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# HEALING THE PLANET

## *AN INTEGRAL DIAGNOSIS AND PRESCRIPTIONS FOR THE CURE*

Ervin Laszlo

In the last few years, and especially since the economic-financial crisis of the fall of 2008, it has become painfully clear that there is something seriously wrong with our world. The media is full of reports of crises, and various experts offer suggestions on what to do about them. But for the most part the diagnosis and the cure are highly sectoral and partial. There is talk about the financial crisis, and the overall economic crisis. Then of the environmental crisis and various resource-crises: energy, food, water, among others. There is also talk about consumerism, power-hunger, and greed. There is no integral, encompassing overview of what's wrong, and what's needed to correct it.

This study attempts a systemic analysis of the world's health problem. It reviews the factors that make the planet sick, and suggests the nature of the treatment that would heal it.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. What's Wrong with the World? Toward an Integral Diagnosis**

An integral analysis shows that the contemporary world is

- (1) socially, economically, and ecologically unsustainable,
- (2) saddled with irrational behaviors, and
- (3) governed by obsolete beliefs, and aspirations.

#### **1.1 The Elements of Unsustainability**

**Unsustainability in society.** The contemporary world is polarized; there is a large and still growing gap between rich and poor, powerful and marginalized. The gap is expressed in economic terms, but it's a social reality. It depresses the quality of life, and even the chances of survival of vast populations.

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed account is in Ervin Laszlo, *WORLDSHIFT 2012: Our Chance to Change*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, and Toronto, Canada: MacArthur & Co., 2009.

Wealth and income differences have reached staggering proportions. At the end of 2008 there were an estimated 946 billionaires in the United States—fifty years ago there was not one—of which 178 were added in 2008 alone. The combined wealth of the world's billionaires equals the income of nearly half the world's population: three billion poor people. Eighty percent of the global domestic product belongs to one billion people, and the remaining twenty percent is shared by nearly six billion.

Poverty has not diminished in absolute numbers. The World Bank estimates that of the total population—currently nearly seven billion—1.4 billion live on less than 1.25 dollars a day and an additional 1.6 billion on less than 2.50 dollars. In the poorest countries seventy-eight percent of the urban population subsists under life-threatening circumstances: one in three urban dwellers lives in slums, shantytowns, and urban ghettos, and more than 900 million are classified as slum-dwellers.

The gap shows up in food and energy consumption, and in the load placed on natural resources. People in North America, Western Europe, and Japan consume 140 percent of their daily caloric requirement, and populations in countries such as Madagascar, Guyana, and Laos live on 70 percent. The average amount of commercial electrical energy consumed by Africans is half a kilowatt-hour (kWh) per person; the corresponding average for Asians and Latin Americans is 2 to 3 kWh, and for Americans, Europeans, Australians, and Japanese it's 8 kWh. The average American burns five tons of fossil fuel per year, in contrast with the 2.9 tons of the average German. The American places twice the environmental load of the Swede on the planet, three times that of the Italian, thirteen times the Brazilian, thirty-five times the Indian, and two hundred and eighty times the Haitian.

Social structures are breaking down in both the rich and the poor countries. In poor countries the struggle for economic survival destroys the traditional extended family. Women are obliged to leave the home in search of work. They are extensively exploited, given menial jobs for low pay. Fewer women than ever have remunerated jobs and more are forced to make ends meet in the "informal sector." According to the International Labour Organization fifty million children are employed for a pittance in factories, mines, and on the land, for the most part in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Many more are forced to venture into the streets as beggars. In some countries destitute children are recruited as soldiers and forced into prostitution.

In the rich countries the gap between the rich and super-rich and the urban and rural poor is widening. Job security is disappearing, competition is intensifying, and family life is suffering. In the U.S. the rate for first marriages ending in divorce is fifty percent, and about forty percent of children grow up in single-parent families for at least part of their childhood. More and more men and women find satisfaction and companionship outside rather than within the home.

Many of the functions of family life are taken over by outside interest groups. Child rearing is increasingly entrusted to kindergartens and company or community day-care centers. The provision of daily nourishment is shifting from the family kitchen to supermarkets, prepared food industries and fast food chains. Leisure-time activities are colored by the marketing and public relations campaigns of commercial enterprises. Children's media exposure to TV, video games, and "adult" themes is increasing, and it motivates violent and sexually exploitative behavior.

**Unsustainability in the economy.** (i) *Resource use.* The economy, in its original and basic sense, is the management of resources for the household (from the Greek *oikonomia*, where *oikos* is household, and *nemein* is manage). The global economy can be viewed as the system concerned with the management of the resources of humanity's household. In this context the global economy faces a structural crisis because, for the first time in history, the rising curve of humanity's demand exceeds the descending curve of global supply.

Until the present, human demand has been insignificant in relation to global resources. But in the six decades since World War II, more of the planet's resources have been consumed than in all of history before then. Human consumption is nearing, and in some cases has already surpassed, planetary maxima. The production of oil, fish, lumber, and other major resources has already peaked; forty percent of the world's coral reefs are gone, and annually about 23 million acres of forest are lost. Ecologists also speak of "peak water," since henceforth the quantity of water suited for human use is bound to diminish.

According to the Fourth Global Environment Outlook of the UN Environment Programme average resource demand in the world is around 8.9 acres per person. This figure masks great disparities between rich and poor economies: resource availability drops to 1.23 acres in the poorest countries such as Bangladesh, and mounts to 25.5 acres in the United States and the oil-rich Arab states. However, the amount of land that could sustainably respond to

human requirements—the “Earth-share” of every man, woman and child on the planet—is 4.2 acres.

Reducing excessive resource use is made urgent by the rapid growth of the population. World population has increased from about five billion twenty-two years ago to nearly seven billion today. Since the amount of available land remains constant—and is actually shrinking due to overpaving and erosion—the per capita availability of land for meeting human requirements has shrunk from 19.5 acres per person in 1900 to less than 5 acres today. This is the maximum share of the planet that’s both physically available, and is sustainably exploitable.

(ii) *The financial system.* The precarious structure of the world’s financial system is another factor in the unsustainability of the global economy. Instability in this system is not new, but it was not generally recognized until the credit crunch of 2008. The bubble that burst at that time had its roots in the low interest rates the Federal Reserve created to accomodate the after-effects of the burst of the previous Internet bubble, and this has led to an unprecedented and largely unanticipated boom in the U.S. housing market. Ever more houses were sold, at ever higher prices, and with ever more profit for banks, brokers, and the whole financial sector. The lenders knew that many people will default on their payments, but they continued to entice prospective buyers in view of short-term profits. When this practice crashed, over two million jobs were lost almost immediately in the U.S. alone. Worldwide the crash resulted in the greatest loss of wealth ever recorded apart from a major war: 2.8 trillion dollars.

The structural unsustainability of the world’s financial system is of longer standing than the creation and burst of speculative bubbles: it’s rooted in the imbalance of international trade. For the past several decades the United States has been running up a massive international debt to finance unrestrained domestic consumption. The excess of imports over exports has produced a staggering trade deficit with China and other newly industrialized Asian economies. The latter have exported more than they imported, and chalked up a large trade surplus. Presently Asian central banks are financing American overspending: they are captives of U.S. fiscal policy.

This is not a sustainable condition. Already in 2005 the IMF’s *Economic Outlook* noted that it’s no longer a question of *whether* the world’s economies will adjust, only *how* they will adjust. If measures are further delayed, the adjustment could be “abrupt,” with hazardous

consequences for global trade, economic development, and international security. Today abrupt adjustment has started, with consequences that prove hazardous for most of the world's economies.

**Unsustainability in the ecology.** Social and economic unsustainability is exacerbated by the conditions human activity is creating in the environment. The planet's wealth is being progressively overexploited and exhausted.

(i) *Water.* The amount of water available for per capita consumption is diminishing. In 1950 there was a potential reserve of nearly 17,000 m<sup>3</sup> of freshwater for every person then living. Since then the rate of water withdrawal has been more than double the rate of population growth, and in consequence in 1999 the per capita world water reserves decreased to 7,300 m<sup>3</sup>. Today about one-third of the world's population doesn't have access to adequate supplies of clean water, and by 2025 two-thirds of the population will live under conditions of critical water scarcity. By then there may be only 4,800 m<sup>3</sup> of water reserves per person.

(ii) *Land.* There is a progressive loss of productive land. The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that there are 7,490 million acres of high quality cropland available globally, seventy-one percent of it in the developing world. This quantity is decreasing due to soil erosion, destructuring, compaction, impoverishment, excessive desiccation, accumulation of toxic salts, leaching of nutritious elements, and inorganic and organic pollution owing to urban and industrial wastes.

Worldwide, 12 to 17 million acres of cropland are lost per year. At this rate 741 million acres will be lost by mid-century, leaving 6.67 billion acres to support 8 to 9 billion people. This would be catastrophic, as the remaining 0.74 acres of productive land could not produce food beyond the level of bare subsistence.

(iii) *Air.* Changes in the chemical composition of the planet's atmosphere constitute another unsustainable trend. Since the middle of the nineteenth century oxygen has decreased mainly due to the burning of coal; it now dips to nineteen percent of total volume over impacted areas and twelve to seventeen percent over major cities. At six or seven percent of total volume, life can no longer be sustained. At the same time, the share of greenhouse gases is growing. Two hundred years of burning fossil fuels and cutting down large tracts of

forest has increased the atmosphere's carbon dioxide content from about 280 parts per million to over 350 parts per million.

During the 20th century human activity has injected one terraton of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. Currently it's injecting another terraton in less than two decades. The rapid injection of carbon dioxide makes it impossible for the Earth's ecosystems to adjust. In the oceans, the explosive growth of CO<sub>2</sub> at the surface makes the water too acid for the survival of shell-forming organisms, the species that is the basis of the chain of life in the seas. On land, absorption is reduced by the destruction of the ecosystems that had previously sustained a stable climate. As much as 40 percent of the world's forest cover has disappeared, due to acid rain, urban sprawl, and the injection of a variety of toxins into the soil.

The influx of greenhouse gases from human activity is now matched by the influx from nature. In Siberia an area of permafrost spanning a million square kilometers started to melt for the first time since it formed at the end of the last ice age 11,000 years ago. A barren expanse of frozen peat is turning into a broken landscape of mud and lakes, over a thousand kilometer across. The area, the world's largest peat bog, is releasing as much methane into the atmosphere as all of human activity put together.

*(iv) Global warming and climate change.* Climate models show that even relatively minor changes in the composition of the atmosphere can produce major effects, including widespread harvest failures, water shortages, increased spread of diseases, the rise of the sea level, and the die-out of large tracts of forest. Currently the cumulative effect of the changes includes the greenhouse effect. A shield in the upper atmosphere prevents heat generated at the surface from escaping into surrounding space.

Global warming is an indisputable fact: in recent years the average global temperature has risen significantly, and the warming is accelerating. Currently debate centers on whether warming is due to human activity or to natural causes. There were other warming periods in the history of the Earth; geologists speak of alternating hot and cold stable states—"hot-houses" and "ice-houses." The best known previous hot-house occurred 55 million years ago, when between one and two terratons of carbon dioxide were released into the air, most likely by the impact of a large meteorite. This caused temperatures to rise 8 degrees Celsius in the Arctic zones and 5 degrees in the tropics. It took about 200,000 years for temperatures to return to their previous level.

Conservative elements claim that today's warming is due to natural causes, at the most exacerbated by human activity. A new cycle in the fusion-processes that generate heat in the Sun sends more solar radiation to Earth and heats up the atmosphere. Unfortunately, for the most part those who ascribe global warming to solar activity dismiss the need for doing something about it—after all, what can humans do to change the chemistry of the Sun? This, however, is a mistake. Whereas we can't do anything about the chemistry of the Sun, we can do something about reducing its effect on Earth. Doing so is indicated, whether the warming is due to the Sun, or has a significant anthropic component. In any event it's producing climate change, ecological stress, and depresses the food supply of the entire human population. (However, carbon dioxide, together with methane and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, is likely to be a significant factor in global warming. The historical record of the past million years shows that the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the air correlates with variations in temperature: more carbon dioxide goes hand in hand with higher temperatures.)

Regardless of its causes, global warming has a highly negative impact on food production; it produces nefarious changes in the climate. There are storms and violent rains in some parts of the world, and persistent drought in others. Drought has become a worldwide phenomenon.

—California is facing the worst drought in recorded history; thousands of acres of row crops have already been fallowed. The snowpack in the Northern Sierra, where some of the state's most important reservoirs are located, is 49 percent of normal.

—In Texas the drought is reaching historic proportions; it's estimated that 88 percent of the state is experiencing abnormally dry conditions, and 18 percent extreme or exceptional drought.

—The worst drought in half a century has turned Argentina's once-fertile soil to dust and has created a state of emergency. The country's wheat yield for 2009 is expected to be 8.7 million metric tons, down from 16.3 million tons in 2008.

—Brazil, the world's second-biggest exporter of soybeans and third-largest exporter of corn, has cut its outlook for these crops after assessing desiccation damage to plants in the drought-stricken regions.

—In Northern China the drought has been the worst in 50 years, creating water shortage for 4.37 million people. The Chinese government has resorted to cloud-seeding, which produced some, but not sufficient, rainfall.



—Australia has been experiencing unrelenting drought since 2004; an estimated 41 percent of its agriculture is hit by the worst drought in the 117 years that records have been kept. The devastating firestorm of February 2009, though it was triggered by arson, was a consequence of extreme dryness in the region.

—In the drought-affected regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, total wheat production has declined by more than 22 percent. Major reservoirs in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria are at low levels, and irrigation supplies from reservoirs, rivers, and groundwater have been critically reduced.

Low international food reserves exacerbate the problem of falling agricultural yields. The combined average of the stock levels of the major food exporting countries—Australia, Canada, United States, and the European Union—has been steadily declining. In the period 2002-2005 the combined reserves amounted to 47.4 million tons, in 2007 they dropped to 37.6 million tons and in 2008 to 27.4 million. Quite apart from the economics of paying for the mounting cost of food imports, these stocks are not sufficient to cover the needs of the food-deficit countries.

Biologist James Lovelock's assessment of the planet's ecological condition has an ominous ring of truth. "I now take an apocalyptic view of the future," he wrote, "because I see 6 to 8 billions of humans faced with ever diminishing supplies of food and water in an increasingly intolerable climate." (*The Revenge of Gaia*, 2006.)

## **1.2 Irrational behaviors**

An integral diagnosis of what's wrong with the world must not fail to take account of the element of irrationality in the way we manage ourselves and the environment. We have created paradoxical, unjust, and basically intolerable conditions.

Millions are suffering from overeating and obesity, and a thousand million go hungry.

Six million children die annually of starvation, and 155 million are overweight.

There are millions of intelligent women ready to play a responsible role in society, but they don't get a fair chance in education, business, politics, and civic life.

Vast herds of livestock, consisting in part of intelligent and sensitive animals, are brought into the world for the sole purpose of slaughtering them, a procedure that, apart from its questionable ethical and health implications, is wasting an enormous amount of

resources (it takes 5,214 gallons of water and 16 pounds of grain and soy to produce one pound of beef, and not much less to produce a pound of pork).

The wellbeing and possibly the very survival of humanity is in question, but most of us remain occupied or preoccupied with making money and holding on to our privileges. We fight cultural intolerance and religious fundamentalism in others, but have been, and many of us still are, willing to subscribe to virulent forms of nationalism under the banner of patriotism and national security.

We tell children to abide by the golden rule “treat others as you expect others to treat you,” but we seldom if ever treat other people, other states and other businesses as we expect other people, states and businesses to treat us.

The problems we face call for the commitment and participation of every able-bodied human being, but we put millions out of work to save on the cost of labor.

The problems we face also call for long-term solutions, but our criteria of success is the bottom line in annual or semi-annual corporate profit-and-loss statements.

The planet is bathed in energy (if fully used, forty minutes of the solar radiation reaching the Earth would cover all of humanity’s energy needs for a whole year), and technologies are on-line to derive energy from sunlight, wind, tides, geothermics, and plants, but the global economy continues to run predominantly on polluting and finite fossil fuels.

Hi-tech weapons that are more dangerous than the conflicts they could possibly resolve are being developed and stockpiled, at vast investment of money and resources.

The ineffectiveness of military force to achieve economic and political objectives has been proven over and over again, yet the world’s governments still spend over \$1.2 trillion dollars a year on arms, wars and military establishments, and similar amounts on empire-building objectives thinly disguised as national defense and security projects.

### **1.3 Obsolete beliefs and aspirations**

Some of the beliefs that guide action and aspiration in the contemporary world are now seriously obsolete and highly counterproductive. For example:

*The planet is inexhaustible.* The long-standing belief that the Earth is an inexhaustible source of resources and an inexhaustible sink of wastes leads to the overmining of natural resources and the overloading of the biosphere's regenerative cycles.

*Nature is a mechanism.* The belief that we can engineer nature like a building or a bridge is producing a plethora of unforeseen and vexing side-effects, such as the destruction of natural balances and the disappearance of untold living species.

*Life is a struggle where only the fittest survive.* The (mal)adaptation of Darwin's theory of natural selection to society produces a growing gap between rich and poor, and concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a small group of smart but often unscrupulous managers and speculators.

*The market distributes benefits.* Affluent people tend to hold on to the belief that the free market, governed by what Adam Smith called the "invisible hand," distributes the benefits of economic activity. When they do well for themselves, they maintain, they do well also for society. The poverty and marginalization of nearly half of the world's population is eloquent testimony to the fact that this tenet doesn't work in the context of today's power- and wealth-distorted global markets.

## **2. How to Heal the World. Some Prescriptions for a Cure**

Constructive steps can be taken to cure the world, creating peace and sustainability in place of crisis and breakdown. The indicated treatment prescribes new objectives in politics, business and everyday life, and requires a fundamental shift in our thinking and consciousness.

### **2.1 The Objectives of Enlightened Politics**

Enlightened politics is democratic politics: it serves the genuine interests of the *demos*, the people. The genuine interests of the people include physical survival, meaningful relations in society, meaningful social and cultural identity, and remunerated and socially useful work. Safeguarding these interests calls for political objectives that ensure the physical availability and the economic accessibility of the required resources.

*Security of physical survival* calls for access by all members of the community to the basic resources of life: adequate supplies of food, water, shelter, and clothing.

*Meaningful interpersonal relations* calls for social and economic conditions suitable for maintaining family life, and stable, meaningful, and potentially beneficial relations within the community.

*A meaningful social and cultural identity* requires a judicial system dedicated to social and economic justice, and a system of education and information that helps people recognize themselves as unique yet integral parts of a conceivably multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community.

*Remunerated and socially useful employment* requires in turn that the economy is maintained at a level where it can provide jobs for all the people who are willing and able to work.

Beyond these basic goals, enlightened politics is dedicated to objectives that are specific to a given place and time. In today's world this means commitment to economic, social, and ecological sustainability. An enlightened politics—

- Provides incentives for the use of alternative energy and resource-saving or recycling technologies, and technologies of low or zero toxin and waste emission;

- Gives priority to eco-labelled, organic, ethical, and fair-trade products;

- Works with the business community to promote practices that incorporate criteria of sustainability in the processes of design, production, marketing, and disposal of manufactured products and of the manufacturing by-products;

- Pays attention to the availability of natural common goods at acceptable cost, including energy, water, and land;

- Improves the quality and increases capacity of the public transportation system, creating realistic alternatives to the use (and overuse) of the private car;

- Channels funds to reconstruct and revitalize derelict or disadvantaged areas;

- Uses safe and efficient energy and resource technologies in public services, including electric power generation, transport, and communication;

- Monitors and regulates civil and industrial activities that destroy ecological balances and despoil or reduce wilderness areas;

Applies strict criteria for urban design and construction, requiring renewable energy technologies and efficient insulation to be part of public housing and in licensing the construction of private dwellings, commercial buildings, and industrial plants; and  
Makes accessible fields, forests, rivers, streams, lakes and seas in the surroundings with adequate provisions for the integrity of ecological cycles and processes.

## **2.2 The Social Objective of Business**

In the course of the last century business companies have progressively excluded themselves from concern with and responsibility for society, seeking only their own profit and growth. The classical objective was to make money for the owners of the company. This “shareholder philosophy” has become a major source of malaise in the world. It polarized society and lead to the unrestrained exploitation of resources. It should give way to the “stakeholder philosophy”—responsibility for everyone who is involved with, or is affected by, the actions of the company, whether he or she is a shareholder, an employee, a client or customer, or just a member of the host community.

A shift in the objectives of business is often viewed with scepticism, yet it's entirely possible. The social spirit is not extinct among business people. A hundred years ago a Rockefeller, a Vanderbilt, a Ford, a Mellon, and a Carnegie didn't think of himself purely as a businessman, out to get the maximum money for himself and his family; he considered himself a builder of society, a force for the common good. As IBM founder Thomas J. Watson Sr. said, companies were not created “just to make money” but to “knit together the whole fabric of civilization.” Today a Bill Gates, a Warren Buffett and other business leaders create charitable Foundations to champion humanitarian causes, much like Rockefeller, Ford, Carnegie and others did before them. But this in itself is no longer sufficient. In the 1920s and '30s nobody suspected that the company's pursuing its own interests would have negative consequences for society. Society obviously had need of motor cars, gasoline, steel, and the other products and services provided by the major companies. For business people being public spirited didn't involve changing the orientation of their company; at the most it meant ensuring fair treatment for workers and staff, and espousing selected social causes on the side.

Today it's not enough to “do good” as peripheral philanthropy while being narrowly focused on “doing well” in the marketplace. The damage done by companies staying with short-term

profit-maximizing strategies is not made good by funding charitable causes, however good these may be. The need is for those who have the wealth and the power to control major businesses to become a force for the public good not by philanthropy, but by re-orienting their companies.

The social objective is not an arbitrary step in the development of management philosophy: it's a logical development of the shift to the shareholder philosophy. Embracing this objective would bring the business world into the fold of societal actors committed to human wellbeing and ecological sustainability.

### **2.3 The Objectives of Individual Responsibility**

Some aspects of the individual's life have become public business. What one person does affects others, and either helps to heal the world, or exacerbates its malady.

Responsible individuals espouse sustainable objectives in their own life.

They live in a way that satisfies their basic needs without detracting from the opportunity of other people to satisfy theirs.

They respect the right to life and development of all people, wherever they live, and whatever their ethnic origin, sex, citizenship, and belief system.

They safeguard the right to life and a healthy environment of all the things that live and grow on Earth.

They pursue happiness, freedom, and personal fulfillment in consideration of the similar pursuits of their fellows in their community, country and culture.

And they choose their work or profession and commit their time and talents to activities that are useful and beneficial to their community and do not harm other people, other communities, and the environment.

Responsible individuals also adopt a sustainable style of living.

They select clothes that express their personality and cultural values rather than looking for prestige labels and the latest fads.

They choose home furnishings made of long-lasting natural materials that make for warmth and sociability, instead of ostentatious items that show how much they can afford.

They save energy in their home by using energy-saving lights and turning them off when not needed and insulate their house or apartment against heat and cold instead of turning on the air conditioner in summer and jacking up the furnace in winter.

They save water by turning off faucets when not in use and installing simple devices that produce a stream of water at adequate pressure at a lower rate of consumption and must save energy and cut down on pollution by using public transportation, or walking or riding a bicycle—and if they need to use a private car, they must use one with hybrid, electric, or another alternative drive.

And they choose foods for their table that are healthy, organic, locally or regionally grown, and don't require vast amounts of energy and water to produce.

When it comes to interacting with business, responsible individuals are highly selective. They patronize and do business only with companies that --

- Honestly and accurately represent the long-term benefits and costs of their products and services accurately and honestly, reporting on their safety, social consequences, environmental toxicity, reusability and recyclability;

- Actively seek to reduce pollution and environmental damage and minimize waste;

- Consult their employees and collaborators when formulating their goals and objectives;

- Take an active interest in the lives of their employees; and

- Take an active interest also in their host communities, encouraging employees to devote part of their time to social work and the improvement of the local environment.

## **2.4 The Personal Growth Objective**

Unsustainability in society, in the economy and in the ecology, the irrationality of many elements of human behavior, and the obsolescence of dominant beliefs and aspirations are symptoms of the disease that afflicts our planet, but they are not the cause of the disease. The cause lies deeper—it lies in the way we think.

Einstein said that we can't solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that generated the problem. We can apply this to the contemporary world: we can't heal our planet with the same kind of thinking that created its malady. Here "thinking" is intended in an inclusive way: it's the totality of our perceptions, values, beliefs, and aspirations. It refers to our *consciousness*.

Today's predominantly materialistic and ego-centered consciousness is obsolete and must change. Fortunately, the consciousness that dominated the world for the past one hundred years is not a permanent feature of the human species. For most of the twenty or fifty thousand years that humans had possessed a higher form of culture and consciousness, they didn't think of themselves as separate from the world around them. They lived in the conviction that the world is one, and that we are an intrinsic part of it. The radical separation of a thinking, feeling human being from an unthinking and unfeeling world came only with the modern age, and came mainly in the West. It prompted the uninhibited exploitation of unthinking and unfeeling nature by the thinking and feeling, and therefore superior, human race. Insightful people have never accepted this narrowly anthropocentric view, whether they were artists, poets, mystics, or scientists. Giordano Bruno, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Nicolas Copernicus, and in more recent times Albert Einstein, gave eloquent testimony of their belief that the world around us, though in many respects still mysterious, is intrinsically whole and meaningful.

The dominant consciousness of humankind could shift again in the coming years; and there are indications that it has already begun to shift. The new cultures emerging at the creative margins of society have a mindset very different from the materialistic, narrowly self-interested consciousness of the mainstream. Social psychologists, experimental parapsychologists, sociologists, and even physicians and brain researchers are discovering a different kind of perception and awareness in people, especially in young people and children: "integral consciousness," "extended mind," "nonlocal consciousness," "holotropic mind," "infinite mind," or "boundless mind."

The consciousness now emerging bears out the predictions of a few remarkable thinkers and spiritual people. The Indian sage Sri Aurobindo viewed the emergence and spread of what he termed "superconsciousness" (the kind of consciousness that surfaces in samadhi, satori, and similar states of meditation) as the mark of the next evolutionary stage of human consciousness. The Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser defined the next stage as the coming of four-dimensional integral consciousness, arising from the prior stages of archaic, magical, and mythical consciousness. The American mystic Richard Bucke portrayed this stage as cosmic consciousness, beyond the simple consciousness of animals and the self-consciousness of contemporary humans.



For the mystic Eckhart Tolle consciousness is part of the universe: the essential part. It's the intelligence, the organizing principle behind the cosmic arising of form, which is the basic evolutionary process. Through evolution, consciousness has been preparing forms for millions of years, and today it's ready to create form without losing itself in it. The next stage in the evolution of human consciousness is the state of awakening—the consciousness of mastering the art of “awakened doing.”

Social scientists Chris Cowan and Don Beck elaborated the colorful scheme they call spiral dynamics. According to this concept human consciousness evolved from the strategic “orange” stage, which is materialistic, consumerist, and success-, image-, status-, and growth-oriented to the consensual “green” stage of egalitarianism and orientation toward feelings, authenticity, sharing, caring, and community, and is now shifting to the ecological “yellow” stage where it's focused on natural systems, self-organization, multiple realities, and knowledge. In the future it would reach the holistic “turquoise” stage of collective individualism, cosmic spirituality, and Earth changes.

Philosopher Ken Wilber, in turn, described a six-level evolution that has led from the physical consciousness of the nonliving world through the biological consciousness of animals to the mental consciousness of present-day humanity. It will issue in a subtle consciousness that is archetypal, transindividual, and intuitive. This will lead to “causal consciousness” and culminate in the ultimate consciousness Wilber calls Consciousness as Such.

Spiritual traditions, too, speak about the coming of a new consciousness. The Mayan elders predict that the coming era will be an era when the ether, the long-neglected fifth element of the universe, will become dominant. “Whereas the four traditional elements [air, water, fire, and earth]... have dominated various epochs in the past,” said Mayan spokesperson and high-priest Carlos Barrios, “there will be a fifth element to reckon with in the time of the Fifth Sun: ether.” Ether is a medium, he pointed out, it permeates all space and transmits waves of energy in a wide range of frequencies. An important task at this time is “to learn to sense or see the energy of everyone and everything: people, plants, animals. This becomes increasingly important as we draw close to the World of the Fifth Sun, for it is associated with the element ether—the realm where energy lives and weaves.”\*

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\* see <[www.SacredRoad.org](http://www.SacredRoad.org)>.

Coincidentally, but perhaps not accidentally, physicists are discovering that the ether was not correctly discarded one hundred years ago when experiments failed to detect the friction it was predicted to cause in the rotation of the Earth—the place of the ether is not replaced by empty space, the vacuum. What physicists now call the quantum vacuum is far from empty space: according to grand-unified theories it's the unified field, the womb of all the fields and forces of nature. It contains a staggering concentration of energy, and carries and transmits information.

In Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy the ether was considered the most fundamental of the five elements; the one out of which all the others arose. The ether was known as *Akasha*, the element that also *connects* all things—as the “Akashic Field”—and conserves the *memory* of all things—as the “Akashic Records.” Today, in the form of a cosmic energy- and information-field, the ether regains the preeminent status it had enjoyed five thousand years ago.

A consciousness that recognizes our connections through the ether—an “Akashic” consciousness—is a consciousness of connectedness and of belonging, ultimately, of oneness with people and nature. It's the transpersonal consciousness foreseen by mystics and philosophers from Aurobindo to Wilber, predicted by the Mayans, and supported by discoveries at the leading edge of the sciences. The evolution of this consciousness in more and more people may be a basic precondition of healing our fragmented, and chronically but not incurably unsustainable planet.

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