

Social Change for a Viable Society

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Many people think that humanity is at a critical point, where things will unravel horribly, or through some miracle of good will and committed action take an extraordinary turn for the better.

The purpose of this essay is to outline a vision of how to accelerate our evolution to a viable society. Our proper intention is not to just 'move towards' being sustainable, but to actually succeed. There are many positive initiatives already.

While the technical side of sustainability is crucial – renewable energy, highly efficient industrial design, shifting to organic agriculture, etc – the mental side is even more important, since our values, intentions and ways of thinking direct all of our behaviours.

Our mindsets, not our technology *per se*, will determine whether we create a viable future or not. At the moment the global imperative for increasing production and consumption is swamping the comparatively small environmental gains we are making, even though peak oil is slowing the global economy. Changing light bulbs is not enough; we must change the intent and operation of our whole system.

The first part of this essay gives a broad-brush overview of what is involved in creating a viable society, giving special attention to the core values of a healthy society. In it I discuss experiential methods of personal development that can help us become the kind of people who can create and enjoy a sustainable society. And I comment on how the healthy values of a sustainable society can be embedded in organizations.

It is one thing to have great ideas well articulated in books and articles. But ideas are useless unless we can reach ordinary people, and use the ideas to change our personal behaviour and the organisation of our institutions.

So the second part of this essay outlines a national and international educational movement that will engage people in thinking through what is needed to create a healthy and viable society. The Alliance for Sustainable Wellbeing, in conjunction with Leading for the Future, is championing the idea of Transition Leaders – people who self-initiate activity to catalyse the transition to a viable society.

Part One: What it will take to evolve a viable society

Our whole system is involved

Global warming has become our great environmental wake-up call. If we ask, "What factors tend to increase global warming," we see that virtually our entire economic and social system is involved. At the most basic level, increasing consumption requires increased energy, most of which currently comes from fossil fuel. Then we note that advertising increases demand, and people's emotional discontent (expressed in retail therapy, aggressively seeking the symbols of wealthy status, and war) make them vulnerable to advertising. Overall our economy and our personal lifestyles are organised to increase GDP; this is inconsistent with achieving ecological sustainability. The task of this century is to develop vastly more ecologically benign technologies, and we already have the design strategies to do so. But given the way our society currently works, Ross Garnaut was right when he said, "Economic growth would be a good thing, if it weren't for its effects on the environment."

It would appear that few people have thought this through. Many of us 'think in silos', with most of our thinking focused on our professional specialties. Or perhaps we just do our jobs, get by as best we can, and relax with beer and barbecue on the weekends. We don't see the big picture and the core drivers, even though we are worried. *She'll be right mate*, and *I've got to take care of me*. And yet, like the foundations of a grand old house being gnawed away by termites, our ecological foundations are eroding away rapidly.

The big question: What will it take to evolve a viable society?

For some years I have explored the question of what it will take to create a viable society – a society that is ecologically sustainable, socially healthy and pleasurable to live in. I have found that there are well worked out ideas for constructive change in every sphere from economics to personal psychology. We know in principle how to create a wonderful society.

Our challenge is to find ways to make the possible real.

The most influential leverage point is in people's thinking

Systems thinker Donella Meadows points out that the most influential point of change in any human system is in people's thinking. We may take 'thinking' in a broad sense to mean people's understanding of the world, their strategies for achieving their goals, their goals themselves, their feelings and their core values. We should also include people's unconscious mental drives as well.

The way people think determines their personal behaviour. It also affects how groups and whole societies operate. For example, as people have come to appreciate the value of organic food, the organic farming sector is growing rapidly, and the larger grocery chains now have an organic section. Schools are being pressured to provide more nutritious lunches.

This change did not come through top down mandate, but through grass roots excitement. One flow-on effect will be healthier children, which is just the kind of cultural evolution we want.

In a democracy 'leadership' cannot usually get too far ahead of the people. If this is true, then we may say that healthy political change emerges from an informed and caring populace. The key point of change is not the government, although political commitment is important, but the population at large.

Partnership or dominator – which value system will shape our future?

I believe that the most significant driver that shapes both individual relationships and society is people's core values. And, while there are many flavours, nuances and mixtures, at root there are just two fundamentally contrasting core values. The brilliant systems thinker Riane Eisler calls them *partnership/respect* values and *domination/control* values.

In *The Power of Partnership* Riane Eisler observes:

In the domination model, somebody has to be on top and somebody has to be on the bottom. Those on top control those below them. People learn, starting in early childhood, to obey orders without question. They learn to carry a harsh voice in their heads telling them they are no good, they don't deserve love, they need to be punished. Families and societies are based on control that is explicitly or implicitly backed up by guilt, fear, and force. The world is divided into in-groups and out-groups, with those who are different seen as enemies to be conquered or destroyed.

In contrast, the partnership model supports mutually respectful and caring relations. Because there's no need to maintain rigid rankings of control, there is also no built-in need for abuse or violence. Partnership relations free our innate capacity to feel joy, to play. They enable us to grow mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. This is true for individuals, families, and whole societies. Conflict is an opportunity to learn and to be creative, and power is exercised in ways that empower rather than disempower others.

Partnership relating is oriented towards the wellbeing of the community (as well as being mindful of one's own self interest). Partnership values find expression in democracy, in the caring aspects of organised religion, and in the growing concern to protect ecological systems. The archetypal form is a mother working for the wellbeing of each member of her family.

Dominator relating uses force and intimidation to establish one's own advantage over others at the expense of the community. It is orientated more towards conquering than towards collaborating. The archetypal forms of this

are patriarchal: fathers dominating their families and emperors conquering vast territories.

Partnership and *dominator* are two contrasting approaches to life that operate on every level of human endeavour from childrearing to global governance. Many aspects of dominator behaviour are truly horrific, both historically and in terms of current events. Therefore it is important to know that in important respects humanity is overall becoming healthier and more balanced, and that there is a strong positive trend that may ultimately set the tone for a positive future.

In my view Eisler's insight is as important in the social sphere as Einstein's $E = MC^2$ is in physics. It enables us to be clear about the deep attitudes and resulting behaviour that will lead either to a sustainable society that is pleasurable to live in, or to the continuation of the miserable unravelling that is already beginning. Our core values are even more important than technology for dealing with global warming, because they affect the kind of technology we choose and our overall commitment to make the changes necessary for us to become ecologically sustainable.

Dominator values are in the ascendancy

Dominator values have been in the ascendancy since the rise of the first city-states in the Middle East. The city-states evolved into empires, complete with armies, slaves and subjugated colonies. Women were subjugated as well.

I call this 'the pattern of empires'. In the pattern of empires society and the economic system is organised so that wealth and material goods flow from the periphery to the centre (all roads lead to Rome) and also from the bottom up, so that massive wealth accumulates at the top.

We may take this as 'normal', since it is so much a part of our current reality. But in fact it is only one way of organising society. Our thesis is that this particular road is inherently self-destructive. The drive to maximise profit at the expense of individuals, communities and the earth itself is an unsustainable basis on which to organise a society or a global civilisation.

Currently, promoting community wellbeing and the wellbeing of all individuals within our society is not the predominate mainstream value. Instead we have competitive individualism and an emphasis on increasing our Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

There is a strong partnership movement going on

Shifting to community wellbeing is the basis for a hopeful future.

Western civilisation has had a partnership counter trend for more than two millennia. The rise of democracy in Greece, Christianity, and the inception of the United Nations are all expressions of a partnership current, however flawed. At more personal levels, today in many respects women have gained equality with men. Many parents are raising their children with less violence

and more empathic respect, and some schools are giving students more autonomy. Unprecedentedly, millions of people around the world protested prior to the invasion of Iraq. Environmental activist Paul Hawken notes that there are now hundreds of thousands of NGOs around the world springing up to deal with social and ecological issues.

In short, there is a strong movement of people with partnership values going on. It is not centrally organised, which is fitting, and it is not remarked upon in the mainstream press. The good news is that it exists. The bad news is that it does not yet set the tone in most institutions, or in larger social policy. It should, if we are to evolve to a viable society.

Intention organises behaviour. If a society has dysfunctional goals, then those of us who care should advocate healthy goals. The merging term for a healthy goal is *wellbeing*. We should be aiming for wellbeing rather than sheer economic increase as our national priority.

A society devoted to wellbeing for its citizens will reorganise for ecological sustainability, social health and, I always add, creating a society that is pleasurable to live in. Pure utilitarianism falls far short of our potential for a joy, love, wonder and delight.

If we were to shift to a national focus on furthering wellbeing, practical actions at a number of different levels would follow.

First, we would launch programs to enable people to understand the difference between partnership and dominator relating, and the real-world consequences that follow from each style of behaviour. In today's language, we would make the business case from a society wide point of view for partnership values setting the tone. The business case is strong: continuing the dominator mode will destroy the conditions of business itself.

Second, we would encourage programs to increase people's capacity for partnership relating. Many techniques that are useful for this already exist. They includes Conflict Resolution, interpersonal communication training, facilitation training, yielding martial arts such as Tai Chi and Aikido, the Feldenkrais method of body awareness, Synectics, and improvisational acting, among others.

These all serve to develop the skills of partnership relating as functional patterns in the central nervous system.

It is not common to talk about the nervous system in the context of social change. But thinking about the nervous system adds a crucial dimension. Both partnership and dominator are ways of 'operating' our brains. That is, they are ways of processing information and organising behaviour that are mediated by the central nervous system. Functionally, they are patterns of coordination between large groups of nerves. These patterns are developed experientially through trial and error.

The important point here is that partnership skills are *not* developed through words. We cannot learn to ride a bicycle from a manual or a philosophical tract; we have to get on the bike and try. We have to train if we are to learn martial arts. So if we want people to embody the skills of partnership relating, we must create vehicles where people can develop the skills experientially. Books won't do it.

Aiming for emotional balance

Our unresolved psychological issues are a major block to partnership relating is. They manifest as anger, hostility, resentment, low self-esteem, fears and anxiety. Child abuse, domestic violence, prescriptions for tranquillizers and antidepressants – along with alcoholism and retail therapy – are all indicators of mental imbalance in our society.

Less remarked upon, we might also include the behaviour of corporate leaders who knowingly sell toxic goods, make ecologically destructive decisions, and who oppose needed reform for ecological sustainability. This level of vicious commercial intent is pathological.

So there is reason to think that emotional imbalances drive both big time dominator behaviour (with war being the extreme) and compulsive consumerism.

Obviously many people would prefer to act out or avoid their psychological issues rather than go inside and confront their demons. This is to be regretted on their behalf as well as society's. They have no way of knowing about the inner pleasure they might come to, or the new orders of profoundly moving sexual connection that could open up with their partners if they became more open and authentic.

There are many forms of psychotherapy and counseling. Probably all of them prove useful to different people at different times. Much depends on the skill of the counselor.

Recently new forms of 'energy psychology' have been developed that can greatly accelerate the process of emotional rebalancing. It has been discovered that emotional upsets are correlated with imbalances in our acupuncture energy system, and that simple techniques of stimulating acupuncture points can rapidly rebalance the energy flow and restore emotional calm. Two of the best known methods are Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) and its progenitor Thought Field Therapy (TFT). Importantly, they are excellent do-it-yourself techniques, although the assistance of a skilled practitioner can greatly aid at the beginning.

Inner work in its many forms can contribute to our evolution to sanity. People used to be stigmatised for 'needing' psychotherapy. However, if our goal is a healthy society, then we should honour people (and ourselves) for doing the inner work to become saner, more balanced, less violent and happier inside. Since other people's presence affects us directly – as ours affects them – and

the quality of our thinking and behaviour collectively affects our culture, we should encourage as much inner work as we can.

Preventing emotional damage

No parenting is perfect, and children can process well-intentioned acts in negative ways. Nevertheless, overall love is better than punishment, and it has been established clinically that prolonged threat damages the brain.

The most powerful prevention is simple: arrange for all new mothers (and fathers) who want it to be regularly visited and supported by caring parents who have some experience. This help can enable new parents to bring out a more of their nurturing side, and rely less on punishment. This has been tried in various places around the world. In a community in Colorado it led to dramatic drops in teenage crime a decade after its inception. So the best way to develop partnership values is to be raised by loving respectful parents who can support you in your own passionate interests. Nice work if you can get it!

At quite a different level, supplying adequate nutrition – vitamins, minerals amino acids and so forth (ideally through organic food) – is relevant to both prevention and ‘cure’ of emotional imbalance. Many mood disorders are the result of inadequate nutrition. Give the developing brain what it needs and it will thrive. Some scientists who study food mechanically assert that there is no significant difference between organic food and food produced by industrial agriculture. But orthomolecular psychologists and nutritionists who work with disturbed children and adults are convinced that food produced by industrial agriculture is nutritionally deficient. They compensate for the deficiency with supplements, and find their theories confirmed by positive changes in mood and behaviour in their clients.

The ideas we have just introduced for accelerating a cultural change to a viable society all operate at a personal level. We looked at teaching people the difference between partnership and dominator relating (and the real world consequences of each style); modes of training the nervous system to operate in a partnership mode; and the importance individually and collectively of resolving inner emotional issues.

Now let's go beyond the personal and look at organizations.

Changing organisations to operate on partnership values

If we want a partnership culture we will need to evolve partnership organisations. We are all profoundly affected by the style of the institutions we participate in. Prolonged experience in authoritarian organisations tends to make us either dominators or people who acquiesce subserviently, although there are many exceptions. And organisations themselves affect the world in ways that are either life-positive or destructive.

It can be shown at every level that partnership values work ‘better’, in the sense of fostering pleasurable human relationships, more prosperous business units and peaceful international relationships.

Businesses that operate with a partnership culture tend to thrive. Research sponsored by the Business Council of Australia shows that the managers of the best performing Australian work units operate with partnership values. When the researchers went on site often it was difficult at first to distinguish the managers from everybody else. The managers did not play up their status, and they clearly treated their workers with friendly respect. This elicited loyalty and enthusiasm.

Internationally, companies like Ricardo Semler's Semco in Brazil and Bill Gore's (Goretec) group of companies in America demonstrate that companies with partnership values can thrive. Both companies give their workers enormous latitude for self-regulation. This inspires both innovation and commitment; people want to do a good job, and will do so when they can work out the best way on their own terms.

All of this is good news. It is an indication that after 5,000 years of patriarchy, parts of our culture are evolving a healthy direction.

But citing particular instances of 'partnership being better' is not the deepest point. I am espousing the view that our whole society needs to reorganise to operate on partnership values – a whole system change. Partnership relating must become our cultural style and aspiration, because the continuation of dominator values will destroy us as a viable civilisation. A healthy cultural tone must come to pervade everything. It must become 'the way we do things around here'.

The global economic system

The next scale up is to look at the global economic system. While this is clearly beyond the reach of ordinary people, as citizens we should have thoughtful opinions about it, because there are aspects of international trade that affect us all.

Presently there are three main positions about how the global economic order should run.

The dominant one is a world with minimal trade barriers that increases trade. Most of the trade is conducted by large transnational organizations.

A modification of this supports open trade, but with rules that stringently protect the environment and workers rights. This might be regarded as a vision of a 'positive evolution' of the WTO.

The third vision is just the opposite. It calls for national governments to resist further steps to complete the open global economy, or to even withdrawal from some of the international agreements whereby governments have surrendered key aspects of legislative autonomy (such as the right to set higher at environmental standards than the WTO supports).

It is important for business leaders, think tanks and policymakers to think these issues through in the context of ecological sustainability and healthy societies – especially since increasing global trade increases greenhouse emissions.

Shock or personal development as the driver of social change?

Some people think that only an overwhelming disaster will move people sufficiently to shift the course of global civilization. This may be the case. However, if runaway global warming, our most imminent disaster, runs its predicted course, then it is simply all over for global civilization. Once the genie is out of the bottle – and the stopper is obviously seriously leaking– it cannot be put back on a human time scale.

Perhaps there is something to the ‘shock’ theory of change. On one view leaders of the United States and Britain were shocked by the World War II following so close on World War I, and they attributed the war to economic stress. So they established three institutions to reduce the likelihood of war: United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Even though the IMF and the World Bank have since operated as dominator institutions, there was something good in the impulse.

Psychologist Claire Graves developed a theory that both individuals and cultures progress through shocks, and his theory was the genesis of a discipline known as Spiral Dynamics. I have seen individuals make positive shifts in their development prompted by shocks in their life. Shocks can be a wake-up call.

However, shocks can also paralyse people. More to the point in terms of today's environment crisis, our concern is not the possibility of a one-off shock such as Hurricane Katrina. Our concern is that the complexly interrelated ecological system will unravel through the effects of runaway global warming. By the time the disastrous effects of this impinge on everybody so strongly that everybody gets it, the unravelling itself will be unstoppable. Our learning will be useless, our responses ineffectual. Our only hope that this point is intelligent foresight and self-chosen responsible action. This is occurring.

Today, using various personal growth vehicles as the means, many people are making profoundly positive personal changes without necessarily being driven by large shocks. They are motivated by a drive for inner wholeness and wellbeing,

On a much larger historical scale, psychohistorian Lloyd deMause cites evidence to show that in Western civilisation positive cultural changes have arisen because, mysteriously, mothers (and more recently fathers as well) have improved the nurturing quality of their childrearing. With less violence children grow up happier, and positive cultural evolution follows.

So we are faced with this question: can we mobilise enough latent goodwill and perceptive intelligence to make the necessary changes without being traumatised by disaster?

Disasters are occurring right now. And things will get worse as environmental deficits already built into the system increasingly hit home. So we are really asking: can we in the developed world turn it around enough, in time, so that much that is good is preserved for the coming generations? Partial decline is inevitable; can we establish a basis for recovery and the next flowering of a vibrant civilisation?

Obviously nobody knows the answer to this. We are testing whether there is enough latent goodwill to turn the tide.

While there is ample cause for despair I choose to be a committed optimist, and work for the good. I am encouraged by my awareness of the many other people and groups who are working proactively in the same direction. I believe that the key point of change for evolving a viable society is that individuals, businesses, countries and indeed our global civilisation should consciously commit to individual and community wellbeing as our goal. Intention organises behaviour. This goal, no longer utopian but essential, should replace the goal of increasing gross national product and international trade.

Let's return to our starting premise: *The most influential point of change in any human system is in people's thinking.*

How can we improve people's thinking on a mass scale? In the next section I will describe a vehicle for doing this. It is called the Alliance for Sustainable Wellbeing.

Part Two: The Alliance for Sustainable Wellbeing

The Alliance's goal is to facilitate a thoughtfully informed national movement that will shift Australian culture to ecological sustainability and social wellbeing as our explicit goal. If we as a culture embrace this goal with enthusiasm, the essential practical actions will easily follow. We know how to become sustainable.

As previously illustrated, as we as individuals change, the necessary social changes will follow. Therefore we offer tools and encourage leadership to help people

- Develop a big picture understanding of how our environment and social system currently interact, and identify positive points of change
- Train personally to develop partnership relating skills and emotional balance
- Form a positive intent to create a viable society
- Effect changes within organisations to operate on partnership values.
- Be prepared to support leadership for larger legislative and global governance changes.

- Initiate leadership within their sphere of influence, perhaps by inviting friends and neighbours to join in thoughtful discussions about Australia's (your own country's) future.

Our organising model

We work through personal networks and established organisations with positive values to establish engaged learning programs. We offer short presentations, on-going discussion groups, and personal development workshops (see below).

There are many networks of people who have positive values and whose work is already contributing to the evolution of a healthy and sustainable society. They tend to operate in their own silos; they are potentially a hugely under-utilised resource for social change. They include environmental educators, organic farmers, union activists for workers rights, city planners, paediatricians and parent groups who care about children's health, psychotherapists, yoga teachers, alternative energy providers, and eco-architects.

The Alliance gives members of these groups support in inviting friends and neighbours to presentations and local discussions about the way forward to a viable society. If we succeed in this outreach model we will have found a way to get past preaching to the converted. We will also have found a way to bypass the mainstream media.

Since we are in a global emergency, transitioning to a viable society needs to become our top-of-mind national passion, with everybody talking about how to do it. We need to discuss it in the same way that we talk about floods or war, except far more creatively. We will know we are making progress when there are regular progress reports in the news, and transitioning to viability is part of the part of the agenda of every boardroom meeting.

We are far from this at the moment.

Therefore we hope to inspire people who are already trainers, speakers and writers to mention their vision and commitment to creating a healthy society at the beginning or end of every presentation they make. Apparently, whatever the topic, the Roman Senator Cato ended each of his speeches – even at a dinner parties – with “...*and Carthage must be destroyed!*” An ugly story, to be sure, but it illustrates the principle. Our version is “... *and we are building a viable society!*”

We also hope to inspire businesses to take a public stand along these lines:

We are committed to contributing to the evolution of an ecologically sustainable, socially healthy society that is pleasurable to live in.

In time, such a reminder of our appropriate national agenda will not be thought of a weird, but as sane.

Support material

We have developed presentations, training materials, and a discussion group manual. They include:

- *Orienting to a Hopeful Future* – a PowerPoint presentation that uses dynamic graphics to help people understand key systems connections and identify the points of change that will enable us to become sustainable.
- *Friendly Solutions* – a workshop that helps people grasp the difference between *domination/control* relating and *partnership respect* relating. The workshop introduces personal development skills that enable us to become more emotionally centred and creative, and better able to relate in a 'partnership' mode. It also gives participants a quick overview of cutting-edge technical changes necessary for civilisation to become viable.

The *Friendly Solutions* workshop is designed so that people from different disciplines can insert their own experiential material. It should be a springboard for participants to go further on their own.

- *Evolving a World That Works* – a discussion group manual for exploring the connections between ecology, industrial design, economics, personal psychology and the core values that will shape either a positive or a negative future. It can be downloaded from the Alliance website www.alliance-for-sustainable-wellbeing.com.

Transition Leader

I would like to invite you to identify yourself as being a Transition Leader. Transition Leaders are people who

- Recognize that we need to change the operation of our whole system in order to become viable
- Think through for themselves how to do that, and
- Initiate some action within their sphere of influence (no matter how small) to contribute to the shift.

Orienting to Creating a Viable Future uses graphics as thought starters to help you think through for yourself what is needed. *Orienting* can be downloaded from the Alliance for Sustainable Wellbeing website, and there are other integrative books as well, such as David Korten's *From Empire to Earth Community* and Paul Raskin's *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* (www.tellus.org).

Taking self initiated action without anybody's authorisation is the key thing. You just do it. One does not have to be a member of any organisation, or have anyone's direction or permission.

An important kind of action is to talk with friends and neighbours about what's going on and why and how we need to change. You do not need to be an expert to do this. Once you are clear that we need to change our material/psychological civilisation to be ecologically sustainable, and that goodwill partnership values are essential, you will have enough of a basic framework to get started.

The key thing *is* to get started, even though you may feel that you don't know enough, and even though you may be concerned about being judged as being weird or proselytising. You will learn as you go. By talking to people, or by doing other kinds of actions suggested by this essay – or other purposeful actions that occur to you – you shift from being a bystander to one who shapes the future. You will feel better for it. And you won't be alone.

Invitation

Whether you are practitioner, businessperson, policy maker or concerned citizen, I invite you to join us in an endeavour that few high civilisations have ever attempted: *creating an ecologically sustainable, socially healthy society that is pleasurable to live in.* A viable society!

If we succeed, future generations will thank us for it.

Andrew Gaines

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Accelerating the shift to viable society

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