

Peril and Promise

An interview with Duane Elgin by Arnie Cooper,

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“Simplify, simplify.” When Henry David Thoreau made this plea 150 years ago, he was reacting to the increasing complexity of life around him. Today we find ourselves in a far more complex world, one in which increasing numbers of us are beginning to see the wisdom in Thoreau’s appeal. Duane Elgin helped define this trend back in 1981 with his first book, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich (Morrow)*. In that now-classic text, updated and reprinted in 1993, Elgin encouraged us not just to cut back on consumption and ease our busy schedules, but to live a life with purpose, in which every action is the result of a conscious choice.

Since bringing voluntary simplicity to the attention of the larger culture, Elgin has focused on how humanity can survive on a planet whose natural resources are stretched to their limits. The ultimate test, he believes, will be in how we respond to the challenges of the coming years, when he predicts that environmental problems will reach a breaking point. His latest book, *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity’s Future (Morrow)*, paints a chilling picture of the cultural and ecological dangers we will face, yet offers an optimistic view of the possibility for humankind’s survival and evolution into a more mature species.

Elgin was born near a small town in Idaho in 1943 and worked on the family farm until he was twenty-three. Growing up in a small farming community, he witnessed a strategy for living that relied on a mixture of independence and mutual support. In college he took pre-med courses, but the social turmoil of the sixties led him to drop out of school and eventually move to Paris to attend the Sorbonne. While in France, Elgin met Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan, who was a seminal influence on his thinking. “Many an evening,” Elgin says, “Father Berrigan would slip a scarf around his clerical collar, and we’d sit at a local bistro, drinking a glass or two of cheap wine and talking about politics, justice, and love.” Berrigan would later become internationally recognized for his nonviolent resistance to the Vietnam War and the nuclear-arms race.

After returning to the States, Elgin completed his education with an MBA from the Wharton School and an MA in economic history. His first job out of graduate school was on a presidential commission exploring population growth and its impact over the next thirty years. It was his introduction to “futures research.”

In 1972, Elgin became a senior social scientist at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International) in California. His first major project was coauthoring a book titled *Changing Images of Man* with Joseph Campbell and others. At the same time, Elgin began an intensive practice in Buddhist meditation.

At SRI, Elgin investigated the long-range future for government agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency. He saw enormous problems on the horizon, not just for the U.S., but for the whole planet. Yet as his understanding of the world grew, so too did his disillusionment with the political establishment; the reports he wrote did little more than gather dust. He left SRI in 1977 to spend six months in a self-directed meditation retreat. An awakening experience at the conclusion of this retreat led directly to his book on simplicity, and later to his 1993 book *Awakening Earth (Morrow)*, a sweeping study of the evolution of human culture and consciousness. In it, Elgin proposes that human civilization is approaching a moment of awakening similar to that experienced by some individuals.

Because he believes that the process of “civilizational awakening” will involve the mass media, Elgin has cofounded a national campaign for media accountability (www.ourmediavoice.org). He works primarily from home and lives with his partner and collaborator, Coleen LeDrew, in a comfortable and, yes, simple two-bedroom apartment in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. In person, he is soft-spoken and displays a serenity one would not expect from someone so in tune with the impending crises facing the planet.

COOPER: How has your upbringing influenced the work you’ve done on simplicity and human evolution?

ELGIN: Because I grew up on a farm in Idaho with very few distractions, it became clear to me early on that the universe is alive. I could see it and feel it around me. That sensibility has guided my life, including my work on simplicity. Simplicity is central to engaging the aliveness of the universe, because it helps to clear away the distractions that separate us from direct connection with life.

Growing up on the land also gave me a clearer sense of humanity’s place in the universe: I saw that people were small creatures compared to the vastness of the sky and the land. I was constantly reminded of our vulnerability to nature’s forces — wind, rain, frost, insects.

Of necessity, people in our farming community were self-reliant and had to be their own plumbers, carpenters, accountants, weather forecasters, mechanics, and so on. At the same time, I saw constant support among neighbors — for example, exchanging different food crops: several bushels of apples one week for corn or potatoes the next. I grew up in a community of self-reliant individuals who were continually pulling together for the well-being of all.

My experience of farming changed as my father became more successful. He began with a small farm and a few horses, which left plenty of free time during the winter months for the woodworking he loved. He built everything from furniture to boats. Over the years, he acquired additional farms, tractors, a crew of laborers, and more. When he finally retired, he was busy year-round overseeing the operation and maintenance of a half dozen farms. There was no time left for woodworking. He was no longer living in the cyclical world of the seasons, but in the linear world of industrialization and material progress.

COOPER: You're probably best known for your book on voluntary simplicity. What were the origins of that book?

ELGIN: The idea of voluntary simplicity came from my mentor on the subject, Richard Gregg. He was a student of Gandhi's and wrote about voluntary simplicity in 1936, describing it as "a partial restraint in some direction in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions." In other words, once we know what our life's purpose is, then we can organize our material circumstances to support it. Simplicity begins inside ourselves as we decide what really matters to each of us. Voluntary simplicity means choosing our path through life consciously, deliberately, and of our own accord. It's not so much about living with less as it is about living with purpose and balance.

COOPER: Yet many people equate "simplicity" with a frugal lifestyle.

ELGIN: Perhaps the biggest misconception about voluntary simplicity is that it's about frugal living and nothing more. The media portray it as a life of material sacrifice, which makes it easy to caricature and dismiss as irrelevant to mainstream Americans. This portrayal also misses much of the joy and purpose of simple living. The simple life becomes equated with a plain and dull life, when it's anything but dull. A long daily commute to a job that has little meaning: that's dull. The simple life is about freeing up time for what matters most to us.

Another misconception is that simplicity is about moving back to the land. Simpler living is certainly about getting back in touch with nature, but rather than moving to the country, most people who choose a simple life are trying to make the most of where they are — planting urban gardens or working to restore polluted and damaged suburban ecologies. Thoreau's cabin by Walden Pond is the classic example of simple living, but few people realize that Thoreau was no isolated hermit. His famous cabin was roughly a mile from the town of Concord, and every day or two he would walk into town. In fact, his cabin was so close to a nearby highway that he could smell the pipe smoke of passing travelers. He also had more visitors while living in the woods than at any other period of his life.

People who choose simpler ways of living are often incorrectly portrayed as being opposed to technology. In truth, these are some of the most tech-savvy people I've run across. Whether it's the Internet or solar power or new gardening tools, they are supportive of any technologies appropriate to sustaining a simpler way of life.

COOPER: The simplicity movement has grown quite a bit since your book first came out in 1981.

ELGIN: Back then, simple living was hardly a blip on the cultural radar screen. Now glossy magazines tout the simple life from the newsstands, and it's become a popular theme on television talk shows. Most people attracted to the simple life are not looking for a life of sacrifice; rather, they are seeking deeper sources of satisfaction than are offered by our high-stress consumer society. Surveys show a distinct subpopulation — conservatively estimated at 10 percent of the U.S. adult population, or 20 million people — is pioneering a way of life that is outwardly more sustainable and inwardly more spiritual.

While U.S. incomes have gone up in the past thirty years, the percentage of people reporting that they are “very happy” has remained unchanged. Meanwhile, divorce rates have doubled, and teen-suicide rates have tripled. A whole generation has tasted the fruits of an affluent society and discovered that money does not buy happiness. In the search for true satisfaction, millions of people are not only “downshifting,” or pulling back from the rat race, but also “upshifting,” or moving ahead into a life that, though materially more modest, is rich with family, friends, community, creative work, and connection with the universe.

Besides being drawn to what the simple life offers, many people adopt it to help counter such powerful negative trends as global climate change, the rapid extinction of species, the depletion of key resources, a burgeoning population, and a growing gap between the rich and the poor. These trends are converging into a whole-systems crisis, creating the possibility of a crash within a generation if we do not find new ways of living.

COOPER: Doesn’t rejecting affluence mean performing more time-consuming tasks ourselves: cooking, cleaning, home repairs? What if these are not the things that really matter to us?

ELGIN: Simplicity doesn’t mean eliminating the basic tasks of living, but it does mean taking charge of a life that is too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. Simplicity means cutting back on trivial distractions, both material and nonmaterial, and focusing on the essentials — whatever those may be for each of us. As Thoreau said, “Our life is frittered away by detail.” Or, as Plato wrote, “In order to seek one’s own direction, one must simplify the mechanics of ordinary, everyday life.”

COOPER: You mentioned “nonmaterial” distractions. Does that include involvement with other people? How do relationships and community fit into a simple life?

ELGIN: Relationships and community are at the heart of a simple life. For many, happiness is not measured in dollars earned but in the rewards of authentic relationships. Not surprisingly, many who choose a simpler life tend to prefer smaller-scale living and working environments that foster face-to-face contact and mutual caring. They also tend to participate in new forms of community, such as cohousing.

COOPER: What does the ideal simple life look like?

ELGIN: Because simplicity has as much to do with each person’s unique purpose in life as it does with their standard of living, it follows that there is no single, “right” way to live more simply. Different people in different life circumstances find varying paths to integrity and wholeness. Richard Gregg wrote, “Simplicity is a relative matter depending on climate, customs, culture, and the character of the individual.” Thoreau said: “I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living on my account. . . . I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way.”

COOPER: You’ve obviously read a lot of Thoreau. Are there any other writers who’ve been an influence on you?

ELGIN: This is where the simple life breaks down for me — books. [Laughter.] I can't get enough. I have been a voracious reader throughout my life, consuming anthropology, metaphysics, history, physics, economics, philosophy, and spirituality. Existentialist writers were important early in my awakening, as were Zen Buddhists and Quakers.

COOPER: How important is spirituality to the simple life?

ELGIN: I view the simplicity movement as more than just a lifestyle change. It's not just about moderating our consumption, recycling, and eating lower on the food chain. It's about integrating our inner and outer worlds. Simplicity lies at the intersection of spirituality and sustainability. If you put spirituality, or the inner life, together with sustainability, or the outer life of maintaining things, what you come up with is the simple life.

For the first time in human history, thanks to various information technologies, all the world's great religions are available for our inspection and practice. We are discovering the deep, common truths at the core of all spiritual traditions: the golden rule, the power of compassion, the importance of looking beyond materialism. One essential truth is to use this world as a place for learning, not as a place for distraction. That doesn't mean we shouldn't enjoy ourselves, but rather that the universe has put us here for higher purposes than watching television reruns.

We also have an opportunity to bring the different aspects of East and West together. Eastern spirituality says this world is a place of suffering, so let's get off the wheel of worldly existence. Contemporary Western culture says this is a place to seek gratification, so let's dive into worldly existence. If we honor both realms, the result is a paradigm of learning. Together, East and West form a mind-set that goes far beyond either one in isolation — creating a new paradigm that values the coevolution of culture and consciousness.

COOPER: I have the feeling that the West is getting the better side of that bargain. Look at Japan, for example, where the younger generation seems more interested in collecting vintage American sneakers than in any spiritual vision.

ELGIN: Well, it's a good idea for them to buy used sneakers. [Laughter.] But I am not at all suggesting that the East adopt a materialistic lifestyle. I am suggesting that putting the two wisdom traditions together gives us more of a systems view of the universe as a living and learning system. In systems terms, we're coming to "self-referencing awareness" as a human family. In Eastern terms, we're at the point of "awakening," a preliminary form of enlightenment. We are awakening to the reality that we are nested within larger living systems, including the earth and the universe as a whole.

One of the great virtues of the West is that we have looked deeply into material reality, and what we have discovered there is truly extraordinary. As Niels Bohr, one of the founders of quantum physics, said, "Anyone who is not shocked by quantum physics does not understand it." The universe is again being considered as Plato once described it: "A single living creature that embraces all living creatures within it." At the frontiers of science, we are rediscovering the

universe as a living system, and this is changing our relationship with the universe, with the earth, and with one another.

Consumerism makes sense only in a dead universe. If the universe is dead at its foundations, then it is rational to turn to material pleasures to protect us from life's pains. On the other hand, if the universe is a living system, then it makes sense to get rid of undue complexity, live more simply, and focus on coming into a conscious relationship with the world around us.

COOPER: What do you think about the self-help movement's version of simplifying: for example, a book like Elaine St. James's *Simplify Your Life*, which offers a collection of quick fixes, such as how to reduce clutter around your house?

ELGIN: I'm all for it. [Laughter.] I try to do that on a regular basis. One aspect of simplicity is reducing clutter. It helps bring clarity and lets me focus on what matters most in my life. More power to any author who can inspire us to reduce needless complexity and thereby get down to what matters most.

COOPER: One advantage to material wealth is the ability to surround oneself with beautiful objects. How does aesthetics fit into the life of voluntary simplicity?

ELGIN: There is a simplicity aesthetic, one aspect of which is an appreciation for older things. The Japanese have a wonderful phrase for this: *wabi-sabi*, a feeling of appreciation for things whose wear and aging reveal life's impermanence. For example, if you have had a cup, table, or chair in your family for several generations, each chip or scratch is not an imperfection, but a memory, inviting you to reflect on all the others before you who held that cup or touched that table. So, in my home, if I happen to scratch the dining-room table, I say I've just "wabi'd" the table — meaning I gave it a little more patina and age, a little more value.

COOPER: How does the notion of voluntary simplicity connect with those who are poor by Western standards?

ELGIN: If you live a life of involuntary simplicity, then the concept of voluntary simplicity doesn't mean much to you, because you have not yet achieved enough material well-being for there to be a meaningful degree of choice.

COOPER: But is it important for the world's poor to understand these concepts, or is it just we in the West who need to think about these things?

ELGIN: Rich or poor, the whole world needs to be thinking about and exploring new ways of living. We need something akin to the Marshall Plan — which restored Europe after World War II— only global in scale. We need to create a future of mutually assured development, where progress leaves no one behind and doesn't destroy the ecosystems on which our lives depend.

Given intelligent designs for living lightly and simply, our manner of living would vary depending on local customs, ecology, resources, and climate. People who are poor need to ask not for access

to the traditional American lifestyle, which is destroying cultures and the biosphere, but for a helping hand toward sustainability over the long haul. The problem is that we've not yet developed a literacy of sustainability that tells us what to ask for. Instead of a global plan that would do just that, we're being sold a consumerist culture by the mass media.

The average person in the U.S. watches about four hours of television each day. Over the course of a year, we see roughly twenty-five thousand commercials, many of them produced by the world's highest-paid cognitive psychologists. Their job is to figure out how to grab our attention and make us feel deficient if we don't own their clients' products. And these heavily produced advertisements are not merely for products, but for a lifestyle based on a consumer mind-set. What they're doing, day in and day out, twenty-five thousand times a year, is hypnotizing us into seeing ourselves as consumers who want to be entertained rather than as citizens who want to be informed and engaged. We need to take back the airwaves as a sphere of mature conversation and dialogue about our common future.

COOPER: So the media can be a positive influence?

ELGIN: Yes. We've already seen evidence of this. The mass media have played a pivotal role in bringing the civil-rights movement, the environmental movement, and the women's movement into our collective consciousness. Broadcast television is not only the primary window onto the world for most Americans, but also the mirror in which we see ourselves as a society.

For the past thirty years, I've been exploring the process of "awakening" at a civilizational scale, and I have concluded that the mass media are the primary carriers of our collective "thought stream," which can foster either ignorance and fear, or awakening. For the individual, awakening involves developing a capacity for reflective consciousness — or simply paying attention to our thoughts. In a similar way, our collective awakening will involve paying attention to our thoughts at a civilizational scale: not just consuming media, but purposefully directing our attention as a society to cultivate mindfulness, equanimity, and so on.

So the media can have a positive influence, if we will reflect on how we use this immensely powerful technology. The basic problem is that the mass media are not being held accountable for their programming. Although, by law, television broadcasters have a strict obligation to serve the public interest, they are serving their pocketbooks instead. It is time for us as citizens to come together and hold them accountable for their legal responsibilities.

The media have long given lip service to serving the public interest, but there has never been a means for measuring their failure to do so, because there's no mechanism in place to register the public's views. Polls show a majority of Americans are deeply dissatisfied with the media but feel powerless to bring about changes. Our Media Voice is a nonpartisan national campaign I cofounded in the Bay Area. We have devised a practical strategy for holding broadcasters accountable for serving the public interest. We want to develop prime-time "citizen feedback forums" in cities across the nation. The forums will be like electronic town meetings, at which citizens can raise concerns about pervasive violence, stereotyping, lack of diverse perspectives,

and limited coverage of critical issues. The idea is to give citizens a new “civic voice” and feedback system for media accountability.

COOPER: What about the government? Doesn't it exert any control over the media?

ELGIN: Government deregulation of the media has led to a rapid coalescing of ownership. As a result, a half dozen enormous media conglomerates now own a majority of media outlets in the U.S. It is these corporations — which value profits above all else — that are controlling the media, not the government. On the contrary, the media set an agenda that, in many ways, controls the scope of governmental concerns.

COOPER: In your latest book, *Promise Ahead*, you liken the human species, though 135,000 years old, to a teenager on the brink of adulthood.

ELGIN: Over the past decade, I've given talks around the world, and I have asked people to consider the human family as one individual and then, looking at the behavior of that individual, to determine our stage in life. Specifically, do they think the human family is behaving like a toddler, a teenager, an adult, or an elder? I've asked this question in India, Europe, Japan, Brazil, and the United States, and without hesitation three-quarters of the people say that we're in our teenage years. Another 20 percent say we're in our toddler phase. On my personal website, more than two thousand people have voted on this question, with the same results.

So I've looked into adolescent psychology and found interesting parallels. Teenagers are rebellious, and we are rebelling against nature. Teenagers don't tend to think about the long-term future; nor do we as nations. Teenagers are often concerned with how they look; we're a materialistic society consumed with appearances.

But there's also an upside to this life stage. Teenagers have a huge amount of untapped energy and idealism, a sense of hidden greatness that is about to burst forth. As a species, I think we also have untapped idealism and a sense of our hidden greatness. We just need a chance to develop these potentials as a human family.

We are already beginning to move from our adolescent, reactive mode into our early adulthood, in which we start learning to live together. For example, the nations of the world are cooperating in ways that are seldom recognized. Every day we cooperate in running the world's weather-forecasting systems and air-traffic control. Cooperation among world health organizations has eradicated polio and smallpox. We are beginning to cooperate in the realm of international justice — for example, arresting dictators for abuse of power and genocide. And around the world, reconciliation movements are emerging and trying to take root. Some are making dramatic progress, like the peaceful transition to democratic rule in South Africa and the growing peace process in Northern Ireland.

COOPER: In the final pages of *Promise Ahead*, you say that, within twenty years, humanity will undergo an “initiation.”

ELGIN: Most teenagers do not become adults without moving through a time of testing and challenge — a rite of passage. I believe the human family is about to go through a time of profound initiation and challenge as we move from our adolescence to our adulthood. This initiation will take the form of a worldwide systems crisis as we hit an “ecological wall” — the physical limits to growth. For example, right now, CO₂ levels are higher than they have been in 20 million years. We’ve already overshot the boundaries and thresholds of climate stability, and it’s just a matter of time before we start experiencing severe fluctuations in the climate.

Add to this equation the fact that by the 2020s we’re going to have roughly 8 billion people on the planet. As the climate warms, however, food production is going to decline, because many seeds are up against the limits of their thermal resistance and will have difficulty germinating. Compounding the situation further is the fact that, within a generation, we’ll be running out of the cheap oil that has propped up our high-production agricultural system with its petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizers. In this same time frame, it is also estimated that 40 percent of the earth’s population won’t have access to enough water to be self-sufficient in growing our own food.

Now, if you start putting all of these factors together, it’s clear that within twenty years we could have a crisis that is completely outside anything in our collective experience. Nonetheless, I think this is a very organic and predictable occurrence. We’re moving from our adolescence into our adulthood as a human family, and you don’t make that transition without going through life-changing events.

COOPER: Is it possible that, through genetics and other new technologies, we’ll be able to avoid the chaos and the tumultuous times that you write about?

ELGIN: In my opinion, no. Just look at the global dynamics at work. Climate change and species extinction represent massive disruptions to the biosphere. Population growth is creating enormous, unsustainable megalopolises around the world. I think genetics and new approaches to food production will be important, but I don’t see anything deep enough, broad enough, and transformative enough to make a difference anytime soon.

COOPER: Could you describe what you think life is going to be like in the United States in, say, 2030?

ELGIN: My guess is that, around the world, the various forces of climate change, population growth, species extinction, resource depletion, and human misery will have converged into an unstoppable force heading for either breakdown or breakthrough — where the human family either pulls together in cooperation or pulls apart in conflict.

I find it harder to predict what life will be like in the U.S. specifically. We are one of the more resource-rich nations in the world. What I can imagine is even larger numbers of people pushing across our borders saying, “We want a part of your affluence.” We could experience the breakdown of civil society and the need to start rebuilding from a more decentralized base. One

way to picture this is to look at what life is like already for people in parts of the world where ecosystems are overstressed, economies are in ruins, and lives are being pulled apart by poverty.

Another dramatic transformation that will take place by 2030 is the growth of global communications. It's estimated that by 2010 roughly a billion people will be connected continuously on the Internet — and that's still twenty years shy of the time frame you're asking about. So, give ourselves twenty years of this new world of communication, add to that the stresses of climate change, species extinction, water shortages, civil unrest, and so on, and what we get is a world that will be intensely in dialogue with itself. And the effects of that dialogue will cascade down into our personal lives — into the food we eat, the clothes we buy, the transportation we use, and the homes in which we live.

COOPER: In your book *Awakening Earth*, you try to look even farther into the future. What might happen after we've cleared the hurdle of our birth as a global civilization?

ELGIN: If we go back to the metaphor of the human life span, it's when people move into their early adulthood that they start thinking about the future, doing meaningful work in the world, and building lasting relationships with their peers. So the next stage will be one of collective reflection on a global scale — seeing who we are as a human family and how we can live and work together in a way that is sustainable.

If we can successfully meet the challenge of living sustainably on the earth, I think we will then have the opportunity to learn to live more compassionately — in harmonious and caring relationships with one another, other species, and the cosmos. A culture of kindness could infuse the planet. This could be an era of renewal, as the earth is restored to health. My sense is that we have a long and interesting future ahead of us, if we can get through this critical period of transition.

COOPER: Our politicians don't seem particularly concerned with any of this. For example, Dick Cheney commented that "conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy." Are there any politicians who are thinking along the lines of sustainability?

ELGIN: Certainly Al Gore had an appreciation for living sustainably when he wrote *Earth in the Balance*. A more immediate example is Oregon governor John Kitzhaber, who signed an executive order in 2000 directing the state to "develop and promote policies and programs that will assist Oregon in meeting a goal of sustainability within one generation — by 2025." The Oregon Solutions website [www.OregonSolutions.net] is dedicated to that purpose and is full of strategies, examples, and resources. And the Bush administration, though it's no friend to the environment, is pushing for a new generation of cars powered by hydrogen fuel cells.

COOPER: Do you think we should continue to develop faster, smarter, more independent machines?

ELGIN: We have to look at what the machines might be used for. If the human family is to create some form of sustainable species civilization, we need a capacity for collective conversation and mutual understanding. So we need the Internet and the global transparency it's bringing. We also need sustainable forms of energy, which means retrofitting and rebuilding a huge amount of infrastructure — homes, office buildings, and the like — for solar and other renewable sources of energy.

COOPER: In *Promise Ahead*, you say that “we are the leaders we have been waiting for.” But to keep the movement going, doesn't there need to be someone leading the way?

ELGIN: If it is going to be voluntary simplicity, then it needs to be deliberate and intentional. If you have to be talked into it, it isn't voluntary. [Laughter.] I find it heartening that this is a self-organizing, leaderless movement. People are recognizing that no one else is going to do this for them. They must take responsibility for pioneering changes in their own lives. When economic, environmental, and social systems begin breaking down in the next decade or two, I think it will motivate nearly everyone to make changes.

Some feel that large-scale change requires government involvement. My sense is that we are moving into a situation that is so dynamic and so complex that no government agency will be able to figure it out. It's going to require inventive, savvy people at the grass-roots level adapting quickly to radically changing circumstances, making small changes that accumulate into a major societal change.

COOPER: Elsewhere in *Promise Ahead*, you quote T.S. Eliot: “And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” What does that quote mean for you?

ELGIN: Let me approach it through the name that we've given ourselves as a species: Many people do not realize that our technical designation is not just *Homo sapiens*, or “wise beings,” but *Homo sapiens sapiens*, which means that we are “doubly wise beings” with the ability to “know that we know.” When we use this precious capacity for reflective consciousness, we are enabling a living universe to look back and reflect upon itself. A gardener appreciating a flower or a child appreciating the stars in a night sky is each a knowing witness to creation, closing a loop that began with the birth of our universe billions of years ago. We are beings who can knowingly appreciate and celebrate the great mystery of our own existence.