

And as my horizons broadened, I knew that millions were not supposed to be starving, that nuclear weapons were not supposed to be hanging over our heads, that the rainforests were not supposed to be shrinking, or the fish dying, or the condors and eagles disappearing. I could not accept the way the dominant narrative of my culture handled these things: as fragmentary problems to be solved, as unfortunate facts of life to be regretted, or as unmentionable taboo subjects to be simply ignored.

On some level, we all know better. This knowledge seldom finds clear articulation, so instead we express it indirectly through covert and overt rebellion. Addiction, self-sabotage, procrastination, laziness, rage, chronic fatigue, and depression are all ways that we withhold our full participation in the program of life we are offered. When the conscious mind cannot find a reason to say no, the unconscious says no in its own way. More and more of us cannot bear to stay in the "old normal" any longer.

This narrative of normal is crumbling on a systemic level too. We live today at a moment of transition between worlds. The institutions that have borne us through the centuries have lost their vitality; only with increasing self-delusion can we pretend they are sustainable. Our systems of money, politics, energy, medicine, education, and more are no longer delivering the benefits they once did (or seemed to). Their Utopian promise, so inspiring a century ago, recedes further every year. Millions of us know this; more and more, we hardly bother to pretend otherwise. Yet we seem helpless to change, helpless even to stop participating in industrial civilization's rush over the cliff.

I have in my earlier work offered a reframing of this process, seeing human cultural evolution as a story of growth, followed by crisis, followed by breakdown, followed by a renaissance: the emergence of a new kind of civilization, an Age of Reunion to follow the Age of Separation. Perhaps profound change happens only through collapse. Certainly that is true for many on a personal level. You may know, intellectually, that your lifestyle isn't sustainable and you have to change your ways. "Yeah, yeah. I know I should stop smoking. Start exercising. Stop buying on credit."

But how often does anyone change without a wake-up call, or more often, a series of wake-up calls? After all, our habits are embedded in a way of being that includes all aspects of life. Hence the saying, "You cannot change one thing without changing everything."

On the collective level the same is true. As we awaken to the interconnectedness of all our systems, we see that we cannot change, for example, our energy technologies without changing the economic system that supports them. We learn as well that all of our external institutions reflect our basic perceptions of the world, our invisible ideologies and belief systems. In that sense, we can say that the ecological crisis—like all our crises—is a spiritual crisis. By that I mean it goes all the way to the bottom, encompassing all aspects of our humanity.

And what, exactly, is at the bottom? What do I mean by a "transition between worlds"? At the bottom of our civilization lies a story, a

mythology. I call it the Story of the World or the Story of the People—a matrix of narratives, agreements, and symbolic systems that comprises the answers our culture offers to life’s most basic questions:

- Who am I?
- Why do things happen?
- What is the purpose of life?
- What is human nature?
- What is sacred?
- Who are we as a people?
- Where did we come from and where are we going?

Our culture answers them more or less as follows. I will present a pure articulation of these answers, this Story of the World, though in fact it has never dominated completely even as it reached its zenith in the last century. You might recognize some of these answers to be scientifically obsolete, but this obsolete nineteenth- and twentieth-century science still generates our view of what is real, possible, and practical. The new physics, the new biology, the new psychology have only barely begun to infiltrate our operating beliefs. So here are the old answers:

Who are you? You are a separate individual among other separate individuals in a universe that is separate from you as well. You are a Cartesian mote of consciousness looking out through the eyes of a flesh robot, programmed by its genes to maximize reproductive self-interest. You are a bubble of psychology, a mind (whether brain-based or not) separate from other minds and separate from matter. Or you are a soul encased in flesh, separate from the world and separate from other souls. Or you are a mass, a conglomeration of particles operating according to the impersonal forces of physics.

Why do things happen? Again, the impersonal forces of physics act upon a generic material substrate of fundamental particles. All phenomena are the result of these mathematically determined interactions. Intelligence, order, purpose, and design are illusions; underneath it all is merely a purposeless jumble of forces and masses. Any phenomenon,

all of movement, all of life, is the result of the sum total of forces acting upon objects.

What is the purpose of life? There is no purpose, only cause. The universe is at bottom blind and dead. Thought is but an electrochemical impulse; love but a hormonal cascade that rewires our brains. The only purpose of life (other than what we manufacture ourselves) is simply to live, to survive and reproduce, to maximize rational self-interest. Since we are fundamentally separate from each other, my self-interest is very likely at the expense of your self-interest. Everything that is not-self is at best indifferent to our well-being, at worst hostile.

What is human nature? To protect ourselves against this hostile universe of competing individuals and impersonal forces, we must exercise as much control as possible. We seek out anything that furthers that aim; for example, money, status, security, information, and power—all those things we call “worldly.” At the very foundation of our nature, our motivations, and our desires, is what can only be called evil. That is what a ruthless maximizer of self-interest is.

What, therefore, is sacred? Since the blind, ruthless pursuit of self-interest is antisocial, it is important to overcome our biological programming and pursue “higher things.” A holy person doesn’t succumb to the desires of the flesh. He or she takes the path of self-denial, of discipline, ascending into the realm of spirit or, in the secular version of this quest, into the realm of reason and the mind, principles and ethics. For the religious, to be sacred is to be otherworldly; the soul is separate from the body, and God lives high above the earth. Despite their superficial opposition, science and religion have agreed: the sacred is not of this world.

Who are we as a people? We are a special kind of animal, the apex of evolution, possessing brains that allow the cultural as well as the genetic transfer of information. We are unique in having (in the religious view) a soul or (in the scientific view) a rational mind. In our mechanical universe we alone possess consciousness and the wherewithal to mold the world according to our design. The only limit to our ability to do so is that amount of force we can harness and the precision with which we

can apply it. The more we are able to do so, the better off we are in this indifferent or hostile universe, the more comfortable and secure.

Where have we come from and where are we going? We started out as naked, ignorant animals, barely hanging on to survival, living lives that were nasty, brutish, and short. Fortunately, thanks to our big brains, science replaced superstition and technology replaced ritual. We ascended to become the lords and possessors of nature, domesticating plants and animals, harnessing natural forces, conquering diseases, laying bare the deepest secrets of the universe. Our destiny is to complete that conquest: to free ourselves from labor, from disease, from death itself, to ascend to the stars and leave nature behind altogether.

Throughout this book I will refer to this worldview as the Story of Separation, the old story, or sometimes outgrowths from it: the Story of Ascent, the program of control, and so forth.

The answers to these questions are culturally dependent, yet they immerse us so completely that we have seen them as reality itself. These answers are changing today, along with everything built atop them—which basically means our entire civilization. That is why we sometimes get the vertiginous feeling that the whole world is falling apart. Seeing the emptiness of what once seemed so real, practical, and enduring, we stand as if at an abyss. What's next? Who am I? What's important? What is the purpose of my life? How can I be an effective agent of healing? The old answers are fading as the Story of the People that once answered them crumbles around us.

This book is a guide from the old story, through the empty space between stories, and into a new story. It addresses the reader as a subject of this transition personally, and as an agent of transition—for other people, for our society, and for our planet.

Like the crisis, the transition we face goes all the way to the bottom. Internally, it is nothing less than a transformation in the experience of being alive. Externally, it is nothing less than a transformation of humanity's role on planet Earth.

I do not offer this book as someone who has completed this transition himself. Far from it. I have no more authority to write this book

than any other man or woman. I am not an avatar or a saint, I am not channeling ascended masters or ETs, I have no unusual psychic powers or intellectual genius, I have not passed through any remarkable hardship or ordeal, I have no especially deep spiritual practice or shamanic training. I am an ordinary man. You will, therefore, have to take my words on their own merits.

And if my words fulfill their intention, which is to catalyze a next step, big or small, into the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible, my very ordinariness becomes highly significant. It shows how close we all are, all of us ordinary humans, to a profound transformation of consciousness and being. If I, an ordinary man, can see it, we must be almost there.



Breakdown

The kingdom of God is for the broken hearted.

—FRED ROGERS

It is frightening, this transition between worlds, but it is also alluring. Have you ever gotten addicted to doom-and-gloom websites, logging on every day to read the latest evidence that collapse is coming soon, feeling almost let down when Peak Oil didn't start in 2005, or the financial system didn't collapse in 2008? (I'm still worried about Y2K myself.) Do you look toward the future with a mixture of dread, yes, but also a kind of positive anticipation? When a big crisis looms, a superstorm or financial crisis, is there a part of you that says, "Bring it on!" hoping it might free us from our collective entrapment in a system that serves no one (not even its elites)?

It is quite normal to fear what one most desires. We desire to transcend the Story of the World that has come to enslave us, that indeed is killing the planet. We fear what the end of that story will bring: the demise of much that is familiar.

Fear it or not, it is happening already. Since my childhood in the 1970s, our Story of the People has eroded at an accelerating rate. More and more people in the West no longer believe that civilization is fundamentally on the right track. Even those who don't yet question its basic

premises in any explicit way seem to have grown weary of it. A layer of cynicism, a hipster self-awareness has muted our earnestness. What was once so real, say a plank in a party platform, today is seen through several levels of “meta” filters that parse it in terms of image and message. We are like children who have grown out of a story that once enthralled us, aware now that it is only a story.

At the same time, a series of new data points has disrupted the story from the outside. The harnessing of fossil fuels, the miracle of chemicals to transform agriculture, the methods of social engineering and political science to create a more rational and just society—each has fallen far short of its promise, and brought unanticipated consequences that, together, threaten civilization. We just cannot believe anymore that the scientists have everything well in hand. Nor can we believe that the onward march of reason will bring on social Utopia.

Today we cannot ignore the intensifying degradation of the biosphere, the malaise of the economic system, the decline in human health, or the persistence and indeed growth of global poverty and inequality. We once thought economists would fix poverty, political scientists would fix social injustice, chemists and biologists would fix environmental problems, the power of reason would prevail and we would adopt sane policies. I remember looking at maps of rainforest decline in *National Geographic* in the early 1980s and feeling both alarm and relief—relief because at least the scientists and everyone who reads *National Geographic* are aware of the problem now, so something surely will be done.

Nothing was done. Rainforest decline accelerated, along with nearly every other environmental threat that we knew about in 1980. Our Story of the People trundled forward under the momentum of centuries, but with each passing decade the hollowing-out of its core, which started perhaps with the industrial-scale slaughter of World War I, extended further. When I was a child, our ideological systems and mass media still protected that story, but in the last thirty years the incursions of reality have punctured its protective shell and eroded its essential infrastructure. We no longer believe our storytellers, our elites.

We have lost the vision of the future we once had; most people have no vision of the future at all. This is new for our society. Fifty or a hundred years ago, most people agreed on the general outlines of the future. We thought we knew where society was going. Even the Marxists and the capitalists agreed on its basic outlines: a paradise of mechanized leisure and scientifically engineered social harmony, with spirituality either abolished entirely or relegated to a materially inconsequential corner of life that happened mostly on Sundays. Of course there were dissenters from this vision, but this was the general consensus.

Like an animal, when a story nears its end it goes through death throes, an exaggerated semblance of life. So today we see domination, conquest, violence, and separation take on absurd extremes that hold a mirror up to what was once hidden and diffuse. Here are a few examples:

- Villages in Bangladesh where half the people have just one kidney, having sold the other in the black-market organ trade. Usually this is done to pay off debts. Here we see, literalized, the conversion of life into money that drives our economic system.
- Prisons in China where prisoners must spend fourteen hours a day playing online video games to build up character experience points. The prison officials then sell these characters to teenagers in the West. Here we see, in extreme form, the disconnect between the physical and virtual worlds, the suffering and exploitation upon which our fantasies are built.
- Old people in Japan whose relatives have no time to see them, so instead they receive visits from professional “relatives” who pretend to be family members. Here is a mirror to the dissolution of the bonds of community and family, to be replaced by money.

Of course, all of these pale in comparison to the litany of horrors that punctuates history and continues, endemic, to this day. The wars,

the genocide, the mass rapes, the sweatshops, the mines, the slavery. On close examination, these are no less absurd. It is the height of absurdity that we are still manufacturing hydrogen bombs and depleted uranium munitions at a time when the planet is in such peril that we all must pull together, and soon, for civilization to have any hope of standing. The absurdity of war has never escaped the most perceptive among us, but in general we have had narratives that obscure or normalize that absurdity, and thus protect the Story of the World from disruption.

Occasionally, something happens that is so absurd, so awful, or so manifestly unjust that it penetrates these defenses and causes people to question much of what they'd taken for granted. Such events present a cultural crisis. Typically, though, the dominant mythology soon recovers, incorporating the event back into its own narratives. The Ethiopian famine became about helping those poor black children unfortunate enough to live in a country that still hasn't "developed" as we have. The Rwandan genocide became about African savagery and the need for humanitarian intervention. The Nazi Holocaust became about evil taking over, and the necessity to stop it. All of these interpretations contribute, in various ways, to the old Story of the People: we are developing, civilization is on the right track, goodness comes through control. None hold up to scrutiny; they obscure, in the former two examples, the colonial and economic causes of the famine and genocide, which are still ongoing. In the case of the Holocaust, the explanation of evil obscures the mass participation of ordinary people—people like you and me. Underneath the narratives a disquiet persists, the feeling that something is terribly wrong with the world.

The year 2012 ended with a small but potent story-piercing event: the Sandy Hook massacre. By the numbers, it was a small tragedy: far more, and equally innocent, children died in U.S. drone strikes that year, or by hunger that week, than died at Sandy Hook. But Sandy Hook penetrated the defense mechanisms we use to maintain the fiction that the world is basically okay. No narrative could contain its utter senselessness and quell the realization of a deep and awful wrongness.

We couldn't help but map those murdered innocents onto the young

faces we know, and the anguish of their parents onto ourselves. For a moment, I imagine, we all felt the exact same thing. We were in touch with the simplicity of love and grief, a truth outside of story.

Following that moment, people hurried to make sense of the event, subsuming it within a narrative about gun control, mental health, or the security of school buildings. No one believes deep down that these responses touch the heart of the matter. Sandy Hook is an anomalous data point that unravels the entire narrative—the world no longer makes sense. We struggle to explain what it means, but no explanation suffices. We may go on pretending that normal is still normal, but this is one of a series of “end time” events that is dismantling our culture’s mythology.

Who could have foreseen, two generations ago when the story of progress was strong, that the twenty-first century would be a time of school massacres, of rampant obesity, of growing indebtedness, of pervasive insecurity, of intensifying concentration of wealth, of unabated world hunger, and of environmental degradation that threatens civilization? The world was supposed to be getting better. We were supposed to be becoming wealthier, more enlightened. Society was supposed to be advancing. Is heightened security the best we can aspire to? What happened to visions of a society without locks, without poverty, without war? Are these things beyond our technological capacities? Why are the visions of a more beautiful world that seemed so close in the middle twentieth century now seem so unreachable that all we can hope for is to survive in an ever more competitive, ever more degraded world? Truly, our stories have failed us. Is it too much to ask, to live in a world where our human gifts go toward the benefit of all? Where our daily activities contribute to the healing of the biosphere and the well-being of other people? We need a Story of the People—a real one, that doesn’t feel like a fantasy—in which a more beautiful world is once again possible.

Various visionary thinkers have offered versions of such a story, but none has yet become a true Story of the People, a widely accepted set of agreements and narratives that gives meaning to the world and coordinates human activity toward its fulfillment. We are not quite

ready for such a story yet, because the old one, though in tatters, still has large swaths of its fabric intact. And even when these unravel, we still must traverse, naked, the space between stories. In the turbulent times ahead our familiar ways of acting, thinking, and being will no longer make sense. We won't know what is happening, what it all means, and, sometimes, even what is real. Some people have entered that time already.

I wish I could tell you that I am ready for a new Story of the People, but even though I am among its many weavers, I cannot yet fully inhabit the new vestments. As I describe the world that could be, something inside me doubts and rejects, and underneath the doubt is a hurting thing. The breakdown of the old story is kind of a healing process that uncovers the old wounds hidden under its fabric and exposes them to the healing light of awareness. I am sure many people reading this have gone through such a time, when the cloaking illusions fell away: all the old justifications and rationalizations, all the old stories. Events like Sandy Hook help to initiate the very same process on a collective level. So also the superstorms, the economic crisis, political meltdowns . . . in one way or another, the obsolescence of our old mythology is laid bare.

What is that hurting thing, that takes the form of cynicism, despair, or hate? Left unhealed, can we hope that any future we create won't reflect that wound back at us? How many revolutionaries have recreated, in their own organizations and countries, the very institutions of oppression they sought to overthrow? Only in the Story of Separation can we insulate outside from inside. As that story breaks down, we see that each necessarily reflects the other. We see the necessity of reuniting the long-sundered threads of spirituality and activism.

Bear in mind, as I describe the elements of a new Story of the People in the next chapter, that we have a rugged territory to traverse to get to it from where we are today. If my description of a Story of Interbeing, a reunion of humanity and nature, self and other, work and play, discipline and desire, matter and spirit, man and woman, money and gift, justice and compassion, and so many other polarities seems idealistic or naive, if it arouses cynicism, impatience, or despair, then please

do not push these feelings aside. They are not obstacles to be overcome (that is part of the old Story of Control). They are gateways to our fully inhabiting a new story, and the vastly expanded power to serve change that it brings.

We do not have a new story yet. Each of us is aware of some of its threads, for example in most of the things we call alternative, holistic, or ecological today. Here and there we see patterns, designs, emerging parts of the fabric. But the new mythos has not yet formed. We will abide for a time in the “space between stories.” It is a very precious—some might say sacred—time. Then we are in touch with the real. Each disaster lays bare the reality underneath our stories. The terror of a child, the grief of a mother, the honesty of not knowing why. In such moments our dormant humanity awakens as we come to each other’s aid, human to human, and learn who we are. That’s what keeps happening every time there is a calamity, before the old beliefs, ideologies, and politics take over again. Now the calamities and contradictions are coming so fast that the story has not enough time to recover. Such is the birth process into a new story.



Interbeing

*I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers that I have read,
all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved;
all the cities I have visited.*

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

A recognition of alliance is growing among people in diverse arenas of activism, whether political, social, or spiritual. The holistic acupuncturist and the sea turtle rescuer may not be able to explain the feeling, “We are serving the same thing,” but they are. Both are in service to an emerging Story of the People that is the defining mythology of a new kind of civilization.

I will call it the Story of Interbeing, the Age of Reunion, the ecological age, the world of the gift. It offers an entirely different set of answers to the defining questions of life. Here are some of the principles of the new story.

- That my being partakes of your being and that of all beings. This goes beyond interdependency—our very existence is relational.
- That, therefore, what we do to another, we do to ourselves.
- That each of us has a unique and necessary gift to give the world.
- That the purpose of life is to express our gifts.

- That every act is significant and has an effect on the cosmos.
- That we are fundamentally unseparate from each other, from all beings, and from the universe.
- That every person we encounter and every experience we have mirrors something in ourselves.
- That humanity is meant to join fully the tribe of all life on Earth, offering our uniquely human gifts toward the well-being and development of the whole.
- That purpose, consciousness, and intelligence are innate properties of matter and the universe.

Much of this book will flesh out the Story of Interbeing. The more we share with each other this kind of knowledge, the stronger we are in it, the less alone. It needn't depend on the denial of science, because science is undergoing parallel paradigm shifts. It needn't endure the denial of livelihood, because from a trust in gift we find unexpected sources of sustenance. It needn't withstand rejection by everyone around us, because more and more people are living from the new story, each in his or her own way, inducing a growing feeling of camaraderie. Nor is it a turning away from the world that is still mired in Separation, because from the new story we access new and powerful ways to effect change.

The fundamental precept of the new story is that we are inseparate from the universe, and our being partakes in the being of everyone and everything else. Why should we believe this? Let's start with the obvious: This interbeing is something we can feel. Why does it hurt when we hear of another person coming to harm? Why, when we read of mass die-offs of the coral reefs and see their bleached skeletons, do we feel like we've sustained a blow? It is because it is literally happening to our selves, our extended selves. The separate self wonders, "How could this affect me?" The pain is irrational, to be explained away, perhaps, as the misfiring of some genetically coded empathy circuit meant to protect those who share our DNA. But why does it extend so easily to strangers, even to other species? Why do we desire so strongly to

serve the good of all? Why, when we achieve a maximum of personal security and comfort, are we still dissatisfied? Certainly, as a little introspection will reveal, our desire to help is not coming from a rational calculation that this injustice or that ecological disaster will somehow, someday, threaten our personal well-being. The pain is more direct, more visceral than that. The reason it hurts is it is literally happening to ourselves.

The science of Separation offers another explanation of what it calls “altruistic behavior.” Maybe it is a kind of mating display, which demonstrates one’s “phenotypic quality” to prospective mates (i.e., it shows that one is so “fit” that he can afford to squander resources on others). But this explanation takes as an unexamined premise another assumption of the worldview of Separation: a scarcity of mating opportunities and a competition for mates. As anthropology, reviewed in books like *Sex at Dawn*, has discovered though, this view of primitive life is more a projection of our own social experience onto the past than it is an accurate description of hunter-gatherer life, which was communal.¹ A more sophisticated explanation draws on game theoretic calculations of the relative advantages of being a strong reciprocator, weak reciprocator, etc., in situations of mutual dependency.² Such theories are actually a step closer to an evolutionary biology of interbeing, as they break down the idea that “self-interest” can ever exist independently of the interest of others.

The desire to serve something transcending the separate self and the pain we feel from the suffering of others are two sides of the same coin. Both bespeak our interbeingness. The emerging science that seeks to explain them, whether it invokes mirror neurons, horizontal gene transfer, group evolution, morphic fields, or something further out, doesn’t explain them *away*, but merely illustrates a general principle

1. Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

2. For a good example of this kind of reasoning, see Ernst Fehr and Urs Fischbacher, “The Nature of Human Altruism,” *Nature* 425 (October 23, 2003): 785–791.

of connection or, dare I say it, oneness. The science is beginning to confirm what we have intuitively known all along: we are greater than what we have been told. We are not just a skin-encapsulated ego, a soul encased in flesh. We are each other and we are the world.

Our society runs in large part on the denial of that truth. Only by interposing ideological and systemic blinders between ourselves and the victims of industrial civilization can we bear to carry on. Few of us would personally rob a hungry three-year-old of his last crust or abduct his mother at gunpoint to work in a textile factory, but simply through our consumption habits and our participation in the economy, we do the equivalent every day. And everything that is happening to the world is happening to ourselves. Distanced from the dying forests, the destitute workers, the hungry children, we do not know the source of our pain, but make no mistake—just because we don't know the source doesn't mean we don't feel the pain. One who commits a direct act of violence will, if and when she realizes what she has done, feel remorse, a word that literally means “biting back.” Even to witness such an act is painful. But most of us cannot feel remorse for, say, the ecological harm that the mining of rare earth minerals for our cell phones does in Brazil. The pain from that, and from all the invisible violence of the Machine of industrial civilization, is more diffuse. It pervades our lives so completely that we barely know what it is like to feel good. Occasionally, we get a brief respite from it, maybe by grace, or through drugs, or being in love, and we believe in those moments that this is what it is supposed to feel like to be alive. Rarely, though, do we stay there for very long, immersed as we are in a sea of pain.

Our situation is much like that of a little girl who was taken by her mother to visit a chiropractor friend of mine. Her mother said, “I think something is wrong with my daughter. She is a very quiet little girl and always well behaved, but never once have I heard her laugh. In fact, she rarely even smiles.”

My friend examined her and discovered a spinal misalignment that, she judged, would give the girl a terrific headache all the time. Fortunately, it was one of those misalignments that a chiropractor can correct

easily and permanently. She made the adjustment—and the girl broke into a big laugh, the first her mother had ever heard. The omnipresent pain in her head, which she had come to accept as normal, was miraculously gone.

Many of you might doubt that we live in a “sea of pain.” I feel pretty good right now myself. But I also carry a memory of a far more profound state of well-being, connectedness, and intensity of awareness that felt, at the time, like my birthright. Which state is normal? Could it be that we are bravely making the best of things?

How much of our dysfunctional, consumptive behavior is simply a futile attempt to run away from a pain that is in fact everywhere? Running from one purchase to another, one addictive fix to the next, a new car, a new cause, a new spiritual idea, a new self-help book, a bigger number in the bank account, the next news story, we gain each time a brief respite from feeling pain. The wound at its source never vanishes though. In the absence of distraction—those moments of what we call “boredom”—we can feel its discomfort.

Of course, any behavior that alleviates pain without healing its source can become addictive. We should therefore hesitate to cast judgment on anyone exhibiting addictive behavior (a category that probably includes nearly all of us). What we see as greed or weakness might merely be fumbling attempts to meet a need, when the true object of that need is unavailable. In that case the usual prescriptions for more discipline, self-control, or responsibility are counterproductive.

Notice whether, when I described people “running from one purchase to another,” you felt any contempt or smugness. That too is a kind of separation. The transition we are entering is a transition to a story in which contempt and smugness no longer have a home. It is a story in which we cannot see ourselves as better than any other human being. It is a story in which we no longer use fear of self-contempt to drive our ethics. And we will inhabit this story not in aspiration to an ideal of virtuous nonjudgment, forgiveness, etc., but in sober recognition of the truth of nonseparation.

In *Sacred Economics* I made the point that what we perceive as greed

might be an attempt to expand the separate self in compensation for the lost connections that compose the self of interbeing; that the objects of our selfish desires are but substitutes for what we really want. Advertisers play on this all the time, selling sports cars as a substitute for freedom, junk food and soda as a substitute for excitement, “brands” as a substitute for social identity, and pretty much everything as a substitute for sex, itself a proxy for the intimacy that is so lacking in modern life. We might also see sports hero worship as a substitute for the expression of one’s own greatness, amusement parks as a substitute for the transcending of boundaries, pornography as a substitute for self-love, and overeating as a substitute for connection or the feeling of being present. What we really need is nearly unavailable in the lives that society offers us. You see, even the behaviors that seem to exemplify selfishness may also be interpreted as our striving to regain our interbeingness.

Another nonscientific indication of our true nature is visible in yet another apparent manifestation of greed: the endless pursuit of wealth and power. What are we to make of the fact that for many of the very rich, no amount of money is enough? Nor can any amount of power satisfy the ambitious. Perhaps what is happening is that the desire to serve the common good is being channeled toward a substitute, and of course, no amount of the substitute can equal the authentic article.

Upon each of us, the wound of Separation, the pain of the world, lands in a different way. We seek our medicine according to the configuration of that wound. To judge someone for doing that would be like to condemn a baby for crying. To condemn what we see as selfish, greedy, egoic, or evil behavior and to seek to suppress it by force without addressing the underlying wound is futile: the pain will always find another expression. Herein lies a key realization of interbeing. It says, “I would do as you do, if I were you.” We are one.

The new Story of the People, then, is a Story of Interbeing, of reunion. In its personal expression, it proclaims our deep interdependency on other beings, not only for the sake of surviving but also even to exist. It knows that my being is more for your being. In its collective

expression, the new story says the same thing about humanity's role on Earth and relationship to the rest of nature. It is this story that unites us across so many areas of activism and healing. The more we act from it, the better able we are to create a world that reflects it. The more we act from Separation, the more we helplessly create more of that, too.



Cynicism

Iwould like to speak to those of you who feel triggered by the principles of interbeing I laid out earlier, which I admit smack of New Age puffery. Actually, let me be brutally honest here: I only use the phrase “New Age puffery” as a way to implicitly assure you that I am no dupe of such a thing; that I am on the side of the hardheaded realists. See, here I am joining you in derision.

This is a common tactic. Liberals take special pleasure in criticizing more radical leftists; nuts-and-bolts UFOlogists are vehement in their derision of abduction claims; the kid who is bullied turns on someone still weaker. The unpopular kids in school take pains not to be tainted by association with the *very* unpopular kids. By doing this, though, we attempt to borrow legitimacy from the very system we hope to subvert, and indirectly enhance its legitimacy by associating our own with its. We commit the same error when we overrely on the academic or professional credentials of our allies to persuade those who are impressed by such things. If I appeal to Dr. Eben Alexander’s status as a professor of neurosurgery to get you to believe in extrasomatic near-death experiences, then implicitly I am affirming that you should trust that

status generally, along with the edifice of academic science surrounding it.¹ But generally, those of that status and of that edifice deny his arguments. Appeals to authority will only strengthen authority. What implicit message is encoded in “See, this professor, that Republican, this businessman, that mainstream pundit agree with me”? It is that these people carry the legitimate stamp of approval, and not those outsiders, hippies, the uncredentialed, the unpublished. Using this tactic, we might win the battle, but we will lose the war. Audre Lorde said it well: The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

Similar logic applies to utility-based arguments for environmentalism. Have you ever heard arguments that we must practice conservation because of the economic value of “ecosystem services”? Such arguments are problematic because they affirm the very assumption we need to question, that decisions in general should be made according to economic calculations. They also fail to persuade. Are you an environmentalist because you are moved by all the money we’ll save? Well, no one else will become an environmentalist for that reason either. We have to appeal to what moves us: the love of our beautiful planet.²

Knowing all this, why was I still tempted to deploy the disparaging term “New Age puffery” to disclaim the very principles I have enumerated, in an effort to maintain my credibility? Like you, dear reader, I still inhabit two conflicting stories, an old and a new. Even as I tell a Story of Interbeing, part of me remains in the world of separation. I am not some enlightened being trying to guide you on a journey he has already completed. That too is an old model, partaking of a kind of spiritual hierarchy based on a linear conception of the evolution of consciousness.

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1. I am referring here to Alexander’s book, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*.
 2. This is not to dismiss the idea of aligning economic incentives with ecological well-being. Green taxes and similar measures are important ways of bringing ecological values into our economic system. They have their limit, however; we must understand that no measure, no quantity, can encompass the infinite. When we attempt to reduce the infinitely precious to a number, monstrosities result. For example, if we value a rainforest’s ecosystem services at \$50 million, that implies that if we can make \$51 million by cutting it down, we should.

In the present transition, each of us is pioneering a unique part of the territory of Reunion. In keeping with that, I must offer you my doubt and conflict along with my insight. Those spiritual truths—and I feel squeamish about that phrase—trigger me too, nearly as much, I dare say, as they trigger the most splenetic defender of scientific orthodoxy. The only difference is that my derision is turned inward.

It is not only that I am adopting the vocabulary of the skeptic in order to defuse accusations of naiveté. What motivates my inner cynic? The principles above are frightening, because they foster a tender, vulnerable hopefulness that might easily be crushed, as it has been so many times before. People ask me at talks, “Back in the ’60s we were saying similar things about a dawning new age, but it didn’t happen. Instead, the course of violence and alienation proceeded apace, proceeded indeed to new extremes. How do we know the same won’t happen this time?” It sounds like a reasonable objection. I argue in this book that the 1960s are significantly different from today, but my argument can be rebutted, and counter-rebutted. Underneath it all something is hurting, and as long as that wound festers, no argument will be persuasive to the cynic.

Remember this when you encounter a harsh, cynical critic (whether inside yourself or outside). If you remember that the cynicism comes from a wound, you might be able to respond in a way that addresses that wound. I can’t tell you in advance exactly how to respond. That wisdom comes directly from hearing with compassionate ears and being present to the hurting. Perhaps there is some act of forgiveness or generosity that calls to you that might allow healing. When that happens, the intellectual beliefs, which are really just expressions of a state of being, often change spontaneously. Beliefs that were once appealing are no longer so.

The derision of the cynic comes from a wound of crushed idealism and betrayed hopes. We received it on a cultural level when the Age of Aquarius morphed into the age of Ronald Reagan, and on an individual level as well when our youthful idealism that knew a more

beautiful world is possible, that believed in our own individual destiny to contribute something meaningful to the world, that would never sell out under any circumstances and would never become like our parents gave way to an adulthood of deferred dreams and lowered expectations. Anything that exposes this wound will trigger us to protect it. One such protection is cynicism, which rejects and derides as foolish, naive, or irrational all of the expressions of reunion.

The cynic mistakes his cynicism for realism. He wants us to discard the hopeful things that touch his wound, to settle for what is consistent with his lowered expectations. This, he says, is realistic. Ironically, it is in fact cynicism that is impractical. The naive person attempts what the cynic says is impossible, and sometimes succeeds.

If you are thinking, “All this stuff about oneness is a lot of garbage,” if you feel disgust or contempt, I ask you to look honestly at where the rejection is coming from. Could it be that there is a lonely, timid part of you that wants to believe? Are you afraid of that part? I know I am. If I allow it to grow, if I allow it to guide my life, if I trust all those statements of the new story I listed above, I open myself to the possibility of immense disappointment. It is an exquisitely vulnerable position to believe, to trust in purpose, in guidance, and that I will be okay. Better stay cynical. Better stay safe.

If you respond to this talk of oneness not with cynicism but rather a feeling of vindication, that doesn't mean you do not bear the same wound as the cynic. Perhaps instead of exercising it like the cynic does, you are ignoring it. Could it be that whenever the doubt creeps in, you assuage its pain by picking up the latest book on angel healing, crop circles, or reincarnation? Are you committing spiritual bypass? One way to tell whether your belief in oneness and its associated paradigms conceals an unhealed wound is whether the derision of the skeptic provokes outrage or personal defensiveness. If so, then something beyond a mere opinion is being threatened. Skeptic and believer are not so different, as both are using belief to shelter a wound. So, whether you feel indignant at my mention of UFOs, or feel indignant toward the

skeptic's doctrinaire rejection of them, I encourage you to reflect on where this emotion comes from. We want to see what is hidden inside us, so that we won't blindly replicate it again and again in what we create.

I cringe to think what a no-nonsense realist like James Howard Kunstler (someone I admire) would say if he read this book. No matter—my inner critic can do him one better. “You imagine that some magical ‘technologies of interbeing’ are going to save us?” it snorts. “This is just the kind of wishful thinking that keeps us complacent and paralyzed. You just can't face up to the truth. There is no way out. The situation is hopeless. Barring some miracle, where everyone wakes up tomorrow and suddenly gets it, humanity is doomed. Prattling on about a ‘purpose’ or ‘intelligence’ in the universe, for which there is no scientific evidence, only makes matters worse.”

I have found, though, that it is the opposite of what my inner cynic says. The doom and gloom is what is paralyzing, and the naive hope is what inspires me to take action. Either one can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. What happens when millions or billions of people begin acting from the Story of Interbeing, in which no action is insignificant? The world changes.

Equally paralyzing is the belief that a nefarious evil cabal controls the world. Why try to create anything, when meaningful change will be crushed by an all-seeing diabolical power? I've dabbled in these theories, which bring me into a heavy, burdened state that feels like I'm suffocating in a pool of molasses. Yet I am told I am naive and impractical to deny it. If only I would open my eyes and see!

Nonetheless, these conspiracy theories do express a psychological truth. They give voice to a feeling of helplessness and rage, the primal indignation of being cast into a world ruled by institutions and ideologies that are inimical to human well-being. The “evil cabal” also represents a shadow aspect of ourselves, driven to dominate and control—an inevitable outgrowth of the separate self in an indifferent or hostile universe. The endless drive to prove conspiracy theories is a

kind of protest. It says, “Please believe me. It isn’t supposed to be this way. Something awful has taken over the world.” That something is the Story of Separation and all that arises from it.

Does that mean the new story is a motivational subterfuge, a device to trick us into acting as if what we did mattered? The last resort of my inner cynic is to say, “Well, I suppose the Story of Interbeing might be useful as a way to deceive people into taking action, but it isn’t true.” I would be like the preacher exhorting people to pious acts while secretly being an unbeliever himself. Underneath this particular cynicism I find again pain, an anguished loneliness. It wants *proof* that the Story of Interbeing is true, proof that life has purpose, the universe is intelligent, and that I am more than my separate self. I wish I could rely on evidence to choose my belief. But I cannot. Which story is true, Separation or Interbeing? I will in this book offer evidence that fits the latter, but none of it will constitute proof. No evidence is ever enough. There is always an alternate explanation: coincidence, fraud, wishful thinking, etc. Absent conclusive evidence, you will have to decide on some other basis, such as “Which story is most aligned with who you truly are, and who you truly want to be?” “Which story gives you the most joy?” “From which story are you most effective as an agent of change?” To make such a choice on something other than evidence and reason is already a huge departure from the Story of Separation and its objective universe.

So, am I tricking you? Surely, if I offered the new story from a place of secret disbelief, I would be an ineffective storyteller. My duplicity would show in one form or another and mar the integrity of the narrative. That is not to say that I have fully stepped into the Story of Interbeing and the total faith and trust it implies. Far from it. Fortunately, my ability to tell the story doesn’t depend on my faith alone. I am surrounded by many, many other people who themselves, imperfectly as I do, hold the same story. Together we move deeper and deeper into it. Enlightenment is a group activity.



Insanity

I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.

—EDGAR ALLAN POE

Contrary to the doctrine of the cynic, the Story of Interbeing is (as we shall see) not actually less rational or evidence-based than the Story of Separation. We like to think that we base our beliefs on evidence, but far more often we arrange the evidence to fit our beliefs, distorting or excluding what won't fit, seeking out evidence that will, surrounding ourselves with others who share them. When these beliefs immerse us as part of a Story of the People, and when financial self-interest and social acceptance are tied to them, it is all the more difficult to accept anything radically different.

That is why to live in the new story can be at times arduous and lonely. In particular, the money system is not aligned with the Story of Interbeing, enforcing instead competition, scarcity, alienation from nature, dissolution of community, and the endless, nonreciprocal exploitation of the planet. If your life's work does not contribute to the conversion of nature into products and relationships into services, you may often find that there isn't much money to be made doing it. There are exceptions—glitches in the system, as well as the halting attempts

by benevolent people and organizations to use some of their money in the spirit of the gift—but by and large, money as it is today is not aligned with the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.

By the same token, neither are our systems of social status, education, or the dominant narratives presented in the media. Immersed in what some call “consensus reality,” one’s very sanity comes into question for believing the principles of interbeing. We are permitted to entertain them as a kind of spiritual philosophy, but when we start making choices from them, when we start living them even ten percent, people begin to question our sanity. We may even question our own. Alongside the self-doubt comes a profound feeling of alienation. Just this morning I heard ten seconds of a news segment on immigration reform. An image sprang to mind of a vast apparatus of fences, checkpoints, ID cards, paperwork, interviews, borders, security zones, and official “status,” and I thought, “Wait a minute—Isn’t it obvious that Earth belongs to everyone and to no one, and that there should be no borders? Isn’t it hypocritical to make life unlivable somewhere through economic and political policies, and then to prevent people from leaving that place?” The two sides of the debate don’t even mention that viewpoint, so far outside the bounds of respectable thought it lies. The same is true of practically every issue of public controversy. Isn’t it insane to think that I am right and everyone else is wrong?

In a way, it is insane—insofar as sanity is a socially constructed category that serves the maintenance of dominant narratives and power structures. If so, it is time to be insane together! It is time to violate consensus reality.

Human beings are social animals, and it is unrealistic and perilous to carry an alternative story on one’s own. Let us pause for a moment of humility here. A number of years ago I came to be acquainted with a man whom I’ll call Frank. Frank was highly intellectual, with more than a cursory knowledge of several scientific fields, but his life’s work, on which he spent eight or ten hours a day, was to cut out words from product packaging and magazines. From these clues he teased out a vast,

all-encompassing conspiracy theory. He believed that by rearranging the words with scissors and glue, he could disrupt the conspiracy and change reality on behalf of all beings.

He brought the most fascinating connections to light. A cereal box might have “General Mills” on the front. “Mills” contains “mil,” short for “military,” and look, the text on the back of the box has sentences of nineteen and thirteen words respectively. That comes to 1913, the year the Federal Reserve was established. Aha! The pattern begins to emerge. This example barely hints at the labyrinthine complexity of Frank’s theories, which tie together packaging, logos, numerology, and more.

Everybody thought Frank was deranged, but I seriously considered, “How am I different from him?” It seems like a trivial question, but I found it fruitful. Both of us uphold an explanation for the workings of the world that seriously violates consensus reality. Both of us are rearranging words drawn from an existing linguistic and conceptual substrate, hoping thereby to alter reality. Both of us are seen by many as deviant, and therefore must persevere indefinitely without much financial support or social affirmation (at the time, I was as broke and unknown as he was).

Sometimes I titillate my brain with the thought that maybe this guy Frank really is right; that he is the greatest and bravest genius in history, working on a magical symbolic level to save the world. Maybe, if only I took the time to delve into his work, I would see it too.

Don’t you sometimes wish that your friends and relatives would just take the time to read so-and-so’s book, watch such-and-such a documentary, open their minds, and stop dismissing your worldview out of hand? If only they’d look into it, then they’d get it!

I haven’t kept in touch with Frank, but I have little doubt that he continues his obscure labors to this day. Most of us don’t have that kind of hardihood. We are social animals and need at least a little bit of affirmation. We cannot stay in a deviant story by ourselves; in the face of a whole society that pulls us into the Story of Separation, we need allies. This book is meant to be such an ally. I hope that it will awaken or

reinforce your understanding that you are not crazy after all, and that if anything it is the world that has gone insane.

You might say I am preaching to the choir. Yes. But as a member of the choir myself, I am grateful for the wonderful preachers whose words have kept me here, kept me believing. Without them I would have quit long ago and found a job greasing the wheels of the world-devouring Machine. That is also why conferences, retreats, and communities for alternative culture are so important. We hold each other in new beliefs. “Yes, I see it too. You are not crazy.” We, the choir, gather, and we learn to sing together.

As things fall apart and the old story releases its thralls into the space between stories, the beautiful music of our choir will beckon, and they will come join us in song. We have been doing important work, first in loneliness, then in small, marginal groups. The time is upon us for the new Story of the People to leave the incubator. When things fall apart, the hopelessly radical becomes common sense.



Force

*T*he state of interbeing is a vulnerable state. It is the vulnerability of the naive altruist, of the trusting lover, of the unguarded sharer. To enter it, one must leave behind the seeming shelter of a control-based life, protected by walls of cynicism, judgment, and blame. What if I give and do not receive? What if I choose to believe in a greater purpose, and am deluded? What if the universe is an impersonal melee of forces after all? What if I open up, and the world violates me? These fears ensure that ordinarily, no one enters the new story until the old one falls apart. It is not something we attain; it is something we are born into.

The same interbeingness that makes us so immensely vulnerable also makes us immensely powerful. Remember this! Indeed, the vulnerability and the power go hand in hand, because only by relaxing the guard of the separate self can we tap into power beyond its ken. Only then can we accomplish things that are, to the separate self, impossible. Put another way, we become capable of things that we don't know how to "make" happen.

To make something happen is to use some kind of force. I can ask

you to give me money, but how could I *make* you? Well, I could, if you are frail, physically force your hand into your pocketbook. Or I could put a gun to your head—any threat to your survival is also a form of force. The threat to survival can be quite subtle. Legal force, for example, rests ultimately on physical force: if you ignore the directives of the court, sooner or later a man with handcuffs and a gun will show up at your house. Similarly, economic force rests on the association of money with comfort, security, and survival.

Then there is psychological force, a term that is more than mere metaphor. It refers to the leveraging of motivations tied to basic security, in particular the desire to be accepted by the group and by the parent. Our training in the use of psychological force begins in childhood with conditional approval and rejection by the parent, which taps into perhaps the deepest fear of any young mammal: abandonment by the mother. A baby mammal left alone too long will cry piteously for its mother, attracting every predator within earshot—a risk preferable to the certain death of separation from the nursing mother. To engage that mortal fear is tantamount to a gun to the head. Many modern parenting practices leverage that fear: the accusatory “How could you?” “What’s wrong with you?” “What were you thinking?” and, perhaps even more pernicious, the manipulative praise that says, “I accept you only if you do what I approve of.” We learn to strive to be a “good boy” or “good girl,” the word “good” here meaning that Mommy or Daddy accepts you. Eventually we internalize the rejection as self-rejection—guilt and shame—and we internalize the conditional acceptance as conditional self-acceptance. To allow oneself that acceptance feels deeply gratifying; to deny it is deeply uncomfortable. That feeling of gratification is core to what we really mean by the word “good.” It is worth exploring: repeat to yourself, “I am good. Good boy. I am a good person. Some people are bad people but not me—I am a good person.” If you think these words to yourself in earnest, you might find that there is something deeply childish about the gratification that they evoke.

Conditional self-approval and self-rejection are powerful mechanisms of self-control: the application of psychological force upon

oneself. We are deeply conditioned to it; it is perhaps the most fundamental of what I will call the “habits of separation.” So conditioned, we are also vulnerable to any authority figure or government that can take over the role of parent: the arbiter of good and bad, the grantor or withholder of approval.

The same conditioning also influences our attempts to change other people and the world. We invoke guilt with slogans like “Are you part of the problem, or part of the solution?” We proclaim the complicity of each and every one of us in the imperialistic depredations of Western civilization, the ecocide, culturecide, and genocide. We try to manipulate the vanity of the people whose actions we hope to change: if you do X, you are a good person.

We habitually apply force to politicians and corporations as well. It could be the threat of public humiliation or the incentive of public praise and a positive image. It could be the threat of a lawsuit or recall campaign. It could be a financial threat or incentive. “Engage in environmentally responsible practices because it will ultimately enhance your bottom line.”

What worldview, what story, are we reinforcing when we use these tactics? It is the worldview in which things happen only through the application of force. These tactics seem to say, “I know you. You are a ruthless maximizer of rational self-interest or genetic self-interest.” Assuming that, we attempt to leverage that self-interest. We do it to other people, and we do it to ourselves.

None of this is to say that we should withhold praise and disapproval, or strive to free ourselves from being influenced by the opinions of others. As interbeings, the world reflects back to us what we put into the world. There is nothing wrong with celebrating the brave choices that move us, or expressing anger or grief over harmful decisions. It is when these are used with manipulative intent that they draw from the worldview of force.

The habitual application of various kinds of force draws on deep roots. In the scientific paradigm that, though obsolete, still generates our view of practicality today, nothing in the universe ever changes

unless a force is exerted upon it. Power over physical reality, then, accords to the one who is capable of mustering the most force and who has the most complete, accurate information about where to exert that force. It is for this reason that the power-hungry are often obsessed with controlling the flow of information.

In a universe lacking intelligence or will of its own, things never “just happen”; they happen only if something causes them to happen, and “cause” here means force. From this universe we must take, within it we must control, and onto it we must project our own designs, harnessing more and more force, applying that force with greater and greater precision, to become ultimately the Cartesian lords and possessors of nature.

Can you see how the word “practical” smuggles in so much of the mentality underlying the depredations of our civilization?

Do you think that operating from within the belief systems of the Age of Separation, we will create anything but more separation?

Control breeds its own necessity. So, when we treat land with heavy pesticides, the superweeds and superbugs that emerge require new and even stronger doses of pesticides. When someone goes on a diet and attempts to control her urge to eat, at some point the pent-up desire explodes outward as a binge, prompting further attempts to control herself. And when human beings are boxed in, surveilled, scheduled, assigned, classed, and compelled, they rebel in all kinds of ways, sometimes irrational or even violent. Ah, we think, we need to control these people. As with an addiction, these escalating attempts at control eventually exhaust all available resources, whether personal, social, or planetary. The result is a crisis that the technologies of control can only postpone but never solve. And each postponement only depletes what resources are still available even further.

It is apparent that “practical” isn’t working as well as it used to. Not only because what was once practical is insufficient to our need, but also because it is increasingly impotent in its native realm: the practical is no longer practical. Like it or not, we are being born into a new world.

This book is a call to surrender control-based thinking, so that we

can accomplish things far exceeding the capacity of our force. It is an invitation into a radically different understanding of cause and effect, and therefore a radically different conception of what is practical. Acting accordingly, our choices often seem, to those operating within the old paradigms, to be crazy: naive, impractical, irresponsible. Indeed, they seem that way to that part of ourselves—and I trust that it lives just as much in you as it does in me—that also inhabits the old story. You might recognize its voice, critical, disparaging, doubting, insinuating. It wants us to stay small, safe, protected in our little bubbles of control. My purpose here is not to urge you to fight that voice or purge it; simply recognizing it for what it is already begins to loosen its power.

None of this is to imply that we should never use force, or that we should abandon all forms of acculturation that depend on winning acceptance from parents, elders, and the group. These will always be important parts of the human drama. However, our deep ideologies have blinded us to other ways of initiating change. This book will explore the return of force (and reason, linear thinking, etc.) to its proper domain.



Science

Our conception of what is “practical” harbors a trap. “Practical” encodes the laws of cause and effect that the old world has handed us, and according to those laws, nothing we do can possibly be enough to create a more beautiful world, or even to much ameliorate the awfulness of this one. The crises are too great, the powers-that-be too strong, and you are just one tiny individual. If even the most powerful of our system, the Presidents and CEOs, feel at the mercy of forces greater than themselves, constrained by their roles and job descriptions, so much the more powerless are we.

It is no wonder, then, that so many activists sooner or later come to grapple with despair. They might say, “When I was young and idealistic, I poured limitless energy into tackling problems, but eventually I realized just how big the problems were, and just how powerful the resistance to change. Nothing I can do can possibly be enough.” In other words, they have tried and exhausted everything in the category of practical.

The question before us, then, is what do we do when in the big picture, nothing practical is practical? Obviously, we are going to have

to do things that are not practical according to our customary understanding.

Here is a crucial point: Our customary understanding of what is practical is grounded in a worldview, a mythos, that is rapidly becoming obsolete. Furthermore, that obsolescing worldview is precisely the one underlying the old world we strive to change. *In other words, the crisis of civilization and the despair over the crisis share a common source.*

You might say that the despair we face when we recognize the futility of the technologies of separation to solve the crisis of separation is a sign of the fulfillment of the Age of Separation. It marks a turning point: we give up in despair and something new becomes available. The old story has finally reached the end of its telling, and the space is clear for a new story to emerge. This cannot happen while the old story still carries hope. If anything in the old world's "practical" still has any hope of succeeding, that means the old story has life in it still. That's why "near term extinction" arguments like those of Guy McPherson are valuable. Irrefutable on their own terms, they vanquish any hope within those terms, which encode the narrow view of the possible implicit in the Story of Separation.

Now, I am not suggesting that we abjure anything that makes sense in the old story just because it is of the old story. The new does not negate the old, but contains and supersedes it. My point is, though, that if we are limited to those things, the task before us is impossible. To those in or nearing the despair state, any effort to change the world seems hopelessly naive.

There is a vast territory on the other side of despair, a new story of the world that births a radically different understanding of cause and effect, but this territory is invisible from the other side, although we may get occasional glimpses of it, premonitions. Within its logic, our situation is not hopeless at all.

Where do our notions of practicality, realism, and causality come from? They are grounded in physics. The Story of Separation and the program of control that stems from it is breaking down, personally and collectively, not only because it is becoming decreasingly effective, not

only because our crises are collapsing our confidence in our world-creating myths. While all this is happening, the scientific underpinnings of separation are crumbling as well. These profound paradigm shifts offer a different conception of the nature of self, of the universe, and therefore of how things happen and what is practical. These developments on the cutting edge of physics, biology, and psychology are hugely important for how we behave as social, economic, and political beings. They aren't just interesting curiosities. In fact, I would go so far as to say that no movement to change the world can possibly succeed unless it draws from these deeper paradigm shifts.

First is the breakdown in the neo-Darwinian orthodoxy that says that well-defined sequences of DNA called genes have evolved by random mutation and natural selection, and that these genes essentially program living organisms to maximize reproductive self-interest. Now we are learning that this account holds only in a very narrow realm: macroevolution happens not through random mutation, but rather through symbiotic merger, through acquisition of exogenous DNA sequences, and through organisms' cutting, splicing, and recombining of their own DNA. It also happens through cellular and epigenetic inheritance. The lack of any interest-maximizing discrete and separate self on the genetic level negates a primary metaphoric foundation of our Story of the Self. The genetic self has fluid boundaries. It is a chimera resulting from an ongoing exchange of DNA and information with other organisms and the environment. It is not that there are no boundaries of self; it is that these boundaries are changeable, and that the self within these boundaries is changeable as well.¹

Moreover, the study of ecology is teaching us that species evolve not only to serve their own genetic self-interest (itself hard to define when organisms can reengineer their own genes), but that they also evolve to serve the needs of other species and the whole. This would

1. I lay out some of the scientific foundation for these claims, with extensive references, in Chapter 7 of *The Ascent of Humanity*. An excellent source by a prominent academic biologist is *Evolution: A View from the 21st Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2011), by James Shapiro.

not have been surprising to cultures who were close to nature, who knew that each species had a unique and necessary gift, but science has come to understand that only in the last generation: to understand, for instance, that if one species goes extinct the whole ecosystem is just that much more fragile. It is not that the rest are better off, absent a competitor. The interest of each is the interest of all.

An even deeper challenge to the old Story of the World is the quantum revolution in physics, more than eighty years old now but so foreign to the scientific assumptions of the preceding centuries and to our dominant Story of the World that we find it terribly counterintuitive and “weird” to this day. I hesitate to venture into this territory because the wanton use of the word “quantum” to imbue a scientific cachet into all manner of questionable ideas and products has rendered the word almost meaningless. Nonetheless, quantum phenomena so flagrantly violate the basis of “practicality” as I’ve described it that a short explanation is in order. Please understand that I am invoking quantum mechanics not as a proof of any assertion in this book, but rather on a mythopoetic level, as a source of intuition and metaphor.

A basic principle, expounded earlier, of the Newtonian universe is that things don’t “just happen” without a cause. (You have to make it happen.) But in the quantum world, this is simply not true. Rather than being fully determined by the totality of forces bearing upon them, quantum particles like photons and electrons behave randomly. In aggregate, one may calculate the probable distribution of their behavior, but for any given photon, a complete account of every physical influence upon it is insufficient to predict its behavior. Photon A might go through the slit and end up here; photon B might end up there—why? There is no reason, no cause; physics therefore calls the behavior random. Here, at the very basis of our explanation of physical reality is acausality. Things can happen without any force making them happen.

The above account, though suitably simplified, is beyond dispute; physics has tried and failed to preserve determinism for ninety years. The situation has not improved since Einstein’s famous protest, “God does not play dice with the universe.” Unable to remove indeterminacy

altogether, physics had to settle for burying it safely in the microcosm: random quantum behavior adds up in the aggregate to approximate the determinate, causal behavior of the human world, in which, as before, nothing happens without some force being responsible.

Why does one photon go here and one go there, if not compelled by some force? Well, why do you do one thing rather than another, if not compelled by some force? You choose, so the obvious intuitive answer is that the photon *chooses* its course. Physics, of course, cannot countenance such an answer, so far outside the scope of scientific thought it is as to be beyond laughable. Physics—and remember, physics lies at the foundation of our Story of the World, of what is real, what is practical, how things work—says instead that the behavior is “random,” preserving, at the price of acausality, a universe of unconscious, generic building blocks. For indeed, to ascribe choice to something as humble as a photon or an electron would be to acknowledge our universe as intelligent through and through. No longer would the universe be just a bunch of stuff; no longer would we so cavalierly arrogate to ourselves the role of its lords and masters. The core project of our Story of the People would be shaken to its foundation.

Let us pause to note that most people who have ever lived on Earth would have no trouble believing that the universe is intelligent through and through. Premodern people, animists or panentheists, ascribed sentience to all beings, not only plants and animals but even rocks and clouds. Young children in our own society tend to do the same. We call it personification or projection, and think that we know better than children and animists that, actually, the universe is mostly a dead, insensate place.

Maybe you don't want your accessing of expanded creative power to depend on accepting the proposal that even electrons bear sentience. Okay, fine—I won't insist. Here at least is a place where force is not the cause of behavior. Moreover, modern physics offers a second, perhaps even more severe, challenge to the Story of Separation: the breakdown of the basic self/other distinction.

We are accustomed to a universe in which existence occurs against a backdrop of an objective Cartesian coordinate system of space and

time. If something exists, it occupies point X, Y, Z, at time T, and this existence is independent of you, me, or any other being in the universe. Even if we know about the quantum measurement paradox or entanglement, the assumption of objectivity is woven so deeply into our perceptions that to deny it is laughable. Say you go to bed before the election results come in. You wake up the next morning. Who won? You may not know yet, but you wouldn't deny that it has already been decided, that there is a fact of the matter that exists independently of your knowledge. Or say that you are investigating a traffic accident. Each party to the accident has a different version of what happened. Would you deny that there is a reality, independent of their stories, consisting of what "actually happened"?²

I would not indulge in these ontological musings at all, if it were not for the fact (the fact!) that the old, inaccurate Story of Being, the separate self marooned in an external objective universe, is a recipe for impotence and despair. Separate from the world, nothing we do can matter very much. In the vast, uncoordinated melee of separate selves and impersonal forces that compose the universe, our ability to change the course of events depends on the amount of force we can muster (or inspire, if only others would listen. And being separate from us, their choices are beyond our control—unless we *make* them listen. Back we are again to force). In particular, this story devalues most of the small, personal acts of service that we experience, on the feeling level, as important and that characterize the kind of world we would like to live in.

For example, in the world of separation, if you want to change the world, stop global warming, or save the sea turtles, then it would be a waste of time to volunteer at a hospice, rescue a lost puppy, or give food

2. I will not in these pages seek to establish an alternative philosophical position on the nature of reality. I just want to point out that our default belief is inaccurate; that it is part and parcel of the Story of Separation. Because that story infiltrates our very language, it may be impossible to undo it with language. Look at that last sentence: "... it may be impossible . . ." You see, I am implying that there is an external fact of the matter. Even words like "actual," "reality," and "is" encode an objective reality. To say, "There isn't an objective reality" already presupposes that there is one (because in what reality does an objective reality exist or not exist?).

to a homeless person. That old lady is going to die anyway. What does it matter if her passing is a little more comfortable? Maybe you should have spent those hours educating the young to imbue them with ecological awareness.

To base our decisions on their calculable, measurable effects is itself part of the Story of Separation. We might call it instrumentalism, and it rests on the belief that our understanding of causality is complete—that we can know with reasonable certainty what the full effects are going to be. But this certainty is increasingly unjustified. Science preserved it for a while by relegating quantum indeterminacy to the microcosm, by ignoring the full significance of nonlinear dynamics with its order out of chaos, and by denying any phenomena that bespeak an intelligent, interconnected universe, but today it becomes harder and harder to hold this edifice together.

Even if the intended effect is something noble, the instrumentalist mindset alienates us from other sources of knowledge and guidance that make sense only within a different Story of Self and World. And it can lead to monstrous results. Who knows who or what we must sacrifice for “the cause”?

Orwell made this point in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when O’Brien, the Party official, is pretending to recruit Winston into the revolutionary Brotherhood that seeks to topple the Party:

“You are prepared to give your lives?”

“Yes.”

“You are prepared to commit murder?”

“Yes.”

“To commit acts of sabotage which may cause the death of hundreds of innocent people?”

“Yes.”

“To betray your country to foreign powers?”

“Yes.”

“You are prepared to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to

encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases—to do anything which is likely to cause demoralization and weaken the power of the Party?”

“Yes.”

“If, for example, it would somehow serve our interests to throw sulphuric acid in a child’s face—are you prepared to do that?”

“Yes.”³

Winston, it is shown, is really no different from the Party in putting an abstract and unreachable goal ahead of any means. It is significant that the Brotherhood is phony, a fabrication of the Party; it *is* the Party. In the same way, only perhaps more subtly, the social or environmental crusader who sacrifices human values for the cause is no true revolutionary at all, but the opposite: a pillar of the system. We see again and again, within environmental organizations, within leftist political groups, the same bullying of underlings, the same power grabs, the same egoic rivalries as we see everywhere else. If these are played out in our organizations, how can we hope that they won’t be played out in the world we create, should we be victorious?

Some groups, recognizing this, devote much of their time to group process, seeking to implement within their own organizations the egalitarian, inclusive goals they are striving to bring to society. The danger is that the group becomes all about itself and fails to accomplish any external goals. Many Occupy groups experienced this tendency. Nonetheless, these efforts to work out new principles of organization and consensus signify a growing realization of the unity of the internal and the external. It isn’t simply about demonstrating one’s virtue by being egalitarian or inclusive. It is that who we are and how we relate affect what we create.

3. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Penguin [Signet Classic], 1950), 172.



Climate

What, then, of the climate change activist who says, “Certainly, inclusivity, exposing unconscious racism and classism, giving voice to the marginalized, nonviolent communication, deep listening skills, and so forth are all worthy goals, but we are talking about the survival of our species here. We need to achieve CO₂ reduction by whatever means necessary. These other things can come later. None will matter if we don’t stop the six or eight degree temperature rise that our present course entails. Therefore, to devote oneself to these things, or indeed to most social issues, is a bit frivolous.”

It may not be obvious, but this view buys in to another version of the Story of Separation, in which the universe comprises a multitude of independent phenomena. In it, an environmental leader’s neglect of his family or contracting of minimum-wage janitorial services has no bearing on global climate change. Quantum mechanics, with its collapse of the self/other, object/universe, observer/observed distinction, offers us a new set of intuitions about how reality works. I won’t say that it “proves” that by changing your beliefs or relationships you will remedy climate change. It does, however, suggest a principle of interconnectedness that implies

that every action has cosmic significance. But even without sourcing that principle in quantum mechanics, we can get there simply by asking, What is the real cause of climate change? CO₂ emissions and other greenhouse gases, perhaps? Okay, what is the cause of those? Maybe consumerism, technological arrogance, and the growth imperative built in to the financial system. And what is the cause of those? Ultimately it is the deep ideologies that govern our world, the defining mythology of our civilization that I have called the Story of Separation.

Carbon dioxide emissions will not change unless everything else that encourages them changes as well. Simply wanting to reduce CO₂ isn't enough, as the abysmal failure of 1992 Rio climate accords shows. The world solemnly declared its intention to freeze CO₂ emissions; in the twenty years following, they rose by 50 percent. Rising CO₂ is inseparable from every other facet of the Story of Separation. Therefore, any action that addresses any of those facets also addresses climate change.

Sometimes, the web of connections that ultimately implicates climate change is visible through our usual lens of causality. Those whose cause is cannabis legalization could point to the ecological benefits of plant medicine over technology-intensive, energy-intensive, chemical-intensive pharmaceuticals, to the biofuel potential of industrial hemp, or even to the way that marijuana smoking weakens some people's drive to participate fully in the Machine. For other areas of activism, the causal link to climate change is harder to see. How about marriage equality? Ending human trafficking? Giving shelter to the homeless? In the separate self's understanding of causality, it is hard to see how these relate.

Let us ask, "What kind of human being is politically passive, votes from fear and hate, pursues endless material acquisition, and is afraid to contemplate change?" We have all those behaviors written into our dominant worldview and, therefore, into the institutions arising from it. Cut off from nature, cut off from community, financially insecure, alienated from our own bodies, immersed in scarcity, trapped in a tiny, separate self that hungers constantly for its lost beingness, we can do no other than to perpetuate the behavior and systems that cause climate

change. Our response to the problem must touch on this fundamental level that we might call spirituality.

It is here where the root of our collective illness lies, of which global warming is but a symptomatic fever. Let us be wary of measures that address only the most proximate cause of that symptom and leave the deeper causes untouched. Already some would justify fracking, nuclear power, and other ecologically destructive activities on the (specious) grounds that they will ameliorate climate change. Technological ideologues propose vast geoengineering schemes that would seed the stratosphere with sulfuric acid or the oceans with iron, actions that might have enormous unintended consequences, and that are an extension of the same mindset of managing and controlling nature that is at the root of our ecological predicament.

For this reason, I am a bit wary of the conventional narrative about global warming, in which reducing CO₂ and other greenhouse emissions is the top environmental priority. This narrative lends itself too easily to centralized solutions and the mentality of maximizing (or minimizing) a number. It subordinates all the small, local things we need to do to create a more beautiful world to a single cause for which all else must be sacrificed. This is the mentality of war, in which an all-important end trumps any compunctions about the means and justifies any sacrifice. We as a society are addicted to this mindset; thus the War on Terror replaced the Cold War, and if climate change loses popularity as a *casus belli*, we will surely find something else to replace it—say, the threat of an asteroid hitting Earth—to justify the mentality of war.

The mentality of war, which justifies and compels the sacrifice of all things for the sake of Victory, is also the mentality of usury. As I describe in *Sacred Economics*, a money system that like ours is based on interest-bearing debt impels the endless growth of the money realm and the conversion of the many into the one—the diversity of values into a unitary quantity called value. As society becomes increasingly monetized, its members accept that money is the key to the fulfillment of any need or desire. Money, the universal means, becomes therefore a universal end as well. Just like the paradise of technological Utopia

or the final victory in the war against evil, it becomes a god with an insatiable demand for sacrifice. The pursuit of it subsumes the small or unquantifiable acts and relationships that make life truly rich, but that the numbers cannot justify. When money is the goal, everything that cannot be translated into its terms gets squeezed out.

The same happens with war, of course, and with any campaign toward a grand unitary goal. If you have ever been a crusader to save the world, you may have noticed how the little things that make life rich get deprioritized and squeezed out. You may wonder, “What kind of revolution am I fomenting here? What experience of life am I upholding as an example?” These are important questions! They cannot be ignored if it is true, as our intuitions tell us, that the crisis we face today goes all the way to the bottom.

There is a danger that the climate change issue occludes other important environmental issues: deforestation, eutrophication, fishery depletion, radioactive waste, nuclear accidents, wetlands destruction, genetic pollution, toxic waste, pharmaceutical pollution, electromagnetic pollution, habitat destruction of all kinds, soil erosion, species extinction, aquifer and freshwater depletion and pollution, and biodiversity loss. Some of the things we need to do to reduce CO₂ emissions would also mitigate these other problems; in other cases, they appear unrelated. If the well-being of, say, a coral reef, or even of just one pond, doesn't implicate the future of civilization via climate change, should we not care about it? Focusing on greenhouse gas emissions emphasizes the quantifiable while making the qualitative—might I even say the sacred?—invisible. Environmentalism is reduced to a numbers game. We as a society are comfortable with that, but I think the shift we must make is deeper. We need to come into a direct, caring, sensuous relationship with *this* forest, *this* mountain, *this* river, *this* tiny plot of land, and protect them for their own sake rather than for an ulterior end. That is not to deny the dangers of greenhouse gases, but ultimately our salvation must come from recovering a direct relationship to what's alive in front of us.

We implicitly devalue that direct relationship when we cite greenhouse gases as our reason for opposing fracking, tar sands excavation,

or mountaintop removal. We conform to the mentality that sacrifices the local and concrete for the sake of the global and the abstract. That is perilous. Numbers can be manipulated; data can be misinterpreted. For instance, climate change skeptics point out that atmospheric temperature has remained steady since 1997 (but what about the oceans?). It is likely to rise again soon, but what if we face not continued warming, but increasingly violent climate gyrations as the atmospheric composition changes with unprecedented rapidity at the same time the primary homeostatic control systems in the forests and oceans are degraded? Or what if some geoengineering scheme brought down CO₂ levels, or promised to do so? Then fracking and drilling opponents would have no ground to stand on. That is why, in addition to systems-level measures to address climate change (for example, a fee-and-dividend system for carbon fuels), we need to appeal directly to our love for the real, local, unique, and irreplaceable land and water. No amount of data can obscure a clear-cut. It can obscure “total acres of clear-cutting,” but not *this* clear-cut. We need to ground environmentalism on something other than data.

Skeptical as I am about the conventional story of climate change, I am even more skeptical of climate change skepticism. Most of the skeptics seem to dismiss every environmental concern with the same blithe confidence that Earth can withstand anything we do to it. The issue of climate change is coming from an important realization that is relatively new for our civilization: that we are not separate from nature; that what we do to the world, we do to ourselves; that we are a part of the dynamic balance of Gaia and must act as responsible members of the community of all life on Earth. Many climate change skeptics seem to long for a simpler time, a story in which we lived on Earth and not as part of it.

In the Story of Interbeing, we should expect that any imbalance in our own society and collective psychology would be mirrored in analogous imbalances in Gaian processes. CO₂ and other greenhouse gases surely contribute to the instability of the climate. Even more dangerous, though, is deforestation, because the forests are so crucial in

maintaining planetary homeostasis (in many ways, not only as carbon sinks).¹ With healthy forests, the planet is much more resilient. Forests, in turn, are not merely collections of trees: they are complex living beings in which every species contributes to their health, which means that biodiversity is another factor in climate regulation. Clear-cutting aside, the decline of one after another species of trees all over the world is something of a mystery to scientists: in each case, there seems to be a different proximate culprit—a beetle, a fungus, etc. But why have they become susceptible? Acid rain leaching free aluminum from soil silicates? Ground-level ozone damaging leaves? Drought stress caused by deforestation elsewhere? Heat stress due to climate change? Understory damage due to deer overpopulation due to predator extermination? Exogenous insect species? Insect population surges due to the decline of certain bird species?

Or is it all of the above? Perhaps underneath all of these vectors of forest decline and climate instability is a more general principle that is inescapable. Everything I have mentioned stems from a kind of derangement in our own society. All come from the perception of separation from nature and from each other, upon which all our systems of money, technology, industry, and so forth are built. Each of these projects itself onto our own psyches as well. The ideology of control says that if we can only identify the “cause,” we can control climate change. Fine, but what if the cause is everything? Economy, politics, emissions, agriculture, medicine . . . all the way to religion, psychology, our basic stories through which we apprehend the world? We face then the futility of control and the necessity for transformation.

Let me take the argument of interbeing to its extreme. Climate change skeptics often blame climate fluctuations on the sun, which of course is not influenced by human activity—right? Well, I would hazard to bet that most premodern people would disagree that the sun is

1. Similar things can be said of the oceans, where overfishing, eutrophication (by fertilizer and sewage), and other forms of pollution may harm the ocean’s climate moderating function. Acidification due to CO₂ may also contribute to this problem.

unaffected by human affairs. Many of them had rituals to thank and propitiate the sun, so that it would keep shining. Could it be that they knew something that we do not? Could it be that the sun is recoiling in pain from the ingratitude and violence humanity is perpetrating on Earth? That it will inevitably mirror our own derangement?

Yes, my friends, the conceptual revolution we are beginning goes this deep. We need to rediscover the mind of nature, to return to our original animism and the ensouled universe it perceived. We need to understand nature, the planet, the sun, the soil, the water, the mountains, the rocks, the trees, and the air as sentient beings whose destiny is not separate from our own. As far as I know, no indigenous person on Earth would deny that a rock bears some kind of awareness or intelligence. Who are we to think differently? Are the results of the modern scientific view so impressive as to justify such arrant presumptuousness? Have we created a society more beautiful than they? In fact, as the example of the quantum particle suggests, science is finally circling back toward animism. To be sure, scientific paradigms that countenance an intelligent universe are mostly heterodox today, but they are gradually encroaching on the mainstream. Take the example of water. Emerging from the shadows of homeopathy, anthroposophy, and research by marginal figures like Masaru Emoto and the brilliant Viktor Schauberger, the idea that water itself is alive, or at least bears structure and individuality, is now being explored by mainstream scientists like Gerald Pollack. We still have a long way to go before anything like the sentience of all matter can be accepted, or even articulated, by science. But imagine what that belief would mean when we contemplate mountaintop removal mining, polluting aquifers with fracking fluid, and so on.

Whatever the mechanism—greenhouse gases, deforestation, or solar fluctuations—climate change is sending us an important message. We and Earth are one. As above, so below: what we do to each other, even to the smallest animal or plant, we do to all creation. Perhaps all our small, invisible acts imprint themselves upon the world in ways we do not understand.



Despair

*Evil is a talented logic which challenges love and truth
by arguing that since all human beings are by nature selfish and fallible,
any pursuit of virtue must be hypocrisy.*

—ROBERT GRAVES

While many people understand that the solution to climate change involves more than a disembedded choice of alternative technologies, few would say that those dedicating their lives to marriage equality for gay people, compassion to the homeless, or care for the autistic are doing something essential for the survival of our species. But that is only because our understanding of interbeing is still shallow. I would like to suggest that anything that violates or disrupts the Story of Separation will heal any and all of the consequences of that story. This includes even the tiny, invisible actions that our rational mind, steeped in the logic of Separation, says cannot possibly make a difference. It includes the kind of actions that get squeezed out by the big crusades to save the world.

I spoke recently with Kalle Lasn, the founder of the radical magazine *Adbusters* and a man who has devoted his entire life to promoting and practicing hands-on activism. He told me that for some time now he hasn't been spending much time on politics or the magazine because he is taking care of his ninety-five-year-old mother-in-law. He said,

“Taking care of her is far more important to me than all my other work put together.”

Kalle agreed with me when I said, “Our worldview must accommodate the truth and importance of this.” My dear reader, can you countenance a reality in which to save the planet, we have to neglect our ninety-five-year-old mother-in-law? There must be a place in our understanding of how the universe works for the intimate, uncalculated acts of service that are such a beautiful part of our humanity.

Is Kalle to trust his feeling that in taking care of this old woman he is doing something significant?

Do you not know in your bones that any belief system that denies that significance must be part of the problem?

Can you bear to live in a world in which what he is doing doesn't matter?

We only keep performing the tasks that keep the world-devouring machine running by quelling that feeling of significance. We steel ourselves to do what some abstract reasoning tells us we must do, in the interests of practicality. Occasionally, this “practicality” means “what will help heal the ecosystem, bring about social justice, and enable the survival of our species,” but for most people, most of the time, practicality involves money or other means of security and comfort. And money, in our current system, generally comes through our participation in the conversion of nature into products, communities into markets, citizens into consumers, and relationships into services. If your heart isn't in all that, you will find that practicality often contradicts the urging of the heart.

The problem goes much deeper than a selfish view of what is practical. It goes to the understanding of cause and effect that underlies it. The urging of the heart might not only contradict the dictates of money, it might contradict instrumentalist logic altogether.

That is not to say we should ignore the mind's logic when attempting to make practical changes in the world, any more than we should abandon technology, literature, or any other fruits of our millennia-long

journey of Separation. The tools of control, the application of force and reason, surely have their place. Humanity is not nature's exception: as with all species, our gifts can uniquely contribute to the well-being and development of the whole. We have yet to use our gifts in this spirit; instead we have used them to dominate and conquer, weakening the health of Gaia and all her beings and, therefore, weakening ourselves as well. Now we have the chance to transform our uniquely human gifts from tools of mastery to tools of service.

Specifically, when are the methods of "practicality" appropriate? Quite simply, they are appropriate when we know how to do something from within our current understanding of causality. If your stove is on fire and you have a fire extinguisher, then of course you use the fire extinguisher. You don't ignore it and pray for a miracle instead.

But by the same token, if your house is a roaring inferno and all you have is a puny fire extinguisher that you know is far insufficient to the task, you shouldn't just wave it in front of the flames in a posture of heroism.

The latter situation is a good description of our current predicament. Yes, it is true, our house is on fire. What the environmental alarmists are saying is true. I am not using "alarmist" as a term of disparagement. If anything, the situation is worse than they (fearing the alarmist label) tell us publicly. But what should we do about it? Or more to the point, what should *you* do about it? What, according to the conventional notions of causality that nearly everyone in modern society has deeply internalized, can you do that is practical? Nothing. Therefore, we must learn to follow another kind of guidance, one that leads to an expanded realm of what is possible.

You may think it is dangerous to sow despair, even if what I say is true. But the despair is there whether I sow it or not. Every activist I have asked confirms that they have at one time or another confronted precisely the despair I am evoking. We try to obscure it with reasoning like "Sure, it makes no difference if you are the only one making changes, but if everyone does it then the world will change." True, but is it in your power to make everyone do it? No. What you do would

matter if everyone did it; by the same token, since everyone isn't doing it, what you do doesn't matter. I have never found an escape from this logic within its own terms. It is as sound as its premises—the separate self in an objective world. Worse yet, some would say that our individual efforts to buy local or recycle or ride bicycles are even counterproductive, giving us a false complacency, depotentiating more effective revolutionary acts, and enabling the larger mechanisms of ruin to trundle forward. As Derrick Jensen says, don't take shorter showers.

I think it is better not to obscure the despair, because real hope lies only on its other side. Despair is part of the territory we must traverse. Until we reach the other side, despair weighs on our hearts as we soldier on, never fully believing we are doing much good. Eventually, however strong our spirits, our efforts waver, our energy flags, and we give up. Perhaps for a while, personal vanity can keep us going as we uphold a self-image of being ethical, conscious, and a “part of the solution.” But that motivation is insufficiently deep to bring us to the courage, commitment, and faith we need.

True optimism comes from having traversed the territory of despair and taken its measure. It is not ignorant of the magnitude of the crisis nor unaware of the forces that stand in the path of healing. Sometimes people confront me at talks to educate me about the power elite and their propaganda machine, their control of finance and politics, or even their mind control technologies, imagining I am unaware or willfully ignorant of the workings of our system. Or they speak of the apathy of the masses, the greed and ignorance of the people who just don't get it and the unlikelihood of their ever changing. All of this is part of the territory of despair, with which I am intimately familiar. It isn't that I have shied away from the bleak truth because I can't take it. Optimism lies on the other side of it, and hope is its herald.

On its own terms, the logic of despair is unassailable. It encompasses more than just the hopelessness of the state of the planet though; it is also woven into our defining mythos, which casts us into an alien universe of force and mass. It is this mythos that at once renders us alone in the universe and at the same time powerless to significantly

change it (or to change it at all, given that those same forces determine our actions too). Perhaps this is why the emotional energy behind the case for hopelessness I just described is identical to that behind rejections of alternative scientific paradigms. Readers of my earlier books will forgive me for re quoting this passage from “A Free Man’s Worship” by Bertrand Russell, one of the great minds of the modern era:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.

As I have hinted, the story on which Russell bases his conclusions is no longer so certain. A philosophy that rejects them can indeed hope to stand—on the foundation of the quantum interconnectedness and indeterminacy, the tendency of nonlinear systems toward spontaneous organization and autopoiesis; the capacity of organisms and environments to purposely restructure DNA; and the proliferation of scientific anomalies that promise further paradigm shifts to come. Without attempting to make a rigorous philosophical case for it, I will observe that all these scientific revolutions lend themselves, at least metaphorically, to a very different Story of the World.