



Is the Future Back in the Picture?  
Resilience, Resurgence, and Rediscovery:  
Reflections on the Quest for a New Social Vision  
by RICHARD REOCH

“YOU SHOULD READ *10 BILLION*,” said a gentleman at a conference I recently attended at the University of London.<sup>1</sup> This little book with a shocking orange cover is by the Head of Computational Science at Microsoft Research, Stephen Emmott, Distinguished Fellow of the UK National Endowment of Science, Technology and the Arts.

It contains numerous charts that graphically demonstrate that in almost every area we are heading to disaster: climate change, air and water pollution, food scarcity, social conflict, and overpopulation. It argues that we are facing “an unprecedented planetary emergency.”<sup>2</sup> The title, *10 Billion*, is the estimate for the human population by the end of this century. It is already at 7 billion.

Analyzing the data, Stephen Emmott says we have two choices: technologize our way out of this or radically change our behavior. As a scientist himself, he says that science alone cannot change our disastrous trajectory. The only alternative is change of attitude and change of behavior.

The first half of 2013 saw the publication of two other books that, unlike the dramatic stance taken by *10 Billion*, strike a note of optimism in the midst of deepening anxiety about climate change and widespread economic disorder. They approach the crisis from two very different vantage points, but both argue that humanity still has options.

They are further evidence of a subtle, but strategic, rebalancing of some of the most deep-seated attitudes in the global discussion about the future. The key question is whether humanity does or does not have the ability to reverse its current, disastrous trajectory.

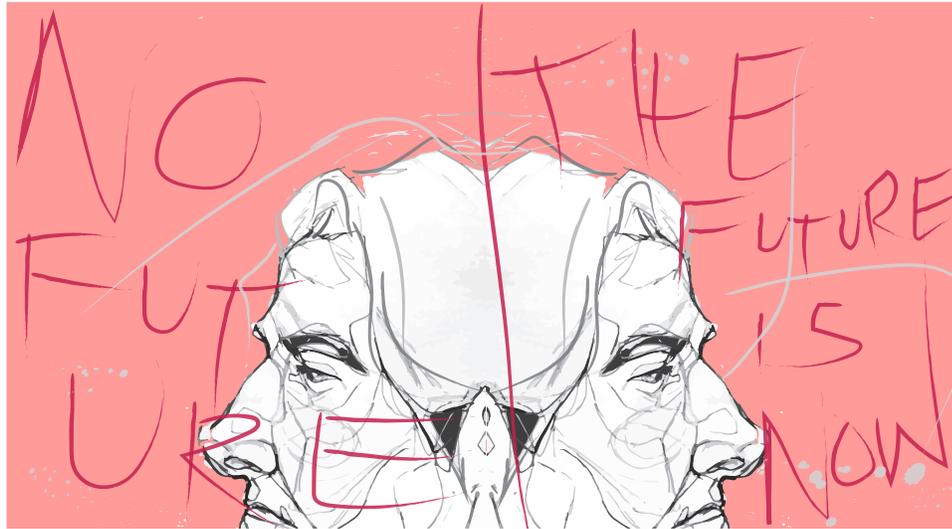


Illustration by  
Alicia Brown

“We need to find ways to reverse the climate change we’ve set in motion and halt the extinction crisis,” write the authors of *Enough is Enough*, a blueprint for global sustainability, published in January 2013. Economists Rob Dietz and Dan O’Neill are clear about the urgency of the crisis, but argue against doom-mongering. “The good news is that ideas for creating an ecologically sound economy are emerging from all corners of the world. The ever-present drone of what we can’t do has become both tiresome and unproductive. The time has come to figure out what we can do.”<sup>3</sup>

They start from the observation that the world economy, as it is currently run, is causing long-term environmental, societal, and economic damage. They go on to map alternative paths that prioritize human well-being and “[move] past the culture of consumerism.”<sup>4</sup>

“We humans have come to a crossroads in our history: we can either destroy the world or create a good future,” states the author of the second book that examines our options.<sup>5</sup> Published in May of 2013, *The Shambhala Principle* by Sakyong Mipham paints a stark portrait. “The pain and confusion of the world is now so vivid and unavoidable that we have no choice but to acknowledge it. When we are finally fed up with torturing ourselves, others, and the planet, out of our exhaustion will arise a gap in which we come to our senses and collectively rediscover a more natural state. Only by staring directly at the confusion—examining it and absorbing its reality—will our species discover a way forward.”<sup>6</sup>

## Global Overshoot

“The modern economy now presumes that we are all fundamentally selfish and competitive... An economy based on selfishness can only become more selfish and aggressive, and when everyone is feeling assaulted by the force of greed, the qualities of trust, empathy, and generosity begin to feel unnatural,” writes Sakyong Mipham, head of the worldwide contemplative community that takes its name from the ancient Kingdom of Shambhala, said to be a model of enlightened society.<sup>7</sup> “Through this greed and discontent we are consuming our planet and the natural resources it provides. The result is personal, social, and environmental deforestation,” he writes.<sup>8</sup>

It is a telling image. Even moderate scenarios used by the United Nations suggest that if current population and consumption trends continue, by the 2030s, we will need the equivalent of two Earths to support us. Thus, a chilling phrase has entered the world of scientific discourse: “global ecological [overshoot](#).” We are now depleting the very resources on which human life and biodiversity depend.<sup>9</sup>

Faced with extreme weather events, dwindling food and fuel stocks, and economic mismanagement on a global scale, “it is no surprise if we experience profound loss of confidence for the future,” writes ecophilosopher Joanna Macy in her latest book, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy*, co-authored with physician Chris Johnstone.<sup>10</sup> The question is not whether the planet is in peril; it’s how we are going to respond. “Most books addressing global issues focus on describing either the problems we face or the solutions needed. While we touch on both of these, our focus is on how we strengthen and support our intention to act, so that we can best play our part, whatever that may be, in the healing of our world,” they conclude.<sup>11</sup>

Talking about “going crazy” in the title of their work pointed to an emerging trend: approaching the crisis from the need to examine the underlying state of humanity’s psyche, rather than focusing solely on metrics and technological solutions. “When facing the overwhelming challenges, we might feel that our actions don’t count for much. Yet the kind of responses we make, and the degree to which we believe they count, are shaped by the way we think and feel about hope,” they point out.<sup>12</sup> They draw their conclusions from more than a decade of working with people from diverse cultures across the globe and argue that far from being crushed by the weight of the crisis, it is possible for

people to “face disturbing information and respond with unexpected resilience.”<sup>13</sup>

So why, in the face of this apparently relentless onslaught of resource depletion and seemingly irreversible social patterns, are voices not just of protest but of optimistic advocacy being raised?

In my lifetime of work in the fields of human rights, environmental protection, and war prevention, I have witnessed some of the most heartbreaking cruelty and devastation of which human beings are capable.<sup>14</sup> The difficulties we face in confronting and preventing such abuses have left many wonderful and committed people on the frontlines of social action in a state of cynicism, bitterness, and hypercritical despair. People often ask me what sustains the human spirit in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds. It’s a question worth asking, as each of us in our own way is living through times when we are forced, increasingly, to consider it.

## Transformative Encounters

For the authors of *Enough is Enough* and *The Shambhala Principle*, it was life-shaping encounters with other people that made all the difference. Significantly, it was the interpersonal nature of the encounter that lifted the experience from data-transfer to wisdom transmission. This kind of meeting affects more than a person’s thoughts; it changes their lives.

“Most of my progress... has come from people as opposed to places,” says Rob Dietz, co-author of *Enough is Enough*.<sup>15</sup> After majoring in environmental studies, he worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and was riveted by the wild beauty of landscapes in nature reserves like Bosque del Apache in central New Mexico. But it was meeting economist Herman Daly that set him on the course to exploring and advocating a new global model.<sup>16</sup> It was Daly who offered him a transformative vision of a sustainable and fair economy.

Central to Daly’s vision was the notion of “enough”. “Enough is the theme of the story of God’s gift of manna to the ancient Hebrews in the wilderness,” he argues. “Food in the form of manna arrived like dew on the grass every morning and was enough for the day. If people tried to gather more than enough and accumulate it, it would spoil and go waste. So God’s gift was wrapped up in the condition of enough—sufficiency and sharing—an idea later amplified in the Lord’s prayer, ‘give us this day our daily bread.’ Not bread for the rest of our lives or

excess bread with which to buy whatever luxuries we may covet, but enough bread to sustain and enjoy fully the gift of life itself.”<sup>17</sup> Recalling the impact of his encounter with Daly, Dietz knows it changed his life: “I wanted to be a part of developing and promoting that vision.”<sup>18</sup>

It was a deep encounter with another person—his father—that gave birth to Sakyong Mipham’s first-person narrative, *The Shambhala Principle*. “Early one morning, when I was about twelve years old, my father called me into his room,” he writes. “I knew that he had something important on his mind. As I walked in, I saw him sitting up in bed. The sun streamed gently through the window. He’d just arisen. I took a few steps toward him and bowed. He beckoned me with a loving gesture, but there was an intensity to his presence. We embraced for what seemed like a very long time. Then, gazing deeply at me, he said, ‘You will be the next *sakyong*.’”<sup>19</sup>

“Sakyong” is a Tibetan term that literally means “earth protector”. The future Sakyong’s father was the great meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, holder of the royal ancestry of Shambhala, and a social visionary, widely acknowledged as a giant figure in the introduction of Buddhist meditation and insight to the West.

Recalling his father, the Sakyong writes: “Being forced to leave his home and venture into a great, unknown world, my father began to ponder the notion of human nature and society altogether. It was during his escape, high in the Himalayas, as he gazed onto the great plains of India, that a vision to create an enlightened human society, a network of wisdom and kindness, arose. Such a society would honor and encourage innate goodness, and cultivate the wisdom in all cultures and traditions. He felt that the essential ingredient to create such a society was bravery. This bravery had the inherent quality of not giving up on humanity.”<sup>20</sup>

One could hardly imagine authors from two more different backgrounds, but both of their stories hinge on the impact of life-transforming social visions. Not escapist or utopian visions, but powerful retellings of the human narrative, based on staring directly into human experience and its trajectory.

For the authors of *Enough is Enough*, the result is a three-fold inquiry: What are we doing? What could we do instead? Where do we go from here? After the impact of decades devoted to countless studies, protests, conferences and emotional debate focused on the first question (“What are we doing?”), it is the second and third questions

(“What could we do instead?” and “Where do we go from here?”) that may now be in the ascendant.

## Reorienting for the Future

This inquisitiveness about the future—based on the potent, sometimes implicit, affirmation that there *will* be a future—points to a number of trends that now appear to be shaping discussion in many fields:

- The long years of examining the realities and causes of the current global crisis appear to have revealed realistic possibilities, both incremental and transformative, for leveraging future-oriented change.
- In parallel with that examination, both scholars and activists have been studying and rethinking the dynamics that bring about significant structural and behavioral change in societies, thus opening up new future-oriented strategies.
- Fresh questions are being asked in many fields about the underlying causes and attitudes that contribute powerfully, often invisibly, to the current crisis—and a shared recognition that a “cultural shift” is needed to reset our relations with ourselves, each other, and the planet.
- Simultaneously, there is substantial evidence of human resilience manifesting in a growing number of initiatives and experiments with alternative models of human community, economic, and environmental sustainability, all charting possibilities for future-oriented development.
- There is increasing debate about the indicators societies use to measure well-being and progress. Modeling is underway for more comprehensive systems of measurement that include factors ranging from personal well-being to the impact of manufacturing and services on the biosphere, all based on securing a sustainable future.
- Whether it be in the realms of business management, political science, or social activism, there is an increasing emphasis on an approach that recognizes the connection between personal and social transformation as the basis for future human society.
- There is growing recognition that human values treasured by the world’s indigenous traditions and centuries-old cultures may offer valuable insights for resetting humanity’s moral compass. Much has been lost sight of in the wake of contemporary

industrial and post-industrial consumerist lifestyles. Reawakened interest in humanity's wisdom heritage may help us as we reorient our aspirations for the future.

## Redesigning Our Cultural Model

More than 250 people attended a Steady State Economy Conference in Leeds, U.K. in 2010. They were there to generate fresh ideas that could serve as a blueprint for a new economic model delivering what they termed "sustainable and equitable human well-being."<sup>21</sup> Much of that thinking is woven into the fabric of *Enough is Enough*. Part of that vision is that the culture of consumerism must be replaced with a culture of sustainability, that political debate and media coverage needs to be focused on the limits to growth and the "[steady-state](#)" alternative, and that nations need to work together to accomplish this.

Here's how Dietz and O'Neill describe the "steady-state" alternative: "At its simplest, a steady-state economy is an economy that aims to maintain a stable level of resource consumption and a stable population. It's an economy in which material and energy use are kept within ecological limits, and in which the goal of increasing GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is replaced by the goal of improving quality of life."<sup>22</sup>

Not much new there, you may conclude. But a new note was struck—the actual possibility of doing this. That which seemed impossible is now being envisaged. "Remember that the economy is a human construct," write Dietz and O'Neill. "Economic 'laws' are not like the law of gravity. They can be changed."<sup>23</sup>

What is the mechanism for change? Culture, they argue. Looking at economic institutions and their policies, it is clear that they are sustained by the often invisible underpinnings of the prevalent culture. It is the implicit, largely unacknowledged foundation of the assumptions and patterns that play themselves out visibly in the economy. "It follows that an economic paradigm shift will occur only in response to a cultural shift," argue Dietz and O'Neill. "Citizens everywhere, but especially those living in high-consuming nations, need to work towards this cultural shift—a process that will require effective activism."<sup>24</sup>

Changing the economic model of intensified individualistic consumption, for example, would require a deep shift in the values and storylines that give overarching preeminence to individualism over other, more communal social patterns. A startling example of how this plays out is the fact that in the US alone there are 56 million electric

drills that on average are used for 13 minutes in their life span. What would need to change in the psyche of all those drill-owners for them to move towards a pattern of shared participation in community tool sharing? Could those psyches change one by one? Unlikely. Certainly not in isolation from each other. It would need a level of common aspiration, leading to an unstoppable cultural momentum.

Too ambitious, too daunting, too slow? Not necessarily. It often seems hard to imagine changing the assumptions and behaviors of societies on a massive scale. But much of human history is devoted, in large measure, to the record and investigation of exactly such shifts in culture and societal organization.

Major changes may take place on a broad scale, as in the rise and fall of entire civilizations, of which there have been dozens. Others happen within the framework of a single civilization: the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, post-industrial society. Even single decades mark considerable shifts in attitudes and behaviors; think of the differences between the 60s, 80s, and the new millennium. And in today's cyber-world, the pace of attitudinal and behavioral change can be stunningly rapid.

Influential leaders in the field have come to the same view, agreeing both on the role of culture as an instrument of deep-seated change and on the possibility of making that change happen. Presenters and participants from over 30 countries took part in an international conference, "Rethinking Development," co-hosted and supported by a wide range of world institutions, including Shambhala.<sup>25</sup> Among the high-profile speakers was Ray Anderson, founder of Interface Inc., the industrialist who has become one of the world's most passionate advocates of change. He told the conference: "A sustainable society into the *indefinite* future depends totally and absolutely on a vast re-design, triggered by an equally vast mind-shift—one mind at a time, one organization at a time, one technology at a time, one building, one company, one university curriculum, one community, one region, one industry at a time, until the entire system of which we are each a part has been transformed into a sustainable system, existing ethically in balance with Earth's natural systems, upon which every living thing utterly depend—even civilization itself."<sup>26</sup>

How does all this sit with those who aim to wake us up to the perilous state of the world, and who have painted an extremely bleak view of what lies ahead? James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Long Emergency*, pulls no punches on his website, "Clusterfuck Nation": "Histo-

ry has a special purgatory where it sometimes stashes feckless nations punch drunk on their own tragic choices: the realm where anything goes, nothing matters, and nobody cares. We've surely crossed the frontier into that bad place in these days of dwindling winter, 2013."<sup>27</sup> Does he rule out the future? No. Instead, he envisages a saner time, one that has turned from the devastating course of the present to an age of smaller, energy-efficient communities dwelling on planet earth. In his article, "Back to the Future," he argues that such an outcome is, in fact, inevitable. He writes: "The infatuation with technomagic in our visions of the future city has paradoxically produced places with no magic, no power to enchant the human spirit... It turns out that the human spirit needs texture, not sleekness in its dwelling place, and it needs things human-sized to feel truly human, and despite all the striving to escape that, it is exactly what we're going to get."<sup>28</sup>

Engineering such a cultural shift (which would embrace eco-economics) in what Stutz termed "a systematic and thorough fashion" inevitably takes us to the cliff face of the consumerist culture in which we are all immersed. Looking at what has happened to contemporary society, the cultural historian Gary Cross says, "Consumerism, the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their roles in society, was victorious even though it had no formal philosophy, no parties, and no obvious leaders. Consumerism was the 'ism' that won—despite repeated attacks on it as a threat to folk and high culture, to 'true community and individuality, and to the environment'."<sup>29</sup>

## A Deep Psychic Shift

"At this time, materialism and its consumeristic influence over every aspect of our life is an invisible totalitarian regime. However, unlike previous totalitarian regimes, this regime is omnipresent, and we are all participating," writes Sakyong Mipham in his analysis of the challenge we are facing when it comes to cultural change. "The modern economy now presumes that we are all fundamentally selfish and competitive. As a culture, we seem to draw the conclusion that even though it is good to be virtuous, human nature is greedy. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."<sup>30</sup>

From his point of view, trained from an early age in the mind-science of meditation, the trigger-point is deep within the human psyche. "Our psychological state is completely related to the environment," he

explains. “When we feel inadequate, we consume the world around us rapaciously.”<sup>31</sup>

Unlike many other analyses of the way forward, *The Shambhala Principle* focuses much of its attention on the inner mechanisms of human beings that lie at a deeper level than analytical thought, socio-economic trends, and perceived behaviors. “Despite the modern world’s efficiency and industry, at an emotional level, the human spirit has been dampened, pressed down,” the Sakyong says. “With fundamental doubt about the purpose of our existence, an air of depression begins to suffocate all of us. Naturally, when we feel that we are faulty, we mistreat ourselves, and then we mistreat others in the same way.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus, he writes, “it is true that climate change and economic instability are big issues. However, any long-term solution to our concerns is rooted in a deep psychic shift. . . . How can we build an economy that does not promote environmental destruction or social imbalance, from which arises warfare?” he asks. “Internally, we need to probe the depths of kindness, patience, intelligence, love, and respect in order to free these qualities and restore balance to society, which in turn will lead to more balance in the environment.”<sup>33</sup>

Easier said than done. The Sakyong is clear about the scale of the challenge we face, individually and culturally. “The psychic repercussions of materialism and the ceremony of unworthiness have created a depressed culture, and the product of that culture is cynicism and doubt. The mind that arises from the combination of intelligence and a depressed state is essentially obsessed with negating everything. . . . But deconstructing or destroying things does not mean that something better will necessarily come about. Condemning things does not necessarily require insight or fortitude. On the other hand, the act of creation takes thoughtfulness, patience, and bravery.”<sup>34</sup>

Bravery may be needed to step outside our personal comfort zone (and that of everyone around us) and envisage a completely different mode of living. It may be the bravery of facing criticism, ridicule, or ostracism by those who do not share our viewpoint. It could be the bravery of those who face threats and violence for challenging the existing order.

## Rising Up, Staying Up

The notion of bravery is emerging more and more in the discourse about global change. Not so much in the form of withstanding un-

bearable pain or not giving into fear, although participants in many peaceful protests and gatherings have returned from them injured, tear-gassed, or beaten. But rather in the spirit of having the energy, imagination, and willingness to visualize a future totally beyond what is conventionally imaginable under our present conditions—and the stamina not to abandon that inspiring vision.

“The present moment determines what the future will bring, for the mind simply follows the tendencies that are established in the present,” says Sakyong Mipham. “If our attitude in the present moment is negative, we are only setting up negative tendencies for the future. Conversely, if we engender positive aspects, we are setting positive tendencies for the future. The power is in the present moment.”<sup>35</sup>

At the “Rethinking Development” conference, Holly Dressel, co-author of *Good News for a Change*, spoke of her direct experience of making such a choice. “Here is my favorite part of sustainability criteria, and when I first ran into it, I thought it was rather superficial and marginal, to say nothing of a little wet,” she said. “I was wrong—it’s the heart and soul of the entire subject. And it is: whatever you are doing, make yourself the most positive and idyllic vision statement you can. Think about *everything* you really want: clean rivers to swim in, good schools and hospitals for everybody, standing forests, good jobs near your community—and make that your goal.”<sup>36</sup>

“Inspiration is not garnered from the recitation of what is flawed; it resides, rather, in humanity’s willingness to restore, redress, reform, rebuild, recover, reimagine, and reconsider,” argues environmentalist Paul Hawken, one of the world’s most energetic campaigners for a new order.<sup>37</sup> His endless travels have taken him to thousands of projects where people are actively engaged in the “acts of creation” that take thoughtfulness, patience, and bravery.

“I now believe there are over one—and maybe even two—million organizations working toward ecological sustainability and social justice,” he writes in his ground-breaking book *Blessed Unrest*. “This is the largest social movement of all human history: coherent, organic, self-organized congregations involving tens of millions of people dedicated to change. When asked at colleges if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: if you look at the science that describes what is happening on earth today and aren’t pessimistic, you don’t have the correct data. If you meet the people in this unnamed movement and aren’t optimistic, you haven’t got a heart. What I see are ordinary and some not-so-ordinary individuals willing

to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in an attempt to restore some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to this world.”<sup>38</sup>

There can be many explanations for this surge of human resilience on a global scale. Some might dismiss it as “too little, too late.” Others might say it is evidence of the natural power of the human mind, constantly exploring and adapting to circumstance, finally forced into action by the extremity of our situation. Some might attribute all this activity to the perpetual resurgence of Mother Nature, working through the human species, to restore the organic balance of our planet. People of many faiths may see in it the mysterious workings of a transcendent and beneficent power, bestowing grace the way rain clouds open over drought-stricken land.

## A Horizon of Possibility

For Sakyong Mipham, it might be the Shambhala principle at work. “*The Shambhala Principle*,” he says, “centers around a profound transmission, a nonverbal transference of wisdom: humanity and society are basically good.... Within humanity is goodness that is alive and fully intact but, in these times, it is surrounded by the darkness of uncertainty and fear, like the earth—a blue sphere floating in the dark expanse of the universe. If, by taking a moment to self-reflect, we realize the preciousness of our life and our connection with others, we can begin to feel the goodness that has sustained us throughout all time. In this seemingly insignificant moment when we feel our own goodness, a seismic shift occurs. Liberated of doubt regarding our nature, we see a vast, new horizon of human possibility.”<sup>39</sup>

Thus, he argues, at this juncture in history there is an underlying question that we need to ask ourselves: What does it mean to be human? “We may never before have considered human nature,” he writes, “but in order to move forward as a global community, it is vital that we do it now.... In this light, human nature is the most important global issue.”<sup>40</sup>

It’s not a small question. How we view human nature is possibly one of the most powerful forces in shaping culture. It determines the way we play our role as a species within the larger community of beings sharing the same blue planet in space. Do we see ourselves as Earth’s dominant life form, using the planet to support the lifestyle of our species? Or do we see ourselves as one among a vast host of species sharing responsibility for the stewardship of a floating, fragile ecosystem in

space? Choose our view of humankind and we change the relationship of humanity to the world.

Positioning humanity in relation to earth and the biosphere is a central question in most of the world's wisdom traditions. Historian Bruce Rich points to principles in contemporary Christian thought that provide alternative ways of contemplating the social order. "One does not have to believe in Christianity, or even in a personal God, to recognize the cogency of these concepts," he writes, "though they all follow from the premise of the relationship of humankind to that which is transcendent, yet present, in our human world."<sup>41</sup>

He identifies four principles: "First, the notion of the economy as *oikos*, as God's household, with the connotation of the economy as livelihood, rather than the accumulation of wealth and ever-growing exchange. Second, the premise of the *plenitude* of creation as the basis of policy, rather than scarcity, which is the founding assumption of modern economic analysis. Third, the concept of nature and the environment as *creation*, rather than as reified raw material or stuff to be used, transformed or managed for human utility. Fourth, the notion of *stewardship*, with connotations of trusteeship and planetary responsibility, as our role on this earth."<sup>42</sup>

*The Shambhala Principle* sees the world through a similar lens. The "cultivation of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other," writes Sakyong Mipham. "By infusing our household and daily life with our conviction in basic goodness, we are 'taking our seat,' as my father would say. Applying values like generosity and discipline to our livelihood, finances, and family time becomes a pivotal step in how we understand basic goodness and bring it into our life—and therefore into our society. As he would put it, 'You can't abandon your life.' He was telling me that every detail presents an opportunity to engage fully in expressing one's principles."<sup>43</sup>

## A Stark Choice

There is a real risk that talking about generosity and goodness in the face of the scale of planetary devastation we face could seem totally idealist and naïve. In fact, the author of *10 Billion* concludes that humanity cannot make the changes that are needed to avert a global catastrophe. He says he asked one of his brightest scientific colleagues what the one thing he would do to prepare for the future. The reply

was: “I would teach my son how to use a gun.”<sup>44</sup> Those are the words with which he chooses to end his book. It’s as bleak as that.

Is that the approach—teaching our children to be violent—that is going to get us out of this crisis? The grim words of that young scientist underline the choice we face. I am reminded of Viktor Frankl, the philosopher who spent time in four different Nazi concentration camps. As he attempted to survive among the horror that engulfed so many people, his mind turned to the profound question of human nature. “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread,” he wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning*. “They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”<sup>45</sup>

There is definitely a choice here. A choice between teaching more of our children to use guns or determining a different future altogether. It could be a choice even about what we mean by the term “life” and how we choose to measure it.

## Defining and Measuring Life

How we define “life” and how we measure it has a lot to do with the way we live, what we expect from life, what we treasure about it, and what we need to prioritize and protect. Increasingly, social planners, politicians, and people from all walks of life are realizing that we need new ways of looking at and measuring our way of life.

“When a lightbulb burns out, the obvious remedy is to replace it (preferably with an energy-efficient alternative). That’s what we need to do with GDP,” says *Enough is Enough*. “As a measure of progress, GDP burned out decades ago, and many people and organizations have noticed that we are fumbling in the dark.”<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most notable of all speeches debunking GDP was Robert Kennedy’s 1968 address to the University of Kansas. “Gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither

our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”<sup>47</sup>

A number of new indices have been developed: the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW),<sup>48</sup> the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI),<sup>49</sup> the Genuine Progress Index for Atlantic Canada (GPI Atlantic),<sup>50</sup> and the Happy Planet Index (HPI).<sup>51</sup>

Experimentation and use of these indices is on the rise. In May 2012, the Vermont Legislature adopted a bill “to establish and test a Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI)... to measure the state of Vermont’s economic, environmental, and societal well-being as a supplement to the measurement derived from the gross state product and other existing statistical measurements.”<sup>52</sup> Maryland and Oregon have adopted similar measures. Other attempts to apply these concepts and methodologies to legislative decisions are GPI indicators used in Alberta and the Atlantic region of Canada, as well as the Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies hosted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>53</sup> and the European Union’s “Beyond GDP” initiative.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps best known is the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH),<sup>55</sup> originally developed in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. “The Gross National Happiness indicator uses visionary standards by which to measure human existence,” writes Sakyong Mipham in *The Shambhala Principle*. “Bhutan’s GNH, used in five-year planning, is supported by ‘the four pillars’: promoting sustainable development, preserving and promoting cultural values, conserving the natural environment, and establishing good governance. Because Bhutan’s culture is grounded in Buddhism, this indicator suggests that cultivation of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other.”<sup>56</sup> Bhutan has now been mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to spearhead a “new economic paradigm” initiative, due to report to the world body in 2014.<sup>57</sup>

Recent attention was paid to an interview given by the current Prime Minister of Bhutan, in which it was suggested that he had largely abandoned the notion of Gross National Happiness. It may be far too early to tell. “Rather than talking about happiness, we want to work on reducing the obstacles to happiness,” he said.<sup>58</sup> He may have been pointing more to the need for practical implementation of the GNH strategy, rather than turning away from it completely.

## A Spirit of Partnership

The spirit of partnership between the material and the spiritual is gaining ground. Witness the way in which mindfulness practice has become mainstream—included in corporate training and health care and frequently the subject of in-depth scientific research.

This spirit of partnership extends beyond simply the use of mind-training and other scientifically validated disciplines in management and staff training. It extends to investigating the lost wealth of other worldviews, often described as “ancient” or “indigenous.”

Several years ago I was representing the Rainforest Foundation at a conference in Brussels, site of the European Commission. Leaders of dozens of indigenous peoples living in the world’s rainforests were protesting to the commission about the devastating impact of its huge development projects on the forests and their inhabitants. These were among the poorest and most marginalized people on the planet. They were people without a voice. Many were survivors of genocide. As they spoke, they told of the destruction of their ancestral lands, the decimation of their communities by disease, environmental degradation and war.

“We are not here only for justice,” said one in hushed tones, his eyes brimming with tears, “but also because we, the indigenous peoples of this planet, have a unique spirituality and a unique vision of the sacredness of life. And it is this we offer you, the rest of the world, in a spirit of partnership.”

Is this merely projecting the out-worn stereotype of the “noble savage”? Or do his words point to something, however crudely expressed, that risks being extinguished—with horrifying consequences—by the global overshoot of the world’s dominant consumerist culture?

More recently, I was part of a group that Sakyong Mipham took to the Tibetan monasteries where his father was once the abbot. He writes about his experience in *The Shambhala Principle*: “I was profoundly affected by sitting in these desolate and lonely sacred places, where meditators had contemplated the nature of humanity for the last eight hundred years. Although the meditation tradition is ancient, it has endured because humanity has not changed. Our questions about who we are and how we feel about ourselves are as relevant today as they were centuries ago.... That is a key element of the Shambhala principle, which is saying that the highest truth is here now, in the most ordinary way.”<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps his words are pointing to an even deeper shift, deeper than a shift of culture. It would be the equivalent of resetting of our personal GPS. If our inner navigation system, the way in which we contextualize ourselves at any moment, is set to despair, mistrust, and rage—however justified those responses may be by the latest bad news—then we are likely to continue bringing those feelings with us into our noble efforts to save humanity and our planet. Through their insidious influence, they can begin to recreate the very scenario we are seeking to change.

Pema Chödrön tells the tale of seeing peace protesters on the television news smashing their “PEACE NOW” placards over the heads of the police. It is a telling image of our era. Everywhere I go in my work, people ask me, “How can I be useful in the short time that is left to us? And how do I do that without replicating the same arrogance, aggression, and devastation that I see all around me?” That question itself is the first step in pressing our psychic reset button.

“I have much compassion for those who have lost their spiritual intellect,” said Francoise Palette of the Chipewyan First Nation on a recent Compassionate Earth Walk in northern Canada. Dramatic before-and-after photos of the country’s virgin forests and lakes devastated by tar sands extraction have shocked public opinion.

It is not that “spiritual intellect” is lost forever. The very words refer to an essential constituent of being human as well as being part of something far larger than each of us. The element of wisdom is as much within reach as any other aspect of our being. The fact that so many of our greatest minds, campaigners and innovators are now turning their energies towards new approaches to the challenges we face is evidence of what we might call “spiritual intellect rising.” That power is not the private preserve of a few; it is the birthright of all. Moreover, it can be shared, and through that very sharing, humanity’s trajectory changes.

## Words of Warning

There could be a powerful and justifiable shadow of skepticism hanging over the notion that it is possible for humanity to change course. We need only recall world history to remind ourselves that dreadful outrages on a vast scale have been accomplished in the name of social progress, wrapped up in the most glowing, optimistic propaganda.

Indeed, even the phrase “enlightened society” could ring warning bells in many hearts, almost as if it could be used as the latest smoke-screen for social engineering, the purging of all those not following the

“enlightened” party line, the suffocation of inquiry and dissent, and the systematic extermination of the “un-enlightened.”

In the final stages of revising and updating this article, I was invited to speak at Prague College in the capital of the Czech Republic. The rich culture of the Czech people has been both lacerated and strengthened by their turbulent history, frequently marked by oppression, not least of which was being one of the battlegrounds of the Cold War.

I am one of those for whom the word “Prague” is immediately linked with the word “Spring,” and the image of Emil Gallo, a municipal plumber in Bratislava, tearing open his shirt and screaming “Shoot!” at the crew of a Soviet T-55 tank.

So let me be clear that I am not talking about yet another utopian ideal destined to end up as an “ism.” In fact, the opposite. I believe we are experiencing a fresh breath of the human spirit, an awakening from the dreadful history we have lived through. It could be seen as a way forward in the face of the very devastation wreaked by “isms” that reduce humanity to a stereotype and fuel the deepest possible mistrust of life itself. Instead, what we are witnessing is a spirit of working with and reconnecting with those qualities inherent in humanity that could be the ground for resurgence and resilience.

“The fact that our society is experiencing a high level of fear and doubt is a signal for humanity not to give up, but rather to engage further with our enlightened tendencies,”<sup>60</sup> says *The Shambhala Principle*. “If a more enlightened society is to come about, it must be based on a global conversation, an exchange in which we all act as spiritual and worldly conduits for the universally positive traits of humanity.... What has given us the upper hand in nature is our ability to organize and work together by observing, listening, compromising, caring, and responding appropriately. In this light, it is human nature to be in harmony with one another and the environment, and our survival depends on it.”<sup>61</sup>

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