CHAPTER 8. STORY: CREATING MEANING IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Tell me the story of the river and the valley and the streams and woodlands and wetlands, of shellfish and finfish. Tell me a story. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and roles that we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings us together in a valley community, a story that brings together the human community with every living being in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night. . . .

-Thomas Berry

INTRODUCTION

We all yearn to hear a good story. Even in the sciences, if someone has written a brilliant research paper, my colleagues and I may refer to the paper as "a great story." And when my graduate students prepare to present their research findings at a symposium, I invariably challenge them to find the "story line" in their data.

A good story ignites the imagination; it enlarges us. Depth psychologist, Clarrisa Pinkola Estes, suggests that the "mother tongue" that unites all peoples is symbolic language—the language of art, music, poetry, and story. It is symbolic language that allows us to grapple with mystery and awe and anguish.

Life's biggest mysteries and sources of existential anguish center around questions of origins: How it is that we come to find ourselves in this world? and destiny: What is it that we are to make of this life? In our time, the way that people and society as a whole answer these fundamental questions determines, to a significant degree, the ecological health of Earth.

An essential first step in addressing the ecological crisis that is now unfolding on Earth is to see clearly how human culture, especially modern Western culture shapes human consciousness (Foundation 1). An important next step is to understand the particular ways in which Western culture’s “story” about life and its purpose is leading humankind, as a whole, ever-deeper into ecological crisis (Foundation 2). The final step is to recognize that it is possible to create a new “story”—one that can engender a more enlightened consciousness—that could lead humanity out of crisis and toward a just and life-sustaining world (Foundation 3). Paralleling these foundations, this chapter's practices center on the power of story to create meaning and give purpose and direction to our personal lives.

FOUNDATION 1. OUR STORY SHAPES OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

Since the mid-1990s my students have been raving about Daniel Quinn's book, Ishmael. Quinn’s book offers meaning in a time of confusion by seeking to explain how humanity’s fractured relationship with Earth is a product of Western culture's overarching story.

A culture’s story is a living mythology that explains how things came to be and how we are to act. Quinn offers Nazi Germany as a vivid example of how a people's story can have disastrous consequences. Hitler offered the German people a story which told how the Aryan race had been discriminated against and abused by mongrel races over history. His story went on to describe how the Aryan race would rise up and wreak havoc on its oppressors and then assume its rightful place as the master of all races. Many, but by no means all, Germans didn't
see Hitler’s story as simply a misguided attempt at meaning making; they embraced it as destiny. Similarly, many of the citizens of Greece, in the time of Homer, probably didn’t regard their stories as "Greek mythology" but simply as the way things were. Our times are no different. We live within a story which attempts to give meaning to our actions:

Like the people of Nazi Germany, [we, too,] are the captives of a story. Of course, we don’t even think that there is a story for us. This is simply because the story is so ingrained that we have ceased to recognize it as a story. Every one knows it by heart by the time they are six or seven. Black and white, male and female, rich and poor, Christian and Jew, American and Russian... we all hear it. And we hear it incessantly, because every medium of propaganda, every medium of education pours it out incessantly. It is always there humming away in the background like a distant motor that never stops.

Once we become aware of a culture’s story, we see how it is employed to explain and justify behaviors. The Nazi Germany story, for example, provided a justification for the creation of a world that would benefit Aryans. One-hundred and fifty years ago white Americans created a similar story of racial superiority to justify slavery.

Today, we in America continue to live within a story. Think back to your grade school and high school history and social studies textbooks. An underlying theme in most of those texts was humanity’s inexorable march of progress. We learned that our distant ancestors were impoverished and backward but that today, thanks to the development of science and the application of technology, we have become enlightened and advanced. Nowhere, is this more so, we were told, than in the United States of America, the land of freedom and abundance. For proof of U.S. superiority we were given statistics emphasizing the phenomenal productivity and growth of the American economy. As we absorbed this story, it was only natural that many of us were led to want to support and defend our culture’s values and accomplishments. Most of us never realized that our story was laden with a particular set of values. All national cultures mark their citizens. If we had been born in France, our story would have valued European cultural traditions much more strongly than production and growth.

One way to appreciate the power of our culture’s particular story is to imagine how it would be for you if you had been born into a society or civilization with a very different story. For example, imagine that your culture’s story was centered on the belief that: "This life is merely a preparation or test for the life to come"; or "There is nothing you can do to change your condition—it is your fate or karma from past lives"; or, in a more positive vein, how about "Everything you do has an effect on the unfolding cosmos—through your life you co-create the universe.” It is clear that each of these beliefs would lead you to a different stance and response regarding the future and your individual planetary responsibility. As futurist Barbara Marx Hubbard points out: "As we see ourselves, so we become." Herein lies the colossal power—for both destruction and salvation—of a culture’s “story.”

A Story of Domination

The overall, big-brush, story of Western Civilization has been predicated upon the implicit, but often unstated, assumption that the world was "made" for humans. Embedded in this story is the belief that combat and war are often the means by which goodness overcomes evil. This story elevates humans and implies that the emergence of “man” was the central event in the history of the cosmos. For example, the Christian Bible teaches that the world was
unfinished without man. It needed a ruler. Man had to subdue the world. Even today, we hear it
over and over: Man is conquering the deserts; man is subduing the oceans; man is conquering the
atom and the human genome; man is taming outer space. According to Western mythology—the
Western story—man was born to control, manage and exercise dominion over the Earth; this is
man's destiny.\footnote{6}

Of course, this homocentric notion that man is the climax, the final objective, of the
whole cosmic drama of creation is simply a story which Westerners have, for the most part,
unconsciously absorbed. But these days it takes a fair measure of naiveté to imagine that the
entire cosmic unfolding of the universe, extending back some 13 billion years in time, was
accomplished and came to an end a short while back when man appeared on a little planet we
now call "Earth." After all, since the appearance of man, the universe has continued to expand,
new stars have continued to be born, and the principles and processes undergirding biological
evolution and speciation have continued, just as if man had never appeared. In fact, to say that
"man is the pinnacle of the evolutionary process" is no less shortsighted than imagining a time
far back in evolutionary history—say when photosynthetic bacteria were the most complex life
form on Earth—and thinking that the appearance of these amazing bacteria was the final
objective of the entire cosmic unfolding. The creative unfolding of the cosmos didn't stop with
the photosynthetic bacteria, nor has it stopped with us.\footnote{7}

A Story of Partnership

As should be clear by now, our Western story is rooted in assumptions. We have
assumed that humans are the endpoint of evolution and that humankind’s highest purpose is to
exercise control over Earth. But perhaps it is not human destiny to be aggressive and controlling.
In her provocative book, The Chalice and the Blade, Riane Eisler differentiates between societies
with “dominator” versus “partnership” characteristics. In so-called “dominator” societies,
interactions and negotiations tend to be hierarchical. A male god often sits at the top, with men,
women and children, in descending order of importance, below, and nature at the very bottom.
The heroes in dominator cultures are often violent; power is often determined by the ability to
control nature and dominate one another.

In “partnership” societies, by contrast, giving birth and nurturance are valued more than
control and domination; cooperation is more important than competition. These societies are
attuned with nature; daily activities are graced by art, ceremony, and celebration; capacities for
empathy, intuition, and imagination are nurtured.

Anthropologists have documented "partnership" characteristics in some contemporary
societies and Eisler believes (though she has her critics) based on evidence from archaeological
excavations that our ancient past also included, in some places, at least, long periods of peace
and prosperity when societies were neither violent nor strongly hierarchical. According to
Eisler, partnership societies apparently existed in areas of Europe and the Near East that we
know today by names such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria,
Cyprus, and Crete.\footnote{8}

If you were able to go back 7000-8000 years in time to these places, you would encounter
a people who had script, trading boats, and complex religious and social institutions. These
people, Eisler contends, were led to see the life-giving and sustaining powers of the world in
female, more than male, form. The remains of female figurines are abundant in the archeological
ruins from this period; and there is abundant evidence of complex religions centering on the
worship of a Mother Goddess.
The extensive art of this period (Neolithic)—in the form of shrines, wall paintings, religious statuary, decorative motifs on vases, pictures on seals, and engravings on jewelry—reveals a reverential posture toward the beauty and mystery of life. Unlike the art of later "dominator" periods, "partnership" art is devoid of imagery idealizing armed might, warriors or scenes of battles.

According to Eisler, the decline of these so-called "partnership" societies was tied to the Kurgan invasions. These nomadic invaders had a "dominator" model of social organization. Successive waves of invasion led to the progressive impoverishment of "partnership" cultures. The archeological record reveals a steady loss of shrines, finely crafted artifacts and works of art. At the same time, fortifications appeared everywhere, as "dominator" societies supplanted "partnership" cultures.⁹

Although the dominator mentality is still very strong today, partnership consciousness is also present. There is a creative tension between these two mind states both in our individual psyches and in Western culture at large. This tension provides the energy for change. We will evolve as a culture not by returning to the mythic partnership societies of the past, nor by placing heavy emphasis on dominator characteristics, as we have done in more recent times. Rather, the challenge for our times appears to lie in evolving beyond this dualistic fixation to a new consciousness grounded in inclusiveness, creativity, shared leadership, and compassion.

**REFLECTION**

When my son was growing up I would tell him a story each night. It all began one day when we were walking along the beach. Jake was two-and-a-half at the time and he was tired. Instead of carrying him, I decided to tell him a story in hopes of diverting his attention. The story was about a lad named Johnny who woke up very early one morning and tiptoed downstairs, so as not to awaken his parents. Johnny quietly prepared a lunch, grabbed his backpack and slipped out the back door. Then, feeling free and ready for adventure, little Johnny walked down to the corner where he encountered Sam. Sam was a dump truck driver and fellow adventurer. Johnny hopped up into the cab of Sam's truck and off they went to fix a bridge that had been partially damaged by a flood. Sam and Johnny worked together all day until the bridge was fixed. Then Sam drove back to town and left Johnny off at the same corner where they had met in the early morning.

That was the gist of the story. Of course, I embellished it with some details: the clothes Johnny and Sam were wearing; the traffic jam they encountered; the discussion they had about which tools to use to fix the bridge, and so forth. But the story, itself, was simply about Johnny and Sam fixing a bridge. As I told the story, my son was transfixed; he walked along for a half hour never once indicating that his legs were tired.

That night, when it was time for bed, Jake said, "Dad, tell me a ‘Johnny’ story." At first, I didn't know what he was talking about but then I remembered. And so I repeated the formula: Johnny gets up early, tiptoes down the stairs, fixes his lunch, slips out the back door, meets Sam and they set out to solve a problem; the problem is not easy to solve but with determination and hard work Johnny and Sam figure it out.

Year after year I repeated the same story line, only the problems changed. One night it was a forest fire, then a traffic signal which didn't work, then a leaky roof at the airport which had to be repaired, next a farmer who needed his tractor fixed, and on and on. As Jake got older, the problems that Johnny and Sam confronted changed: an exotic species invading a natural area, a rare disease which can only be cured by a plant growing in Amazonia, a young man who is
struggling with nicotine addiction, a midget who abandons the local circus and wants to start a new life . . . . Each time Johnny and Sam figured out a solution—sometimes technical, sometimes psychological, sometimes political.

In the process of telling these stories, I came to understand how stories can bring meaning to our lives and shape our view of the world. The stories I told Jake were ostensibly about fixing bridges and putting out fires but they carried deeper messages such as: bad things happen but we don’t have to be victims; it is important to think before acting; men are good problem solvers, and so forth.

Since that time I have come to understand that when I was growing up I, too, received a story about the world—where it came from, how it works, and my role in it. Now I realize that it was largely my cultural inheritance from Western culture that I was passing on to my son through story.

Questions for Reflection:
- What are the stories that you were told when you were growing up and how have these stories shaped your understanding of the world?
- What are the underlying themes and messages in the stories you receive from the news media each day? How do these messages shape your understanding of the world?

PRACTICE: DISCOVERING THE POWER OF STORY

The Inuit Indians have a saying that the Great Spirit must have loved stories for why else would he have created so many people. Each of our lives is, indeed, a story, with each day a chapter. This is why, at the end of the day, when we meet with a friend or a loved one, they ask, "So, what happened to you today?" When we respond, "Not much" or "You know, same old stuff," we may have just “slept” through another day.

There are simple practices that we can adopt to awaken to the drama of our lives. A good starting place is to learn to look at our daily life as an anthology of stories. For example, see the morning newspaper as a story book; regard all your daily encounters and activities as having a beginning, middle, and end; see each meal as a story involving food preparation, eating, and cleaning up; listen to the 11 pm news as your goodnight story, and so forth. Consider the characteristics of these daily stories. What effects, for better or worse, do they have on you? What is memorable about them?

To formalize this practice, consider doing an "evening review" of the events of your day. In other words, run the movie of your day through your mind. As you do this, pay particular attention to the activities that you engaged in, the interactions you had with others, and the thoughts and conversations surrounding any decisions you made during your day. Think of this evening review as a way of harvesting the stories of your life.

Some people make it a practice to take a bit of time before bed to write about the events of their day in a journal. The journal becomes a place where the stories of their days are recorded: the difficult encounters as well as the sweet moments; the recurrent conundrums as well as the fresh insights. If you take up this practice, you may find it helpful to have several questions to guide your journaling. Possible questions include: What happened today that I am grateful for? When was I timid today? When was I courageous? How much of my day was spent in a state of worry, fear and inadequacy? How much was spent in equanimity, confidence, and sufficiency? When was I fully present to others? (See Box).
Harvesting the Stories of our Lives

I was waiting in line to board an airplane. The line was long and moving slowly. As I stood in a state of impatience, an elderly couple pushed past me. They were both very large people and it appeared as if the man had suffered a stroke because his speech was slurred. A few minutes later, when I approached my seat at the back of the plane, I noted that the same couple was seated in my row and I confess, with some embarrassment, that I felt irritated that I would be sitting next to them, but, as it turned out, my seat was on the other side of the aisle.

About half-way through the flight, a stewardess came down the aisle holding up a twenty dollar bill and asking for change. It occurred to me that I might have change but I decided that it would be too big of a hassle to undo my seatbelt, dig my wallet out of my back pocket, and search. Just after I reached this decision, I heard a man with garbled speech say that he thought he had change. It was the man I had earlier wished to distance myself from. For a several minutes he wrestled with his seatbelt and then his wallet; finally, he produced change for the twenty; the stewardess thanked him.

It wasn't until later, when I paused to review the events of my day, that I was able to fully bring this story and its significance to consciousness. It was then that I remembered the slight irritation I had felt when the couple had pushed their way past me; and my chagrin when I thought that I would have to sit with them; and then my deep humiliation and embarrassment because the man helped the stewardess when it would have been so much easier for me to have done so. That man had been my teacher that day and I was grateful to him. To the extent that we are alive and engaged in life, each day is bristling with stories. When we fall into bed at night without reflecting on our day, we fail to harvest life’s lessons and deprive our lives of meaning.

Taking time to reflect on the stories and lessons embedded in each day cultivates self esteem. When we do this, we are saying, in effect, "I care enough about myself to want to pay attention to the daily unfolding of my life journey."

Just as it is important to “harvest the stories of our life,” so, too, it is worthwhile to take the time to tell our stories. In the exchange of stories with friends we offer them the opportunity to empathize with our circumstances, whether happy or sad. In this way our friends become co-participants in our lives, helping us see how our stories might offer us moral guidance and wisdom. As English professor, Scott Russell Saunders points out "Stories gather experience into shapes we can hold and pass through time, much the way DNA molecules in our cells record genetic discoveries and pass them on."

The best story tellers are people who are authentic, entirely comfortable in their skins and fully awake to their lives. So it is that we all have the capacity to become story tellers. Natalie Goldberg in her book, Writing Down the Bones, describes how she sometimes calls friends together to form "story-telling circles." She invites her guests to sit on the floor in a circle with a candle in the center to "create a sense of magic." Then, Goldberg invites stories to come forth by saying: "Tell us about a time you were really happy" or "Tell us about a place you really love" or "Describe a time when you were really down" or "Give us a magic moment that you remember from last week." Any one of these questions is sufficient to elicit a rich round of stories. In one of the circles a man named Lauchlan described a magic moment:

There was one summer that I was a forest ranger in Oregon for four months. I was alone for that whole time and I hardly ever wore any clothes that summer, because there was no one around. I was deep in the woods. By the
end of the summer I was very tan and very calm. It was late August and I was squatting, picking the berries off a berry bush and eating them. Suddenly I felt a tongue licking my shoulder and I slowly turned my head. There was a deer licking the sweat on my back! I didn’t move. Then she moved next to me and together we silently ate berries off the bush. I was stunned. An animal trusted me that much!  

In sum, we don't need to search for stories in books or turn on the television to hear stories. Our lives are filled with story and we can all be story tellers. As we engage in practices like the evening review, journaling, and story-telling circles, we build community and create culture from the bottom up.

FOUNDATION 2. OUR PRESENT STORY AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The general ideological thrust of Western culture’s story has continued unchanged for the last several thousand years ago. Today, Westerners still mostly see themselves as separate and superior beings charged with taking dominion over the Earth. However, in recent history, movements such as Renaissance Humanism, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment, have worked together to give the Western story a distinctly secular character.

In the Middle Ages, prior to the Renaissance period, Western life was organized primarily around religion; it was religion that formed the basis for governance; works of art were frequently created to glorify God; and armies were assembled and wars waged mostly to further religious agendas. The emergence of Renaissance humanism (15th Century) was a revolutionary reaction against the constraints imposed by the church-state power of the medieval world. Humanism posited that "man," by virtue of his rational mind, had the capacity to understand the workings of nature. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries scientists, like Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, were demonstrating that it was possible to ascertain reliable knowledge of the workings of the physical world. Gradually, the medieval story—about salvation through divine grace—was replaced by the doctrine of material progress. Man, not God, gradually became the central focus of life and reason triumphed over dogma.

The Enlightenment (18th Century) represented the consolidation and extension of the humanist-scientific orientation to all spheres of human endeavor. The “medieval Christian world, wherein all creation was infused with God's presence and direction, was replaced by a sense of a clockwork-like universe that had been set in motion by God in the beginning but otherwise operated autonomously, according to Newtonian laws.” By the end of the 18th Century, modern man had emerged as the detached manipulator of the world, with a strong secular, rationalist orientation centered on the pursuit of self-interest. Once scientists had made it abundantly clear that Earth was not at center of the universe, the Enlightenment philosophers elevated the individual to that exalted position.

In sum, the expansion of secularism, since the 1500s, isn't so much a new story as it is a new spin on Western culture’s old story. If anything, the tendency for humans to see themselves as the culmination of evolution and to believe that it is their destiny to control and manipulate nature, has been reinforced by modern secularism. At the same time, secularism is a welcome historical development in so far as it signals an expansion of human consciousness. The ascendancy of science and its decisive separation from religion has allowed mankind to shed medieval superstitions and gain a much broader understanding of life and the cosmos.
Economism: The Modern Permutation of Secularism

Imagine that you have been hired to make sense of human culture as it is enacted in the United States. This would require that you assume the role of a detached observer as you visit homes, churches, workplaces and schools throughout the U.S. Listening to what people talk about and noting how people spend their time, you discover that, aside from family and friends, much of what occupies human consciousness is linked to money, work, possessions, production, efficiency, communication, and technology.

Social change activist, Barbara Brandt has used the word "economism" to characterize the story or belief system undergirding contemporary U.S. culture. Economism is an approach to life which places great meaning on money, work, and possessions. Most Americans are undeclared adherents of economism in so far as they believe that their primary purpose in life is to work hard (or study hard) so that they can make money to buy the things that will bring them personal happiness. Like any powerful story, economism is so fully a part of American thinking and culture that most people simply see it as the way things are (See Box).  

A Cricket and Some Coins

Gerry was walking down a sidewalk in Washington D.C. with a Native American friend who worked in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It was lunch time in Washington. People were husslin' and busslin' along the sidewalks, and car honks and hurried engine noises filled the streets. In the middle of all this traffic, Gerry's friend stopped and said, "Hey, a cricket!"

"What?" said Gerry.

"Yeah, a cricket," said his friend. "Look here," and he pulled aside some of the bushes that separated the sidewalk from the government buildings. There in the shade was a cricket chirping away.

"Wow," said Gerry. "How did you hear that with all this noise and traffic?"

"Oh," said the Native man, "It was the way I was raised... what I was taught to listen for. Here, I'll show you something."

The Native man reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins... nickels, quarters, dimes... and dropped them on the sidewalk. Everyone who was rushing by stopped... to listen.  

Economism is not different from secularism; it is simply a new expression of it. A measure of economism's effectiveness has been its ability to reframe the original purpose of many societal institutions and functions. So it is that many Americans have now come to believe that the central purpose of schools is to teach children the skills they will need at work so that U.S. businesses can remain competitive in the global economy; the main purpose of government is to promote policies that will help our economy flourish; and the primary purpose of the natural environment is to provide resources that will fuel our economy. Under economism, the needs and values of business have come to dominate society. Activities that generate a profit and/or that bring a high return on investment are judged as desirable, often irrespective of whether they are wise, wholesome, or morally defensible.

Economism has become so fully integrated into U.S. culture that it now serves as a kind of pseudo-religion. Strange as it may sound, economism has the equivalent of deities, high priests, missionaroes, places of worship, and commandments. Among economism's pseudo-deities are: Money, the ultimate source of security; Science, the ultimate source of knowledge;
and Technology, the ultimate source of power. This is the Trinity that many in Western culture now seem to trust in for earthly salvation. It follows that the “high priests” of economism—those who are closest to these gods—are economists, scientists, and technologists. The missionaries are the minions from transnational corporations seeking to convert all nations to “free-market capitalism.” Economism’s churches—the places where people hear about the power of money and hard work to satisfy their “needs” and about all the new products and cures generated by science and technology—are the outlets of the corporate-controlled media, especially television. Finally, economism, just like a bonafide religion, has commandments: Work hard to earn money! Watch television to stay hip! Buy on credit! Keep up with the Jones! These commandments have become so institutionalized that most people see them simply as the way life is lived in America. Although somewhat simplistic, this metaphor does offer a way of beginning to make sense out of contemporary American values, beliefs, and behaviors.

**Cracks in Our Story**

Religion, at its best, offers us a way of seeing ourselves that summons up what is most noble in us; it appeals to our highest selves—our adult selves—and inspires us to be kind, courageous and loving. However, the pseudo-religion of economism tends to appeal to our lowest selves—our adolescent selves—drawing out our greed and small-mindedness. Students of U.S. culture suggest that Americans have created an adolescent culture which thrives on consumption because promoting perpetual consumption is the way to make money and, under economism, money is the principal measure of progress, success, and happiness. But there is a growing tension in America between values and appetites—between our will and our wants—and this leads is leading to cognitive dissonance (See Box).

**They Didn’t Skip a Beat**

Recently, I asked a gathering of college freshman to reflect on what really mattered to them. At first they were taken aback by this question but after some thought they began to speak. For many, what mattered most was family, friends, the places where they grew up, their religion, health, learning, personal freedom and natural beauty. It was wonderful to hear these freshman speak in public about what they cherished. Next, I asked them to reflect on what really mattered to society, at large. This time they didn't skip a beat. “This country is all about image,” they said; “its about convenience and competition and getting ahead; its about business and making money.” I was surprised by undertones of anger and cynicism in some of their responses. Here were young Americans who, on the one hand, had personal values that were generous and life-affirming, living in a culture that they perceived as crass. When I introduced the idea of "cognitive dissonance" (i.e., the tension which ensues when two belief systems or mental models clash), many students were grateful to finally have a word (a diagnosis!) to describe their divided mental state.

The strain that economism is now putting on the human psyche was revealed in "Yearning for Balance," a comprehensive analysis of American perspectives on consumption. According to this study, when Americans—irrespective of gender, age, or race—look at the condition of the world today, they come to a similar conclusion:

*Things are seriously out of whack. People describe a society at odds with itself and its own most important values. They see their fellow Americans*
Cognitive dissonance often prompts a change in attitudes and behavior. So it is that significant numbers of Americans are less and less lured by the fancier car, the second house, the luxury vacation. Just like the college freshman mentioned above, these people somehow have come to know that true wealth lies not so much in financial assets as in:

- social relationships—friends and family.
- cognitive capacities—abilities to read, learn, and reason.
- wholesome natural and man-made surroundings—beautiful buildings and parks; healthy oceans, rivers, and forests.
- cultural legacies—traditions, literature, artistic expression.
- political liberties—civil rights, open civic exchange and local governance.

Material wealth is not irrelevant for these people, but its role is largely in terms of how it facilitates their ability to access other more meaningful forms of wealth.

Summing up, a society behaves as it does because of a deeply ingrained, and largely invisible, story. Economism, the present permutation of Western culture’s story, is based on the notion that the Earth is primarily a lump of resources waiting to be transformed into products for humankind. This story's main plot revolves around corporations, markets, resources, manufacturing, capital transfers, and advertising. The story's central character is the human, a being with a seemingly insatiable appetite for material goods. But it is a characteristic of human cultural evolution that, eventually, our old stories no longer supply enough meaning to satisfy us. The cognitive dissonance now manifest in America is a sign that we are in the throes of birthing a new story.

REFLECTION

I find this concept of "economism" intriguing and disturbing at the same time. I can see that it offers a useful description of contemporary life. Many of us do spend vast amounts of our waking life working (or in the case of students studying) so that we can make money to acquire the things—many of which are not “necessities”—that we assume will bring us ease and happiness. But economism, as a worldview, presents a depressing characterization of the human enterprise, suggesting, as it does, that work, money and stuff are the central reason for—and significance of—our lives.

At the same time I can see how, over evolutionary history, the human’s appetite for more—more territory, more food, more status, more mates—has helped to ensure our survival as a species. Cognitive psychologist, Timothy Miller, has suggested that the success of all species, including humans, results from the fact that they lack an "enough" switch. According to this view, if a species were to say to itself "This is good enough; I really don't need more territory, food, status, mates; I'll just take it easy now," it would soon be out-competed by other species and rendered extinct.

I accept that having no "enough" switch probably ensure the survival of our species in the distant past, but today it is this very inability to define "enough" which puts humanity’s survival in jeopardy. Fortunately, we do have the ability to consciously cultivate an awareness of how much is enough and then to learn to live within those bounds. So it is that I have come to believe that economism—with its emphasis on constant growth and
consumption—is not our destiny, but simply a stepping stone on the path to fuller human consciousness.²¹

**Questions for Reflection:**
- In what ways is “economism” similar and/or dissimilar to other “isms” (e.g., nationalism, sexism, pluralism)?
- If economism is Western culture’s present “story,” what is the story that is waiting to be born?

**PRACTICE: BECOMING AWARE OF OUR PERSONAL LIFE STORY**

Just as consciousness can change and evolve over time within a society, so it is that we, as individuals, have the opportunity to evolve and grow in understanding and wisdom during our life times. We can sit back and passively react to what comes along in our lives or proactively create our life story. When we chose the later path, our lives become stories about the deepening and widening of consciousness.

There are exercises and practices that can help bring awareness and agency to one’s unfolding life story. A good place to begin is to figure out what has contributed to your present understanding of your life and its purpose. While I was working on this book, I was invited to participate in an exercise with just this purpose. We gathered in Richard's living room and he asked us to pick a specific time in the past when we were going through a transition (e.g., graduation from high school, starting our first job, beginning a special friendship). Next, he invited us to bring to mind the people, experiences, places, activities, and institutions which had influenced us up to that point and, also, to recall what we understood to be true about the world at that time.

After allowing us to mull this over for a few minutes, Richard placed a box of magic markers in the center of our circle and gave us each a transparency sheet. He then asked us to put pictures and symbols (avoiding words if possible) on the transparency sheet and in so doing to describe what influenced us and what was true for us at the particular time in the past that we had chosen.

When we finished our drawings Richard invited each of us to talk about the big themes that shaped our world view up to the historical marker we had selected from our past. For example, I chose the transition between high school and college. My world view up to that time was heavily shaped by the Catholic Church: authority, morality, ceremony, self-sacrifice.

Then, Richard asked us to hold our transparencies up in front of our faces and to look through them. This was an 'aha!' moment. What each of us had on our transparencies was what we had absorbed from our families, schools, authorities, natural surroundings, and culture, in general. Each of us looked out onto the world through lenses tinted and modified by our particular past.

Someone in the group observed that when we forget that we have a lens on, we make the mistake of thinking that the way we see the world is the way the world really is. We see things not as they are but, rather, as we are. In reality we are like the proverbially blind men describing the elephant, each operating from their own limited viewpoints.

Of course, we are not stuck with our lenses. Some people noted that certain things on their transparencies from the past were no longer present. Others spoke of their new
"corrective lenses," noting that in recent years they had incorporated new things into their lenses (e.g., more compassion) which had improved their ability to be more skillfully present in the world. Richard was particularly interested in these positive changes, asking about the circumstances surrounding them. In many cases, the insights arose during periods of trauma or loss.

The phrase "no pain, no gain" does seem to describe the setting of most personal growth. Noting this, I sometimes ask my students to prepare a "failure resume" to go along with their standard success-oriented resumes. I tell them to fill it up with all their worst failures. I then ask them to note the lessons encoded in each of their failures and how their failures have changed their lives. The upshot of this exercise is that students come to see that their failures reveal much more about themselves than a simple list of their accomplishments. Our responses to disappointment and failure are, to a significant degree, a measure of our self acceptance, determination, flexibility, and integrity.

It is often during periods of failure in our lives that we are most fully alive because these are the times when we are living on the edge, taking risks. As Gregg Levoy notes in his book, Callings:

*It's almost axiomatic that the important risks we don't take now become the regrets we have later. In fact, I was once told that if I'm not failing regularly, I'm living so far below my potential that I'm failing anyway.*

Another helpful practice for discovering one’s life story involves drawing. Drawing is a way of gaining access to those parts of ourselves that are more grounded in images, sounds, sensations and feelings, than in words. Psychologist, Molly Brown encourages the use of drawings to explore major life questions. I was a bit skeptical about this but decided to give it a try. So, feeling a bit sheepish, I went to my local book store and bought a box of crayons. When I sat down with a clean sheet of paper, I felt unsettled and decided to take a few minutes to simply breathe and calm my body and quiet my thoughts. Once I was relaxed, I asked myself, “Where am I now in my life story?” Then, I simply paid attention to the thoughts, images, sensations, and feelings that arose. After a time, I began to work with the crayons giving form, color and shape to my thoughts and feelings. I found, to my surprise, that I enjoyed using crayons to express my non-verbal responses to this question, especially knowing that I was not performing for anybody. Afterwards, I looked at the drawing for a long time trying to decipher its messages. Then, I shared it with a friend and we talked about it. Brown recommends hanging these “life” drawings on your bedroom wall, and examining them from time to time until you have fully absorbed their messages.

As we gain the capacity to see our life as an unfolding story, we remember to become full participants in it. Levoy recommends pausing from time to time to embrace your life story as a grand myth—an epic story of your destiny and travails. Why do this? [Myths] get at the heart of human behavior, at profound truths, universal truths, ageless patterns. They are . . . stories of transformation: from chaos to form, sleep to awakening, woundedness to wholeness, folly to wisdom from being lost to finding our way. They describe the stages of life, the initiations we all go through as we move from one level to another: child to adult, young to old, single to married, cowardly to courageous, life to death, death to life.
I remember a June morning many years back when I looked out my kitchen window and saw my son bending over a large plastic dump truck in the sandbox. Jake was three at the time. As I watched him, I realized that he was "studying" the mechanics of movement. With excruciating slowness he pushed the dump truck up a sand mound. His head was bent down, his face six inches from the truck's rolling wheels. Then, he painstakingly guided the truck down to the bottom, studying the mechanics of "reverse." This went on for a full ten minutes—very slow, very focused. Jake is now a young man; his heart sings when he is engaged in mechanical work—fixing his car, building a house.

David Whyte believes that "Each of us, somewhere in the biography of our childhood, remembers a moment where we felt a portion of the world calling and beckoning to us... Somewhere inside us, the child is still running enthusiastically toward a horizon it once glimpsed. Our future life depends on finding this original directional movement in our lives."

Seeing ourselves as mythic characters on the hero's journey of transformation is not loony or far-fetched. It is a form of self-respect. We see our lives as unique endeavors with noble purpose. Conveyed as myth, the struggles in our lives become tests of initiation in an epic adventure; our earthly friends become our guardians and muses; our heart's calling or vocation becomes the sacred treasure that we are willing to risk all for.

FOUNDATION 3. OUR NEW STORY AND THE SUSTAINABILITY REVOLUTION

It is culture, more than anything, which shapes both personal life stories and societal belief systems. Thus, a lasting solution to the ecological crisis now confronting humanity, of necessity, lies in the gestation and emergence of a new life-affirming belief system—a new story.

Humankind needs, in effect, a revolution on the order of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions of our past. It is likely that these earlier revolutions were also catalyzed by crisis. In the case of the Agricultural Revolution, the central crisis appears to have been food scarcity. Prior to ten thousand years ago, humans were nomadic. As human numbers grew, edible wild plant and game resources became less available and it is believed that this scarcity prompted humans to migrate out of Africa and the Middle East. However, some human groups hit on an entirely different strategy: They settled down in one place and domesticated animals and cultivated plants. This was a radical idea and it subsequently changed the face of Earth in ways that could never have been imagined at the time.

Staying in one place, rather than constantly moving from place to place, meant that humans could accumulate possessions for the first time in their history. Some people apparently were more adept at accumulating things than others. Over time it was this accumulation of possessions—of wealth—that helped create the conditions for the emergence of money, crafts, trade, cities, governments, and armies, among other things.

The increased food availability made possible through agriculture was a key factor allowing the human population to grow from 5-10 million at the time of the Agricultural Revolution to almost one billion by the late 1700s. But then, once again, scarcities—this time of energy and land (especially in the case of Europe) began to cause stress. As the availability of trees, as a fuel source, declined, Europeans—first in England and then elsewhere—began to use coal to satisfy their energy needs. The mining, transport, and combustion of coal presented many technological challenges which, in the solving, triggered many changes: "Coal led to steam engines. Machines, not land, became the central means of production."
The spectacular success of the Industrial Revolution, along with improvements in sanitation and medicine, led to a further explosion in human numbers. So it is that now, in the early 21st century, humanity faces another suite of scarcities—namely: diminishing supplies of fuels and metals and land, as well as a reduced capacity of the environment to absorb the polluting byproducts of industrialization.

Our species is now, quite literally, living in a "middle time." The old stories which brought meaning to life for our ancestors no longer work and a compelling new story has not yet fully taken hold in our psyches. So it is that those alive today have the opportunity to literally act as midwives in the birthing of a new story. Alan AtKisson, in his recent book, Believing Cassandra, summarizes the challenge as follows:

"To... prevent global collapse, we need an idea that is both visionary and profitable, a solution that can appeal to both the ardent altruist and the hardened venture capitalist. We need a source of hope that is also a business opportunity, a hot investment that is also intensely idealistic. We need something that will challenge our higher natures and attract our baser instincts, coaxing us into the game of transformation without polarizing society or fomenting revolution. We need something that has not been seen since humans first began plowing up dirt, building skyscrapers, and messing around with atmospheric chemistry. We need something that has the power to command a lifetime of allegiance..."

This sounds intimidating. Fortunately, though, there is already a word to describe the new "something" that AtKisson speaks of—the word is “sustainability.” This word began to be used in academic circles in the 1980s; by the 1990s, the general public was hearing the word; and, now in the 21st century, schoolchildren are introduced to the concept of sustainability; entire magazines are devoted to exploring its many facets; prizes are awarded for sustainable buildings; cities have developed sustainability indicators; and food labels tout sustainable farming practices. “Sustainability” is not an easy word to say. Nor is its meaning crystal clear. But in spite of its seeming awkwardness, "sustainability" is popping up everywhere precisely because this word is so necessary for our times. Again, AtKisson provides a useful perspective:

"History is full of examples of new and complex ideas overturning the old order, often against seemingly long odds. An example is 'democracy.' Today, most people throughout the World take it as a given that governments should be elected by the people. But this is a fairly recent idea and not a simple one (nor is the word particularly beautiful). Before a rudimentary form of democratic government took hold in the late 1700s in the newly formed United States—inspired in part by the ancient Greeks and the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations—democracy was not exactly a household word. Nor was this form of social organization widely understood, accepted, or practiced."

**Sustainability as the Foundation for a New Story**

Sustainability’s power as an organizing concept for modern life has come about, in part, because of three remarkable lessons that humans slowly absorbed over the second half of the 20th century. The first was the lesson of exponential growth, most stunningly illustrated by the J-form of the human population growth curve, but exhibited just as dramatically in scores of production,
consumption, and waste trends. The second lesson was that Earth, in terms of materials, is a closed system. Resources are finite, and there are physical limits to growth. The third lesson was that humans by sheer force of their numbers and appetites could outstrip the Earth’s carrying capacity. Taken together, these three remarkable lessons are gradually sensitizing humanity to the fragility of Earth and the need to practice more sustainable lifeways.

Those championing sustainability recognize that the human economy is embedded in the living Earth. If Earth were eliminated, the human economy would cease to exist. Hence, in a sustainable society the central focus is no longer on the money cycle, but instead on the life cycle. The concept of sustainability is most fully understood by referring to the core principles or values that undergird all sustainable enterprises. (See Box).

The Five Sustainability Principles

Governments, organizations and households seeking to become sustainable behave in accord with the following core principles:

- Respecting life and natural processes: Sustainability commits us to explicit consideration of the effects of our decisions and actions on the health and well-being of the entire community of life.
- Living within limits: Sustainability involves an awareness that the natural resources upon which all life depends—forests, fertile soils, fisheries, pure water and clean air—are finite endowments to be used with care and prudence at a rate consonant with their capacity for regeneration.
- Valuing the local: Sustainability commits us to show respect for the natural components of our neighborhoods and bioregions; to preservation, restoration, and use of local knowledge; and to creation of strong, self-reliant local economies.
- Accounting for full costs: Sustainability requires that we become aware of the costs generated by our products—from “source to sink”—to the environment and society. Product prices must reflect this awareness.
- Sharing power: Sustainability demands we recognize that we are all interconnected—people, biota, and physical elements. Problems are solved by each individual assuming a share of the responsibility.

Though the concept of sustainability may be new, it is clear that the substance of its principles (See Box above) is embedded in widely shared human values. For example, “living within limits” embodies the traditional American values of frugality and thrift; “accounting for full costs” is a call to remember the value of honesty and complete disclosure; and “sharing power” is, theoretically, what we believe American democracy is all about. It would seem that sustainability, as embodied in these core principles, offers a richer, deeper, more generous value system than the world view based on economism (Table 1).

Contemporary mass culture—grounded, as it is, in economism, does not live in accord with sustainability principles. For example, this culture often fails to respect life—instead, it frequently regards the Earth’s biodiversity as raw material for human ends; and it fails to live within limits—instead, consuming the natural stocks of soil, ocean fishes, and forests more rapidly than they are able to regenerate through natural processes. Furthermore, this consumer culture fails to account for full costs—instead, selling things cheaply and in the process often violating the rights of workers, the environment and future generations; and it
fails to value the local, often harming local economies, traditions, and cultures in a rush for short-term profits. And, finally, this culture, in many instances, fails to share power to any significant degree—increasingly leaving its citizens in a state of disempowerment and dependency. Although there are some exceptions to these generalizations, in aggregate, the human attitudes and behaviors spawned by economism are far from ennobling.

Table 1. The values undergirding two world views: economism and sustainability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECONOMISM</th>
<th>SUSTAINABILITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Life on Earth is for our use.</td>
<td>1. Life on Earth supports us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-human is separate from nature</td>
<td>-human is part of nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Earth is a static system</td>
<td>-Earth is a living, evolving system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-concern for this generation only</td>
<td>-concern for future generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. We can expand forever.</td>
<td>2. There are limits that we must live within.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-resource supplies are infinite</td>
<td>-resource supplies are limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-emphasis on consumption and constant growth</td>
<td>-emphasis on conservation and steady state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-happiness through acquisition</td>
<td>-happiness through relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The market will guide society.</td>
<td>3. The market is amoral—it is not a good guide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-humans only motivated by self-interest</td>
<td>-humans have the capacity to act for the common good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-de-emphasis on regulation public</td>
<td>-government regulations are necessary to protect the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-economic growth is more important than environmental protection</td>
<td>-environmental protection is more important than economic growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. We must globalize everything.</td>
<td>4. We must accord respect to the local.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-we need FREE trade</td>
<td>-we need FAIR trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-emphasis on mass-media</td>
<td>-emphasis on face-to-face interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-materials and food come from far away</td>
<td>-materials and food come from local sources when possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. We must impose control from above.</td>
<td>5. We must share power and wealth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-hierarchy: “power over”</td>
<td>-equity: “power with”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-society built around competition</td>
<td>-society built around cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-wisdom resides at the top</td>
<td>-wisdom resides in the network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-strength in separateness</td>
<td>-strength and mutual well-being through partnership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sustainability Means Defining a New Bottom Line

Citizens can take an active role in redefining values and in so doing transform culture. Indeed, sustainability is a radical concept precisely because it invites citizens to comprehensively redefine the "bottom line" in all sectors of society. In this vein, Jewish
rabbi, Michael Lerner calls on citizens to get together in their offices, factories, schools, churches, and businesses to consider what their workplace, professional endeavor or daily routine would look like if it had a new bottom line—one that promoted personal self-esteem, caring human relationships, and ecological integrity (Table 2). For example, imagine what it would be like if the primary goal of a university education was to cultivate a human being who is curious and intellectually alive, loving and able to show deep caring for others, awake to the spiritual and ethical dimensions of being, ecologically attuned, and creative. How would this be different from the present experience of university education? Or what about rethinking the bottom line for business. A commitment to sustainability means literally expanding the traditional business bottom line beyond profit to include the wellbeing of the planet and the planet’s people. Triple bottom-line companies strike a balance between the three Ps: profit, planet, and people (Table 2).

Table 2. Redefining the "bottom line" in alignment with sustainability principles in different sectors of society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector of Society</th>
<th>Status Quo Bottom Line</th>
<th>Redefinition of Bottom Line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Passive: something that one submits to in order to “get ahead.”</td>
<td>Active: something that one willingly participates in for self-actualization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Single bottom line: Success defined only in terms of profit; only growth is rewarded.</td>
<td>Triple bottom line: Success defined in terms of Profit, People, and Planet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Occupation: A job defined by someone else that one agrees to do in exchange for money.</td>
<td>Calling: A passionate pursuit that springs from within a person and engages mind, body, and soul, while contributing to the common good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Federal: Concentration of power at the top; role of citizens is to work, consume, and obey the laws of the land.</td>
<td>Bioregional: Power vested in citizens at the regional level; all voices valued citizens work collectively to promote the common good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>Salvation: Emphasis on personal salvation, good vs. evil, punishment, separation, shame.</td>
<td>Transcendence: Emphasis on expanding consciousness, insight, interconnection, acceptance, forgiveness, transformation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Science, Sustainability and the Evolution of Human Consciousness

The ecological crisis offers humans the opportunity to understand themselves in a new, more expansive way. As was true five hundred years ago in the time of Galileo (and more recently in the time of Darwin), so it is today that the discoveries in the sciences are playing a central role in catalyzing the expansion of human consciousness. For example, new
discoveries—born of modern physics, astronomy, and biology—concerning the nature of matter, the origins of the universe, and biological evolution allow us, as never before, to see ourselves as participating in a most extraordinary story. Indeed, the entire story of the universe—from the flaring forth 13 billion years ago, to the creation of the first atoms of hydrogen, to the birth of our Sun and Earth, to the appearance of bacteria, to the emergence of the human and onward—is the story of the evolution of consciousness within an expanding universe. We, humans, are not the pinnacle of evolution; nor is it in our best interest to rule the Earth. Rather, it appears that we are co-participants in a process leading to ever-greater complexity and perhaps ever-greater consciousness.

Western science over the past five hundred years has focused on understanding nature's parts. By reducing the world to its parts—taking a so-called reductionistic approach—scientists believed that they could fully understand it. In the reductionistic view, the world is composed of clearly defined objects; and relationships among objects, to the extent that they occur, are secondary. The reductionistic approach has been extremely fruitful but, in the end, not wholly satisfactory. Scientists now know that we can't fully understand the essence of things by simply taking them apart. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. For example, when iron and nickel are blended, they produce a material, steel, with a tensile strength far greater than the combined strengths of iron plus nickel. Likewise, the combination of hydrogen and oxygen produces a substance, water, with properties that aren't predictable based on a separate knowledge of each element. The case of hydrogen is particularly instructive: A “complete” knowledge of the hydrogen atom would not allow one to predict that hydrogen could self-organize to produce galaxies and planets and apple blossoms, but this is what has happened over the past 13 billion years. The properties of any "whole" are the result of the interactive relationships among the parts and these interactions produce "emergent properties." This is particularly true of living systems.

The relatively new field of Systems Science serves as a kind of counterpoint to exclusively reductionistic and mechanistic approaches to science. Scientists with a “systems” orientation are primarily concerned with understanding the patterns of interactions—the relationships among the parts—and this orientation leads to different ways of speaking about and seeing the world (See Box).

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**Systems Thinking and Language**

The way we use words has an immense, though frequently unrecognized, effect on how we see and experience the world. People schooled in reductionistic thinking—i.e., most of us—often think in “thing” language. For example, in referring to Earth, we might say:

1-Earth is a rock in space.
2-Earth is a planet in the solar system.
3-Earth is a bundle of resources.

However, someone schooled in system’s thinking would see Earth as a process alive with relationship and say:

4-Earth is a cosmic happening.
5-Earth is our living body.
6-Earth is allurement, relationship, potentiality. . .

In the reductionistic mind frame each human being has sharply defined boundaries (Figure 1). In this view, the way to ensure personal well being is to make one's boundaries
strong. Hence, the emphasis is on separation, often expressed as hyper-individualism. However, in the systems view, human beings are seen as participating in larger patterns of flows. Rather than being mostly separate, people are mostly connected through flows and interactions of matter, energy and information (Figure 1). In this systems view, relationships are primary and the way to ensure well being is to soften one’s boundaries and become permeable to the whole.

This system's view of reality, though difficult to grasp, appears to be a more accurate portrayal of living systems than the old mechanistic view. This new way of seeing gives more emphasis to interdependence rather than independence, spirit rather than ego, fluidity rather than rigidity, wholes rather than parts, union rather than division, connection rather than separation, synthesis rather than dissection.

Figure 1. Mechanistic vs. Systems views of reality.

REFLECTION
I confess, I am both terrified and exhilarated by this present moment in history. On the one hand, humanity has never experienced such a dangerous time; we live in the shadow of nuclear annihilation, widespread chemical poisoning, and catastrophic climate change. On the other hand, we live at a moment when we can finally see ourselves as part of a grand cosmic
unfolding—a time when it is possible, at least theoretically, to build a life-affirming, sustainable society.

We are, as Joanna Macy says, at the time of “The Great Turning.” It is an in-between time. We may not make it; the dangers are real and daunting. But what a time to be alive! If we do pull through, it is likely that our descendants will look back at our time with envy, knowing that we lived at a time of high adventure. They will say, “They were the ones alive at The Great Turning. At first, they were burdened with despair; their actions were paltry; their words tentative. But bless them for they rose above their despair; they found their voices; they acted; they were the people who took part in The Great Turning.”

Questions for Reflection:
- Which of the five sustainability principles might you consider embracing? In what ways might you manifest these values in your daily life?
- How might you consider participating in The Great Turning?

PRACTICE: CREATING OUR CULTURE’S NEW STORY

Culture is not static. It changes and evolves as a result of the things that we, human beings, do—the ways that we behave, the stories that we tell, the conversations that we have, and the values we espouse during our lifetime. Each day humans participate in the process of culture making culture. In this vein, the efforts throughout the planet to give birth to a new story—one grounded in sustainability—can be viewed as a grand social change movement.

Not long ago I participated in a practice called “The Double Circle” which shed light on this cultural process. There were twenty of us and we sat facing each other in two concentric circles, ten people per circle. Those in the inner circle, facing out, were humans from a hundred years in the future; they had come to listen. The people in the outer circle, facing in, were simply themselves, beings of the present. I was in this outer circle and sat, knee-to-knee facing my partner, a person from the future.

Our guide welcomed us into a “middle world”—a space outside of time—where the generations can meet. She said that the future ones (in the center) had four questions for those of us in the outside circle. The questions were to be conveyed telepathically from the future ones to the present ones through our guide’s voice.

The first question from the future ones was:

Ancestor, I have been told about the terrible times in which you lived, wars, and preparations for war, hunger and homelessness, the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer, poisons in the seas and soil and air, the dying of many species. . . . It is hard to believe. Was that really true? Tell me.

Each of us present-time beings responded, speaking out of our personal experience. The future ones, across from us simply listened to our words. After a time, when we, present ones, had no more to say, the future ones, seated in the center, were asked to rotate one position to the right. Then, using the guide as a mouthpiece, the future ones asked their new partners:

Ancestor, what was it like for you in the midst of all that? How did you feel?

After we present ones had finished responding to this question, the future ones again moved to the right for the third question:
Ancestor, we have songs and stories that still tell of what you and your friends did back them for The Great Turning. Now what I want to know is this: how did you start? You must have felt lonely and confused sometimes, especially at the beginning. What first steps did you take?

And, finally, after another rotation, the fourth question came forth through the guide:

Ancestor, I know you didn't stop with those first actions on behalf of Earth. Tell me, where did you find the strength and joy to continue working so hard, despite all the obstacles and discouragements? After listening to our responses to this final question, it was time for the future ones to speak. They addressed us, present ones, expressing what was in their hearts after all that they had heard.

Our guide concluded this ceremonial practice by inviting us to come back to present time. Then, we formed a large circle and shared our thoughts and insights. Many of those who had been in the outer circle—the present-time people—found this experience ennobling; they felt heard and appreciated and their lives seemed to take on added meaning. Those from the future experienced great admiration and empathy for the present ones and, by extension, compassion for themselves, as flesh-and-blood present-time beings. Exercises like this can be empowering in so far as they encourage us to see ourselves as participating in an epic moment in history.

The birth of the life-affirming new story, necessary to usher in “The Great Turning,” will not occur without midwives—people who understand their interconnectedness with all life, who feel the pain of the Earth's suffering, and who realize that it is both necessary and possible to create a sustainable world.

A simple beginning practice for people wishing to participate in this “Great Turning” is to change their “news diet.” Why? Because what we take in through the media affects our mind states and who we become. Start with a “news fast”: Turn off the tired messages from mainstream newspapers, television, and radio. This is not a shutting down so much as an opening up to a whole new world of power and possibility. In so far as the mainstream media is financed and controlled by the keepers of the old story, it is largely incapable of seeing and communicating the emergence of a new story based on different values, principles, and beliefs.

Next, invite new messages—new sources of news and inspiration—into your life. Consider subscribing to Yes!, Resurgence, Orion, Sun or Earth Light. These are some of the magazines of the Sustainability Revolution; many of their articles offer stories about people and communities awakening to the wonder of life, adopting sustainable practices to reduce their ecological footprint, and acting for the common good. It is the enactment of these individual life stories that is giving rise to a grand “new story”—a story about connection not separation; awe and wonder, not business-as-usual; partnership, not domination. Ultimately this new story transforms our understanding of what it means to be human.

Becoming midwives for the new story also means learning to use a new vocabulary, a vocabulary of solutions. In recent years this new vocabulary has been popping up everywhere. So it is that people are coming to hear words and phrases like living machine, organic agriculture, wind power, ecological footprint, growth boundary, natural capitalism, car-share, green buildings, voluntary simplicity, community-supported agriculture, co-housing, watershed stewardship, holistic health, integrated pest management, restorative justice, socially responsible investing, community land trust, micro-radio, and on and on. This is the vocabulary of the Sustainability Revolution.
As we will see in the next chapter, there are now sustainable solutions to meeting humankind’s energy, food, transportation, housing, water, education, and other needs. What is lacking isn't political will so much as its antecedent, individual will made manifest through personal decisions and actions. In our buying decisions, in particular, each of us has countless opportunities to make choices which foster sustainability. In this vein, a powerful practice is to jot down the five sustainability principles on a card and carry this card with you in your wallet. Then, every time you take out your wallet to buy something, you can ask if, in making this particular purchase, you are: 1) respecting life, 2) honoring planetary limits, 3) helping your local economy, 4) supporting ecologically responsible businesses, and 5) contributing to social justice.

The new life-sustaining culture will emerge as individuals adopt sustainable practices and tell the stories of these practices. I was reminded of this recently while attending a presentation on voluntary simplicity. Towards the end of the evening, Beth stood up and said she had a personal story to tell. This wasn’t a scheduled part of the program but the host consented. Beth was nervous but her determination to share her story allowed her to overcome her jitters. She told us that after many years of commuting to work alone, she had decided to give carpooling a try. Beth confessed that, at first, she was apprehensive because she didn't have much natural affinity for the two women she had arranged to carpool with. However, she told us that, to her surprise, she was enjoying being in the presence of two people who were quite different from herself.

Beth went on to mention two other unexpected benefits of carpooling. The first was that, with two other people in the car, she was no longer able to do "impulse shopping" on the way home. This saved her money. Second, knowing that her two colleagues were waiting for her meant that she could no longer dawdle about in her office at the end of the day. When 5 PM came, she had to be heading for the door to be on time for her colleagues. So, Beth decided to carpool because she wanted to do a good turn for the planet and in the process she made new friends, saved money, and gained time. Just as important as the particulars is the fact that she shared her story.

In sum, each of us can help to create the new culture of sustainability by first fully appreciating that we live in an epic time and, then tuning into the new story of the Sustainability Revolution. The practices for this consist of switching our news antenna from the old signals to the new frequencies, learning the new vocabulary of solutions, adopting sustainable lifeways, and telling the stories of our actions.

CONCLUSION

It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. . . We need a story that will educate us, a story that will heal, guide, and discipline us.

-Thomas Berry

In this chapter we have entertained the possibility that it is Western culture’s story—a story founded on control, expansion, and separation—that is at the root of the ecological crisis. In its modern guise of "economism" this story proclaims that: Man is essentially an economic being; reductionism is the primary pathway to knowing; and the subjugation of nature is
necessary for progress. These are the "truths" which we are all taught—American, Russian, Japanese, and Swede—but they are, in fact, only half-truths, unable to fully support and sustain a healthy and just world. But the solution is not to shun modernity. This would be folly. As philosopher, Ken Wilbur reminds us:

_The rise of modernity. . . served many useful and extraordinary purposes._  
_We might mention: the rise of democracy; the banishing of slavery; the emergence of liberal feminism; the differentiation of art and science and morality; the widespread emergence of empirical sciences, including the systems sciences and ecological sciences; an increase in average life span of almost three decades; the introduction of relativity and perspectivism in art and morals and science; the move from ethnocentric to worldcentric morality; and, in general, the undoing of dominator social hierarchies in numerous significant ways. These are extraordinary accomplishments, and the anti-modernist critics who do nothing but vocally condemn modernity, while gladly basking in its many benefits, are hypocritical in the extreme._  

The solution for we modern ones is to take the next step in human cultural evolution. Humankind has moved from hunting and gathering to plant and animal domestication to industrialization. Now we need to take the good which modernity offers and leave behind its harmful effects, attitudes, and behaviors. Religion, science, and economics need to be integrated into a larger whole that is grounded in enduring values, spirit, and truth-seeking.

The essential practices for participating in this "Great Turning" center on story. Story is a key catalyst in both personal and cultural change. At the personal level, our fidelity to our unique calling (i.e., personal story) is forged by our passion and sense of purpose. At the societal level, a mythic story with the power to excite our imagination and call forth that which is good and noble in us is necessary to ensure the survival of our species.

The dysfunctional behaviors that characterizes this time in history have their roots in a story which no longer works. So it is that tens of millions of people across the world are creating, from the grassroots, a new story—a new bottom line—grounded in respect for life, sharing of power, and sustainable practices. This new story calls on all human beings to take actions which are "survival effective" in the long-run—actions based primarily on caring and compassion, not money and power. If we, as a people, can change our story, we can change our destiny.

**Chapter 8. End Notes**


