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Conversations That Matter

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

—MARGARET MEAD

Nothing has given me more hope recently than to observe how simple conversations give birth to actions that can change lives and restore our faith in the future. There is no more powerful way to initiate significant social change than to start a conversation. When a group of people discover that they share a common concern, that's when the process of change begins.

—MARGARET WHEATLEY

Some of our most important leverage for addressing our predicament is a new species of *conversations*. Talk is not enough, of course (as in “all talk, no action”), and yet whole system change must begin with human society and culture—and we enact such change, in part, through conversation. So certain kinds of conversation are among the most important actions we can take. But there are many hardwired structural obstacles to the kinds of communication breakthroughs that are now necessary.

Profound intelligence and creativity can emerge from real meetings of awakened hearts and minds. Powerful conversations can catalyze not just new understanding and insights, but new friendships, communities, projects, and even movements.

In this chapter, we will look closely at the nature of conversations—what is keeping them from happening and their benefits and implications. Consequential communications are critical to change, but we are still learning to realize their fullest possibilities. We will also look at the different kinds of conversations that are necessary for whole-system change. Then we will go on to explore in depth a few very specific, potentially consequential conversations.

We might usefully think of the most urgently needed conversations as encompassing three broad categories:

1. **Conversations among practitioners**, like experiments in integral we-space. In committed communities of practice, conversations deepen our consciousness, understanding, and capacities for friendship and mutual understanding. They create the basis for inter-group altruism and new levels of cooperation.
2. **Intertribal dialogue** across the boundaries between the many different cultural and ethnic tribal identities in the global human family.⁸² An important sub-category in America now focuses on transpartisan conversations across the boundaries of our red/blue culture war, in order to reknit our torn social fabric.
3. **Serious conversations across the boundaries between three specific communities of discourse, whom I call the innovators, the ecologists, and the evolutionaries**—each of which is passionately and intelligently imagining, creating, and preparing for the future. (Unfortunately, today people in each of these groups are mostly talking only among themselves.)

Although I hope this discussion will be useful to activists and peace-makers bridging the boundaries that divide the whole human family and America, I feel best prepared to serve the conversations described in the

first and third points above. We just explored integral we-space, in the first category. In this chapter we will turn our attention to the conversations taking place among innovators, ecologists, and evolutionaries, and how bridging them can open new pathways to a healthy human future. These are enormously critical conversations. Let's begin by taking a look at their revolutionary context and the structural obstacles that they must overcome.

THE CONTEXT OF OUR CONVERSATIONS

In this critical time, our ecological and sociopolitical systems are beginning to experience breakdowns. At the same time we are also seeing the beginnings of a wave of *breakthroughs* into advanced transformative potentials in human knowledge, power, wisdom, and communication. Interestingly, while our breakdowns relate to the functions that are “low,” or basic and fundamental to our well-being, we are approaching breakthroughs in our “highest” potentials. At the leading edges of human development we see a flowering of creative innovations across multiple fields, but they can only be sustained if our roots hold.

We haven't yet grounded and integrated our cognitive and imaginative triumphs. In fact, we are wasting tremendous energy straining against one another—energy we may now need in order to join together to defend everything we all share and depend on. Reconciling and cohering after our divisions have become so extreme would be truly revolutionary. But is it even possible?

In fact, achieving a unified voice is not only possible, it has already begun—although one may have to look beyond the usual places to find it. It is expressing itself in countless ways—in the simple goodness of people helping neighbors, treating strangers with courtesy and respect, taking care of people in need, and deferring their narrow self-interest in service of larger purposes. It is in the social mycelium that is always underfoot, unnoticed but pregnant with power. We can also see it among activists and among practitioners, among the most “elite” (in industrialized societies) and among the most ordinary, rooted people living simple lifestyles. It has expressions in the integral, evolutionary, and ecological

worlds I have inhabited and in many others I have only read or heard about. We see it in the rise of transpartisan movements to “undivide” America and the world, and in the many programs that sponsor dialogue between individuals and groups that usually don’t speak with each other. Some of these movements seemingly exist on the margins, but they are setting in motion what could become a conversational revolution.

What might such a revolution look like? Perhaps we will see a nearly overwhelming wave of moral and spiritual awakening the likes of which we’ve never seen (not in tension with rationality this time around). This is significant, since “great awakenings” have taken place periodically through history, in America and around the world, when the time was ripe for new inspiration and ideas. Even though historical utopian movements have never realized their ideals, they have sometimes unleashed waves of dynamism, awareness, and energy that have washed through cultures with long-lasting consequences.

Wholesome, wholehearted participants in a fragmenting culture are nonviolent agents of our deeper wholeness. We can appropriately call them revolutionaries, because amidst fragmentation wholeness is what is *most* revolutionary. Revolutionary change marks a turning, perhaps a radical turnabout, a transformation of the order of things. The great wheel revolves, and the world is turned upside-down—or seems to be, from our former point of view. It sets up a whole new stage of cultural evolution.

As we move forward into this revolution (or are carried into it), let’s skillfully hold its paradoxes, balancing our excitement about that which has never existed before with healthy caution against stressing our foundational social order and institutions, appreciating the pervasive human propensity for delusion. We are tasked with wisely incubating a new and wholesome cultural possibility. Poised as we are on the edge of something new, none of us knows yet quite how to enact it. We are feeling our way. Our capacities and consciousness are the growing edges of something to come. We do well to become quiet, observant, willing participants, listening for the current of a greater intelligence—humble practitioners of what Korean Zen master Seung Sahn called “don’t-know mind.”

OBSTACLES TO ESSENTIAL CONVERSATION

If your village were very slowly sliding into the sea, and your fellow townspeople were arguing over whether it was really happening, and fistfights were breaking out among them over whether it was real, with no clear plans emerging about what to do, and if this persisted for decades—what would you do? One of the things you would do is to find someone you could really talk to, to have a real conversation that could lead to effective action. You would look for people awake and grounded enough to help you cut through the fog and confusion.

Today many of us are noticing the unsustainability of our global village and starting these kinds of conversations about what is really happening now in our world. Many more people are participating in these conversations, often vigorously. And some of us are being changed by them—becoming practitioners, innovators, and activists, and even changing aspects of our lifestyles. Vital discussions are appearing here and there throughout culture, subversively breaking the taboo against questioning the popular social consensus that keeps most conversation superficial and pleasant. This is no minor thing—those taboos are entrenched, dominating even many of those who could otherwise be valuable participants in the conversation.

These conversations must overcome other obstacles too, as does every conversation. It is still very hard for us not to talk *past* one another—if not in blatant terms, then subtly, taking turns with our soliloquies. Rather than cocreating mutual understanding, we most often simply present our views, sharpening them as we bounce them off one another.

Consider your own experience. Haven't you found yourself, time and again, feeling frustrated, waiting for your conversation partner to finish elaborating on a point, as he says something you could have predicted or repeats ideas you've heard many times before? Too often, our experience of conversation is one of accommodating other people's needs to be listened to. Worse, conversations often are set up as competitions, in which one person is allowed to be the "winner" based on their assertiveness or persuasive skills (convincing everyone that they are right and the other side is wrong), or adherence to formal rules of debate or presentation,

or other forms of one-upsmanship. We have all been imprinted by popular cultural habits that implicitly validate these strategies. Today's form of "debate," with its point-scoring, is widely considered a way to get at the truth—although we have certainly seen otherwise in the non-communication of our wearying political debates.

This is regrettable but understandable. Our habits, shaped by our ecological and economic adaption, have us tensed up, biased toward relating as competitors. It's no wonder our modes of discourse have tended to be defensive and assertive, more interested in outsmarting or taking advantage of one another than we are in learning from, appreciating, and helping others advance a shared understanding. It's hard for us to listen well and then add meaningfully to our understanding of what is happening to our village and what we can do about it. All too seldom do we deeply hear and metabolize what others say, and learn from it and be affected, and then respond intelligently and creatively. Rarer still are the occasions when our responses are truly heard, so that there is not only shared understanding, but a conversation that moves forward. Rarest of all is the revolutionary act of inquiring together, listening for new emerging possibilities, experimenting with them, and advancing into genuinely new territory.

As a human family, very few among us have learned to trust ourselves or one another enough to engender such a breakthrough of discourse. We don't know how to be undefended, authentic, and curious in each other's presence. We don't know how to ask and listen to the big questions we are facing, let alone how to do that together, with all the vulnerability that implies. And if we do, it is with a special few, and only with people with whom we share many values, understandings, capacities, and perceptions.

Realizing that none of us has a handle on the whole truth helps us to maintain what philosophers call "epistemic humility." It is the opposite of "epistemic closure," the closing of the mind to perspectives we have an aversion to. Epistemic humility requires us to really know, deeply and consistently, that however much we know, what we *don't* know is just as important, and probably more significant.

The common current conversational praxis, even when it seeks mutual understanding, usually tends to value the speaker's own perspective above others, rather than prioritizing conversational synergy and the emergence of something new. It's understandable, though, for many of the reasons examined in this book—data smog, the consensus trance, the shadow of fear, and numerous other factors. It's no wonder that truly creative conversations are not terribly common—even among people who are motivated, serious, and who largely see the world in similar terms.

But many of us don't share the same worldview, or even the same ideas about what constitutes a good conversation. As pointed out in the previous chapter, any worthwhile conversation depends on the participants sharing a common ground—of knowledge, attitudes, values as to what contributes to meaning, and even modes of conversation. The “community of the adequate” for worthwhile scientific discussions must have enough specialized knowledge to understand and participate. Every worthwhile conversation needs some shared agreements, even if they are usually unstated. We must agree about what is interesting and relevant and what isn't, about what constitutes a valuable contribution to the conversation and what is a distraction, about listening to one another and noticing the implications of what is said. Generally, we need to share a worldview, or at least some of its critical elements. Every discussion must have what we can call “terms of discourse” in order to be coherent and focused—and in order to keep us from getting sidetracked, ambushed, or bogged down in irrelevancies. It is the implicit context of every serious conversation—so pervasive we usually don't even notice it.

OUR MOST SERIOUS CONVERSATIONS AND THE WALLS AROUND THEM

Within the boundaries of these agreements, some of humanity's most consequential conversations are taking place now—and here. I am using the word “conversation” expansively, to include bodies of cultural discourse that contain books and articles and scientific research and conferences as well as countless conversations. Brilliant intellectuals—scientists,

philosophers, scholars, futurists, and sages—are making use of our best knowledge and wisdom to imagine (and even to reimagine how to imagine) the future. They are offering hypotheses, refining them, inquiring into their implications. They are challenging themselves to anticipate and respond to coming challenges and opportunities. Sometimes they engage public conversations about politics and policies. But they are also participating in conversations that make no concessions to public opinion or political realities. They unleash their best intelligence to take in the implications of our civilizational and planetary tipping point—and then go (in conversation) to where almost no one has gone before in imagining possible futures and alternative ways of being.

These conversations about what is happening, and what it all means, have found their way into distinct cultural neighborhoods. In each of them, one or another of humanity's many forms of genius is in conversation with itself, working out its best understandings, channeled through the minds and hearts of brilliant individuals all over the world. In each of these separate cultural neighborhoods, we are considering how our predicament affects our village and the ways to halt its metaphorical slide into the sea. In some of these conversations people are considering how we can invent our way out of our troubles, or how we can adapt. In others, we are considering how to return to a right relationship to the living earth, and how to be authentic and healthy versions of our selves under the changed conditions of our probable futures. In still others, we are considering the nature of how the future will unfold, in and through ecology and technology and culture, as they interact, and how we can practice being the best versions of ourselves.

These conversations—and the boundaries that define and protect them—are precious to everyone involved. We are implicitly aware that our worthwhile conversations are already overcoming formidable obstacles. In the process we naturally gravitate toward people who share our worldview, our values, our cognitive biases, our cultural sensibilities, and our ways of validating truth. We have unstated agreements with them, through which we coalesce a community of coherent discourse. With

that in place, we get traction and the conversations move forward, and we refine our understanding.

Each of our conversations, whether consciously or not, has established terms of discourse. These rules filter out perceived irrelevancies and stupidities—anything too frightening, alien, or that otherwise threatens the foundations of our worldview. They violate our terms—meriting what Paul Kingsnorth has named “terms of dismissal”—so we decisively close our ears. Certain conversations are too discordant, depressing, or potentially destabilizing. They are a preposterous waste of time—irrational, deluded, ridiculous, beneath contempt. They are pernicious, oppressive, dangerous, or potentially destructive and/or evil. They are utopian or nihilistic or fascist or soulless or irrelevant. So we don’t hear them at all. We shut them out.

This serves the necessary function of shielding us from cognitive dissonance that we instinctively sense might confuse or distract or otherwise undermine our conversation. Excluding alien discourse allows us to tune in and focus on a delimited community, a smaller conversation that we can make sense of. The human organism functions well only within a certain range of stress. If we could not in effect tune out big chunks of the human conversation, we fear we would be overwhelmed—like trying to use the internet without a good search engine. We would at least lose our ability to gather with a smaller circle of congenial conversation partners, and advance human understanding. Without some agreements, we wouldn’t be able to have any real conversations at all.

So our discourse tends not to question certain foundational assumptions. And, in the process, even our best conversations self-select their way into isolation from one another. We inevitably tune out more than just the ill-informed, paranoid, delusional, or otherwise irrelevant discourse. We also write off whole bodies of serious, original, vital conversation about our shared and personal futures. We shut out the communities whose contributions are most significantly different from our own areas of greatest competence. We are unable to listen to and learn from them, at least not right now. We are too busy with our own important work!

CONVERSING ACROSS OUR BUBBLES: WHO AREN'T YOU LISTENING TO?

In a hypercomplex world, the future will be shaped by myriad factors, so no single perspective or worldview can account for it all. It is inevitable that we all see the world through a particular lens. The integral evolutionary cultural ecosystem came into being in a great attempt to integrate all truths into a fully adequate metatheoretical narrative. Wilber's achievement in that regard should never be undervalued.

But every perspective, no matter how inclusive, is both true and partial. Structural limitations constrain our efforts. However complete our perspective, it will be subject to limitations. So the attempt to achieve "a theory of everything" is a contradiction. By standing somewhere, anywhere at all, there's much we will *not* be able to see. We can account for the limitations of our perspectives, though. Simply by "being in conversation with" differing perspectives, being informed by their insights and concerns, we can emerge from the universal myopia that otherwise pertains. However, as we have just seen, that is not an easy or quick task. We tend to automatically shut out perspectives that deeply clash with our own worldview. If we are truly serious about this necessary conversation, in which we live into the question of our time, we do well to enter into conversation with perspectives we otherwise would dismiss and ignore.

Who are you refusing to listen to? It depends on who you are.

If you are fundamentally optimistic, you probably don't want to listen to those who are deeply pessimistic about our human future, whose attitudes sound only like a self-fulfilling prophecy. And if you have faced the "terrible truth" about our situation, you don't have much patience with the delusion-reinforcing narratives of the various species of "hope addicts"!

If your primary value is reason and scientific progress, you probably don't take very seriously the voices of mystics, yogis, or sages. But if your worldview is informed by spiritual awakening, or even psychological and philosophical introspection, you may have a hard time respecting what can be achieved exclusively by science, technology, objective measurements, and rational logic.

If you are a “person of action”—an entrepreneur, politician, activist, or journalist—you are probably impatient with scholars, philosophers, mystics, and poets. If your interest is in human psychology, you are probably dismayed by the rampant superficiality that is so often justified in the name of pragmatism or action.

If you have achieved social or cultural or professional prominence, you may feel superior to those who have not, and reluctant to waste your time listening to them. If you are participating in marginalized subcultures, you may well critique and reject the “arrogant” systematic cultural biases by which our cultural gatekeepers define the bounds of legitimate mainstream culture.

If you are a global citizen, you probably feel superior to “provincial” people who haven’t seen the world. But if you are a farmer, deeply rooted in your knowledge of your particular place and its weather and cycles and creatures, you probably think urban dwellers and world-travelers are blind about something essential.

If you are a person of color, an immigrant, or a gender nonconforming individual, you probably are tending to judge others who are not sensitive to your experience—especially white people—as privileged and ignorant and morally deficient. And if you’re white, you probably feel subtly superior to marginalized people, without even realizing it, since much of your privilege, understandably, tends to be invisible to your own eyes.

If you inhabit a worldview that is committed to positive action, constantly investing yourself in engaging the resurgent creativity of innate human goodness, you probably have trouble hearing the views of those who posit a darker human nature. And if you are actively confronting and seeing the darkness in the human soul, you probably don’t have much patience to listen to those who avoid facing it as you have.

These are only a very few of the many divisions among our ways of being human and ways of conversing. But, as we have seen, these many divisions naturally organize themselves according to certain broad worldviews—traditional, modern, postmodern, and integral. In each of these cultural neighborhoods we see vital conversations about the human

future—conversations in which human intelligence has been unleashed to make genuinely new discoveries that can push the envelope of human possibilities.

Because we can converse only with a limited number of other people and perspectives, we need to exercise “terms of dismissal,” to protect our conversations from irrelevant digressions. But in the process we reinforce our worldviews and prejudices.

Humanity’s best intelligence is grappling with our predicament in specialized conversations that don’t interact. Each fails to benefit from edifying challenges to its implicit assumptions. The terms of discourse that defend our most consequential conversations are preventing their integration and advance. Human civilization as a whole is held back from the catalytic, healing integral discourse out of which we could bring our best intelligence to our collective decision making.

INNOVATORS, ECOLOGISTS, AND EVOLUTIONARIES

Let’s consider three ongoing bodies of discourse about our human future. Each of these is immensely important, but each takes place more or less in its own bubble, separate from the other two ongoing conversational threads. I am calling these three groups the *innovators*, the *ecologists*, and the *evolutionaries*.

Each of these groups is engaged in a serious conversation in which an aspect of humanity’s best current intelligence is asking the most central questions it can about the human and more-than-human future. Each is making real discoveries, and each is facing, preparing for, accounting for, and creating our future in unique ways. Although each of these conversations embodies perspectives that are partial in some respects, they each are accounting for aspects of reality better than either of the others. Each of these conversations is going on separately among three distinct expressions of humankind’s intellectual leading edges. The *innovators* reflect the brilliance and limitations of modern worldviews, capacities, and values. The *ecologists* reflect the vision-logic, deep empathy,

and limitations of the postmodern worldviews, capacities, and values. And the *evolutionaries* express the metasystemic holism and limitations of spiritual awakenings and integral capacities and values.

Each of these conversations has diverse participants; each contains much nuanced thinking and many controversies. But each of these conversations is acknowledging and addressing essential dimensions of reality that will shape our shared future. When it's happening, each conversation may seem to be *the* most important conversation of all—and participants often tend to talk more than listen—which can lead to “epistemic closure.” So the participants are not really in active conversation with one another.

Our predicament and critical moment of truth requires this to change. Each of these conversations is vital. Each represents a crucial dimension of humanity's best intelligence and wisdom. They each are engaging important perspectives that have vital contributions to any adequate consideration of our future.

These perspectives often tend to be distinct and it is fine for them to stay that way. It is not even appropriate for them to try to arrive in full agreement with each other. They each have a different genius and a distinct function, intellectually and culturally. But by interacting they can each evolve in important ways. If each is more fully “in conversation with” the others, that dialectic can begin to “true up” all three bodies of discourse, and all participants, and thus it can evolve culture.

Let's introduce them in turn, painting a brief (and necessarily oversimplified) picture of each.

Innovators

I use the word “innovators” to describe people committed to creating an intelligent human future by means of creative scientific and technological innovations. They include entrepreneurs like Bill Gates, Larry Page, Elon Musk, and John Mackey, as well as writers and thinkers like Sam Harris, Nick Bostrom, and Ray Kurzweil. (It's not an exclusively masculine crowd, but the current stars are mostly men.) For the most part (but with significant variations), they largely subscribe to a powerful,

internally consistent story about the nature of reality and of our future that goes something like this:

Positive advances driven by human reason, science, technology, and cultural innovations are even more central to our probable future than is our ecological predicament. Climate science and climate change are real and sobering; clearly many disasters are inevitable. But we can innovate rapidly and wisely, respond to new problems, and a benign future can result. Our biggest problems can be addressed by identifying their essential discrete categories and devising effective solutions. Important innovations might include some that are environmentally significant, like carbon-neutral energy and transportation systems, capturing and sequestering atmospheric carbon, restoring the health of the oceans, reducing and recycling waste, and more. They also include advances in artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, robotics, and bioscience.

When we harness the miraculous powers of technological innovation to those of the free market, nearly magical progress results. We are most focused on imagining positive futures on Earth. At the same time, it is wise to hedge our bets by exploring geoengineering and learning to travel through space and colonize other planets. It was inevitable that an intelligent species would make some mistakes and learn some hard lessons on our home planet. But we will resolve these problems and/or adapt to them. In the meantime, it is critically important that we innovate wisely and that we not turn back. Progress is directional, urgent, and potentially miraculous. It is our job to create a future in which human intelligence enables us to overcome our constraints. The human future has unlimited potential.

Their conversations range widely. They are curious to explore issues surrounding life extension, the replacement of human labor by that of robots, the emergence of artificial “superintelligence,” and the exploration and colonization of outer space. They debate the timing of social changes such as the adoption curve for driverless cars, cheaper and higher-efficiency batteries, electric vehicles, and a guaranteed annual income. They are highly individualistic, but resonate with both conservative (usually libertarian) and liberal (at least socially and culturally liberal) attitudes. Innovators are trying to accurately imagine, design, and

execute the radically transformative advances that will uplift the human future. They have the knowledge, data, intelligence, and resources to capitalize on the best information and predictions, and they are highly entrepreneurial—moving ahead at a remarkable pace. As a group, they possess tremendous knowledge, power, and money, which they sometimes devote to laudable humanitarian efforts.

To innovators, the achievements of modernity loom very large—the fact that science, industry, free markets, and liberal democracy have delivered millions from a brutal, exposed existence to lives of unprecedented safety, comfort, knowledge, mobility, and creativity. It is not clear to most of them that anything important can be gained, even psychologically, spiritually, or existentially, from deeply contemplating the collapse of industrial civilization or its catastrophic destructive impacts. They are suspicious of doomsayers and Luddites. Their curiosity tends not to extend very deeply into realms where reason cannot translate inquiry into concrete responses. In general, they have not learned to “abide in” profound unanswerable questions, or to appreciate what can be gained by doing so. In general, it is hard for them to fully take in the likely cataclysmic impacts of our ecological and cultural crises; they are cognized only abstractly.

Innovators respect the biological, climate, and ecological sciences, but most of them resist synthesizing them into a holistic ecological or integral worldview, especially if they suspect it might be hostile to continuing economic and technological progress. They are, in general, skeptical of nonmaterialistic models of reality. Although they may appreciate scientifically validated mindfulness meditation, they usually dismiss even intelligent transrational spirituality as “New Age” silliness. They tend to interpret the tangible fruits of scientific and technological advances, including their own success, wealth, and influence, as evidence of their own relevance and rightness.

But they are only seeing part of the picture. They are at the leading edge of a vector of thinking and creativity that will have far-reaching impacts on our human future, so their insights are tremendously consequential. But what they are able to see is by no means complete or

conclusive. And what they are able to accomplish, however impressive, is not necessarily wise and benign. Even though they are able to imagine exponential technological progress with granular insight, they do not and cannot know exactly how the future will unfold.

Society and culture are hyper-complex, as are the ecological dynamics of the living world. Innovative achievements will bear their fruits in a dynamic future that will be significantly shaped by biological system dynamics that include elements that this group does not understand as fully as do the ecologists. The future will also be shaped by cultural and spiritual dynamics about which they can learn much from the evolutionaries.

A series of technological breakthroughs and fixes are an insufficient response to our predicament. The biosphere is not analogous to a machine; it is a dynamic living system. Is it possible that it has interiority, sacredness, and inherent, intrinsic value? It is important not to dismiss this possibility, especially not without investigating it thoroughly.

As powerful as the innovators may be, they will not be alone in creating our shared future. It will be cocreated by the whole biosphere, including all its other human beings and nonhuman creatures, including many that don't see the world the way they do. Innovators would do well to find other serious and intelligent ecologists—conversation partners who can open their eyes to vistas they tend to exclude and challenge their assumptions.

However, certain innovators are the masters of contemporary society; they are wealthy, powerful, and very influential. Their power confers upon them special responsibility. What do they have to gain by listening to ecologists or evolutionaries? Their best reasons are rooted in intellectual and moral integrity. They are in the process of creating the future, so what they do is consequential. For them, epistemic closure exposes them to the risks of myopia, recklessness, and a poisonous legacy. They would benefit from becoming curious about, learning from, and entering into conversation with both ecologists and evolutionaries.

Ecologists

Those most willing to contemplate the full implications of climate science and the implications of the problems with the cornucopian myth can be called “ecologists.” They have internalized the persuasive but terrifying pessimistic narrative expressed in the next two paragraphs:

Scientific modeling and measurements tell us that we have already overshot our natural planetary carrying capacity. In fact, we have now begun to degrade it significantly. We have inadvertently caused a massive series of species extinctions (the sixth Great Extinction event in our planetary history) and many interpenetrating ecological crises. It may be too late to avert horrific destruction, but it is certainly not too late to radically change the ways we live. We civilized humans have become dangerously destructive to our fellow creatures, indigenous cousins, and all the cycles of our Mother Earth.

The most important issue of our time is the future of the more-than-human living world. Alas, it may already be too late to restore health to the biosphere in time to prevent the breakdown of social order in civilized societies. People have so many psychological barriers to facing this reality that we generally fail to face the existential issues of our time. What is worthwhile, satisfying, and meaningful amidst this reality? How can we best relate to and learn from our fear and grief and anger? What remains wonderful amidst these terrible truths? How shall we live and relate to one another? Can we live in a more authentic way? How can we honor and defend and care for and be sustained by the living earth now?

I have raised many of these questions here in this book, because they are fundamental and necessary questions. If the “terrible truth” of our predicament is the primary issue of our time, ecologists are the ones who have had the strength of mind and character to first face it squarely. As we earlier observed, denial is the first stage of grief. We humans are reluctant to accept our losses, especially the inconvenient truths of global warming and ecological destabilization. People have powerful psychic barriers to accepting pessimistic narratives, so our consensus trance defaults to

denial of our predicament. Since we sense that pessimism might be a self-fulfilling prophecy, we recoil from any worldview or narrative that suggests we will be unable to rise to meet our crises. Ecologists are those who have the intellectual integrity and moral courage to go beyond our commonplace denial and face reality.

The Dark Mountain Project in England came into being when Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, facing the likelihood that humans were not going to address global warming in time to prevent civilizational collapse, wrote a manifesto, founded a literary magazine, and organized a festival. They connected with others willing to face what they were facing, pondering the stories worth telling, the songs worth singing, the conversations that are meaningful under these circumstances. They join with the mythopoetic movement in contemporary culture, as expressed in the work of Martin Shaw, Robert Bly, and Michael Meade, who are recovering and sharing wisdom and inspiration from our most ancient stories. They are also “in conversation with” some wisdom from indigenous teachers. And indigenous wisdom is crucial to the time ahead. They are the only people alive who know how to live happily under zero impact conditions. The Pachamama Alliance was founded when the Achuar people of the Ecuadorian Amazon asked Lynne and Bill Twist to help them “change the dream of the north” to a happier future earth. Ecologists also bring the intelligence of the living earth into the conversation, so they are holding some of the most crucial of human intuitive wisdom.

Joanna Macy, Carolyn Baker, Derrick Jensen, Andrew Harvey, Michael Dowd, John Michael Greer, Peter Russell, and David Abrams have done something at an analogous level (but each in very different ways) in the U.S. Philosophers and activists are enlarging this human confrontation with reality in Europe, Australia, Asia, and Africa. James Hansen, Michael Mann, Vandana Shiva, Paul Hawken, Nicolas Hulot, and Bill McKibben have become influential, internationally recognized leaders in the practical activism that our climate predicament requires.

All these people have allowed themselves to depart from our consoling social consensus in order to inhabit a worldview that requires a

new level of character and grit. Such voices must be at the table for our conversations to be complete. Some of these perspectives are grounded in science and data predicting ecological disruption. Some also offer the well-founded, rational arguments for respecting the complexity and nonlinearity of the biosphere, regarding it as a living system that is in some ways robust, but in other ways fragile, with finite adaptive capacities that impose limits to the growth of human economies. And some help the conversation land in the soul, and proceed with its guidance.

Ecologists, as I am defining them here, recognize that the world monetary economy is not our ultimate context; it is a subset of Earth's ecology. They extrapolate from our present experience that continued human population growth will result in more pollution and more mining and drilling and consumption of natural resources, with intensifying impacts on the quality of our air, water, and soil. They recognize that we will probably be crossing critical thresholds that could carry us past certain tipping points, unleashing positive feedback loops that exaggerate the imbalances even further. Although some of them find grounds for significant hope, they do not hide from the implications of the coherent Malthusian narrative that connects the overshooting of carrying capacity and the drawdown of nonrenewable resources to the probability of the severe degradation and eventual collapse of human civilization. The grim data on recent, rapid global temperature increase provides powerful evidence for this view, and suggests that a cascade of additional difficult, irreversible effects is already (at least in part) unavoidable.

Further, ecologists also think metasystemically. They appreciate the enormously complex nature of our global ecological community. They have opened into a profound and soulful recognition of our relationships with our larger biotic planetary community. They recognize that humans are only a part of a greater whole, the living Earth, Gaia—and that our well-being depends upon Gaia's health. They are curious about an eco-psychological shift, not only into stewardship and regard, but also into deep learning and communion with the larger natural world. Similarly, many ecologists (such as Bill and Lynn Twist and John Perkins) are taking the lead in opening to the wisdom of indigenous elders, arguing

that their long success in living in harmony with nature is a key source of guidance in relation to our current predicament.

They respect reason and science, but are highly skeptical of the confidence (they would say arrogance) of technological optimism and scientific materialism. To them innovators seem blinded by an egoic psychological self-centeredness that denies reality. Some of them are also dismissive of spiritual responses to material challenges (such as those of evolutionaries). Evolutionaries, to them, seem good-hearted, but naive, ineffectual, self-indulgent, and irrelevant. To them, neither innovators nor evolutionaries seem able to have a reality-based conversation about the human future, and this only deepens their sobriety.

However, as a group the ecologists too are seeing only part of the picture. They are willing to face and process realities that others will not, and for this they deserve great respect. But, like other perspectives, theirs tends toward epistemic closure. Like all of us, they tend not to be able to recognize that their understanding of reality, however much it does account for, is still incomplete. Reality is alive and dynamic. So are the potentials of technological and social innovations. If ecologists really see the emergency they've described, and if they are fully committed to co-creating the future, then they need to find conversation partners among the innovators and evolutionaries.

Ecologists need to remind themselves that they do not and cannot entirely know how the future will unfold. Humans for millennia have shown a built-in propensity to be attracted to apocalyptic thinking, so that must be factored in to ecological epistemic humility. This is especially important because beliefs can function as self-fulfilling prophecies.

Another potential pitfall is righteous contempt for differing perspectives. It risks exerting a dangerous, potentially regressive, destructive influence on culture. Optimists are more likely to thrive than pessimists, even when their expectations are less factually accurate. Therefore, it may be a moral failing to propagate a dark vision of our ecological future that leaves no space for possibility and hope.

Ecologists recognize the sacredness of the living earth. That can be extended to the human experiment. Human culture and civilization

reflect something beautiful and transcendent, despite their destructive impacts. The same evolutionary impulse that has driven biological evolution can be seen in human culture. Even if it unleashes destructive powers, it is an expression of something good, true, and beautiful. It deserves to be honored. In their revulsion to human delusion and their reverence for the nonhuman world, some ecologists risk veering into unproductive and even pathological misanthropy.

Doubting technological optimism is legitimate, as long as that doubt is tempered with epistemic humility. Technological changes will likely be a central factor in shaping our planetary future. Ecologists might need to understand and partner and converse with innovators. They also would do well to enter into deep conversation with evolutionaries. They need not suspend all their doubts about whether there really can be dramatic changes in culture, consciousness, and human behavior, but they would do well to acknowledge that these are hypercomplex, unpredictable domains, which means that they cannot rule out their potential for emergent transformation. Changes in consciousness and culture may be as essential to our shared future as reducing our dependence on fossil fuels.

Ecologists may need to partner with evolutionaries to deepen into epistemic humility and a more expansive, multifaceted dialogue. Ecological initiatives will bear their fruits in a dynamic future shaped not only by ecological factors, but also by social, cultural, and technological changes. Ecologists' own discourse risks irrelevance if it refuses to listen to, be informed by, and evolve through conversations with innovators and evolutionaries.

Evolutionaries

"Evolutionaries," as I define the term here, includes everyone whose worldview has been reshaped by wholeness—through awakening as well as integral and evolutionary worldviews. Evolutionaries make a unique contribution to this conversation. When we are at our best, we are quite aware that even our own perspectives are "true but partial," so we're willing to turn the mirror on ourselves, and to humbly learn even from people whose perspectives seem to us obviously incomplete.

I have previously described the nature of integral evolutionary consciousness and culture—including its awareness of wholeness and its impulse to enact it, its humble optimism, and its willingness to engage life as a never-ending practice. It is clear to us evolutionaries that our actual human future will be shaped by the chaotic interplay of many factors—*both* interior *and* exterior. Changing patterns and habits and practices of consciousness and culture will interact with changes in ecology, biology, behavior, and systems—often in startlingly unpredictable ways. It is obvious to us that every perspective (including those of innovators and ecologists) contains important truths, even as it may inevitably leave out other important aspects of reality. When we are actually walking our talk, we relate to everyone and everything as a teacher.

My colleagues in evolutionary culture are refining and clarifying a new integral evolutionary worldview, articulating it, educating people about it, raising awareness, and actually empowering people to develop their spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and civic lives. We have spawned dozens of diverse initiatives that are catalyzing real positive changes in people's lives. Our project is profoundly gratifying. We naturally gravitate toward this transformative work, inviting others to join us in a kind of elegant, evolutionary spiral. We can identify and praise many remarkable evolutionary accomplishments.

And we are capable of critical self-examination. The integral evolutionary perspective is often compared to an eagle's-eye view of the territory. The eagle has a sweepingly inclusive point of view. It sees the ocean, the river, the mountain, the meadows, and the creatures. As evolutionaries, our panorama extends into the past and future of our developmental processes. It feels to us like we have an all-encompassing perspective. But we can see that there are limits to that achievement. The eagle can also see that there is much it cannot see—beneath the trees and bushes, hidden in crevices, burrowing under the earth, there are territories and creatures it doesn't notice. Those creatures can smell and taste and touch and know local realities that lie outside the panoramic perception of the eagle. Every perspective, even the most comprehensive, is in its own way partial. The integral evolutionary worldview—even with its active

interest in science and philosophy and activism and self-transformation, even with its panoramic awareness of how states change even as world-views constellate and self-reinforce—tends not to notice its own limits. That tendency toward arrogance is inherent to *any* perspective.

So we realize that a single perspective will always be limited. A truly integral awareness must be informed by, or “in conversation with,” a wide range of viewpoints different from our own. The practice of being “in conversation with” other perspectives is crucial to participating in a reality that is shaped not just by everything that does loom out to our notice, but also by narratives of people seeing things in ways very unlike we are, so we are curious to recognize every partial truth that is being held by the people we disagree with. We must keep valuing and practicing *epistemic humility*, “knowing that we don’t know” so clearly that we never stop learning. As a result, even though we might think we can clearly see the characteristic limitations of innovators and ecologists, they are deeply engaged in a conversation that might have something crucial to teach us. We can recognize that we must be in conversation with and learn from these other serious people.

An integral consciousness can hold paradox. It can advocate for its perspective without denying the legitimacy of conflicting ones. It can model and teach listening and receptivity without imagining that receptivity equates to agreement. Truly evolutionary dialogue refuses to get bogged down in oppositional sophistry. Its conversations are never win-lose or zero-sum. This allows those conversations to go deeper.

Mature evolutionaries can even mobilize passion and emotional intensity without becoming aggressive. This makes for dynamic, playful, creative conversations. If all participants are willing to be challenged, they are then freed up to challenge one another. That means we can take more risks. We don’t have to be right. We can even point out our differences and explore them. Consequently, evolutionary conversations can lead to much greater intimacy. They also can move through a much bigger territory of thought and imagination.

Therefore, I think evolutionaries have a sacred responsibility to convene catalytic conversations. And we can recognize that if we do so with

any degree of arrogance—any degree of blindness to our own limitations—this will present a critical obstacle. And yet, as we’ve pointed out, everyone tends toward subtle arrogance—evolutionaries most definitely included. In fact, historically this has been our biggest liability. So we proceed humbly, with caution, curious to learn whatever this task will teach us. We think we are capable of epistemic humility. But we are also entirely capable of arrogance and delusion. Let’s aspire to humbly get beyond that hubris or tragic pride, and self-critically find our courage to offer our bold contributions.

That means we are obliged to practice, to keep becoming our very best selves, and to be of service. Some of us can help convene a whole series of necessary conversations. Some of us have been working to serve the emergence of integral we-space and the practices of evolutionary dialogue as described here. Some of us are helping convene or facilitate transpartisan conversations like those just mentioned. And others will focus on another body of crucial global conversations, ones that will draw upon lessons learned in all these domains, to invigorate productive conversations among different tribes, ethnic groups, classes, nations, religions, and political factions. And some of us will focus on an emerging discourse with innovators and ecologists about faithfully cocreating an auspicious future.

WHO REALLY OWNS THE FUTURE?

All of us—ecologists, innovators, and evolutionaries—are holding a different necessary “bottom-line” perspective on our predicament and our future. There is something to be deeply revered and respected about the foundational sacredness and sensitivity of the living earth. There is something to be revered about the dynamic creativity of reason and science, and the potential good it can do.

There is also something to be appreciated and honored about a multidimensional, holistic, process-oriented evolutionary understanding of reality. This evolutionary view, advocated here, is awake to (and as) consciousness, wholeness, and sacredness, and yet able to converse meaningfully with

innovational and ecological insights, priorities, and realities. It is the participant in these conversations that should be most keenly aware of the provisional and nonultimate nature of all perspectives, and therefore able to be the most open and catalytic participant in such conversations.

It is difficult enough for us to achieve profound, meaningful, groundbreaking conversations, even *within* our chosen communities and shared worldviews. It is wonderful but, alas, rare to be listened to intelligently and thoroughly, and to be heard deeply. For a conversation to genuinely advance understanding, the participants must take in what is said, letting it penetrate their preconceptions and actually affect them. We must listen and open up and allow ourselves to be changed. This usually requires moments of shared silence. Then we must be able to articulate what we have understood and the questions it brings forth in a way that is observant, insightful, and grounded. And we must then be heard by our conversation partners, who must receive what we have said.

This iterative process can build a momentum of intelligence and care that propels it through familiar turf into new territory. This sometimes happens, but not nearly frequently and deeply enough. It is dramatically more rare, almost unheard-of, for *communities* of conversation to enter into productive dialogue *with one another*. To do that they must surmount even deeper challenges. They must bridge diverging vocabularies, competencies, stories, values, worldviews, identities, and styles of interaction. But this is what will be necessary for us to bring our fullest capacities to address our megacrisis. Yet at present, even wise human beings are only very occasionally honoring voices from other communities of discourse as real conversation partners, and then usually only on their own terms.

Each of these three conversations is now mostly independent of the others. Each is rooted in a worldview and perspective that sees a whole dimension of reality crucial to the future—one they've earned the hard way over time. Each brings an expertise or capacity that is absolutely necessary for a conscious relationship to the future of our species and planet. But it would be a mistake to think that we can learn each of these and synthesize them into a new, radical holism that would adequately include them all.

Rather, each of these perspectives is analogous to a lens. We must look through a lens to see what it reveals. And we cannot gaze through multiple lenses at once without losing sight of what each uniquely reveals.

Each of these different truths is far-reaching. They are not something anyone can quickly consume, understand, and summarize. The communities of innovators and ecologists are specialists in a meaningful and holistic sense—both intellectually and experientially. We evolutionaries should listen to them, learn from them, and become related to the world they see. And they would do well to reciprocate.

It is unrealistic to expect that we will soon witness the iconic leading lights among the innovators or the ecologists coming forward to reach some sort of grand agreement that spirits the whole culture into a higher synthesis. Rather, the early stages of these conversations will probably involve a few thoughtful participants from each of these conversational worlds choosing to talk with each other. If they do so with openness and curiosity, and if the conversation is well facilitated, a catalytic synergy will slowly, tentatively develop. That conversation will hopefully pique broader interest and participation, over time coming to inform the primary discourse of both the innovators and the ecologists.

No matter how successful the project is, tensions between the ecologically minded and the progress-minded will continue. This is one of our culture's "enduring polarities." Even if we succeed in reaching agreement on broad principles, the devil will inevitably emerge in the details and a host of new questions will arise. For example:

We may come to agree that we should constrain our own human presence on the planet in order to minimize damage and to care for Earth's recovery, but by how much?

We may come to agree that some emergent kinds of technological progress could *possibly* provide solutions for our human future, enabling us to restore a more sustainable human presence on the planet, but how far down such roads can we go, knowing that these decisions may directly or indirectly cause additional ecological damage?

We may come to agree that cultural uplift is crucial, but what kinds of education and cultural initiatives will really work? Can we cooperate to generate larger-scale cultural change?

Evolutionaries will immediately recognize the value of such conversations. Gradually, more and more individuals in both the ecologist and innovator camps will realize the importance of “out of the box” conversations like the ones I’m proposing here. More and more people will be humbled by events and insights. And these conversations, when they are successful, will attract more participants. The possibilities opened up by epistemological humility will be visible. More and more individuals will be willing to step outside the boundaries of their faction’s chauvinistic attitudes and tacit codes. If the right kinds of invitations, conversations, and facilitation appear, a new wave of crucial conversations will change not just *what* we think and do but *how*—with far-reaching effects.

This dialogue will probably start slowly. The innovators’ conversation especially tends to be hermetically sealed, made confident by its superior cultural status and power, and defended by “skeptics” committed to attacking perspectives and evidence that challenges their reductive mindset. A great moral certainty arises among ecologists that makes epistemic humility profoundly challenging for them as well. Evolutionaries too will need to give up a subtle sense of epistemic, moral, or evolutionary superiority. But courageous, creative conversations will take place, and they will show some measure of progress. These conversations will, in time, uncover compelling commonalities, subversive points of agreement and insight, potential for innovative synergies, and much more. Experiments in dialogue and we-space will inform some of these boundary-spanning conversations.

Because the innovators effectively own the cultural mainstream, cultural progress will require overcoming resistance to the insights of ecologists and evolutionaries. These are the conversations that must be advanced, and to gain additional influence they will need evolution and refinement. This is where radical integral ecology can play a key role in the evolution of our central conversation. It is a step in the direction of that integration, a move among integral evolutionaries to open into

deeper conversation with radical ecologists. Integrated, their perspectives may evolve to represent the needed corrective medicine that can inform the innovators' conversation about the future it is so busy creating.

But we must start where we are. In our subcultures of discourse we tend to gather only with those with whom we can most readily resonate, grouped around a limited range of conversation topics, always in ways that share various tacit assumptions. When we are most lucky, courageous, creative, and smart, we actually break into new ground with our conversation partners and our conversation moves forward and evolves. Changing this is an art. Like the divisions and frictions across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion, differences in worldview will have to be honored and engaged in ways that acknowledge those differences without intensifying divisions, and that elicit mutual understanding and encourage courageous shared inquiry.

It is important to bring together all the leading-edge conversations about our human future. How else can the best of their diverse knowledge and wisdom synergize on behalf of our collective human and more-than-human future? It will begin with a few courageous ideological apostates, defecting from the insular superiority of their camp. That trickle, if their conversations are fruitful, might become a stream and then a river, the vanguard of something extremely consequential. These conversations can matter. Convening and facilitating them will be a privilege and a precious opportunity.

WHERE IS AN INTEGRAL REVOLUTION?

These conversations will arise in a world that will be rapidly changing. We are already living through a greater and more primal revolution than we tend to realize. It is a commonplace observation that we are living in revolutionary times. But we are slower to recognize the multidimensional and radical (or "integral") nature of our current transformation. It defies our categories even as it is reshaping them.

This epochal "intervention" demands that each of us steps across a threshold into a new reality. As we've said, that means whole-system

change—an integral transformation, implying new consciousness, behavior, culture, and systems. We must find our way into the newness organically, rather than conforming to our ideas of what things should be. But we can catch a vision of what this revolution requires by noticing that it has multiple bottom lines:

Interior: This revolution's essential nature can be viewed as *subjective*. It is a transformation of our way of experiencing life and reality and sharing it all with one another. It is a multifaceted revolution of consciousness and culture.

Exterior: Simultaneously, this revolution's essential nature can equally be viewed as *objective*. Whatever is not lived and acted upon is only partially real; *to be*, fully and altogether, is also *to do*. We are ultimately asked to enact a revolution in the way we work, eat, relate, reproduce, raise our children, and create the new. And it is a revolution in the way we feed, house, clothe, transport, warm, and cool ourselves. It is a revolution in the agreements, rules, policies, and institutional structures and systems through which we cooperate and adjudicate our conflicts, and through which we regulate and power our relations with one another, with other living things, and with Earth itself. It is even a revolution in the way such agreements and structures can continually change and renew.

Individual: You can only truly understand this revolution when you choose to live it. If it is not happening within you personally, now, and again in each new moment, it disappears, concealed from your view, and becomes unknowable, abstract, and unreal.

Collective: And yet you cannot recognize and choose it without enacting it with others. The revolution inside you needs to integrate with the revolution taking place inside others; otherwise even this process of self-recognition is incomplete. And once mutually recognized, the integral revolution implies mutual enactment. It is pondered abstractly only until it is lived, and lived *now*. And yet it is also an organic, lifelong, ongoing multigenerational process.

It is a revolution of paradox—already, in a real sense, a *fait accompli*. And yet it is also nascent, barely beginning, an insurgent underdog, in need of our personal, heroic participation. It is also in its prime, in

mid-stride, and on the verge of emerging victorious. And failures will be inevitable, because the more things change, the more they stay the same—there's a real sense that nothing ever changes.

The revolution is also an ancient process, stretching back at least ten thousand years. From a future perspective, historians may look back at the entire period from the emergence of tribal societies to the singularity as a single evolutionary event, a single revolution in consciousness, becoming self-aware and self-actualized as a trans-planetary phenomenon—the coalescence of the planet as a single, unified conscious being, what Teilhard de Chardin called the “noosphere.”

Yet even from where we stand, as sentient motes in the light of awesome cosmic processes, there are textures and qualities to this revolution that we can call out:

The radical turnabout that is upon us is *holistic* and *integral*.

It cannot be reduced to a revolution of sustainability, even though that certainly looms urgently.

It is not merely a political revolution, although it will inevitably eventually reshape our politics and institutions.

It is not *essentially* a technological or scientific revolution, although it certainly includes all of that in a profound way.

Nor is it merely a cultural and psychological and spiritual revolution, even though it is transforming our interior lives in ways more profound than we commonly realize.

It marks a revolutionary transformation in the whole trajectory of human evolution, especially our relationship to our planet and our whole human and nonhuman family, and yet it is not merely ecological.

It is already happening in individuals and in relationships, in families and communities, in businesses and schools and organizations of all kinds.

And it is almost invisible to us—even as the process accelerates.

So let's talk.