

# The Biggest Wake Up Call in History\*

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## Introduction: a planetary emergency

Standing behind the familiar surfaces of everyday life – our family, our work, the travel we undertake, our preferred recreation and so on – a single question confronts us all, rich and poor, in every country in the world – how should we respond to a world slipping deeper into crisis each and every year? It's a question that vast numbers of people are aware of and to which there are at least two fundamental responses that we can label 'passive' or 'active.' Perhaps the former is most common and it is commonly expressed through denial and / or avoidance. Here the issues appear so challenging, so difficult to understand and respond to, that they are simply set aside allowing people to get on with the kinds of close-up and personal things they *can* have some influence upon. The clear drawback of such responses is that they lead to widespread disempowerment. We also know that denial and avoidance don't really work at any level. All they do is to defer issues, to shove them aside for a while. This leads me to speculate that the repressed knowledge of this failure to confront reality may be among the root causes of the 'depression epidemic' noted in recent years.

Active responses are clearly different and hold greater potential. They involve a willingness to learn, to take on board new and sometimes disturbing ideas and, at some point, to engage in some sort of personal project or action. What is often at stake here is *the very sense of self* that is responding. As our enquiry proceeds we'll find that this is indeed one of the key domains that offers some highly significant answers to our collective dilemma. Some responses are active but not particularly effective. Opinions differ here but one could include in this category minor changes in lifestyles such as purchasing a more fuel-efficient car or composting scraps of food for a garden. Beyond this are responses that are not restricted to individuals but become more widely influential, that involve real structural changes in how things are done or that initiate new or renewed ways of knowing and being. To some social innovators and related pioneers this is not news. Yet in considering the wide array of responses to the planetary emergency a couple of things stand out. First, those actively involved are still very much in a minority that is either ignored or lampooned by the mainstream, especially mainstream conservative media. Second, there's insufficient broad agreement and shared understanding about what the priority tasks are and how to go about them.

This book has two main purposes. The first, which I tackle in Part One, is to describe 'the problem' as clearly as possible. If we know what that is and can articulate it without exaggeration or distortion it then we have at least made a start. In considering this material it seems to me that an attitude of open and non-judgemental receptiveness is useful. While it is true that some of the material we'll be looking at is challenging and may at times weigh heavily on the spirit, Part One is only the beginning and intended to set the scene, as it were. Part Two attempts to break new ground. It attempts to re-frame conventional thinking about 'world problems' and also honours and evaluates some of

the many contributions that have been put forward to resolve it. It's here that the positive implications of the book begin to emerge, where new hope and new capacities can be seen to arise. The process is quite straightforward. As we allow ourselves to open to what are sometimes called the 'signals' that are being constantly generated within the global system, as we become aware of their import and actively respond to them, then a deeper, richer, understanding emerges. Then, out of that understanding new and renewed values, motivations and capacities can also emerge. That's part of the 'good news' that arises from a clear understanding of the human prospect before us. We also have what might be called a powerful beginning advantage in that the near term future is by no means the 'unknown territory' it is sometimes taken to be.

Personal and informal forward thinking comes so naturally to human beings that we seldom give it a thought. Upon awakening one of the first things to arise is a mental picture of the expected day. At the beginning of a week we have a similar picture of the days to come, a less well-defined one of the month ahead, a view of the year and so on. Were this not so then we'd feel confused and have little reason to get up. Children would not be sent to school. No one would study anything. Nothing would be planned, built or achieved. Travel would cease and, indeed, society would grind to a halt. Simple thought experiments to 'remove' all traces of the future from our minds show that human motivations and actions all rely upon an open future in which we imagine and play out images of expectation and purpose.<sup>1</sup> Each and every moment of our lives gains meaning both from past experience and also from the backdrop of the near term future that constantly and effortlessly arises within our minds.

The fact that futures scanning has such a long pedigree hints at its central role in social life and its many practical uses. From the earliest times astronomers, priests, soothsayers and oracles sought to provide guidance on a range of personal and social matters: when to marry, when to plant, when to invade or build defences. In later times, as societies became more complex, greater coordination became essential and unavoidable. The fact that less and less could be left to chance is reflected in the rise of timetables and schedules, themselves a result of the standardisation of time. Future eventualities had to be foreseen and provision made for flood, famine, war and peace. In modern times the investments in futures scanning have become ever greater. Contingency plans are needed for the growing number of threats that can be envisaged. Does a global recession presage a wider economic collapse? How serious will the next 'flu pandemic be, and the one after that? Will conflict in one of the world's major oil-producing areas cut off the West's supply of oil? Will radical Islam prove unstoppable? Will global warming spin beyond human influence? These are just a few of what might be called the 'new unknowns' that organisations and societies are beginning to confront. Together they've ushered in a new era wherein few of the old certainties remain but the risks continue to multiply.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of futures scanning developed rapidly during the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century under the impacts of war and threat of war. They gave rise to new professions that included planners, strategists and futurists – now better known as foresight practitioners. Over a few decades their toolkit developed and diversified.<sup>3</sup> By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century these efforts had become widespread. Government departments, local authorities and

corporations adapted and used them for their own purposes – which usually meant applying them to questions about technology, the economy and commerce. A 2008 survey provided some fascinating insights into the spread of this work.<sup>4</sup> Very briefly, it suggested that the bulk of futures work occurs in places that are strongly identified with the status quo and that more recent and perhaps more innovative uses remain rare. The continued evolution and development of the field appeared problematic because, while large numbers of partly-trained ‘scenario technicians’ could be found nearly everywhere, the demand for advanced futures work was episodic at best. This was partly due to the way that governments and commercial organisations defined their requirements to suit their own specific interests. It was also due to the rush of the universities toward market-led applications and their diminished capacity for paradigm breaking and innovative work beyond the market.

It is for such reasons that the futures field *per se* remained a minor player in the expanding global drama, many of its practitioners attuned to earlier concerns. It remained too small and undeveloped to take the lead in responding to growing international challenges. Instead, the best work began to emerge from other sources – men, women, research teams and groups who had started to read the ‘signals,’ or indicators of change, around them, had understand their implications and begun to reach clear – often startling - conclusions. As a result a new wave of futures-related work emerged and it is to this wider context, with its ever-growing literature and web presence that this book is in large measure indebted. It is also indebted to the rise of the Integral perspective that, as we’ll see, has brought new clarity and depth to these concerns. These rich materials provide us with a variety of resources and insights for negotiating the unprecedented period of upheaval and structural change that lies ahead. There is, however, one central certainty in all the confusion – the human race is challenged as never before. Hence title of this work is that that the culmination of all that we know constitutes ‘the greatest wakeup call in history.’ Will the futures field rise to the challenge? Perhaps. What is increasingly clear, however, is that ‘the future’ is no longer the province of specialists. Rather, it has become – or very soon will be - the ‘core business’ of everyone and of all human societies. Which in turn heralds major shifts in perception, policy and practice. That is also why this book is not primarily intended for specialists but for ‘general readers’ who are alert to changes in their world. A Glossary of Terms is available on the web.<sup>5</sup>

Although it seems to have crept up on us almost without warning we are in fact already right in the middle of a planetary emergency with no simple solutions, no easy exits. It is not merely an economic or financial crisis but a systemic one that is simultaneously global and also reaches into the deepest recesses of individual lives. *The only way forward that makes sense is to seek clarity on what we are facing and mobilise on a society-wide and global scale to deal with it.* Anything less will consign our children to a diminished and unliveable world. Some have suggested that we need to move to a ‘war footing’ to deal with such unprecedented challenges, but it’s by no means clear that near-future dangers have anything like the same impact or significance for currently affluent populations as those that pose more immediate threats to them (such as economic and financial instability). Many current impacts tend, in fact, to be felt those whose plight is largely overlooked and distorted by poverty and distance.<sup>6</sup> The fact remains, however,

that we have precious little time to act if we're to avoid the worst outcomes – a world unfit for life, including humans, and unable either to sustain civilisation or the rich ecology upon which it depends. Perhaps the best, and certainly one of the most succinct, descriptions of our situation, was offered by biologist E.O. Wilson when he suggested that:

We have entered the Century of the Environment, in which the immediate future is usefully conceived as a bottleneck. Science and technology, combined with a lack of self-understanding and a Paleolithic obstinacy, brought us to where we are today. Now science and technology, combined with foresight and moral courage, must see us through the bottleneck and out.<sup>7</sup>

Science and technology + foresight + moral courage is not a bad beginning formula for approaching what many believe to be the most monumental task ever faced by human beings. As will become clear below it recognises several key domains that are seldom accorded 'equal treatment,' yet each of which has an essential role to play. In our search for clarity we'll be alert to ways that different kinds of knowledge illuminate different aspects of the context and contribute to a broader and more systematic picture.

As noted above, Part One of the book is devoted to exploring aspects of 'the problem.' Chapter 1 draws widely on recent futures-related work to answer the question 'what is the challenge to civilisation?' It presents a concise view of the evidence and draws on several views of the 'global problematique.' Chapter 2 takes a look at some common social responses, including overviews of the fate of significant 'signals of change' in the US and Australia. It also critiques an entire industry based on denial.

Chapter 3 asks if the prospect of 'overshoot and collapse' is credible. It offers a range of evidence in the affirmative but then goes on to suggest that notions of collapse may not be quite what they first seem. Chapter 4 then looks at some of the contexts where these phenomena can be seen operating. On one hand the poor of the world are suffering immense privation. But on the other, some of the rich are continuing to indulge in the kind of extreme over-development that has helped to bring us to where we are today. While that model still retains much of its raw instrumental power its time is past and its usefulness has ended. We attempt to 'connect some of the dots' between these extreme examples and some of their links to everyday life.

Chapter 5 takes a look at a subject that has been widely overlooked in this context and that psychologists refer to as 'the shadow' (or repressed contents of consciousness). Here this is applied not to individuals but to societies. This allows us to approach a phenomenon that is seldom mentioned in this context – that of the 'spoilers.' Various forms of organised crime are increasingly active and widespread in the world and they arguably undermine progressive efforts everywhere. Globalisation and the Internet have made it easier for them to undertake a range of geopolitical, commercial and criminal activities that stand in direct opposition to humanity's wider long-term interests. Set alongside these activities are those that may currently be legal but are involved in

spinning ‘unreal value’ that is disconnected from the real world of people and ecologies. This ‘fantasy economy’ also needs to be understood and some of its implications noted.

Part two focuses on the search for solutions. Chapter 6 uses aspects of the Integral framework – namely, quadrants, levels and values - to outline elements of a new approach to climate change and global warming.<sup>8</sup> It reviews a sample of climate change literature and considers emergent patterns within it. With this in mind Chapter 7 takes up the issue of ‘peak oil’ and the global energy dilemma. It uses two different approaches to depict an emerging narrative that moves the debate away from collapse to notions of descent. The latter helps to enable shifts away from fatalism and despair, in part by providing many more opportunities for intervention and choice. The use of Integral thinking throughout helps to generate a different ‘take’ on the nature of long-term solutions.

Chapter 8 employs Integral concepts to review a number of proposed transition strategies. It draws a number of conclusions from this material but also draws attention to the disjuncture between the *description* of proposed responses and the *personal and psychological burdens* involved. This leads very naturally on to the topic of chapter 9, that of ‘waking up,’ or enhancing awareness. Most of the literature and web-based material dealing with global issues overlooks the ‘individual interior,’ or upper left, domain of Integral enquiry. So the notion of waking up here refers to two specific developments. First, becoming aware of the internal characteristics and dynamics of this critically important domain through a clearer grasp of ‘facets of the self.’ Second, using this and other aspects of the Integral model to support an expanded frame of awareness and understanding. Some applied examples of the latter are provided.

Chapter 10 begins by reviewing some of the key features of our time. It then considers the role of social foresight in helping to bring about constructive change. It introduces the notions of ‘transformation’ and ‘translation’ - two complementary approaches to social and personal and change. In the former case ‘post collapse’ futures can be rendered as inspirational motivating factors. In the latter options for helping people become more effective ‘where they are’ are explored. The chapter also explores options for communicating the waking up metaphor in relation to a hierarchy of values. With this in mind chapter 11 takes a fresh look at what might be termed post collapse and post descent futures. It links these with four different worldviews and illustrates some of the implications through the lives and work of three individuals. Each of the latter have ‘walked the walk’ and, in so doing, demonstrated in practical terms some of the many options that are potentially available to everyone.

Overall, the benefits of ‘waking up’ in such ways to the challenge to civilisation are, I believe, highly significant. It’s not possible to guarantee that we can avoid the costs of past mistakes, oversights and missed opportunities. On the other hand, neither we nor our descendents need be condemned to fall all the way to the very depths of a new dark age within a ruined and debased world. How far we do descend is perhaps the central issue and trade-off of our time. Early and effective action will certainly moderate the process. Late and ineffective action will exacerbate it. The act of faith and belief inherent in this

work is that humanity still has time to rise to the occasion and take the opportunity offered to re-negotiate the terms of its tenancy on, and relationship with, this small and fragile world that we call home.

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<sup>1</sup> Two general responses emerged from workshops where this exercise was carried out. By far the most common was a sense of disorientation and confusion. Experienced meditators, however, recognised the attempt to ‘empty the mind’ as something familiar and unthreatening to them.

<sup>2</sup> Beck, U., *World Risk Society*, Polity Press / Blackwell, London, 1999, explores the new world of unresolved risk in considerable detail.

<sup>3</sup> While early mid 20<sup>th</sup> century work was characterised by quantitative forecasting, modelling and trend analysis these were later balanced by ‘softer’ qualitative methods such as visioning and scenarios, and ‘broader’ ones such as strategic planning and social foresight. See Slaughter, R., From forecasting and scenarios to social construction: changing methodological paradigms in futures studies, *Foresight*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2002, pp. 26-31

<sup>4</sup> Slaughter, R. The state of play in the futures field: a metascanning overview, *Foresight*, vol 11, No. 5, 2009, pp. 6-20, summarises this project and some of its key implications.

<sup>5</sup> A Futures glossary can be found at: <http://foresightinternational.com.au>

<sup>6</sup> See Faris, S. *Forecast: The Consequences of Climate Change from the Amazon to the Arctic*. Melbourne: Scribe, 2009, for a number of well-described examples.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, E.O. *The Future of Life*, Abacus, N.Y., 2002, p 23.

<sup>8</sup> For a succinct introduction to the essentials of the Integral map, see Sean Esbjorn-Hargen’s accessible overview at: <http://integrallife.com/node/37539>

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For more information, including other works, please go to:

FI website: <http://www.foresightinternational.com.au>

RS weblog: <http://richardslaughter.com.au/>