

Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing



A Report to the Fetzer Institute

by Duane Elgin

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*“The responsible rapprochement of
human consciousness with the
powers of the collective psyche, that is
the task of the future.”¹*

—Erich Neumann

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SUMMARY

This is a wide-ranging inquiry into collective consciousness and cultural healing. These are among the core themes of this report:

- **Collective crises and collective consciousness.** The condition of the world reflects the condition of our collective consciousness. Collective or group consciousness (also sometimes called the empathic field or collective knowing) provides a common context from which we can collectively recognize—and begin to heal—the psychic wounds that divide humanity (such as racial and gender oppression and injustice). Perhaps the most basic challenge that we face is to awaken our capacity for collective knowing and conscious action so that we can respond successfully to the immense social and ecological difficulties that confront us.
- **Science and collective consciousness.** The view of reality emerging from the frontiers of science seems congruent with the possibility of a functioning collective consciousness. The new cosmology in physics views our vast cosmos as an “unbroken wholeness in flowing movement.” Consciousness or an observing capacity seems a natural part of this new view of the universe.
- **Collective consciousness in everyday life.** A functioning collective consciousness is recognizable in many settings—in relationships, classrooms, groups and organizations, communities, nations, and, increasingly, in the overall human family. Although subtle and easy to overlook, collective consciousness is a pervasive and powerful force in our everyday lives.
- **The evolutionary inflection and species awakening.** Humanity is on a collision course with nature and will soon hit an evolutionary wall, probably within the next few decades. This does not have to be a crash. Instead, the human family could mobilize itself for an evolutionary bounce by releasing humanity’s collective energy for the common work of building a positive and nurturing future.
- **Enabling qualities of consciousness.** The evolution of consciousness is highly empowering for both individuals and civilizations. Perhaps the most important enabling quality of an empathic field is that it may allow people to recognize intuitively how to live in harmony with others and the world.
- **The communications revolution.** Within 10 to 20 years, the human family will have in place the communications infrastructure that could support a quantum increase in the collective intelligence—and the collective consciousness—of the species. The communications revolution is perhaps the most powerful force for enabling the awakening of collective consciousness at a planetary scale.
- **The mass media and the madness of materialism.** Civilizations can “go crazy.” Television’s flood of materialistic messages presents an enormous challenge to the awakening and evolution of collective consciousness. It seems possible that, by programming television for commercial success, we are programming civilizations for evolutionary stagnation and failure.
- **Collective consciousness and cultural healing.** With conscious cultural healing, the human family could work through the reservoir of unresolved pain that has accumulated through history. With healing, we could free up our collective psyche and place much more of our collective attention on building a sustainable and meaningful future. What a remarkable “project” it would be if humanity could learn to mobilize itself around the evolution of culture and consciousness instead of around enemies. We could then begin the common work of building a sustainable, satisfying, and soulful species-civilization.

Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing

by Duane Elgin

October 1997

*“In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual,
everything depends on the development of consciousness.”²*

—Carl Jung

1. Collective Crises and Collective Consciousness

Humanity is in a race between collective awakening and global catastrophe. From many different voices, we can hear echoes of this common theme.

Psychiatrist Roger Walsh writes that “the state of the world reflects our state of mind; our collective crises mirror our collective consciousness.”³ Vaclav Havel, president of Czechoslovakia, stated in a 1990 address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, “Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better . . . and the catastrophe towards which this world is headed—the ecological, social, demographic, or general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable.”⁴ Author Marianne Williamson describes the contemporary challenge this way: “There is within every person a veiled, oceanic awareness that we are all much bigger than the small-minded personas we normally display. The expansion into this larger self, for the individual and the species, is the meaning of human evolution and the dramatic challenge of this historic time.”⁵ Philosopher of

consciousness Ken Wilber offers a similar view of our world situation: “Gaia’s main problems are *not* industrialization, ozone depletion, overpopulation, or resource depletion. Gaia’s main problem is *the lack of mutual understanding and mutual agreement in the noosphere** about how to proceed with these problems.”⁶ Finally, this is how psychiatrist Stanislav Grof describes the challenge before us:

It is difficult to imagine that the crisis in the world can be solved with the same attitudes and strategies that were instrumental in its development in the first place. And since, in the last analysis, the current global crisis is the product and reflection of the stage of conscious evolution of humanity, a radical and lasting solution is inconceivable without inner transformation and a move toward global awareness.⁷

Perhaps the most basic challenge humanity faces is to awaken our capacity for collective knowing and conscious action so that we can respond successfully to the immense social and ecological difficulties that now

*The “noosphere” is the name Pierre Teilhard de Chardin gave to the global aspect of what I am calling “collective consciousness” and is described in Section 3.

confront us. If the human family can find a shared sense of reality and purpose—consciously held in common—then we have a strong foundation from which countless actions can flow.

Roger Walsh believes that global problems ranging from ecological destruction to overpopulation and resource depletion are actually symptomatic of wounds in our individual and collective minds.⁸ If this is so, and I believe it is, then humanity's evolutionary success depends not only on awakening our collective consciousness but also on promoting its health and healing. Acknowledging and healing the psychic wounds that divide us is as vital to our future as recognizing the ties that bind us.

Before proceeding, it is important to note the inherently subjective nature of this inquiry. Culture and consciousness are powerful, though largely invisible. These aspects of life are difficult to quantify and measure; they involve elusive qualities such as mutual understanding, personal authenticity, and empathy. To bring greater perspective and objectivity to this report, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 18 individuals from widely ranging backgrounds who bring vast experience and deep insight to this subject. Their names are listed at the end of this paper, and quotes from my interviews with them are included throughout this report.

2. Personal Consciousness and Collective Consciousness

It has often been said that where animals “know,” humans “know that we know.” In that subtle but profound extension of consciousness, a revolution has occurred that is transforming the Earth. Knowing that we know is the core capacity of the human species. It is our very name and scientific designation—*homo sapiens sapiens*. We are more than sapient or “wise,” we are sapient-sapient or “doubly wise.” We humans have the distinct capacity to know that we know.

The capacity for varying degrees of self-observation or double wisdom is not a trivial enhancement of evolutionary potential. It is an explosively powerful capacity that has given a supercharged boost to the

evolutionary process. Teilhard de Chardin describes this well in his book *The Phenomenon of Man*. When the first living creature consciously “perceived itself in its own mirror, the whole world took a pace forward.”⁹ “The being who is the object of his own reflection, in consequence of that very doubling back upon himself, becomes in a flash able to raise himself into a new sphere.”¹⁰ He explains that this is not merely “to know,” but to establish a center from which one can “know that one knows.”

Turning from the personal to the collective, most psychologists and social scientists agree that strong parallels exist between the psyche of the individual and that of society. Wilber articulates this in his book *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality*: “an individual human being and its sociocultural environment evidence the *same* basic structures of consciousness (correlation of micro and macro), and *further*, these same basic structures can be found in the evolution of the individual and the species. . . .”¹¹ The collective and the personal go hand in hand. They arise and develop together.

Author and professor Stanley Krippner has made the provocative suggestion that, instead of viewing individual consciousness as primary, or that which gives rise to group consciousness, we could view group consciousness as primary:

Another posture could be taken . . . namely that all consciousness is basically “group consciousness.” An individual’s awareness, attention, memory, etc. is socially constructed. Without group interaction, an individual would never achieve “identification” with anyone or anything. From this viewpoint, “group consciousness” is the fundamental matrix from which “individual consciousness” emerges.¹²

When a group “knows that it knows,” it has the ability to be self-observing and to take responsibility for its actions. The ability to collectively observe or witness our own knowing—as a tribe, nation, or species—represents a powerful evolutionary advance, because it enables us to take charge of our behavior with a new level of clarity and intentionality. When a nation, for example, can see itself in the mirror of reflective knowing, it becomes more accountable to itself and can take charge of its future. For example, when the mass media awakened U.S. citizens to the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the

environmental movement, it made the reality of these movements undeniably apparent to the larger society. Being unable to ignore the reality of these powerful movements, the American people began to awaken together to issues of racial injustice, gender discrimination, and ecological destruction.

Despite the power of collective consciousness in human affairs, little attention has been given to this idea historically. The overwhelming emphasis has been on the development of personal consciousness. There are understandable reasons for this overemphasis on the personal aspects of awakening. In the East, spiritual traditions that have developed over the past several thousand years have existed in an agrarian cultural context, where life—like the seasons—is cyclical, and nothing fundamentally changes. Little thought was given to awakening the larger culture, which was assumed to be unchanging. Alan Watts explains this phenomenon in describing the Zen perspective on personal and social awakening:

In the East the effectiveness of a religion is judged by its success in producing a comparatively small number of thoroughly enlightened men, for it is not believed possible fundamentally to alter the lives of vast numbers of people within the span of a thousand years or so. Great social changes are not expected; the religions of the East are more concerned with the enlightenment of some few individuals than of society as a whole.¹³

The West had a different reason for overlooking the idea of collective consciousness. We Westerners have equated our existence with our physical body and brain, and assumed that we are existentially separate from one another—that there is an unbridgeable gulf between us as physical beings. By defining reality in this way, we have cut ourselves off from the idea and the experience of partaking in a deeper field of consciousness. Thus, both Eastern and Western traditions have historically ignored the idea of collective consciousness. By focusing primarily on the individual, East and West have neglected the integral role that the awakening of the collective plays in both personal and cultural evolution.

As the worldviews of both East and West are being transformed, the historical over-emphasis on individual awakening seems to be giving way to a more balanced

view that includes the evolution of cultural consciousness. The East, caught up in the global economic revolution, is experiencing rapid and profound social and cultural changes. The West is experiencing equally dramatic changes in its view of reality as science reveals that underlying the seeming separation within the material world there exists a deep and profound unity. The world is thus awakening to the idea of collective consciousness (see the report that I authored, *Global Consciousness Change: Indicators of an Emerging Paradigm*, May 1997).¹⁴

3. The Historical Awakening of Collective Consciousness

Before Carl Jung popularized the idea of a collective unconscious, Ralph Waldo Emerson was writing in the late 1800s about the experience of a transcendent consciousness that could arise in groups:

In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; it is God. And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company becomes aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought. . . . All are conscious of attaining to a higher self-possession. It shines for all.¹⁵

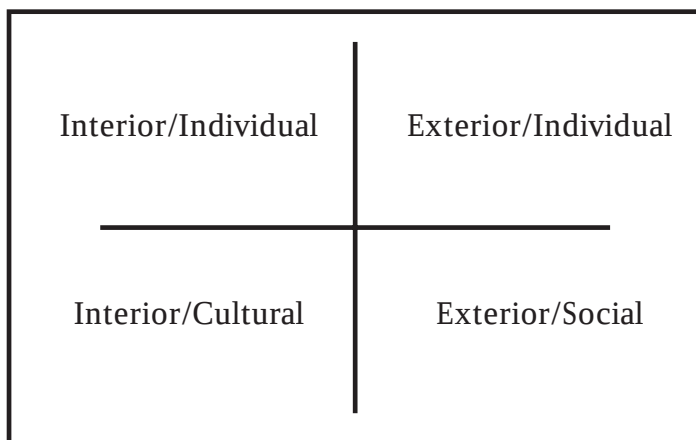
Jung developed the idea that the collective unconscious includes the historical experience of the entire human race. In his view, deep archetypal images carry the memory of our ancestral experience. Jung felt that the collective unconscious was more than a psychic repository of our evolutionary experiences; it also contained a deep intelligence and wisdom that could help guide us in a healthy direction. The symbols and images that emerge from the collective unconscious not only carry the experience of the past, but can also draw out our potentials for transcendence in the future.

A half-century later, the idea of collective consciousness emerged forcefully in the work of the Catholic priest and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote about the awakening of a collective transpersonal field that he termed the “noosphere.” The noosphere can be thought of as the planetary mind-field; it is the product of humanity’s entire evolutionary experience and expression. This mind-field or collective consciousness is enriched as we develop, whether the development is in language, art, music, technologies, cities, or any other area of endeavor. In his book *The Future of Man*, Teilhard de Chardin describes the noosphere this way:

In the passage of time a state of collective human consciousness has been progressively evolved which is inherited by each succeeding generation of conscious individuals, and to which each generation adds something. Sustained, certainly, by the individual person, but at the same time embracing and shaping the successive multitude of individuals, a sort of generalised human superpersonality is visibly in the process of formation on the earth.¹⁶

Ken Wilber’s monumental works represent another major step in articulating both the personal and the collective dimensions of an evolving human consciousness. Wilber developed a four-quadrant description of the domains of consciousness, which places culture and society in two of the four quadrants:

Figure 1: Wilber’s Domains of Consciousness



Wilber synthesized an enormous body of literature relevant to the study of consciousness. He is forceful in concluding that consciousness extends beyond the physical organism and is to be discovered in the extended field that permeates and sustains culture and society:

Thus, the first step toward a genuine theory of consciousness is the realization that consciousness is not located in the organism. Rather, consciousness is a four-quadrant affair [intentional, behavioral, cultural, and social], and it exists, if it exists at all, distributed across all four quadrants, anchored equally in each.¹⁷

Physician Larry Dossey writes that “we have for so long defined ourselves as separate personalities that we have fallen into the hypnotic spell of believing that separation, not unity, is the underlying reality.”¹⁸ If unity rather than separation is fundamental, then feelings of connection with others are “nothing special.” We do not have to establish or invent these connections, says Dossey, because they already exist.

The awakening of collective consciousness is apparent in popular culture as well as in scholarly work. The modern media have brought themes of collective experience and shared knowing into popular awareness. For many of today’s youth, the experience of shared consciousness and connection is an accepted reality. “Raves” are a vivid example of the emerging culture of group consciousness. At a rave, a large group dances continuously into the late night hours in search of an ecstatic, collective experience. This is how author Douglas Rushkoff describes a rave in an article in the *San Francisco Examiner*:

It is the closest thing to a religious experience that I have ever had. There is a magic moment that can happen at a rave—at 2 or 3 in the morning, when everyone is dancing, you experience a feeling of collective organism, and I think people who have had that experience see the world differently afterward. They don’t see the world made up of individuals vying for power, but rather, they see it as one throbbing thing.¹⁹

I do not intend to equate the experience of a rave with the mature awakening of reflective consciousness

by a community or group. My point is that the idea and experience of collective consciousness seem to be emerging in the popular culture as well as in professional settings. Before exploring examples of collective consciousness in everyday life, let us consider the scientific foundations for this subtle human potential.

4. The Scientific Basis for Collective Consciousness

Until recently, there has been no scientific foundation for explaining the existence of an empathic field of collective knowing. From a traditional scientific mindset, the very idea of collective consciousness is farfetched. If consciousness is synonymous with the subtle bio-electrical activity in the gray matter of the brain, then how can consciousness possibly connect with anything beyond the body? How could brain waves move through lifeless, empty space to connect in a meaningful way with the world beyond? When viewed this way, the idea of a collective or group consciousness seems impossible, if not ridiculous. During this century, however, the Western scientific view of the nature of the universe has changed dramatically. With breakthroughs in cosmology has come a new openness to consider the nature and role of consciousness, both personal and collective.

Less than a hundred years ago, scientists thought that the universe was a static, unchanging system no larger than our galaxy. Today, we know that the universe is expanding rapidly and contains at least 50 billion galaxies, each with a 100 billion or more stars. In recent decades, scientists have made many stunning discoveries that have added to the scope and depth of the awesome mystery that is our universe. The pioneering physicist Neils Bohr stated that “anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it.” Even scientists are stunned by the world they are discovering.

Let us look at just a few of those discoveries. Whereas we once viewed space as empty, the new physics asserts that, even in a complete vacuum, there remain immense levels of background energy (called zero-point energy).²⁰ Another dramatic departure from the

traditional view is that the cosmos is now seen as an integrated system that, in some mysterious way, is profoundly unified. Indeed, one of the most stunning insights from modern science has been the discovery of “nonlocality,” which shows that objects that seem to be separate are really connected in fundamental ways that transcend the limitations of ordinary space and time.²¹ Still another astounding discovery is that immense levels of energy flow through the universe and continuously regenerate it. As physicist Brian Swimme explains, “The universe emerges out of an all-nourishing abyss not only 15 billion years ago but in every moment.”²² Everything in the cosmos is a flowing movement that co-arises along with everything else, moment-by-moment, in a process of continuous regeneration.

These radically altered views of the universe weave together into a new scientific vision. Physicist Will Keepin gave a succinct glimpse of that vision in my interview with him: “I share David Bohm’s view of the cosmos as a single unbroken wholeness in flowing movement, which continually recreates itself and has a holographic structure so that each part of the flow contains the entire flow.” If the cosmos is a unified, flowing system, we must be part of that flowing unity, each of us holographically containing the entire flow. This represents a dramatic shift in our perception of ourselves and the nature and depth of our interconnection with the universe. This view also makes it easier to see the possibility that collective consciousness is part of the connective tissue of the cosmos.

Biologist Rupert Sheldrake has expanded on the view of the universe as a resonant, vibrating field. His ideas about fields of “morphic resonance” may shed light on our understanding of collective consciousness—as well as on Jungian views on the collective unconscious. Sheldrake proposes that subtle fields provide a resonant infrastructure within which material reality becomes manifest.²³ This theory suggests that the field of morphic resonance for humans contains not only the dynamic blueprints of our physical bodies, but also of our psychic natures—our collective thinking, feeling, and sensing.

If Sheldrake is correct, then consciousness may be a field phenomenon that weaves all life into a single fabric. Indeed, this field of consciousness seems to extend down to the very building blocks of biology—to the level of molecular ecosystems consisting of a few

proteins. Even at this level, there is the capacity for self-replication and complex interactions that are the signature of living systems. As one of the researchers of this recent discovery stated, “We were surprised that such simple proteins can act as if they had a mind of their own.”²⁴ Are proteins mobilizing a reflective or observing capacity that permeates the universe and using it to the degree that they are able?

Another example of collective consciousness at a primitive level comes from the remarkable behavior of a forest slime mold in search of a new feeding area. For most of its life, slime mold exists as a single-cell amoeba; however, when it needs food, it can transform itself into a much larger entity with new capacities. Individual amoebas send out signals to nearby cells until thousands collect together. Eventually, they reach a critical mass and, without the aid of any apparent leader, organize themselves into an organism that can move across the forest floor. Upon reaching a better feeding area, they release spores from which new individual amoebas are formed.²⁵ Under conditions of great stress, forest slime molds seem to be able to mobilize a capacity for collective consciousness so as to insure their own survival.

If some form of collective consciousness is operating at the level of molecular clusters and single cells, we should not be surprised to find this capacity operating in humans. One of the indications that consciousness does operate in humans is our capacity for extra-sensory or non-physical knowing. The scientific investigation of psychic abilities has contributed greatly to our understanding of the nature and ecology of consciousness. Dean Radin, director of the Consciousness Research Laboratory at the University of Nevada, did an exhaustive meta-analysis of parapsychological or psi research involving more than 800 studies and 60 investigators over nearly three decades. Based on this research, he concludes that consciousness includes both “receiving” and “sending” potentials:

- **Receiving**—He found evidence of receiving potentials from experiments concerned with perception at a distance, which is sometimes called “remote viewing.” This is the ability to obtain meaningful information about a remote person or location by non-physical means. Radin found that this ability has “been repeatedly observed by dozens of investigators using different methods So, the

evidence demonstrates that psi perception operates between minds and through space.”²⁶

- **Sending**—Radin found evidence of the sending potentials of consciousness from experiments dealing with mind-matter interactions. These experiments tested the ability of an individual to influence physical systems through their conscious intention. He concludes that “after sixty years of experiments . . . researchers have produced persuasive, consistent, replicated evidence that mental intention is associated with the behavior of physical systems.”²⁷

Based on this mountain of evidence, Radin asks whether “the world itself has something like a “global mind?” “Recent experiments,” he says, “suggest that the answer may be yes.”²⁸ He believes that these studies have profound implications for understanding social order and disorder. “They suggest that a previously unsuspected cause of global violence and aggression may literally be the chaotic, malevolent thoughts of large numbers of people around the world.”²⁹

As these examples suggest, scientists from a wide range of disciplines are giving credence to the notion that collective consciousness exists. It is not surprising that an appreciation of the elusive mystery of consciousness would emerge now when our understanding of the nature of the universe has changed dramatically in the last few decades. The more we learn about the nature of the universe, the more we deepen our appreciation for its deep design intelligence—and the more plausible it seems that some form of infusing consciousness is at work. Evolutionary theorist Ervin Laszlo eloquently describes how, in the emerging scientific view, our minds connect with the universe: “The dance of our mind with the quantum vacuum links us with other minds around us, as well as with the biosphere of the planet and the cosmos that lies beyond it. It ‘opens’ our mind to society, to nature, and to the universe.”³⁰

5. Collective Consciousness in Everyday Life

Scientific research suggests that collective consciousness is a fact of our life experience. If this is so, if an empathic field or group consciousness is an ordinary but largely overlooked aspect of reality, then it should be identifiable in a number of settings. My initial inquiry suggests that collective consciousness is recognizable in many settings—in relationships, classrooms, groups and organizations, communities, nations, and the human family as a whole.

- **Couples**—Relationships provide a practice field on which we can develop the skills of being conscious with one another. John Welwood is a clinical psychotherapist whose work has long recognized the subtle, transpersonal connections of energy and feeling that uniquely characterize each couple's relationship. He writes that "every person we know has a somewhat distinct 'feeling tone' that interacts with our own subtle energy field in a unique way, generating attraction, interest, aversion, or indifference."³¹ He goes on to describe how "two lovers' physical bodies are like musical instruments—they are the media through which the lovers' different life energies weave a natural harmony and counterpoint." Gregory Kramer and Terri O'Fallon have developed a process they call "insight dialogue," which they describe as combining meditation with interpersonal communication.³²

- **Classrooms**—A teacher for 20 years, professor of religious studies Christopher Bache writes eloquently about his experience of collective consciousness in the classroom. He describes the palpable "learning fields" that sometimes emerge with a class of capable and motivated students. As the instructor focuses the energy of the class, the shared interest and engagement of the students brings more energy into the class field. As instructor and class mutually reinforce one another, the intensity of collective knowing can increase enormously. He says:

When all goes well, there is a crystalline quality to what emerges that every person in the room can feel. Like a great symphony that lifts the soul, what arises comes from depths that cannot be measured and is aimed by an invisible hand that finds its mark. What could not be accomplished

separately becomes available to those who work together, and the wholeness that surfaces in these moments is characterized by a luminescent transparency. This transparency is contagious and its gifts precious. Each person draws from it gems unique to their situation. The most precious gift of all, however, is the transparency itself, as it is a token of the true nature of mind.³³

When the transparent experience of shared learning happens, Bache writes "knowledge is not flowing down from a solitary source but arising from within the living presence of the class mind."³⁴

- **Groups and Organizations**—Robert Kenny has served in a number of human resource management positions and lived in an intentional community for 16 years. Having explored the idea and experience of group consciousness in both professional and personal contexts, he explains it in this way:

Group consciousness may be defined as a state of transpersonal awareness, in which personal identification expands beyond the ego to the group and its task. As a consequence, group members feel they are subjectively united, perceive themselves as mutually interdependent parts of a larger whole, and develop an authentic concern for the well-being of group members and the productive functioning of the group.³⁵

Here is Kenny's description of how collective consciousness fosters group synergy:

In such situations, group tasks are performed fluidly, efficiently, cooperatively and in coordination, with minimal communication. An intuitive connection (a "sixth sense"), empathy and an ability to anticipate the actions, thoughts, or words of other group members seem to develop. As a result, teammates react as a unit rather than as an aggregate of individuals.³⁶

He gives the following as examples of groups in which synergy naturally emerges from group consciousness: teams engaged in risky activities requiring a high degree of physical coordination; semi-autonomous, high-performance teams in organizational settings; organizations with a high degree of

commitment to a mission; highly skilled sports teams, orchestras or jazz ensembles; and intentional communities with a clear sense of spiritual purpose and with actively engaged members.

Brian Muldoon has worked in mediation and conflict resolution for many years and has observed what promotes conflict or synergy in groups. He describes the experience of a group flowing together in its work as “confluence,” which he says “emerges when a group learns how to think collectively—to be guided, not by individual ego or even by explicit agreement—but by what is called *group mind*. It occurs when a constellation of individuals crystallizes into a whole.”³⁷ The group mind can emerge, says Muldoon, when people engaged in a common project let go of their personal frame of reference and begin to think on behalf of the whole (which, he says, is not so different from being in love). Through such whole-systems thinking, individuals are able to actualize their own potentials. In order to release this transpersonal power, Muldoon says, “One must become transparent so that the power can flow through the channels of the whole without becoming diverted to private aggrandizement.”³⁸

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs are consultants in organizational communication and transformation, who work with senior business leaders on initiatives for large-scale change. In their experience, successful, large-scale efforts most often grow out of the organizational culture itself, through countless conversations that build a foundation of interpersonal trust and shared vision. They suggest that “inquiry and conversations are *already* the natural transpersonal processes by which people create together a new ‘common sense’ (the sense they make of their situation).”³⁹ Brown and Isaacs give a fascinating description of the field properties and potentials of collective consciousness:

When the transpersonal process is really alive, it tends to jump across traditional boundaries of thinking into the collective “field” of multiple emergent possibilities rather than driving toward a pre-determined vision. At some point a collective field is energized in a way that seems to nurture multiple possibilities in multiple places in multiple forms simultaneously. When this happens, emergent possibility becomes a

primary force for building collective intelligence and generative action.⁴⁰

Brown and Isaacs also observe that, when working from the transpersonal-collective domain, personal transformation comes, through the focus not on the individual but, paradoxically, on that which is larger than the self—a bigger idea, question, or belief, a larger collective yearning, hope, or image of possibility.⁴¹

- **Communities**—Another expression of collective consciousness in everyday life is research that explores the possibility that the rate of violent crime in a community can be reduced simply by having a large group of meditators bring their peaceful and calming resonance into the collective consciousness of the community. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of transcendental meditation, maintains that the collective atmosphere of consciousness influences the thinking and behavior of individuals. In a similar vein, transcendental meditation researcher, David Orme-Johnson contends that crime, drug abuse, and other social ills are not simply problems that arise within individuals, but are symptoms of stress in the collective consciousness of society.⁴² To test this hypothesis, a group of approximately 4,000 practitioners of transcendental meditation assembled in Washington, D.C. from June 7 to July 30, 1993. Their purpose was to demonstrate that the coherence and harmony produced by a large group of meditators would infuse the collective consciousness of the surrounding community and would measurably reduce violent



Earth as seen from the moon.

crimes. Although the results are controversial given the complexity and number of variables involved, there was a statistically significant drop in violent crimes during this period.⁴³

- **Nations**—The importance of the collective mood and atmosphere of a nation has long been appreciated by leaders. President Abraham Lincoln said, “With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.” In modern examples of collective consciousness at the national level, the mass media—particularly television—seems to play a central role. All three examples are from the U.S. experience, primarily in the 1960s and ‘70s. First, television brought the Vietnam war into America’s living rooms and gradually awakened the collective consciousness—and aroused the conscience—of the nation. It also brought the non-violent marches of the civil rights movement into America’s collective consciousness and helped to awaken broad recognition of racial oppression. Finally, in airing the voices and views of women calling for liberation, the mass media helped to catalyze the women’s movement and its explicit call for consciousness raising. I believe that examples like these will become more and more common as the reach and diversity of the global media continue to grow.

- **Species**—The human family experienced a few hours of collective, self-observation and shared recognition when much of the world paused in 1969 to watch the first humans walk on the moon. The power of this event was not only in the triumph of seeing humans on the moon, but also in the awareness that several billion people all around the Earth were simultaneously watching the telecast. Moments of global, collective knowing may have also occurred during recent worldwide telecasts of the Olympics and of events such as the Live Aid rock concert that raised millions of dollars for famine relief in Africa.

As these diverse examples indicate, collective consciousness is not an esoteric potential removed from daily life. It is a natural aspect of existence that presents itself in practical ways throughout life—in relationships, classrooms, organizations, communities, nations, and in humanity as a whole. Although subtle and easy to overlook, collective consciousness is already a pervasive and powerful force in our everyday lives.

6. Stages in the Evolution of Collective Consciousness

Where is the human family in the process of maturation? Is there a logical progression in the unfolding of collective consciousness that parallels the individual’s process of awakening? I think there is. In this section, I present a stages-of-growth model to describe the unfolding of collective consciousness. I recognize that any model of human evolution based on stages of development can give the impression that evolution is linear—a straight-line march from one stage to the next in a smooth and direct flow. Of course, it is not. I also recognize this is only one of many ways of looking at the development of consciousness. Human evolution is a messy process that seldom conforms to orderly boxes and clear boundaries. The path we take through the various stages I describe will surely be filled with many surprises, accidents, and confusing twists and turns that will make it uniquely human and characteristically unpredictable. Finally, I do not assume that there is a predetermined future for human evolution. The rise and fall of more than 20 major civilizations throughout history make it clear how vulnerable humanity is to regress as well as progress. With these caveats in mind, I do think there is a general direction to evolution that leads toward our initial maturity as a self-reflective and self-organizing planetary civilization.

The highly simplified model that I present here is derived from a process view of reality and a “sacred geometry” that I describe at length in my book *Awakening Earth*. This model is highly congruent with the stages of human development described by Western psychology and Eastern meditative traditions. Specifically, this description draws from the Western psychology of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi;⁴⁴ the spectrum psychology of Ken Wilber;⁴⁵ the philosophy and history of human consciousness of Jean Gebser;⁴⁶ the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow;⁴⁷ the Hindu philosophy and meditative insights of Sri Aurobindo;⁴⁸ the Christian tradition, and a range of Buddhist traditions.⁴⁹ (See Appendix I of *Awakening Earth*).

Simply described, the model, which is summarized in Figure 2 below, assumes there are two major phases in the development of collective consciousness. In the first phase, humanity is largely operating on automatic;

Figure 2: Stages in the Evolution of Collective Consciousness:

Phase I—Domain of the Collective Unconscious:

Stage 1: Hunter-gatherer era—Collective-**sensing** consciousness

Stage 2: Agrarian era—Collective-**feeling** consciousness

Stage 3: Industrial era—Collective-**thinking** consciousness

Phase II—Domain of Collective Consciousness:

Stage 4: Communications era—Collective-**reflective** consciousness

Stage 5: Restoration era—Collective-**oceanic** consciousness

Stage 6: Surpassing era—Collective-**flow** consciousness

there is no appreciable degree of conscious reflection or self-observation by the cultural body regarding its capacity to know its own mind. This is a phase of collective unconsciousness about consciousness. In the second phase, humanity consciously awakens to its capacity for reflective consciousness and begins to observe itself deliberately and to cultivate its field of collective knowing. I assume that each of these two major phases contains three stages.

Before proceeding, I need to say more about the nature of collective consciousness, which can also be called mindfulness or knowing that we know. Reflectivity is the capacity for self-observation. Whether it is personal or collective, I assume that reflective consciousness represents a richly multi-faceted observing capacity that requires a series of stages or learning environments to draw out the full range of its potentials. With each new stage, the focus of attention shifts to a progressively larger aspect of the “self.” For instance, some 35,000 years ago, in the hunter-gatherer era, the observing ability of the awakening human was extremely limited. At that stage, humanity focused primarily on the bare fact of physical existence in the here and now. In a slow process over roughly 25,000 years, humanity moved into the agrarian era and began to expand conscious attention to include an emotional life of growing richness and depth. It is this capacity to observe and connect with the emotional dimensions of life that is so fundamental to the agrarian era. After nearly 10,000 years of immersion in the perceptual mindset of the agrarian era, human societies began to

reflect upon and consciously develop the intellectual life that is so basic to the scientific-industrial era. Now, 300 years or so later, as we enter the communications era, humanity is making another quantum leap in collective consciousness as our observing or knowing capacity is being turned back upon itself. We are becoming conscious of consciousness as a species. At each stage, a different set of observing or reflective potentials is being awakened, developed and integrated.

Phase I: Domain of the Collective Unconscious

In the first three stages, I assume that although some individuals may be intensely awake and aware, the majority of humanity is “running on automatic.” The collective (whether a family, tribe, nation, or species) is not decisively conscious of consciousness. Instead, the collective knowing capacity is focused on, and largely embedded within, the flow of sensation, feelings, and thoughts. Because consciousness does not reflect upon itself, it remains largely unrecognized during this phase. These three stages characterize human history up to the present day. Next to the name of each stage I have indicated the historical era to which it corresponds.

• **Stage 1: Collective-Sensing Consciousness—Hunter-Gatherer Era.** Although the glowing ember of consciousness was passed by our ancestors along for several million years, according to the archaeological record, it did not emerge as a distinct flame of self-observation and reflective

knowing until roughly 35,000 years ago. At this time, the development of culture and consciousness—which had been glacially slow—achieved a critical mass, and 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 dramatic changes in toolmaking, painting, carvings, and evidence of expanding social and trading networks. However, we should not confuse the capacity for fleeting self-recognition that emerged at this time with the stabilized “I-sense” that emerges later with movement through a series of additional, challenging stages. 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. I assume that, in this stage, the capacity for self-observation is not sufficiently developed to be able to reflect for long on much more than the simple reality of bodily existence and physical sensations. In this stage, life is so immediate that it is not contemplated with reflective detachment. Erich Neumann writes in *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, that the weaker the consciousness of a “primitive” person, the more things “just happen.”⁵⁰ Much of the time, people are operating on automatic—moving through the repetition and routine of a simple, nomadic life, with no distinct sense of self. Individuals see themselves as inseparable from the empathic field of their family and tribal group. Collective-sensing consciousness is directly felt, implicit, and tacit. I assume that this shared context of meaning was understood and accepted as an ever present, unspoken reality. I also assume that, at this stage, language was not developed sufficiently to allow the cognitive representation of consciousness.

• **Stage 2: Collective-Feeling Consciousness—Agrarian Era.** This stage is most readily associated with life in an agrarian society. Collective-feeling consciousness is a way of describing the perceptual paradigm that emerged with farming life roughly 10,000 years ago and persisted as the dominant mode of cultural organization into the twentieth century. During this time, people were primarily conscious of the experience of living in a cyclical world—the seasons go round and round, but the world remains essentially the same. In the cyclical mindset of an agrarian society, meaning is found through belonging to an extended social group. No

longer are blood and tribal ties the primary cultural glue. In an increasingly differentiated society, it is the power of fellowship, emotional bonds, social status, and shared symbols of meaning that provide the connective tissue. Collective consciousness is experienced as a feeling of affiliation that is shared with others who have certain commonalities—such as living in a similar geographic region, being of the same ethnic origins, and having a common religion. In a largely preliterate and prerational society, feeling-based communications are the dominant currency of culture. Despite its greater depth and cultural complexity, collective consciousness in the agrarian culture tends to be severely limited by rigid customs, irrational superstitions, social immobility, widespread illiteracy, and the authoritarian character of the church and state. Although all of the basic arts of civilization (such as writing, organized government, massive architecture, mathematics, and the division of labor), arose during this perceptual stage, most people lived as impoverished peasants with no expectation of material change or progress.

• **Stage 3: Collective-Thinking Consciousness—Industrial Era.** In this stage, the power of the intellect reveals that humanity can move beyond the circular nature of an agricultural life and into a new era of invention and creativity. If this were to be represented symbolically, the circle of existence would be drawn out into an open spiral for the foreseeable future. A spiral evokes the possibility of material “progression” or progress. As cultures awoken to the experienced possibility of material progress, there is an flowering of economic growth, and societies are transformed from agricultural to industrial. As the scientific-industrial society places a premium on rationality and the intellect, consciousness is focused primarily on the capacity of the intellect to reshape and transform the material world. Consciousness is viewed as a by-product of brain activity and is thought to reside within the body exclusively. Given that we identify almost exclusively with the intellect, the individual feels unique—and uniquely alone. Collective consciousness is either dismissed or viewed as shared agreement instead of shared experience. We assume that only through the intellect can we communicate, develop understandings, and reach agreements—and thereby bridge the otherwise impassible distance between ourselves and others. Because individual identity is implicitly equated

with the thinking process, collective-thinking consciousness is a shared thought thinking about itself—a self-referencing loop in materialistic reality.

Phase II: Domain of Collective Consciousness

The three stages of Phase I create a relatively stable base from which human beings can move into the transpersonal realms of collective knowing. In the next three stages, the collective (whether a family, a nation, or the species) becomes progressively more conscious of consciousness. This is a subtle though decisive transition as an observing consciousness is now becoming a co-equal partner in evolution. As a species, we are becoming more conscious, deliberate, and intentional in our actions. As one example of this, a range of surveys and indicators show that, in recent decades, humanity has begun to wake up to the global ecological crisis and to global responsibilities.⁵¹ The following are the three stages in this next phase of maturation:

• **Stage 4: Collective-Reflective Consciousness—Communications Era.** I associate this stage with the communications revolution and with the ability of humanity to observe ourselves as a conscious species. No longer operating largely on automatic, either as individuals or groups, we 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 with greater objectivity. As well, the collective-transpersonal context is spacious enough to enable the human family to come together while honoring our differences. From this perspective, all creatures share in a common ground of consciousness that transcends differences of gender, race, wealth, religion, politics, and even species. Because consciousness can extend meaningfully beyond the body, we can experience an authentic, empathic connection with other people, places, and situations. Though subtle, collective-reflective consciousness seems already commonplace in such settings as dialogue groups, Quaker meetings, and conversations characterized by respectful, deep listening. I assume the primary challenge in this stage is for human beings to reach reconciliation around a shared vision of a sustainable future for the Earth and our species.

• **Stage 5: Collective-Oceanic Consciousness—Restoration Era.** In this stage, consciousness itself becomes the object of consciousness. As consciousness seeks to know its origins, we awaken to the infinite ocean of life-energy that sustains and infuses all that exists. When ordinary knowing knows itself by relaxing into itself, then knowing becomes self-appreciative. As knowingness or consciousness is infinite in its potential reach, we naturally experience it as oceanic or boundless. Our sense of identity moves beyond the polarity of observer and observed from the previous stage and into the experience of unbounded Beingness. The poet Mikhail Nimay writes beautifully of this experience:

So think as if your every thought were to be
etched in fire upon the sky for all and
everything to see. For so, in truth, it is.
So speak as if the world entire were but a
single ear intent on hearing what you say.
And so, in truth, it is.⁵²

Touching into this experience even momentarily can awaken feelings of boundless connection and great compassion. In this new cultural atmosphere, many people may feel they are among friends no matter where they are in the world. During the agrarian era, nearly universal literacy seemed almost impossible, yet it became the norm in the industrial era. In the same way, a literacy of compassionate-consciousness may seem almost unimaginable today, but could become the norm within a few generations. In this stage, humanity could move beyond reconciliation to actually building a sustainable future for ourselves and the Earth. The restoration and renewal of the biosphere could become a central project and could promote a deep sense of community and bonding. A global culture of kindness could foster world projects to transform massive cities into decentralized eco-villages and micro-communities; global celebrations and concerts; and world games as an alternative to warfare.

• **Stage 6: Collective-Flow Consciousness—Surpassing Era.** I associate this stage with the liberation of humanity's creativity. In this stage, oceanic consciousness returns to its center, and becomes a force for focused, creative expression in the world. Focused into action, people delight in becoming more fully engaged participants in the

world. Humanity moves beyond maintaining itself to surpassing itself. We learn how to liberate our inventiveness without tearing ourselves apart as a species-civilization. With flow consciousness, we experience existence as fresh, alive, and arising anew at each moment. The observer no longer stands apart from any aspect of reality, but participates fully. T.S. Eliot describes this process perfectly:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁵³

We return consciously to the center of our ordinary lives, and bring the power of our wakefulness to our creative expression. 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, a core challenge is to learn the skills of maintaining the dynamic stability of a self-organizing planetary civilization.

I believe that all these stages are essential for achieving a sustainable, compassionate, and creative global civilization. When we have fulfilled and integrated the potentials of all six stages, humanity will have become a consciously self-organizing species-civilization 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. As the human family moves through these six stages, we could develop a culture that values wisdom as much as today's industrial culture values material consumption. In such a wisdom-culture, there would be a dynamic balance maintained between planetary unity and individual creativity.

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

This model of humanity's stages of growth should not be interpreted to mean that one stage in the evolution of consciousness is better than another. The mindset of industrial society is not better than that of the agrarian era, just as an adult is not better than a toddler or adolescent. An adult is simply bigger and older, and generally has more depth and a broader scope of experience. In a similar way, each stage is an invaluable building block in the process of developing our overall human character and experience. Each stage is a vital stepping stone on the path toward a global civilization.

Although no stage is better than another, each one is different—and has its limitations. For example, an agrarian mindset is simply not equal to the challenge of organizing a global civilization with citizens from diverse cultures living in massive cities and using industrial technologies. In my view, none of the first three stages (hunter-gatherer, agrarian, and industrial) has a mindset and form of social organization adequate to provide a framework for the future.

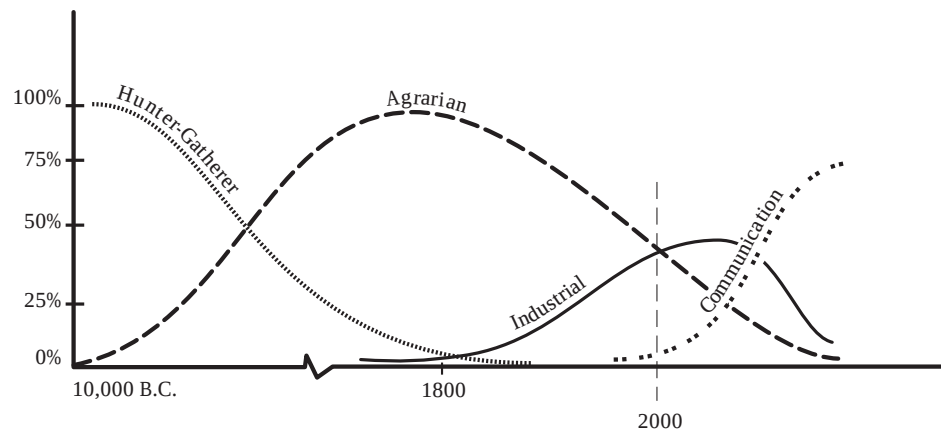
Because humans have become such decisive agents in the Earth's evolution, the capacity for consciously observing or witnessing our behavior as a species has become an essential skill for us to learn; without that, we cannot take responsibility for creating our future. Never before has the entire human family been challenged to become conscious of consciousness at the level of entire civilizations. We are now involved in a more challenging process than evolution—we are now involved in the "co-evolution" of culture and consciousness.

7. The Evolutionary Inflection and Species-Awakening

Using the six stage model as a guide, where is humanity along the evolutionary journey of awakening? In my view, the collective consciousness of the human family seems to be spread across four different stages—or perceptual paradigms—as we approach the twenty-first century:

•**Hunter-Gatherer Stage: Collective-Sensing Consciousness**—Currently, hunter-gatherers account for less than a fraction of one percent of all people on the Earth.

Figure 3: Percentage of World Population by Perceptual Paradigm



• **Agrarian Stage: Collective-Feeling Consciousness**—Roughly half of the world’s people live in agrarian cultures. This fraction is declining rapidly with the spread of industrialization and urbanization.

• **Industrial Stage: Collective-Thinking Consciousness**—Urban-industrial cultures with a materialistic view of life are developing swiftly around the planet. By the year 2000, a majority of the world’s population will live in urban-industrial settings, many in impoverished slums. As people leave the countryside for an uncertain future in the city, they leave agrarian culture and are challenged to survive in a setting that requires an entirely different way of viewing themselves in the world.

• **Communications Stage: Collective-Reflective Consciousness**—A majority of the world’s population already has access to television and, for better or worse, is being dramatically influenced by the mind-set of the commercial media and the communications revolution. Even those who are agrarians or industrialists in their daily work nonetheless orient themselves increasingly within the perceptual framework created by the pervasive communications culture. As the reach and power of the computer revolution continues to grow, it will broaden and deepen the culture and consciousness of the communications era.

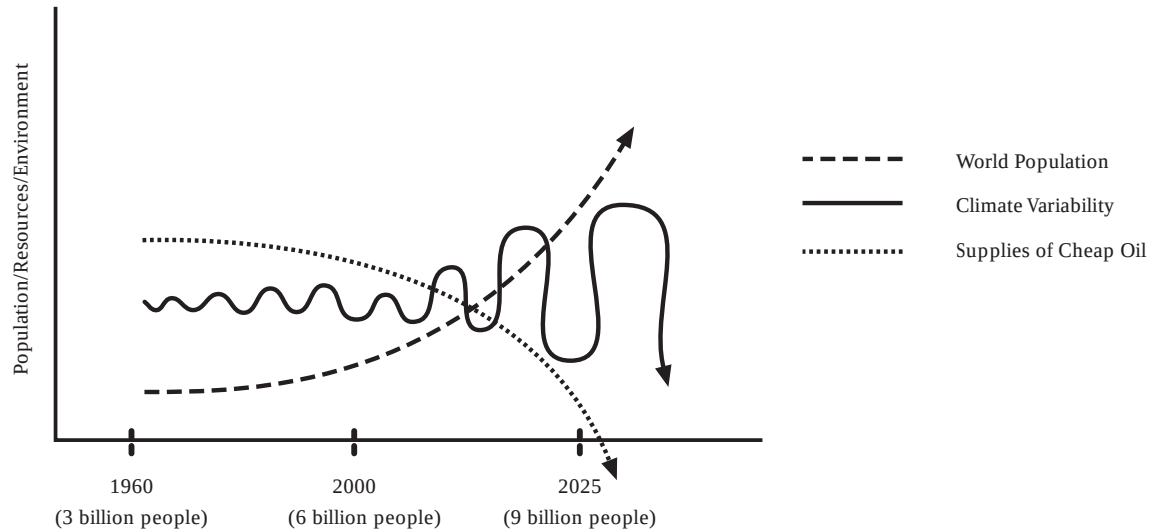
Figure 3 gives a rough estimate of the changing

percentage of the world population living in each of these four perceptual paradigms. These are rough approximations, but they illustrate the dynamics of our evolution as we move toward our species-maturity.⁵⁴ This graphic shows clearly how the human family has entered a time of complex transitioning among multiple paradigms.

How, then, does the road ahead look? My analysis of driving trends suggests that, by the decade of the 2020s, humanity will hit an evolutionary wall and enter a time of great reckoning.⁵⁵ By the 2020s, at least three powerful driving trends will converge, as shown in Figure 4. There will be an additional three billion persons on our planet; a destabilized global climate will make it increasingly difficult to grow an adequate food supply; and dwindling supplies of cheap oil will make it difficult to maintain a high-intensity agriculture that relies on petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizers. We do not have to look further than these three trends to see a blueprint for a global calamity. Yet these trends will be intensified by other forces, such as rainforest destruction, soil erosion, overfishing of the oceans, and ozone depletion.

The combined strength of these interlocking trends will create the evolutionary wall. We will reach this wall when our material powers become so great that they destroy the ecological foundations of the Earth and we thus have no alternative but to work together in the common task of survival. How we respond when we hit this evolutionary wall will be a profound test of our

Figure 4: Hitting the Evolutionary Wall



collective intelligence and collective consciousness. It will also determine our future.

The point at which we hit the evolutionary wall will be a dramatic point of evolutionary inflection, a unique pivot point in human history. Billions of people will be challenged to become conscious of our process of planetary evolution, and to consciously shift from a path of separation from nature and others, to a path of reconnection and reconciliation. If we cooperate in responding to this challenge, the result could be an evolutionary bounce that propels us onto a path of sustainable development. On the other hand, if we do not work together and fail to mobilize our capacity for collective consciousness, then hitting the evolutionary wall could produce a devastating crash and send us on a long detour into a new dark age. We are rapidly approaching this testing zone.

In 1992, over 1600 senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences, signed and released a documented entitled *Warning to Humanity*. In it, they stated that "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course . . . that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know." They concluded by giving the following, simple warning to the human family:

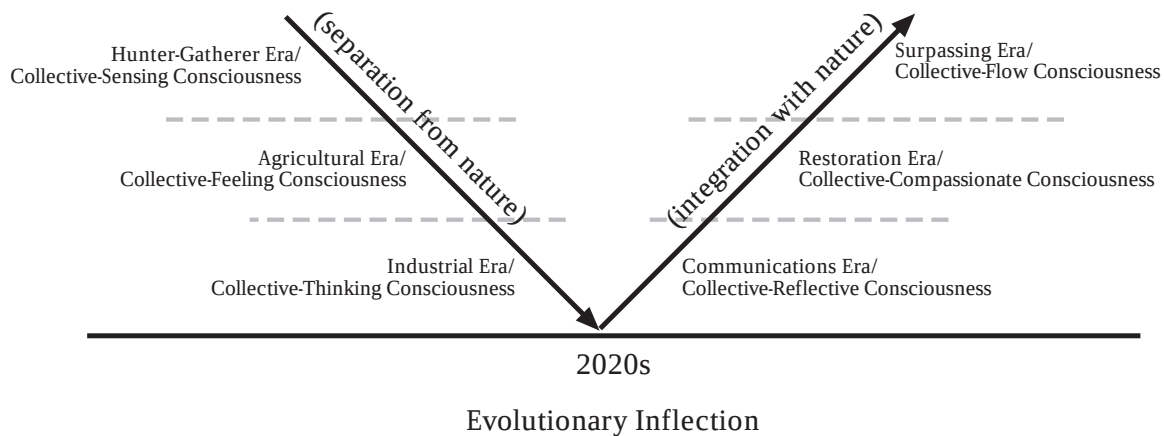
We, the undersigned senior members of the world's scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. **A great**

change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.⁵⁶ [emphasis added]

Figure 5 portrays the evolutionary inflection in terms of the stages of the unfolding of collective consciousness. As this figure suggests, humanity is roughly "halfway home." By my estimates, we still have to move through three major stages of co-evolution before we reach our early adulthood as a conscious species and the potential for enduring into the deep future as a sustainable, compassionate, and creative species-civilization. Although we still have far to go, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge how far we have already come.

The evolutionary flow will probably not be as orderly and precise as Figure 5 portrays. Nor do I think there will be a single crisis that will give birth to a sustainable species-civilization. Instead, within a generation or so, I expect that economic disruptions will worsen as a result of ecological and social crises, and all these will combine to foster civil unrest. Humanity will then move through cycles of contraction and expansion until we exhaust ourselves and finally break through the barriers that separate us from our wholeness as a species.

Figure 5: The Evolutionary Inflection and Stages of Collective Awakening



Christopher Bache has employed systems theory to gain insight into what might happen to human society in a time of ecological crisis and psychological chaos. He explains that, when a system is driven beyond equilibrium and moves into an unstable, chaotic condition, a subtle interconnectedness that lies latent beneath its surface may enable the system to know itself in a more holistic way. This would enable the system to consciously reconfigure itself with a new level of simplicity, synergy, and sustainability.

Under these extreme conditions, systems that were previously isolated might spontaneously begin to interact with each other to form new connecting patterns. The capacity for coordinated experience which is inherent within the collective unconscious may emerge into our collective conscious experience. If this happened, it would feel as though the entire human psyche were becoming alive at new levels, organizing human experience in previously impossible ways. . . . When driven into far-from-equilibrium conditions, systems do not just break down, they generate new structures that pull higher forms of order out of the surrounding chaos. It is as if nature reaches into herself and draws forth structures that reflect the inherent potential of the system for higher orders of self-organization.⁵⁷

In the freedom and creativity that chaos allows, humanity may open to the empathic field of collective

consciousness and discover that we are members of a single family of conscious beings. Trusting this invisible sense of recognition and knowing, we may come together to realize our species-potential. We may yet build a higher order of community and family. But, as I suggested earlier, there is no guarantee of a positive outcome when we hit the evolutionary wall. As Frances Vaughan said in her interview: “I am agnostic on whether there will be some awakening of the species-mind in the context of a global ecological crisis—this may be true, or it may be wishful thinking. A lot of times crises just generate more fear, and people get more defensive and more angry, and it is counterproductive.”

As we move through this pivot point in human evolution, the awakening of reflective consciousness could make a decisive difference in determining whether we take a path of fear or of higher possibility. Let us look at the enabling qualities of this powerful, pro-evolutionary capacity that could make the difference in which future humanity is able to choose.

8. Enabling Qualities of Reflective Consciousness

Paying attention can make a decisive difference. That is as true for civilizations as it is for individuals. Perhaps the most important characteristic of reflective consciousness is that it seems to enable individuals to

recognize intuitively how to live in harmony with others. John Welwood, writing about relationships, says that we are each “naturally attuned, deep within, to the power and magic of the natural order” and “intuitively know what is wholesome and life-promoting, and can distinguish that from what is corrupt and life-negating.”⁵⁸

Several of the people I interviewed for this report discussed the natural ethics that seem to accompany collective consciousness. Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz, pioneers in the use of “groupware” to facilitate Internet dialogues with a spiritual foundation, said, “If we are centered in the Divine—if we are truly centered in the life current flowing through us—then we will be acting as part of a coherent whole.” Glenna Gerard, who has done extensive work in organizational transformation and dialogue, described collective consciousness as a kind of moral tuning fork for humanity. “Collective consciousness enables individual alignment and integrity on a collective level. It makes possible individual action that has collective integrity. Without a collective consciousness, I don’t see that happening, because there is no place for the individual to tap into that would tell that individual what is right action.”

The ability to intuitively trust other people seems increasingly important as global surveys show that people around the world are withdrawing their sense of trust and legitimacy from a wide range of institutions, including government, business, education, and religious organizations.⁵⁹ If we cannot rely on big institutions, then we have to rely on one another as individual human beings. A subtle but widespread awakening of collective consciousness could provide the empathic field for aligning individual actions into a coherent and purposeful direction.

The cultivation of reflective consciousness allows many other enabling capacities to emerge. Some of these capacities are described below. This list is drawn from my book *Awakening Earth*. To develop it, I expanded the Buddhist notion of factors of individual enlightenment, and applied it to society. Characteristics of a conscious, reflective society would include the capacity to be:

- **Self-Determining**—One of the most basic expressions of a maturing consciousness is an enhanced capacity for self-reflection and self-determination. A conscious society is able to look at its choices as well as observe itself in the process of choosing. It is able to observe itself “from the

outside,” much as one culture or nation can view another. A reflective society does not blindly trust a particular ideology, leader, or political party. It regularly reorients itself by looking beyond superficial slogans and vague goals to choose its preferred pathway into the future.

- **Error-embracing**—A conscious society recognizes that social learning inevitably involves making mistakes. Therefore, errors (both our own and others’) are not automatically thought of as bad. They are accepted as useful feedback in the process of learning.

- **Non-attached**—A conscious society is objective, and impartial, and reacts calmly to the stressful pushes and pulls of trends and events. It demonstrates an evenness, detachment, levelheadedness, and confidence that is not pulled off center by the passions of the moment.

- **Inclusive**—A conscious society continually searches for the synergy of the highest common denominator. Individuals from differing ethnic groups, geographic regions, and ideological perspectives are actively invited into dialogue as vital participants in a society that seeks common ground.

- **Anticipatory**—In viewing the world more objectively and from a larger perspective, a reflective society consciously considers alternative pathways into the future.

- **Creative**—Because a conscious culture is able to stand back and look at its choices, it is not locked into habitual patterns of thinking and behaving. Rather than respond with preprogrammed solutions, it explores options and priorities with a fresh and flexible frame of mind. A conscious culture does not wait passively until some crisis forces action. It is already energized and actively engaged. It can respond to even subtle warning signals of danger and opportunity.

While there is no recipe for a healthy species-consciousness, these are specific qualities that are enabling and empowering and that can be cultivated. Both individuals and entire civilizations can develop these qualities. These are not inconsequential attributes; humanity’s success in developing these qualities will likely determine whether or not we will respond successfully to the crises.

Frances Vaughan is an author, educator, and transpersonal therapist who has explored a related line of inquiry in her book *Shadows of the Sacred*. She writes that “characteristics of healthy spirituality are also characteristic of psychological maturity.”⁶⁰ The examples she gives seem closely related with the qualities of enlightenment described above. She writes that a healthy spirituality is “based on experience rather than dogma,” and its expression includes authenticity, letting go of the past, facing our fears, insight and forgiveness, love and compassion, awareness, peace, freedom, and community.⁶¹ If individuals can cultivate these experiential qualities, perhaps civilizations can also.

Another quality associated with reflective consciousness is the capacity to live together in greater freedom and community. The phrase “communities of freedom” rings like a Zen koan and invites us to examine its meaning from many perspectives.⁶² Teilhard de Chardin wrote specifically about the relationship between community and freedom. He felt that in the future we would consciously arrange our living together more “adroitly,” first to preserve our freedom, and then to increase our freedom of action.⁶³

Learning how to live together in community in a way that maintains, and then increases, human freedom is a psychological, social, and spiritual challenge. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes about the role of an evolving empathic field in fostering our ability to live together in freedom:

Communities of mindful living are crucial for our survival and the survival of our planet. A good community can help us resist the speed, violence, and unwholesome ways of our time. Mindfulness protects us and keeps us going in the direction of harmony and awareness.⁶⁴

Tom Hurley of the Institute of Noetic Sciences echoed these sentiments in my interview with him:

There is a causal relationship between an inclusive and living collective consciousness and communities of freedom. Communities of freedom require development of personal consciousness to the point where we are more empathic, and awake to the greater whole. Freedom is informed by a sense of something held in common with others. Some degree of collective consciousness is

critical to living together in communities as free persons.

David Isaacs raised a similar theme in his interview, saying, “It is necessary to be in community to evolve our consciousness and, conversely, it is essential to evolve our consciousness to live in communities premised on freedom.” Finally, Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz stated in their interview that “community has to do with a sense of the commons and responsibility to the whole as well as to myself. We don’t think you can have communities of freedom unless people are conscious of who they are and how they relate to other people. . .”

If the “price of freedom is eternal vigilance,” then learning how to pay attention in community with others is a powerful and positive force for human freedom. Our capacity for shared knowing makes possible voluntary actions at the personal level that have integrity at the group level. If the subtle atmosphere of shared consciousness is nourished within a community or country, then people can liberate their creativity at the local level, mindful of how their actions contribute to building a sustainable future at the global level. In addition, communities that trust their intuitive sense of connection could become important anchors of compassion that hold firm, even in the storm of ecological and social distress.

To summarize, there are many ways in which reflective consciousness is enabling and could bring a powerful “lift” to human evolution. Capacities such as self-determination and an enhanced ability to live in freedom with others are vital to humanity’s future.

9. The Communications Revolution and Collective Consciousness

Within 10 to 20 years, the human family will have in place the communications infrastructure—or enabling technologies—that could support a quantum increase in the collective intelligence—and the collective consciousness—of our species. More than three decades ago, Teilhard de Chardin foresaw a powerful role for communications in awakening the noosphere, or planetary mind.

How can we fail to see the machine as playing a constructive part in the creation of a truly collective consciousness? . . . I am thinking, of course, in the first place of the extraordinary network of radio and television communications which . . . already link us all in a sort of “etherised” universal consciousness.⁶⁵

Ken Wilber also writes eloquently about the spiritual potential inherent in the communications revolution:

Spirit will move through circuits of fiber optics as well as through flesh and blood; and all of that will be natural, and normal, and alive; and from within that global network the new voices of transcendence will begin to attract those sensitive to the Divine.⁶⁶

Lynne Twist is one of the founding executives of The Hunger Project, an organization dedicated to ending persistent hunger worldwide. She believes that the communications revolution actually represents a breakthrough in consciousness, as this snippet from my interview with her shows.

The communications revolution is a complete match for the awakening of humanity. One is a function of the other. It looks like a technological breakthrough, but I actually think it is a consciousness breakthrough that is showing up in technology. They are totally related. With the communications revolution comes opportunities to learn deeper truths—that we are inner-connected and inter-connected, and the ultimate truth is that we are each other. The communications revolution will engage us and enable us to move along a path to live the truth that we are each other.

In recent years, the growth of communications globally has been explosive (including the Internet, computers, satellites, and digital communications). In turn, we are in the midst of a rapid and radical awakening an entirely new level of communication—and potential for collective knowing. The power of the new technologies is like nothing we have known before. According to Joseph Pelton, who has written extensively about the globalization of telecommunications, a single advanced satellite or fiber

optic cable currently has the capability of sending the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica* with all its illustrations every three seconds.⁶⁷ Future prospects are even more breathtaking: “In another quarter of a century these are likely to be . . . systems that could send the equivalent of the entire U.S. Library of Congress in less than 10 seconds.”⁶⁸

Geographic isolation is rapidly giving way to electronic intimacy. Soon, virtually every home in developed nations could have a large-screen, high-definition, interactive television/computer that will bring an even greater avalanche of communication into our lives. It is important to emphasize that the fiber optics, satellites, and computers are not themselves the “collective consciousness;” they are simply the visible infrastructure that makes possible an enormous increase in our capacity for collective knowing.

When a planetary scope of human connection is combined with the functional intelligence of computers, a new level of human awareness and communication—a “global brain”—could potentially emerge. Robert Entman, who has done in-depth research on the future of universal telecommunications, alludes to this when he writes that “a substantial increase in the functional intelligence of the species seems imminent.”⁶⁹ Peter Russell describes the blossoming of the global brain as follows: “Billions of messages continually shuttle back and forth, in an ever-growing web of communication, linking the billions of minds of humanity together into a single system.”⁷⁰ To a great extent, the awakening of a global mind parallels the emergence of global telecommunications.

Mark Pesce, writing about the Internet, says, “The web is a signifier, but what is being signified? *The advent of the noosphere*.”⁷¹ He adds that “it is not an overstatement to frame the World Wide Web as an innovation as important as the printing press—it may be as important as the birth of language itself . . . in its ability to completely refigure the structure of civilization.”⁷²

In the interviews I conducted to write this report, I found striking examples of how even the seemingly profane medium of television could also bring a sacred message of implicit transpersonal connection. Dave Ellis, an author and social innovator who has traveled throughout the world, gave this response when asked if the communications revolution is fostering a new global consciousness:

Yes. Absolutely. A good example of that is when I was walking through the poorest villages in India. There was no plumbing, no chimneys, and yet every once in a while someone had a television set. It brings them the world. People who had that little chose to spend what little extra they had to get a television. And I don't think it was to give them stature in the community. I think it was to give them a window onto the world. And it alters their consciousness as does the Internet.

The communications revolution is supporting a revolution in consciousness. Like all revolutions, however, it is a mixed blessing. While it gives us a window into the world and a mirror on our collective nature, the mass communications system also may be distracting humanity from its larger evolutionary tasks by focusing largely on consumerism and escapist entertainment. Many people recognize that the global telecommunications system may not serve us wisely without our conscious intervention as both citizens and consumers. They fear what Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz called "the global brain going into seizure, rather than turning on and becoming conscious and self-reflective."⁷³

In a later section, I will explore in more detail the dark side of the telecommunications revolution. First, it is important to consider a broader possibility: our potential for descending into collective neurosis—or even madness—as a human family.

10. The Potential for Collective Madness

If we have the potential to awaken together as a species, do we also have the potential to go mad together? The concern for the sanity of collectives is not new. In 1841, Charles Mackay wrote of the madness of crowds:

In reading the history of nations, we find that, like individuals, they have their whims and their peculiarities; their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care

not what they do. . . . Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.⁷⁴

Nearly a century later, in 1930, Sigmund Freud expressed his concern for the neuroses of civilizations in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become "neurotic"?⁷⁵

There are enough examples of collective madness through history to make us concerned for our future. Let us consider two examples here—Easter Island and the witch hunts in Europe during the Middle Ages.



Statue on Easter Island

With a mild climate and rich, volcanic soil, Easter Island was a paradise covered by forests and filled with diverse animal and plant life when it was first settled by Polynesian colonists in approximately 500 A.D. As the Islanders prospered, their numbers grew to 7,000 or more, and they used the resources of the island beyond its regenerative capacity. Archeological evidence shows that the destruction of the forests on Easter Island was well underway by the year 800—about 300 hundred years after people first arrived. By the 1500s, the forests and palm trees had disappeared as people cleared land for agriculture, and used the remaining trees to build ocean-going canoes, burn as firewood, and build homes. Jared Diamond, professor of medicine at UCLA, describes how the animal life was eradicated:

The destruction of the island's animals was as extreme as that of the forest: without exception, every species of native land bird became extinct. Even shellfish were over exploited, until people had to settle for small sea snails. . . . Porpoise bones disappeared abruptly from the garbage heaps around 1500; no one could harpoon porpoises anymore, since the trees used for constructing the big seagoing canoes no longer existed. . . .⁷⁶

The biosphere was so devastated that it was beyond short-term recovery. With the forests gone, ocean fishing no longer possible, and animals hunted to extinction, people turned on one another. Centralized authority broke down, and the island descended into chaos with rival groups living in caves and competing with one another for survival. Eventually, according to Diamond, the islanders, “turned to the largest remaining meat source available: humans, whose bones became common in late Easter Island garbage heaps. Oral traditions of the islanders are rife with cannibalism.”⁷⁷ By 1700, the population had crashed to between one-quarter and one-tenth of its former level. When the island was visited by a Dutch explorer in 1722 (on Easter Sunday), he found it a wasteland almost completely devoid of vegetation and animals.

The parallels between Easter Island and the Earth are strong: Easter was an abundant island of life floating in a vast ocean of water. The Earth is an abundant island of life floating in a vast ocean of space. “By now the meaning of Easter Island for us should be chillingly obvious,” professor Diamond concludes. “Easter Island is Earth writ small. Today, again, a rising population

confronts shrinking resources. . . . we can no more escape into space than the Easter Islanders could flee into the ocean.”⁷⁸

As Easter Island reveals, we humans have already demonstrated our ability, on a small scale, to descend into collective madness and to devastate the biosphere irreparably. The witch hunts of the Middle Ages in Europe are another dramatic and sustained example of humanity's capacity for collective madness. The witch hunts were unlike the militaristic madness of Hitler's army and the efficient killing of millions behind barbed wire fences; instead, this was the religious madness of the Catholic church that resulted in the public torture and cruel deaths of at least several hundred thousand women, men, and children over a period of more than two and a half centuries.

The witch hunting craze began in the 1400s with the encouragement of the Catholic church. A declaration issued in 1484 by Pope Innocent VIII provided the moral authority and official encouragement for the witch hunts. It reads, in part:

. . . many persons of both sexes, heedless of their own salvation and forsaking the catholic faith, give themselves over to devils male and female, and by their incantations, charms, and conjurings, and by other abominable superstitions and sortileges, offences, crimes, and misdeeds, ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foal of animals, the products of the earth, the grapes of vines, and the fruits of trees. . . . We therefore . . . remove all impediments by which in any way the said inquisitors are hindered in the exercise of their office. . . it shall be permitted to the said inquisitors . . . to proceed to the correction, imprisonment, and punishment of the aforesaid persons. . . .⁷⁹

During these dark centuries, the idea persisted in Europe that departed spirits still inhabited the earth, and that some people had the power to summon evil spirits among them in order to bring misfortune to their fellow humans. An epidemic of terror seized Europe. Few thought themselves secure from the invisible powers of evil spirits. A witch was suspected as the cause of every calamity: If a storm blew down a barn—it was witchcraft. If cattle died unexpectedly, or if a beloved person died suddenly—it was witchcraft. Someone was

calling on disembodied spirits in order to bring harm to others. Mackay gives the following account of the “witch mania:”

France, Italy, Germany, England, Scotland, and the far north successively ran mad upon this subject, and for a long series of years furnished their tribunals with so many trials for witchcraft, that other crimes were seldom or never spoken of. Thousands upon thousands of unhappy persons fell victims to this cruel and absurd delusion.⁸⁰

Throughout Europe, people were obsessed with this delusion, generating an avalanche of trials. One bishop (of Geneva) burned 500 “witches” within three months, another bishop 600, and another 900.⁸¹ After two and a half centuries, this wave of cultural madness began to subside, gradually giving way to the rationalism of the industrial era.

These two examples reveal how vulnerable we are to collective madness. Still, I have to confess that I was surprised that one of the largest areas of agreement that emerged from the 18 interviews that I conducted concerned humanity’s potential for mass insanity. Here are several illustrative responses:

- Ram Dass: “Is it possible for a civilization to become psychotic or neurotic? I think we already are. Philosophical materialism is a collective psychosis, and we are spreading it around the world as fast as we can.”
- Mwalimu Imara: “Can a whole civilization be neurotic? Absolutely.”
- Margaret Wheatley: “Yes, an entire civilization can go crazy. The nature of a group in this self-organizing world depends on the set of beliefs around which it is organized. If a group is organized around a ‘self’ that is filled with hatred and paranoia (for example, the Nazis or Stalin or self-styled militia), it will lead to self-destructive behavior. It is possible, then, for a whole civilization to embrace a set of beliefs that will eventually lead to self-destruction because they are not congruent with the deeper cosmological reality. Any tribe, clan, group, or nation whose set of beliefs is not founded in love, but who organize only around self-protection and fear, go against the natural order, whose nature is love. In turn, they will not succeed.”

- Roger Walsh: “Is there the potential for regress? Absolutely. Look at the Dark Ages. The implications are very disturbing, for it suggests that with one major natural disaster, we could be back into tribal warfare. Our lifestyles are dependent on complex technical systems. We could regress with disturbing ease.”

- Juanita Brown: “The transpersonal is neutral. People can be transformed into the darkest selves as well as the lightest and most generative selves. The collective can create hate and horror as much as love. Therefore, evolution requires our attention/intention.”

Consciousness researcher Dean Radin conjectures that:

...there may be a mental analogy to environmental ecology—something like an ecology of thought that invisibly interweaves through the fabric of our society. This suggests that disruptive, scattered, or violent thoughts may pollute the social fabric. . . . Perhaps periods of widespread madness, such as wars, are indicators of mass-mind infections.⁸²

We do have the potential for collective madness. There is no guarantee that we will rise to the opportunities before us. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where humanity descends into species neurosis and we veer off on a long and needless evolutionary detour.

11. The Mass Media and the Collective Madness of Materialism

It is impossible to consider the condition of collective consciousness in the modern world without exploring the connection between a culture’s consciousness and its television-viewing habits. Television has become humanity’s primary window onto the world and the primary mirror in which we see ourselves. Globally, more than 60% of the world now

has access to television and this percentage is growing rapidly. In the U.S., 98 percent of all homes have a TV set. It is the most common fixture in U.S. households. There are more homes with a television than with indoor toilets, stoves, or refrigerators. What is more, the average person watches more than four hours of television per day—which means that, as a civilization, Americans watch approximately one billion person-hours of television daily. Thus, it is not surprising that most Americans say they get most of their news from television. During the course of a year, the average American will see approximately 25,000 commercials. These commercials are much more than advertisements for products; they are highly sophisticated vignettes that promote materialistic values and attitudes and a materialistic way of living in the world.

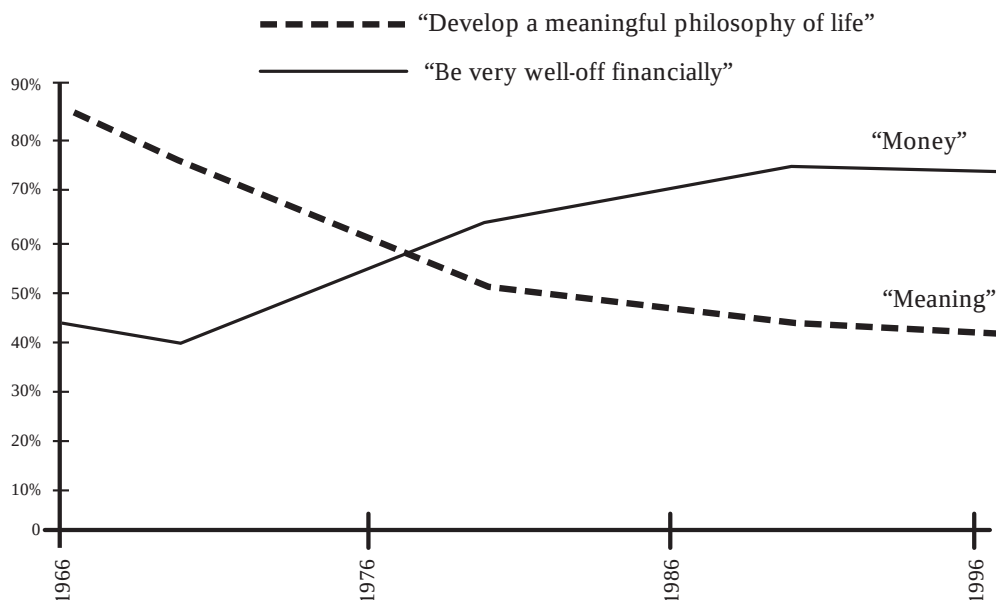
There may be no more dangerous challenge to our future than the hypnosis of commercial television which trivializes the human experiment and distracts humanity from our larger potentials. **By programming television for commercial success, we are programming the mindset of entire civilizations—perhaps even the species-civilization—for evolutionary stagnation and ecological failure.** The use of television to promote exclusively materialistic values has become a massive

mental health and public health problem for the United States and the world. Americans—and much of the rest of the world exposed to American television—are in an impossible double-bind: the mass media that dominate our consciousness tell us to buy more, while our ecological concerns for our planet tell us to consume less.

Carl Jung says schizophrenia is a condition where “the dream becomes the reality.” Has the American dream of a consumerist lifestyle become our primary reality? Is this media-manufactured reality increasingly out of touch with the reality of the Earth and our evolutionary potentials? Is the current use of the mass media implanting a deep, and unnecessary, conflict into our collective psyche?

Striking evidence of the powerful impact of television on values is found in a major survey of American college freshmen over a period of 30 years. This study, by the American Council on Education and UCLA, found that there has been a dramatic shift in values between 1966 and 1996⁸³ (see Figure 6 below). In the late 1960s, “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was the top value, being endorsed as a “very important” or “essential” goal by more than 80 percent of the entering freshmen. “Being well-off financially”

Figure 6: Contrasting Value Trends of U.S. College Freshmen



lagged far behind, ranking fifth or sixth on the list, with less than 45 percent of freshmen endorsing it as a very important or essential goal in life. Since then, these two very different life-orientations have essentially traded places. In 1996, being very well-off financially was the top value (at 74 percent) and developing a meaningful philosophy of life fell to sixth place (at 42 percent).

A major reason for this profound shift is the impact of television viewing on values. Researchers in this survey found that “the more television watched, the stronger the endorsement of the goal of being very well off financially, and the weaker the endorsement of the goal of developing a meaningful philosophy of life.”⁸⁴ Simply stated, freshmen entering college in the late 1960s had been exposed to much less television during the formative stages of their lives as compared to freshmen entering college in the late 1980s.

Two decades ago, Gene Youngblood warned of the possibility that the mass media could lock in a materialistic mindset and hold back human evolution simply by controlling the perception of alternatives.

The industrial order endures not by conspiracy but simply by default, simply because there's no popular demand for a specifically-defined alternative. . . . Desire is learned. Desire is cultivated. It's a habit formed through continuous repetition. . . . But we cannot cultivate that which isn't available. We don't order a dish that isn't on the menu. We don't vote for a candidate who isn't on the ballot. . . . We rarely select what's scarcely available, seldom emphasized, infrequently presented. . . . What could be a more radical example of totalitarianism than the power of the mass media to synthesize the only politically relevant reality, specifying for most people most of the time what's real and what's not, what's important and what's not. . . ? This, I submit, is the very essence of totalitarianism: the control of desire through the control of perception. . . . What prevents our frustration from shaping new institutions is the inability to perceive alternatives, resulting in the absence of desire, hence of demand, for those alternatives.⁸⁵

This is perceptual totalitarianism, which allows access to only a single point of view. The experience of the Soviet Union is a powerful example of what happens as a result of perceptual totalitarianism when people are prohibited from considering alternatives. Historically, even though a majority of Soviets were opposed to “party boss” communism, this opposition could not lead to radical reform of the social system “chiefly due to the fact that there was no ‘model’ of such reformation in the social consciousness.”⁸⁶ The Soviet people knew what they were against—the party boss form of communism—but they did not know what they were for, because they had been denied the opportunity to openly consider positive alternatives to communism. This example illustrates the importance of consciously giving ourselves alternatives so that we can individually and collectively consider new paths into the future. If we could use the mass media to do that, then we could consciously organize ourselves and make rapid improvements in our lives.

It was our ability to communicate among ourselves that has enabled *homo sapiens sapiens* to travel an enormous evolutionary distance and to now stand at the edge of establishing a planetary civilization. In turn, it will be our ability to communicate that will determine whether we are able to cope with the systems challenge posed by unprecedented human numbers, dwindling natural resources, and mounting ecological devastation. I agree with Lester Brown, president of the Worldwatch Institute, who said that “The communications industry is the only instrument that has the capacity to educate on a scale that is needed and in the time available.”

12. Cultural Healing and Collective Consciousness

At present, humanity is fractured and divided along many dimensions—including wealth, gender, race, age, ethnicity, generations, and religious orientation. Underlying these divisions is our history of intolerance toward each other. The psychic wounds that need healing include genocide, slavery, religious persecution, colonialism, and gender oppression.

The challenge of cultural healing that lies before

humanity is not well understood—and for good reason. Our situation is unprecedented in human history. The entire species faces the trailblazing challenge of coming together as an entire human family on behalf of a sustainable and meaningful future for us all. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the challenge we face in this way:

We are challenged to rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. . . . Through our scientific genius we have made of the world a neighborhood; now through our moral and spiritual genius we must make of it a brotherhood.⁸⁷

Where can we look for insight into the nature of cultural healing in this dramatically changing global context? One promising avenue is to explore the parallels between personal healing and social healing. Ken Wilber writes that the individual and cultural levels “evidence the *same basic structures of consciousness*, and these same basic structures of consciousness show up in the development or evolution of both the *individual* and the *species*.”⁸⁸ Many of the people I interviewed shared Wilber’s view that insights at the personal level are relevant to the social level. For example, Margaret Wheatley, who has done extensive work with large organizations, stated, “Regarding the relationship between personal and collective consciousness—all consciousness is sourced from one consciousness. Therefore, the same approaches would work at any level of scale.” Angeles Arrien has worked with groups around the world, and she offered a similar view: “I think anything that works in personal mind-body healing is like the tip of the iceberg for what could work globally.”

Applying insights from personal healing to social healing invites many different questions; for example: What is the cultural equivalent of meditation? How does an entire civilization pay attention while maintaining its equanimity—that is, “witnessing what goes on without getting sucked into the drama of it?”⁸⁹ Given the power of visualization for individuals, what might be the impact on our national and global psyche of the visualizations we receive daily through the media? Are there psychological insights from personal therapy that are relevant for civilizational neuroses? Hard-won insights at the level of personal healing may provide valuable insights for healing at the socio-cultural level.

Another promising path toward cultural healing is to shed light on injustices. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “injustice must be exposed, with all of the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”⁹⁰ Injustice and inequities flourish in the darkness of inattention. When they are exposed to the healing light of public awareness, that light creates a new consciousness among everyone involved. The world is becoming transparent. Increasingly, the media are bringing instances of injustice, oppression and violence, into the court of public attention and opinion. In our communications-rich, and tightly interdependent world, it will be difficult for old forms of repression and violence to continue without a massive avalanche of world public opinion descending upon the oppressors.

When our capacity for collective consciousness first awakens, what will probably emerge will be the deep psychic wounds that have festered through humanity’s history—the voices that have been unacknowledged and the pain that has been unexpressed. As Christopher Bache explains:

The floor of the collective unconscious appears to be rising. As it does, it is bringing with it the psychic sludge of history. The first step toward realization is always purification. The karmic residue of the choices made by countless generations of half-conscious human beings is rising into our individual and collective awareness as we confront en masse the legacy of our past.⁹¹

It may seem unwise to bring the dark side of humanity’s past into the light of day, but, unless we do, this unresolved pain will forever pull at the underside of our consciousness and diminish our future potentials. Fortunately, the compassionate distance of reflective consciousness provides the psychological space for healing to occur. As professor Mwalimu Imara said in his interview:

We don’t need to make another person believe like we do to feel comfortable with them. What is important is the willingness to let stand another person’s experience of their experience—to live in comfort in their experience and our own—knowing that we inhabit a common reality. When I see the ground we share as spiritual experience, it

lessens the anxiety I feel about enormous differences between us.

Being heard is the first step to being healed. Mediator Brian Muldoon writes, “Consciousness is formed in the crucible of human suffering. We *know* because we have been *through it*.”⁹² By acknowledging and listening to the stories of those who have suffered, we begin the process of healing. Our collective listening to the wounds of humanity’s psyche and soul is vital to society’s healing. Healing also means that we publicly acknowledge and mourn legitimate grievances and seek just and realistic remedies.

Ken Wilber writes that, “if you and I are going to live together, we have to inhabit, not just the same empirical and physical space, but also the same intersubjective space of mutual recognition.”⁹³ He continues that it is “fitting our minds together in an intersubjective space that allows each of us to recognize and respect the other. Not necessarily *agree* with each other, but *recognize* each other. . . .”⁹⁴ It is this capacity for mutual recognition that gives us a foundation for mutual respect, and an alternative to perpetual conflict.

In its simplest terms, cultural healing means overcoming our deep and profound sense of separation—from one another, from the Earth, and from the cosmos. Healing occurs when we realize that the life-force that unites us is deeper than the differences that divide us. With conscious cultural healing, the human family could advance beyond chronic ethnic conflict, racial oppression, economic injustice, gender discrimination, and all the other inhumanities that divide us. If we can bear witness to the reservoir of unresolved pain that has accumulated through history, we will release an enormous store of pent-up creativity and energy. We could truly achieve an evolutionary bounce with the release of humanity’s collective energy in service of building a positive and nurturing future.

In his interview, Ram Dass said that, with healing, instead of mobilizing around enemies, we could begin “mobilizing around the co-evolution of culture and consciousness.” What a remarkable species-project this could make. As the inner world of humanity’s psyche and spirit consciously engages the outer world of action, we could begin our common work of building a sustainable, satisfying, and soulful species-civilization.

13. Looking Ahead— A Menu of Possibilities

Looking ahead, “collective consciousness” appears to be a rapidly developing area of interest, particularly if one is open to its various names and descriptions at this stage. For example, one person might describe their interest as exploring “learning fields” and the “group mind” in a classroom setting. Another person might describe their work as exploring “remote viewing” and the “nonlocal mind” of physics. Still another, might be interested in “group synergy” and how it can be cultivated through group meditation and mindful communication. Despite the differences in language, all could recognize they are exploring a similar mystery—the ecology of consciousness that permeates our living universe. Because it is such an unexplored area, I would like to suggest a brief menu of possibilities that might advance this vital area of human learning:

- **Inquire into the qualities of a healthy collective consciousness**—It would be of great value to begin translating insights from meditative and contemplative traditions into their social corollaries. This could involve work with both mental health practitioners and spiritual scholars. By describing more rigorously the qualities of a healthy civilizational mind (for example, equanimity, mindfulness, concentration, forgiveness), we could have visible guideposts for reflecting on and talking about the current status of our cultural consciousness.

- **Investigate the impact of the mass media on the mental health of civilizations**—Given the evidence that the mass media are promoting a set of materialistic values that are detrimental to the long-term health of the planet, it is important to question how we are using our tools of mass communication. Are the mass media creating a level of desire for consumption that cannot be sustained globally? If media-generated desires cannot be sustained, then how will those who are left out respond? How well does the “media mindset” fit the reality of our world? Is our use of the mass media an accurate reflection of our evolutionary intelligence as a species? Could the media mindset of consumerism be diverting our cultural attention, dumbing-down the potential of humanity, and holding back our evolution? How might the mass media nourish and strengthen our culture and enable us to cope with ecological, social, and spiritual challenges?

How can we take back the subtle environment of shared consciousness that provides the context for all of our social actions?

• **Work for cultural healing and reconciliation**—A world divided against itself is a recipe for disaster. Innumerable projects and actions could be launched to promote healing at every level and could support humanity in moving beyond a world divided by gender, wealth, race, religion, geography, and more. Without deep and authentic communication across these barriers of suffering, misunderstanding, and resentment, humanity seems likely to remain so divided that our collective future will be imperiled. How can our powerful tools of mass communication be used to support a process of social dialogue, healing, and reconciliation?

• **Develop ongoing indicators of an awakening human consciousness**—There are a number of indicators that show deterioration of the biosphere as well as many social aspects of life. It would be of great value to have a countervailing set of positive trends that are regularly updated—an “indicators report” that suggests the pace at which a new culture and consciousness may be emerging in the world.⁹⁵ Bringing positive indicators of change into public awareness establishes new benchmarks for dialogue, and provides an expanded frame of reference for thinking about our future.

• **Promote personal discovery of positive images of the future**—The power of positive visualization is widely recognized in mind-body medicine. Currently, many people can visualize a future of worsening global crisis, but few have been invited to develop their personal, positive vision of humanity’s future. Without a hopeful future to be drawn toward, people will tend to withdraw and to focus on the shorter term. We cannot build a future consciously that we have not first imagined. We are a visual species: When we can see it, we can build it. We need to develop the skills of consciously imagining positive, long-term futures for ourselves.

• **Foster small-group learning and dialogue**—Face-to-face conversations can provide a vehicle for collective learning that clarifies what we care about, strengthens our commitment to constructive change, and informs what actions are most appropriate for the future.⁹⁶ As a time when the human family will be reflecting on our progress over the past thousand years,

the millennium could be a wonderful opportunity to speak about the overall human journey, what we have learned together, and where we want to go from here. Millennium conversations in classrooms, living rooms, and board rooms around the world could include an inquiry into the emerging culture and consciousness.

• **Encourage dialogue and inquiry among diverse professionals**—Diverse communities of scholars, educators, and other professionals could come together in sustained dialogue, which might generate new insights to questions such as:

- What is the nature of collective consciousness as seen from diverse perspectives (gender, cultural, racial, ethnic, geographic, etc.)?
- What are the nature and meaning of cultural healing?
- What are the core enabling qualities of collective consciousness?
- What are the role and responsibility of the mass media in cultivating a civilization’s healthy mental habits?
- What is humanity’s potential for collective madness?

As these ideas for further inquiry suggest, collective consciousness is a largely unexplored territory. Nevertheless, I hope that this brief overview begins to reveal the outlines of new evolutionary possibilities for humanity. Looking ahead, a panorama of possibilities beckons, echoing the words of Carl Jung: “In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual, everything depends on the development of consciousness.”⁹⁷

We bear the universe in our being as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged.

--Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Universe*⁹⁸

But are we being dreamed by a single divine intelligence, by God, or are we being dreamed by the collective consciousness of all things?We cannot ask if the part is creating the whole, or the whole is creating the part because the part is the whole. So whether we call the collective consciousness of all things "God," or simply "the consciousness of all things," it doesn't change the situation.

--Michael Talbot, *The Holographic Universe*⁹⁹

Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing



Appendices

By analogy, just as the individual near-death experiencer may have to endure the pain and suffering associated with the trauma of almost dying before positive personal transformation can take place, so the world may need to undergo a “planetary near-death experience” before it can awaken to a higher, more spiritual, collective consciousness with universal love at its core.

*--Kenneth Ring, *Heading Toward Omega*¹⁰⁰*

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The universe is a communion and a community. We ourselves are that communion become conscious of itself.

*--Thomas Berry, *Riverdale Papers VII*¹⁰¹*

Appendix A

People Interviewed for this Report

In addition to reviews of the relevant literature, I interviewed 18 people (many for several hours) for this report. They are a diverse and highly talented community, all with international experience:

- **Angeles Arrien**—anthropologist, educator, author, and corporate consultant
- **Juanita Brown**—consultant in organizational communication and transformation
- **Ram Dass**—author, spiritual teacher, and former psychiatrist and professor
- **Dave Ellis**—educator, author, philanthropist, social entrepreneur
- **Glenna Gerard**—consultant in organizational transformation and dialogues
- **Tom Hurley**—director of education at the Institute of Noetic Sciences
- **Mwalimu Imara**—Episcopal priest, professor, explorer of alternative healing
- **David Isaacs**—consultant in organizational communication and transformation
- **Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz**—authors, corporate consultants, and pioneers in exploring the use of the Internet for building transpersonal communities
- **Will Keepin**—physicist, workshop leader in ecopsychology and gender healing
- **Mike Murphy**—author, co-founder of Esalen Institute, athlete, educator
- **Marilyn Schlitz**—director of research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences
- **Vernice Solimar**—chair of Consciousness Studies department at JFK University
- **Lynne Twist**—founding executive and director of funding for The Hunger Project
- **Frances Vaughan**—author, therapist, educator, leader in transpersonal psychology
- **Roger Walsh**—author, professor, psychiatrist, and brain researcher
- **Margaret Wheatley**—author and speaker on new organizational forms and processes

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Appendix D

About the Author



Duane Elgin is a researcher, author, and speaker with 25 years of experience in exploring the co-evolution of culture and consciousness. He is the author of two books: *Awakening Earth: Exploring the Evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness* (Morrow, 1993), and *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (Morrow, 1981, revised 1993). He is the primary author of the report: *Global Consciousness Change: Indicators of an Emerging Paradigm* (May 1997). He co-authored (with Joseph Campbell, Willis Harman, and others) the book *Changing Images of Man* (Pergamon, 1982). Duane was formerly a senior social scientist at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International), where he co-authored numerous studies on the long-range future; for example, *Alternative Futures for Environmental Planning: 1975-2000* (for the Environmental Protection Agency); *Anticipating Future National and Global Problems*; and *Limits to the Management of Large, Complex Systems* (both for the President's science advisor). While at SRI International, he also participated as a subject in a range of scientific experiments on parapsychology over a period of several years. Prior to SRI, Duane worked in 1970-71 as a senior staff member for the joint Congressional-Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. From 1981 to 1989, Duane was the founder and director of the non-partisan and non-profit organization Choosing Our Future. The mission of COF is to revitalize citizen participation through the innovative use of tools of mass communication. COF conducted research, took legal action with the FCC, developed a pilot "electronic town meeting" (aired on ABC-TV in San Francisco), and organized a "community voice" organization to produce televised forums for citizen dialogue and feedback. Duane has an M.B.A. from the Wharton Business School and an M.A. in Economic History from the University of Pennsylvania.

The Fetzer Institute is a nonprofit educational organization located in Kalamazoo, Michigan whose programs fall into three interrelated areas: studies of the unity of body and mind that enrich approaches to health and healing; education programs for health professionals, teachers, and other public leaders; and studies to increase understanding of the fundamental nature of consciousness and spirit.