The Biggest Wake Up Call in History - Synopsis

Richard A. Slaughter

Part One: Understanding the problem

Part one provides an overview of what has been termed the 'planetary emergency' and I refer to the 'civilisational challenge.' Both terms suggest that, if we understand what is at stake, then the prospects for dealing with it are greatly improved. Moreover, to the extent that we heed early warning signals then we buy ourselves time to act. Part one draws on a wide range of contemporary sources in order to establish just what 'the problem' is.

Chapter 1: What is the challenge to civilisation?

Chapter one provides a global overview of humanity's collective impacts on planet Earth. It summarises conclusions from research on the global system, assesses the state of the world's oceans and considers our impacts on other species. It then relates these to social, cultural and economic factors and especially to critiques of market led economic theory. It concludes that, residual uncertainties notwithstanding, a sound framework exists for understanding and coming to grips with global change. The growth dynamic that has been dominant for some three centuries has become counter productive to the point where it needs to be phased out and replaced. In view of the magnitude of the changes required conflicts have arisen in many places, especially between those who still think that old-style growth and development remains viable and those who do not.

Chapter 2: Conventional responses

Chapter two examines conventional social responses to global change. Among the most significant is the reception accorded to significant 'signals of change.' The track record of 'missed signals' is outlined in two countries - the US and Australia. Evidence is presented that those responsible for wise government and social policy have missed or ignored information that provides vital evidence about global change processes. Overall, the social capacity for detecting and interpreting such information is shown to be inadequate. The issue is also approached through looking at the occurrence of disasters and again, it is suggested that the track record here is problematic. Two other manifestations of 'business as usual' are reviewed. One is the widespread habit of looking to new technology to save the day. Another is the rise of consumerism and the deliberate stoking of demand through pervasive advertising. Overall, conventional responses impede progress in understanding and dealing with the world we've collectively created.

Chapter 3: Is 'overshoot and collapse' credible?

Chapter three is pivotal. It seeks to resolve the question of whether or not the hypothesis that humanity is now set on s path characterised as 'overshoot and collapse' is correct. It reviews the *Limits to Growth* project, evaluates later research on its findings and concludes that humanity is indeed living a long way beyond its means, thereby degrading its global life support system. The 'collapse' thesis can therefore not only be substantiated, it has also become a structural reality to which we must respond. A key implication is that there are significant gaps between humanity's ability to perceive and understand this fact and the magnitude of the actions that are responsible for creating it. Two important caveats are also noted. First, and despite appearances, the above does not necessarily amount to a 'gloom and doom' conclusion. Second, the notion of 'collapse' is not as monolithic and settled as first appears. Other aspects of the story considered below suggest a more positive and enabling outlook.

Chapter 4: Contexts and extremes of 'overshoot'

Chapter four brings the discussion back to concrete realities, particularly those confronting some of the poorest in the world. Aspects of their plight in specific places are outlined and linked with the emerging impacts of climate change. It then looks at Las Vegas and Dubai, two environments where 'hyper development' has reached new extremes and, in so doing, represents the immanent end of the high-tech, rapid growth and energy intensive model. The latter is also linked back to the success and subsequent failure of neo-conservative, free market oriented, ideology. While both still retain much of their raw instrumental power their time is past and their usefulness has ended.

Chapter 5: Confronting the collective shadow

Chapter five examines several linked phenomena that have been widely overlooked in this context. They can usefully be approached through what psychologists refer to as 'the shadow,' or repressed contents of consciousness. Just as the human shadow is held to rob individuals of autonomy and power it is suggested that organised crime exerts similar costs upon societies and, indeed, the whole world. If the nations of the world are to unite to deal with global challenges, they cannot afford the loss these resources and the vitality they represent. Globalisation and the Internet have contributed to this situation and current attempts to resolve it have not been successful. Set alongside these activities are others that may currently be legal but are involved in spinning 'unreal value' disconnected from the real world of people and ecologies. The 'fantasy economy' of international finance also needs to be understood and its implications noted.

Part Two: The search for solutions

The literature global problems mainly addresses the world 'out there' and overlooks the world 'in here.' Part two begins with what are perhaps the two key issues of our time – global warming and peak oil. It reviews recent work on both and introduces elements of an Integral perspective. The latter throws new light on such issues and arguably brings new clarity to possible solutions.

Chapter 6: Reframing climate change and global warming

Chapter six begins the attempt to move beyond conventional thinking, limiting values and standard responses. It is divided into three parts. The first briefly introduces key elements of the climate change dilemma. The second outlines several aspects of an approach or perspective that arguably throws new light on global issues and on possible solutions to them. This Integral approach introduces four domains of reality (known as the four quadrants) specific lines and levels of development in each and, lastly, a systematic approach to values. Careful use of these distinctions allows us to outline new approaches to climate change, global warming and other issues raised in part one. The final section reviews a sample of climate change literature, considers emergent patterns within it and suggests a number of ways forward that are further developed below.

Chapter 7: Beyond collapse – an emerging narrative

Chapter seven reviews the global energy dilemma and the issue of 'peak oil' by analysing and evaluating several authoritative sources. It acknowledges the seriousness of the former and the value of the latter, but then proceeds to identify an emerging narrative that redirects and refreshes the debate. The use of Integral concepts helps to generate a different 'take' on the nature of long-term solutions and to accomplish three things. First, there is a move beyond the original 'overshoot and collapse' thesis to a narrative based on the notion of 'descent.' Second, our ability to conceptualise aspects of the macro change process is improved. Third, we can start to move beyond 'gloom and doom' responses to explore the emerging grounds of action and hope.

Chapter 8: Transition strategies

Chapter eight begins by considering the value and limitations of empirical science. The Integral concepts introduced above are extended and used to characterise individual and social worldviews. They are subsequently used to review and evaluate eight transition strategies or perspectives that have been put forward. Several conclusions emerge. First, they tend to confirm the need for major shifts in current ways of life including: shifts away from passive consumerism; reductions in energy consumption across the board; re-localisation, especially in relation to food production; the pursuit of strategies to increase resilience; restoration of the natural environment: and, overall, the need to wean societies away from their addiction to

economic growth. A second conclusion reinforces an issue encountered above, i.e., the disjuncture between the relatively simple *description* of such thorough going shifts in current ways of life and the *personal and psychological burdens* of such changes. Finally it notes how various approaches appear to cluster around a default notion of decentralised, small-scale societies and poses questions about this 'new orthodoxy.'

Chapter 9: Enhancing awareness

Chapter nine pursues two themes that have been running like an underground stream throughout this work. The first brings clearly into focus the domain that has received *least* attention in relation to the global predicament - the interior characteristics and potentials of each individual. To that end it draws on further aspects of the Integral perspective that clearly depict some of the interior realities that help to shape the more familiar external ones. The second theme explores how the approach taken in this book suggests an expanded frame of awareness and action. It then provides several case studies to show how these notions have been put into practice in relevant areas such as futures studies / foresight work, AIDS awareness and strategies for communicating about sustainability.

Chapter 10: Responding to a world on the edge

Chapter ten begins by summarising some of the conclusions that have emerged above. It then sketches in aspects of an emerging global agenda. Next it considers how *social foresight* can emerge from widely shared sources and, in so doing, help to focus shared attention on the issues raised here. It then looks further at two specific strategies for responding to these dilemmas. The first is what Integral practitioners call 'translation', i.e., level specific options that help individuals to act more effectively at whatever stage they may have already reached. Equally, understanding 'where people are coming from' makes it possible to design 'core messages' in ways that have resonance and meaning across a wider spectrum of individuals and groups. The second option is more difficult to achieve but, overall, more powerful and productive. This is known as 'transformation' and involves more thorough-going development. The notion of 'waking up' is further considered and, it is suggested, greatly expands the palette of options available. Overall, the perspective outlined here helps to reveal aspects of global issues that, being largely grounded in non-material factors, have thus far been widely overlooked.

Chapter 11: Vision to action

The final chapter considers how certain visions of the future can serve a number of useful purposes. First, they show that the options currently being envisaged by no means exhaust those that are possible or preferable. Second, they provide starting points for individual action and social innovation. Third, under the right circumstances they can catalyse social processes that, over time, enact possibilities that were previously invisible and out of reach.

While earlier chapters reviewed notions of 'overshoot and collapse' futures and varieties of 'descent' from the peak of industrial civilisation, the whole point is that there are other options – 'post-collapse' and 'post-descent, futures.' As these are better understood, humanity can choose to follow a different track. To establish a framework of possibility this chapter considers post-collapse, post-descent futures at a high level of generality. It then moves to a close-up view of three individuals who have each experienced their own awakening with results that are directly relevant to the thesis presented here. Briefly, the deep-seated changes that these accounts depict can be started here and now in our own time. If pursued decisively with intelligence and appropriate values they prefigure a very different future world.

Conclusion

The conclusion wraps up the argument by depicting two forces acting together upon humanity. First there is the prospect of a disastrous crash, or precipitous descent, that will decimate humanity and destroy large parts of the remaining natural world. This is a force that is driving us out our present zones of comfort. Second, there is the attraction, or 'pull' force that holds before us new and renewed modes of individual and social development. As has been demonstrated throughout the book, these bestow exactly the gifts that are needed in our time – broader and deeper understanding, more effective modes of communication and action, greater capacity to re-connect with each other and the world that sustains us. To the extent that we can utilise both of these forces we will be able to achieve a viable transition that leads toward sustainable futures.