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Wholeness and Fragmentation

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

The word “whole” derives from the same etymological root as do the words “hale,” “heal,” and “health.” It may even share the same proto-Indo-Aryan root syllable with its homonym “holy.” In the context of this book, the most meaningful synonyms for “wholeness” are “integrity,” “coherence,” and “health,” and its most meaningful antonyms would be “fragmentation,” “corruption,” “incoherence,” and “disease.”

But, beyond those definitions, wholeness is radical. It might even be said to be the most essential nature of reality. Contemporary science points us in that direction. Matter and energy are not separate, nor are space and time, we are told. All living things are family, says our DNA. But even

those observations don't capture the radical nature of wholeness—or its slipperiness.

Above all, we might say that wholeness is elusive. No definition is sufficient. We cannot think our way into it. It is not something we can wrap our brain around—not the brain we have now, at least. But a consideration and contemplation of wholeness can be very revealing. And this consideration is absolutely essential not only for any spiritual or sacred activist, but for anyone wishing to understand the multifaceted nature of reality, or of what's really happening in our world.

An idea commonly spoken of is that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” That conveys some of the flavor of wholeness. The word “synergy,” which means “working together,” refers to holistic dynamics that are greater than the sum of the parts. Activism requires synergy. Although synergy has many definitions and applications in the sciences, it points to the fact that the interaction of seemingly separate processes can create results that are utterly unpredictable if we simply examine the parts themselves. Activism is a multifaceted process involving many people, many parts—and so is all of reality. This is all the more true when one considers the elusiveness of the Whole itself, in its most radical sense. Everything is related, everything is contained in the Whole, and we do not even know what “everything” consists of!

Today's society—and even today's greatest scientific and technological successes—all express fragmentation, which, as we've said, is the antonym for wholeness. Above all, today's culture and mindset reflect fragmentation. We learn how things work by fragmenting them, taking them apart. Kids, at least in the predigital generations, would take things apart to find out “what makes them tick,” and with skill, persistence, and luck, would find out how they worked, or be able to fix them. Science works along the same principles: it digs in and analyzes the parts. Western medicine also works along these same lines; this is especially epitomized in the principle of surgery. Find the offending organ or system in the body, and deal with that.

The problem with fragmentation at any level—whether in science, academic studies, politics, culture, or even the ways we use language—is

that it can make the Whole not only elusive but invisible. It is a separative approach rather than a holistic (or “wholistic”) one. It breaks things down into their component parts and mechanisms, and learns a great deal—including gaining the reintegrative vision of our evolving cosmos, and the revolutionary powers of science and technology. But analysis only takes a given part and studies it. The fragmented approach often forgets the larger context of the item studied—so it examines and reifies its understanding of it apart from its relationships. And yet nothing exists in isolation.

Even the way we speak of ourselves and others betrays the sense of isolation and fragmentation that colors our “consensus trance.” It has often been pointed out by mystics and philosophers, and even some scientists, that our self-identity is a construct based on conventions of thought, memory, and language. “I” am thought to end at the surface of my skin, yet everything about me is utterly dependent on and related to my surroundings. If the environment were withdrawn for a moment, “my” body/mind would cease to exist. To ignore this is to ignore that all of life is a massive global ecosystem, a living system in a dynamic universe.

Once we acknowledge our interdependence in its totality—of being contained in the unimaginable context of the whole—certain things become obvious. One is that the “us versus them” mentality in *all* its myriad forms—“them” referring to people we view as other, or an environment or biosphere we view as other than ourselves—is not only unhelpful but is based on an illusion. Another is that our situation vis-à-vis the Whole is inconceivably more vast and mysterious and awe-inspiring than our minds can imagine. We cannot “know” it, but we can apprehend it, and our intuition of wholeness takes the form of awe, wonder, or love. Fear, hatred, discord, and often certitude itself are the products of obsessive fragmentation. If we choose our intuition of wholeness—whether through contemplative and meditative practices, or through opening the doors of relationship to others, or through study—we usually become better able to face all the more conditional, limited realities of our lives. We even become better able to make a positive difference by acting in constructive, synergistic ways.

One result of looking at our situation—at our planet’s situation—more holistically is that we can more clearly see how a greater wholeness holds the human prospect. And that wholeness is not and could not be endangered. In fact, it is ever resurgent, no matter what. But we can also see that industrial human civilization—and even human-friendly planetary conditions—are endangered indeed. The data on which we base these findings are, of course, products of analysis—and fragmentation is absolutely necessary to help us know facts and act on them. But today’s earth and climate science, with all their data and analysis, point to a nonfragmented totality. Scientists today see, as never before, just how interdependent everything is.

While apprehending the fragility of our situation can be fragmenting, terrifying, and depressing, the lesson of interdependence also points to something from which we can draw hope and confidence—a deeper dimension of things; the natural *telos*, or attractive power, of wholeness.

Even while things are very noisily falling apart, they are always also silently coming together, in diverse, remarkably inexorable ways. Wholeness is dynamic. Although “wholeness” is a noun, it refers to an active *process*—a natural tendency for fragmented or distorted energy to restore its natural, more coherent flow. We heal from illness and from wounds. Life restores and reasserts itself every spring.

Interdependence also points to how awesome and unfathomable the universe is—not just the observable, physical universe, but all of life, all of experience. We do not know and *cannot* know ultimately what the Whole “consists of.” This is both humbling and inspiring. We are not separate from anything, and yet all the “anythings”—the totality of everything—can never be counted and measured. That means we can relax our fears. We can know that we are not separate and can never be separated from wholeness.

We can open our imagination to be instructed by the great saints and other individuals who have appeared in our midst, who have understood and told us about these wondrous paradoxes. If the world is big enough for great teachers and great activists, and even great enlightened sages who have understood the mystery of existence, then wholeness

must be able to find its way into the inner lives of human beings. If it finds its way into the inner life of human beings in general, then it will be expressed in our outer works, and no consequence will vanquish us. At the same time, there is more reason than ever to be committed to embodying love in action, to take care of what we love. Activism simply becomes, as Joanna Macy has said, something we naturally do.

FACETS OF WHOLENESS

Aside from the infinitely vast totality of life and of possibilities, we can make other interesting observations. Buckminster Fuller famously pointed out that “I seem to be a verb.” And as we’ve just pointed out, wholeness is a dynamic activity, always in process. Wholeness naturally reasserts itself, in ways we know and, undoubtedly, in ways we don’t know. Wholeness has agency. Things *want* to move toward wholeness. “Immune responses” are observed not only in biological organisms, but in social and cultural ones. We see similar processes throughout the natural world. And we see them in the human psyche and spirit.

We can think of wholeness in many ways, and none are final or complete. We have considered it as the *boundless totality* of everything. We can also think of it as *source*—that from which all of life, all existence, springs. Or, borrowing more from Western thought, we can think of it in a *teleological* sense—as that final omega point toward which everything is heading. We can consider its *integrative* qualities of bringing everything together (much as integral theory attempts to do). And we can certainly think of it as *radical*, meaning literally at the root.

Perhaps wholeness is so paradoxically *all of the above at once* that it interrupts every distinction with a reunification. Therefore, by its nature it can never be fully known in the terms of conventional subject-object consciousness. It is a radical mystery, perhaps intuitively grokkable only when there is no difference between the knower and that which is known.

Our mind tends to want to “grasp” things. But it can only relax in the presence of radical wholeness—in a state of “mind-blown” amazement. Once the whole is apprehended to that degree, perhaps we might begin

to learn to think “*from the whole to the parts*” in a way that gives birth to a very different worldview.

Mysteriously, we could say that wholeness has a kind of purpose: wholeness, already self-complete, seemingly wants to be felt and lived more fully, known more completely, articulated and expressed more richly, and enacted with more power and integrity and grace. We will see more about that in the next chapter on evolutionary consciousness. It is a process that has no end.

It should be obvious from what has been said that wholeness is not synonymous with any one idea, system, framework, philosophy, or pattern of understanding; it resists being “owned” by any school of thought. Rather, it is a *context* for such systems, frameworks, and philosophies. Wholeness transcends all perspectives, and is owned by no particular perspective.

WHOLENESS, SCIENCE, AND SPIRITUALITY

Wholeness is the central principle of humankind’s most ancient wisdom, pointed to (but not captured) by many names—from the “unspeakable Tao” of ancient China to the indivisible Brahman-Atman of the Vedas to the “being” ascribed by Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers to the God (Yahweh, or YHWH) of the Abrahamic religions. Wholeness is signaled indirectly in much of the world’s spiritual wisdom—apophatically invoked in the agnostic psychology of Buddhism as well as in the “cloud of unknowing” of Christian mysticism.

Modern secular readers may need to translate, because wholeness was most often signified by the ancient texts with religious words like “God” that pose challenges not only to our knowing but to modern scientific beliefs. However, the divine was not always conceived of as an anthropomorphic mythic deity; the wisest esoteric mystics of every great tradition have long understood divinity in transpersonal and usually transcendent terms.

That higher wholeness, or God, was the source of the most profound inspiration. But it tended to be conflated socially with mythic religious dogma, and then to function as a kind of “final word,” stifling doubt and innovation. Only by freely examining, measuring, testing, and analyzing

the component parts of things have we known them rigorously enough to discern the physical laws of nature, and to translate them as physics, chemistry, and biology.

That kind of “knowledge of the parts” is the source of the world-transforming power of Western humanistic science. We have analyzed the particular dynamics of the apparently separate phenomena comprising wholeness, and integrated the fragments of our hard-won knowledge into a series of increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive theories that have increased our powers to understand and control those phenomena.

But all along, even as some human beings harnessed the power of knowledge by slicing reality into ever-tinier slivers, others were trying to glean its deepest meanings by integrating those fragments into a clearer perception of its seamless totality—sometimes in ways that reintegrate science and religion.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one of the first scientifically informed Western descriptions of wholeness emerged among German idealist philosophers like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Although they used the theological language of their day, their perspective can be stated something like this:

While transcending all its parts, God (our original wholeness and divinity) has manifested itself through the physical world. Evolution—the often meandering but steady and inexorable emergence of new and “higher” forms of existence, from matter to life to human beings—is how the spirit of that wholeness and divinity has unfolded in time and space. And that spirit is still unfolding. The implicit potential of that wholeness and divinity are gradually made explicit through evolution.

Michael Murphy, a founder of Esalen and the human potential movement, describes this worldview as an “emerging canon” that—although currently mostly surviving and thriving only on the margins of the academic, scientific, and religious mainstream—will eventually capture the world’s imagination. He also points out that it is already a more satisfying integration of our most essential inner and outer data than naive scientific materialistic positivism or traditional religious belief.

Not that we will ever abandon the incredibly useful, subject-object, parts-to-whole analyses of science. My spiritual experiences have transfigured my worldview, but not in a way that exempts me from rational accountability to the evidence, or that disconnects me from the scientific mode of testing and validating knowledge. I recognize the necessity to closely read the facts and evidence around our rapidly evolving world.

We can apply “both/and” thinking. On the one hand, I can appreciate that it is important not to confuse facts with theories, documented evidence with elegant syntheses, or scientific knowledge with mystical vision. On the other hand, I can appreciate the power and value of intuition and vision, and the moral importance of human growth and transformation. There’s no need to marginalize any kind of valid human experience or knowledge. Wholeness, by its nature, does not exclude any perspective; it invites us to inquire into how they can all coexist.

Certain aggressive “skeptics” zealously guard the citadel of science as if it were threatened by this whole realm of discourse, deriding it (and even the most meticulous, rigorous, hard-headed research into super-normal human capacities) as “woo-woo,” “fuzzy-headed,” or “pseudoscience.” The skeptical enterprises sometimes make valid and important points, especially when attacking superstitions, sloppy thinking, and careless statements. But they often attack “straw men” with an excess of righteous contempt, acting as though materialists are incapable of errors or biases.

There is an important distinction between engaging in measurement-based science and intuitively synthesizing a more adequate, inclusive, nuanced worldview. Or between evidence-based science and preliminary research to explain paradigm-defying phenomena or anomalies. These activities should not be conflated or confused. It is valid to critique the naive enthusiasm of unsophisticated people who appropriate scientific ideas in support of idealistic wishful thinking. But there is an equally valid critique to be made of the attempt to delegitimize sophisticated discourse that appreciates intuitive insights and higher states of consciousness, or that intends to learn from the implications of mystical experiences.

The project of integrating human knowledge includes a great body of work that inspects the evolution of the states and structures of interior consciousness, sometimes correlating them with the evolution of exterior physical structures. This work validates the potential for—and, indeed, supports the importance of—awakening into higher states and stages of consciousness.

In this context it is useful to distinguish prerationality from transrationality. Archaic consciousness was prerational; it had not yet become capable of applying reason with rigor. Transrational consciousness is not only capable of using reason, it has developed enough to be awake to and interested in realities beyond the reach of reason. It is able to accept that there are dimensions and dynamics of reality that have not yet been (and some that may never be) fully measured, validated, or described by the physical sciences. It even allows that these are potentially important. Quite a few distinct transrational fields of study have now emerged (from the noetic sciences to transpersonal psychology to contemplative neuroscience to integral philosophy), and practitioners in these fields have entered into conversation with experiential explorers of the experience of wholeness—*contemplative* practitioners.

In part, what these new fields of study have done is to embody a new kind of intelligence, grounded in intuitive wholeness and expressing its health. Where is its point of view located? Where exactly does wholeness stand? Wholeness cannot really be visualized, except perhaps as an exploded sphere “whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.”²³

The center may be everywhere, and yet it is also at the heart. Subjectively, wholeness is most readily intuited by our heart intelligence (to which we will return in chapter 6). It is felt at the heart, and can be most readily experienced via the breath. Wholeness is transmuted at the heart into our wisest feeling-impulses—like care, appreciation, well-being, affection, strength, generosity, and courage.

Thus, wholeness is infinitely profound. High mystical states are experiences of wholeness. In these states, divisions fall away—between self and other, matter and energy, experience and experiencer, consciousness

and phenomena. With no knower there can be no known, no subject and no object, no boundary of any kind. A self-validating sense of wonder, joy, bliss, and love subsumes everything. This radical wholeness is “prior” to the experience of divisions that appear to subject-object consciousness. The most profound utterances of ancient scriptures, of mystics, of poets and philosophers are often infused with the spiritual fragrance of the presence of this felt wholeness. It is, indeed, the essence of sacredness and holiness.

This urge toward wholeness also expresses itself in our era’s renaissance of a living, more than merely rational spirituality. Perhaps the greatest experts on paradoxical wholeness—this totality that simply cannot be grasped with subject-object thinking—have been humankind’s great mystics and spiritual masters. Wholeness goes by many different names: “suchness” or “Buddha nature” or “the Self” or “awareness” or “open intelligence” or “spirit” or “God” or “love” or “wonder,” to name just a few. Whatever name they give it, millions of spiritual practitioners are now students of wholeness in one way or another.

Because it takes one to know one, there is a backlash too. From the perspective of subject-object consciousness (the mode of science and most rational discourse), this unitive apprehension of wholeness is an entirely subjective experience—even perhaps a hallucination with no intrinsic meaning—rather than valid “knowledge” of the nature of reality. It cannot be tested and verified or falsified, like valid scientific knowledge. So it tends to be excluded from “mainstream” rational public discourse.

Wholeness may be ignored or denied, but it doesn’t go away. It is self-validating and resurgent—in part because it not only carries with it a sense of peaceful clarity about the nature of things, it sometimes seems to elicit wise behavior, and even a kind of “grace” or good luck, which enables people with such an intuition to be a harmonious influence on others. Although many people these days report achieving these states of consciousness, at least for brief moments, it is still extremely rare for someone to stabilize a powerful direct intuition of such wholeness consistently and to sustain it over time.

Increasingly, however, intuitions of wholeness have begun penetrating mainstream culture. This trend is inexorable. It will ultimately breed broad recognition that intuitions of wholeness can coincide with “attention to the parts,” informing and uplifting the dispositions of scientists and researchers.

CONTRACTING FROM WHOLENESS

The world’s ancient mystical traditions tell the story of wholeness and fragmentation in esoteric terms, in terms of consciousness and energy. This account directly tackles the paradox that even though our underlying reality is wholeness, the predominant experience of human beings is one of fragmentation.

These traditions all suggest that divine wholeness is the most fundamental nature of reality, and it is unbroken and unblemished—and yet human beings separate themselves, becoming “egos” instead of harmonious expressions of and participants in that original wholeness. This is the ancient esoteric meaning of “sin”—in Greek *hamartia*, “to miss the mark” by losing touch with and denying wholeness itself. A nuanced process-oriented version of this primal narrative holds that the ego is less an entity than a *present activity*. All conscious embodied beings experience reflexive shock at their mortality and vulnerability, and keep recoiling into separation, presuming the position of a separate self in a world of separate entities and processes. This present activity takes place at an “extremely subtle” or “causal” level of being, entirely invisible to ordinary conscious awareness. Wholeness, although unbroken, is not an object in our field of vision and so escapes our notice. From the perspective of mortal beings, wholeness is always being fragmented by this activity of self-contraction—so consistently that separation does not seem to be an activity at all; it just seems to be “the way things are.”

This whole event of contraction is a process within a continuous field of potency or energy—the vibratory substrate (called “conscious light” by mystics) that contemporary physics tells us is the “stuff” of all matter and energy. The divisions that are experienced take place in a field of

force or energy, and so do the reactions or results. So wholeness is constantly being fragmented. And yet that's only half the story—*wholeness is also always reasserting itself*.

There is a tendency for disturbed energy to regain the continuous flow or circuit that is original to it. Thus, the innate wholeness that is the nature and form of reality always tends to reassert, resume, or reinforce itself. This tendency is experienced subjectively in individuals as a desire for health, awareness, love, or wholesomeness. The pressure of this desire opposes the tendency toward contraction, fragmentation, division, solidity, and separation—the dualistic mind of “me and that” that results from the activity of contraction.

Things don't only keep loudly falling apart; they are also always quietly coming together. Wounds heal. The immune system mobilizes and the disease runs its course and health is returned. And we can participate consciously in this process, intensifying it. The reassertion of health and wholeness is stronger when it is supported by a strong sympathetic intuition of the prior unity or wholeness of existence. The intensifying fragmentation around us summons an intensifying subjective impulse to join with others out of care for the whole, restoring wholeness when we can.

The most radical teaching about wholeness and fragmentation can be found simply in the prior unity of all opposites and conditional experiences. Contraction creates the experience of separation and division and dilemma. Problem or dilemma, then, is the essential structure of human suffering. Subtly, it is presumed by all individual egos, in every ordinary activity, and even by traditional mystical and spiritual paths that strategize ways to reunite with a wholeness that has somehow been “lost.” But the problem cannot be radically solved from the perspective of the separation it presumes in the first place. Seeking relief from separation doesn't work. We can only awaken from the dream of separation and recognize that it isn't true, and never has been.

And, in the meantime, entirely apart from our seeking to escape separation, health and wholeness and integrity keep reasserting themselves. Our attraction to wholeness drives our healthiest and noblest choices and

aspirations. Even more fundamental than seeking, it is woven through our character. So, when we are healthiest and most conscious, we live a wholesome life.

CHALLENGES TO LIVING A LIFE OF WHOLENESS

Wholeness is the simplest and most fundamental of all values and properties. And the burgeoning, evolving transrational worldview described earlier, embracing all expressions of wholeness, should support us in this quest to live those values.

Yet a contemporary life that embodies wholeness is stubbornly elusive, especially when our world is complexifying and fragmenting so rapidly.

Human life and consciousness are enormously complex. We experience ourselves as individual and apparently separate human beings composed of many subpersonalities and drives and faculties and levels of capacity. We are always finding ourselves in contexts that require us to account for ourselves as separate individuals—like relational exchanges where we have distinct roles and are guided by rules. But the wholeness of the natural world inexorably evolves, seemingly indifferent to our apparently separate identities.

How can we account for all the fast-moving complexity? We can't. And there is no pause button—our lives keep confronting us with discrete, specific challenges that require timely responses. So we act, react, or fail to act. Have we adequately accounted for wholeness? There is no source of objective feedback.

And as profoundly as we have evolved on all levels, the habits of our neurological hardwiring still retain a deep thread of primitive conditioning that tends to cognize big abstractions like “the whole” as something “out there”—separate from the self, and thus not important to our lives, at least for now. For the vast majority, even among apparently “highly evolved” people, the good of the individual, family, group, tribe, political party, city, or nation trumps the good of the Whole (which, again, is viewed as a separate “thing,” apart from us). This helps explain the contempt of many politicians as well as ordinary citizens for our

climate and environment; the mind of parts doesn't notice that the economy is a subset of the ecology. This thinking encourages separate selves and separate groups to compete against "the other" for limited resources. It encourages and rewards our cannibalization of the commons and of Earth.

But a system, culture, or civilization built on this model will eventually fall apart. Because *everything* is a part of the Whole, the well-being of all parts depends on the health of the Whole. The failure of humans to see and embody this has resulted in a chaos of disconnection, in which most individuals and organizations "game the system" in one way or another, gaining advantage for themselves at the expense of the collective. Corporations are incentivized to maximize their shareholders' advantages, and they often do so at the expense of the commons. Citizens game corporations and governments if they can. In this respect, we enable one another to degrade our shared well-being. Each of us then functions something like cancer cells or tumors, sapping the health of the larger body politic. We have recently reached a level of social complexity that has created countless hiding places for such cancerous "memes." This is what has produced the chaos, fragmentation, conflict, and disintegration now occurring all around us.

Our looming crises, likely centuries in the making, are a result of this mind of separation—countless generations of humans living, striving, and creating from a consciousness partially defined and compromised by fear, separation, division, conflict, and competition.

What is ironic and can seem vexing is that separative thinking (also often called "subject-object consciousness") is so damn productive. The symbols and ideas that are creating so much confusion, division, conflict, and fragmentation are the very mental tools that have paradoxically made possible the advance of human knowledge and progress. We separate our "subjective" awareness from the "objects" we perceive, notice differences, identify our preferences, and exert our efforts to achieve effects. By separating wholeness into component parts, we perceive, distinguish, analyze, measure, and increasingly comprehend these parts. This allows us to construct frameworks, categories, and criteria for knowledge; protocols for

rigor, observation, and investigation; and techniques to apply knowledge in ways that, over time, have given us enormous powers.

The cognition of separate parts has been an immensely potent move. It has enabled us to discern and manipulate the laws of physics, the structures of matter and living organisms, the underlying principles and dynamics of energy, and the relationships and interactions among infinitesimal particles in the subatomic realm. It has enabled us to understand the structures of living organisms; the fossil record of biological evolution; and the secrets of the atom, relativity, galaxies, deep space-time, and the quantum universe. It has empowered our engineering of all the innovations that have transformed human life over the past five hundred years.

The power acquired through “knowledge of the parts” has been an enormous blessing. But it has also been a curse. On one hand, it has been the key to most human creativity and progress, through the world-transforming power of Western humanistic sciences. And yet it has become an unconscious habit that has estranged us from the Source of our very being. We are addicted to it, and often reflexively drawn into it. It is part-and-parcel of the “consensus trance.” It is a continual source of reinforcement for a particular and limited way of being, and often leads to a contracted, reductive, narrowed view of the world, through which lazy minds cognize separation, division, conflict, and destruction—not only among men and women, but between humans and nature.

But the mind of science has long been confronting the implications of a multidimensional, evolving, integrated reality, grounded in wholeness and expressing it. Wholeness is not in tension with science; it is the message of our best scientific understanding of life. Science is in the process of recontextualizing and ultimately contradicting the story of separation, even though the separative habit remains strong in the minds of many, including many scientists.

In hindsight, we can see how much cultural evolution has unfolded out of separative consciousness. Out of this consciousness, and with the powers it has given us, we have created a complex global civilization that expresses a “consensus reality” that dreams up more radical separation, division, conflict, and competition than our science tells us is real and natural.

And we have created a vast web of rapidly deteriorating and unsustainable institutions and social and environmental conditions, which now threaten the future of our civilization and a human-friendly biosphere.

This habit-based separative consciousness is now *itself* tending to become a real danger to our survival. It has already led us to an evolutionary impasse. Acting from this consciousness cannot be ultimately effective. Such actions reinforce their own operating assumptions, habits, and patterns. “Good works” done from this state of consciousness will not ultimately save us. Whether it’s more educating, innovating, recycling, conserving and legislating; more donating, volunteering, protesting, organizing, and demonstrating; more good intentions and great ideas; trying harder, being smarter; knowing what’s wrong and what’s possible—none of these things can ultimately succeed. If we act from separative consciousness, even all the good things we do will inadvertently reinforce the separation we presume, so our good deeds will inevitably spawn additional problems.

Advances in technology, scientific knowledge, cultural values, spiritual vision, and psychological sophistication are remaking the world so rapidly that there is ample reason for hope. Yet it is this lower, primitive structure—this consciousness rooted in separation rather than wholeness—that responds unskillfully and even destructively to evolutionary challenges. It must be alchemically transformed if we are to rise to a new evolutionary octave.

The most cutting-edge sciences in every field, the deepest psychological insights and spiritual teachings in human history—these will not save us until we *integrate* them into our selves, our institutions, and our cultures. Otherwise they will remain like unread books on library shelves. They only come alive when they live in us and we live them in life.

Something unprecedented is required from us now if we are to survive and thrive. And that something new must be grounded in wholeness and in consciousness. It is *who we are and how we see* that holds the potential for the necessary radical leap. That is why, in the next two chapters, we explore how an evolutionary perspective and an integral framework provide foundation and fuel for this increasingly urgent imperative.

CARE FOR THE WHOLE: INTEGRATING ACTIVISM AND AWAKENING

How can we remain consciously rooted in a deep, unifying intuition of prior wholeness—and live from there? How can we be the very presence of that wholeness in action? How can we be the agency of wholeness that heals division?

It is perhaps *the* question of our time. Activism and awakening are two great projects with the potential to be integrated in a way that can liberate a profound, hidden, and world-changing synergy. There is deep kinship between our urge to awaken to Reality and our impulses to make the world better through our dedicated service. When they connect deeply, our public life is uplifted and energized. A higher integration of awakening and activism might have the potential to generate a movement of wholeness adequate to address our current challenges of fragmentation.

But shadows too often fall upon both of these great purposes. Both activism and inner awakening intuit a higher wholeness and intend to bring it to life. But it is profoundly difficult to embody activism *or* awakening in our complex, fast-moving contemporary world in a way that is not in some way subtly naive, incomplete, avoidant, self-serving, or otherwise ineffective—sometimes even destructive.

Our resonance with wholeness is fundamental to our urges toward both activism and awakening. Whether we know it or not, most of us are inspired to penetrate the illusion of separation, and yearn at some level to integrate everything healthy and noble and holy in ourselves and in the world.

And yet even “awakeners” and activists commonly picture themselves as separate and estranged in the way I described above. The habit of human thought and speech is simply to imagine ourselves separate from and independent of what we think about and describe. The mind imagines that every object of attention exists by itself, separate and independent from other objects and from us.

In a universe of more than three hundred sextillion suns, and mind-boggling numbers of atoms, subatomic particles, and, supposedly,

unimaginably greater amounts of “dark matter” and energy, we see a world of separate entities, and we ourselves feel separate, discrete. From there, the full integration of everything can begin to seem like a mystical abstraction or a utopian ideal, rather than inherent and obvious and heartening.

We’ve thus tended to leave wholeness and integration out of our activism and awakening. Our energies tend to flow in one direction or the other, at least in each moment of experience—inner or outer, activism or awakening. Yet recognizing and intuiting the underlying wholeness of existence is essential to the kind of intelligence that our predicament—and potential—demands.

Activism and awakening each aspire in some way to heal the fragmentation of human experience. And they each partially achieve this. Awakening cultivates a wholeness in our personal awareness and life that puts us profoundly in touch with our moment-to-moment experience. It restores our relationship to wonder, to the essence of life and death, and to all sentient beings.

Activism strives for a wholeness in our social relations, our political and economic systems, our institutions, and our structures of power.

These expressions of inner work and outer work are complementary, but each is, in its own way, incomplete. The obvious thing to do is to bring them together in a greater wholeness that draws on the strengths of each of these two great purposes, finds common cause, and innovates new synergies and greater efficacy. A “movement of movements,” if you will—an ecosystem of wholeness.

Of course, there are and have been great spiritual activists—from Jesus of Nazareth to Mahatma Gandhi to Mother Teresa to Martin Luther King—who have exemplified some integration of these two purposes, of the inner and outer work, as we saw in the last chapter. And vital public conversations have continually emerged among spiritually inspired activists, from the students of Gandhi and King, to Quaker peace initiatives, to Catholic liberation theology.

Wholeness is also expressed in the modern work of those attempting awakened activism—including engaged Buddhists like Joanna Macy,

deep ecologists like Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, compassionate climate activists like Paul Hawken, Bill McKibben, Michael Dowd, and Connie Barlow, and sacred activists like Andrew Harvey, Marianne Williamson, and Charles Eisenstein. All of these individuals seek to evolve activism and advance social change in service of wholeness.

We also know that there are countless unrecognized “awakening activists” doing good work every day. The more we look, the more we find these everyday heroes and exemplars of wholeness in action.

There is a resurgence of wholeness wherever science and spirituality find ways to be in authentic dialogue, such as the Mind and Life Institute conferences on neuroscience and dharma involving the Dalai Lama. There is wholeness in Pope Francis’s climate encyclical, arguing for “integral ecology.” There is an opening into wholeness in the attempts to integrate our knowledge about the evolution of matter, life, and mind as chapters in a single story, the “Big History” championed by David Christian and Bill Gates.

Nonetheless, a *movement*—a broad, self-aware, culturally effective arising of awakening activism—has yet to truly take root. The discourse, practices, institutions, narratives, values, and cultural structures and agreements of a greater integral wholeness are only just beginning to appear.

CULTIVATING WHOLENESS: A PRACTICE, A PROJECT, AND AN EVOLUTIONARY IMPERATIVE

Once we become attuned to wholeness, we can begin to see it showing up everywhere around us. And once we seriously commit to and intentionally orient ourselves toward wholeness, we can embody a deliberately more inclusive and expansive approach to every aspect of our lives. We can cultivate a more wholesome and essential relationship to life. We can evaluate our actions by more holistic standards. We can create new practices, unfold new strategies, and form new organizations explicitly oriented toward emergent wholeness.

We can call such a bias toward attention and commitment to wholeness—with the potential to counteract and transcend the fragmentation

of our postmodern world—an *integral impulse*, and those who express it *integralists*. This orientation is part of the answer to that urgent, rubber-meets-the-road question of our moment: How can wholeness be *lived*?

Thankfully, although an enormous transformation—still in the future—is called for, this orientation is already emerging in many corners of contemporary culture.

I have had the privilege and fortune to participate in a number of specifically integral initiatives over the past forty years—from my life in a profoundly integrative spiritual ashram to my work as an integral teacher, coach, and cultural leader. I've witnessed the birth of what I call the *integral evolutionary ecosystem*, comprising many such initiatives and practitioners. Yet, viewed alongside the scale and complex dynamics of our challenges, all such projects are obviously early versions of something much more powerful that has yet to fully emerge.

Despite our present cultures of separation, polarization, and alienation, we are not separate or disconnected. An integral transformation of *ourselves* and our relationship to this larger web, and the discovery and development of new, holistic ways of being and doing, are becoming evolutionary imperatives.

We are being called to our next stage of evolution and to a new level of consciousness. We are being called to evolve beyond the exploitive, cannibalizing behaviors arising from narrow self-interest, and to embody values that serve the greater good of the whole. We are being called to develop a new revolutionary framework for our global culture, based in a profound realization of our interdependence, our prior and ultimate wholeness and unity.

This evolution of human nature can be nurtured by an integral practice that combines inner work with altruistic service and action in the world. In the next two chapters we will explore both an evolutionary perspective (chapter 4) and an integral framework (chapter 5) that will allow us to understand and arrive at a simplicity on the other side of complexity, from which we can express wholeness in just this way.