

Caring for Future Generations – Why a Wise Culture Trumps the Growth Economy

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The human growth economy is founded on assumptions that no longer hold. It has exceeded global limits from the 1980s onward. In simple terms it is consuming natural capital at an increasing rate and reducing the capacity of the Earth to support life. (Global emergency clips from Toronto, 2012) It needs to be replaced by a *steady state economy* based on different assumptions, values and views of reality (below). Since human beings have so many ways of avoiding, discounting or denying reality, this presents us with a huge challenge. (Powerful interests are also set against us undertaking this shift.) It presents future generations with an even larger challenge – it threatens their very existence.

It is one thing to stand in the present and be concerned about the future. It is quite another to put oneself in the place of future generations who currently have no voice and no representation at all. If they had voices what might they say to us?

- Please adopt a long-term perspective.
- Please invest in future relevant research.
- Please develop future-relevant education.
- Please remember us in everything that you do. (Allen Tough).

There *are* grounds for caring about future generations. They include:

- The human project is *unfinished*. (Hanna Arendt, Elise Boulding)
- To *not* care diminishes us.
- We share responsibility for dangers to their wellbeing – the global commons *have* been compromised by human activity.
- Caring is ethically defensible.
- Caring is a *cultural force* that is valuable to us now.

We simply don't bring FG into our thinking or make a space for them in our decision-making forums or councils. This, despite long-standing proposals for social innovations such as: a council for FG; an ombudsman for FG, or even the creation of sovereign fund with them in mind.

Such oversights, however, are *not* the result of deliberate selfishness or blindness. They arise, in large part, from a *shared worldview* that renders them out of court, literally un-thinkable. What are some of the shared defects of the Western Industrial Worldview?

1. *The dominance of instrumental (means – ends) reason*. Powerful but dangerous on its own. (William Blake knew this – he called it 'single vision.')
2. *The utilitarian view that nature is primarily a resource for human use*. Here anthropomorphism rules – we're caught in a trap of our own making.
3. *The lack understanding of appropriate limits*. (Lewis Mumford, the Limits to Growth project.)
4. Widespread and chronic *future discounting*.
5. *The marginalisation, or problematic status, of the numinous and the sacred*.
6. The primacy accorded to science, technology and its bastard offspring – relentless and pervasive marketing.

These are some of the hidden influences that keep things as they are. They make deep-seated and necessary social innovations difficult to achieve. But there *are* alternatives to each of the above.

1. *Intrinsic value* (in place of instrumental value) beyond the market.
2. *Nature as a complex community* to which we all belong.
3. *Recognition of limits* as a vital aspect of social existence and governance thereof. (LTG – a 40-year project – see Randers 2012)

4. The conscious use of *different timeframes for different purposes*.
5. The re-enchantment of the world (Berman et al).
6. Recognising the uses and limits of science, technology and, especially marketing, and placing them in a wider context.

These can be considered as 'aspects of a wise culture'

What is wisdom? Aust Oxford Dict. - *Experience and knowledge together with the power of applying them critically or practically; sagacity, prudence, common sense.*

Other aspects include: *Foresight intelligence, post-conventional thinking, appropriate values and progress toward a steady state economy.*

1. Foresight intelligence

What is foresight? *Primarily an in-built capacity of the human brain / mind system.* Websters Dict: *an act or the power of forward seeing, prescience; an act of looking forward; action in reference to the future.*

Or RS: *Expanding awareness and understanding through futures scanning and the clarification of emerging situations.* It pushes the boundaries of perception forward in at least three major ways:

1. By assessing the possible consequences of actions, decisions etc.
2. By anticipating problems before they occur, and,
3. By considering the present implications of possible future events.

"The proof of improvidence lies in falling under the empire of necessity" Bertrand de Jouvenel, *The Art of Conjecture*, 1967.

Strategic foresight: The ability to create high quality forward views and to apply them in organisationally useful ways; for example, to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy; explore new markets products and services.

Social foresight. Forward thinking is a norm. Foresight is embedded in everyday life and is supported by relevant social norms and institutions. It facilitates the search for more sustaining and sustainable ways of life.

The former is in patchy use in some organisations while the latter only exists in sparse fragments, despite the huge need for an installed capability for high quality social foresight. This oversight clearly demonstrates the lack of wisdom in our current arrangements.

2. Conventional to post-conventional outlooks

Conventional

Individuals are successfully socialised and have adopted standard, largely passive, ways of thinking and operating. They generally operate unreflectively and put their energies into maintaining the status quo.

Post-conventional

This view sees beyond dualisms (right / wrong) and deals more successfully with ambiguity, contradiction and paradox. It readily transcends rules and regulations, in part because it sees them as socially constructed and therefore open to change. A wide range of innovative capacities emerge from this one shift of focus and capability. Basically it's the ability to see beyond what is to what may be. Vision → Action.

3. Appropriate values

Spiral dynamics proposes a series of nested values within a spiral structure, each of which has its own specific operating systems. (Beck and Cowan, 1996.) Becoming conscious of these allows us to understand choices that are available to help us move on. (*You Tube* interview with Don Beck.)

Why relevant? Clive Hamilton in *Requiem for a species* hit the nail on the head when he suggested that the most significant key to making human and cultural progress was *not* 'technology' but contained within the notion of "accelerated psychic development" (Requiem p 215).

In *The biggest wake-up call in history*, I apply both of these dimensions to the debate on climate change.

4. The steady state economy

Brief definition:

An economy with constant stocks of people and artifacts, maintained at some desired, sufficient levels by low rates of maintenance 'throughput', that is, by the lowest feasible flows of matter and energy from the first stage of production to the last stage of consumption.

(Daly, Herman. 1991. *Steady-State Economics, 2nd edition*. Island Press, Washington, DC. p.17.)

A steady state economy, therefore, aims for stable or mildly fluctuating levels in population and consumption of energy and materials. Birth rates equal death rates, and production rates equal depreciation rates.

(Ref to CASSE the Centre for the Advancement of a Steady State Economy.)

A wise culture gives us the best chance of negotiating the demanding period ahead

Wilber's version:

- Vivid understanding of common humanity.
- Move beyond roles based on race, gender etc.
- Balanced use of rationality and intuition;
- Higher motivations re-shape economic life.
- Methods, institutions to foster growth of consciousness.
- Technology as an aid to transcendence, not substitute.
- Governance depends on mastery of the (human) system at each level: body/mind/soul/spirit. (Wilber, *Up from Eden*, 1983.)

All very well – but idealistic? Maybe. Yet it's *clear that there are more choices than we often realise*. Here, for example, are some recent suggestions from Karen Wyatt, an integral practitioner. She writes about the desirability of:

- being a calming presence;
- taking the highest possible perspective
- seeking the greatest good for all;
- being a bridge and seeking commonalities between opposing views; and, interestingly,
- doing one's own 'shadow work.' The notion that the shadow (or unacknowledged contents of consciousness) has pervasive impacts is not generally recognised. It shows up, eg, in organised crime, the drugs trade etc, (I devoted a chapter to it in BWCH.)

Responding to the global emergency is 'win / win' - valuable now, and also to FG.

Matrix of 'generic responses.'

Steps in the right direction include:

- Bringing forward thinking and capability into the heart of educational theory and practice.
- Creating and staffing Institutions of Foresight (IoFs) tasked with creating and sustaining viable forward views. Situate these close government but not necessarily within it.
- Don't wait for disaster to strike. Understand the threat / opportunity matrix ahead. (Singapore, Canada, Finland.)
- Look very seriously indeed at a variety of 'descent pathways' for society and economy. Investments here would repay outlays many times over.
- Engage with the systemicity of the global context and begin to consciously intervene in destructive feedback loops such as:
 - Perverse subsidies (fossil fuels).
 - Universal marketing and mass merchandising.
 - Commercial TV (which is not at all 'free to air').
 - Unquestioned population and econ growth.
 - Energy hungry mega-projects incl. tall towers and road tunnels. Etc Etc.
 - CF Transition towns movement.

Conclusion

The most likely, business-as-usual, do-nothing, future is indeed a Dystopian, overshoot-and-collapse, nightmare. To understand this is not to be 'negative' and it is certainly not 'gloom and doom' (lazy thinking).

Imagine taking a group of young people out into the bush. You know there are dangers, so how do you prepare? Ditto for the Sydney to Hobart race, or any long journey where there are dangers and risks.

Our situation is not dissimilar. *Understanding 'overshoot & collapse'* provides the best possible chance to avoid or moderate it. This is crucial work (thought few are calling for it or actually doing it). We should be re-directing significant social resources *away* from indulgence, consumption and waste to disciplined enquiry and action, to strategies of response. (Activities that *encourage* affluent consumption could be considered crimes against humanity and FG!!)

I've examined some of these issues in many papers and two recent books. In these I argue that *collapse discourses are inherently inhibiting* whereas those dealing with *descent* tend to be more liberating and useful. They allow for the exercise of human agency and choice. Hence *the exploration of 'descent pathways' is one of the most responsible projects we can undertake*. Yet the organisational infrastructure to support this vital work barely exists at the present time.

Last word: A wise culture trumps the growth economy because it *opens out* the future for humanity and its world instead of steadily closing it down. It also encourages us to explore *the higher reaches of human and cultural evolution* where, it seems to me, most – if not all – the solutions to the present global emergency actually lie.

At the level of humankind there is no discernable limit or ceiling... Self-awareness is a power of unlimited potential. (E.F. Schumacher, *Guide for the perplexed*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1977, p. 48.)

Recommended reading

Ehrlich, P. & A. Can a collapse of global civilisation be avoided? Proceedings of the Royal Society, Biol Sciences, 2013 280, 20122845, published 9 January, 2013.

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Other resources

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You Tube Videos

Interview with Don Beck (spiral dynamics integral):

http://integralfutures.com/wordpress/?page_id=13

On the global emergency: <http://www.foresightinternational.com.au/video-clips>

7.30 Report interview with Richard Slaughter: http://richardslaughter.com.au/?page_id=2