

# The Self-Guiding Evolution of Civilizations

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*In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual,  
everything depends on the development of consciousness.*

--Carl Jung

**Abstract:** The universe is creating self-organizing and self-referencing systems at every scale. In accord with this dynamic, the human family is working to become consciously self-organizing at progressively larger scales. We have evolved from awakening hunter-gatherers to a species that has created a wired world whose actions are changing the face of the planet. Because the impact of humanity is now global, that is the scale at which we are challenged to become reflective if we are to be choiceful about our common future. We are challenged to no longer “run on automatic,” but to pay attention to how we pay attention as entire civilizations. The vehicle of collective attention at a civilizational scale is the mass media—particularly broadcast television. If civilizations are to realize their potential for full reflective consciousness and become self-guiding in their evolution, then it is vital for the public to mobilize the public’s airwaves on behalf of the public interest.

## Self-Reflective Systems Throughout the Universe

I believe that our core evolutionary potential as a species lies largely unnoticed in the scientific name that we have given to ourselves. It is well understood in the scientific literature that our name is not simply *Homo sapiens* or “wise humans.” Rather, we are *Homo sapiens sapiens* or “doubly wise humans.”<sup>1</sup> Where animals have the capacity “to know,” we humans have the capacity “to know that we know” and the ability to bring a reflective consciousness into our lives. *If we use our scientific name as a guide, then our core purpose as a species is to realize—both individually and collectively—our potential for double wisdom.* In turn, a key

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challenge for humanity is to recognize that the fulfillment of our evolutionary potential involves

the development of our collective capacity for reflective consciousness—a capacity vital for the self-guiding evolution of civilizations.

How does humanity’s journey of awakening a reflective consciousness fit within the larger dynamics of evolution in the universe? Does our journey accord well with nature’s “evolutionary intentions?” I assume that if we fight against nature, we will be fighting against ourselves—and our evolutionary journey will be one of frustration, stalemate, and alienation. If we cooperate with nature, we will be serving our deepest potentials—and our journey will be one of satisfaction and learning. If we trust the integrity of nature’s wisdom, then what kind of evolutionary processes do we see occurring in the world around us?

An important way to learn about nature’s evolutionary direction is by examining the designs expressed in the physical systems of the universe. Wherever we look in the natural world, we see a recurring organizing pattern at work. The basic physical structure of that pattern is the torus, which has the shape of a donut. At every level of the cosmos, we find the characteristic structure and geometry of toroidal forms. *The torus is significant because it is the simplest geometry of a dynamically self-referencing and self-organizing system that has the capacity to keep pulling itself together, to keep itself in existence.* The most common signature of self-organizing systems in nature is the torus.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 below shows six different expressions of this easily recognizable form—from the minute topology around a black hole, to the scale of everyday human experience, and then to the scope of the magnetic field around a galaxy.

### **Figure 1: Different Expressions of the Torus: the Signature of Self-Referencing and Self-Organizing Systems**

If at every level of the universe we find self-referencing and self-organizing systems, then this appears to be a fundamental evolutionary drive or intention as it is being expressed in countless ways by nature’s designs. Self-organizing systems have a number of unique properties that can help us discern the direction of evolution occurring throughout the cosmos:

- **Identity**—A self-organizing system requires a center around which and through which life-energy can flow.

- **Consciousness**—A self-organizing system must be able to reflect upon itself in order to “get hold of itself.”
- **Freedom**—To be self-organizing and self-creating, systems must exist within a context of great freedom.
- **Paradoxical nature**—Self-organizing systems are both *static and dynamic* (they are flowing systems that manifest as stable structures). They are both *open and closed* (they are continuously opening to the flow-through of energy and continuously closing into an identifiable entity). And they are both *unique and unified* (they are uniquely manifesting themselves at each moment while being completely immersed within and connected to the whole universe).
- **Community**—Self-organizing systems grow in concert with other systems in a mutually supportive process of co-evolution. Communities of self-organizing systems are the building blocks of existence.
- **Emergence**—Surprising potentials emerge as communities of self-organizing systems grow to higher levels of integration. We cannot predict the nature and capacities of new systems that may emerge from combinations of smaller systems. For example, we could not have guessed the nature of molecules by looking only at the property of atoms, and we could not anticipate the nature of living cells by looking only at the property of molecules, and so on.
- **Enlarged experiences**—An expanded scope of community, attained by combining smaller systems, supports new levels of learning and experience for members of that community. Members broaden and deepen their life-experience by co-evolving new orders of systems with others.

These properties indicate that *the universe does have a central project: to support the*

*development of self-referencing systems that are able to live sustainably at the local scale while joining into communities at larger scales which offer the opportunity for learning and expression in a context of ever-broadening freedom.* Of course, this is no more than an evolutionary orientation. The universe does not provide a cookbook and recipes for unfolding this potential—and that is a measure of our great freedom.

How does humanity's development into doubly wise beings fit with the universe's central project of developing self-organizing systems? I believe that they are one and the same. If we want to choose an evolutionary direction that is congruent with nature's evolutionary intentions, it will involve developing our species-potential to become fully self-reflective. Becoming fully self-reflective means nothing less than becoming full members of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*. To the degree that we cultivate this capacity we will, I believe, be successful in our evolution.

As humanity develops our capacity for reflective consciousness, the universe is simultaneously acquiring the ability to look back and reflect upon itself. We are the culmination of 14 billion years of evolution. It has taken the universe these billions of years to grow organisms on the Earth that have a sufficiently developed consciousness to be able to reflect on and appreciate the simple fact of being here. After billions of years of evolution, a life form has emerged on the Earth that is literally the universe looking back at her creations through the unique perspective and experience of each person. A gardener appreciating a flower or an astronomer peering out at the night sky represents the closing of a loop of awareness that began with the birth of our cosmos some 14 billion years ago. Our universe gave birth to and sustains living planets which, in turn, have given rise to life-forms that are now able to “know that they know” and look back at the universe with wonder and awe. We are returning to where we started and are awakening as doubly wise beings that can consciously reflect on the miracle of the universe and the gift of our existence. The awakening of a reflective human consciousness enables the universe to know itself and thereby to experiment consciously in its own evolution. Thus we are becoming conscious partners with the universe in the unfolding story of cosmic evolution.

## **Stages in the Collective Unfolding of Double Wisdom**

Although there have been individuals throughout history who have journeyed into the further realms of reflective consciousness, my concern is with the changing consciousness of the majority of humans beings—the changing “social average.” How has the complex capacity for double wisdom awakened and developed for the overall human family?

Just as there are relatively distinct stages that characterize the development of an individual from infancy to early adulthood, so too do I think there are discernible stages in the development of our species. The people and events that make headlines tend to float on the surface of the stream of life but it is the deeper changes in our species-maturation, working below the surface of popular culture, that ultimately make history.

I have found it is useful to look at the unfolding of humanity’s collective potential for double wisdom by considering seven stages of growth. (Note: This description is drawn from my book *Awakening Earth* which contains extensive references and can be downloaded for free from my website: [www.awakeningearth.org](http://www.awakeningearth.org)). I recognize that a stages-of-growth description of human evolution can give the impression that evolution is linear—a march from one stage to the next in a smooth and direct flow. Of course, it is not. Human evolution is an untidy process that seldom conforms to orderly progressions and clear boundaries. Our path through the various stages will surely be filled with many surprises, accidents, and confusing twists and turns that will make it uniquely human and characteristically unpredictable. With these qualifications, I do think that there is a general direction to evolution that leads toward a “wisdom civilization” that is conscious of its actions.

In exploring the awakening of reflective consciousness at a civilizational scale, it is useful to acknowledge that this is a rich and multi-faceted faculty whose full range of potentials develops through a series of stages or learning environments. At each stage, a different set of observing or reflective potentials are awakened, developed, and integrated. Our evolutionary challenge is to consciously retain the lessons of each era while moving on to the next. Our capacities for participating in a reflective culture are growing as we move through a nested series of experiences, the complete spectrum of which seems vital to fully unfold our civilization’s capacity for double wisdom.

**Stage 1: The Era of Archaic Humans—Contracted Consciousness.** For several million years, our archaic ancestors lived in the faint dawn of reflective consciousness. Their

capacity for knowing that we know was almost entirely undeveloped. Our earliest human ancestors functioned primarily on instinct and habit. As a result, their way of life remained virtually unchanged over thousands of generations. Stone tools, for example, show a monotonous sameness over an immense span of time—for roughly 10,000 generations there is no evidence of invention.<sup>3</sup> An important degree of reflective consciousness must have begun to awaken more than two million years ago when *Homo erectus* migrated out of Africa and, to cope with harsh ice-age climates, learned to use animal skins for warm clothing, construct shelters, and use fire. Nonetheless, it is only with the earliest evidence of burials, approximately 65,000 years ago, that we find a clear recognition of death and evidence of conscious reflection on the “self” that lives and then dies.

### **Stage 2: The Era of Awakening Gatherers and Hunters—Sensing Consciousness.**

Although our ancestors passed along the glowing ember of double wisdom for several million years, it apparently did not emerge as a distinct flame of self-observation and reflective knowing until roughly 35,000 years ago. At this time the glacially slow development of culture and consciousness finally reached a critical threshold and ignited a flow of development began that leads directly to the modern era. Humans made a dramatic leap in their capacity for self-observation and this is vividly expressed in tremendous changes in tool making, painting, and carving as well as in evidence of expanding social and trading networks. Still, the capacity for fleeting self-recognition that emerged at this time should not be confused with the stabilized “I-sense” that emerges later. There is enormous evolutionary distance between the capacity for momentary self-observation and a steady mirroring capacity that we can consciously mobilize as we move through life.

For awakening gatherers and hunters, life was so immediate that, for the most part, it was not regarded with reflective detachment; instead, things just happened.<sup>4</sup> Much of the time, people operated on automatic—moving through the repetition and routine of a simple, nomadic life. The world was experienced as up close and immediate—a magical place filled with unknown and uncontrollable forces, unexpected miracles, and strange happenings. Nature was a living field without clear boundaries between the natural and supernatural. Daily life was a mixture of unseen forces and unexplained events, for people did not have the conceptual framework to describe rationally how the world worked.

Social organization was on a tribal scale, and individuals felt themselves to be inseparable from the empathic field of their family and tribal group. People's sense of identity came from affiliation with a tribe and from a sense of intimate connection with nature. With few possessions, there was little basis for material differences, or material conflict. Meaning was found in the direct sensing of and engagement with life. A sensing consciousness was bodily based, directly felt, implicit, and tacit. Without an objectified sense of time—without being able to name it or describe its workings—there was little sense of the future; instead, most things happened in the simple, passing present.<sup>5</sup> Every recurring season and event was a unique miracle: the return of springtime after a long winter, the annual migration of animals, the waxing and waning of the moon—all were mysterious wonders.

**Stage 3: The Era of Farming-based Civilizations—Feeling Consciousness.** Roughly 10,000 years ago human perception again expanded. People were able to step back further from unconscious immersion in nature and see how they could tame nature through farming. Combining the gathering of wild grains with seasonal hunting, they made a gradual transition to a settled way of life. Small, incremental improvements in food raising resulted, over time, in a revolution in living. Over thousands of years, people learned to pull weeds from wild fields of wheat to increase their yield, to plant seeds around the margins of wild fields to extend the size of the crop, and to protect the fields from grazing animals. From such modest beginnings came one of the most fundamental transformations the world has ever known. The surplus of food that farming produced made possible the eventual rise of large-scale, urban civilizations.

The mindset of the agricultural era was cyclical, governed by nature—the seasons go round, but the world remains essentially the same. Life was not perceived to be “going anywhere.” The vast majority of people lived in small villages and found meaning through belonging to an extended community. No longer were blood and tribal ties the primary cultural glue. In an increasingly differentiated society, it was the power of fellowship, emotional bonds, social status, and shared symbols of meaning that provided the connective tissue. In this stage, the power of consciousness is used to reflect on feelings of affiliation with others who shared commonalities—such as living in the same geographic area, sharing ethnic origins, and having a common religion. In a largely preliterate and pre-rational society, feeling-based communications were the dominant currency of culture. Despite its growing depth, reflective consciousness in

the agrarian culture tended to be limited by rigid customs, irrational superstitions, social immobility, arranged marriages, widespread illiteracy, a patriarchal society, and the authoritarian character of the church and state. Although all of the basic arts of civilization (such as writing, organized government, architecture, mathematics, and the division of labor) arose during this stage, most people lived as impoverished peasants with no expectation of material change or progress. For the majority, life was brutal, bleak, and short. While this era represented a dramatic change from the hunter-gatherer and small-village ways of life, it was still an early stage in the journey to develop the full expression of humanity's capacity for double wisdom.

#### **Stage 4: The Era of Scientific-Industrial Civilizations—Thinking Consciousness.**

The next great change in consciousness arrived in full force by the 1700s as a number of powerful revolutions blossomed in England, Europe and the United States. These include a scientific revolution that challenged the belief in the supernatural and the authority of the church; a religious reformation that questioned the role and function of religious institutions; the Renaissance, which brought a new perspective to the arts; an industrial revolution, which brought unprecedented material progress; an urban revolution, which brought masses of people together in new ways, breaking apart the feudal pattern of living; and a democratic revolution, which fostered a new level of individual empowerment and involvement. These powerful revolutions were expressions of a new perceptual paradigm and mark a dramatic break with the agrarian era.

When the industrial revolution began in earnest in the late 1700s, more than 90 percent of the population in Europe and the United States lived and worked on farms. Two hundred years later, more than 90 percent of the population in these countries lived and worked in cities and suburbs. In this single statistic is the story of an extraordinary transformation of these societies—a transformation that is now being repeated in countries around the world.

Fundamental to this shift is a change in the perception of time. The flat wheel of time that oriented perception in the agricultural era opens up in the industrial era to become a dynamic, three-dimensional spiral. In experiencing that time is “going somewhere,” people perceive the potential for material progression or progress. As the mystery of nature gives way to science and an analyzing intellect, material achievements became a primary measure of success.

All of life on Earth has paid a very high price for the learning realized during this era. Although people in industrialized societies are more intellectually sophisticated and psychologically differentiated, they are also more isolated—often feeling separated from nature, others, and themselves. Feelings of companionship and community have been stripped away; many people live nearly alone in vast urban regions of alienating scale and complexity. Unprecedented economic and political freedoms have been won, but at great cost when life seems to have little meaning or sense of purpose beyond ever more consumption. The perceptual paradigm of the scientific-industrial era has immense drive but virtually no sense of direction beyond the acquisition of power and things. Despite these limitations, reflective consciousness has advanced considerably in this era, fostering greater citizenship in government, entrepreneurship in economics, and self-authority in spiritual matters.

**Stage 5: The Era of Global Communication—Observing Consciousness.** Because the communications revolution has enabled humanity to begin observing itself consciously as a species, the capacity for double wisdom is now taking another quantum leap forward. No longer operating largely on automatic, entire societies are increasingly conscious of the simple fact of consciousness—and this changes everything. With reflection comes the ability to witness what is happening in the world and the freedom to choose our pathway into the future.

Reflective consciousness provides the practical basis for building a sustainable future. We cannot afford to run on automatic given the scope and urgency of trends converging around us. Because of the collective severity of problems ranging from climate change, species extinction, resource depletion, terrorism, and more, we are being challenged to pay attention to how we are paying attention collectively. With reflective consciousness we can objectively witness environmental pollution, religious intolerance, poverty, over consumption, racial injustice, sexual discrimination, and other conditions that have divided us in the past. With a more objective perspective combined with the skills of conflict resolution and the tools of mass communication, we can achieve a new level of human understanding and discover an authentic vision of a future that serves the well-being of all.

Reflective consciousness provides the glue that can bond the human family into a mutually appreciative whole while simultaneously honoring our differences. As we cultivate our capacity for knowing that we know, we begin to heal our sense of disconnection from the larger universe.

We catch glimpses of the unity of the cosmos and our intimate participation within the living web of existence. No longer is reality broken into relativistic islands or pieces. If only for a few moments at a time, we see and experience existence as a seamless, living totality. As the Sufi poet Kabir wrote, he saw the universe as a living and growing body “for fifteen seconds, and it made him a servant for life.”<sup>6</sup>

**Stage 6: The Era of Global Bonding—Compassionate Consciousness.** In the next stage in the unfolding of double wisdom I believe that an observing consciousness will mature into a compassionate consciousness and love will genuinely begin to infuse our civilizing activities. The same compassion that binds a family is the unifying force that will make global reconciliation and commitment possible. It is love that will enable us to join in a purposeful union of global scope so as to ensure a sustainable home for all life.

We will not enter this stage with our capacity for compassion fully developed; instead, it will be through working together day after day over generations that we shall evolve our capacity for loving engagement with the world. In turn, it will be the strength of this union that will enable us to withstand the enormous stresses that will be unleashed during the next stage of growth. Where the dispassionate consciousness of the communications era will be sufficient to enable us to achieve embryonic reconciliation, it is the compassionate consciousness of the bonding era that will enable us to move further ahead in building a creative, global civilization.

A compassionate consciousness will generate a new cultural atmosphere where people feel that they are among friends no matter where they are in the world. During the agrarian era, universal literacy seemed almost impossible, yet we are working to achieve it in societies today. In the same way, a compassionate consciousness as a cultural norm many seem unimaginable today, but it could become a cultural reality within a few generations. Humanity could take on the restoration and renewal of the biosphere as a common project that could promote a deep sense of community and bonding. A global culture of kindness could develop “world projects” that range from transforming massive cities into decentralized eco-villages to hosting global celebrations and concerts, and developing ongoing world games as an alternative to warfare.

**Stage 7: The Era of Global Creativity—Flow Consciousness.** In the next stage of awakening—with flow consciousness—we experience existence as fresh, alive, and forever

arising anew. The observer no longer stands apart from any aspect of reality but now participates fully. We return consciously to the center of our ordinary lives and bring the power of our wakefulness to our creative expressions. We know, moment by moment, through the subtle hum of knowing-resonance at the core of our being, whether we are living in a way that serves the well-being of the whole.

In this stage, humanity will move beyond maintaining ourselves to surpassing ourselves. In this “surpassing era,” compassionate consciousness coalesces into self-organizing action and becomes a force for creative expression in the world. The critical challenge will be to maintain global unity while coping with the enormous stresses generated by the unleashing of human creativity and diversity. To meet this challenge, it will be important to develop and integrate all dimensions of reflective consciousness into a balanced whole:

- **Sensing consciousness** of the era of awakening hunter-gatherers
- **Feeling consciousness** of the agrarian era
- **Thinking consciousness** of the scientific-industrial era
- **Observing consciousness** of the communications era
- **Compassionate consciousness** of the bonding era
- **Flow consciousness** of the surpassing era.

When we have fulfilled and integrated the potentials of all these stages, humanity will have become a consciously self-organizing planetary family with the perspective, compassion, and creativity to sustain ourselves into the deep future. We will have consciously developed a rich sensory existence, a textured emotional life, a complex intellectual world, the capacity for reflection and reconciliation, a deep love for the Earth and compassion for all its inhabitants, and the subtle freedom of flow consciousness. Figure 2 illustrates these stages in the unfolding of reflective consciousness.

## **Figure 2: Stages in the Unfolding of Civilization and Consciousness**

I want to emphasize that *these stages represent a pathway, not a prediction*. What is important is that we begin to see and explore our journey of awakening to the potentials of our self-given name as a species—*Homo sapiens sapiens*.

In my view, completing these stages will not represent the end of humanity's journey; instead, it will represent our beginning at a new level of possibility. Humans will not become angels or saints; we will simply be awake to the fullness of who and what we already are. Just as reaching adulthood marks the beginning of creative work in the world for individuals, attaining our early adulthood as a planetary civilization will mark the beginning of a new phase in humanity's exploration and learning.

While moving toward an integrated world, it is vital that we remember the living wisdom that is at the core of each of the major stages of human experience—as gatherers and hunters, as farmers of land, as dwellers in cities and, increasingly, as inhabitants of cyberspace. Each stage represents an invaluable building block in the nested process of developing a sustainable species-civilization that honors both human diversity and global unity. In my view, while all of humanity's past modes of thinking and living will be invaluable for solving the challenges of the future, none of them are sufficient. We have further discovering and inventing to do, both as individuals and civilizations, in our ways of thinking, living, communicating, and relating.

## **The Power of Conscious Evolution**

If the direction of evolution is toward the development of self-organizing systems that have the ability to reflect upon themselves and thereby to provide themselves with self-orienting feedback, then the most direct and powerful way for us to mature as a species is by increasing opportunities for conscious reflection from the personal to the planetary scale. Personal reflection refers to seeing ourselves in the mirror of consciousness as individuals and to observe the unfolding of our lives. By analogy, social reflection refers to seeing ourselves in the mirror of collective consciousness by using tools such as the mass media and the Internet. Once there is authentic social reflection, we can achieve a shared understanding and a working consensus regarding appropriate actions for a sustainable future. Actions can then come quickly and voluntarily. We can mobilize ourselves purposefully, and each can contribute their unique talents to the creation of a life-affirming future.

Voluntary or self-organized action will be vital to our success. Our swiftly developing world situation is far too complex for any one individual or group to figure out and propose remedies that will work for everyone. The world has become so interdependent that our consciousness as citizens needs to match the actual nature of the world of which we are an inseparable part. This is a time for rapid learning and experimentation locally while being mindful of how we connect globally.

*Engaged reflection is the foundation for concerted, voluntary action in democratic societies.* In order for social reflection to lead to effective actions, it is important to recognize the creative tension between two pulls toward engagement. On the one hand, there is the pull to have social reflection occur locally where it is tangible and grounded in face-to-face conversation with others such as family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. On the other hand, there is a pull to have the scope of social reflection match the scope of the challenges—many of which are at the more impersonal scale of community, country, and planet. Therefore, effective social reflection needs to foster both face-to-face conversations as well as conversations of national and global scale, recognizing there is a creative tension in this polarity.

## **Awakening the Double Wisdom of Civilizations**

Although many recognize that an individual can be conscious of him or her self, few seldom ask whether an entire society can be conscious of itself. Can a society evolve its “level” and “quality” of consciousness and, if so, what difference will this make in how it functions? Research shows that living more consciously has benefits for an individual (for example, in reducing stress and increasing competence in relating to others), but are there comparable benefits when an entire society seeks to live more consciously? While an individual can meditate and become more awake and attentive, is it realistic for a society to seek to enhance its qualities of consciousness and, if so, how can a society do this? These are some of the core issues that naturally emerge when we consider the knowing capacity of entire civilizations.

Certainly at moments of great tragedy or great triumph there seems to be a capacity for a nation comprised of millions of autonomous individuals be conscious of itself as a collective. For example, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, virtually an entire nation went into mourning. For a period of several days, a whole country paused and, together, people acknowledged the passing of their leader. Another moment of shared knowing occurred with the

first lunar landing. For a few hours, much of the world paused to watch the first humans walk on the moon. The power of these events was not only in the individual sense of tragedy or triumph experienced by each person, but also in the awareness that this personal experience was being simultaneously shared by millions of other persons. Clearly, an entire civilization can be conscious of itself and, particularly in the case of the moon landing, the entire species can be aware that it is passing through an historic moment in its evolution.

Now a growing ecological crisis is pushing humanity to pay attention to how we pay attention at the civilizational scale. The Earth's biosphere is being severely wounded, even perhaps being "irretrievably mutilated" in the words of the world's senior scientists in their *Warning to Humanity*.<sup>7</sup> Pushed by the harsh reality of an injured Earth, the human family is being challenged to discover a new level of identity, responsibility, and purpose.

Within the next several decades the citizens of developed nations must begin to make profound changes in our manner of living, consuming and working if we are to build a sustainable future. To make this pattern shift toward sustainability will require a dramatic change in the mindset of entire civilizations—a whole systems shift in consciousness. Because a new life-orientation for entire civilizations is essential, and because hundreds of millions of persons will be required to act in conscious cooperation with one another if the realization of that purpose is to be voluntary, a new level and scope of shared consciousness is required. A subtle but pervasive shift in collective consciousness is needed to provide the context for aligning individual actions into a coherent and purposeful direction.

## **Qualities of Civilizational Consciousness**

With self-reflective consciousness we can become self-directing agents of our own evolution, both personally and socially. For example, in a democracy, when we are informed as individual citizens, then we "know." However, when we communicate among ourselves as citizens—publicly learning about and affirming our collective sentiments as an extended community—then we "know that we know." In our dangerous and difficult time of transition, it is not sufficient for civilizations to be wise; we must become doubly wise through social communication that clearly reveals our collective knowing to ourselves. Developing our capacity for reflective consciousness, both personally and socially, is a paramount evolutionary challenge. How, then, are we to begin thinking about the qualities of consciousness of entire

civilizations?

Every day we are able to identify and assess the basic qualities of an individual's consciousness: We can immediately recognize whether a person's attention is dispersed or concentrated, lazy or alert, spaciouly open or narrow and closed, and so on. These and other qualities are recognized and examined in great detail by both meditative traditions and various psychological disciplines.<sup>8</sup> By extrapolation we can begin to develop a map that enables us to think objectively about the qualities of civilizational consciousness. For example:

- **Mindfulness**—Are citizens being collectively mindful of the larger world, or is the body politic largely oblivious to the big picture, inattentive to critical trends, and unmindful of where civilizations are headed?
- **Concentration**—When the situation warrants, is the society able to mobilize its attention and focus on critical choices that need our attention? Are we able to cut through the turbulence of our social chatter and distraction and, with penetrating attention, bring a steady focus to concerns vital to our future? Or are we so distracted and/or spaced out that we cannot focus our societal attention on critical concerns?
- **Responsiveness**—Are we collectively responsive to subtle warning signals and feedback? Or do we have to be bludgeoned into united action by some catastrophe? Do we wander into the future half asleep, only momentarily awakened by the shock of some calamity?
- **Alertness**—Are we lazy and dull in our collective consciousness or are we bright, alert and alive in our attention? As a society, do we make an effort to pay attention? Or is our capacity for spacious attention absorbed by trivial social distractions, exaggerated fears, and obsessive greed?
- **Calmness**—Are we reactive, wildly thrashing about in our societal attention? Or are we able to remain relatively calm and steady in the midst of social turbulence, chaos, and distress? Instead of being thrown off balance, can we remain steadily present and responsive?

- **Creativity**—Can we stand back in societal awareness and accept innovative ideas or are we so locked into our history that we are unable to consciously consider creative alternatives? Do we rely upon slogans and preprogrammed solutions or do we explore options with a fresh and flexible frame of mind?
  
- **Investigation**—Do we accept life passively as a society, or do we actively challenge ourselves to learn about life and to constantly innovate as we learn? Do we invest time and energy in our collective learning process as a civilization?
  
- **Compassion**—Do we consciously look for the synergy of the highest common denominator, inviting racial, ethnic, gender, geographic and other differences into the process of social learning? Or do we collectively seek to affix blame to one group or another and resist errors as unimportant to our social learning?

The foregoing does not exhaust the attributes of a conscious civilization, but it does indicate how these are not arbitrary or trivial capacities—they are fundamental to the healthy and happy functioning of a person or society. This is not to say there is a cookbook recipe for a healthy consciousness; however, there are discernible capacities and qualities that can be cultivated that are enabling and empowering. Just as these qualities or factors can be cultivated by an individual, so too can they be cultivated by an entire civilization. As we move into an era of unprecedented challenge, we will need to be as attentive, responsive, and creative as we can. These are not inconsequential enhancements as they may well determine whether societies are able to respond successfully to the global ecological crisis rapidly closing around us.

The quality of our social attention is the most precious resource that we possess as a society. Instead of taking our collective consciousness for granted as an unchangeable given, we must begin to inspect, explore, and call forth the most healthy qualities of consciousness that we can muster as civilizations. It is not an empty slogan to assert, “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.” Our level of social vigilance is fundamental to the functioning of a free society. If we don’t pay attention while decisions of monumental importance are being made, then we effectively forfeit our future.

## **The Central Nervous System of Civilizations**

We are moving into a new era where we must pay attention to how we pay attention as a society. Still, how does a nation of several hundred million persons “pay attention?” What is the equivalent of the central nervous system in mass society? If the brain is a key organ for mobilizing consciousness of the individual, what is the key organ for mobilizing societal consciousness for an entire civilization? How intelligently are we using the social brain of modern society? Where is the “knowing faculty” to be found in a modern civilization?

I would argue that television is basic to the “knowing faculty” of modern societies. Biologically, we are a visually oriented species so there is truth in the adages that “seeing is believing,” and “one picture is worth a thousand words.” However, to suggest that television at the core of reflective consciousness for modern societies will strike many persons as an outrageous assertion. Television has been called a “boob tube,” a “cultural barbiturate,” a “vast wasteland,” “chewing gum for the eyes,” “a golden goose that lays scrambled eggs,” and worse. How can such a dysfunctional technology be at the heart of our capacity for social knowing?

A few stark statistics testify to the power of television in dominating the consciousness and perceptions of modern society. In the U.S., at least 98% of all households have a television set—more than have stoves, refrigerators or indoor toilets—making the TV set the most common fixture in our lives. The average person watches four hours of television per day, and a majority of persons get a majority of their news about the world from this single source. Television creates our shared frame of reference and, with the speed of light, television extends our experience of involvement to the entire planet. Through the eyes of television we can see the reality of a starving villager in Africa, the destruction of rain forests in Brazil, urban decay in New York, the effects of acid rain in Germany, and fighting in the streets of the Middle East. Television makes every viewer a witness—a knowing and feeling participant in what is being shown.

In times past, the newspaper was our primary instrument of collective knowing. Alexis de Toqueville said that the power of a newspaper was to place a single idea in ten thousand minds all on the same day. The power of television is to place a single idea—with accompanying images—before tens of millions of minds all at the same instant. For all practical purposes, if something does not appear on television, it does not exist in mass social

consciousness. Television, then, has become our “social witness,” our shared vehicle for knowing that we know.

### **How Well Are We Using Our Capacity for Collective Consciousness?**

The question naturally emerges, how well are we using our social brain, the mass media? It is widely recognized that contemporary programming is so fast-paced and with such rapid-fire cuts to disjointed images that it promotes a fragmented and shortened attention span—the very opposite of the sustained and spacious attention that is the goal of most meditative practices. In addition, research shows that the world portrayed by television is unrealistic. Compared to everyday life, television reality is far more violent and inhabited by fewer elderly, people of color, and poorer persons. Television may be our dominant social window, but the view it provides is cramped and partial.<sup>9</sup> Television may be our primary social mirror, but it is holding up a reflection that is distorted and inaccurate.

Current television programming also produces an unbalanced and distorted sense of social priorities by taking trivial concerns—such which laxatives or denture adhesives to use—and inflating them into issues of seemingly enormous importance to our lives. When a person sees world-changing issues such as nuclear proliferation and global warming presented side-by-side with high intensity commercials for toilet bowl cleaners, cat food, and sports utility vehicles, it distorts our sense of perspective and priority as a society.

Television aggressively promotes a consumerist consciousness at the very time we need to shift towards more ecological ways of living. In the U.S., the average person sees roughly 25,000 commercials a year on TV. These are far more than a pitch for a particular product—they are also advertisements for the attitudes, values, and lifestyles that surround consumption of that product. In turn, people use the consumption levels and patterns portrayed in television advertising to evaluate their levels of personal well-being while those same consumption patterns are simultaneously devastating the environment and resource base on which our future depends. *By programming television to achieve commercial success, the mind-set of entire nations is being programmed for ecological and evolutionary failure.* The mass media are perpetuating and reinforcing a consumerist mindset at the very time that we need to bring an ecological mindset into our collective consciousness. Our economic engines are exploiting the physical ecology of the planet while the media engines are exploiting the ecology of our shared

consciousness as citizens.

The conclusion seems inescapable that, although television is at the heart of our capacity for social knowing, it is now being used in a way that is dysfunctional and counterproductive to meeting our immense evolutionary challenges. Our evolutionary intelligence as a species is being tested and, instead of promoting a dramatic increase in civilizational awareness, consensus, and creative action, we are using television to dull social awareness, fragment consensus, diminish compassion, and inhibit creative action.

### **Social Reflection and Conscious Democracy**

When it comes to social transformation, small group conversations and mass communication are two sides of the same coin. Both are essential. Although the foundation for a reflective society is in individual, face-to-face conversations, it is important that these conversations unite at larger scales of social reflection—at the regional, national, and global levels. Ultimately, the scale of social reflection must match the scale of evolutionary concern—and that is now the entire Earth.

Communication at these larger scales necessarily involves television and the Internet. In considering the circulatory system of effective communication in our modern democracies, three ingredients seem essential to sustain a reflective democracy and learning society: First, citizens need to be adequately informed through their dominant media; second, they need to be able to engage in electronically supported dialogue in order to build a working consensus with others, and third, citizens need to have the opportunity to petition leaders for making positive changes. Consider what would happen if any of these three ingredients are missing. If citizens are deprived of essential information, they cannot make sound judgments, so the democratic process will be ill informed, which is dangerous and counterproductive. If citizens are adequately informed but cannot peacefully assemble, then they cannot discuss what they know and build a working consensus. The result would be informed individuals with no ability to form the critical mass necessary for change to occur. Finally, if citizens have the ability to be informed and to gather in electronic dialogue, but are deprived of the ability to convey their shared sentiments to their leaders, then participation is meaningless. The result would be the proverbial “all talk and no action.” It is the mutually reinforcing support of these three rights working together that provides the foundation for a reflective democracy and a learning society.

Currently, around the world, all three ingredients of a conscious democracy are woefully inadequate for meeting the challenge of the combined adversity trends. For the most part, the media treat their viewers as consumers who want to be entertained and distracted, not as citizens who seek to be informed and involved. In addition, we have scarcely begun to exercise the rights of mature citizenship by developing “Electronic Town Meetings” and other kinds of feedback forums where citizens can assemble for sustained dialogue and petition for change. Conscious democracies, with a healthy circulation of communication, are still in their infancy, waiting to be invented by citizen-entrepreneurs facing a time of momentous change.

If the public is to use the public airwaves for purposes of mature social reflection, then citizens will need to come together and assert this fundamental right. In the United States, communications law is clear in saying that television broadcasters must place serving the public interest above seeking profits.<sup>10</sup> The reason is that, unlike cable TV stations that don’t use the public airwaves to transmit their signal, TV broadcasters use the public’s airwaves and so, by law, their first priority must be “to serve the public interest.” However, because the public has not come together to express the kinds of programming would be in its collective interest, by default, we are left with programming that serves commerce instead of society and democracy. Therefore, true to the spirit of self-organizing systems, it will be important for the public to self-organize and make its collective voice heard in the new media environment.

A straightforward but extraordinary cultural shift could occur when the public begins using the public airwaves to communicate directly and publicly with broadcasters about their responsibility to serve the public interest. Local communities could launch televised “citizen feedback forums” that provide a democratic way for the public to express its collective interests on an ongoing basis. These feedback forums could be presented on broadcast television and draw upon the views of a representative sample of citizens whose feedback could hold broadcasters publicly accountable in the court of community opinion. These forums or Electronic Town Meetings could explore media issues such as gratuitous sex and violence, the stereotyping of minorities, women, and elderly, and many more. They could also raise questions vital to a sustainable future for the Earth: Is television programming and advertising creating a level of desire for consumption that cannot be sustained globally? Does the mirror of television accurately reflect the reality of our world? By trusting feedback from a random sample of citizens, a non-partisan, highly participatory, democratic process could become a vehicle for

articulating each community's voice. (For additional information, see the website: [www.ourmediavoice.org](http://www.ourmediavoice.org))

To build a sustainable future, it will be important to cultivate a culture of sustainability—a social and psychological mindset as citizens, communities and nations that reflects a new way of thinking about the Earth and a new valuing of future generations. Once established, innumerable actions will flow naturally from a cultural mindset of sustainability. It is primarily through our “social brain” (the television system and its interconnected computer and satellite networks) that this mindset will be established and cultivated. How we use our tools of mass communication is not “just another issue,” it is the basis for understanding and responding to all issues. With mass communication we can achieve the level of mass social reflection and cooperation needed to adapt our manner of living to the new global realities.

### **Mobilizing the Self-Guiding Capacities of Civilizations**

To respond to the global ecological crisis and other challenges successfully, we require the conscious and creative use of our capacity for social reflection. Nearly all of the environmental and social problems we face are human caused and are amenable to solution only through a dramatic increase in human communication. Although the future of the physical environment will depend directly upon the use we make of our electronic environment, this basic insight has yet to become established in our social consciousness. The electronic environment is generally assumed to be an immutable given that is impervious to change. There are countless books, studies and reports that describe the pollution and devastation of our physical environment but completely ignore the tightly linked pollution and devastation of our collective consciousness in today’s electronic environment. Strengthening our capacity for reflective social consciousness is not yet on our social agenda. We are still largely ignoring what may be the most pivotal tools we have for evolving our consciousness and consensus as a species.

Assuming the adage is true that “a problem recognized is a problem half solved,” then we can make a giant leap forward in evolving our civilizational consciousness by simply placing the quality and status of our shared consciousness on our social agenda. However, to do so, we need to stand back from unconscious immersion in our collective mindset and recognize our capacity to evolve our civilizational knowing faculty. Because we have never before had the ability to consciously evolve our collective consciousness, this is an unfamiliar territory for everyone—

citizens, political leaders, media managers, educators, and more. Research and communication that awakens public understanding to our ability to deliberately evolve our capacity for double wisdom may be one of the most decisive factors in determining whether we will be successful in building a sustainable and compassionate future for ourselves as a species.

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<sup>1</sup> The designation of modern humans as *Homo sapiens sapiens* is widespread; see, for example: Campbell, Joseph. 1988. *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol I: The Way of the Animal Powers, Part I: Mythologies of the Primitive Hunters and Gatherers*. New York: Harper and Row, Perennial Library, p. 22. Leakey, Richard. 1981. *The Making of Mankind*, New York: E.P. Dutton, p. 18. Maxwell, Mary. 1984. *Human Evolution: A Philosophical Anthropology*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 294. Pfeiffer, John. 1982. *The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion*, New York, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 13. In the popular press, see: *Newsweek* magazine, Nov. 10, 1986, p. 62 and Oct. 16, 1989, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Young, Arthur. 1976. *The Reflexive Universe*, San Francisco, CA: Merloyd Lawrence Books, p. xxi.

<sup>3</sup> John Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, Princeton, N.J: Bollingen Series, 1970, p. 275.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, von Franz, Marie-Louise. 1978. *Time: Rhythm and Repose*, New York: Thames and Hudson. Campbell, Joseph (ed.). 1957. *Man and Time*, New York, Princeton University Press: Bollingen Series. Fraser, J.T. (ed.). 1966. *The Voices of Time*, New York: George Braziller.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Bly (trans.). 1977. *The Kabir Book*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> The 1992 “Warning to Humanity” was sponsored by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 26 Church St., Cambridge, MA 02238

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Walsh, Roger and Deane Shapiro. 1983. *Beyond Health and Normality*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. Fellows, Ward. 1979. *Religions East and West*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Goldstein, Joseph. 1976. *The Experience of Insight*, Santa Cruz, CA: Unity Press. Welwood, John (ed.). 1992. *Ordinary Magic: Everyday Life as a Spiritual Path*, Boston, MA: Shambhala Press.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, New York: Viking Books. Kimball, Penn. 1994. *Downsizing the News*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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<sup>10</sup> The U.S. public has been given very strong communication rights from the earliest stages in the development of broadcasting law. In 1928, the U.S. Congress set down the basic requirement that continues today; namely that broadcasters must give first priority to serving the “public interest, convenience, and necessity.” The Communications act states that: “...broadcast stations are not given these great privileges by the United States Government for the primary benefit of advertisers. Such benefit as is derived by advertisers must be incidental and entirely secondary to the interest of the public. . . . The emphasis must be first and foremost on the interest, convenience, and necessity of the listening public, and not on the interest, convenience, or necessity of the individual broadcaster or advertiser.” This high standard of obligation to the public has remained in effect since the inception of broadcasting and is reflected, for example, in the 1969 U.S. Supreme Court decision that clarified the responsibilities of broadcasters. The court ruled that: "It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount." In addition: “It is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will ultimately prevail, rather than to countenance monopolization of that market, whether it be by the Government itself or a private licensee.” Finally, the expressed duty of the public to intervene in broadcasting issues was clearly stated in a major 1966 U.S. Court of Appeals decision: “Under our system, the interests of the public are dominant. . . . Hence, individual citizens and the communities they compose owe a duty to themselves and their peers to take an active interest in the scope and quality of television service which stations and networks provide...Nor need the public feel that in taking a hand in broadcasting they are unduly interfering in the private business affairs of others. On the contrary, their interest in television programming is direct and their responsibilities important. They are the owners of the channels of television—indeed, of all broadcasting.”