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The Age of Ecology: Self-Organization in Liberal Modernity and Ecology

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The Cold War officially ended in 1991. For four decades the leaders of the United States justified building a massive arsenal of nuclear and conventional weapons by arguing that they were protecting the Free World from the “evil empire”—the USSR. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the USSR, national attention in the United States and Canada could focus on the hard reality that high levels of consumption, rapid population growth, pollution, and inappropriate land-use practices in industrialized nations have led to an environmental crisis more serious than any in the history of civilization.

National governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world began preparing for an Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992, to address these urgent environmental and social issues, including rapid deforestation of tropical and temperate forests, loss of biodiversity due to destruction of habitat, global warming, and depletion of the protective ozone layer. Neither the issue of rapid human population growth nor basic philosophical issues concerning human responsibility for nature were on the official agenda of the Rio Summit nor were these topics discussed by the official delegates at the conference. The United States government delegation, headed by President George Bush, played an obstructionist role at the Rio Summit by refusing to sign a biodiversity treaty approved by a majority of governments, by demanding that a proposed forest treaty be taken off the agenda, by refusing to discuss the issue of rapid population growth, and by refusing to help third world nations in developing strategies for a sustainable society. As a result, the Rio Summit received mixed review. Some saw the results as hopeful first steps to massive transformations needed during the 1990s, and others saw it as a failure which will discourage necessary international cooperation.

There is broad agreement among politicians, scientists, environmentalists and informed citizens in the United States and Canada, however, that the decade of the nineties, for better or worse, will be decisive for human and nonhuman inhabitants of the Earth. The Union of concerned Scientists, in November, 1992, issued a “World Scientists Warning to Humanity,” signed by over fifteen-hundred scientists in sixty-nine nations, stating that “human beings and the natural world are on a collision course.” The “Warning” was signed by ninety-nine of the one-hundred ninety-six living scientists who have won the Nobel Prize. Monumental changes never experienced during the history of civilization are occurring virtually overnight.

In 1992, a United Nations report on the state of the world's environment documented marked deterioration over the past twenty years in most of the environmental and social indicators included in the report. Mustafa Tolba, head of the United Nations Environment Program, which produces the annual report, said, "Time is running out. Critical thresholds may already have been breached."

In the United States a persistent economic recession during the early 1990s, with characteristics unlike any recession of the past two decades, led many people to question some of the conventional assumptions that guided political decisions, career choices, and self-conceptions over the past several generations. From the end of World War II, to the beginning of the 1990s, surveys indicated that most Americans believed that continuing economic growth would bring prosperity, and prosperity would make it possible for Americans and Canadians not only to achieve ever higher standards of living but greater happiness and a greater sense of well-being.

Americans believed that nature would always be a constant provider fresh air, trees, food, and fiber for our use. They believed that bigger was better. They became addicted to bigness— bigger human population, bigger spending, bigger government, bigger corporations, bigger military, bigger public works projects. During the 1980s, the United States government went on a huge binge of appropriations for bigger and bigger military expenditures in the name of fighting the Cold War against the Soviet empire.

Personal lifestyles of many Americans became focused on consumption of material things and on the idea that technology could solve all problems. Many believed that medical technology could solve our health problems, that nuclear technology could solve our problems of national defense. Americans bought more and more of everything— houses, automobiles, appliances. Americans used more and more electricity and fossil fuels per capita in the belief that in consuming more energy they were increasing their standard of living.

Many believed that ever-increasing prosperity would provide the means to solve intractable social problems including poverty, crime, dysfunctional families, and relations between the sexes.

Many people lost their sense of community and pursued their own careers, their own success, without thought of their obligations and responsibilities to the larger community- -to the ecological community we call nature.

Collectively, the most wealthy nations—the United States and Canada—went on a forty-year spending binge, ignoring the lessons of ecology, and oblivious to most of the great wisdom religions of the world. I call this forty-year spending spree the Age of Exuberance.

In the early 1990s the Age of Exuberance ended. The bills have come due. The costs of excess are very high.

Overriding all other concerns in the 1990s is our relationship— as individuals, as members of communities, as nations, as a species—with nature. Vast parts of the web of life are dying due to human interventions in natural processes. If we focus too narrowly on the economy and especially the recession of the early 1990s, we might not see the larger context of structural changes in society and the changing context of our relationship with nonhuman nature.

As residents of the United States and Canada, we are faced with harsh realities that will require major changes in our social policies, our daily habits, and our lifestyles.

We have begun to understand that we must address questions that were considered heretical a decade ago. Can economic growth, measured by the outdated standards of Gross National Product, provide the means to “solve” our collective environmental and social problems? In other words, is it possible to grow our way out of environmental dilemmas such as deforestation, species extinction, atmospheric imbalances, and toxic pollution on a massive scale, when economic growth in itself contributes to these problems?

On a personal level, more and more people are asking if there is something more to life than fighting to maintain a job or earn a slightly bigger paycheck?

Long-established habits of consumption are already rapidly changing. For example, “no smoking” ordinances, higher taxes on tobacco products, educational programs, and growing concern for our health are reasons for rapid decline in smoking, a previously widely accepted habit. Waste reduction laws, bottle and can deposit laws, and general public acceptance of the fact that we are wasting scarce resources are turning many Americans and Canadians into recyclers. Rising prices and decreasing supplies of water in many regions are encouraging residents to be more frugal with water. For similar reasons we are becoming more conscious of the amount of fossil fuel we use. Other changes in our patterns of consumption will come about due to conscious choices by consumers and by economic and ecological necessity.

Adults have the ability to make rapid and drastic conscious changes in lifestyle based on clear understanding and acceptance of certain philosophical principles. In particular, the global environmental crisis is motivating many people to understand the connection between certain patterns of consumption and the deterioration of life support systems on the planet. Surveys indicate that many people want to begin “greening” their lifestyles.

“Greening our lifestyles” means developing a deeper love for ourselves as part of nature, changing our attitudes toward materialism and overconsumption, and becoming mindful of our connections to nature. It means making specific changes in our daily behaviour and drastic changes in our long-range goals. There are many ways to green lifestyles. Suggestions made in my book *Living Richly in an Age of Limits* concerning homes, gardens, participation in voluntary

organizations, and perception of the land, point to some of the ways anyone in a moderate or higher income household can lead a more fulfilling and life-supporting life.

If we begin greening our lifestyles, we can enhance our sense of well-being, add meaning to our lives, and revitalize our sense of purpose and self-esteem, as well as contribute to the community of all beings, not only the community of human beings. By practicing the three Rs of reduction, recovery, and responsibility, we can enhance possibilities for richness of life, realization, and revitalization. Paying our debts to nature will not be simple or easy. It will be difficult to change some of our wasteful and destructive habits. But if we find congenial social support for our efforts, we can help each other on the road to recovering our balance.

The question is, will we only be reactive to large-scale changes in society, in philosophy, that are occurring around us, or will we be also be proactive? Will we be full, voluntary participants in the challenge of change during this decade, or will we reluctantly, and perhaps fearfully, conform to the demands for change imposed on us by forces beyond our control?

The answer to this question is based on our attitude. If we welcome, accept, and embrace the opportunities for change—vast changes in our approach to the rest of nature, to society, and to economic changes—then we can feel empowered. Through changing our lifestyles, we can live richly—in experience of life, not in yearly income.

The major philosophical issue is one of anthropocentric versus ecocentric perspectives. States briefly, an anthropocentric perspective means that one views humans as the “highest” or most advanced or important species on the planet. All other species are “lower” in some ordained hierarchy, less intelligent, and less important than humans. Humans, in various versions of anthropocentric doctrine, have a right or even a duty to “develop,” control, dominate, and manage all of natural creation. Whether as “stewards” or gardeners or resource developers, those who use anthropocentric arguments see their first responsibility and duty to be “serving the needs of people.” Indeed, the slogan “People First” is frequently used as a shorthand statement of anthropocentrism. Ecocentrism, or the deep ecology movement, as it is often labelled, presents the idea that humans are part of nature, not apart from nature, that the human place in nature is more modest, even humble, than under anthropocentrism. Humans will be helping some of the tendencies in natural processes, but humans no longer are Lord Man and Lord Woman. We are, in the phrase coined by famed ecologist Aldo Leopold, “plain citizens” of the biosphere, of the cosmos.

Our task is to become more mature—as individuals, and as a species—in order to live well and so as not to endanger whole systems and natural processes that have developed intricate relationships over time. Our job, our “real work” to use a phrase from Gary Snyder, is to live with integrity, in the midst of vast social

and biological changes that we cannot fully understand, much less control. We cannot know the outcome of our efforts. We can only set ourselves on a pathway toward maturity. The Chinese say, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” The journey we have embarked upon is a journey home. It will be long and difficult, never easy.

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