

The Breaking Point

An interview with Duane Elgin by Carter Phipps

What is Enlightenment? Magazine, Spring/Summer 2001

INTRODUCTION

My first exposure to Duane Elgin's work was, in a word, frightening. I picked up his new book, *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity's Future*, and began reading the first few chapters only to run headlong into a very cogent, very clear, and very devastating description of the state of our embattled world. Indeed, as he laid out the daunting ecological and social challenges we face as an evolving species at this point in history, all kinds of dire scenarios of the future began to unfold in this reader's head, scenarios that were a lot closer to *Blade Runner* and *Waterworld* than *Star Trek* or *The Jetsons*. What I did not know at the time, but would soon learn, is that Elgin, despite initial evidence to the contrary, is a profound optimist. In fact, *Promise Ahead*, like all of his work, is infused with a positive vision of the future, born of someone who obviously has great faith in the possibility and promise of the human endeavor. Yet Elgin knows that if our optimism is to prevail in the world of tomorrow, the price that we must all pay today is realism. And for over twenty-five years, he has been taking a realistic look at the human condition and trying to awaken our slumbering species to the truth of our situation so that we can begin to consciously evolve.

Elgin first burst into the public eye in 1981 with his now-classic book *Voluntary Simplicity*, a book that helped to identify a new movement toward more simple and balanced ways of living. At the time he was working as a senior social scientist for the Stanford Research Institute, which gave him an unusual opportunity to observe and document emerging trends in society, and he used that work as the basis both for *Voluntary Simplicity* and for his 1991 book *Awakening Earth: Exploring the Evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness*. The latter book was an attempt, in his words, to "understand the deeper nature and direction of the human journey," and it explored the awakening process of the human species as we move toward building a mature global civilization. It was in *Awakening Earth* that Elgin first began to address our current global crisis within the context of the larger evolutionary journey of the species—a critical theme that has been a fundamental part of his work ever since.

Today, as a renowned author, speaker, and activist, Elgin has an approach that might best be described as carrot and stick, encouraging individuals and institutions to begin to honestly reflect on both the extraordinary opportunities and the sobering dangers of our moment in history. And while he sees the spiritual journey as crucial in coming to terms with the issues we face, for Elgin, that journey must, now more than ever, be both individual and collective. When we received a copy of his book *Promise Ahead* last summer, we found within it a short note he had attached that

contained a simple but important question: “What does awakening look like as it moves into the world?” Indeed, Elgin knows that our entire future may depend on how we answer this question, on how effectively we are able to bring a spiritual perspective to bear on the urgent global challenges faced by our awakening species at this decisive juncture in our evolutionary journey.

Interview

WIE: Many of today’s leading thinkers, futurists, scientists, and visionaries are warning us that the next twenty to thirty years will be a testing time for the human species, a time of evolutionary crisis that will entail great, and potentially even catastrophic, change. Could you please describe what you feel are the key factors precipitating this crisis? What will we be facing in the coming years?

DUANE ELGIN: What we’re really facing is the convergence of a number of powerful trends—climate change, species extinction, the spread of poverty, and the growth in population. All of these factors could develop individually, but what’s unique about our time is that the world has become a closed system. There’s no place to escape, and all of these powerful forces are beginning to impinge upon one another and reinforce one another. Our situation is something like a set of rubber bands that you stretch out and out and out until they reach the limit of their elasticity, which is the breaking point of the system. My sense is that we still have a fair amount of elasticity in the world system. It’s going to be another couple of decades until we reach the breaking point.

WIE: How would you respond to someone who said, “What crisis are you talking about? There may be a lot going on, but things aren’t that bad. I’m sure we’ll deal with it. No problem, we’ll be okay.” What would you say to that person to convince them that the situation is urgent and that we have to face it directly?

DE: Let’s take a look at these trends one at a time. First of all, climate change. I think it’s clear that, by itself, this could change the entire situation in the world. If you look, for example, at carbon dioxide levels, they are very closely correlated with temperature levels over thousands of years. The carbon dioxide levels have fluctuated between 170 and 300 parts per million for the last twenty million years. And we are now outside of that range. We are at nearly 380 parts per million in CO₂, which means that we have created a situation that’s beyond what has existed for the last twenty million years, a period in which there have been enormous fluctuations in glaciation on one hand and global warming on the other. And we’re still shooting out the roof in terms of the amount of CO₂ we’re putting into the atmosphere.

Now let’s look, for example, at the Greenland ice cores and the way they indicate how quickly climate changes can occur. They show that the last great ice age, about 120,000 years ago, descended, scientists believe, in a period of two decades. It wasn’t centuries; it was roughly twenty years. So we are creating a very critical situation. But my concern is not simply with warming and the oceans rising, but it’s rather with changing weather patterns, precipitation patterns—how much rain and when. If it shifts radically, we will not be able to adapt global agriculture to respond to the new climate circumstances.

At the same time that climate change is under way, in the same twenty-year period, we're going to add roughly two to three billion people to the earth-that means the equivalent of another Los Angeles every month. We're going to be adding enormous numbers of people to the earth at the very time the climate is beginning to shift and make food growing more precarious. It is also estimated that, in terms of resources, 40% of the people in the world will not have access to enough water by the 2020s to grow their own food. Forty percent of the world will not have enough water to grow their own food. And most of those people are going to be in the poorest parts of the world, in developing countries where they have moved to mega-cities and are living in the slums.

We can then factor in other impacts, like species extinction. It's estimated that as many as 20% of all plant and animal species could be extinct in the next thirty years, and half could be extinct within the next hundred years. Now let's put that into even more specific terms. It's estimated that roughly 25% of all mammals are threatened with extinction, 12% of all bird species, 25% of all reptiles, and 30% of all fish; this is the World Conservation Union's recent report. We are beginning to tear at the fabric of the biosphere at the very time that we're stressing it with climate change, at the very time that we're stressing it further with population, at the very time that we're diminishing the availability of critical resources like water. And then we factor in a final force, and that is poverty, which is so extraordinarily massive in the world. I really had no idea until recently traveling in India and seeing the magnitude of it. In the United States, the poverty line is about \$11 a day per person. If we cut that poverty line by three-quarters, and set it at \$3 a day per person and ask what percentage of the world lives on less than \$3 a day, it's 60% of the world! And that means that whether it's a pair of shoes or a book to read or glasses, aspirin, vitamins, etcetera-the basics of life that must be purchased at world market prices are not accessible to 60% of the world's population. But if you walk into the villages in India and Brazil, you see that even the poorest people have a television set. They are seeing, in living color, lifestyles that will never be accessible to them. And historically those are the ingredients for revolution.

So there we have what I call the adversity trends, and we could talk about many others: ozone depletion, ocean overfishing, deforestation, and on and on. And it's utterly clear that not only are these critical individual trends, but that, as you look at the dynamics of their convergence, we are facing an unprecedented whole-system crisis within the next few decades. Something powerful is going to begin happening at that point, and while right now we can turn away from this, in another twenty years a systems crisis will be an unyielding reality that we will have to deal with. And we will either deal with it by pulling together as a human family to produce what I would call an "evolutionary bounce"-or by pulling apart to produce an evolutionary crash. If we pull apart, it will be an evolutionary dark age.

WIE: In your book, you also mention several trends that potentially herald new opportunities for our collective evolution. What are those trends, and how do you see them impacting us in the near future?

DE: I feel that there are a number of equally powerful opportunity trends that are cooking away in the world that have the power to transform what could be an extraordinary evolutionary crash into an evolutionary bounce. The first is the power of perception, the capacity to see the universe

as a living system. The second is the power of choice, the power to choose different ways of life. The third is the power of communication, the power to use these incredible tools of communication for purposes way beyond commerce. And the fourth is the power of love, the ability to bring a spirit of reconciliation into relationships of all kinds. We could speak about each of these, but collectively they are an extraordinary force for transformation in the world.

WIE: Could you give a brief overview of each one?

DE: First, there is the idea of a living universe. Science has traditionally regarded the universe as nonliving at its foundations, but it's extraordinary that now, at the frontiers of science, we're beginning to find out that the universe itself is functioning as if it were a living system. For example, the physics theory of nonlocality tells us that the universe is connected with itself, despite its enormous size. And physicists say that there are enormous amounts of energy at the foundations of the universe, the so-called zero-point energy. Also, consciousness appears to be present at every level of the universe, from the atomic scale (and the behavior of electrons that seem to have a mind of their own) on up through the human scale. So the universe has the properties of a living system; life exists within life. This is an amazing miracle, and as we discover this, I think that it is going to begin to shift who we think we are and what we think our life-journey is about. It's transformative. The idea and the experience of a living universe is a powerful recontextualization of who we think we are and where we think we're going.

The next opportunity trend is the emergence of simpler ways of living that put less stress on the earth. These lifestyles of simplicity are not so much driven by sacrifice as they are by a new sense of where satisfaction is to be found. What I see emerging in the world now is what I call the "garden of simplicity." There are some people who are practicing a more frugal simplicity by cutting back on their spending and decreasing the impact of their consumption on the earth. They're choosing to live simply, in Gandhi's words, so that others may simply live. Someone else may be practicing a "political simplicity," feeling that we have to organize our collective lives in a way that enables us to live lightly and sustainably on the earth-and that means changes in our transportation, education, media, and so on. There's also an approach that I call "soulful simplicity," which means approaching life as a meditation and cultivating our experience of intimate connection with all that exists.

The point is that there is a whole shift in mind-set now occurring. In the United States, for example, a conservative estimate is that about 10% of the American adult population, or twenty million people, are making a shift on the inside toward a more experiential spirituality and on the outside toward a more ecological approach to life. Taken together, these could transform the adversity trends into a great opportunity.

Opportunity trend number three is the communications revolution, and it is also a very powerful trend. We can already see it transforming the world. Whether we're going to use this for positive transformational purposes or whether it's going to use us and just transform the entire world into consumers, I don't know. It depends upon us as citizens to see that the power of these communications technologies is used for higher purposes.

WIE: In your book, you connect the history of human evolution with our ability to communicate.

DE: Yes, I think it was our ability to communicate that enabled us to get from hunter-gatherers to the verge of a planetary civilization. And it will also be our ability to communicate that will get us to a sustainable species civilization.

The fourth opportunity trend I see is reconciliation. If you look at the nature of violence and conflict in the world, I think it's actually shifting out of the adolescent reactive mode into the adult interactive mode of negotiation. We're recognizing the enormous cost of hostility. In South Africa, for example, there has been a shift away from apartheid to their new government. What an extraordinary transformation. In Northern Ireland, they are attempting to achieve some degree of peace, and it's coming along. Look at what's happened in the Middle East. They came close, and now they're seeing how painful it is to have missed that opportunity. And so there's a more mature consciousness that seems to be growing in the world—seeing that the power of love, of reconciliation, is fundamental to our future if we're going to live on this small earth together. And it's not only about ethnicity, gender, and race, but it's also about issues of income distribution, generational reconciliation, even other species that we're divided from—there are many dimensions of reconciliation.

WIE: You have also stated in your book and elsewhere that you believe our current crisis is a crisis of spirituality or awakening. Could you explain why you feel the spiritual journey is inextricably linked to our collective success or failure as an evolving species?

DE: We are not simply hitting an environmental wall, or the limits to physical growth, but we are hitting an evolutionary wall, which is the limit of our traditional image of who we think we are as a species, and the limit of that form of growth. And we are also hitting the limits of our life stories as nations, as races, as ethnic groups. We need to find our larger story as a human family. So when we look at our sense of identity as a species and our need for a larger story, then that invites us to look into the so-called spiritual realm.

WIE: What do you mean by “our larger story as a human family”?

DE: I mean, who are we? What are we doing here and where are we going? My sense of our larger story is beautifully summarized in the name that we've given ourselves as a species: *Homo sapiens sapiens*. “Sapient” means to be wise; “sapient sapient” means to be doubly wise. We're the species, by our own definition, which knows that it knows. So to fulfill our self-given name as a species, as *Homo sapiens sapiens*, to fulfill our capacity to be doubly wise, is to discover our place in this living universe. It utterly transforms the nature of the human journey. Then we can ask ourselves: Are we serving our capacity for double wisdom, for knowing that we know—in other words, for awakening? And can culture co-evolve with that awakening of consciousness? And if so, how can we best evolve the culture and consciousness in a way that really serves our collective awakening? Then that becomes the agenda, and at that point, all of these issues that we're struggling with now are put into a completely different context.

WIE: What do you think has to happen practically to make these changes? How do we pass this evolutionary test?

DE: I think there are different things that need to happen, obviously, but what it finally comes down to, I feel, is conversations. The tissue of our lives is our conversations and our stories. As individuals, whether it's in the living rooms, boardrooms, or classrooms, we need to be having conversations about these adversity trends and opportunity trends, about the initiation that we're going through. We have to wake up to what's happening. We need to have face-to-face conversations that really anchor this in our personal lives. At the same time, we need to be having conversations in our public lives, through our mass media, that support people in seeing that in addition to a consumer world, there's another world happening out there that we have to pay attention to as well. With these, what I would call "reflective conversations," happening both at the local scale and the societal scale, I think we could rapidly reach a working consensus for moving along a very different track toward sustainability and a much more satisfying future for ourselves. But consciousness is the key. Waking up is the key.

WIE: How do we create the sense of urgency that is so critical in terms of our collective consciousness?

DE: We can either wait for the circumstances to impinge upon us so harshly that we wake up, or we can magnify the input regarding, for example, species extinction or climate change, or poverty, or resource depletion. We can magnify the input by putting those things into our consciousness via the mass media. And right now all those factors are excluded from the mass media. We're regarded not as citizens who want to be informed but as consumers who want to be entertained. So a very powerful way to transform this would be to open up more time in the airwaves-which is really opening up our species mind, our collective consciousness-for these kinds of concerns, as well as for the wonderful opportunities that are out there for us.

WIE: One way to look at the spiritual path is to see it as a journey from an egocentric, self-centered perspective on life to an ever-increasing care and concern for greater and greater dimensions of life as a whole. However, traversing the deeper dimensions of the spiritual journey in a way that truly frees one from an egocentric view of the world has long been considered to be a very arduous undertaking, involving a profound commitment on the part of any individual who would take up the path of transformation. While there is no doubt that the world is in dire need of spiritually mature individuals, the genuine article seems to be a rare commodity. So, given the urgent demand of our collective crisis, and yet at the same time the profound challenge of real spiritual transformation, what gives you confidence and hope that the transformation you envision will take place in a significant enough number of individuals and/or institutions? How can enlightenment save the world?

DE: Let me say that as I've gone around the world in the last five or six years, I've had the opportunity to ask people in very different places and circumstances the following question: If you look at the whole human family as a single individual, how old are we? Are we behaving like toddlers, teenagers, adults, or elders? And immediately, much to my surprise, people have had no

problem understanding the question and overwhelmingly have said that we're in our teenage years as a species.

That prompted me to look at adolescent psychology. And, indeed, if you look at adolescents, they tend to be rebellious, just like we're rebelling against nature. They tend to feel that they're immortal, that they're going to live forever in their current form, and we are also living with disregard for the long-term consequences of our behavior. Adolescents tend to be into outward appearances—and here we are, this materialistic, consumer-oriented culture. So there are a lot of parallels between teenagers and the behavior of the human family today. Now I have three sons in their late twenties and have seen them mature out of those adolescent qualities into a real concern for their families, their future, their work, and their relationships with others. And if we, as a human family, make that simple shift from our teenage consciousness into our early adult consciousness, I think the results will be organic, very natural, and quite amazing.

So I take confidence from having asked people about the age of the human family and having heard people respond so enthusiastically and so quickly that we're in our adolescent years. That suggests to me that a very normal, organic process of development and growth is taking place. We are approaching our natural opportunity to wake up and come to our early maturity as a species, and I have confidence in the deep integrity of the universe and in our integrity, as a human family, in our journey.

WIE: Social activists have often been harshly critical of the spiritual search as being overly narcissistic—concerned solely with the individual and indifferent to the larger concerns of society. At the same time, spiritual masters have long claimed that it is only through individual transformation that anything can ever truly change in society as a whole. For example, the highly respected master J. Krishnamurti is quoted as saying, “What you are, the world is. And without your transformation, there can be no transformation of the world.” It is a question perhaps as old as the spiritual life itself: Do I change the world or do I change myself? Given our current evolutionary crisis, how do you understand the role of individual evolution versus that of collective change? For those individuals who have a powerful spiritual calling and who also care deeply about the state of the world, where should they put their energy and attention?

DE: My sense is that it's a co-evolutionary process. We've thought that we could disengage from the world and have a spiritual enterprise that was our own process of awakening. It's wonderful to be awake in an ancient tradition, but it's also very important to integrate those lineages into the modern world. So we have a lot of bridging to do between the spiritual and the worldly, between the species mind and the species body, so to speak.

For example, if you look at the world's spiritual traditions and ask how many of them are looking at the mass media as an expression of the collective mind and, therefore, bringing insights from their traditions to help transform the mass media into a more enlightened, healthy expression of that collective mind—it's not happening. You don't read about this. But the mass media is a powerful tool for bringing the principles of insight developed in personal meditative practice into our collective practice of paying attention as a whole civilization. For example, in Buddhism, there is a list of factors of enlightenment or of a healthy mind, which include concentration,

mindfulness, equanimity, etcetera. Now let's apply those to our whole civilization and use television as the most obvious manifestation of our species mind. Are we using television to be mindful? No, we're not. We're being contracted into a very narrow, small, consumerist view of the world. We're practically disconnected from the world. We do not understand these larger adversity trends that are impacting upon us. Are we using television to cultivate the capacity for collective concentration on critical choices? No, we're fostering distraction and fragmentation. Are we using television-our social brain-to cultivate equanimity? No, we're fostering collective agitation in much of the media produced now. My point is that irrespective of the spiritual tradition, there are general qualities of an awakened species mind that we need to begin cultivating as a human family if we're going to really deal with these serious challenges.

So I think we're discovering that we're deeply immersed in the species mind and that the species mind is not terribly awake at this point. But those who are awake are experiencing the suffering, the tension, and the stress of that species mind, which is struggling to awaken. And it's important for those who are working on their own wakefulness to be attentive to the species mind and to recognize that they are pioneers in a larger struggle, in a larger process of awakening. In many ways, this is the call to species maturity that is being evoked by this time of initiation, this rite of passage as we move from a journey as individuals to a journey in communion with the rest of life, with other people, and with the species mind.

WIE: Earlier you mentioned that to fulfill our purpose as *Homo sapiens sapiens*, or “doubly wise humans,” is to “discover our place in this living universe.” Could you explain how realizing our potential for double wisdom allows us to discover our place in the universe?

DE: First of all, I think it's very important to look at nature's designs as we try to understand our evolutionary journey. And if we come into alignment with nature, my sense is that our evolutionary journey is going to be much easier and smoother. If you look at what nature's doing, whether at the atomic level, the human level, or the galactic, you see this common signature, a common shape that emerges, which, in a static form, looks like a doughnut and in its dynamic form could look like a tornado, a hurricane, or a whirlpool. Called a “torus,” this is the simplest structure of a self-organizing system. Atoms have that structure; galaxies have that structure. And so what I infer is that at every level the universe has a central project, and what the universe is doing is creating self-organizing systems. Now *Homo sapiens sapiens* is the capacity to be consciously self-organizing. If you know that you know, you have the capacity to center yourself, to organize yourself, and to take charge of your life. Becoming a fulfilled *Homo sapiens sapiens* is the fulfillment of what the universe is all about. So as it turns out, we have given ourselves a name that is completely in alignment with the fulfillment of the universe's common purpose.

WIE: You have also written about our common purpose in more explicitly spiritual language, suggesting that part of the human journey is the pursuit and discovery of who we are at the level of the soul, far beyond the confines of our physical bodies. In the evolutionary process, we can ultimately recognize ourselves to be, as you put it, “a body of light and knowing.” Could you explain what you mean by this “body of light and knowing,” and do you believe that this is the final endpoint of human evolution?

DE: Physicists talk about the basic building block of this reality as being the photon, which is light. Now that means we already live in an ecology of light, that we already are beings of light, right now. It's just that it's fairly dense here. So you could say that the endpoint of evolution is already in front of us, in that sense. As we fulfill our potential for knowing that we know, often this awakening is described as being bathed by a light with immense wisdom and compassion. I feel that we are immersed in that light right now in the midst of a living universe. Evolution seeks to allow that light to flow into our being and then out into expression in the world. Now, is that the final endpoint of evolution? I don't think so. What I think is happening is something perhaps even more extraordinary. As we come to our center of knowing that we know, that's really just the beginning of evolution. When we are stabilized in our own deeper sense of self, we can then move in the deep ecologies of eternity as conscious, active, co-creative participants. So rather than the endpoint, it's really the starting point. I think the cosmos is a place for life-forms to come to self-referencing knowing freely. Realizing our potential for double wisdom marks the beginning point of a whole new phase of evolution.