The background of the entire page is composed of various thick, hand-drawn green lines of varying lengths and directions, creating an abstract, organic pattern. Some lines are curved, while others are straight, and they overlap and intersect across the page.

**A strategy for change-
A search for meaning:**

*for a creative, response to
climate change, economic
inequity and democratic
collapse*

**The
solution
is simple
...but demanding**

Yves de Morsier

The content of the book:

This book presents a fundamentally new and different approach to the problem: climate change, the growing gap between rich and poor, the slow decay of our democracy, etc. ... these are symptoms of a deeper crisis – one which cannot be fixed by technical measures.

It is all about life and the meaning of life. We cannot wait for our leaders to act. Nobody else will do it for us! As ordinary people, citizens, workers, consumers, we have to empower ourselves; we are the main and only agents who can truly initiate the move towards change.

The solution is simple: it is in our hands. In our daily lives we have all the necessary means to create, locally, the basic conditions for ourselves to thrive – and to put pressure on our leaders to follow us.

But it is also demanding: we have to learn to think differently and invent and practise new ways to work, exchange, share and live together; we have to discover a new practice of freedom, inclusiveness and solidarity-mutuality.

This book reinvents practical ways of living.

It proposes a concrete strategy for change, in 40 points, how to do this here and now.

It is also a guide to the search for meaning,

because the change of mentality that is urgently needed can only arise from a better and deeper understanding of the meaning of life and of the laws of the universe.

The Author: Yves de Morsier

Architect by training, proposes here a very practical approach that draws from about 50 years of experience in forms of gentle development that aim at a fair share of common resources. He lives on the South Coast of New South Wales (Australia) where, with his wife Ursula, he has built an off-grid solar-powered rammed earth house, facing a national park, where they experiment with new ways of sharing and facilitate times of meditation and workshops.

See: <http://www.desertcreekhouse.com.au>



By the same author

The solution is simple ... but demanding:

A strategy for change and a search for meaning, for a creative response to climate change, economic inequity and democratic collapse.

Published: Desert Creek House Publishing, 2021

* * *

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Yves de Morsier

The solution is simple
... but demanding!



A Strategy for Change — A Search for Meaning:

*for a creative response to climate change,
economic inequity and democratic collapse*

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The solution is simple ...but demanding

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ENVIRONMENT

ETHICS

DEMOCRACY

ECONOMICS

To Aurélie

To Marcin, Claire and Tomek

*“Be the change you want to see in the world”
– Gandhi*

My thanks to David for having accompanied me on this journey for a while

My appreciation to Ken for his precious support and encouragement

My gratitude to Catherine Dunk for her generous contribution in improving the fluidity of the text

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The solution is simple

Introduction

The solution is simple

They never told you, and you won't probably believe me, but I tell you: the solution is simple!

By “solution” I mean the way out of the present crisis: climate change, pollution, vanishing biodiversity, the disappearance of most species, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, the growing inequity between nations and between people, the manipulation of information and truth, the dismantling of democracy, etc. The list can go on for ever.

The solution is simple ... but that does not mean it is easy! It is simple but very demanding, and it is directly in our hands.

Yes, there is a simple and immediate solution. It is why I had to write this book. I want to share with you with my own vision, which is fundamentally different from what is usually said in public debate and in our media about the urge for a radical change in our society, about fighting climate change, about reviving our political system, about restoring equity, about searching for truth, about creating beauty, etc.

This book presents a radically new vision by presenting a completely different dynamic for the move towards change. I believe it is urgent to find another dynamic, because it's becoming clear that the present dynamic is not working as it should, and has not done so for the fifty last years. Not only does change not happen at the necessary speed, but it does not happen in the qualitative and radical way that is needed. I propose here that change should not be understood as happening top-down (initiated by governments), but that it has to

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happen bottom-up (initiated by us, ordinary people). Does this seem utopic, or is this unclear? I'll explain.

In our public discussion (can one call it debate?), change is always thought of in terms of institutional changes and technological improvements, top-down. It is usually believed and said that “governments will have to do this and that”, “international agreements are necessary to implement radical measures against climate change, hence the Paris agreements”, “we need new renewable sources of energy to be installed by contractors with investment capacity or by established corporations”, “subsidies are needed to finance the conversion”, etc.

All this is true, because all this does need to be done. But there is a huge problem in this dynamic: everybody is waiting for the others to act. By others, understand: institutions, governments, corporations, specialists, engineers. We, the ordinary people, wait for governments (mainly) to implement a radical strategy. And governments do not dare, because they depend on their electorate to stay in power. How could they change what needs to be changed without being immediately punished by their electors and ejected from power at the first opportunity? For political leaders, acting radically against climate change seems suicidal, because they cannot change what most needs to be changed: overproduction and overconsumption, and our behaviours linked to them.

They can't come shopping with us and forbid us to buy what we buy. Hence these leaders spout some promises about technology and the economy (more jobs), but they do not address the real issue: our consumption and the way we live, as generally comfortable people in rich (Western) countries. The truth we don't want to recognise is that our political leaders can't change our behaviours in the way we produce, consume, transport ourselves, travel, and have holidays. And this, in my mind, is the main roadblock to which we have come. A huge and powerful roadblock indeed.

The solution is simple

That is why I want to propose a very different strategy and dynamic. A dynamic that starts from the grassroots and develops organically. Hence this book will be very concrete and practical. But be warned: even though the solution is truly simple, it will nevertheless not be easy, because we have to face a lot of inner resistance; in others, yes, but primarily, within ourselves. It will be very demanding. The problem is not the solutions – we already know what they are – the main problem is in fact our own resistance, as ordinary people, to change; and this is true for all of us.

This is why my proposal is at the same time very practical and concrete (it concerns the choices, initiatives, acts and gestures of everyday life), but will also delve into a kind of psychotherapy for society. I believe psychotherapy is the right term, because our quest has to deal not only with technical or structural solutions but essentially with our own motivations, values and desires (both conscious and unconscious). It is mainly about what moves us through life. My investigation will therefore dare to ask what our main values and priorities are, and what our addictions and resistances and blockages are. We will also reflect on the meaning of life, on what is essential in life that we have to protect more than anything else – or what we have to rediscover because a lot of the depth in life has already been lost, through the different stages of our materialistic development. Of course my proposal will not give you easy answers about the meaning of life, but at least I will try to ask the right questions.

Einstein used to say that if he had only one hour to solve a problem, he would spend fifty-five minutes trying to formulate the right question, and then the remaining five minutes seeking the solution. We will do the same: we will search first for the right questions. Having found the main questions, we can then adapt them to local circumstances and look for the local answers ... because there are no ready-made universal answers that would fit every case. Better learn to fish than to depend on begging; better learn to think than to copy recipes.

Chapter 1:

The approach in 10 basic principles

There are 10 main factors or principles that will guide our search and our attempts to implement a new strategy, far beyond mere technical fixes. These principles will show where the real challenges are, in the present crisis, and we will come to see the crisis as more of an opportunity to live a full life than as a sign of impending doom.

01 - A bottom-up move towards change

A radically new strategy

The strategy I propose is radically different from the top-down process of change initiated by institutions, governments, corporations and all kinds of specialists. I am convinced the change should happen from the bottom up. Bottom-up change has several essential qualities that make a real difference. I'll summarise these now.

First, a general remark: climate change is not the problem; it is only the symptom. This does not make climate change any less real, but it does mean that we still have to understand the real cause of the problem. Excess CO₂, overheated atmosphere and oceans, collapsing permafrost, melting glaciers, general pollution, exhausted resources, overabundant waste, disappearing species ... these are not the

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problems, as such; rather, they are the consequences of something that went wrong in our modern society at a much deeper level. Upstream from our behaviours and acts (i.e. at the source of them), we can identify general social trends and leading perceptions and attitudes that explain pretty well our present state of conflict with our environment and with many of our neighbours. In looking behind the veil of the most apparent signs of the present slow collapse, we can observe and become aware of our fundamental lack of ability, as human beings, to live in harmony with our surroundings. By this I mean our natural, as well as our social, surroundings.

We have always believed that humankind is above nature, and thus we have never attempted to adapt to the laws of nature and life. This is a big mistake, because these laws are all-powerful: they rule the alternation of days and nights, the seasons, all cycles, the movements of stars and planets. They regulate all the cycles of nature, which means not only how resources are renewed and wastes absorbed and transformed into new resources, but also how all species are interdependent. Cooperation and complementarity are much more prevalent in nature than competition; generosity and gratuity are the two main qualities of nature. Everything we need is given freely by nature (there is no other source for what we need), and we have only to add our own work and creativity, as human beings, to make these many gifts available to us in the form we wish to use them.

This rising awareness of our incapacity to adapt leads us to a second remark: if climate change is not the problem, as such, but the consequence of something much more fundamental, how shall we transform this primary cause into a positive and creative understanding and attitude that fosters life and harmony? And, if our blindness prevents us from adapting to nature, how shall we open the eyes and change our behaviour?

We will not try to answer these disturbing questions immediately, but we can already see how they emphasise the fact that mere technical fix is not enough. We need a much deeper conversion: a shift in our

Approach in 10 principles

perceptions and attitudes, values and priorities, our ways of thinking, living, working, producing, consuming, enjoying leisure time. Technology, although a helpful adjunct, will not fix this problem. We need truly a deep mental conversion, and radical adjustment to our way of living.

Overproduction and overconsumption

To make this hidden cause more understandable and concrete (visible), we have, at this stage, to simplify the approach and try to identify one – if not the – dominating and major cause for our decay. This main cause is, in its most concrete and visible form, overproduction and overconsumption. Overproduction comes before overconsumption, although we speak mainly only of the latter. This is a mistake, because ignoring the real cause of overproduction allows us to hide the main flaws of our culture. Let me explain.

Traditional societies and our Western society until the 17th century have mainly only produced what was needed. This meant production was regulated by demand, and demand was defined by needs, which were mainly basic needs. After satisfying their principle needs, which went beyond mere subsistence and also encompassed human immaterial values, our ancestors used to take time for leisure or celebration. The only purpose of production was to satisfy these essential needs, because even this level of production was a huge effort for everybody. There was hardly a sense of what profit could be and of how profit could foster growth and wealth as such. There were no advertisements, no fashion, no strong trend for mimetic behaviour that could foster complementary desires. Life was very simple, and needs were kept to a minimum. And work, because it was very effortful, was kept to its minimum, which was already very demanding.

But at the time of the Industrial Revolution, there was suddenly a deep change in the way production happened. A kind of brutal break in evolution, a fundamental change in orientation and speed. This

The solution is simple

change had already been initiated in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, thanks to improved techniques and tools, but at such a level that it did not yet drastically impact our ways of living as a society. At the Industrial Revolution, though, the change was radical. New sources of energy were discovered (steam, coal, electricity) and revolutionary machines were designed that could use these new sources of energy: steam engines, looms, trains, pumps, generators, and so on.

This deep transformation had a tremendous impact on our social structure and the way we produce goods today. These new sources of energy and new technologies allowed us to increase production, and, for the first time, to produce many more goods than were necessary. Selling greater quantities of these goods, produced industrially, allowed greater profits. Wealth, mainly as available cash and capital, increased tremendously in the hands of the few richer people who were the practical leaders, initiators and beneficiaries of this evolution. Exploitation of workers became drastic in the push to reduce production costs and increase profit. The gap between rich and poor widened violently, requiring the state to intervene and subsidise work in order to prevent the poorest workers from starving ... and to allow production to go on.

Since this revolution of production methods, overproduction has become a standard business practice – a source of possible endless profits. However, because overproduction aims at generating surpluses, there is a major problem in finding profitable outlets for these surpluses; they are not needed but are, for the main actors, the conditions for acquiring more wealth (accumulation) in order to produce even more, later, and make ever more profit. The deep contradiction is this: as fast as one finds new outlets and as fast as overproduction continues to expand, one needs to find ever more outlets – new markets, new sales opportunities. This is what leads to economic liberalism, which calls for a free market – for the systematic undoing of protectionism. Globalisation is simply the expression of this compulsion that rich countries have to sell their

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overproduction to poorer countries, extending outlet possibilities there, and giving increased profits here.

Since there is competition in all these markets, with each player trying to outsell the others, there is at the same time a pressure to reduce sales prices, in order to attract more buyers. And to reduce prices one needs to reduce production costs. There are many ways to do this: reduce wages, automate work, increase production, reduce the quality and durability of the goods produced, and delocalise production, shifting it to poorer countries. In these countries, labour is much cheaper, regimes are often authoritarian, with social protection non-existent, trade unions forbidden, and ecological legislation absent or ineffective.

Our usual local activities of transformation (industry, craftsmanship) migrate to other countries, and we lose our local production and the traditional know-how that used to go along with it. Our small businesses and workshops disappear. Our local economy vanishes and switches from the first and second sectors of production-transformation (agriculture and manufacturing) to the third sector, services (no longer production, but sales). We buy Chinese goods. Production is bad quality because costs have to be reduced and buyers choose according to the principle of the cheapest offer. Goods do not last, so wastes are maximised.

The global economy is growing, and this growth profits the most privileged actors while the reliability of goods and the quality of services decrease. Wealthy people get richer; the poor get poorer. We become more and more dependent on imports, having destroyed our local subsistence economy and know-how: even food is imported from far away. We are some four meals away from starving as no local storage is thought necessary (storage costs!). Whenever distribution networks are disrupted, shortages of necessary items occur very quickly. And this can happen easily, due to such things as conflicts, natural events (tsunami, flood, bushfire), political unrest, pandemics ...

The solution is simple

The main consequence of this materialist evolution is that we have lost control of our own subsistence, our local economy, our resilience and sustainability. We have zero control over the conditions of production when it happens elsewhere. We are completely disempowered. From the client-kings we were, we have become client-slaves.

And on top of that, this system of extensive overproduction, of eternal growth on a limited planet, by its excess and even more by its intensification, increases ever more the wreckage of nature and its resources, of biodiversity, of the climate and its regulating effects, of the main natural equilibriums and systems (forests, rivers, oceans, glaciers, water, air, wind, rain, etc.).

The most terrible aspect of this evolution is that it makes no sense. It is pure madness, destructive madness, for no reason ... except material wealth for a tiny minority and less equity and happiness for all. Yet we must recognise here that it does satisfy our need for false security (comfort) and our tendency for greed.

Revive small-scale local development

When we present the issue of climate change and other aspects of the present crisis in these terms, we immediately come to the obvious conclusion – that we need to regain our ability for local subsistence.

That is why the solution I propose here is simple. It is simple because it is in our hands. In practice, it means redeveloping locally what we always had – small-scale businesses that rely on local creativity, know-how, workforce and customers, according to the needs of local people. Our action is completely in our hands, since we are the local workers, the local customers, the local citizens, and even the local investors. Nobody else can do this for us. And it is also simple because we already know how – this is simply what we have always done previously.

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By acting locally, we generate transparency. What we see is what we have. Mechanisms on this scale become more visible and understandable. Local actors are more reliable, and more easily accountable, because they are personally known and will be put to the test by local customers.

Obviously it is simpler to build a basic economy on local scale than to exert direct influence over a globalised economy, whose actors are unknown and so far away. It is also simple because it means going back to a simpler way of life, with more direct connections, more human relationships – a reduced material standard of life, perhaps, with less stuff, with less technology – but more humanity, more creativity, more equity, more warmth, more joy. Simplifying our material life allows a life of a deeper meaning, of richer experience.

This is why change has to happen from the bottom up, and not the top down.

We are the only main actors

At the roots of these many advantages of better control in a more local livelihood, there is an untold dimension we tend to underestimate. As citizens, workers and consumers, we are indeed the main actors because there are no other human actors other than us – ordinary people.

This is an essential factor at the core of the climate issue and of all other aspects of the present crisis that touch our evolution as a society. Our world is what we make it by the summation of all of our personal acts, as people – whether as simple worker-consumers, as rich businesspeople or as powerful lobbyists. Of course we do not all have the same degree of power and influence, but we are nevertheless all the only actors.

As ordinary people we have lost our power, and we have to regain it if we want to propose real solutions to the crisis. This means that, as citizens-workers-consumers, we have to initiate the change. And thus

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the change will be bottom-up: from the grassroots level to more general collective and institutional levels, to larger structural change. And it is in our hands, as ordinary people. This is why our potential empowerment – which will become real as soon as we recognise it – makes the bottom-up solution much simpler than it would be if it depended on the initiative of others, whoever they are. In any case, they will also be involved at a later stage.

We are the only possible actors, for the following five reasons:

- 1) **Nobody else will do it for us:** no government, no institution, no corporation, no church, no scientist, no engineer, no wise leader. I already mentioned how our political leaders are in the worst position to implement the necessary mentality change – because they are paralysed by their taste for power and dependent on their electorate. Our form of institutional democracy can be the tool for change but it can also prevent it, mainly by inertia. The role of these leaders is nevertheless essential, because they have to shape the general institutional frame and the necessary infrastructures: legislation, subsidies, taxation, economic and political options, international agreements, etc. But they cannot do anything if we do not move first. We are the only possible actors because it concerns us directly: our survival, our life conditions, our need for equity, our hopes to be happy. We are in the best position to be motivated by our own destiny – and we, as citizens, are the only actors who can motivate our governments to act.
- 2) **We are the only people who can change our own behaviours** concerning the way we live, think, relate, work, exchange, transport, consume, use energy, etc. This change cannot be imposed from above. Even totalitarian systems would not do that, without motivation. The change depends on our maturity. We must first be willing to change, and this is a big roadblock. When the will to change becomes real, change can happen. This fundamental change does not only concern production and

Approach in 10 principles

consumption, but, even more, our values and what guides our choices in life. Is our vocation a selfish search for egocentric advantage (the accumulation of wealth, pleasure and comfort), or is it geared towards quality connections with others, an inclusive move in the direction of caring and sharing, in the hope of establishing deep and dynamic human relationships? Is the emphasis in our lives on material values (things I get) or on human values (active and vivacious processes in-between people)? Is the purpose of our lives limited to mere material comfort and practicalities, or does it delve into the meaning of life and how we relate to one another, as unique, sacred beings, including all sentient beings such as animals and plants, and even rocks?

- 3) **We are the only people who can re-initiate a local economy.** We are the main actors, able to organise small local corporations to produce the necessary basic goods we need. Who else could or would do that? As a priority, food should be produced locally. Next, small workshops should produce the most necessary items for our daily lives: basic tools, clothes, dwellings, buildings, repair workshops, vital services. And, most importantly, energy production should be in the hands of the community. The energy must be fully renewable and decentralised, yet produced in a network of interrelated sites (on roof tops, or as farms) with good storage capability (e.g. hydro-storage) to remedy production irregularities (linked, for example, with variations in the intensity of sunshine or wind or tide). Nobody else can do this for us.
- 4) **We are the only people who can organise a form of local decision-making,** such as citizen councils, and learn to make decisions by finding the common denominator between all participants, allowing local communities to define the necessary conditions for a renewable and resilient local livelihood network, in a spirit of equity and inclusiveness that welcomes everyone. This also implies regularly reviewing what has been achieved and adapting as new perceptions arise through experience. Once

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again, transparency is the basic function of local decision-making. The local reality is simpler and easier to grasp than our complex system of external exchanges, and at local level we also find the best competence and knowledge of the issues, problems and solutions, even if external specialist advice might be needed later, to complement our local technical skills.

- 5) And most importantly, **we are the only people who can translate into visible forms and expressions what we wish for** and make it in this way more understandable. Most people today have trouble envisaging change and letting go of their past way of life. They don't see what they need to change, nor how to change it; and they don't see what it could look like. This is why it is essential that a few people (the most aware and the most motivated) start to give shape to change in a positive way. This is not a nasty restriction to our way of life that is imposed upon us; rather, it is a fabulous opportunity to create new life conditions that are sustainable and just. It is our precious opportunity to escape from economic domination and to re-build a more human society, with life at the core and relationships as the substance. Since we are the only possible actors, we will give shape to this other form of development – and make it visible and convincing. Beginning as a small group of motivated and committed people, we change the way we are living; and then others will see how our lifestyle brings us more happiness, more humanity. Proof by the acts. This is true “seduction”!

The most amazing thing about these five reasons is that we already practise all of them in our families, neighbourhoods, clubs, parties, parishes, etc. Why not extend this practice, and the know-how that goes with it, to the further or wider circle of our friends, neighbours and local community? These are roughly the same people, but there are more of them. We can also extend these compassionate practices to areas that provide real empowerment, such as organising local subsistence economies and localised living.

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These five reasons do not mean that we must do everything by ourselves in an enclosed, self-sufficient cluster. No, we only reconquer here our basic empowerment as local actors. Exchanges remain lively with our near neighbours and even with further regions or nations. These external exchanges are suitable for complementary products that cannot be provided locally, and for immaterial exchanges that enhance the differences and complementarity between nations and cultures. These exchanges are motivated by their qualitative content, not just by profit.

The different but complementary roles of people, governments and corporations remain valid. Each has an important role to play. Our role as ordinary people is to initiate the move towards change. Institutions have to implement structural change at a larger or higher level.

Starting the move towards change is the hardest step. We more or less know all the solutions, but we feel paralysed to implement them, and especially to start this move towards change. This is the fundamental hindrance that we now have to overcome: to dare and to do it now. What prevents us? It is in our hands.

Principle 1: bottom-up movement

As ordinary people and workers-citizens-consumers, we are the only possible actors who can start the move towards change.

02 - A true empowerment

Who has power?

We say often that big businesses are opposed to any serious and consequential action against climate change – because it goes against their interests. This is true, but only partly true. It *is* true that they do

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everything they can to increase their own power and profit and to prevent change. But it nevertheless remains true that we are the final consumers of what they provide or sell. In principle, if we do not participate – i.e. if we do not buy what they produce – then they cannot sell. This means that they exist, develop and thrive only thanks to our more-or-less willing collaboration. With democracy and marketing, we live in the most participative society that has ever existed.

This is an important truth, and probably the key to my proposal. This is a kind of law of our market society: “Each choice is a vote that promotes (plebiscites) the goods, services or values that we choose to consume, use or live by.”

To act as coherent people we should not buy (i.e. encourage or enrich) that which harms us. This is nevertheless what we do when we avidly consume the products big businesses sell to us.

A few powerful corporations control the main sectors, such as:

- food production and distribution (e.g. Nestlé, Unilever, General Mills)
- genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and seeds (e.g. Monsanto, DuPont, Syngenta)
- pharmaceuticals (e.g. Johnson, Pfizer, Roche, Novartis)
- banking (e.g. Bank of China, JPMorgan, HSBC, Paribas)
- information technology (e.g. Apple, Samsung, Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Facebook)
- fossil fuels (e.g. Shell, ExxonMobil, BP, Total)
- media (e.g. Walt Disney, Fox, CNN)
- fashion (e.g. Zara, H&M, Gap, Calvin Klein, Lacoste, Nike, Adidas).

These are quasi-monopolies. In a certain way these corporations control our lives and influence the evolution of our world according to their own interests, which in most cases go against ours.

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Except that we are keen to consume their products. This is the whole problem ... and also the key to the problem. The problem is the solution. But we are not only *keen* on these products – we are actually *addicted* to consuming them. It's because these goods are trendy, attractive and sometimes (accessorily) useful. What makes us dependent on these sellers is not their objective power, and not (or rarely) true necessity, but mainly our own desire to consume these goods.

Certainly these products can be seen as improving our standard of life. But our behaviours and desires are also the consequences of fashion, advertisements, and mimetic behaviour. The so-called “improvements” these goods bring to our lives are quantitative (more goods) rather than qualitative (a richer life), especially if one considers that the price we pay for our addiction is climate decay, exploitation of the poor (the workforce) and ultimately the destruction of our living conditions. What we buy from these major corporations is luxurious rather than necessary – we could do without it, and do not truly need it for our subsistence.

We must be clear and see things as they are, rather than living in a dream world. Local food, if available, will feed us better than Nestlé or Kellogg's or Unilever could. Our small local bank is more trustworthy than multinational speculators such as JPMorgan. Computers are powerful tools for our everyday life, but their use implies an intrusion by external agents (Microsoft, Google, Facebook etc.) into our privacy, including exploitation and control. Our large consumption of fuel, due to our desire for unrestricted mobility, generates climate change, pollution and natural catastrophes (e.g. when a drilling platform spills or a tanker sinks).

In general, for those of us in richer societies, the more powerful interests involved, and the more luxurious goods concerned, the less opportunity for true personal growth, and the higher the price in terms of secondary effects (climate, exploitation, injustice, pollution, loss of privacy, fake news, totalitarianism).

The solution is simple

The poorest people do not have as much freedom of choice as we do. When they engage with these powerful and dominating economic interests, it is not out of free choice, but because their own survival often depends upon being exploited. Their low-paying jobs, with poor conditions (e.g. in sweatshops, mines or plantations) barely allow them to survive.

Local economy and empowerment

As pretty well-off Westerners, it's clear that we often feel quite dependent on these major actors – but also how much this dependency is the consequence of our own choices and desires, rather than of basic needs or constraints. We wish for, or are addicted to, these products – and we are not ready to pay the psychological price of not consuming them.

The world is what we make it – through the accumulation of all our respective choices and actions. Too often we feel that each of our choices (especially if we have to give up something harmful) costs us a lot and seems incredibly insignificant, compared to our objective individual impact on the climate, or on justice issues. Nevertheless, we need to become aware that the accumulation of our choices, and nothing else, has created the state of the world and the situation we are presently facing. This law of accumulation is very encouraging: what we have done, we can also undo, in a similar but opposed way. The process works both ways.

In the end, it means the choice is ours. What do we prefer: our own immediate material comfort at any price? Or to thrive long-term as a wider human community (local, regional, national or global)?

This question is essential in a world where our subsistence becomes so fragile because it depends on actors who are far away and do not care for us. This is precisely what we can change immediately. By redeveloping a local economy, we regain relative autonomy and control over the means of production. We can control capital and

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investment, because we are the investors. We can establish a policy of prices that result from real costs, and eliminate economic activities that are purely for speculative profit. The activities we generate locally (food production, small businesses, small workshops, sustainable energy, etc.) will increase our resilience in case of major disruptions (natural events, unrest, bushfires, pandemics) and allow us to be more sustainable.

This is the most direct path to local democracy. A practice based on authentic local debate, on relative consensus, on choosing sustainable and resilient life conditions, on equity and inclusiveness. This is a precious opportunity to learn how to live together, in the local community, and how to include minorities and make them integral to our community. Supporting Indigenous peoples to regain their rights, and to fully participate and express themselves, will lead to much-needed maturity in our society.

This is an opportunity to develop a network of care for one another. Indeed, our personal wellbeing and growth depend upon our local community thriving. The most egalitarian societies are the most successful, the least damaged by dysfunctional imbalances (poverty, criminality, imprisonment, drug abuse, marginality, illiteracy, etc.), and the wealthiest – in terms of harmony, peace, trust, care, compassion, and so on, and even in terms of material comfort (sometimes to excess).

The beautiful thing with this bottom-up option is that it depends on us, and us alone. We can start to act right here and now. It is much simpler to start here, where we are, by consuming less and working directly with our neighbours, and to reduce our engagement with far-away actors and products of unclear origin. Transparency allows empowerment and direct human involvement. Concrete, common-sense actions are far simpler than abstract world connections based only on greed.

The choice and preference for convivial human quality in cooperation (rather than egocentric material accumulation in

The solution is simple

competition) requires that we reduce our material standard of life, making space for life to unfold freely in relationships. Self-chosen self-limitation is a beautiful quality. It prioritises human values over material gains, bringing reciprocal care and compassion – concern for the other – into focus.

Top-down strategy as a complement

It is important to see that the bottom-up strategy needs to be the starting point, the initiator of the change, but also that it has its own limits. We will not be able to achieve a complete change without also addressing the systemic aspects of our society. This kind of change is much more than the accumulation of individual initiatives. It has to become structural.

In reorganising our local livelihood, in forming some citizen councils to start a local democratic process, in creating a new form of local economy under our control, we will also affect the structure of our subsistence modes. Probably we will be able to reorganise our local life as a community and become pretty sustainable and resilient. This is a structural change made of more than just individual initiatives, but it is nevertheless limited to the local level; many structural dimensions that involve higher and more global levels are also relevant at this stage.

This means that we will also need the complementary forces of institutional power. Only institutions can establish the new patterns of legislation, international trade, subsidies, relative protectionism, international agreements, etc. which are necessary to make the change completely effective and more extensive, taking in other nations and regions, and protecting the gains afforded.

In starting at the grassroots level, we avoid the inertia of our present situation. Change can happen now. Change on a local level demonstrates our will for change and puts real pressure on governments and institutions to act. It reverses the dependence of

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governments on their electorate, turning the hindrance of fear into a creative call for action.

Most of us have a passive resistance to change – so we readily accept the need to wait for change to happen, top-down. This allows us to wait for others to act. For instance, we rightly feel that it would be good if some powerful investor came along and installed new renewable energy sources in our region, not seeing that we can start the process ourselves by divesting from harmful activities (coal, oil, airports, weapons, the stock exchange) and investing in local production. Or we can see how international agreements are a necessary piece of the process – but we forget that even in the absence of these, we can still do the right thing in caring for our own community.

There is a powerful ambiguity in the present perception that change should happen top-down. Behind this expectation there is also an unconscious resistance to change, the wish that nothing much will change in our standard of life; that we can continue to live as we do right now; that we just need to replace our sources of energy with sustainable ones; that everything can go on as it did before. Back to normal, as they say! But this is a tremendous illusion – and the cause of the present blockage, where we expect governments to do everything for us. We must realise – urgently – that we cannot solve the problem by mere technological solutions. So much of the problem is in how we presently view our comfort and happiness. This is the deep cause of the present destruction. A technical fix would merely replace one technical flaw with another.

We have to recognise that our system is not sustainable. This is not only because our energy sources create pollution, but essentially because our production and consumption (of energy, of goods, of services) is completely excessive – violently misaligned with what the Earth can sustain.

It would never be possible to produce enough solar, wind or tidal energy for the present world population (nearly 8 billion people) at

The solution is simple

our present rates of consumption. This is not because we lack adequate sunshine, wind or tide, but because there are not enough of the necessary materials, such as rare earths,¹ to produce all the equipment that would be required – and also, there would not be enough energy to produce that much equipment. This vicious circle, though rarely recognised, is very real.

The big advantage of the bottom-up strategy is that it allows us to escape this trap of believing in fairy tales.

Principle 2: local empowerment

By developing a local economy that provides most of the essential goods and services we need, we empower ourselves as individuals and as a community; we generate more resilient and sustainable conditions of life – and put pressure on our institutions to change radically, adapting to the new dynamic.

03 - Hurdles on the path of liberation

Guilt versus awareness

The first obstacle to change is guilt, but this is rarely mentioned. Any serious debate about topics such as climate change, natural decay, inequity, democracy failure, etc. awakens our guilt. We need to look very honestly at what is happening around us, and how we arrived at the precipice of collapse. But all too often, the dominating interests and even our ordinary neighbours deny the truth of what we observe. We have a responsibility to make them see. Westerners especially, the wealthiest people on this planet (the richest 10%), cannot avoid

1 “Rare earths” is an expression that concerns some chemical elements; practically, the rare minerals used for mobile phones, batteries, electronics, etc. that one finds almost exclusively in Australia, China and the US.

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seeing that we've messed up. Our development since the Industrial Revolution has wrecked the Earth and our colonial system has transformed it into one vast empire, led by a few main corporate interests and their political allies.

This is evidently not a glorious balance sheet! We are guilty of many crimes and irresponsible acts, of robbery and violence. This is why, when I dare to talk to my friends or neighbours about climate change in radical terms, I am perceived as a preacher on my soap box, or as an accuser without compassion, attacking everybody and generating unease and guilt. I'm the bad guy, the one who makes the future seem impossible, even though I'm only describing what I see around me – and what you can see too, if you dare to look. All I say is what I see and describe. I'm just a messenger – nothing else.

I'm perceived as the enemy, but in fact am the contrary. I attempt to make people aware of what we are going through, and how we could solve these problems and find a simple solution. I aim only to free you, allowing you to see reality as it actually is – and to live a decent life that does not need to be hidden from sight. And we may even rejoice to discover new ways and potentials for happiness. Far from being a guilt trip, this is a path of liberation.

Knowing the illness

The most urgent thing is for all of us to recognise the present illness and its causes. If we feel guilty, we will never be able to look at the problem honestly. We will find many excuses to avoid confronting the harsh reality and how dreadfully responsible we are. But, if we look with honesty, serenity and lucidity, we will see the problem clearly and find the many answers.

The fact that we are responsible for the present state of the world should actually *encourage* us to open our eyes, because this responsibility and involvement also make us capable of correcting

The solution is simple

the situation. If we messed up, we can also, with different but equivalently powerful means, find the way out of the present crisis.

To find the real causes of the illness, we need to look deeper than just its apparent symptoms, such as shrinking biodiversity, pollution, excess CO₂ ... All these signs are true and real, and need to be addressed urgently – but they are only the outward signs of what is happening at a deeper level. If we just treat the symptoms, we do not heal the body; we just hide the fact that it's ill. So let's search for the real causes: overproduction, overconsumption, exploitation of nature and people, injustice, etc.

All these excesses are due to our lack of awareness and the lack of more conscious options – more meaningful solutions – in our lives. The real question is: what matters most, to you? If you ask your neighbour, she will probably tell you that, beyond her basic needs for food, shelter and so on, her family is what matters the most to her; and harmonious relationships with her friends and neighbours, the quality of her life, etc. She will not say that she wants to work more and make more money – although she may say that she needs more money and more stuff if she still gets such a small wage that she hardly makes ends meet, or if she persists in believing that material wellbeing, comfort and happiness are the same things. But they are not. And this is precisely the core of the problem, and the core of the debate we are meant to open.

Less or more?

The big issue of change is the question: What shall I lose and what shall I gain? It is important to see that “less” can lead to “more”. I'll explain.

The most common fear that people express is that we'll have to give up our present comfort to go back to a rough existence something like the Middle Ages. This is pure nonsense.

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First, we have to make a clear distinction between needs and desires:

- 1) Needs concern what is truly necessary: life, air, water, food, shelter, recognition, compassion, education, health, etc. These are basic needs, whether material or immaterial or both at the same time. They are, in principle, pretty easily satisfied ... although very many people in the world do lack them.
- 2) Desires, by contrast, do not concern basic needs but rather “what is possible” and “what I can get”. This means that so-called “needs” can extend to objects that are possibly available and whose consumption I do not need for my livelihood (as under point 1) but I can wish to acquire or use or consume. The availability is an essential factor: I can wish to fly to Timbuktu because planes are available and I have enough money to buy a ticket and enough free time to have holidays. I don't wish to go to Mars, because I cannot afford it – and no one has offered such a trip. Desires are then very much defined by mimetic behaviour (what others do) and by advertising and fashion, which encourage me to desire things I don't need. These desires are created artificially by our surroundings. Of course these messages find resonance within us, but this resonance does not imply necessity and is something we can tame, especially if we are aware how deceptive it is. We can choose whether to surrender to the desire or not, depending on how we measure its necessity and its contribution to our positive evolution. Becoming more aware of how we are influenced allows us to better distinguish needs from desires – and deep desires from artificial desires.

Out of the preceding distinction, some evidence appears: If we wish to, we can collectively ensure that all the basic needs (in point 1) are satisfied for everyone, and then focus on better interpreting our desires. Hence the debate about necessity, priorities and “leading values” in our lives.

The new door that opens invites us to reconsider our priorities and the meaning of life. This is the great benefit of the present crisis.

The solution is simple

Every crisis brings opportunities – opportunities for change, opportunities for improvement, opportunities for liberation.

The hurdle of our addictions

The core problem is our addiction to comfort. The many twists of the so-called needs (desires) we have to reverse (untwist) are simply deep addictions. We are addicted to our materialistic, hedonistic way of life – to our comfort. This is not because we believe our is the best way to live, but because we are afraid of change; we cannot see clearly how to change for the better, and we do not feel in our heart and guts how very practically we can win a better quality of life.

This is why it is important that we, the most aware among us, dare to start the move towards change and demonstrate how to implement the wished-for quantum leap. For example, we do our best to turn our back on attitudes of indulgence and (self)-destruction in order to discover harmony, adaptation, simplicity, justice and love. First we need to identify where we are stuck – and what our real, true potential is.

The main problem with addiction is that we deny it, and we especially deny the fact that we are addicted. This is precisely what makes addiction so powerful: we not only succumb to its power but we fundamentally refuse to see that it controls us. We will only be free of addiction once we recognise how much it impacts on us and our society – how much it prevents us from living in freedom. Time to awake! Let's repeat it: The solution is simple but we complicate it with our addictions and attachments – with our psychological resistance – more than by ignorance of what the solutions are. Addiction is the first issue we have to solve.

It will be fascinating to reinvent a just and human world together. It seems so simple to open our imagination and transform anonymous destructive processes into more compassionate ways of living. We already practise this more human quality every day with our families,

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friends and neighbours. So why not extend it to the community at large? This depends only on our will to do so. Sure it requires a tremendous change of mindset, which is truly demanding. But we can do it if we want to. If we want to!

We can start today and implement this new way of living within ten years.

Principle 3: the hurdle of our addictions

The main hurdle is not that we do not know the solutions – we know them very well indeed. The main hurdle is our addiction to our present way of life and comfort. This prevents us from truly seeing what is happening in front of us. The problem is how to start the move towards change.

04 - A new anthropology as a positive gain

Two aims: the tipping point and the quantum leap

In this new quest for true needs, authentic desires and deeper meaning, we have to discern two major dimensions – or two aims that combine.

1) Avoiding the tipping point of collapse

First there is the defensive aim: We need to urgently save ourselves and the Earth from the tipping point of general collapse of major ecosystems and from sharp imbalances in our global economy and social settings. We need to drastically reduce our emissions of CO₂ and restore the ecosystems that have been so badly impacted. This is urgent for our survival.

Consequently, our first aim is to open our eyes and to see where we are truly going, while knowing the illness and its causes. We

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need to avoid the tipping point of destruction by which climate change and economic collapse will push us over the cliff. This is the first urgent step.

2) Living life to the full – the quantum leap

But this is not sufficient. There is also a second aim in this radical move towards change; a positive and creative aim. Beyond avoiding collapse, we also need to bring forward another tipping point, this one positive and restorative, in the opposite direction. A complete revolution of awakening and a fundamental change of mind. Our second step, no less important, is to generate change for a healthy planet and society.

A future free from exhausting labour, insignificant wages and bad conditions, due to competing with poorly paid workers overseas who suffer unacceptable living conditions. We have to stop throwing away our lives for little return, and we need to give up our consumerism, our absorption in material issues. We must leave time for the important things in life, such as creativity, and deeper relationships with our families, friends and neighbours.

By abandoning our old ways of living, producing, consuming and relating, we can fundamentally re-create a different paradigm. One that will help us escape from self-deprecation, depression and loneliness, and the illusions of material wealth. To experience a form of humanity based on compassion and cooperation rather than exploitation and competition.

This is the second aim, the creative aim, which we may well call the “quantum leap”. By rejecting the collective insanity threatening our world, we will leap forward, reinventing life and experiencing it to the full.

This is the whole gain of the process, far beyond mere escape from destruction. It is about rediscovering life in its real substance. This is in no way a sad move towards self-harming

restriction – it is a great leap into much richer living, and deeper relationships.

A new anthropology

The quantum leap consists in decisively choosing life, harmony, responsibility, human relationships, inclusiveness and our own empowerment.² This radical choice contrasts so sharply with the general trend of our present evolution that it constitutes an important mental shift, and it needs to be rooted in a clear, deep understanding of what life is all about. We need a whole new anthropology.

By anthropology, I do not mean the academic study of other societies with the paternalistic attitude of the so-called developed and educated scientist observing primitive people as if they were undeveloped beings. No! This is about us – all of us – as human beings, discovering what the core meaning in life is or might be. This is a deep mental revolution requiring a fundamental change in thinking.

Einstein (again) used to say that one cannot solve a problem with the same mentality as that which generated it. This is why we now need to radically change the way we think and live – and invent new ways to relate to one another. This implies new values, as we have seen, but it also means a new way of thinking.

These important changes will go against the grain of our market culture, but they will truly go with the flow of life, which is much more essential to our heart and freedom. Our market culture has inverted some essential laws of life. We must now reverse these inversions, which is why I call these reversals “untwists”. This is the goal of our new anthropology.

2 See chapter 2 for a more detailed description of these choices.

The solution is simple

Principle 4: we need a new anthropology

The present crisis cannot be fixed by mere technical solutions. We need to undergo a deep change of mind (turn-around) in our ways of thinking, producing, consuming, exchanging and living together – a turn-around in our values and priorities. We need a new anthropology to help us favour human values over practicalities, and help us discover – together – the true meaning of life.

05 - Wealth vs equity: the twist of money

The huge contrast of wealth in our world

One aspect of the present crisis is rarely mentioned – or it is twisted. This is our relationship with wealth, the current inequity of wealth, and how climate change is linked to wealth.

According to the most recent report, concerning data from the end of 2019, published by Credit Suisse³ (hardly a rebellious institution!):

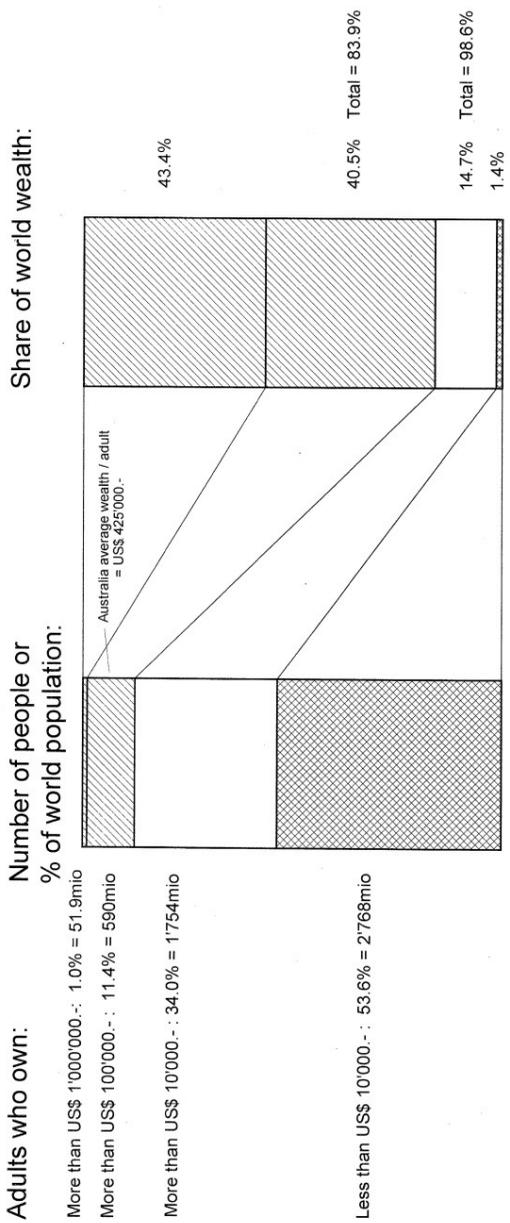
- 1) 12% of the world's population (the 642 million adults who own more than US\$100,000 each) own 84% of the world's wealth
- 2) a little more than half of the world's population (54%) own only 1.4% of the world's wealth (less than US\$10,000/person).

In the diagram, we can observe how a small proportion of the world's population (top of left column) owns a major proportion of global wealth (major part of right column).

3 Source: See Credit Suisse: *Global Wealth Report 2020*, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/global-wealth-report-2020-en.pdf>

DISTRIBUTION OF WORLD WEALTH

ONLY ADULTS - DATA CREDIT SUISSE - END 2019



12% of adults (us) accumulate 84% of global wealth, while half (54%) of world population live on only 1.4% of this total wealth.

The solution is simple

Imagine that you are among ten friends who share a cake. The first one takes more than three quarter of it; the next four take what is left; the remaining five have only the crumbs. As Westerners, we are like the first friend, the greedy one. We find it hard to identify with this role, because we don't feel we have much more than our neighbours – but they belong to the same category of privileged people! We have no occasion to compare ourselves with the five neglected “friends”, because we never meet them.

As Westerners we're situated (on average) in the upper part of the top 12% and even, for many of us, among the 1% of the world's population (52 million adults) who own more than US\$1 million/person. This privileged tenth (the rich and super-rich) includes most Americans, Europeans, Japanese and Australians, less the poor of these same countries (about 10–15% of their population, depending on the country), plus the rich elites of the emerging economies (the BRICS⁴), the Emirates and poor countries.

This means that we, as “Westerners” (belonging to the 12% rich or even the 1% super-rich), are the problem. We are the cause of this huge imbalance, even if the super-super-rich (a tiny part of the 1%, owning the many yachts and private jets) are still more noxious than us.

Our ecological footprint is far too excessive, and (obviously!) is narrowly linked with our material wealth. It needs to be reduced by a factor of between 4 and 8, if not more. So climate change is the responsibility of only 12% of the world's population. This is not a demographic problem, as is too often said, but a wealth problem! This is rarely acknowledged.

4 The BRICS are Brazil, Russia, India, China, South-Africa.

Livelihood depending on time and skills ... or not

Let's briefly consider how wealth, and more precisely money, generates more needs and desires in our modern society ruled by market laws. As I have already said, if I have money, I can think of flying to London – because planes are available for people who have money. This example shows how means (mainly money) generate needs – and needs stimulate means – through money and the creation of more money. This is the knot!

As a person, there are two basic ways I can satisfy my own needs, i.e. my own subsistence or livelihood:

- 1) I can produce, by myself, what I need. To complement this, I can barter with my neighbour. He and I both rely on what we can produce according to the time available to us (the time duration of each day) and on our respective skills and the resources we can access. We cannot escape these material and physical constraints. Barter complements what I can provide for myself, but without changing the ratio between my needs and the time or skills that are directly available to me (mine or my neighbour's). Money can play a useful role here – but only in its most restricted use, as a temporary support for the value to be transferred between me and my neighbour. In this case money is not a value on which one could speculate, nor a potential for investment that might bring interest (more money). It is only “neutral” money, palpable bank notes to pass from one hand to the next.
- 2) Beyond the possibility of self-sufficiency and barter, there is another possibility, fundamentally different. It relies on using money to satisfy my needs. I no longer rely on my own time and skills, but on money as a financial means to buy what I need or to increase my wealth. On the one hand there are resources (the goods available to satisfy my needs). On the other hand there are my needs and desires, which have no special measure but are the motivation for buying what I want. And in between the resources and my needs or desires, there is money – an intermediary

The solution is simple

yardstick used to measure the value of what is exchanged. I can calculate how much money I will need to get the resources I want, in order to satisfy my needs.

This yardstick reveals itself to be a very flexible measure and I will be able to play on the conversion of value. The exchange rate between my desire and the object I wish to acquire is not in fact neutral, objective and inflexible, but rather like a rubber band I can stretch more or less at will.

Money is an artificial creation. Not only is it used to transfer value from one to another (the banknote I give you), but it has a dynamic all of its own: it can multiply, extend, and be amplified or produced at will. As they come to disturb the relationships between my “needs” and the necessary resources, these ways to play with the value of money should be called speculation – which highlights money’s true essence. In this way, money contrasts with time and skills, which remain constant, or at least are highly constrained by material reality (context).

Money as speculation

I can extend the quantity of money I have almost indefinitely, as the following few examples will illustrate:

- If I’m rich and the seller is poor, I can play with my power and get a cheaper price, by invoking the possibility I might buy elsewhere. I then get more resources for the same money.
- I can also sign a cheque or use my credit card in order not to deplete my own quantity of available cash but instead use some virtual money (a number in my account or in the general computer of my bank).
- And if I need still more cash, I can go to my banker and borrow some money, which will be created just for me when the banker enters the loan into her computer.

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The consequence of these different manipulations is that my purchasing power increases considerably, despite my own skills and available time not increasing.

In other words, using money allows me to increase the quantity of resources I can get (the goods I wish to acquire) for a quantity of cash, which can also be increased independently of what I truly own or may provide for myself. Is this not speculation, rather than a fair exchange?

The important thing in the examples above is that the value of what I can acquire is no longer related to what I can produce myself, by accessing resources and tools to transform materials, with the time and skills I have, as would be the case in self-sufficiency or barter.

The item I covet is simply offered for a quantity of cash I can access – even if I do not have it yet or if the necessary means are not available to me. These two categories of material constraints (time/skills/means versus cash) are evolving independently of each other, especially the quantity of cash. Time, skills and means are not as flexible, being anchored in material/physical dimensions or in personal potentials.

The impact of money as a systemic way of thinking

It is important to notice money's special characteristic of being a fluctuating yardstick, created or expanded at will, and changing in value and quantity through different means of management based on artificially creating cash via speculation, i.e. through playing “astutely” with the conversion between independent values. This is the kind of artificial rubber measure that can retract or extend, as I mentioned.

For instance:

- varying exchange rates change the conversion between two currencies, benefiting the stronger currency, which will be able to

The solution is simple

buy more, at the expense of the weaker currency, which will lose purchasing power

- varying interest rates change the speed at which capital increases without any production being provided (I get rich while I sleep)
- stock exchange benefits (e.g. dividends, increase in value) allow wealth to be transferred from workers to investors, depriving one at the expense of the other
- new credit produces new money, which appears suddenly on the market when a loan is confirmed
- printing new cash increases the total amount of money in circulation
- playing with budget deficits liberates cash, at the expense of future generations (if debt has to be repaid)
- cancelling debts does not impact much on the total available cash, because this cash has remained abstract (hidden at the bank, behind credit cards or in computer files) and the money has already been spent, stimulating a chain of exchanges
- devaluation increases the purchasing power of foreign currencies and provides outlets for overproduction
- varying the prices of identical items or trades creates a disparity in purchasing power between different buyers
- different prices for the same item or service in different countries (for instance a shoe repair in Sweden versus in India) show a disparity in purchasing power for buyers in comparable positions and a disparity of income for the producer.

The purpose of all these manipulations is that the total quantity of money in the world increases ceaselessly in order to generate more profit, which then participates in increasing wealth. And profit becomes then the principal means to increase one's own capital when money is not simply produced as such (printed or created as credit) –

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such profit does not come from work but from interest, dividends, capital gain on sales (e.g. of real estate), or any form of speculation. Twisting exchange conditions to benefit the winner is the principal way to increase wealth, which is why the poor get poorer and the rich get richer when exchanges are not balanced (when the same value does not circulate in both directions). Profit, because it is provided by speculation, has nothing to do with satisfying basic needs – it simply increases wealth in its own right.

This is a powerful factor in social disparity – these increases of available cash, like getting a loan or investing capital, are mainly accessible to people who already have money or wealth, and not for poor people. The rich have more opportunities to play the game, and thus get richer. A poor Malian farmer, though, has almost no access to credit.

In contrast with neutral money, which merely supports transferred value – as in bartering – *official* money has the power to multiply by itself, producing nothing besides more money. The statistics show that the share of national wealth generated by profits from investments (or speculation) increases constantly, and that the share of wealth generated by income from work has been decreasing proportionally for many decades. Speculation plays a growing role in accessing wealth; work does not. Global wealth (as measured by gross domestic product, GDP) is said to grow – but for whom?

It is fascinating to observe that, without profit or speculation, money loses its power and we lose our wealth. Without money, we would all be more equal. The New York lawyer and the Kalahari bushman would both need to rely on their own skills for survival. Who seems richer in this scenario?

Speculation with time and power

Despite this general increase in available cash and in the quantity of cash I can access myself, the quantities of available resources in

The solution is simple

nature have not changed; nor has the amount of time a craftsman needs to produce a given object. And even though the daily time available to me (and everybody else) has not grown, and my skills have not grown, thanks to money I can now afford a lot more goods. Nothing has changed but the cash available to me. Thus my power, through cash, multiplies my time and my skills. This is an astonishing phenomenon.

Consequently, we can say that the money I can access allows me to pay for slaves⁵ who will work for me – and compensate for my lack of time and skills:

- 1) I can buy energy slaves. Thanks to using money, I can afford to consume more energy than my own physiological human power could provide (which I estimate at some 11 kWh/week). I can buy energy (fossil or renewable) in the forms of heat, electricity, mechanic energy, or incorporated in goods (the energy required to produce these goods). An American exploits, on average, 110 energy slaves, a European 60, a Chinese person eight, and a Bangladeshi just one – his or her own organic energy.
- 2) I can buy work slaves. Thanks to accessing and using money I can, on top of the energy I buy, also acquire a workforce of others (slaves). I can use their time and skills, as well as their own organic energy, for my own satisfaction. The GDP per person of Switzerland is some 200 times bigger than the GDP per person of Mali. This means that, on average, a Swiss person can buy 200 more work slaves than can a poor farmer in Mali. An Australian can buy about 142 slaves, a Chinese person 18, and a Malian only one (his or her own power).

5 I reinterpret here, in a free way, the concept of slave proposed by US designer and futurist Buckminster Fuller, as quoted by Herbert Girardet and Miguel Mendonça in *A Renewable World: Energy, Ecology, Equality – A Report for The World Future Council*, Green Books Ltd, Totnes, Devon, UK, 2009.

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This is evidently a short and simplified explanation. These numbers are not exact, because they vary according to time and circumstances – but they nevertheless reveal something important, which is probably the true source of climate change. It is this: our ability to play artificially with resources (both natural and human) and to change the relations of power between us and the environment (both natural and social). We can do this because we know how to speculate with money – and, in this way, we can change the quantity of it we accumulate, giving us the power to consume ever more of the limited resources. Oddly, this is known as “growth”.

Wealth, as we can see, also increases my needs, because it develops my power to use resources that would not otherwise be available to me. The Malian farmer is not less clever than me. How then do we explain that he and I have such contrasting potentials to use (or rather exploit) the workforce of others? This challenging question demonstrates how the financial power of money generates an incredible twist that is one of the main causes of the present crisis. It needs to be mastered in an equitable way if we want to find true solutions to climate change.

This demonstration shows how money changes the way we think. Speculation becomes ingrained in our perceptions and behaviours. For instance, we come to accept that profit (the result of speculation) is a normal thing – and we confuse it with income (the result of work). And we never think twice about this twist by money each time we buy something.

This new awareness of money’s illusions should help focus our attention on the real issues: equity and justice; the many treacherous ways we manage our financial power; the way our democratic system truly works; the need for new ways to live together and for localised economies. Since we belong to the 12% of richer people, voluntary simplicity (reducing our footprint by a factor of 4 to 6) is the solution. It is important to emphasise here that simplicity does not diminish our lifestyle; it is a qualitative transformation (radical

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improvement) that relies on the priority of human relationships over material accumulation. This is actually what most of us aspire to. The new way of life is not a loss but a gain (a quantum leap), even if it relies on less.

The illusion of ownership

An important belief in our present society is closely linked with the power of money. This is the idea that private ownership is necessary – a cornerstone of our civilisation; a precondition for thriving.

My toothbrush, my trousers, my books, my tools, my car, my house, my land ... everything I buy becomes mine. This is so well accepted – and seems so fundamental to our way of life – that it may come as a shock that I dare to question how legitimate it is.

As I've said, everything we really need is supplied by nature or society free of charge: life at birth, air around us, water in the creek, food in the garden, wood in the forest, health from our immune system, knowledge from parents and teachers, love from relatives, friends, partners, etc. Of course it is not always so smooth, and we also have to add some work to make these gifts available in the form and place we prefer to access them. But the truth remains: they are all free gifts given generously to us, by nature and by society. Why then should we have the right to put a fence around them, to make them our own, accessible to us only – to exclude others? And why do we also accept that others have access to goods we have no right to access, just for the reason that they have exclusive access to them in the name of the sacred right of ownership? Private property deprives me of what you have – and you of what I have. This is obviously nonsense.

For example, how could we possibly own land? Land was here before us, and will remain after we die. This is our planet; it gave us life. It's more appropriate to say that we *belong* to the land, which fosters us and makes our life possible, than that we own it. We were

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born naked to life and naked we leave at death – maybe wearing our best dress or suit in the coffin, but going on without it. Being naked at birth and death means we cannot take anything material with us. Thus we can really only *own* our experience of life, our perception of it, our understanding and interpretation of what happens to us, our feelings, our love, our memories. We are more witnesses than actors.

So, what is ownership? It is hard to answer this question while we confuse *ownership* of resources or goods with *access* to these resources or goods. The most important thing is access: that I may breathe in and out when I need fresh air; drink water when I'm thirsty; eat when I'm starved; find understanding and recognition when I express myself and try to connect with others. And so on, for everything I may need. Poverty is not a lack of ownership; it is a lack of access to necessary resources. This is a crucial distinction.

It is probably hard for you to accept that ownership cannot be a legitimate right; this statement goes against our usual ideology of accumulation, and our fascination for wealth in individual terms. But if we recognise the need for everyone to access vital resources and the gifts of nature, we find that this basic access can easily be managed, independent of ownership, and that resources, goods and services may remain in common ownership, managed collectively. This common stock of wealth is precisely what we call the Commons. It includes all precious resources and goods that cannot belong to anybody because they remain accessible to all. And these Commons include most of our resources: land, air, water, food, nature, knowledge, wisdom, justice, peace, compassion, and so on.

Unfortunately, we live in a society that has promoted accumulation. Greed is the cornerstone of our economic system, and we try to justify it however we can, to affirm our misplaced sense of identity. We need to accumulate more and more things in order to feel secure. But it's a form of illusory compensation for what we wish to be – or wish to be perceived to be. This ideology of accumulation and intense consumption has made most of us into radical takers. We

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have become absolute takers, losing our ability to be true givers. Money seems to not only allow but also justify our power to take. But this is obviously in fundamental contradiction with the setting of nature, which offers us everything for free. In fact, if we receive freely what is needed, we should logically pass it further on, in a spirit of generosity that tries to mimic the generosity of nature and of life in general.

It is our general experience that we have been raised freely by our parents, taught freely at school; our environment teaches us freely how to cope with gravity, with seasons, with cycles; further training or experience teach us freely more knowledge and even wisdom. Even our skills are given to us free of charge, and the opportunities to develop them are provided by our social context, free of charge.

On the other hand, we can also easily notice how sharing what we have received and passing on what we have learned may open up new ways of relating with one another, because it makes everybody rich. When I share knowledge, it multiplies. When I share love and peace, they become realities, activated by the fact that I share them. Without sharing, they remain dead and inactive.

We are obsessed by *things* – we want to grab them, and we focus on them. But we forget what happens *between* things, in relationships. Atoms are made of almost nothing. The density of electrons and of protons is almost insignificant compared with the huge space that remains between these particles. What is essential is not the mass of particles (the things) but the attraction that keeps them together (the relationship). Without the relationships of attraction, the whole would collapse into nothingness. This invisible fact is at the core of reality: relationships keep the whole alive, although particles are almost negligible. It is the same with our solar system: there are huge distances between the planets and the sun, and yet the system remains stable because of attraction – because of the relationships that link the parts and ensure the coherence of the whole.

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Our world is constantly transforming. This means that life happens in a long process that never stops evolving. The “things” are only small hooks on which relationships are attached. The processes are the leading forces and they mainly affect relationships, rather than parts. To avoid being in conflict with the whole world – with the very process of life – we need to tune our attention to what matters most. We have to learn to focus on relationships and processes, rather than on things. Things are almost irrelevant.

We must detach from the illusory power of ownership and acquire the wisdom of practising generosity, sharing and caring; these are the true energies of relationships. Let’s learn to focus on what happens in the in-between – between people, between us and the environment, between humanity and the universe. There’s a lot to learn!

Principle 5: equity and generosity

The present crisis cannot be solved without equity. We, as rich Westerners (only 12% of the world population), are causing the main destructive trends of this crisis. Money plays an important role in preventing equity, through increasing the power of rich people (the 12% who possess 84% of world wealth) at the expense of the poor (the 54% who possess only 1.4%). Ownership is an illusion. What matters is free access to what we all need. This can only be done if we practise generosity – giving and receiving – instead of grabbing.

06 - The essential role of the quality factor

A society obsessed by quantities

Closely connected with our use of money as power is our tendency to look at problems mainly in terms of quantities – of practicalities, technicalities, expenses and profits (how much) – and not in terms of quality and a wider vision or perspective (how, why, for what

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purpose). This issue is rarely mentioned today when we discuss the present crisis.

We are obsessed by quantities. For example, we:

- wish to increase the gross domestic product (GDP)
- believe in unlimited growth
- want more energy production
- desire a bigger house, a faster car, holidays further away
- appreciate political promises to create many more jobs
- intend to invest more capital
- worry about the latest prices on the stock exchange (did the values increase?).

We usually focus on quantities because we're used to solving problems on the lowest possible level – the level of mere direct and short-term practicalities. This is why technology and market forces have become the two main energies that foster and dominate our world and our way of thinking. We think almost only in terms of what we see materially, as if what we see at first glance would reveal the essence of the problem.

We do even worse: although we are obsessed with quantities, we do not properly manage them. We fail to manage the flows of resources, or the flows of energy we consume. We just consume them in the quantity we need or wish to, not considering how our consumption fits into the broader picture – the universal laws of compatibility. We do not even know, in most cases, where the resources come from. We take our supplies for granted, as long as we have electricity at the power point and water on tap, and there's food at the supermarket. We rarely ask ourselves where these supplies come from and just how they have been extracted, transformed and delivered. As long as there are enough resources for us, we happily pay the bill. Our obsession with quantities stops when our consumption is satisfied. Resources are simply summarised by the bill, and we pay in order to continue accessing them.

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This is precisely the core of the problem. Not only do we fail to manage the resources we consume and the wastes we produce, we tend to convert these diverse, precious flows into abstract amounts of money (the final bill), simplistically translating them into the amount of cash they cost us, given their prices. Yet everybody knows that prices do not represent the true value of things. Each resource is reduced to an amount in dollars, euros, yuan, rupees. We no longer manage the quantities of resources, energy and wastes, but only how much they cost us, i.e. the quantity of cash we have to spend to gain access. For instance, we do not manage our consumption of water in relation to what is available for the local community as a whole, but only by how much we have to pay for it at the end of the month.

And it gets even worse. Most corporations ignore almost everything about the real material flows (raw material, energy, knowledge) they consume; they hardly know where they come from and in what degree they are sustainable. Rather than managing the finite resources, they just order more of what they need, as they need it, and pay the bills.

By contrast, those same corporations know everything about the monetary cost of each resource they use, and the cost price of each item they produce, and how much profit each unit will bring. Money has become the common denominator for all things and processes.

Decisions are not taken in terms of resources and wastes, or in terms of quality – of how the process is adequate or fits into a broader perspective or in the general landscape. Instead, decisions are based on simplified, financial understandings, on simple accounting – costs, expenses, incomes, investments and returns – and not on processes. Fiction (money) overtakes reality (transformation). The impact of the successive trends of the stock exchange on the general evolution or breakdowns of our economy is therefore a striking example of what we expose here. Money has become the supreme value, used to express all other values. It is the only quantitative measure that can summarise everything. And, worse, decide

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everything. Hence the ultimate power – that which leads us – is money.

Qualities and processes as essential factors

It is absolutely clear, at least somewhere in our unconscious, that the financial world – and even our material reality (the complex flows of resources and wastes) – do not represent the final and essential issues of life. All these exchanges and processes of transformation are only the visible parts of the iceberg – not the real causes that foster life, but only their external expression. We know that something more important shapes them and makes them possible – something that has to do with life itself, on a deeper level. Things do not happen by themselves, mechanically. What matters most (more than all these quantities) is what has generated this evolution and our present situation.

This question is especially important in light of the acute crisis (climate-economic-democratic) we are facing right now. What matters most is the mentality that has given shape to our present world. And this much more fundamental cause does not depend on quantities (whether flows of resources or money) but on broader and deeper terms of quality. Not “how much?” but “how, why, and for what purpose?” Not quantities of stuff or money, but qualities of choice and purpose. The present crisis is truly the fruit of our past and present choices concerning our own evolution as people and as a society. And these main choices are fundamentally issues of quality, preference and priority. The big questions are always qualitative issues – which is why our obsession with quantities does not serve us well.

At the end of the day, it’s all about processes – how they develop, and why. It is about exhausting nature’s resources, about overproduction, about growth, about greed – all of which are qualitative processes. It is about why we do what we do. Not *how*

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much too much we produce; or by what *degree* we don't adapt to nature enough. But *why* we do or do not.

In order to learn from the past, we need to examine our past attitudes, which have fostered the present situation. We need to design a new long-term frame for the way we think, in terms of quality of life, quality of relationships, and the new version of society we want to shape. We need a new anthropology (better quality) rather than short-term technology and problem-solving.

Without a wider qualitative vision, we are reduced to solving problems in mere technical terms, to acting only on quantities. This will lead us nowhere, which is why we need to change our way of thinking – today – and shift to a qualitative pattern of evolution.

We need to embrace simplicity in our way of life, in order to get more quality for less quantity. Small is beautiful. Simplicity, as a general qualitative option, is the necessary condition for a new life pattern and the best way to prioritise clear, caring human relationships over business. Only the shift from quantity handling to quality thinking will allow us to find new solutions.

In summary, the simple solution I'm trying to describe in this introductory chapter relies on two coexisting movements:

- 1) **top-down, from qualities to quantities**, which I just described. Qualities come first (our general world and life vision) and then help to define how we handle quantities (stuff). We translate our vision into specific materiality – the “how”
- 2) **bottom-up, from ordinary people to institutions**, as I mentioned earlier, noting that we, as ordinary people, have to initiate change, rather than our governments – although (of course) they also need to participate, i.e. to “follow”.

Now, here is something very surprising. It is amazing, fascinating, and also appalling, to observe that, in fact, we do exactly the opposite of what I just described with these two movements:

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- 1) Instead of a top-down movement from qualities to quantities, we practise a bottom-up movement from quantities to qualities – by amalgam, and not by choice.
- 2) Instead of a bottom-up movement from ordinary people initiating change to institutions that implement it on a global level, we expect that specialists (scientists, technicians, government departments) will initiate a top-down movement for us, from institutions to ordinary people.

The world, or rather life, is upside down. This is the big twist we have to fundamentally reverse. And it is urgent.

The invisible absent dimension

There is another fascinating aspect of our blindness that must still be mentioned and described here: we often do not notice what is missing – precisely because it is not here and it is invisible.⁶ In perceiving reality, we are constantly confronted with the major difficulty of noticing the absence of what is not. This difficulty is rarely mentioned and can be described like this:

- 1) We see clearly that which is in front of us, especially if it is a material “thing”. And we may also more or less distinguish the qualities that are currently active – though these are significantly less visible, being immaterial.
- 2) In contrast, we have much more difficulty noticing what is absent – what is missing. Even for material objects, it can be difficult for us to notice what was here yesterday but is not here today. So it stands to reason that our ability to notice what is missing is even weaker when we look at immaterial qualities.

6 I reinterpret here a fascinating point that Naomi Klein makes in her book *This Changes Everything*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2014.

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For instance, we can observe our environment and notice the negative impacts of our collective actions, such as pollution. But we have more difficulty in noticing what has disappeared, what is not, or is no more. We may notice obvious qualities, such as cruelty, or ugliness, but we are likely not to notice the absence of the qualities that would resolve these tensions.

For example, after intense bushfires we may notice that there are very few wild animals running around. But we find it difficult to identify what is truly missing, what has been decimated, unless we choose to focus on this question. The absent bird does not sing. Silence may make us aware of its absence, but there is little chance that this lack or absence will be noticed as clearly as we would notice, say, a disturbance. We are blind to absence – even absence of a real bird. And, further, we are even blinder to the absence of a missing quality, unless it truly hurts; this quality is not only non-existent (missing), but also immaterial. Hence it's doubly likely to remain invisible, unnoticed.

These statements about absence and silence seem obvious, but in fact they are not anodyne. This is an essential point. We notice what *is*, oblivious to what is *not*. We are not aware that absence should be an alarming sign, tending to focus on what is visible. We often fail to notice what we have destroyed, lost, or omitted to implement.

This is probably the reason why we tend to focus on quantities instead of qualities. Material appearances make things visible and we can more clearly and easily see practical means to transform them, in terms of technology or tools.

A deafening silence

Because we fail to notice what is not there, silence – a lack of presence or expression – is hard to notice. How can we hear the voices of the silent? The silent victims of domestic violence or other abuse; the silent victims of racism; the silent victims of

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discrimination. In many cultures (including our Western one) women are silenced, or only have a right of expression if they adopt masculine attitudes. Most feminine qualities of care and kindness are silenced too, by the more noisy or dominant trends of control and domination. All the victims and all the recessive qualities, erased or squashed by dominating trends, remain silent and cannot reveal their deep suffering or their qualitative presence. There is simply no way for them to be heard or made visible. This is the deafening silence of our time: the disappearance of biodiversity; the mutism of hidden victims; the silence of first nations, minorities, and larger social groups which lack power; the rejected identities of marginal people; the enforced silence of refugees who drown at sea. Quantities (more stuff) have silenced quality (our humanity). Suffering remains untold. Pain hidden. Destruction is ignored. Constructive guidelines are disparaged.

As a practical result of this, many people have no voice. They have no right to be fully human and recognised for who they are. They are considered as only partially human, and their identities rejected. In many cultures, women are considered to be second-class beings. They have no right to talk, no voice, no social identity. They are silenced, as if they did not exist. Victims are also denied the right of expression. Older people, strangers, refugees, marginal people, even poor people, are pushed away and cannot fully participate in social life. They are considered only half beings, or not at all. Despised races and indigenous cultures are not listened to, although they try to be heard. This leads to the terrible and unnoticed absence of maybe half of the population. And if these people want the right to speak and be heard, they often have to imitate the standard model. They have to play the game of being someone they are not. Women have to play the game of masculinity, refugees or racial minorities of being white inside (Amerindians like to say jokingly, “this is an apple, red outside but white inside”). Poorer people have to accept the rules of the game, renouncing any protection or means of self-defence.

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Silencing an important part of the population leads to terrible loss for the whole community: voices unheard, faculties unexpressed, gifts and skills not offered, compassion not shared. This is the big absence, the missing quality that nobody can notice – because it has not been. And nobody knows what it could have been. Silence has killed these fabulous gifts before they can be offered, castrating the whole community. Society has been reduced to a shadow of itself, a simplistic sliver of what it could be.

And, therefore, when we look at what we see, we omit what is not, and tend to focus on smaller problems, on finding petty solutions. We lose sight of the wider picture and fall into detail-handling – into small solutions, which are mostly technical; more technology to solve problems generated by excess of technology. But when we see what is missing – when we are aware of the absence of these major qualities that would make the whole different if they were active – we become truly creative and can reinvent our ways of living. We get involved in the wider picture and can truly make a difference. We break free of “problem-solving” and start creating an entirely new paradigm.

The big question, for now, is: How can we get better at discerning what’s missing? How can we identify the leading qualities I described above, when they aren’t clearly expressed? Or notice the absence of an immaterial quality such as care or respect, which if practised might transform our ways of sharing and our one-on-one relationships, generating a better quality of being and of living together. The missing quality can be overlooked because it’s not strikingly visible, or not fashionable, or it’s too unfamiliar to be recognised – and it’s even easier to overlook the effective absence (non-practice) of a missing *leading* (overarching) quality.

To become aware of this imperceptible absence we need a clear frame of reference – to help us discern what matters most; to establish truly human priorities. This frame cannot be an absence; we need a positive, guiding framework. As mentioned earlier, only a new

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anthropology can provide this frame of sharp reference, causing flatland and indifference to vanish – leaving space for true discernment, for consciously chosen priorities, for real commitment.

Simplicity (more quality, less quantity), transparency (visibility and locality) and awareness (seeing what is or what is missing) can become the main leading energies and qualities, transforming our daily life. We can do less and live better.

Principle 6: quality (or, the missing quality)

The challenge is not about quantities (more, less) but about qualities (how, why, for what purpose), especially qualities that are missing without us noticing – precisely because they are missing. This is the deafening silence of the voiceless, leaving us incomplete as a community and handicapped as creators.

07 - The crisis of our way of living together

The leading trend of domination and exploitation

Another fundamental point concerns the leading energy that drives us, socially.

Many countries outside Europe are still deeply marked by their colonial past – such as the United States and Australia. In these places deeply ingrained heritage defines so many aspects of life. We see:

- unresolved relationships between past history and the present time (First Nations peoples, land rights, frontier wars)
- lands with an energy, context and climate differing from those of the colonisers
- ways of governing by decree more than by legislation

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- a contempt of squattocracy for lower social classes (mainly “people of colour” or migrants)
- exploitation of resources prioritised over solidarity and social cohesion
- a critical role for personal volunteering to compensate for lacks in social security, a cohesive social project, etc.

These characteristics are far from exclusive to colonised countries. Ex-colonies and many of today’s most influential countries still suffer from their past role as colonial or imperial powers (the UK, France, the US) and their understanding of domination (empire, UN Security Council, G7 summits). As in the colonial past, politics and economic domination seem to go hand in hand. The rhetoric is: if we want to promote the wellbeing of our nation (us as upper classes), we have to plunder these lands (ex-colonies where our presence is well affirmed) and make our economy grow. This attitude obviously only profits a minority and generates unrestrained exploitation of natural resources. It gives way to a model of competition and to the general greed for more wealth, comfort, pleasure. And so many other people are left behind.

Let’s consider another model, practised in northern European countries. This is the deliberate choice for the practice of best possible equality. The reduced competition increases the likelihood that every member of the community receives a fair share of the common wealth. The priority is not on growth but on quality of life for all. Finland, for instance, has no selective school system; its educational model is aimed at serving the *children*, first and foremost. This favours personal development and allows equal access to means of personal expression and interesting activities (not jobs).

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It is well known that countries with higher equality, such as European Nordic countries, have a much more balanced social system, shown by:⁷

- a better level of education
- better democracy
- better opportunities of expression for women (most of these countries have female leaders)
- better social conditions
- better social security
- less of a gap between rich and poor
- better working conditions
- less unemployment
- less violence and crime
- less people in jail.

It is no coincidence that women play an important leadership role in these countries that have consciously chosen to take a different path. They are no more privileged than other countries. And they are different by choice, not chance.

It is self-evident that equality, and caring for one another, allow better access for all – to wealth, to possibilities of expression, to the conditions for a peaceful life.

The main question we have to ask ourselves now is: why do we, as responsible citizens, allow our policies not to follow these evident human purposes and priorities? It depends on us, and only us! As ordinary people and citizens, we must demand to have these conditions implemented – or else implement them ourselves. If we are a mature nation, aware of what we prefer (equality, sharing, caring, access to common wealth for all), then we can practise these

7 Find the research in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Bloomsbury Press, New York, 2009.

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values on a local level and ask our leaders to account for why they do not lead us onto this more equitable road. But if we are not aware of the quality that is missing, and of what is best for us, we disempower ourselves.

So, what will we choose? Our happiness depends on that answer.

Our democracy between Charybdis and Scylla

In our search for the true path to shared happiness, we are like Odysseus deciding between Charybdis and Scylla. This is an excellent metaphor for the dangers that threaten our democracy today. In Greek mythology, Scylla was a six-headed monster who used to devour any victim who passed by; and Charybdis was a whirlpool that would engulf any ship coming near to it. Because the strait between these two monsters was narrow, Odysseus could not sail through without approaching one of them. He therefore had to choose between Charybdis, which would destroy the whole ship, or Scylla, who would eat six of his companions but allow the rest to pass. The Greek metaphor has the meaning that, when facing two threats, one should always choose the least if it's not possible to avoid both.

We can use this myth to describe the present state of our democracy, caught as it is between two dangerous threats: totalitarianism, monolithism and narrow nationalism on the one hand; virtuality, fake news and illusion on the other. China has adopted the first as its paradigm, the United States the latter. These are of course only paradigms, because both of these threats are active in all societies. But unlike Odysseus, we can choose a third road, to avoid both threats. Let's look at this in more detail.

The totalitarian model (Scylla)

Let's begin with the threat of totalitarianism (Scylla, with its six devouring heads). There is a marked tendency, today, for strong

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power. Many nations are evolving towards a pattern of one social group dominating another (or others); for example, in China, Russia, Eastern Europe, Turkey, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia. China's example shows us that economic growth does not necessarily lead to freedom of opinion and speech, nor to democracy. The Chinese model cleverly combines the dynamic of capitalism with the strength of what is (falsely) labelled a Communist ideology.

We must urgently notice four mistakes the so-called "democratic" nations make regarding China:

- 1) **We describe its power as something inevitable, intimidating and threatening, invading many aspects of our lives.** Its power *is* real, but we can still choose how to respond to it – how to oppose it or protect ourselves from it. Our fear only makes it bigger and stronger, and when we surrender, we give it even more power. But China's power is not infinite – nor can it last for ever. Our surrender also strengthens the strategy of domination by propaganda, helping it propagate. By contrast, reaction and resistance make us stronger, and the power weakens its grip on us.
- 2) **We tend to observe this growing power with disdain, thinking our societies are so much more democratic,** because it seems to send back to us a kind of positive mirror image of ourselves. This is an illusion. Although our procedures are more democratic, true democracy is something much more than just holding regular elections. This is in fact a whole culture how to live together and come to a form of general agreement. So much inequality inhabits our social structure, and the dominant nations have become rich through exploitation, which still continues today. It is important that we do not fall into the trap of self-glorification. We need to take an honest look at our own societies, recognising they that are based on similar, ingrained mechanisms of domination.

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- 3) **We unwillingly observe China's powerful, effective ideology, which allows it to use all the available means to implement its collective project.** All means are in the hands of a central organisation (the Party, the State), which decides on the destiny of over a billion people. Production, resources, finance, education, media, technology, armed forces, police, repression, re-education, work camps, are all at the service of one single project. They are combined in order to bring the best efficiency, which is not restrictively measured in terms of financial profit, but rather in terms of power and achievement. It is also true that Eastern cultures are highly aware of their collective dimension. People in Asia readily understand that individual wellbeing depends on community wellbeing. We, Westerners, in contrast, focus much more on our personal comfort and individual desires. As long as no-one interferes with us, we happily lose sight of the bigger picture – our common destiny. This means that we urgently need to develop our own ideology: one that is not oppressive but a positive, creative vision of the society we wish to give shape to. This shared vision would guide our daily choices, both personal and collective, since the many common factors of destiny, at all levels, are closely linked and interdependent. Only a strong sense of cohesion and belonging can ensure our personal and collective security.
- 6) **We participate freely in building the Chinese Empire.** Western countries never stop trading with China. We buy Chinese goods, dismantling our own capacity for local production; Chinese goods are much cheaper. Going further, we sell China our most precious resources (mineral, energy, technology). We even sell our land, our essential source of subsistence, to Chinese individuals and companies. We introduce them in the most sensitive fields of research and communication; into our laboratories, universities, telecommunications networks and political parties. China invests in other countries, owning or managing important infrastructures (consider the Belt and Road

The solution is simple

Initiative, and the leasing of Port Darwin). We should learn to think more broadly about dependence, independence and interdependence. This does not mean we should refuse all exchange with China – but we should examine our degree of exposure to its power. This is not about fostering general fear – it is about not being naïve. We have become blind to the impact of our choices on the wider context, and even on our own lives; unable to see why we need to behave differently to ensure our common and personal future.

These four mistakes find their common source in our individualism and lack of social vision. We tend to think of ideology as something negative, linked with oppression. But this is only true when an ideology becomes totalitarian propaganda, serving to oppress, dominate and repress. One could also say that our own obsession with a free market and individualist freedom is a destructive totalitarian ideology. Freed from these negative practices, ideology can be a constructive force – a wider vision that describes the type of society we wish to implement. It becomes a leading image of the missing quality of human values: equity, sharing, care for one another. Translated into a vision, it's a call for solidarity and mutuality. This is precisely what we need: an ideology rooted in solidarity-mutuality that could resist the Chinese model; not over there in China, but here, in our own country.

The virtual model of fiction (Charybdis)

Now let's talk about Charybdis, the whirlpool. This represents the United States' pattern of spin: virtuality, fake news and artificial illusion. Again, this is only a paradigm, because we are all infected by this same tendency. In North America, Europe, Australia, and many other places, we have lost our rootedness in reality. Everybody has opinions, and any truth goes; this is the post-modern trend. There are less and less checks and balances, examining what is said. We live in a virtual world of our own making.

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It all starts with advertising, which creates false needs, fictive realities and fictive hopes. Social media is a powerful means of communication, but it nevertheless creates an illusion, completely disconnected from our real world. And the general media (newspapers, television, internet) actively participates in inventing new realities, propagating a certain amount of fake news, for financial or political purposes. The world of television and the many videos available on the internet have generated a world of show that is totally disconnected from our daily lives. We live glued to our screens, watching or listening to what others think, say, do. And we have lost our power of discernment, being either too lazy to check the truth of what is said, or incapable of doing so. While we watch, our own lives are on standby.

The focus is on opinions, and freedom of thought or speech. Diverse perceptions are certainly rich, but truth does exist nevertheless. Even if the truth is extremely complex and nobody can quite grasp it, we can't simply make up whatever suits us, under the cover of freedom. We can look for the truth in total honesty, beyond partisanship, and try to conform to what we do understand of it. We do not make truth; it exists independently of us. Sometimes we can only grasp a very tiny part of the truth – and it may be a very different part from what others have perceived.

Trumpism has been a flagrant demonstration of this trend of remaking the world like a television show. More actor or clown than leader, policy makers such as Trump create a totally fictive world of their own, tailored to their own interests – and then act accordingly. Acting according to fiction obviously brings havoc! The talk dominates reality, and transforms it into a suitable story, creating its own artificial bubble.

We live in this bubble, in illusion, not daring or knowing how to challenge these false discourses. They're difficult to oppose rationally, since they rely on representations not rooted in experience. They emerge from fictive talk and rely on the faith of followers in

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their so-called “charismatic leader”, who has forged this illusion out of nothing. The beliefs attract people who feel rejected, and fanatics who’ve lost the ability to critically examine what they hear. The discourse is fed by a network of media dedicated to this fiction, which invests all its energy in developing it: climate change denial, racism, white supremacy, religion as grounds for discrimination, fear of strangers, power of weapons, etc. The opponents of this fake world are also fed by media that tells them the opposite. Two worlds, two ways of thinking, two sources of worldviews that never meet and cannot find a way to engage in dialogue but only continue fighting one another.

There is a puzzling mechanism: the more we try to pierce the bubble of the false clowns, the more we trigger the self-defence reflex in their supporters. They feel called to defend their idol from attack, which only reinforces their own fanaticism. The fake discourse has forged this other world in which they live, and probably also the false reality in which we all live, because the fiction leaking out of this bubble contaminates us too. We become fans of Facebook, of television shows, of the myth of our own importance and righteousness. And this creation never seems to be truly confronted by reality, because we have lost our connection with it. Our computers help us to forge this fiction; we live in a bubble of comfort of our own making, whether it be a bubble of fanaticism or a bubble of self-glorifying liberalism. The bubbles are expressed in television shows, advertisements, trends and fashion, our self-image built through social media, our idea of pleasure and comfort, our aspiration for wealth and power.

The fiction the clowns are creating is often based, at least partially, on a justified criticism of our modern society; this gives it strength. It is based on the complaint of most disadvantaged people who have been abandoned to their own destiny (unemployed, despised by higher social classes, marginalised, etc.). It is true that we have failed, as a modern wealthy society, to deliver peace, justice and equity for all:

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- wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few
- money rules our world
- the upper social classes show contempt for blue-collar workers
- insecurity threatens most workers
- materialism has reduced our culture to mere ownership of things
- many people have lost their bearings in society
- solidarity and mutuality are less and less practised on the general level, and tend to be limited to the realm of familiar circles of relatives and friends.

The need for a creative alternative

In summary, Charybdis and Scylla are true threats to our daily life and our current evolution. They are not always opposed one to another, often joining forces to work together. The only response we can make to oppose both of them, as a kind of middle way, is our own empowerment – finding relative consensus on the local level to define the type of society we wish to implement. The challenge is giving form to a true expression and practice of lively democracy; of dialogue and inclusiveness, guided by a creative ideology, a positive vision of solidarity-mutuality. We have all the tools at hand. We just need to dare and to desire it.

If we consider the two models I just described as the consistent harm we want to avoid, our real choice is then between two narratives (as is fashionable to say in these days of despair for trustworthy guidance):

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- 1) what we have experienced so far – a combination of the two models described above, based on individualism, competition, accumulation, domination and exploitation; or one of the many forms of more or less hidden totalitarianism or fiction
- 2) or the new narrative, to be (re-)invented, based on solidarity-mutuality, on the joy of living together and of creating a society that aims at harmony and care for all.

Even though the word “narrative” is fashionable today, it remains very ambiguous. It can help to sell any future, any false myth – or any true path for deepening the meaning of life. This means that not just *any* narrative will do the job.

When we see how antagonistic these two narratives are, and become aware that the former leads to extinction, the latter to revival, it is not difficult to choose life over death. But do we want to open the eyes? This is another question.

Principle 7: living together

To oppose the totalitarian model, and the virtual model of fiction, we need to invent a third way – a way for each of us to participate in elaborating a common vision of our future (consensus for a form of creative ideology). We then need to make the necessary changes to our community, a body of complementary differences, led by an ideal of mutuality-solidarity.

08 - A necessary turn-around of mind

A new vision, rooted in a new understanding of life

Yes, we need a new narrative to lead us. But it seems that each nation has already something similar, like a national myth, with leading

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values that are widely accepted as priorities or as an expression of what is seen as the world order:

- China has a broad vision to regain its lost power and become an empire again after having been humiliated by Western domination.
- The United States also has a vision of itself as a dominating nation, the policeman of the world, in the name of democracy (or rather profit). As a social model, capitalism has imposed the law of unlimited exploitation. Democracy is ever more perceived as the right to do what one wants, even at the expense of others.
- Russia has the totalitarian nostalgia of its past empire, whether under the tsars or the soviet regime.
- Turkey is building a strong regime in the name of populism.
- Iran is ruled in the name of so-called religious doctrine (or rather oppression).
- The narratives of the Emirates and Saudi Arabia focus on wealth.
- Israel uses the pretext of security, in the name of past suffering of its people.
- India acts in the name of Hindu supremacy.

But there is something we forget to notice: all these myths and leading energies are aimed at promoting one's own nation at the cost of dominating others. This means they are all destined to conflict with rival powers, which also aim at domination for their own interests – and therefore our myths are doomed to fail miserably. None of them are able to provide harmony. They are paths of (self-)destruction. And they need to be revised and readjusted into creative and life-bringing projects and visions.

They are also all tainted with a false understanding of freedom. The myth of freedom, understood in its narrowest sense – pure individualism – has intoxicated our spirits, generating illusory

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passions and greed for more. We are almost all tacitly on the same track, competing one with another for power in order to be in the top positions of the leading empire. Confrontation lurks as the permanent hidden parameter. What a blindness and ignorance that can only bring conflict and war and destruction. How can there be any good in a path that brings about our own annihilation?

Yet there is an alternative. This is revealed by all humanistic teachings and deep philosophies and spirituality that aim at collective wellbeing and truth. It is found through serious and free introspection into the laws of life.

What is life about? What is its main meaning, its main priority?

- Is it competition and confrontation?
- Is it cooperation and solidarity-mutuality? (i.e. reciprocal relationships where we care for one another and work together for everyone to enjoy the mystery of life)
- Is it power for me alone?
- Is it harmony in a quality of the present instant that brings joy and peace, here and now?
- Is life a business in which one has to overcome their neighbours?
- Is life a precious gift in which we have already won the jewel of experiencing the most mysterious, mind-blowing, extraordinary reality?

I believe we need to reject the violence we have spread everywhere and aspire for a good life based on truth and compassion. I really do not think it utopian to have this higher aspiration. It is a radical realism that embraces not just the most visible aspects of life, but all of them – pragmatic, practical and material aspects, yes, but also the affective, intellectual, artistic and spiritual dimensions. Because these are the ones that matter most, once we have enough to survive.

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As we grow in maturity we discover that we have fewer needs, but each of these remaining needs becomes more important – vital even. Only this qualitative, selective and more focused perspective can bring out the best in us. All other patterns, which are either based on consumption, without discernment, of all possible goods and activities on offer, or which imply any form of competition or exploitation, are doomed to fail; they can bring only havoc, violence, injustice and suffering. Our own suffering. In our society of overabundance where everything seems possible (and we believe should be tried), we have to learn to select the few (even very few) essential priorities that truly matter because of their deeper meaning. Everybody would probably agree in principle with this evidence.

The question is very simple: Do you want to be happy, sharing with others? Or do you want to have more stuff, even at the expense of your own peace? Put in these terms, it's easy to answer.

A philosophical or spiritual perspective

The question above seems so simple that it seems almost ridiculous or indecent to ask it. Yet it reveals the sharp conflict between two models of society we are confronted with. These models are also based on diverging personal perceptions of reality; they are:

- 1) the conventional model, based on practicalities; it focuses on immediate individual pleasure, comfort and advantages, without much thought for the wider context
- 2) the spiritual model, based on a wider perception of the meaning of life, which also integrates the invisible aspects: qualities such as justice, equity, compassion, joy, peace.

The shift from the former to the latter perception happens when we – first personally, then collectively – discover through our own experience of daily life that life is much broader than what we make it when we consider only (or mainly) the practical issues rather than the deeper content. Perennial philosophy and spirituality teach us

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how to find the way, if we know how to listen to them and use them in our personal research. They help us broaden our general understanding of our destiny, and consider the less visible dimensions, which we finally perceive to matter even more we had imagined.

Either we believe that life is just what we see (i.e. the visible, physical appearance of this world) or we can look further and discover an incredible wealth of unfathomable depth. The paradigm shift from the former to the latter is an essential and meaningful stage in our personal development, fundamentally changing how we live everyday life. Most people agree that life is deeper than just what we see. This means we are called to look for further, deeper meanings. When we agree that we are more than just this body-mind-memory with which we tend to identify, we can make the shift more easily. For we *are* more than this narrow envelope – broader than this beautiful, restricted shell that accompanies us everywhere we go.

We know very well that we have a spirit that cannot be located physically in one single part of our body but which animates us as a whole – in our feelings, perceptions, interpretations and decisions. This inner spirit is the voice that guides us and distinguishes us, one from another, precisely by the way we let it guide us in an inspiring and creative way, or repress it with useful but narrow rational thinking.

We need to learn how to use our right brain, which provides us with a broader encompassing vision. In contrast, our left brain is more rational, which is of course very useful when we need to find some order in our world view – as long it reorders creatively rather than repressing our deeper intuitions. And most importantly, we need to stop being afraid of life as an unknown adventure and discovery of all we do not know so far.

The two world orders I mentioned (the pragmatic and the spiritual) are not separate – they co-inhabit our daily life experience. Yet they

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are also the fruits of antagonistic perceptions of reality. The two models contrast as follows:

- 1) The conventional materialist world order (business as usual) is the fruit of a perception of our own person reduced to a strictly individual body that has to act in its own interests. We can be kind to our neighbour, but there is no reason why we should not use all means available to try and live better than him or her. The point of reference is me, myself, principally and exclusively.
- 2) When we retain materiality but add a spiritual dimension, we encompass all aspects of practical daily life. This is the fruit of a perception that sees the continuity between people and all sentient beings; even the whole universe. The universe is understood as a system that involves every part; its evolution as a whole depends on the parts, on how the universe feeds them, and on how much these many parts consciously contribute to transforming the whole. In this vision we are no longer individuals, but participants. Our point of reference is the whole, and how the parts are integrated.

The shift from the one to the next happens when we, as free persons, discover that the latter model is much more adequate than the former. It happens more practically when we see that our way of thinking about our own lives as personal projects, in which we act and counter-act, is very primitive and incomplete. We come to understand that we are not the principal actors but rather the recipients of a form of life energy that happens in us and animates us. This helps us become participants, instead of takers.

This is not an impoverished life of struggle, but one of generous abundance. Everything is freely given: life, air, relationships – even food and water, respect, help, compassion, etc. We just have to participate fully and work with the “system” (the universe). The seasons grow food, nature provides the necessary materials for basic protection, the community supports our attempts to get education and training, we have ceaseless opportunities to interact with others. Life

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in this second perception is not something imposed upon resistive or antagonistic surroundings; it is just free, willing participation in the dynamic creativity of a generous whole. Of course not everything is given without our participation; we need to contribute, to work hard, to give some personal energy and creativity to make the whole work properly. But this is precisely what makes life so fascinating.

This is a huge shift from the mechanical model (individual control) to the more meaningful model (free participation). Perennial philosophy and general spirituality can facilitate our breakthrough from the former to the latter. They help us break down the false image and inner resistance that prevent us from seeing and participating. We need that insight, turn-around, revelation, enlightenment, conversion – call it what you will – when we say: “Aha, I see! This is how things work!”

It is important to understand that the role of perennial philosophy and spirituality is not to control our moral progress – nor to dictate our beliefs. But it *can* help us to understand the laws of life, perhaps show us a path of liberation or wisdom that our ancestors experienced, and show us ways to fit more harmoniously into the wider universe, so that our own happiness is not in conflict with the happiness of others. We remain free to apply this wisdom or resist it. This is our choice. But why would we reject a wider understanding that brings us into better harmony with the whole?

This inherited wisdom cannot do more than inspire us, because our human experience cannot be fostered from above – it can only happen in the innermost core of our being. Enlightenment cannot be taught, only experienced, since it’s an exclusively personal experience. It cannot be forced, even at the point of a gun.

And this is the deep mystery of life. It is our own responsibility to rediscover the new anthropology, the vision that will lead us. Of course it cannot be taught, but we can listen to our elders and let them guide us; we can support each other in our common quest, sharing what we discover. It is not about answering every question

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and ticking all the boxes. It is just about searching for the meaning of life. What is life about?

All deep forms of spirituality have shown that the path is not a struggle for control and domination but a practice of simplicity, of letting go inadequate desires in order to be truly free and discover the unknown. It is not about promoting our small, individual ego. The ego does have some importance in the way we interact with others; we need to have consistency and to form a whole that can behave responsibly and autonomously. But it is not all that we are. Our being is much more than this narrow ego that imprisons as much as protects us. Besides the ego, we also have a deeper Self that animates us, brings us life and inspires us – in every instant.

The ego acts in the world, and the Self in ourselves. Ego and Self are not separate; they work together and express themselves in the material as well as spiritual dimensions of life. We remain incarnated beings, but there is more to us than just mere practicalities. More than just what we can see. As Rabindranath Tagore wrote (originally only in the masculine form!): “[Wo]man is setting out to satisfy needs that mean more to [her/]him than simply nourishment and clothing. [S]he is embarking on a rediscovery of [her/]himself. The history of [wo]man is that of [her/]his voyage toward the unknown, in the search for the realisation of [her/]his immortal Self, of [her/]his Soul.” There is nothing to conquer, because everything is given. We just have to open our eyes and see it, open our arms and welcome it, to share this incredible quality. So let’s learn together.

Once we see this alternative perspective of a further dimension in life, we cannot avoid seeing that life is much more than what we have made of it so far. Then, together, we can start to focus on what truly matters most – this mysterious quality life has, just as an experience in its own right. We feel called to build a way of living together based on inclusiveness and cooperation; life now appears in a very different light.

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The Chinese and American paradigms described above appear now very small, very reductionist, as illusions of the path, misleading false dreams we no longer want to follow. Here and now opens the unsuspected door of a new future. This is the path we already practice with our loved ones, with our family, our friends. Why not extend it to further neighbours, if it brings joy, peace and wellbeing? Once we see this new door, we can build a new narrative, a new vision of life based on its true essence, or the search for it, and not on false scenarios or ways of grabbing more than our neighbour.

Three necessary transformations in attitude

If we accept the need for a new attitude, for a radically new way of life, we may describe this transformation as three main attitude changes. We will come back to this important step of evolution in the chapter about our relationship with truth (chapter 5). But to summarise, for now, the changes are:

- 1) **Simplicity-humility-listening:** First, we must detach from any superfluous need or action. Simplicity is the path to make our way of life more straightforward, getting rid of anything we do not need. It is a form of freedom. Clearing away the superfluous allows us to perceive the essential. Now we can better see what matters and be more attentive to what happens to us. As we learn to listen better, our awareness grows – with no unnecessary burden weighing it down. At the same time, we also approach a deeper form of humility. No longer hiding behind false derivatives, we can better discern our own limits, opening to the unknown or complementary. This is a purification of our way of life; we reduce our life conditions to a minimum (the restricted essentials that matter most) in order to allow our environment (natural and social) to communicate with and inspire us.
- 2) **Inclusiveness-adaptation-harmony:** Following the stage of simplification, we become aware of our own limits, then open to others and discover what true complementarity is. We become

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keen to learn new ways. We practise inclusiveness because it opens us up to diversity and enriches our lives. We learn to adapt, rather than imposing our own ways. We especially need to adapt to the laws of life and nature, which will bring us into harmony with our environment.

- 3) **Solidarity-mutuality:** We learn next to develop reciprocal relationships with others – to nurture equity and balance in our relationships. When there is as much quality flowing one way as the other, both partners are equally enriched, even if differently. We become members of the same community and start to form a more cohesive body, in which each of us plays a unique and irreplaceable role. Not only do we become responsible for the wellbeing of each other, but the whole community that forms in this way is also in charge of caring for each of us.

These three main transformations do not happen in a second. They are progressive, feeding and supporting each other.

Principle 8: insight

A deep shift happens in our heart-mind when we discover that living together is not an individual struggle to satisfy our own egocentric interests, but free participation in the dynamic of the whole (the community, the universe). This insight reveals something essential about the true meaning of life and transforms the way we live our everyday life, in terms of: 1) simplicity-humility-listening; 2) inclusiveness-adaptation-harmony; and 3) solidarity-mutuality.

09 - A new understanding of identity

It is striking to observe how many aspects of our activities, choices and aspirations are more or less directly linked with how we define or express our personal or collective identity. The coherence of the

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group to which we belong socially – whether defined by geography, class, race, religion, profession, or any activity or leisure we practise – is, in large part, related to the idea or definition of our own identity or self-image.

And most of the conflicting situations we experience in our personal life, or more generally at the level of social groups or nations, are mainly the consequence of affirmation or conflict of identities. This is probably because we feel uncertain about who we are and have a need to feel confirmed and clearly seen and recognised, even in our own eyes. We believe that identity, when clearly defined, tells us who we are and shows it to others.

It is also fascinating to notice how the three main attitude transformations needed invite us to fundamentally rediscover a very different understanding and practice of what identity means for us. This contrasts with our usual understanding of identity as a clear, well-defined image of ourselves.

Sociology shows that we tend to define our identity, whether personal or collective, not as something existing by itself, depending essentially on our own nature – but rather in contrast and opposition to what we believe or imagine others are. This means that our identity is not defined independently, but rather by the way we set the limits of our social group, and by the ways this group perceives itself as different from others. For this reason, our identity is usually based on the notions of “us and them”. We use ourselves as the main point of reference in this comparison, and as a model of a superior order. The meaning we give to our identity serves mainly to justify our pretended superiority. The definition of who we are becomes very simplistic and monolithic; it has to include most people who are inside the fence and exclude all the others outside the fence. It’s inevitably a kind of rough caricature, or a solid, immovable, rigid block, which turns quickly into shackles.

When tribes, clans, races, nations, classes, and so on, define themselves in contrast to others, they create a fictitious opposition

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between the “us”, inside the group, and the others, outside the group. Identity then leads to exclusion and opposition, or outright conflict between the interior (us) and the exterior (them).

What is a race?

If you travel to remote mountain areas, especially high altitude valleys that are cut off from contact with the wider world for many months of the year, because of snow, or simply isolated by topography, you will notice how much the local people resemble each other. The same is true if you travel to remote islands where people live in consistent isolation. They all seem like brothers and sisters, as if born of the same parents. This is precisely what biogeography studies: how much the isolation of a species generates internal similarity (whether human, animal or vegetal), due to limited variety in the genetic pool of characteristics, from the lack of contact with external agents.

More frequent exchanges with the outer world would regularly add diversity to this pool, but in the absence of this, the local genes in the reduced pool combine with very similar genes, again and again, so that characteristics are reinforced instead of diversified. And probably most adaptations of these common genes to local climatic or topographic conditions will go in similar directions: activities such as fishing will eventually improve the resistance of the species to water. And the low diversity of this pool of genetic characters will help reinforce the efficiency of this evolution. Most of the inhabitants will have a characteristic nose, the same colour of hair or eyes, or longer arms to better pull out the nets.

If you live near the northern polar circle (e.g. in Norway), your skin and hair will not have to protect you against strong radiation from the sun. This means they will not have to develop dark pigments of protection, and your skin will probably be very light in colour; your hair will probably be blond. The girlfriend you meet, who lives in the same town and who you might marry, will probably share these

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characteristics. Note that you will have more opportunities to meet her than someone very different – you both live in the same place, speak the same language, were educated in the same culture, share the same services, schools, pubs, clubs, etc. This increased probability of local encounter becomes even more convincing if we place my example in the past, at a time where locomotion and mobility were not yet very developed. Your children will then most probably also have light skin and blond hair. The amazing thing is that, in a certain way, you and your girlfriend have “started” a new specific race of fair-skinned and blond people, with some additional characteristics you both share. Your children will be similar to both adults: similar head shape, similar smile, similar voice, etc. If your children and grandchildren continue to intermarry inside the small genetic pool of your town, your descendants will progressively present the kind of similarities noticeable in the people you could have visited in the remote valleys or islands I mentioned above.

Now, it is also evident that you can break this form of relative uniformity by introducing new genes, for instance from southern Europe where you may travel for holidays. For instance, if you travelled to another isolated village, say in southern Italy (at the time when it was still isolated), your children might meet a boyfriend or girlfriend from this region. Let’s simplify our example by ignoring the role of dominant and recessive genes in traditional genetics. In mixing the respective genetic pools of these two different but remote places, your children generate a crossbreed that might have dark hair but blue eyes, or a darker skin and short nose. With the help of the many coming future generations, you will “create” a new race that combines genes from northern Norway with genes from southern Italy. This so-called new race will still be what we call a white race, although no longer fully Norwegian nor Italian. By the colour of their skin, the descendants of this new race will still contrast strongly with people born in Africa or China, say, and yet they will also be (slightly) different from northern Norwegians in the colour of their hair.

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This very simplistic example asks us to consider exactly what a race is; what defines or delimits it. We understand that local intermarriage reinforces local genes and reduces the chance of diverse characteristics in the individuals who can be born. We also know that local climatic conditions, traditions or activities will contribute to reinforcing favourable characteristics. This is what Darwin used to call “survival of the fittest”; not because this “fittest” is superior and wants to dominate, but simply because it is better adapted to local conditions and thus has more chance of surviving longer and breeding. On the other hand, any new genes imported through external exchange will bring new characteristics. The combinations are infinite and there is a continuous spectrum of variation between the numerous genetic characters. This means that races, as we understand them, are only patterns; they rarely exist purely but combine with one another indefinitely. There are no clear limits between pools of characters, and more than a few of these pools cannot be delimited from each other; there is simply continuity between many poles of influence.

What defines a tribe, social group or race?

Now we have to extend this narrow understanding of race as a genetic factor, because physical differences and appearances are soon interpreted in cultural and social terms, when a group of people of similar profile form together as a social group in contrast with another. Race, in its physical form, is then loaded with social and cultural content. This is where we come to “us and them”. We are the dark-skinned and they are the fair-skinned. Most tribes have traditionally called themselves “the people”, “the humans”, or something similar, affirming to represent the prototype or paradigm of what it is to be human.

The further step, “the race”, although badly delimited (due to all the possible intermediary combinations), becomes a common reference to define a limit between “us” and “them”. Soon this new identity

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will be loaded with imaginary values that define new hierarchies. “We are better than them.” And obviously nothing can prove this; it is just a belief, or rather a make-belief.

The false divide and the erroneous justifying twist

Now at last comes the central knot: The self-declared superiority of any artificially delimited, self-declared group, is not justified by any real superiority over others, but only by the myth the group has created to evaluate and glorify itself. The myth is flexible, and freely elaborated to meet the objectives of the group, especially its privileges or intentions of domination. The myth is used to justify domination attempts, which would not be “acceptable” without the myth – especially when this domination is based on oppression, pure force or better weapons, rather than some effective cultural superiority.

Europeans have often declared themselves superior to black people to justify the conquest of southern continents and, more than anything else, their own practice of slavery, which is in reality pure oppression and cruelty. The so-called superiority of the white race over black people did not cause slavery; actually the oppressor, supported by better weapons and better ships, used its self-declared superiority to justify slavery. Promoting slavery led to the false discourse. The sad thing is that many people believed, and still believe, this complete nonsense.

We see here that the definition of a race relies on two illusions: on the one hand, false delimitation of a group that has no clear characteristics, no well-drawn limits; and on the other hand a twist of discourse that tries to demonstrate a fictive superiority.

The false divide is based on erroneous and simplistic premises, and is very reductionist. By analogy, the first living cells were unicellular beings, but evolution has progressively introduced ever more complexity, a potential for complementarity of different cells that

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allows better performance. Our complex human body has evolved to contain different organs that fulfil special functions – because they are different – and provide necessary services. A social group that defines itself by its homogeneity, reduced to a few common characteristics, goes against this evolution that leads to complementarity and stops it, because it refuses to accept diversity and complexity. Perceiving one's own group identity as well-defined, permanent and rigid is a form of regression – it denies the diversity of the many components. Such a social group can only evolve and mature if it accepts that identity is not monolithic but complex, diversified and mobile. More on this later.

The erroneous justifying twist or inversion that opposes diverse identities and claims superiority does not reflect any objective reality, either. It is pure regression into a false mythology. The mythology is false because it does not help the group to progress. It generates isolation by rejecting others as well as encouraging conflict with these others.

Through this long yet simplified explanation, I've tried to show that the concept of race or collective identity is extremely difficult to define, even though, objectively, differences of race do exist. There is continuity in the infinite possible combinations of all genes and cultural characters, which create as many crossbreeds as possible. We're all hybrids. This is "miscegenation".

Races cannot be defined as pools of identical characteristics, but as perceivable poles of influence with some dominant tendencies, like the forces of a magnetic field that combine and organise the elements without defining their intrinsic nature. And this magnetic field combines elements that are as much cultural as genetic. Is this not fabulous?

What I have said here about race also applies to tribes, clans, social classes, professional corporations, religious beliefs, etc. – any expression we use as a sign of belonging. We tend to search for identity as if it were a set of ready-made clothes we could put on. But

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seeking refuge behind a fictive image or disguise is the source of most conflicts we can observe around us, in personal relationships as well as between classes, races and nations. It is hard to identify without imprisoning oneself in a kind rigid, limiting armour.

Our twisted relationship with others suffers from our self-definition – from any clear divide that separates us from them. We no longer form one single humanity, but split into small groups and clans. Not only do we tend to believe in our own integrity and superiority as a clan or group, we also project our own shadow side onto the other and make him/her the cause of all evils, the scapegoat for our own failures. Past and recent history is full of these twisted projections: Jews, gypsies, blacks, indigenous people, refugees or simply strangers play the roles of scapegoats, exempting us from seeing and facing our own flaws, crimes and shadows. Scapegoats sacrificed to our own illusions.

Whether we oppose our own image to the image we have forged of others or whether we cannot grasp who we truly are, it is all about the twists of our identity. Who am I? Who are we collectively as a community? These metaphysical questions are central to the way we live our lives, so it's a priority to handle them well – to liberate our thinking from false premises.

In a nutshell: we do not need to identify with common characteristics in order to belong to a given community. We may share some common points of interest or similarities, but we may also develop relationships because we are different. Similarities are no more useful for connection than differences. Life is mobile, made up of diversity and continuity between different poles of influence. This is its most precious wealth.

What is identity?

When we look more closely at the nature of identity (the many elements in the magnetic field), we see that it contains many partial aspects that never stop evolving and changing – for the simple reason

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that our whole personal existence is one long evolution of growth, adaptation and maturity. Our identity evolves, often changing deeply. Think of what you were as a kid. There is an immense contrast between your childish identity and the one you believe in now, as an adult. And do you even know, with any clarity, who you are? No!

To illustrate the many elements that combine to form our identity, we can describe ourself as a network of components: we are a body, a mind, a memory, an intellect, an emotive and sense system, an ego, a persona, a soul, a spirit, a consciousness, etc. But we are also produced by external influences: our genes, our culture, our language, our social class, our religion, our political belonging, the result of many external conditions and events ... And our past has forged us through a context, experiences, perceptions, reactions, etc. Our identity is far from simple. It is a complex body of diverse and mobile components, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes complementary, always combined in complex relationships.

This is not the place for a deep investigation of identity, but there are seven dimensions of identity that I believe essential. These dimensions cohabit, presenting different aspects of our person. They do not compete in any way. Basically, they are as follows:

- 1) **Essence:** This is our original source of being, the subtle energy that keeps us alive, even before we became an incarnated being. As the koan asks: what was your original face before your parents were born? Our essence is our true Self.
- 2) **Land:** The place where we were born and where we grew up has shaped us in a way we too often ignore. The land (country) is the true nourishment that gives us our shape and content. It is more than the land – it is all that is connected with it, has shaped it and has shaped us.
- 3) **Substance:** We have a personal physical body with characteristics inherited from ancestors through genetics. But substance is not only material. It is nourished by our heritage,

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culture, language, religion, and even our mythology about ourselves. It is also made of many emotions, perceptions and experiences that will form our body and our personality through the different stages of our life.

- 4) **Persona:** The persona or ego is necessary, to define and protect the person we are – but it's only an envelope, a shell or vehicle that helps us navigate in the external world. This persona is made up of all the characteristics that define us in the eyes of others, or relate to our status or role in society: name, gender, profession, etc. The persona is only an envelope – not content.
- 5) **Form:** Everything we are needs to find a way to integrate into the surrounding context, and a form of expression so we can be perceived by others. This is the creative aspect of life; we have to invent a suitable form of expression, choice or action. But the expression is only the external sign, not the essence.
- 6) **Consciousness:** Consciousness is probably what counts most is the way we perceive the world and life – how we understand ourselves in context; how we want to relate to our environment. It means observation, deep listening, discernment, interpretation, etc. Our consciousness grows when we focus on our search for truth and authenticity. This requires us to dismantle our illusions, to detach from expectations or ready-made representations. When we discard all that is illusory or superfluous, we reach the core of our being.
- 7) **Humanity:** This seems to be the last stage of our belonging; we fully participate in a wider community that, unlike a tribe, has no limits – no forms of rejection or exclusion. It includes all dimensions of life. We abandon our individual shell and become a participant in the whole, as described earlier. This is where we discover our true humanity, experience our belonging to an unlimited network of life that includes not only all human beings but also all sentient beings (animals and plants) and even rocks and planets and galaxies. The infinite connection might be

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impossible to grasp mentally, but this feeling and awareness of belonging to the wider universe is an essential life experience; it deeply transforms the way we live. And yet, despite this universal character of our experience, we can only live it in a given place, with given neighbours, in a given culture, etc. It is at the same time universal (humanity) and peculiar (here and now).

When we discover that our identity is a form of search for truth and being, rather than any given definition or status, we see how it constantly changes; it cannot be imprisoned in concepts. This realisation frees us to live a true life – to participate fully.

The obvious process of hybridisation

Because identity is not a rigid block but is made up of unlimited characteristics, it relies on continuous ranges of infinite combination. And the further we go from our original place of birth, the more we meet people who are different, and the more we open up to diversity, integrating aspects that are brought to us from elsewhere. As our mobility evolves, it continually challenges the rigid definition of identity.

As I said, we are all crossbreeds and hybrids. We have to rediscover the continuity that exists between us, marrying our similarities and differences. Miscegenation is not only biological; in fact, it is mainly cultural and spiritual. Hybridisation is the process of enrichment that links us all together, where exclusiveness is the wall that falsely separates and “protects” us. When we make this process of hybridisation more perceptible, we become more aware of the continuity in diversity. We break down the artificial walls between differences, recognise our own limitations, and call for help from others.

Now, one more point about identity and belonging: when I say that there is no clear delimitation for belonging to a social group, class, race or clan, I do not mean that such groupings are fictions and do

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not exist. The conflicts between different classes, races and social groups are all too evident and omnipresent. What I mean is: identification with a particular group, race or class is not very clearly defined, *and* there is a form of continuity between these different groups. This does not deny the existence of the closed paddocks; it just shows they are built on illusions (false myths) and that the conflicts between them are fruits of these same illusions. As soon we accept the continuity or hybridisation between these different characteristics, we considerably weaken the reasons, explanations and opportunities for conflicts. We also weaken the intensity of conflicts and the strength of oppression as we become more aware that what unites us (our common humanity) is stronger than what divides us. Races in all their diversity then become incredible sources of inspiration.

Apartheid, from segregation to contempt or “otherness”

Paradoxically, awareness of the trend towards hybridisation can also reinforce our tendency to apartheid, as a counter-reaction; we often feel threatened by a lack of well-defined identity or belongingness to a clearly delimited social group. Apartheid is a regime stipulating that two categories of people living on the same land be treated differently because of their special identity – defined by race, gender, origin, wealth, social class, religion, etc. This different treatment of the two categories of people, who are in principle equal, can be based on legal rules, decrees, administrative measures, attitudes, simple acts of discrimination or contempt, or intentional ignorance and neglect. Apartheid leads to segregation between these different categories of people.

In one of its strongest expressions, apartheid (this is an Afrikaans word) was practised in South Africa, from the 50s to the 90s, according to legal definitions, rules of enforcement and strict segregation. It was and still is practised in the USA between white and black people, while no longer legally, yet still actively. This is

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especially perpetuated by police practices inherited from the time of slavery, when mobs of black people were considered to be dangerous slaves who had escaped or were rebelling. Police forces were intended to chase black people back to “their place”. They still do today. Apartheid can also be expressed through political decisions and administrative measures (without legal bases), such as occurs in Palestine between people considered Jewish and others considered Palestinian. Other cases of apartheid without segregation are India (discrimination between Hindus and Muslims), or Myanmar (between Buddhists and Rohingyas or other minorities).

In Australia the differential treatment of Indigenous people and white Australians is not validated legally but is the heritage of long practices of domination and even elimination (by killing or forced assimilation). There can be intentional marginalisation and contemptuous practices by political powers and police, especially around differences in opportunities linked with social segregation, and poor access to free expression, health, education or promotion. This is mainly the consequence of a deeply engrained ignorance and contempt for traditional Indigenous cultural values in the eyes of the dominating white culture.

In Europe many categories of people are rejected, whether because they belong to indigenous traditions (Sami, gypsies) or because they are immigrants (foreign workers or refugees). And the list continues without end.

But the significant point is that we all live in some form of apartheid: white only, women only, rich only, Catholic only, etc. We tend to build a wall around our own social group, whatever defines it, because we feel more comfortable living in a setting we know well, which offers no surprise. We live in isolated clusters; a divided society in which one cluster does not communicate with the other. Each group can develop its own fiction, discourse or “truth”, inside protected walls that blind it to the wider truth. Differences overrun complementarity, and cohesion is lost; we stop searching for wider

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community, focusing only on the private interest of our small cluster. Or we wish for power. The high degree of division often remains hidden – and the missing quality of unity remains unnoticed. We remain “linked” by the same public services, the same market and the same political system, which attempt to hide our deep division as a community.

As these diverse examples of apartheid and division show, apartheid doesn't need to be clear and formalised. It can remain rampant or hidden. It can be explained by the dominating group in terms of a lack of skills or flawed qualities among people discriminated against, or just in terms of the “other”, the one who is “wrong”. Once again, this discourse is not an explanation; it's an attempt to justify self-enclosure, injustice and inequality, exploitation, or simply otherness, when discriminated-against people become the vilified other, the exploited class, the scapegoat.

This is why inclusiveness is so important: it doesn't make differences a reason for segregation, but a reason for better integration and belonging, in the name of complementarity.

Principle 9: identity

Identity is not a ready-made, monolithic pattern but a complex combination of many aspects of all types, fostered by hybridised influences, based as much on differences as on similarities. Identity never stops evolving and generating personal transformation. It calls for inclusiveness (the opposite of apartheid), allowing everyone to be valued for who they are and to be enriched by what the others contribute.

10 - Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation

A new form of dialogue based on complementarity

Once our identity has broken open, like an egg that hatches, we truly become able to relate to the other. He or she is no longer a threat but a fascination, bringing us what we ignore and what we miss the most. Differences no longer trigger fear but become opportunities for enrichment. When we realise that diversity can open our minds and hearts, bringing light and truth, we next need to learn how to have a dialogue with these others.

Dialogue is not about justifying one's own stand or point of view against what others affirm. It's precisely the contrary – we forget about our own standpoint and completely enter the world of the other, in order to understand him or her from the inside. This does not negate our own nature but is a letting go of who we are; we build a bridge in order to understand the other as he or she is.

Dialogue is made up of observation and listening. Listening is more than just hearing; it means going deeply into what is expressed, and even trying to understand what has not been fully expressed; it means understanding how the other forms his perception, from his own point of view.

When there is true dialogue between a group of people who do not share the same points of view (just because they are not repetitive cogs) and when there is true reciprocal listening, something absolutely mind blowing happens: reality transforms and suddenly widens. When all participants bring their own contributions to the dialogue, another picture⁸ arises by itself, made of the combination of all contributions. It reveals itself to be much wider, and more

8 The quantum physicist David Bohm describes this phenomenon very well in his book: *On Dialogue*, Taylor and Francis Ltd, Routledge, London, 1996. Or <http://www.desertcreekhouse.com.au/texts/texts.html#bohm>.

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complex and complete, than any of the particular contributions. This is a bit like a mosaic or a mandala, which only starts to represent something when all the stones or colours are in place.

Generating this incredible, complex global view is only possible when we accept that no single one of us has the whole truth – together, we contribute to a common faculty for true discernment. We need each person's contribution to reach this point, through a willing, full acceptance of the process of hybridisation, which makes it clear that truth can only appear in plurality, diversity, complementarity and complexity.

But there is something more to this; something essential. It is more than just a few people exchanging their personal opinions and ideas; more than people putting the many stones of a mosaic together. There is more than the participants, because there is a third factor we always forget to mention: Reality! I write Reality with a capital R because it concerns more than just our material environment; it is essentially about a wider ungraspable reality (the hidden part of the iceberg). The question is not whether I am right or you are right. The question is not about our respective opinions and ideas; it is about the third part: Reality. What is Reality? What is life about? What is the meaning of all that? If we present the need for dialogue in this way, it looks completely different. It is not about opinions and persuasion – not about me convincing you to think as I do – it is about discovering Reality together; it is about revelation.

Revelation will be a recurrent dimension of this book. I cannot provide revelation for you. But we can help each other discover it. The dialogue is not about what I see; it is about truth and how we perceive it. We need to open a door onto reality.

In our postmodern age we are so focused on our egocentric selves that we do not see the third part, Reality. We are trapped in disputing one opinion against another. We have forgotten that all this is about reality, and that opinions really do not matter much. True dialogue must not confront opinions but provide the key to revelation; and

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revelation is nothing less than the discovery of Reality as it is, beyond our preconceptions. Dialogue has to break our self-sufficiency, the personal hubris that we believe holds part of the truth. We are not the knowers we think we are; all of us are, in fact, quite ignorant. Truth is out there, out of our touch – especially as long we think we know. Of course we have small glimpses of truth. But, more important, we must learn to be ignorant, on the path to discovery. From knowers, we need to become searchers. When discovery happens, it is the A-Ha moment; it is revelation. We suddenly see what is, as it is. This is the big turn-around of mind. You can call it enlightenment.

The necessary shift is from dialogue about opinions, to dialogue about Reality. This is probably key to the present crisis. We tend to remain caught in our perceptions, as if we make the world, and make reality. We have to learn to adapt to what is given. We have to escape a world of virtuality generated by our lack of direct relationship with nature and the practical world; we have to become aware how much our constant use of computers or social medias or virtual sources participates in building a fiction that can avoid being regularly checked by a direct confrontation with the outer world as it is. Fiction has replaced reality. Our talks, our opinions are the bricks that help us to build the fiction we wish to; and to hide behind the wall of our projections.

It is why this book will propose a search, a quest for truth, for reality. I will write about meaning, about truth, about mystery. A path to the revelation that may come if we open to it.

Once this global view of Reality has opened again and a general picture takes shape (the mosaic), participants may start to debate the nature and content of a possible consensus, which could guide the group into the future, as a community of individuals in mutual solidarity.

The solution is simple

Truth and Reconciliation: the dialogue for peace

In South Africa in the late 90s, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu started the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (report published 1998). The intention was to allow perpetrators and victims from the time of apartheid to reconsider the past, recognising and describing the crimes they had committed or the suffering they had undergone. In the eyes of Mandela and Tutu, the only possible way to get to the core of the problem was through a kind of radical national psychotherapy, allowing each perpetrator to tell the full truth about what they did and each victim to describe their own suffering in the terms she or he wished. Forgiveness, rather than punishment, was promised to the perpetrators.

The process of truth and reconciliation relies on this fragile dimension of forgiveness, since it allows people to tell the whole truth. Generalised forgiveness, on the condition that truth must be told, brings more healing to the community than does partial revenge and punishment against the perpetrators. This is because it gets to the real core of what happened. In contrast, court case arguments by perpetrators are always expressed with the intention of attenuating responsibility and minimising sentences. This means that no true dialogue between perpetrators and victims can occur. Restorative justice, in contrast with punitive justice, allows truth to be told and forgiveness to be given, starting a new era cleansed of past hatred, open to peaceful creativity and harmony.⁹

This is also the path that the Uluru Statement from the Heart¹⁰ proposes, here in Australia. It offers a change to openly recognise how this land was conquered through violating and murdering its

9 Read chapter 6 of volume 1 of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, by Desmond Tutu and collaborators:

<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf>

10 See the text of the Uluru Statement of the Heart:

<https://fromtheheart.com.au/explore-the-uluru-statement/>

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first nations. The Uluru Statement from the Heart describes a path for us to live together harmoniously, on the same Land. Truth is the only way to bring us together, beyond the differences and suffering of the past. We need to see the truth to bring us peace – in our minds, hearts and relationships.

All of us humans actually need to practise a constant, permanent process of Truth and Reconciliation. This will break down the barriers we put up between ill-defined categories of people. It will reopen communication, teaching us to be enriched, instead of frightened, by difference. It will make us more aware of our fragility and humanity – even our real limitations and flaws – and bring true humility. Differences are an opportunity to open up, to discover what we do not know or are not; what the other knows or is. This is the way to rediscover our shared humanity – and to discover what true humanity is. This is the only possible path. It allows us, together, to continually see where we stand and where we have to go. Identity is now the ongoing discovery of one's own essence, in relation with others. This is a demanding requirement – but a pre-condition for our common happiness.

The way to enlightenment

In the process of re-examining identity, and the process of Truth and Reconciliation, we open to reality as it is, instead of projecting our preconceived ideas or privileges onto the surrounding world. The physical and social sciences, philosophy, art and religion have always, despite their own twists and (sometimes powerful) flaws, tried to describe reality and help us learn from it and better adapt to it.

The temptation to twist what we observe and describe it how we wish it to be is strong, whether because what we see is frightening or because it goes against our privileges and comfort. But this turns research into mythical creation, rather than a discovery of what is. Myths then change from symbolic evocations of reality, into twists

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and manipulations. But if we are very passionate about discovering the truth, we will dare to leave our attachments behind and open to truth, whatever it happens to be.

The sciences, philosophy, art and religion are our guides, but they cannot teach us what reality is. They cannot tell us what to believe. Even religion cannot do that, although many believe it does. But these complementary forms of research help open our eyes to the essence of the universe, of life, of our being, of reality. Once we receive their teaching, the ball is in our camp. Only our own experience can truly teach us what our essence is. When we discover it through our own experience, with a free mind, supported by the inspiration of others, liberated from most false premises and twists, we undergo the metanoia that I described earlier. This thorough change of mind and radical turn-around in our way of thinking and living is true enlightenment. Then nothing can ever be as before. Life is simple and beautiful.

But enlightenment is not performance. There is no special glory in it that could be reserved for any selected elite. Everybody can do it. It becomes a reality when we wish for and commit to it. I like to say that it is like going to Timbuktu. This will only happen when we do what is necessary to get there. Then we arrive. There is no miracle. It is just a choice: the choice to commit to it. Yet this is not completely in our own power; it is not something we achieve; it is rather offered to us through the trust that it will be given and that we may arrive there – because Timbuktu is a free gift. So, let's invent this new future together.

We're a bit like caterpillars. Our genes say that we are meant to transform into butterflies. But there is a major difference between caterpillars and humans. Caterpillars have no choice – at least it seems so – but to become butterflies, whereas we have free will. Our DNA certainly indicates this potential, but we remain free to walk this path or not. If we want to, we can remain caterpillars, crawling in search of food and egocentric pleasure. Or we can choose

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transformation, which is our true vocation and the path of liberation. But if we choose this more demanding path, then we must commit to the search for truth, do what is necessary (as with the trip to Timbuktu), and undergo the fundamental change of mind that is the key to discovering and experiencing our true essence. This is far more demanding, but also far richer.

The choice is yours!

If you wish, we can try to discover this new path together – through better dialogue, through Truth and Reconciliation, through accepting hybridisation. We can discard our illusions and false beliefs, all our projections onto the world; we can resist the false beliefs of conventional wisdom and oppose their impact on our surroundings. And we need to replace them with direct observations and personal experiences of life, of its true nature. Let's open our eyes and, maybe for the first time in our lives, try to see truly – to see life as it is; a fascinating, inexhaustible process. Life is not the false twists of our own representations, taught to us by advertising and fashion, by fictive talk aimed at economic interests, or pure cynicism, by our falsely defined identities, by conflicting relationships with others.

And let's also talk with others, especially when we do not agree, and learn to recognise who the other is, in an inclusive move towards unity. Let's practise true dialogue, in a spirit of Truth and Reconciliation, in the terms described by Bohm, daily and constantly. Let's rediscover the path of liberation that leads to an authentic experience of life.

Principle 10: Truth and reconciliation (dialogue)

In our local communities and diverse social groups, we need to practise an ongoing dialogue, examining truth and reconciliation. We need to stay aware of our own limits, of the rich potentials of living together, and of what threatens the fragile unity that holds us together.

The solution is simple

The core of the crisis in a nutshell

Now that we've examined my 10 main principles, let's bring them together to summarise the main aspects of our present situation and try to grasp its underlying cause – the main root of the rampant destruction we see all around us.

As described above, we live in a culture focused on overproduction, overconsumption and profit. This is the main trend of modern Western society, which sadly leads our common evolution as a species. Market and technology are the two main forces guiding this evolution; we obey them because they are the main practical means we use to foster our present and our future. Market leads our preferences and choices; technology guides our sense of meaning and purpose in very pragmatic ways. In using these two main tools and giving them priority, we believe we are powerful enough and free enough – as individuals or small social clusters – to manage our context and to get what we want for our own pleasure and comfort. In this way, we have become (mainly) takers. We take what we want without caring how it impacts our environment. We take and take, exhausting nature and its resources, overloading it with our wastes.

This is precisely the deep conflict that climate change reveals to us. It presents a mirror in which we can suddenly discover our own image, the profile of our main characteristics, and see our own devious behaviours reflected back at us. It is a shock – and an opportunity to learn. If we are ready, we'll see things clearly: how we've become self-centred takers, caring mainly for our own interests, neglecting the context that nourishes us. This is true with nature, which we plunder and destroy. It is also true of our human community, which we use for our own purposes, not considering how it can continue to provide all that it does when we only exploit it.

This demonstrates how we live in a linear way when we focus on self-centred greed. The linear way is: nature produces, we consume, and we reject our wastes, which accumulate. We do nothing to ensure

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that our resources are renewed, that our wastes are absorbed, that our activities enrich our surroundings. We give no thought to feeding back nature as it feeds us. In a similar way, our community raises us, educates us, offers us many possibilities for sustenance and expression. We use these opportunities but feel no responsibility to give back what we have received so generously. Economically or financially, we observe the same process. Poorer nations provide our natural resources (fuel, minerals, wood, food), and buy our products – but the strong imbalance of our exchanges make them ever poorer and us ever richer. Wealth predominantly circulates one way. We exhaust, and even slowly kill, the goose with the golden eggs.

In stark contrast with our behaviour, nature proceeds in cycles, with unlimited outflowing generosity. Everything in nature works in circular ways, feeding the many sources that provide everything. Abundance, cooperation, diversity, complementarity, generosity, sustainability and circularity are the main laws guiding the process: life, air, water and food are pure gifts accessible to all, free of charge. This is how wildlife can survive: they find everything they need in nature. And this is true for humans too. But we do not want to see this obvious fact; we are blind to nature's generosity and circular flow. As takers, we have turned the process of abundance and generosity into a reverse venture of competition, exploitation and domination. We live against the laws of nature, the flow of life. No wonder we're in trouble.

Climate change, the growing gap between poor and rich, decaying biodiversity, imbalances in the main natural equilibriums, our collapsing democracy and more show us that we urgently need to change our mindset. Not just our opinion, but the entire way we think, live and relate to one another. For this necessary change of mind, we have to undergo a deep mental and spiritual mutation, from an egocentric focus centred on our individual desires to a general perception of us and our fellow sentient beings as a wide human and living community where each one depends on the others.

The solution is simple

Instead of thinking in linear ways (I take what I can), we have to learn to think in circular ways (how do I give back what I have received so generously). We have to learn to perceive and understand our society (or our universe) as one single body of many organs that need each other to survive and thrive. We need to learn that our own wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of our community. This means we have to feed it back with all we have, in order to maintain its liveliness and continue to receive from it what we all need. We need to nourish what nourishes us. If life is truly based on generosity, we have to practise this same generosity one with another. If it is true that relationships matter more than stuff, that the quality of the way we live together defines the quality and breadth of what we can experience, then it becomes evident we have to drastically change the way we live together. We do not truly live together nowadays; we just live side by side and try to take advantage of what our surroundings and the others can provide. Of course we can also be kind and take care of our relatives; and we do. But we rarely try to understand how our community functions as a whole and how it needs us to take on responsibilities for the whole.

As I described earlier, relationships matter more than what we can accumulate. Most goods and services are part of the Commons, and we have to manage them carefully to ensure they remain accessible to all and are not appropriated by single dominant actors for their own advantage. We need to care for the community as a whole – a whole we too often forget to consider or even to be aware of.

This is a huge shift I describe here. It's pretty simple in its essence and spirit: it's just about care and attention for our neighbours, and commitment to the harmony of the whole community. Care and attention are where we have to put our energy. Everybody can do that. But it is very demanding because it requires that we shift from our linear egocentric modes to circular hetero-centric (or world-centric) all-encompassing modes.

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I believe that the major expanding attraction of entertainment so many practise today (computer, social media, videos, games) leads us in the opposite direction of true life. We sit on the sofa looking for distraction in ready-made exhibitions of talk and images, instead of experiencing life directly on our own skin as an all-surprising endeavour. If it is truly urgent that we shift from narrow, self-centred, navel-gazing self-obsession to a broader and compassionate community understanding, then we need to stop looking for entertainment. We must search for the meaning of life and for what matters most for us as a community, as a real social body.

We urgently need to develop a new vision of where we want to go together, how we want to live together, how we may communicate together and listen to one another, and how to enter into dialogue and find the best possible consensus. This consensus will probably never be complete nor perfect, but it will be the best we can achieve. We need to escape our loneliness and disempowerment in which market and technology have imprisoned us and in which blind power (totalitarianism) or illusion (fake news and false myths) have driven us. How many people are stuck at home watching a screen (computer, TV, phone) and trying desperately to connect with others through these artificial means? These devices become tools to exploit us (through manipulation, bullying, data exploitation). We are better off getting directly in touch with people; with life and its unforeseeable surprises and riches. Life is not a problem to solve or a struggle to win, but a mysterious and sacred process that helps us to evolve and grasp deeper truth, whatever this may mean for each of us.

I have an ambitious aim with this book: to propose a strategy for how we can reach consensus on a shared vision, in the next few years. This strategy will (of course) be far from perfect, but at least it will propose and illustrate a very concrete path for us to experiment with.

I will also explain why I believe this change is worthwhile and why it should be handled seriously; and which priorities should lead us on

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this path of liberation. The core of the problem is our disempowerment – and our lack of vision as to how we can undergo this radical transformation – rather than simply our selfishness. I believe that selfishness and greed are only default settings, onto which we fall back on (or withdraw into) when we feel lost, disempowered or threatened. That’s why, in the second part of this book, I will propose a path in the search for meaning; the real core of our distress is our lack of vision and consciousness. We no longer know where we’re going, because there’s so much on offer (including plenty of rubbish) and so little trustworthy guidance for our choices. The choices remain ours, but we need to learn how to choose, and especially, between which alternatives to choose.

But enough for now of general principles. Let’s see how this can be done practically.

Approach in 10 principles

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**PART 1:
THE STRATEGY**

Chapter 2: The strategy in 40 points

After the long introduction, which presented the main arguments and general aspects of our approach bottom-up, I will now describe the strategy itself. I have chosen to do so in 40 short sketches that address the general spirit of my approach. Be aware that this is not a ready-made recipe to be applied systematically. On the contrary, it is only a rough draft to show how the solution could apply in general terms. It is an illustration that should be discussed and adapted, even fundamentally modified, by the local actors (us). Of course, to reach the right aim, we should nevertheless keep in mind the main objectives of the process: a new anthropology, simplicity and self-limitation, local development, equity, harmony with nature and society, care, sharing, control over economic forces, emphasis on relationships, inclusiveness, empowerment, circularity, and so on.

Here is the description in 40 points. There will be some repetition of what has been said in the introduction; these main, essential aspects now need to be situated in context.

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Climate change calls for new ways of living

01 – The tipping point

Today we are coming near the tipping point where the whole natural system and climate may collapse and generate terrible cataclysms. The whole equilibrium of nature is under threat.

The current economic system is also threatening our wellbeing, because it is mainly based on speculation, exploitation and competition. It excludes the poor and the weak, while it makes the rich ever richer and the powerful ever more noxious.

Totalitarian regimes (Scylla) are on the rise, and the practice of democracy is severely endangered. Discourses (Charybdis) present only what suits the talker; they invent fiction, which is hard to counter, being based on lies and prestige.

We urgently need to act, in order to avoid the tipping point, so that we can survive. This is a question of life and death.

02 – A new way of living

Climate change is not a problem that can be fixed by even the most sophisticated technical measures. It is simply a sign that our modern way of life is completely out of tune – and even in sharp conflict with – our natural and social surroundings. We have to get the message before it's too late.

The solution is a radical change in the way we live, think, produce, consume, transport ... and understand life. And, for Westerners and most privileged people, a drastic reduction in our standard of living.

03 – The laws of nature

Climate change is principally an expression of our inability to adapt to the rhythms of nature and obey the laws of the universe (natural cycles, biodiversity, natural equilibrium, systemic interdependence of species, abundance, complementarity and cooperation). It is the consequence of an excessive consumption of resources. They are being used more quickly than nature can renew them, with excessive waste produced faster than nature can absorb and recycle it.

We urgently need to understand that nature dictates the character of her processes and rhythms – not us. We must learn to respect these processes and rhythms and adapt to them.

04 – (In)equity

This striking imbalance is mainly generated by 12% of the world's population: us, the ordinary people who consume 84% of world wealth. The two-thirds of the world population who live on 2% of world wealth are not to blame.

We are the 12% of people who roughly have a car and a credit card and who live in North America, Europe, Japan or Australia, minus the poor of these countries (about 15% of their population), plus the elites of “poor” countries (the BRICS, the Emirates, India, China and a few more). In total, approximately 1 billion people. Which means that climate change is only the work of a minority! Demographics are not to blame, but wealth and high consumption by a minority.

05 – All in one

Climate change is narrowly linked with the state of our global economy, which is in crisis because it's based on overproduction and extreme competition – both stimulated by its dominant actors to accumulate maximum profit. Better to focus on meeting the basic needs of the whole population, in a radical spirit of equity.

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The collapse of democracy adds to the state of decay, discouraging our communities from taking control of their future in a constructive, meaningful way.

Climate change, economic inequity and democratic degradation are three indissociable aspects of the same crisis.

We are the main actors who have to initiate change

06 – Equity as the first condition

There will be no answer to climate change as long as there is no equity. The actors responsible for causing the damage (overproduction and overconsumption) are living in more protected areas and different parts of the globe to the victims who suffer the consequences of climate change (hurricanes, rising sea levels). The former are not in direct touch with what they provoke. They can't (don't want to) see it. Nowadays the rich, in Western countries such as the US, or in the EU, spend the resources and the poor pay the price in Mali, Bangladesh or the Maldives.

07 – We are the real actors

If, as privileged people, we have generated climate change, we are also able to reverse the process by the same (but opposite) means by which we have produced it. The problem is the solution! We need to drastically reduce our standard of living (our ecological footprint) to make it compatible with Earth's biocapacity (her capacity to provide the necessary resources).¹¹

11 To know more about the ecological footprint and access the data for each country, see Global Footprint Network: <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/>

Nobody else will do this for us: no government, no corporation, no church, no wise leader. We are the main actors because we are the only citizens-workers-consumers. It is our responsibility to start the move towards change now.

08 – We have to initiate the change

Governments cannot initiate the move towards change unless they are totalitarian and want to impose drastic measures; and in any case, these measures would not offer the right solution. Our governments could organise a wide and radical answer to the crisis (as they have in the past for a pandemic or an economic crisis), but they do not have the necessary vision, or the courage to dare to become leaders. They fear losing their electorate, and are prisoners to the major interests that finance them.

The main adjustment needed is a radical change in our standard of living (both quantitative and qualitative) and for us to choose different, much more human priorities. So it is our responsibility, as ordinary people and citizen-worker-consumers, to initiate the change. Nobody can do it for us.

09 – Pressure on governments

If we want to succeed, the process must be truly democratic. This means it has to involve all people, even the ones who are generally disempowered. Our radical, direct, consistent involvement as citizens will inevitably put pressure on governments to act. Once we, as ordinary people, initiate this change, governments will be able to follow, implementing the broader necessary measures that escape our direct control as citizens: leadership, a broader national vision, an institutional legal frame, investment in necessary infrastructures, subsidies, taxes, trade agreements, international cooperation.

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10 – Corporations

Corporations will only follow when it is in their interest – that is, when consumers put the necessary pressure on them. We are privileged people who can afford to consume more than strictly necessary goods, so our choices are powerful.

Most preponderant corporations (Apple, Google, Monsanto, Unilever, ExxonMobil, Nike) are branded. They sell products we could either live without or choose alternatives to (fair trade, local products, open source programs).

State legislation has to drastically frame corporate activities and impose standards of quality, limits to power.

11 – One choice is one vote

Each choice we make, personally or collectively, concerning any good or service we choose to consume or use, is a vote or a plebiscite for the good we buy, for the service we use. Crucially, it is also a vote for the values that sustain these different products or services, and even for the way these “things” have been produced (social, ecological, political conditions).

By the additive power of our respective choices, we create the world in which we (wish to) live. Each of our personal choices is of very small significance in terms of the impact it has worldwide, but it might cost us a very high price to abstain from it, especially when, because the item seems harmful, we renounce something we love.

Yet the accumulation of all these small, apparently insignificant impacts has generated the huge problem of climate change we now face.

12 – Empowerment

We have to empower ourselves. This might mean becoming aware that we already possess all the means we need to manage our present and future, cooperatively. And if not, we need to organise ourselves in order to reappropriate those means. Empowerment relies on a perception of our true unrealised potential. On seeing what we can do at local level when we reach a form of grassroots consensus.

13 – Consensus

Together, we need to develop a vision of the society we want to implement locally – a positive, life-giving and creative ideology. We need to reach consensus with all members of the community on a suitable agreement about the aims and priorities we intend to follow.

Consensus is based on the ability to give up more or less minor preferences in order to agree on the major priorities concerning our local community. Every aspect not covered by this consensus will remain out of control, and open to exploitation by external actors in their own interest – very probably to the detriment of the local community.

Total consensus is rarely possible. This means that we have to learn to walk together despite our disagreements or differences of interests. Nevertheless, to ensure our community does not split under the unresolved tensions, we have to integrate the antagonisms, as elements of balance and compensation for extremes, not as causes for disruption.

Consensus is enriched, not prevented, by diversity. Difference allows a more complex and complete perception to arise, beyond our respective tendencies to adopt simplistic beliefs often linked with our

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privileges. We may then engage in true dialogue¹². Consensus calls us to open to a wider, more inclusive perspective.

Consensus is linked with a practice of local and direct democracy. For instance in the form of Citizen Councils.

14 – The Tipping Point Alliance

In order to multiply our impact in the struggle against climate change, in our alternative way of thinking, living, producing and consuming, as persons and communities, we need to come together, beyond our differences. Our diverse actions, skills and preferences are complementary. We can form an Alliance between movements, communities, citizens and classes.

I propose here the Tipping Point Alliance, a form of contract or Convention whereby each person and group commits to practising a new way of daily life. This informal, oral contract is based on a series of options¹³ that each participant can choose to apply, or propose, or adapt to his/her own situation.

Implementing these options will help us generate the necessary changes in all the main domains of life, on all levels. The Alliance is like a gearbox, intended to multiply the effects of our respective actions and enable coordination beyond the local level. We will support and encourage each other, enrich each other with our respective experiences, share a spirit of innovation and creativity.

I will come back to the practicalities of this proposal in the next two chapters: the tools and the catalogue of possible options.

12 Read the beautiful text by David Bohm already mentioned: *On Dialogue*, Taylor and Francis Ltd, Routledge, London, 1996.

Or <http://www.desertcreekhouse.com.au/texts/texts.html#bohm>.

13 For the 10 basic options of the Alliance, proposed at the start of this book, see chapter 3: The tools. For a more detailed list, with examples, see chapter 4: Catalogue of possible options.

15 – Quantum leap

This necessary fundamental change does not constitute a loss of wealth or quality of life as a kind of bitter state of mind or self-inflicted restriction. On the contrary, it's an opportunity to discover life fully, to become free from obsessive and oppressive processes, to engage with real creativity and authentic human exchanges. It's a quantum leap towards true quality of life.

Remember: each crisis is also an opportunity.

A fundamental change of mentality

16 – A radical change of mentality

Einstein used to say that a problem cannot be solved by the same mentality as the one that has generated it. This means that in facing the crisis of climate change and economic collapse, we need to undergo a radical change of mentality and spirit: a revolution of the mind.

The fundamental change is seeing that life is nourished by relationships in a community, and that our own wellbeing depends on the general health and wellbeing of our community – on the level of equity, reciprocal care and sharing in this community.

No-one is an island; we're all connected. This means we have to switch from an attitude of egocentric wealth accumulation to a general practice of compassion, caring and sharing for one another. The true maturity of a society is clearly seen in the degree to which it is capable of caring for its weakest or most marginal members. As long as some of its members lack something essential, an advanced community cannot be at peace.

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17 – Reversing the inversions (untwists)

The new way of thinking we have to (re)discover will be in strong contrast with what we practise today. Not because it goes against common sense or reality, but because our present, mad way of living has inverted the main laws of life – adapting to the rhythms of nature, biodiversity, complementary, differentiation, cooperation, generosity, care for one another, sharing resources and skills freely provided by nature and society.

We must recognise that our “modern” way of living is wrongly focused on material accumulation and has inverted the basic rules of life. The radical change of mentality we aspire to will reverse these inversions – undo the twists. For now, let’s describe each of these necessary “untwists”.

18 – Untwist 1 – True value of the Commons

We need first to rediscover that our personal wellbeing does not rely on our ability to overtake our competitors but on the wellbeing of our local community. The broader the common wealth of a community is, the better its members feel. The more equal a society is, the more wealth and privileges are accessible to all – there is less poverty, criminality and drug dependency, and members feel more secure.

The Commons are the common wealth of any local community. These Commons are the wealth that remains accessible to all – that nobody can own or exploit for private interest. These include life, air, water, food, land, public space, know-how, knowledge, wisdom, education, health, all shared values, a common vision of the future, consensus, common infrastructure, goods in common property or tools accessible to all, skills, creativity, justice, natural resources, nature, and so on.

This new understanding of the Commons, of course, questions the way we practise ownership nowadays. There are very few goods that it is right to own privately – because most resources are given freely

by nature or society, or are made possible and available by an important contribution of our context (education, heritage, public services). We never create wealth just by ourselves. Even we ourselves (our physical wellbeing, health, level of sensitivity, knowledge, understanding, awareness) are a fruit of our surroundings – by birth, or through education and acquiring skills.

Everything originates in nature or in the Commons: life, land, air, water, space, knowledge, skills, exchanges ... all are given free of charge. If we can challenge our current unquestioning acceptance of ownership, it will also help us review the issue of equity.

19 – Untwist 2 – Rising to our responsibilities

It is not enough to define human rights. The people who do not enjoy basic human rights are deprived of them because of their state of poverty, disempowerment, exploitation or oppression.

This is why, personally and collectively, we need to acknowledge our responsibility to initiate change, even if we do not suffer under the same ills. We have an urgent responsibility to end our harmful behaviours. This should override any ambition to change the world in a way that might align to our personal tastes and desires.

20 – Untwist 3 – Inclusiveness

We need to rediscover how diversity offers us richness, based on the complementarity of diverging or even antagonistic perceptions that are reconciled at a higher, more inclusive level of understanding.

For instance, if we consider only our individual interests, we see a very partial picture; but if we consider the community as a whole, we discover new factors and relationships, on a higher, more inclusive level. This transforms our entire perception, even as it concerns our egocentric needs.

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We need to practise inclusiveness as the basic force that allows each of us to participate and find our place among others, despite our differences (such as ethnic, cultural, sexual, racial or religious identities).

21 – Untwist 4 – Indigenous peoples

We must rediscover how indigenous cultures and people have been hurt, destroyed, violated and marginalised by the prevailing white Western greed for domination and exploitation. Our global society has been impoverished by the false pretence of superiority, denial and exclusion.

Beyond our evident responsibility to correct a scandalous wrong that is a humiliation for all, it is urgent that Indigenous people recover their full rights and the expression of their full potential. And, today more than ever, they have a very important role in teaching us how to relate to the land, how to adapt to natural laws, and how to give priority to hetero-centric human values over material egocentric interests.¹⁴ One of the best ways to establish true communication and listening between Indigenous and white Australians would be to share the meaning the Land has for each of us.¹⁵

22 – Untwist 5 – Sense of meaning and truth

We have to rediscover the value of truth. In our postmodern culture we give so much attention to the diversity of opinions that we lose

14 It is striking how the Uluru Statement of the Heart (<https://fromtheheart.com.au/explore-the-uluru-statement/>) describes an approach which also answers the challenges of climate change. As long as First Nations people cannot be fully recognised and listened to, and as long as they cannot practise their full rights, there is no possible response to climate change.

15 Concerning our search for the meaning of the Land, see: <http://www.desertcreekhouse.com.au/texts/two-insights-one-proposal.pdf>

The strategy in 40 points

our sense of truth and meaning. Any opinion goes. We can no longer discern opinions from knowledge or wisdom. We have become tragically incapable of opposing manipulation.

This is why we need to rediscover “meaning” as the main guide for our personal and collective choices. We need to search for the meaning of life. This search will not provide ready-made answers, but constantly looking for the true meaning will help us focus on the essential, keeping us awake in our search for truth and for the right priorities.

23 – Untwist 6 – Relationships

We need to rediscover that relationships between people and with our environment – not objects/stuff – are central to life in any community. Caring and sharing are the main energies that allow true humanity to thrive.

This means that we have to shift from an egocentric focus on material accumulation and pleasure (through competition against others) to a practice of conviviality (living together), of solidarity-mutuality and cooperation, based on respect, inclusiveness, care, reciprocity and generosity. We need to stop focusing on the things and look at the space in between – at how we relate to one another, and to the cosmos.

24 – Untwist 7 – Role of economy

We need to rediscover the real role of economy – as a means to collectively satisfy basic needs, not as a way to individually accumulate wealth through speculation.

The market, and the laws that run it, must remain under the control of the community. Together, our task is to define real human priorities over the forces of market. We cannot allow it to continue imposing

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its illusory laws on all our relationships, making us cogs in the global machine of production and consumption.

The true purpose of politics is to develop the vision for our common future – to find a form of consensus that includes the diversity of all members. And to implement it.

25 – Untwist 8 – Use of money

We need to remember how to use money as a simple tool that makes things available for the common good. Nowadays money replaces relationships and kinship. By its power for speculation and the greed for increasing profits, it generates a vast illusion about our relationship with our material world; it stimulates false needs; it fosters exploitation and inequity. But money is nothing more than a temporary support for the transfer of value. Speculation is harmful; it prevents money being used correctly.

26 – Untwist 9 – Investments

We need to invest capital in projects that profit the local community, without any interest rate or at least at a minimum rate. Investors should get their profit in terms of satisfaction from the improvements and benefits their investments provide locally – not through the payment of interest.

Disinvestment from harmful activities (fossil fuels, weapons, drugs) will liberate important amounts of available capital. Many small investors look for ethical projects and will be keen to support a creative and just economy based on sustainability and equity. In order to be democratic and remain under control of the local community, investments should remain open to small amounts as shares of participation.

The value of invested capital has to be kept constant, equal to its purchasing power at the time of investment (indexed according to the

increase of subsistence's cost). This means that the stockmarket has to be abolished or used only to provide the necessary funds for investments, without any dividends or speculation on values.

The existence of tax havens calls for drastic control by international agreements; the taxation scale and rates need to be reviewed in order to provide more equity.

27 – Untwist 10 – Technology

We need to rediscover the true role of technology. As we face climate change, many possible technological solutions are presented. This is pure illusion – most of these technologies do not even exist yet, or are not realistic for reasons of scale. For instance, it would be impossible to provide electric cars for 7 billion people. We lack the necessary materials and energy, and the consequences would be unbearable – our planet could not afford it. As is the case with biofuels, we would need many planets to produce the necessary quantities, without even feeding ourselves.

More generally, technology now invades every field of our lives. It has replaced meaning. Technology is perceived as answer to everything, and especially the solution for the problems generated by too much technology. But this is precisely the flaw in our thinking that climate change reveals to us!

We need to practise a very soft form of technology that questions the aim, the adequacy of the means, the impact it has on our social network and environment, and the values it is based upon. And whether it brings us further as humans.

One essential advance of gentle technology is repairability. A long-term warranty should be required on all industrial products – say a five or ten-year warranty, depending on the item. All products should be easily repairable; it is the basic principle of industrialisation to be able to use interchangeable parts. Most of the common parts, such as batteries, chargers, light bulbs, ventilators, etc. should be

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standardised. Shops should be responsible for repairing the items they sell, either providing this service themselves or being the intermediary. Repair should happen locally. Reparability is a very important factor in reducing overproduction.

28 – Our addiction to comfort and pleasure

The obstacle to these main untwists is our general state of addiction. We're addicted to our present way of life and level of comfort. Not because it is perfect, but because we know it well and are afraid of change.

But, as with any addiction, we all deny being addicted. Denial is a defining characteristic of addiction. Once we become aware of our state of addiction, we must treat it – drastically – for our own physical and mental health, and for the recovery of our planet.

We will recreate a sustainable local community

The following proposals form a practical answer to the present crisis.

29 – Re-create a local economy

The urgent priority in response to the present triple crisis (environment, economy, democracy), is to re-create local economies that are sustainable, equitable, close to self-sufficient in most basic needs, and resilient in the case of major disturbances to supply systems. Violent and destructive events (floods, unrest, pandemics, disruptions of transport) will be more and more frequent in the near future, until we restore environmental balance.

30 – Before ten years, with high targets

We do not have more than ten years to implement this change, taking into account the natural tendency for all types of imbalances to accelerate, and the inertia of natural systems. It will take a few years, depending on our degree of motivation, to reconvert our economy and our ways of living. Even if we act quickly, we will continue to observe a degrading situation for many decades to come – but if the causes have been (even partially) mastered, the Earth will slowly recover.

The best we can do is hurry – and try to avoid the coming tipping point. We must also try to boost resilience for this time of transition – and care for those who must undergo deep change in their subsistence (mainly activities linked with fossil fuels). All of the political targets fixed at 2040 or 2050 are in fact optimistic illusions; alibis with too much delay.

In order to achieve rapid change, we must adopt very ambitious targets. This will radically support our effort, even if we do not reach them fully. We should aim at a maximum of 300ppm (parts per million) of CO₂ in the atmosphere. This was the level in the 1950s. According to the report of the IPCC¹⁶, the current level is around 410ppm; this is forecast to create an increase of temperature of more than 2, 3 or even 5°C in comparison to the time of the Industrial Revolution (the 1800s).

31 – Progressive disconnection

The new local economies need to progressively detach from the globalised market, at the same rate as they become more capable of providing for themselves. External products are opaque and abstract, but local production is transparent, revealing its conditions of

16 Consult the website of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): <https://www.ipcc.ch/>

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production. External exchanges should be maintained for immaterial goods – and for truly necessary goods that cannot be produced locally.

32 – Local citizen councils

We need local citizen councils to be in charge of managing the change. The members may be volunteers, or chosen according to some system yet to be imagined. Election is not necessarily the best way to represent all social categories.

The role of these citizen councils will be to define the main options. They will need to delegate the diverse projects they conceive to specialised committees.

Some special tools must be implemented in order for the process to be continually evaluated, assessed and improved. The quality of the process itself is of major importance; maybe even more than its direct products.

It is fascinating to see how friendship is an important part of the process of establishing true, direct democracy.¹⁷

33 – Integration with natural cycles

From now on, we have to integrate all our activities into natural cycles, renewing the resources we consume and absorbing the wastes we produce. This means no fossil fuels, only biodegradable wastes, rigorous recycling and only renewable energy.

More fundamentally, we do not decide how far we adapt – this is a given, dictated by nature. We must obey, adapting to these natural cycles as they run and evolve: their locations, rhythms, speeds, variations, etc. They are global but also local; they are variable, not

17 About the role of friendship, see:
www.desertcreekhouse.com.au/texts/markettechnocommunity.pdf

constant; they are complex and interrelated. As long as our personal ecological footprint¹⁸ is higher than the average bio-capacity of the Earth, we are the problem!

34 – Food supply

Food is the priority. We have to organise regular supply through a contract between producers and consumers (farmer baskets). The principle is that regular consumers commit to buying regular quantities of food. They pay in advance or by regular instalments. Producers provide what they can, according to weather variations and seasons. The contract is a form of support for one another. If not enough supply is available locally, we need to ensure safe sources at a near distance.

35 – Leave them in the ground

We have an urgent responsibility to stop feeding climate change through excessively using energy and natural resources. We must reduce our total consumption and replace the sources of energy with renewable ones (solar, wind, hydro, thermal). Fossil fuels must immediately remain in the ground. Our current main forms of energy production (mostly fossil) must be urgently dismantled and progressively replaced by sustainable sources. The present tendency is to install sustainable sources of energy without dismantling the old ones. This means that global production increases, and even if this is due to more renewable sources, it is not acceptable. It is true that the present sources are usually big units that cannot be dismantled progressively. But they must be, by stages and as soon as possible.

18 A more detailed document on reducing our personal footprint is at:
<http://www.desertcreekhouse.com.au/alliance/footprint-reduction.pdf>

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Global consumption has to be reduced drastically, of course by reducing waste and non-useful consumption, but mainly by reducing our needs. We must shift away from excessive material comfort towards qualitative relationships and immaterial consumption (culture, celebration, wonder, compassion).

36 – Community-owned energy production and storage

Energy should be produced by a community-owned not-for-profit association or trust. A grid can be installed, or the existing one converted, to allow all the users and sources of production to be interconnected, according to the pattern of the net and not the tree. This means that each part will remain linked, even if one main connection fails. A network with many small units like this is highly decentralised and flexible.

The community-owned corporation will install the elements and retain ownership, both of the parts (solar panels/inverters for example) on private dwellings and the general interconnecting grid. Users can also install their own systems at their own cost.

Renewable energy is never regular, because it depends on natural, and thus variable, conditions (sunshine, wind, tide, geothermal activity), so storage must be organised. Rather than relying on batteries, which require a lot of special materials and energy to produce, and need replacing regularly, storage might be better organised as out-of-rivers pumped hydro-storage systems. Out-of-rivers systems do not interfere with rivers; they are separate compounds, composed of one lower and one upper reservoir, linked by a large pipe. Water is either pumped up the pipe when there is overabundant power or runs down through a turbine to use the stored capacity to supplement power generation at peak times.¹⁹

19 For a detailed description of out-of-rivers pumped energy hydro-storage, please see the ANU website (Prof. Andrew Blakers):

<http://re100.eng.anu.edu.au>

37 – Variety of trades of small scale

Small local workshops must be organised to produce the main basic goods we use in everyday life. The work will be varied and working conditions flexible and adapted to the wellbeing of workers. The workshops will not be required to make a profit, yet will be compatible with economic realism.

All kinds of necessary goods can be locally produced: clothes, furniture, plates and pans and pencils, simple tools, computers, small solar cars, solar panels. Goods will need to be redesigned to suit decentralised production, and to be durable, repairable and sustainable, with degradable or recyclable components. They will come with a long-term guarantee.

The way we understand production will fundamentally change. Cars, for instance, can be produced in small workshops where the conditions of work are varied and pleasant, the design of each unit being adjusted to the needs of the buyer. New forms of building can be developed that will offer energy efficiency and thermal mass, and use only recyclable materials.

Fair prices should be calculated that are closely related to production costs; prices that satisfy the needs of workers, respect all ecological and social security requirements, and yet provide the necessary stability for the business (but without creating accumulated wealth).

It is not essential that all parts are produced locally (especially if they require special skills, resources or technology) because very specific components can be purchased elsewhere. What matters is that design and production remain local, under the control of workers and users, remaining flexible and adaptable to special requests or evolution. What is imported should also remain relatively regional. We need to urgently repatriate production from China! And the know-how that goes with it.

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For local development to work, we need to change our relationship with money. Price will no longer be the decisive criterion in our choices. We need to commit to buying local, even when it's much dearer. Because it is more ethical and personal, local production is more flexible and adaptable; producers remain accountable; wealth remains local; work conditions are much improved; youth enjoy possibilities for skilled local activities; sustainability and resilience are stronger; local empowerment is consolidated, and so on. These qualities are worth the extra money – this wealth becomes ours. It's important that we see this advantage clearly and commit to it. If not, these local activities won't be economically sustainable.

38 – Small workshops producing solar cars

We need to find a solution for local transport that does not rely on fossil fuels but remains flexible. It would be interesting to produce some very light, simple solar cars – like solar rickshaws. Electric cars are not the solution – we lack the necessary materials to make electric cars for 7 billion people! Yet small, light solar cars would profoundly change our habits around mobility. They could be shared, and used only when energy was available, encouraging people to share opportunities (what shall I buy for you in town today?).²⁰

39 – Local currency

A local currency needs to be revived and extended (such as LETS) which has to be accepted in most local shops and workshops. It is important that most local businesses accept it. Maybe only for part of

20 If you want to find more details on this solar car project and the impact it could have, see: <http://www.desertcreekhouse.com.au/alliance/solarcar.pdf>
And for practical examples of simple solar cars, see: <https://www.solartaxi.com> (Switzerland – a car which relies on its own solar panels) or <http://www.sunnev.com> (USA – a car for some US\$6,000 with a range of 50km and a speed of 40km/h – available in kit form).

The strategy in 40 points

the price as components purchased elsewhere will need to be paid in the official currency.

All members of the community will be invited to accept local currency for their services (even if only partially) and to use it, as it will be the best way to keep local wealth circulating locally. The more diversity in the network using the local currency (tradespeople, doctors, education, public services, energy, shops, even taxes), the more efficient and accessible it will be for everybody.

To start such a currency circulating, a local community-owned bank could sell local currency in exchange for official currency at a rate of 1.0 local units for 0.9 official units, in order to support and encourage the new use and the mentality it implies. Reverse exchange should also be possible, but at an inverted rate. This favourable rate would comparatively increase the value of the local currency by 10%, reinforcing the positive experience for customers and shopkeepers.²¹

40 – A community-owned financial institution

A local bank needs to be created to manage the necessary funds. At first, the investors will be mainly the users, who will disinvest from other activities and concentrate their capital on local utilities. Next will come small local investors keen to invest according to ethical rules (there are many such people!).

The purchasing power of the invested capital has to be kept constant. If possible, a guarantee of constant value should be provided (perhaps by the government?) in order to allow people to invest funds they may have put aside for their old age or another purpose, which require some level of security. Flexibility will ensure investors that they can get their capital back at will.

21 See the Transition Towns movement: <https://transitionnetwork.org/>

The solution is simple

Significant subsidies should be provided by the government or public institutions for major infrastructure work. Progressively, non-locals and wealthier people can be inspired to participate and support the action.

The bank itself, being community-owned, is managed by the users and investors.

These proposals are only intended to stimulate a process of reflection and action. Add to this! Discuss it! Adapt it! Participate!

Chapter 3: The tools

In the last chapter, I showed how reconstituting a local economy and a network of more human relationships could work in practice. In this chapter, I wish to propose a few tools that can help us do this more efficiently.

Let me be clear: using these tools is not necessary in implementing the strategy I described. However, I do believe they may be of great help. Whether you choose to use them or not, you can still be part of the move towards change.

The proposed solution relies, as we saw, mainly on new attitudes and behaviours which, combined, will bring about structural change. This means we need to go beyond individualism, knitting the dispersed initiatives together into a coherent whole that promotes radical structural change and generates a real, inclusive community experience.

This is why the basic purpose of these tools is to shape a form of alliance (as touched on before), a social contract by which each participant or grassroots movement commits to certain attitudes and behaviours that foster the deep necessary change we want to implement. These new attitudes and behaviours must be radical and fundamental enough to rewind the way we live; and at the same time, extend to the wide range of fields that cover most essential human activities. They must also be constant, and persistent enough to break through the wall of our resistance.

The solution is simple

An Alliance: unity in diversity

Many today are already committed to embracing new ways of life: permaculture, food swaps, alternative energy, simplicity in everyday life, true conviviality, and so on. Yet people tend to act individually or in small clusters that do not generate a larger impact. The many circles are too small, or disconnected from one another and from other people. We tend to lack the means to coordinate and support each other in a way that makes our individual action more powerful as part of a wider global strategy.

This is why I propose an Alliance, as mentioned in point 14 of the last chapter. The Alliance is designed to multiply the effect of our respective actions – to form a powerful resonance chamber. Like a gearbox, it will magnify the effects of our individual and group actions, making them more visible and more efficient. It will also foster imagination, courage and cooperation. Any whole is more than the sum of its parts.

The Alliance will help overcome our tendency to wrap ourselves in splinter groups that seem to oppose or compete with one another. It will help us recognise how our diversity is a strength in addressing the crisis – how to create unity in diversity. It will be a loose coalition of like minds, supporting each other wherever possible to achieve the necessary change.

I invite you to be part of this general Alliance that will link us all as participants and improve the efficiency of our actions. The Alliance can bridge the gap between our differences, allowing us to practise the quality dialogue I described earlier, as one of the 10 principles exposed in the first chapter.

Because the Alliance is based on the extreme variety of our persons, groups, situations, potentials, resources, skills, etc., it captures our diversity in unity. All of the participants and grassroots movements

that join will remain free to focus on what seems a priority for them, and to choose the orientation and intensity of their action.

The basic concept of Convention

As shown earlier, we need to work together to rebuild our local economy and community. This will not only prevent our own immediate destruction but help us implement a richer quality of life. We must commit to practising more adequate attitudes and behaviours, together and locally, in the small and larger issues of our daily lives. Within our own limits, but to the very limits of our possibilities. We must practise a more conscious and equitable way of life, implementing our creative and sustainable vision for the future.

The Alliance is guided by the vision and strategy described in the last chapter. This strategy can only be broad and effective if grounded on reciprocal commitments by all participants. It is a Work, in the most noble sense of the word, that involves many of us, aiming at a similar quality of life, yet through means adapted to our differing perceptions and circumstances. It is a collective creation, in solidarity and reciprocal support.

This Alliance is an informal unwritten moral contract that unites us in our diversity. It goes beyond mere material and legal obligations, encompassing a larger vision of new potentials for a better life.

In order to show that this kind of pact is of a higher order, I wanted a name that would make its special, metaphysical dimension explicit, yet also apply to the most mundane aspects of life. Two names came to mind: Covenant and Convention. A Covenant is a contract that involves a noble purpose and implies a kind of spiritual commitment by all participants. A Convention, on the other hand, seems to involve the social and political dimensions, but for humanistic reasons; it is about what we do together and how we organise our

The solution is simple

society in a spirit of justice, peace and equity. For this reason I chose the term Convention, even though the spiritual, rather sacred dimension of the Covenant, linked with the essence of life, remains strongly present in the project of the Alliance. Convention seems to fit better for this social contract that aims at changing the way we live as a society. It is the most evolved expression of politics, drawing a positive vision of our common future, based on human and sacred values.

This social contract is a Convention to engage each member of the Alliance, through free expression of their own will, in pursuit of a common goal. It operates on two levels:

- 1) **Personal:** The Convention is a contract for each one of us with ourselves, to commit to what we intend to do as an individual. It will help each person to remain committed to their own choices and to act in a more radical and persistent way.
- 2) **Collective:** It is also, principally, a contract between all of us, with one another, within the broader context of society and nature. It will link us collectively and help us, as a community, to act locally where we live, knowing that other people commit to a similar quality of involvement, here or elsewhere, in similar or different conditions, all struggling for the same effects.

The Alliance links all participants in mutual support. It helps us overcome our own resignation and sense of powerlessness. It challenges us to see the real issues – and our true potentials – more clearly. To work together to invent more imaginative and human-focused solutions. It gives us courage to dare to do what can seem beyond our control and capability.

An initial Convention of 10 options

Beyond its function as an unwritten moral contract that links all the participants, the Convention is a very practical tool. It translates the

general strategy into smaller bits and pieces that describe many possible attitudes and behaviours we might wish to adopt, making the strategy more concrete and achievable in our everyday lives. As a global social agreement, it presents a range of possible practical options. Each one of these options represents a specific action or attitude we might use in our daily activities. These options broadly attempt to translate the strategic vision into practical ways to achieve the necessary changes. They are not intended to limit – nor are they compulsory.

Clearly, we will not be able to embrace all of these options that concern so many different aspects of life. This is why we must choose which ones we want to pursue as priorities. The options we choose will constitute our personal Convention, and, on a collective level, by the combination of our respective contributions, the general Convention of the Alliance.

Each of the options aims at helping us, ordinary people, citizens-workers-consumers, to recreate our local communities. To make them more sustainable, resilient and self-sufficient, and to foster better life conditions, based on care and solidarity.

It is important that the options we choose are adapted to our personal conditions and preferences, and that they cover most fields of our daily life. They will aid our personal growth, since they're not easily achieved and thus challenge us, pushing us to do more than we would spontaneously. They will support our willingness, but not our wilfulness, because they leave space for flexibility.

The 10 options below are just offered as a starting point. They can be adopted as they are, or modified to suit different circumstances.

Each option is followed by “examples of practice” – possible applications in daily life.

Let's see what these 10 basic options are.

The solution is simple

01 – Integrating our activities into natural cycles

Doing everything possible to integrate all our regular activities (work, leisure, consumption) into natural cycles (resources and their reconstitution, wastes and their resorption, restoration of main ecosystems, re-creation, evolution) and trying to stop consuming goods and services that do not satisfy this requirement.

Examples of practice: Using renewable energy; measuring what is truly available (water, power, food) and consequently adapting our day-to-day consumption; using public transport; giving up meat and fish; not buying food or goods from faraway countries; using our own containers when shopping; refusing to buy goods wrapped in non-recyclable materials, or leaving the packaging in the shop as an expression of protest; sorting recyclables at the point of collection, with consumers separating their own wastes (e.g. into glass, paper, metal, aluminium, etc.) instead of throwing them all together into the same rubbish bin.

02 – Minimising our ecological footprint

Transforming the way we live in order to reduce our personal ecological footprint (the impact of our standard of life on the environment – see <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/>). Adapting our footprint to an average level (per person) of Earth's bio-capacity (the effective capacity of production of necessary resources by the Earth). Measuring the footprint regularly and evaluating how changes in our way of life impact positively on it.

Examples of practice: Examining all the different areas of our consumption (food, clothes, housing, transport, work, leisure) and eliminating things with a bigger footprint and those that are not absolutely needed; using footprint calculators (<http://www.footprintcalculator.org>) to measure our improvements; sharing our discoveries with friends.

03 – Practicing simplicity and generosity

Choosing simplicity as a form of freedom. Practising self-limitation, simplicity and generosity as positive forces that bring harmony and peace. A radical simplicity that strips life from the superfluous and opens it to listening, receiving and wondering.

Examples of practice: Reducing consumption to a strict minimum; being happy with lower levels of comfort and being more in touch with our natural environment; focusing more on relationships than on material ownership; giving importance to quality and beauty; sharing what we have freely (goods, skills, knowledge).

04 – Contributing to the common wealth

Becoming aware that most resources are free, given by nature or society, as part of the Commons, the common wealth that belongs to all of us, locally as community, globally as humanity. These include air, water, life, energy, sunshine, plants, natural ecosystems, knowledge, wisdom, information, silence, public space, and qualities such as peace, justice and equity. Observing how much our own personal wellbeing depends on the health of our community; participating in, and nourishing, the common good by making our skills, knowledge and love available to all. Learning to care for, and sharing with, one another instead of competing, allowing easy, free access to the common wealth for everyone.

Examples of practice: Sharing what we have; organising storage for common property (tools, vehicles, a library, second-hand items); helping our neighbours; listening to others' needs; organising food swaps and car or tool sharing; sharing our knowledge by offering courses or training for free.

The solution is simple

05 – Resisting the negative impacts of technology and market

Learning to use technology as a simple tool in the service of the common good. Questioning the meaning, means and impact of our projects and actions in accordance with our values. Making choices based on meaning and purpose – not on technicalities, practicality or convenience.

Resisting all forms of market invasion and intrusion (advertisements, specials, bonuses) because they stimulate fashion, imitation and false needs and generate overconsumption. Do we need it, or do we just want it? Our real needs should dictate what is necessary.

Restoring cycles by promoting re-use, repair, durability, and industrial products whose parts can be easily replaced to extend their useful life.

Examples of practice: Using hand tools; avoiding virtual tools that create illusion; giving priority to relationships (human interaction) over material gains (search for profit); practising direct barter and work exchange; buying locally; paying more to get better quality from local businesses that will help to circulate local wealth; organising local repair shops; using local currency (local exchange trading systems – LETS).

06 – Voting with our feet

Each choice is a vote! Realising that we are the main actors who influence social life and market (without us there is no market). Empowering ourselves. Acknowledging that in each of our actions or choices (such as the purchase of goods and services) we plebiscite the value of the things we choose.

Being aware that the accumulation of our individual choices creates the world in which we live.

Examples of practice: Consuming fair-trade goods or recycled products; repairing what is broken; refusing to patronise corporations that exploit people; not consuming non-renewable energy; not flying; not buying clothes made in sweatshops; avoiding buying or using most plastic items or wrapping; avoiding goods produced in poor social, ecological or political conditions, poor quality goods, and those that cannot be repaired, even if they are cheaper; not buying products derived from palm oil (big challenge!) since it's a major factor in deforestation; withdrawing our investments from major banks and investing in local sustainable projects, even if the interest rate is lower.

07 – Standing for the rights of minorities

Celebrating a multicultural society that respects all minorities. Defending the rights of minorities (whether racial, ethnic, national, gender-defined, religious, cultural, migrant etc.) to be heard and to influence the local or regional community. Breaking barriers (social, cultural, economic and emotive) that prevent First Nations people from achieving equitable outcomes. Opposing white supremacy and racism. Transforming society by opening it to the rich and creative contributions of minorities with different traditional visions. Closing the gaps (education, health, imprisonment, housing, empowerment). Welcoming refugees locally and helping them to integrate.

Examples of practice: Not accepting racist comments or actions; developing relationships with local minorities or First Nations people and creating respectful links with them (listening to their needs, learning from them, sharing the meaning of the land for each of us); welcoming a stranger into our home; accommodating asylum seekers or refugees during a time of transition; learning about others' customs and cultures.

The solution is simple

08 – Promoting consensus in community

Practising dialogue as a synthesis of different visions. Learning to listen and debate respectfully within our communities to reach a lasting consensus for positive outcomes. Encouraging community members to express their concerns and aspirations and finding ways to achieve compromise for the best way forward. Being aware that consensus does not arise in one day – it is the fruit of a long learning process. Accepting that sometimes we have to agree to disagree because of our differences of origin, experience or awareness, but that we can nevertheless continue to walk together. Implementing new forms of local direct democracy.

Examples of practice: Organising local meetings (citizen councils) about local life and issues; respecting everybody as they express their views; integrating these views in a form of compromise that includes the most important aspects; letting go of our will for self-promotion; promoting the decisions taken in these meetings; putting pressure on governments and institutions to implement our common vision.

09 – Living in the truth

Daring to change the way we think and live to support our values, instead of conforming to pressures from governments, institutions, technology and markets. Becoming free in spirit, with enough courage to live in the truth. Being able to resist the negative, inequitable, wasteful pressures of society and daring to bear the consequences of resistance rather than conformity.

Examples of practice: Identifying what matters most in our life (our true priorities for a better quality of relationships); discerning what is truthful and what is just bluff; conforming to truth even if we have to pay a high price; not waiting for others to agree with us.

10 – Questioning ideology

Observing our own society and questioning the values that guide it and the mechanisms that constrain it. Daring to identify any flaws in our own perception of how society operates as well as in the conventional wisdom supporting societal norms.

Identifying the trends of dominating systems of ideas and ideology that form the basis for current economic and political policies. Recognising when they are not compatible with how we should be living our lives.

Thinking about how the current ideology could change to result in a more positive and compassionate future. Developing a new vision of this future, or a creative and positive ideology, to guide our choices as people or as a community.

Examples of practice: Observing how market and technology define the priorities in our society, at the expense of human values; translating our own values into a guiding and inspiring ideology that promotes values of care and sharing.

Summary

These are the 10 basic options we propose as a starting point. They are meant to help all of us and our grassroots movements or communities, to make our daily life more compatible with the values we want to implement. You are invited to add your own personal options or adapt the options here to suit your own circumstances.

There are more option examples in the next chapter. The list is endless and can never be exhausted.

The solution is simple

The Hubs for solidarity-mutuality

Members of the Alliance may wish to form local social groups – places to meet, share and search together. These are “Convivial Hubs”, but by “convivial” I do not mean that we drink tea and chat lazily together. “Convivial” has another, much more powerful meaning: etymologically it means “living together”. We have to learn how to live together better, as a community of people from different backgrounds who nevertheless depend strongly on each other. This is the term Ivan Illich²² used in the 1970s in his concept of a “convivial society” – a society where members share with, and care for, one another. But, because of the limited significance the term has acquired in Anglo-Saxon culture, *convivial* is not adequate; it would be widely misunderstood as a club where we simply have a good time together. The aspect of friendship and pleasure is important too, but it does not express the urgent challenge of learning how to fundamentally rediscover how we can live together, sharing one planet. This is why I prefer to use the term *Hubs for solidarity-mutuality*.

Establishing local Hubs aims at a better and quicker performance: these Hubs will help sustain the rhythm of change we need, for our action to be effective. Hubs for solidarity-mutuality will help us evaluate where we stand, to locate obstacles to progress, and to develop the tools to assess timeframes for action. This is a race against time – the speed of change is an all-important factor.

As centres of reflection and imagination, the Hubs will encourage new ideas and actions at local, regional and national levels. They’ll help animate wider debate about our present and future – and the society we wish to build together. The Hubs could become the “soapboxes” of another way of thinking and living, of a more

22 Ivan Illich, *Tools for conviviality*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1974.

creative way of giving shape to more fundamental human values in our communities.

There is no central organ or committee to the Alliance. It is a network that extends organically, not controlled by any institutionalised central power. At most there could be a central secretariat to coordinate and distribute a minimum of information (through a website or mailing list), making contacts and exchanges easier between participants. The Alliance is a call for action, a seed sewn into different groups that takes root where the ground is fertile. There is no need to direct the way it develops or extends. We are all in charge. We all have a common aim.

Practically, this means that, when you decide to take part in this Alliance, you do not enrol or register in a central place. You are in charge, along with your friends, neighbours or colleagues, of establishing new links of cooperation and alliance between different groups and persons involved locally in the attempted change. The Alliance is not a new movement, but a quality link between people who are more or less already involved. This is not a new chapel!

The Hubs for solidarity-mutuality can become places for the quantum leap to emerge. Places to invent a new approach. Places where new types of relationships can be forged, allowing us to support each other in achieving our shared goals.

An important distinction: we have talked about Hubs for solidarity-mutuality and about Citizen Councils. These are very different meeting places. The Hubs are laboratories for questions, research and invention; the Councils are places for debate, consensus, decisions and actions, more or less representing the general will for change in the local community – or its most motivated part.

The solution is simple

Some realistic examples in 7 initial actions

To show that the proposed strategy and Alliance are realistic, I want to describe some very concrete, immediate actions. These actions are practical illustrations of the options above, and are things we can start doing today.

These actions could be adapted and pursued as first steps through the Hubs for solidarity-mutuality.

1 – Support a local currency (Option 4)

Restart Local Exchange Trader Systems (LETS), encourage different kinds of services to be paid for in local currency, extend the network of people who trust it, stimulate local exchanges, diversify activities, train youth. Inspire a local economy with no interest rate, no profit and no capitalisation.

2 – Discard wastes and packaging (Option 6)

Put pressure on shops to provide goods without packaging, bring your own containers, leave wastes at the door of shops, avoid heavily packaged items, stop using plastic. Compost all vegetable wastes; install a composting toilet; recycle grey water; reduce wastes down to compostable items, such as paper and cardboard.

3 – Repair and require long-term warranties (Option 5)

Look for repair solutions when something is broken. Rather than throwing things away, reuse or recycle. Support standardised parts such as batteries, chargers, bulbs, fans, small motors, etc. as well as industrial products that are easy to dismantle. Put pressure on shops to promote, and governments to legislate for, long-term warranties (for instance ten years) and local repair of industrial products.

4 – Produce solar cars locally (Option 1)

Organise a small workshop where light solar cars with a limited travel distance range can be produced. Use these cars ourselves (if possible through car sharing) and adapt our mobility to what is available (sunshine), promoting our experience through the media.

5 – Connect with First Nations people (Option 7)

Have regular contact with local Aboriginal communities. Respond positively and actively to the Uluru statement,²³ promoting its spirit locally and trying to practise what it states in small spontaneous groups, first inside the local community. Show our openness and readiness to participate in responding to First Nations initiatives. Practise truth telling; talk about the land and how we each relate to it; practise what is decided in consensus between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Start a local *makarrata*/truth-telling group, without waiting for political leaders to agree about the principle of a constitutional voice for First Nations people.

6 – Take a stand as a community (Option 8)

Have regular meetings with local people (Citizen Councils) to discuss community issues (not personal ones). Work with the local Council for change, learn to reach consensus, and take a public stand on local and national issues.

7 – Restrict advertising clutter (Option 5)

Ensure that public spaces (schools, sports clubs, pubs, streets, media) remain clean of the clutter and pollution of advertisements.

23 The Uluru Statement of the Heart (2017) is a call by First Nations people to all Australians for a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations, and truth-telling about our common history: <https://fromtheheart.com.au/explore-the-uluuru-statement>

The solution is simple

Chapter 4:

Catalogue of possible options (examples)

What the options are

As explained earlier, the initial starting point of the Alliance is a Convention of 10 flexible, adaptable options for all people taking part. Many other options can be added or subtracted. In fact I recommend adding many other options in order to cover a wider range of our everyday life. Each person is invited to do so, in harmony with the spirit of the Vision.

The 10 basic options serve as foundation for designing our personal Convention. The following ideas are only examples; you may adopt them as they are or adapt them in your own way. You can also add and delete whatever you want. This is your personal Convention and nothing can be imposed upon you.

When we list our options, we do not expect to fulfil them perfectly. Rather, they are a means to help our personal growth. Thus, they should be slightly more challenging than what we feel able to achieve. It is like when riding a bike – one has to make just a bit more effort than what one really feels like or wants to.

Catalogue of possible options

When we commit, we do not mean we will infallibly achieve our aim. But we intend to put a structure in place to help us change the way we feel, think and live. There is always a certain creative tension between what we aim at and what we can do.

Therefore, choose a wide range of options. Rather than focusing on only a few things that seem easily achieved, try to widen your range of awareness so that your practice represents many diverse aspects of life – in contrasting fields and at different levels or depths. But do not take on too much either, lest you feel discouraged about not reaching the level of accomplishment you wish for.

There should be no competition or comparison between the different people who want to commit. Each one is in their own unique position. This is not a race; it is an expression of diversity.

Later on, our practice of these chosen options should be shared and examined (assessed) together. We need support and help to see the present situation clearly, to be able to decide to act, to start a move towards change, to imagine the most adaptive ways, and to gain courage. We also need to regularly assess how far we are succeeding in practising our chosen options, how they help us evolve personally and together, and how effective the change is.

We need to adapt our strategies based on feedback. For this we need to meet regularly on a local level. This is the role of the Hubs for solidarity-mutuality, created by each local group in an informal way; they allow participants to exchange ideas and provide reciprocal support.

The following examples are intended to inspire you to invent options that suit your own perception and situation.

As the following list of options comes in the form of a catalogue, it might seem more reasonable to present it as an appendix to be consulted at the end of the book. But I have chosen to present it here as a normal chapter, despite it being an unfinished list of items. I feel it's a good illustration of the messiness of life. Life is not a pure,

The solution is simple

coherent process. It is composed of many parts, which are often in conflict one with another, but still provide a form of general balance. It is the same with our action and good will. Some elements here are essential while others, in the same list, are very accessory. The catalogue is strengthened by this seeming incoherence and disorder (messiness), because it calls for our awareness and discernment. I propose that you read this catalogue with a sense of discernment in mind. Feel free to skip forward, to come back, to leave it when you feel saturated, or even to skip directly to the next chapter. It is here to provide a very partial and limited description that calls for endless additions.

Many of the ideas or concepts in this catalogue will be developed in more detail in Part 2: A search for meaning. You will notice how these possible options are strongly impregnated by a particular way of looking at the world and a preference for certain values (in this case, mine). They are subjective; and in this way they can foster new choices. Remember, they are only examples – nothing forces you to accept them as they are. You can adapt them or use other ones. I hope they will stimulate your imagination and your search for meaning.

A) Nature, economy, science and technology

01 – Integration into natural cycles

- 1) **Relationships:** Discovering how immaterial, general principles (such as diversification, cooperation, generosity, consciousness, etc.) rule the composition, reaction and evolution of matter. Focusing on relationships (the in-between), which are the substance of life, rather than on matter, which is only the intermediary means and tool (hook) for relationships.

Catalogue of possible options

- 2) **Simplicity:** Choosing simplicity as a form of freedom. Practising self-limitation, simplicity and generosity as the positive forces that bring harmony and peace: a radical simplicity that strips the superfluous from life and opens us to listen, receive and wonder.
- 3) **Laws of life / the Universe:** Learning to know the laws of life. Learning to read the book of the Universe (nature) to discover the real laws that rule the cosmos, such as intelligence, generosity, change, difference, cooperation, unity, etc. Accepting that these laws (and many others) define the modalities for our adaptation.
- 4) **Contradiction:** Becoming aware of the fundamental opposition (contradiction) of our modern culture (based on control, domination, exploitation, accumulation) to the laws of life (based on gratuity, abundance, impermanence, generosity, sharing). Becoming aware how much our modern society lives in a logic that not only goes against the laws of nature (and destroys it) but is also poorer, depriving us of many qualities life and nature can offer.
- 5) **Integration:** Discovering how to reintegrate with the laws of the Universe. Rediscovering a truly rich life, adapted to the main laws of nature that teach us rich ways of being, such as intelligence, generosity, difference, change, cooperation, unity, etc.
- 6) **Natural cycles:** Learning how to live in harmony with natural cycles. Doing everything possible to integrate all of our activities into natural cycles (resources, wastes, re-creation, evolution) and giving up goods and services that do not satisfy this requirement.
- 7) **Wastes:** Refusing to buy goods in non-recyclable packaging. Leaving these materials in the shopping centre as an expression of our protest. Sorting recyclables at the point of consumption.
- 8) **Water tanks:** Installing tanks to collect rain water, use it locally, and return it locally to the land.

The solution is simple

- 9) **Grey water:** Installing a grey-water system for watering the garden or returning water to the land.
- 10) **Composting toilet:** Installing a composting toilet to save water, avoid unnecessary water treatment (precious water is used only for transporting wastes) and use the rich manure it provides.
- 11) **The body as a book:** Discovering our body as the visualisation of who we are. Learning to read our body and its illnesses or diseases as a book that tells us everything about ourselves, on each of the many different levels of our deeper being (body, mind, soul, spirit).
- 12) **The land as a guide:** Learning to read the landscape as an expression and visualisation of the society we have shaped. Reconnecting with the land as a guide that teaches us about our origin, our past, our true nature. Reconnecting with one another as we recognise that we are all children of this land.
- 13) **Immaterial goods:** Focusing less on material goods and more on the immaterial aspects of life, which have less impact on the environment. Inventing new ways of living that harmonise with the laws of life and nature, change our needs and focus our attention on immaterial interests (relationships, quality, creativity, discovery).
- 14) **Ecological footprint:** Transforming the way we live in order to reduce our personal ecological footprint to our share of Earth's biocapacity. Measuring this footprint regularly and evaluating how the changes in our way of life reduce it.
- 15) **Expression:** Learning to make visible that which we discern as essential. Translating our new perception and understanding into material expression.
- 16) **Gardening:** Cultivating our own garden in an organic way to produce part of our food.

Catalogue of possible options

- 17) **Local market:** Supporting local markets for all goods, and buying local food. Not buying Chinese.
- 18) **Internet:** Refusing to buy through the internet, even though it might be cheaper and quicker; paying the right, higher price and doing our best to support local businesses.
- 19) **Transport:** Using public transport every time it is possible.
- 20) **Ban of planes:** Not flying, because planes are one of the main causes of the ecological debt (CO₂ released at high altitude), are important vectors in the standardisation of cultures, and foster unhealthy illusions about time, distances and differences.
- 21) **Solar hot water:** Installing a solar hot water system (with a booster) to provide most of the necessary heat and allows us to save much power. Adapting our consumption to match times of abundant sunshine.
- 22) **Solar power:** Installing a stand-alone solar system for the house, and seeing what energy is truly available; indulging when supply is abundant, restricting use when it is scarce.
- 23) **Solar car:** Creating small local workshops to build, sell and use simple solar cars (like light solar rickshaws), teaching us to be mobile only when there is enough solar energy and to learn a new practice of limited mobility (true simplicity).
- 24) **Harmony:** From the ways we change our ways of living, finding a new harmony in our relationship to the land and to one another.
- 25) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

02 – Economy at the service of all, through relationships

- 1) **Generosity:** Becoming aware that most resources are free, given by nature or society as part of the Commons which constitute the common wealth (peace, justice, equity, knowledge, wisdom, natural equilibrium, silence, public space, etc.). Learning to

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recognise the generosity of nature and society and to practise gratitude and wonder in making available to others what we have received (gifts, skills, tools, knowledge, awareness, love, etc.).

- 2) **Community wellbeing:** Learning how to improve community wellbeing in order to enrich everybody. Seeing how much our own wellbeing depends on our community thriving, and participating in the common good by making our skills, knowledge and love available to all. Learning to care and share with each other, instead of competing. Sharing what can help others to thrive.
- 3) **The Commons:** Learning to practice easy access to the Commons for everybody. Giving priority to easy access for all to goods, tools and services, rather than private ownership (private property deprives me of what others own, and vice versa). Discovering the precious value of the Commons, i.e. the common goods and qualities nobody owns but everybody may access freely. Valuing the Commons, and helping extend and deepen them.
- 4) **Profit:** Becoming aware that profit, in contrast with income, is a stolen value out of the Commons wealth. Living on real income from one's own work and renouncing any form of profit (additive income from speculation, playing with values, income without work) as this is a form of robbery, taken from the common good in terms of quality, knowledge, resources, workforce, creativity, generosity.
- 5) **Creative work:** Restoring the creative and linking potential of work. Liberating work from market forces and practising work as a form of creativity that links people.
- 6) **Restoring work:** Considering each task as work (for instance subsistence, maintenance, cooking, washing, caring, telling a bedtime story, having leisure time, connecting with friends or

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partners, etc.) in order to reconquer our creative empowerment and to detach work from money (income) as much as possible.

- 7) **Income from work:** Limiting our need for income to what is necessary to cover basic (material and immaterial) needs and liberating ourselves as much as possible from the financial pressure of work. Becoming free (beyond subsistence) to use one's time for the most creative and useful purpose in relation to the common good, free of charge or without any need to earn an income.
- 8) **Work as relationship:** Learning that creativity may be offered freely once livelihood is ensured. Making one's skills and creativity available to others for free, as a natural contribution of the skills one has received from nature and society, especially once one's own subsistence (livelihood) is ensured. Practising exchanges that satisfy real needs, and not for one's own profit in competition with others.
- 9) **Social link:** Discovering that, even in economic exchanges, human relationships and social connection are what matters most, not the objects that are exchanged. Focusing on relationships, and seeing that objects are only the "hooks" and pretexts for relationships!
- 10) **Money:** Using money as a commodity (practical transport and transfer of recognised exchange value), renouncing speculation (profit, stock exchange, accumulation). Using social money (LETS) as a way to regulate exchanges without using real money.
- 11) **Compensation for work:** Using time (how many hours worked) as a yardstick for valuing work, rather than hourly rates (in \$/h), because we all have similar needs and a similar amount of time at our disposal. The differences in our skills and knowledge are more due to differences of heritage (what is received from our

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community) than to different degrees of personal involvement. Therefore 1 hour of my time = 1 hour of your time.

- 12) **The measure of time:** Liberating the slaves we are used to exploiting through the power of money. Not consuming more goods or services than we could produce personally with the time and personal skills available to us – i.e. not exploiting slaves, even if we have the money to pay for them. Keeping this equality of time duration and available skills; and maintaining exchanges based on complementary skills or gifts.
- 13) **One choice = one vote:** Discovering how, as citizens and consumers, we are the only actors that can influence social life and the market; without us, there are no actors. Re-empowering ourselves. Practising the motto: *one choice = one vote*: in each of our actions or choices (our acts, our use of goods and services, our attraction to certain values), remaining aware that the accumulation of our respective impacts creates the world in which we (wish to) live. Remembering this basic law even when it costs us a great price in terms of unsatisfied desires. We vote for (encourage) the values, qualities, processes, goods, etc. that we consume.
- 14) **Whitewashing:** Learning how to read the true origin and conditions of production (ecological, social justice, cultural, fair trade, etc.) in the products we buy, despite the whitewashing they undergo, packed in pleasant wrapping to hide their real origin.
- 15) **Ethical investment:** Removing our investment funds from harmful activities or corporations (weapons, fossil fuels, GMOs, pesticides, child labour, deforestation, etc.) and investing in local workshops where new skills are learned (by our youth) and where creativity predominates as the real quality of work. Favouring social recognition for quality work and a spirit of service.

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- 16) **Living in the truth:** Being aware how our choices can be directed by our own egocentric desires, by conformism, or rather by our own conscious choice to live within the truth. Preferring true empowerment and living within the truth to comfort and easy consumption, or easy bland social assimilation. Having the courage to cope with the possibly harsh consequences of this choice.
- 17) **The spirit of the giver:** Discovering how exchanges are expressions of what we are and how we offer our gifts freely to others. Respecting the *mana* (the spirit of the giver), which provides a human content to each good or service offered by the giver. Discovering how exchanges are motivated mainly by generosity rather than greed for profit. Behaving like leavers, not takers.
- 18) **Takers, leavers, receivers, givers:** Learning how to become receivers and givers in a society that tends to encourage taking – grabbing everything that is available.
- 19) **Radical generosity:** Learning detachment and practising the freedom of radical generosity.
- 20) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

03 – Beyond restrictively rational science and technology

- 1) **New integral perception:** Learning, at each quantum leap of personal or collective evolution, how to integrate and adapt the previously assimilated knowledge and skills into the new paradigm shift and wider perspective – or new, higher-level skills. Reinterpreting past experience in light of the new perspectives offered by each step of evolution. Discerning the different sources that feed these different ways of thinking; learning to combine them; integrating the less evolved into the more evolved. Learning to recognise the differences between

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pre-rational and post-rational consciousness,²⁴ and identifying which is foremost in each of our particular behaviours or ways of thinking.

- 2) **Beyond rationalism:** Daring to search for deeper consciousness, knowing that we must escape from rational thinking that entraps us. Not negating or discarding rationalism but integrating this fascinating faculty into a broader approach (a new, larger paradigm).
- 3) **Word-centrism:** Learning to face complexity and antagonistic truths. Practising a higher, wider level of understanding that may integrate many different and even antagonistic approaches (world-centric, not ethnocentric).
- 4) **Plurality:** Learning to combine the awareness of plurality, complementarity and diversity with discernment, especially since people are at varying levels of maturity and awareness. For example, a Neo-Nazi and a Buddhist monk represent very different stages of personal evolution. Not preventing anybody from being who they are, with the caveat that they behave responsibly (not manipulating the truth, not sowing seeds of hate, but being respectful and caring).
- 5) **Multiculturalism:** Engaging in more cooperation to give shape to a world-centric rather than ethnocentric view. Practising multiculturalism as a way of diversity contributing to shaping a multi-faceted society.

24 This difference will be examined later, in chapter 6, part 06; it essentially concerns the difference between two contrasted stages of consciousness: 1) a primitive superstition usually characterised by an instinctive fusion with nature (pre-rational) and 2) a more evolved all-encompassing conscious world-centric perception rather as observer (post-rational). The first stage comes usually before the rational way of thinking we practise in daily life; the second stage represents a further development of this rational stage into deeper maturity.

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- 6) **Technology:** Opposing technology's domination as the source of all meanings. Learning to use technology as a simple tool in service to the common good; questioning the meaning, means and impact, in terms of ethical values. Making choices based principally on meaning – not reduced to mere technicalities, practicality or convenience.
- 7) **Mobility:** Reinterpreting mobility in light of human and spiritual values and practising it in new, more limited, meaningful ways. Reinventing mobility and the use of cars and other transport systems in terms of slowness and sustainability. See my proposal above about solar cars.
- 8) **Cars:** Beyond a mere practical understanding and use of cars, reinventing a new form of mobility that deprives the individual car of its destructive impacts (violent impact on people and the environment, abolition of distances/differences, polarisation, individualism, illusion of power, bubble of comfort, pollution, noise, etc.). Using cars in a different spirit, one which is creative and respectful of the environment and the deeper essence of life, following values such as self-restraint, solidarity, mutuality and simplicity.
- 9) **Institutions:** Remodelling our institutions and infrastructures to better serve community members, as whole people in all their many dimensions (body, mind, soul, spirit). Caring for our institutions and deeply rethinking the way they function, so they may serve the common good: a transport system that makes destinations ecologically, meaningfully and easily accessible; a health system that works with the body's natural healing ability; an education system that facilitates personal development, maturity and consciousness, etc.
- 10) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

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B) Diversity, consensus and the search for meaning

04 – A mature expression of diversity

- 1) **Non-violence:** Becoming aware of the mechanisms of conflict, violence, victimisation and sacrifice that are surreptitiously active in our community. Observing where and when they occur, then revealing and remedying them in order to bring back peace. Contesting the values, behaviours and discourses that foster or stimulate contempt, hate and violence.
- 2) **Traditional societies:** Respecting the remaining traditional societies and protecting them from colonisation. Learning a form of gentleness from them, an ability to prioritise reciprocity and cooperation over monetary power.
- 3) **Minorities:** Creating a multicultural society that respects all minorities, even small groups with divergent sensibilities. Defending the rights of minorities (whether ethnic, religious, cultural, migrant, etc.) to be heard and to influence the larger community.
- 4) **Indigenous:** Restoring the full rights of Indigenous communities (whether Aboriginal, Maori, Amerindian, Gypsy, Sami, nomad, or any ethnic clan). Opposing white supremacy and racism. Transforming white society by allowing Indigenous people to contribute to transforming Western ways of perceiving, thinking, living. Bridging the gap, in terms of education, health, imprisonment, work, housing, empowerment, etc.
- 5) **Migrants:** Welcoming migrants and supporting asylum seekers in their quest to be secure and to thrive. Supporting their integration by assisting with subsistence, education and adaptation, while respecting their identity. Being aware that migrants bring rich, diverse contributions to our society.

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- 6) **The other:** Opening ourselves to the different identities of others. Welcoming strangers, whoever they are and trying to help them find a place in our local society. Doing what we can to break down the monolithic images that ensue from an “Us and Them” approach; allowing more complex perceptions to arise, concerning “them” as well as “us”, that are no longer caricatures but impregnated by many diverse aspects, sometimes contradictory. Dismantling our preconceived ideas about strangers – meeting them in our common humanity as distinct and lively beings with their own life stories.
- 7) **Level of consciousness:** Welcoming the other but remaining aware that not all people are at a similar level of maturity; our fascination with diversity does not mean anything goes. We still need to discern between what is creative or compassionate and what is destructive or hateful.
- 8) **Plurality:** Finding a delicate balance between diversity and unity. Learning how to practise plurality and allowing it to emerge, by balancing differences, complementarity, antagonism and unity.
- 9) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

05 – Community and consensus as a shared vision

- 1) **Landscape:** Learning how to read the network of relationships in the land and their potential for the present and the future. Understanding the relationships we have developed by observing the landscape as a visual representation of who we are as a community.
- 2) **Consensus:** Creating local, community tools for control over present and future developments, and learning how to use them. Preventing external agents from defining and exploiting our life conditions in their own interests. Bringing together all parts of the community to express their aspirations, then finding ways to

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combine these contributions for the best possible consensus. Implementing new forms of local direct democracy.

- 3) **Responsibilities:** Learning that rights always imply further responsibilities and how both combine. Developing a sense of responsibility (better than duty) that is in balance with the sense of rights.
- 4) **Empowerment:** Making our local community a place of responsibility, empowerment and resilience. Being an instrument of consensus and support for the efforts of local people (or oneself) to promote creative and link-fostering activities.
- 5) **Political vision:** Expressing and agreeing about a common vision of the future society we wish to implement together for our local community. And the same at regional and national levels. Generating a political vision based on reciprocal care and sharing, on care for and restoration of the Earth, on using market exchanges and technology to serve the common good. Practising politics that guide and unify us beyond differences, based on true debate that facilitates a cooperative search for truth and solutions (not as a struggle for power).
- 6) **Friendship:** Making relationships the true cement of community; going deeper into friendship and daring to be involved in others' concerns or letting them be involved in ours, without invading privacy. Being aware that friendship needs to develop outside the circuits of consumption (market, technology and social state).
- 7) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

06 – The search for the meaning of life

- 7) **Living in the truth:** Daring to change the way we think and live because we want human values to be at the centre of our lives, instead of conforming to the existing social process that is

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fostered by mainly mechanical forces (technology and market). Becoming free enough in spirit and having enough courage to live in the truth – being able to resist the false pressures of our society, and daring to bear the consequences of non-conformity.

- 8) **Ideology:** Observing our own society to detect the values that guide it and the mechanisms that constrain it. Daring to identify the flaws in our own perception and in conventional wisdom as stereotypes. Identifying the dominant trends of ideology and where they are not compatible with life. Understanding how the dominant ideology we assimilate or generate together falsely justifies dubious egocentric attitudes and behaviours – but how it has the potential to become an inspiring guide for dynamic, positive evolution. Expressing, together, a broader ideology that generates positive and creative attitudes.
- 9) **Yin values:** Protecting and restoring feminine values (i.e. Yin attitudes such as welcoming, listening, caring, etc.) and protecting their expression since they tend to yield to masculine (i.e. Yang) dominating values. By analogy with biology one could call them recessive – which is not a weakness! For instance, silence is broken by noise, peace by violence, etc. Feminine (Yin) values and attitudes must be given priority over masculine (Yang) ones: care over control, cooperation over competition, listening over imposing, sharing over accumulating, and so on.
- 10) **Gender difference:** Offering an alternative to the unisex treatment of gender differences by a society that treats us as identical cogs (workers) independently of our gender, race, age, person; yet these dimensions of our person do not define us. Finding new expressions of gender identity that resist the unisex trend and gender stereotyping. Encouraging flexible, creative ways of expressing one's identity linked with gender and personality. Remembering that Yin and Yang always combine, stimulating the possibilities to be different (do things differently)

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because of gender and personality. Accepting one's own gender (except when it feels incompatible) and expressing (translating) it into something personal: as a woman, being a different lawyer or truck driver than a man would be. As a man, being a different cook or builder than a woman would be. Seeing gender not as handicap or restriction, but as potential or challenge.

- 11) **Meaning of life:** Searching for a new anthropology, i.e. helping and supporting each other in our endless collective and personal quest for the meaning of life. Asking essential questions rather than proposing ready-made answers. Going back to the roots of our humanity and making deliberate philosophical and spiritual choices to steer the future. Evolving towards maturity and consciousness by finding, in our new values and focus on meaning, the true guidelines for a renewable, convivial lifestyle.
- 12) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

C) Truth, consciousness and sacredness

07 – The need for a subjective vision

- 1) **Heritage:** Understanding how context has shaped us, by learning about our own national, tribal, familial, traditional or religious culture and heritage, both its strengths and weaknesses. Delving into the local and present heritage as it is, with riches and flaws. Trying, in this first stage of discovery, not to judge or discriminate, but just to understand the full complexity.
- 2) **Discernment:** Identifying how the institutional forms of this heritage, or its transmission, have twisted its content in a dreadful way; but nevertheless not throwing out the baby with the bath water. Examining what we have been taught and identifying the aspects with which we resonate. Trying to accept the aspects we do not fully understand as mysteries to be

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clarified later (remaining open), rather than discarding them immediately.

- 3) **Personalisation:** Learning to assimilate and to make personal the positive aspects of our heritage, and the challenging dimensions too (what we still do not perceive as true). Trying to integrate what we have learnt into our own lives. Prioritising that which is most challenging, because challenge produces more growth than comfortable truths.
- 4) **Openness:** Learning to listen to the unknown, and to our inner voice, and being enriched by them. Daring to test our heritage by comparing it to our own experiences and our own (sometimes illusory) representations, knowing to question the experiences as well as the representations, but remaining aware that we have a lot to learn from our heritage that we still cannot fathom. Identifying our inner resistance; trying to understand it and its origins.
- 5) **Questioning:** Learning the limits of our freedom of perception, thought and opinion and what it relies on. Questioning our attitudes of denial. Daring to question everything but being aware that our lack of oversight does not allow us to recreate the world at will.
- 6) **Role of religion:** Progressing from understanding traditional religion as translation (an explanation of the world as it is) to a more challenging form of spirituality that may act as energy of transformation and liberation of our deeper being and consciousness. Finding one's own path – between religion as a translation that explains what is and religion as a path of personal transformation; or between religion as an answer, and religion as a challenge, or endless questioning. Combining both, because both are rich and neither is sufficient.
- 7) **Vision:** Translating our reinterpreted heritage, and integrating our own experience into it as a vision to guide our lives.

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Developing our own personal or collective vision as a creative perspective of what should lead us in our choices and initiatives.

- 8) **Freedom:** Practising freedom as a liberty to recognise truth, whatever it might be, and conforming to it (living in the truth), instead of being attracted by illusory freedom focused on egocentric desires. “Freedom is the path, truth is the content.”²⁵
- 9) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

08 – The path of liberation to higher consciousness

- 1) **Transformation:** Changing our mentality from “What do I get?” to “What does life expect of me?” Choosing the path of transformation, with all its risks, rather than the path of self-centred comfort and indulgence. Understanding that the path of transformation is not our project (what we control) but rather our experience (what we may witness).
- 2) **Impermanence:** Letting go of our attachment to the past (what we are accustomed to). Perceiving that transformation is the way of nature: the only permanent thing, is change. This means inner growth and constant movement, and a deeper consciousness when we learn to accept, and adapt to, new situations.
- 3) **Consciousness:** Accepting that life is about our own personal and collective transformation towards higher maturity and consciousness, rather than personal projects. Doing what we can to evolve through the (higher, deeper) levels of consciousness.
- 4) **Knowing oneself:** Investigating who we truly are. Learning how to practise introspection and knowing oneself. Accepting, addressing and transforming our respective “pathologies”.

25 Paul Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, New City Press, New York, 1979.

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- 5) **True Self vs false self:** Learning to discern the True Self from the false self. Searching for our true essence while keeping our false self (the ego) alive as a necessary, protective social shell.
- 6) **Observing the mind:** Learning how our mind functions and how it continually tricks us. Observing how our mind tends to construct a false image of reality strongly modulated by our own representations, emotions, desires for pleasure and wants to escape from pain. Observing how these false constructs are the real causes of our suffering. Learning to observe the functioning of our mind as something which happens to us, almost like a dream.
- 7) **Wonder:** Learning to marvel and wonder at the creativity of our mind; even if it is not reliable, it is nevertheless fascinating and wonderful, like a sort of firework. Being able to witness, without being involved in the process, discerning the many (often contradictory) facets of reality.
- 8) **Deeper consciousness:** Undergoing transformation through higher levels of consciousness that are ever more inclusive and hetero-centric; integrating our experience of the preceding levels into each new paradigm.
- 9) **Witness:** Learning to become a witness. Observing how the facts and changes we observe in and around ourselves are only external or internal events that happen to us; becoming aware that our true essence is in witnessing life fully, rather than being actors who shape it.
- 10) **Illusions:** Becoming aware how much our perceptions are only illusions. Searching endlessly for the mysterious essence of life that can never be grasped.
- 11) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

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09 – Integration into the sacredness of the Universe

- 1) **Meditation:** Training ourselves to be open and sensitive to the mysterious dimension of life by practising regular (twice daily) times of silence, meditation, contemplation or prayer as a path for wider and deeper awareness and to search for peace.
- 2) **Leading Presence:** Being aware that a Presence leads the Universe in its evolution. Focusing our attention on deciphering diverse and mundane expressions of this Presence (which is never evident) and recognising its Source in everyday life.
- 3) **Trust:** Learning to trust this Presence as the Source of our wellbeing and life energy. Recognising that this Presence is Mystery and Graciousness and that it nourishes us; without it we would not be alive, since life is an energy that thrives in us but which we do not generate. Remaining rooted in this quality of Graciousness in our daily activities and behaviours.
- 4) **Gentleness:** Learning to practise in harmony (in tune) with the laws of the Universe. Choosing the path of gentleness and powerlessness and practising these qualities towards others in the image of this essential energy of Love who respects our freedom of conscience. Practising loving kindness and learning to care for, and share with, one another.
- 5) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

D) Starting a move towards change

10 – An end to resignation and passivity

- 1) **Daily practice:** Discovering that only daily personal practice can bring about change. Adopting a personal discipline that allows us to progress in our transformation. This creative and practical

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attitude is the only possible answer to climate change and economic collapse.

- 2) **Start a move towards change:** Making a personal initiative of our personal choice to act, because nobody will make this choice for us. Wanting to be the actors. The problem is not in finding solutions but in our readiness to start moving towards change. The start is the problem.
- 3) **Thinking freely:** Learning to observe and to make up our mind – to get the necessary information and know what to do. Acting freely according to one's own beliefs.
- 4) **Clear-sightedness:** Learning to describe what we see and explain what we understand. Words are tools for research. In expressing our ideas we deepen them and become more aware of what's essential. In sharing them we try to connect and create consensus and unity for action.
- 5) **Tribune:** Finding a way to talk publicly about social evolution. Opening public debate about our present and future and the model of society we wish to implement. Allowing all voices to be heard.
- 6) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

11 – Our relationship with evil and suffering

- 1) **Mimetic behaviour:** Noticing our tendency for mimetic behaviour and conformism.
- 2) **Banality of evil:** Recognising in our life a deep untold collusion with evil – by negligence, by ignorance, by attraction, etc. Accepting that this tendency is within us, but controlling it as sharply as we can.

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- 3) **Reconquering meaning:** Opposing our society's trend of denying meaning and making everything irrelevant or equal in value (flatland). Affirming our priorities and an ethical attitude.
- 4) **Not resisting evil:** Resisting our usual tendency to fight evil by adopting the same weapons as the adversary. Non-violently opposing evil with our own way of being and attitude (resilience), affirming the truth of a more creative and generous way.
- 5) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

12 – Truth and reconciliation

- 1) **Forgiveness:** Practising forgiveness in conjunction with truth, allowing the complete truth to be revealed. Avoiding conflicting attitudes and fostering opportunities for reconciliation.
- 2) **Detachment:** Learning to practise detachment in order to be free to be who we are and so that we dare to take a true stand. Detaching from greed (power, prestige, pleasure); detaching from our projections onto, and expectations from, others; detaching from change and transformation in time and from loss (accepting impermanence); detaching from the image we have of ourselves.
- 3) **Implementing our common vision and strategy:** Daring to practise the Options we have chosen, in a radical way as a changing energy in our personal and collective life, leading to deep inner and exterior transformation. Giving shape to the Alliance described above. Making the Convention a new force for radical change and unity in diversity.
- 4) **A strategy to be free:** Seeing our options not as constraints but as tools for liberation that will offer us much more.
- 5) **Hubs for solidarity-mutuality:** Assessing the progress of the Strategy in a local group and continuing to adapt the strategies

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and options in order to further and transform the way we live. In a further stage, extending the process to social structures.

- 6) **Solidarity-mutuality:** Making the Hubs a place where people meet physically, to connect and communicate directly, open to the complexity of human expression, rather than through the virtual illusion and falsity of social media.
- 7) And many other ways that each one of us may invent.

The solution is simple

**PART 2:
A SEARCH FOR MEANING**

Preamble:

Sharing my own search for meaning

The first part of this book described a practical strategy for change, but the second part, which opens here, is very different, in both style and content. These next chapters concern the deeper motivation for change, via a search for meaning – the search for the meaning of life. As we reflect and search, we uncover the perceptions, values and priorities that will forge and underpin our practical strategy.

I have mentioned that the present crisis is not a technical problem to be fixed by new technological means but a fundamental challenge to the way we understand life. As I explained, we need a new anthropology that will dare to ask the right questions.

I will propose a version of this quest and some elements of answers or further questioning it calls for. But none of these “answers” are definitive, and you do not need to agree with me. They are only threads to follow – thresholds from which to explore.

This is my personal contribution to the general debate. I am describing my personal path, in the hope that it might help you with your own quest.

In the first part of the book, I explained that the answer to our present crisis – climate change and economic or social collapse – is much simpler than we think. I have shown how it is in our hands and how we can start now. I described what can be done. To do this

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effectively, we need to reach some form of consensus. We need to agree on some basics.

By contrast, my personal path of search for a new anthropology does not need agreement. It is my own path and expresses the reasons why I believe in the simple solution of the bottom-up process.

Nevertheless I feel it is important to share this path and to show one to another why we may feel motivated to react creatively to the crisis and to implement change. I hope in this way to make this search for meaning more graspable and more consistent. And more meaningful. I hope through this personal example to demonstrate what it could be. And also to convince you about my own motivations.

I hope you might find this expression of my own perception fruitful, and that it challenges you to do your own research, in your own way. It is my way of “priming the pump”. Once the pipe is full of water, the pump can suck and produce something. You are in charge of producing your own quest. Not me.

You’ll find some elements from earlier chapters repeated, but presented from another angle. Skip what does not interest you. But let yourself be questioned and challenged by another approach that is based on a spiritual perspective. You don’t need to agree. I believe you can still think about and reflect on these issues, even if you have already made up your mind.

A practical point: This part of the book can be read at three different levels or speeds. The boxed subtitles of each part propose a summary of the main concepts. This means that you can scan quickly through, reading only these titles, to get a general overview of the whole content, before reading more. Then, the second level is to read only the main text, which presents the primary content. As a third way, for a slower, deeper reading, also read the indented parts of the text, in the smaller type. I used this smaller type to include more information, explanations and references about the topics described concisely in the main text. These more detailed passages are

independent from each other – one can be skipped and the next can be read, for example.

The chapters that follow tries to cover most aspects of our human reality, from our relationship with nature to our economic system, our democracy, our desire for deeper consciousness or the sense of the divine. Please feel free to skip a sub-chapter or even a whole chapter if it does not interest you or seems like nonsense. But obviously, you will miss what you skip!

I hope this contribution will enrich you.

00 – A much needed synthesis between wisdom and know-how

Science and wisdom: two disconnected paths we need to combine and integrate into a wider synthesis

Especially since the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, our modern society has developed fascinating means for science, technology and the production of goods that have improved our standard of life. Our search for the meaning of life and for wisdom has also deepened along the centuries, providing new perspectives on the way we live or aspire to live. But the scientific-technological path and the wisdom path have developed on parallel tracks instead of combining to enrich each other and integrate into a wider, well-balanced synthesis of our human potentials.

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Market has replaced relationships; technology has replaced meaning

In today's society, market has replaced relationships. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins²⁶ described how kinship (relationships between members of the same community) has been replaced by money exchanges that exclude our capacity for empathy and communion.

It is also true that technology has replaced meaning. Ivan Illich²⁷ has shown how the means and tools we use impact on the way we understand life, and how these tools – when used as the universal technical solution to problems of any kind – impose their own logic onto the way we live. They generate priorities and impose meanings that are contrary to our aspirations.

Market and technology, as the two dominant yet very partial areas of our daily life, provide their own solutions, in their own name and in an exclusive way, and determine our lives. Consequently we have given up our power to decide what the priorities in our personal or collective lives should be. Because the scientific-technological path and the wisdom path propose completely divergent ways of thinking and living, we urgently need to integrate them – and to prioritise wisdom. Wisdom should guide us in the use of all other available means – goods, technology, economics, politics, science, knowledge. It is essential to rediscover a true anthropology; a wider vision of the meaning of life.

26 Marshall Sahlins: *What Kinship is ... and is not*, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

27 Ivan Illich: *Medical Nemesis: The expropriation of health*, Calder & Boyars UK, 1975.

Climate change as a visualisation of global inequity

It is urgent we realise that climate change threatens our survival – and how quickly it will destroy us if we do not do everything possible to limit it and its impact. But this is not enough: we also need to understand that climate change is much more than an overabundance of CO₂ in the atmosphere. It is a fundamental sign of the deep injustice in how we relate to one another.

As I mentioned before, our global society suffers from incredible inequity:

- Just 1% of the world's population (the 52 million millionaires) own 43% of global wealth.
- Only 12% of the world's population own more than US\$100,000, which represents 84% of the total wealth.
- The poor majority, 54%, own less than US\$10,000 and live on just 1.4% of the total wealth.
- As rich Westerners, while we make up only about 1 billion people or 12–15% of the world's population, we consume roughly 50 times as much as the average person in the poorest half of the world's population.²⁸

In a nutshell: the rich and powerful (most people reading this book) take all. This is the deep message of climate change. Our climate is deteriorating due to over-production and over-consumption by rich countries. It is not a demographic problem (high birth rates in poor countries) as is too often declared by rich people. The problem is excessive materialism and greed in rich countries, which anyway is incapable of bringing true happiness. One rich American consumes

²⁸ According to the Global Wealth Report 2020, using 2019 data, from Credit Suisse. See the diagram in chapter 1 (under “The huge contrast of wealth in our world”).

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more than 10,000 poor Bengalis! The problem is the rich (us), even if they are few; and not the poor, even if they are many.

This means that climate change is mainly *our* problem, as a rich society. If everybody consumed their fair share of Earth's biocapacity, equilibrium would be guaranteed. But we do not. Of course the standard of living is not equal for all people in rich countries, but our standard remains much higher than the average world bio-capacity. The message of climate change is a call for us to live in harmony: in harmony with our environment, not using more than our average share of wealth, in harmony with all other human beings, and respecting the needs of other sentient beings. We must learn to share what is provided, respecting the limits defined by the natural cycles that renew resources, living in harmony with the whole universe, the laws of nature and the laws of life. This is an enormous, positive challenge!

The main obstacle for change is our incapacity to break our resignation and to make choices

I believe that the fundamental problem confronting us, in this fracturing world, is not the lack of solutions. We know what the issues are, and we know most of the solutions. Our main problem is our incapacity to look clearly at what is happening, and then to decide on priorities and make bold choices. We have surrendered to the powers of market and technology that define most of our lives. We surrender to materialism and comfort in the name of our little privileges, which are quite illusory – they bring suffering upon us and our fellow human beings and offer us very little happiness. We are no longer able to aim at a general quality of life for all, based “essentially and simply” on human values. The great challenge of our time is how to break the deep resignation of our state of mind, and our addiction to comfort and pleasure. The great challenge is how to start a move towards change. The start is the problem, not the change itself.

A search for meaning

And most important: change will improve the quality of life we experience, here and now. Most people dream of a just world with more compassion. The time is now! Let's see how we can recover our full ability to live life to the full.

The solution is simple

Chapter 5: Our rootedness in truth

01 – Integration into the perspective of the Universe

A leading Intention orients the Universe towards a meaningful yet mysterious aim

I believe that the Universe is more than an apathetic heap of materials evolving in a chaotic and hazardous way; it is infinitely more than a mere material reality generated by the laws of physics, chemistry and biology or by the laws of chance and necessity. Pure probability could never have generated, even in the 14 billion years since the Big Bang, the infinite diversity and complexity we observe today.

If Jacques Monod (winner of the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1965 and author of *Chance and Necessity*) were right, he would himself be similar to a heap of stone, just a bit more complex. His Nobel Prize would also be meaningless, a mere fruit of chance and necessity. Absurd!

The materialist approach poses major problems:

- 1) If we accept that the world is merely material in essence, then what is the essential source of our sense of justice, of generosity,

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gratitude, beauty, faith, hope, love, etc.? Are these immaterial realities formed only by hormones, genes or other chemical functions? What is their material cause or expression? How can such immaterial dimensions exist in a materialist approach? How do materialists experience dimensions of life such as love, and how do they explain their presence?

- 2) Along similar lines, what is the essence of life? What is the difference between a living body and a corpse? How does life translate, in material terms, excluding any spiritual dimension in humans or other sentient beings?
- 3) Is the present complexity of the world just the fruit of chance and necessity? Can pure chance and probability, even in 14 billion years, produce the complexity and diversity we observe in the universe, from bacteria to whales and platypuses, from mind to consciousness?
- 4) If there is no spiritual dimension to life, because there is no material form or explanation of the essence of spirit, why do people who defend the materialist approach not consider themselves as just stuff, a bit complex but nevertheless just matter? Why should we value the life of a human being more than the existence of a heap of stones? Why should these people have merits, if their actions are only the result of chemical processes, of chance and necessity? Why should they expect to be loved?

These first observations imply for me two conclusions:

- 1) The Universe tends towards an unknown but real aim, or is led by an Intention or a Will or at least by a Presence that guides its evolution, yet not in an imposing way.
- 2) If the Universe is more than pure matter, then its guiding energy, Intention or Will or Presence is mainly invisible but still essential, because it is the real source of the world as it is.

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In scientific terms, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin²⁹ has described the whole evolution of the Universe, interpreting it as aiming at an Omega Point that represents the final accomplishment of evolution. He first illustrated how evolution is generating forms that are ever more physically complex; this he calls “the Without”. In parallel to this external development of physical complexity (the Without), an inner evolution happens simultaneously. This is understood to foster an ever deeper consciousness, called “the Within”. The evolution of the Without towards more physical complexity cannot be separated from the evolution of the Within towards more depth of consciousness. More complexity, more consciousness. In this interpretation, consciousness did not appear with humankind but was already present in the whole evolution of the Universe, since its origin as a nascent, evolving, growing process.

An invisible but essential energy: the Ground of Being, Source of all life

At the source of this process of increasing physical complexity and deepening consciousness, there is an energy that feeds and leads the evolution. Like the wind, which cannot be seen but only observed in the way it moves the trees, or like life, which animates sentient beings, I say that the Ground of Being is this Source of the Universe that cannot be seen directly but only perceived through its diverse forms of expression.

Although not visible, it is much more essential than the material appearances we observe. It is the cause of everything, the energy that nourishes us and guides the evolution of the whole. This means that if we want to understand the deeper meaning of life – and even how our world works and evolves in physical terms – we must seek to better know this invisible dimension.

29 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: *The Phenomenon of Man*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1955.

Integration is necessary to adapt to the laws of the Universe

The Universe is a larger container and frame with its own laws and energies. These laws play a major role in evolution. They shape the general context of the cosmos into which we must integrate our own ways of living to be in harmony, rather than at war with, our surroundings. Humankind, especially since the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, has failed to integrate; we tend to believe we can recreate the world at will.

It is certainly good to be creative and to generate new inventive forms, but we must respect the main laws and orientations of the Universe. If we go against the flow of these gigantic forces, we can only be squashed. We know very well that, when we ignore the law of gravity, we pay a high price. It is similar with the more invisible laws guiding the Universe.

The book of the Universe reveals Reality as Mystery and Graciousness

Our material surroundings – especially nature – make the fundamental laws of the Universe explicit; they allow us to survive and thrive. If we are ready to listen to, and observe, our physical surroundings as the expression of what fosters them, we will learn about the nature of the cosmos and the true essence of life. Our surroundings make these fundamental laws visible, like a book that explains what life is meant to be. Despite their powerful influence and energy, the laws and forces do not predetermine the course of our lives. They shape the world in which we live, but we remain essentially free to respond in the way we feel appropriate. Of course, we are then responsible for the consequences of our actions.

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As Rupert Sheldrake³⁰ explains, if these laws were rigid, they would not have allowed evolution to develop the way it did. The laws remain very flexible in allowing new forms of creativity to arise, and new forms to evolve – for ever-growing diversity to extend ceaselessly – as long as the main laws are not negated or contradicted.

I believe that the Intention guiding the Universe is a form of generosity that offers us, as human beings and other sentient beings, the best possible conditions of life we could imagine. Of course reality is complex and manifold and often a bit messy. Yet we must learn to trust this essential Intention, even if it is a Mystery that we cannot know fully. The experience of past generations has shown that this energy, the Ground of Being, is Graciousness. It is a positive energy that offers us love, peace and joy, rather than trying to impose a predetermined future or obliging us to act in a particular way.

As Indian Zen teacher Fr AMA Samy SJ puts it (not a literal quotation): Reality is a Mystery. Everybody will agree with this statement; we know so little about the true essence of our world and the meaning of life. This Mystery is Graciousness. This second statement cannot be proved, only experienced.

The radical and surprising respect of the Ground of Being for our own freedom and personal responsibility means that everything is possible in our lives to the measure of our own understanding and intention, but at the cost that we must cope with the consequences of our choices and behaviours.

True love cannot impose itself: it chooses to be self-giving and powerless

The Ground of Being does not impose anything upon us. As its essence is love, its presence remains fundamentally discreet, almost imperceptible, even hidden – in a certain way powerless – its true

30 Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature*, Crown Publishing Group NY, 1988.

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intention is to be freely answered. Pure love can in no way dominate; it only offers itself in abundance in the hope of being freely chosen by the one to whom it is offered, even at the risk of not being recognised. Thus this essential Intention does not try to control us, either. The source of life chooses to be powerless.

This intentional, radical self-restraint of its powerful might, which opens an unlimited space for our personal and collective freedom, neither excludes nor tries to prevent harm or evil (or any act in general) done by us; this is the basic principle of self-restraint of the Source in the name of our freedom of will and of conscience.

True compassion is a force that freely decides to become powerless because it cannot impose anything without betraying its own nature. This does not mean it has no power, but its power is not used to control or to impose. Life can only thrive when it chooses to become powerless. Love expresses itself as this independent energy that cannot be forced upon us; it is freely self-giving and we can choose to respond to it if we want to. Powerlessness also means recognising and accepting our own fragility and vulnerability, and allowing others to perceive them too. This does not deprive us from fully *being*. Quite the reverse.

The invisible order and apparent powerlessness of the Universe is based on the extremely subtle and discreet presence of love. Most of the time it remains completely hidden, but it is always present, always acting and giving. Our role as human beings is to recognise and identify this presence; to discover who or what it is. And then we can create personal links with it (Him or Her), and harmonise with the essence of this energy that is the Source of all. Creation is a permanent movement of transformation, rather than a single act giving birth to all things.

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02 – A vision that is subjective and yet in harmony

We are born in a specific, limited context that marks our starting point and opens further onto the vastness of Truth

The awareness that there is an essential Presence guiding the Cosmos deeply changes the way we live. Although the essence of this Presence remains a Mystery (despite all the various teachings trying to explain it), we see that the Cosmos is forged by a general perspective that gives meaning to life. We can try to harmonise all of our activities, intentions and choices with this perspective.

Each of us is far from being a universally conscious being. We are all born in defined contexts of time, space, language, family, race, culture, religion, etc. that we did not choose. We each start our lives and our spiritual journeys at a unique and specific point, and we are therefore marked and defined by our original context that seems, by its own limits, to reduce our personal possibilities for the future. We could say that this specific character has hidden the true essence of life from us; but equally it has also revealed, day by day, what life is about – not in general terms but in small details that progressively reveal glimpses of the larger picture.

The place of our birth, with all its predefined settings, is truly and inevitably the distinct root of our growth; it is the specific compost in which we are rooted and which nourishes us from the start. Although this starting point is very specific and never perfect, we are nevertheless free to grow branches in all directions as far as we wish to, and especially in the way which seems to respond to our deepest needs and intuitions, as well our originality. Our specific starting point truly aids our growth, more than limits it, because it nourishes us with specificity and originality. Of course the dysfunctions we

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inherit along with our context do not help us escape from predetermined perspectives, but the potential of reinterpretation remains complete, in principle.

We inherit the wisdom of previous generations' experience

The personal experiences of our ancestors, collected over many generations, have come together, as much in their contradictions as in their convergences, to build a kind of larger fresco of what we, as humankind or an ethnic group, believe the world is. Our social setting (community, culture, civilisation) has organised the accumulated experience of past generations into different cultural heritages and social constructs to explain the world and initiate new generations into the complex visible and invisible reality, bringing them to the level of knowledge, awareness and wisdom their community has reached. This heritage is extremely rich, allowing each of us to hit the ground running rather than having to rediscover what matters in life for ourselves, from scratch. In this way we are all initiated (in our families of origin, at school, in spiritual communities, or simply through everyday life) into the accumulated knowledge of our own culture, whether through daily interactions, science, psychology, sociology, philosophy, ethics, arts, spirituality, etc.

The many threatening twists of inherited teaching need to be undone

Our heritage (science, religion, art, culture, etc.) is very rich, but it is also (often powerfully) influenced and deformed by the negative aspects of our ambiguous common humanity. Because of fear or anger, we may lose touch with our shared roots and start to fight each other; or try to dominate the weaker members of our community; or exclude foreigners in the name of some well-rooted false beliefs

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anchored in heritage. Science, religion, art and culture are, in their past and present forms, very powerful illustrations of this major and divisive twist due to our human awkwardness.

Science, religion and culture have participated in distorting our common vision as much as they have shaped it positively.

- 1) Science, at first a tool of wonder and discovery of our environment for the common good, has a bias towards cold, impersonal measurement of the surrounding world – leading to a basically materialist understanding of our universe. It has also led to the unrestricted use of technologies, with little consideration for the right purposes, adequate means and consequences they may imply for our natural and social environment.
- 2) Religion, in its bias, has frequently generated a kind of regressive understanding of the Universe. All too often it tries to offer simplified answers and settle people as docile, rather than trying to describe an unfathomable Mystery. It rarely dares to ask challenging questions or invite deep inner transformation.
- 3) Culture, and especially liberalism or humanism, propose the stimulating act of questioning the existing evolution of our societies, but due to their bias they concurrently create an image of man as a semi-god (the top species). This illusory perspective is doomed to fail, since it ignores the wider web of relationships and meanings beyond the mere interplay of social forces.

Our respective paths consist in personalising our heritage through questioning and experience

Each of us must personally re-examine the heritage of transmitted knowledge, in the light of our own experiences. We must make it personal, assimilating it in our own unique way. Our personal experiences are essential because they belong to the flow of everyday life. They offer us opportunities to bring back into the subtle dynamic of our own personal life all that we have inherited from external collective knowledge about our context (nature, society) and from general wisdom about the meaning of what matters most.

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By *personal experiences* I mean all aspects of our personal life in our interaction with the world, with the others or with ourself. Experiences are not only material (everyday life) but also include how we interpret what we observe, the different states of our own mind, and our emotions and thoughts. Experiences are at the same time experiences of matter, of the body, of the mind, of the soul and of the spirit. They are not only pragmatic and mechanical but also highly psychological, intellectual, spiritual, etc.

The subtle qualities of knowledge and wisdom from our heritage are living forces and cannot be pinned down as abstractions. They can only exist and be active if they are truly flowing through our own lives. This is why our personal reinterpretation of the social heritage (science, psychology, culture, wisdom, etc.) is an essential task for each of us, in order to bring them to life in our own perceptions. Everything can be questioned; there is no taboo. We must dare to question anything passed on through heritage: Is the Earth flat? Is God a creation of man? Why is the sky blue? We are free to recreate our own understanding of life by reinterpreting science, technology, psychology, philosophy, the arts, spirituality, etc.

Yet despite this freedom to shape our own understanding, the harmony of the Universe remains what it is and cannot be changed, even by our most powerful means, and still less by our projections. Our position can only be mere subjectivity (respective personalisation) – because of our unique personal experience and the specific context in which we develop – but we are also constrained (or at least challenged) by the impersonal and objective forces of Reality, over which we have no influence. None of us can redefine our own truth without trying to conform to universal Truth.

On one hand there is flexibility in our personal interpretation and in the experiences we seek (this is the subjective aspect) but, on the other hand, we need to remain in, or find, harmony with the whole (this is the objective aspect). We cannot reinvent the world at will!

We assimilate and personalise our human heritage through a process of individuation as we learn to interpret what we have perceived and observed through experience. The way we apprehend our

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environment goes through a chain of transformations. We capture and interpret the signals emitted by our environment in order to integrate these signs and their meanings into our existing perspective of life. Our perspective also evolves based on the new information acquired. The transformations are as follows:

- 1) Things (facts) happen around us and within ourselves. We perceive them through our six senses (i.e. the five senses plus the mind) and we organise or re-combine a first image of what happened by making the synthesis of, or recombining, the impressions these distinct and specialised senses have communicated to us through their separate channels (hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting). Perception is the first transformation.
- 2) We interpret these perceptions and try to give meaning to the new material, by relating it to what we have experienced in the past and what we have learned in general, according also to our inner state of emotion or our capacity to keep distance (or not) from what happens to us. Interpretation is the second transformation.
- 3) We make a choice (or choices) in response to what we have perceived and interpreted. Choice is the third transformation. This choice then generates action or non-action, which constitutes in turn a further fact. Thus begins another chain of transformation.

We can see that this chain of transformation is far from delivering a trustworthy representation of the original external fact. It is our subjective way of transforming reality into perception, interpretation and meaning. Interpretation is not a scientific rational move, although it does use all of our rational faculties. Emotions and feelings, especially unconscious ones, also affect in this chain of transformation; intuition, memory and imagination too.

The role of religion and spirituality: both explanation and transformation, but mainly transformation

In this process of reinterpreting our heritage and finding our own path, religion plays an important role that is nowadays too often rejected. This is because institutional religion (which differs from

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religion in general) often degrades into simplistic teachings that aim more at controlling believers than at offering a true path of liberation.

First we need to understand the difference between religion and spirituality.

- Spirituality is our personal experience or relationship with the divine, with the sacred dimension of life.
- Religion is the teachings organised or formalised over the centuries, into rituals and dogmas, in order for our ancestors to transmit what they learned about spirituality.

This teaching or translation is strongly influenced by their own subjective experience and deeply shaped by the culture and attitudes of each past century, especially by social and political constraints (the will for control and domination) that had nothing to do with the true content of the message. But, beyond this negative influence, it is nevertheless mainly fostered by a will to transmit, i.e. paradoxically to express in words and principles what, by essence, cannot be translated into words and principles. It is important to understand this deep contradiction; it makes religion's role very challenging.

These two categories of influence (the marks of historical conditions and the will for clear expression) show us that religious messages are only a starting point, a finger giving a direction in which to search, rather than perfect and complete expressions of the truth. This means we each have to evolve from religion (elementary teaching) to spirituality (better understanding through personal experience). The basic explanation helps us to catch up with the present state of knowledge; then we may delve into a deeper, more personal relationship with the divine. The finger pointing the direction is not the whole truth – it proposes a possible starting place for personal evolution; for how to become more ourselves. Of course there is no clear separation between religion and spirituality – they meet in the observable expressions of our faith and hope (whether for example in social action, in ethics, in celebration or in prayer).

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On the other hand religion plays a double role. It can be understood as both a translation and a transformation:³¹

- 1) It is a translation (with its own language, myths, stories and teaching) in that it explains how the world and the Universe are, and how life “works”; and why they are as they are. It also proposes a way for us to *be* in the world and Universe. This is the explanatory aspect.
- 2) On the other hand, religion also proposes a path of personal transformation and liberation from illusions and false desires. This is the aspect of personal evolution and deepening of consciousness.

These dimensions also meet – there is no clear line distinguishing one from the other. Religions are both translation and transformation at the same time. But we may nevertheless choose to follow one path more than the other path because, although these two ways are common to the spiritual path, they nevertheless lead in very different directions. One leads us to accept the world as it is; the other leads us to personal transformation.

The first path can be very simplistic, a reduced system that answers any question and avoids any form of challenge – this is the primitive and regressive aspect of religion. But religion can also lead us to the second path, daring us to question everything and calling for a radical practice of life that relies mainly on a perception of meaning beyond appearances. The second path is nevertheless extremely concrete because it leads us to adopt different behaviours in the present world. People like Francis of Assisi or Gandhi took this path. Because of their deep spiritual understanding of the world, they adopted very different attitudes and behaviours compared with common people. This is radical transformation. In our own process of reinterpreting our heritage, we have to situate ourselves between

31 This distinction is inspired by Ken Wilber: *One Taste*, Shambala Publications, Boston, 2000.

these two poles of extreme translation or extreme transformation. We get to choose where.

We need to forge a personal vision as a wider frame for our life

Our need for a subjective approach to life goes much further than assimilating and personalising universal heritage and wisdom. The process of individuation cannot be limited to observing and interpreting the world as an external reality; it is also essential that we find our own personal rootedness in this world, and progressively forge a personal vision to guide us in making our own choices in everyday life. This need for a wider vision includes our capacity to see where we are going, personally or collectively, and our ability to take a stand – to make specific personal choices, and act in line with these choices, having the courage to remain true to our aspirations, even if we pay a price for doing so.

In true personal growth, we cannot avoid suffering. We do not search for suffering but it inevitably stands on our path when we commit to a wider vision. Trials also help us to grow in consciousness and spirit, especially if we can make sense of them.

We believe (because we experience it constantly when we listen) that we have an inner voice that inspires us. This inner voice or intuition is the spirit (or Spirit) that generates and nourishes our creativity and clear-sightedness. It is a precious guide with nothing supernatural about it; on the contrary, it is a completely natural part of human nature. As an expression of the Ground of Being deep within, it does not impose anything upon us; it inspires us to have insight, to be more imaginative, more sensitive, more daring and more committed to truth or love. We have all experienced these inner surges or insights whose origin we struggle to identify.

One of the most fascinating aspects of inspiration by Spirit is that it is completely subjective; it is an interpretation of a sign that is hardly

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tangible. The sign itself can never be proved, and the interpretation we make of this sign still less. Yet the sign is nevertheless very real (at least to people who follow a spiritual path) and to ignore it simply because it is not clearly graspable would be to miss something essential. We must take the risk of interpreting and trusting that which we can never be fully certain of. This is called trust, or faith.

The inner voice is accessible to everyone who wants or dares to walk the path; we each have it within ourselves.

The path of freedom does not consist in doing what we please, but in living in the truth

This deep rootedness in inspiration by the Spirit and an authentic and personal relationship to truth are essential. In our modern Western society we have made individualism our supreme virtue in the name of a twisted understanding of personal freedom. But it is a great deceit. Our contemporary motto is: do as you please and stop doing what you do not like. This is purely narcissist behaviour, focusing only on the ego (the false self) and short-term pleasure.

Our freedom to be authentic needs to be rooted in truth if we want true liberation. We cannot just reinvent the world in our own image and to suit our will. Being free does not mean doing whatever pleases us, but being able to accept truth as it is and the Universe as the great whole into which we must integrate. True freedom is the ability to renounce one's own wilfulness because there is a higher will that creates life as it is. To oppose this will is like denying gravity; the price is heavy when one falls. To oppose this will under the pretext that we know better is to oppose life. According to Russian Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov, "Freedom is the path, truth is its content".³²

32 As quoted earlier, Paul Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, New City Press, New York, 1979.

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The path of living in the truth opens onto the richest possible experiences in life. Renouncing one's own will is not a restricting resignation that renounces opportunities for creative living. On the contrary, it is a deep awareness not to accept destructive social constructs. It is the great step of total openness to authentic freedom: the capacity to live life to the full, as it is offered, or to restore it to what it is meant to be, i.e. without personal hang-ups! Once our personal wilfulness is out of the way, we are truly free to seek truth, justice, peace, love and joy as the true essence of life. This is far from resignation. It is grounded in truth more than in our personal false preferences. Yet it remains a personal choice to be in tune with the essence of life as we understand it. Instead of being based on stubborn wilfulness, it is nourished by open willingness. This is how subjectivity can lead to freedom, once it is liberated from social pressure, from personal twists of vision, and from illusory hang-ups.

The perception of two cohabiting realities

Our personal path is subjective. We can only discover the meaning of life in a personal, experiential and therefore subjective way. The true essence of our being is not intellectual knowledge that can be transferred in words, through teaching. It is a personal experience that cannot be explained or learned about. It can only be lived – experienced in one's own guts.

There are two realities:

- 1) The reality we experience in our daily lives when we have to cope with the material world, i.e. having to eat, to clothe and shelter ourselves and our dependents. This is a rational and physical context that imposes its laws of physics, mechanics, gravity, attraction and repulsion, and others. It is the material world we see around us; it appears directly. In this world, we tend to identify with our body-mind-memory because it accompanies

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us everywhere and we cannot be without it. We are incarnated beings living in a physical envelope managed by our mind.

- 2) But we are more than just this envelope, as rich as our incarnation can be in impressions, skills, faculties, insights, etc. Beyond these external appearances and the body-mind-memory with which we tend to identify, there is an invisible intelligence, a subtle energy and a discreet will that together give a different impulse to our daily life. We do not need to be aware of its presence and action, because it does not depend on us and exists regardless; in the same way as the earth continues to circle around the sun, whether we know it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, whether we think of it or not. In this other form of reality we do not identify with our body-mind-memory, although they continue to accompany us everywhere we go; instead we perceive ourselves as part of something much bigger. We become aware of our precious relationship with the universe, perceiving that we are constantly nourished by life and that this life energy is the core of our existence. We become aware that we do not lead our life as independent individuals, but rather that life happens to us. We are not truly the actors but rather the participants or spectators of something that happens to us. This does not mean we are passive. We need to participate fully in this extraordinary event of life, and this requires all of our attention and awareness.

Clearly, we can exist without being aware of the second form of reality, just coping with material issues and understanding life as a struggle out of which we intend to get the best. But perennial wisdom, i.e. the wisdom that has penetrated most cultures, traditions or religions for millennia and is common to most of humanity, teaches us that there is more than this material world. We remain fully free and responsible for the way we perceive what happens to us and how we react to what is offered to us at any instant. In this way the Intelligence and Presence that fosters life never constrains

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us; it reveals glimpses of a more subtle reality and we remain free to interpret these insights as we wish – or even to ignore them.

We have to “choose” whether we are spiritual beings who have a human experience or whether we are human beings who can have a spiritual experience, as Teilhard de Chardin used to say in affirming the former rather than the latter. We are free to choose, but our choice does not change reality. It changes only the way we live our lives.

Metanoia: the radical turn-around of the mind

For me, life’s challenge is to break through the curtain of appearances. To take the best possible care of this world in order to better understand what has given shape to it. We have to perceive the energy that is life itself, and which animates everything, from bacteria to galaxies.

This is what true spirituality searches for: the real meaning and essence of life. When we experience the necessary breakthrough that allows us to perceive, at the same time, the reality of our physical world and the truth that animates it, we undergo a deep transformation of mind. It can be called a radical turn-around of the mind, metanoia, enlightenment, satori, conversion, revelation, breakthrough, etc. There are many words to describe it, but none can truly express what it is; it must be experienced personally. And even our personal experience is never complete, showing us only glimpses of this further reality.

There is nothing supernatural in such a turn-around. It is in our essence and we are called, as human beings, to undergo this deep change of mind. Maybe it is even the purpose of life. This essential quantum leap is radically subjective, but it is not a reinvention of the world; it is, rather, a total surrender to what is.

This radical turn-around of the mind (metanoia, in ancient Greek) brings a radical personal transformation; this is a total change of mind or enlightenment; we shift our main focus of attention from our

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mundane daily habits to deeper aspirations. I use the word *enlightenment* here on purpose, because it happens when we discover the deeper meaning and nature of life, or at least have a first taste of it. Enlightenment is only the radical shift; this means that it is only the first step – it is when we change our mind. This is only the beginning of the path. Then we must learn how to practise the other way, and go deeper. To remember; to try again and again. Enlightenment is the start of a long process. The mystery remains complete – we get a first glimpse of what it seems to be but nevertheless never grasp fully what it is truly. And we feel called to investigate this new world. It is a long path, with no end.

This breakthrough results in a radical shift of interest and attention. We are no longer deeply concerned with our individual comfort or pleasure, or our short-term projects (although they remain in the background), because they now seem rather irrelevant or accessory; by contrast we concentrate on this presence that nourishes our existence. It is no longer “what can I get” that matters, but “what is happening and how may I be more deeply in touch with this mysterious dimension of life?”

In this deep transformation one leaves behind most egocentric concerns and becomes passionate about discovering the essence of life. Of course this is no intellectual or academic search, through talks and books, but direct personal experience with the substance of life. It is not an esoteric approach, but rather a very pragmatic way of delving into reality as an unknown and hidden dimension. The most amazing thing about the experience of life is that, to experience it, one does not need anything other than to be alive: breathing in and out, and perceiving what happens in us and around us. This is the simplest possible activity, and is accessible to anybody who is alive, as soon as basic subsistence is ensured. There is total equality in “being”, once one is fed and safe, no matter whether one is poor or rich, young or old, educated or illiterate.

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When the breakthrough happens, one stops being interested by mundane comfort or pleasures (which can nevertheless still be felt and enjoyed) and looks for deeper experiences. One can have these experiences just by being totally present and aware of what is – by becoming a witness that observes, experiences and enjoys what is happening without judging whether it is suitable or not, nice or painful, enjoyable or not. It is just life and one learns to enjoy it as such, whatever comes. One becomes, from inside, the witness and participant in what is, without discrimination. It is like being, from inside, and as a full participant, the spectator of an unending show.

The turn-around of one's way of living

In my mind, this change of attitude brings three major transformations in our way of living, which I described briefly in the first chapter:

- 1) **Simplicity-humility-listening:** I have shown how the first transformation detaches us from any superfluous need or action. Simplicity is the strict stripping away of anything that is not necessary or essential. It is a form of self-chosen poverty that does not deprive; on the contrary, it offers much more as it allows us to perceive reality (life) in its barest form. Simplicity is the way to make our way of life more straightforward, detaching from anything we do not need. It is a form of liberation, allowing the essential to be perceived when our mind and heart are no longer overloaded by the superfluous. We can then better perceive what matters most, and be attentive to what happens to us. We learn to listen better and our awareness can grow because no unnecessary burden loads it. As we grow in maturity, we discover that we have ever fewer needs but that each of these essential needs become more and more important for our evolution. This journey into simplicity also reveals a new awareness of our limits and leads us to a deeper form of humility, which generates a new clear-sightedness. We no longer need to

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hide behind false derivatives (the many shadows that are not the original); we can better discern our own lacks and flaws and we are freer to open to the unknown or to what is complementary to us. This is a way to purify our way of living – reducing our living conditions to the minimum (the restricted essential that matters most) in order to allow our environment (natural and social) to talk to and inspire us.

- 2) **Inclusiveness-adaptation-harmony:** I have shown how the process of simplification and our growth in awareness of our own limits lead us to open to others; we discover next that our own limitation is a great opportunity because it calls us to open to diversity and to discover true complementarity. We become keen to learn new ways, whether because we do not know or because we feel invited to discover other ways of looking at the same thing. This new openness to diversity and complementarity invites us to practise inclusiveness. Inclusiveness opens us not only to diversity but also to marginality. We discover that the down-trodden and excluded are rich in the same humanity as us. Otherness becomes a new form of enrichment. We learn to better listen and adapt, instead of imposing our own ways. We open to dialogue, as I described in the first chapter – all voices join in to make a more complete picture, like a mosaic where each stone is necessary to create the full image and expression. We also learn to adapt to the laws of life and nature, which teach us how to live in harmony with our environment. Adaptation is opposite of what we tend to do when we try to force the environment to conform to our tastes and wishes. Adaptation is also a form of simplicity since it recognises that life is the dominant energy that shapes our world. We renounce acting in a dominating way, so we can fit better into the environment and understand what it is and what it teaches us – without disturbing it. When we try to watch wildlife or birds, we do the same: we make ourselves almost invisible in order to observe without perturbing the life around us. We are no longer the dominators but the recipients of what is already given.

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We do not prevent our own nature or the true nature of others from arising. We become what we already are truly. As Hakuin Zenji's *Song of Zazen* says, "All beings by nature are Buddha, as ice is water. Apart from water there is no ice; apart from beings, no Buddha. How sad that people ignore the near and search for truth afar, like someone in the midst of water crying out in thirst."

- 3) **Solidarity-mutuality:** As consequence of the evolution in point 2, we may also learn to develop reciprocal relationships with others – relationships of equity and balance. With inclusiveness and adaptation, we learn that together we form a wider community, which has to take care of its cohesion and of all its members. The maturity of a society can be measured by the care it takes of its weakest members. In reciprocity there is as much quality flowing between two people one way as the other. Both partners get equally enriched, even if diversely. The meaning of living together is for people to be complementary, recognised for what they are and valued for what they contribute. There is no hierarchy between contributions, because they are all necessary. We become members of the same community and start to form a cohesive body in which each of us plays a unique, irreplaceable role. Not only do we become responsible for the wellbeing of each other but the whole community is also in charge of caring for each of us.

This turn-around of mind, which integrates simplicity, humility, inclusiveness, adaptation, solidarity and mutuality, brings total surrender. We no longer need to master the context. We can adapt and observe, being part of everything without losing anything. Everything and everybody is a precious gift. There is no longer desire, no longer the need to accumulate or to appear in a special way. We learn to listen attentively and eventually even forget ourselves as a distinct being, becoming one with the other, one with the universe. One can just be, and nothing else. Be an eye that sees, an ear that listens, a tongue that tastes, a nose that smells, a skin that

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feels. All that matters is the taste, the smell, the sound, the vision, the touch. This is life in its purest form, stripped of the superfluous. Just loving what is.

It is essential to insist here that daily life continues as before, but radically changed. One lives, at the same time, in both of the two realities I described earlier:

- 1) In the duality of the material world, going to the market place, drawing one's own water and sawing one's own wood – as the Buddhist tradition likes to say.
- 2) In total unity with the whole universe, with all sentient beings, in a deeper dimension in which one remains rooted, in the deeper essence of which one is conscious. It is evidently the same essence that always was, is and will be; but the difference is that one is conscious of it and that this light brings a new vision of life. This is why we call it enlightenment.

We live – at one and the same time – in both duality and unity. And they are in tension with each other, not in contradiction.

03 – The path of liberation to higher consciousness

We have to make a clear choice between egocentric comfort and the search for truth

In general our attitude, before we experience this radical turn-around of mind, implies an egocentric existence centred on our own personal desires, pleasures and wants, or on the desires of our dependents, while the new attitude very soon questions how we handle our relationships with others and how we integrate into our own lives a search for personal inner growth and transformation. We become hetero-centred (from *hetero* = *other* and *centred* = *focused*; or in

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other words *focused on the others*), which means no longer considering only our self-centred point of view but perceiving a more global complex reality or process involving many other beings and influences. This new way of looking at the world takes us onto a path “upwards, deeper and beyond”. We learn to see globally, as if from above, taking on a general view that forms independently of our egocentric self. We get a world-centric view – one could say an overview – almost as if we were not involved, or at least not conscious of our own subjectivity. And yet this path will also paradoxically connect us more strongly with the “mundane” reality of everyday, in a meaningful way.

Permanent change calls us to make a clear choice for personal transformation

In nature, as in life in general, nothing is permanent; everything is changing ceaselessly. As I see it, the key issues in our society and our personal lives are all deeply related to the question of whether we accept this character of permanent change. To whether we search for inner transformation and social change (because evolution is the essence of life), or whether we deny this constant flow of change and try to resist it. Without a personal inner need or urge for transformation, we become resistant and refuse to evolve. An inner quest inevitably leads us on a path of discovery that radically opens new perspectives of evolution, allowing us to live a much deeper, more meaningful life.

Step 1: knowing oneself and accepting our own “pathologies”

One of the first steps on the path of transformation is coming to know ourselves – with all our inner contradictions, skills and aptitudes, unsolved knots and personal wounds, whether inherited or self-inflicted. We all have personal “pathologies” fostered by our

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past, which have become characteristics of our person. We need to accept them and work with them, see them for what they are and unknot the knots. Most of them can be addressed and will not stand in the way of our journey (or personal realisation), once we decide to look at ourselves honestly. As a bonus, we can also perceive our real potentials and special skills or gifts.

Step 2: distinguishing our false self from our True Self

A further step is to discover what our false self is and, by contrast, how our True Self acts within us. The false self is a social construct based on the ego identity. It is a necessary defence, an artificial envelope that protects us from external aggressions or wounds – a kind of protective shell that also imprisons us. Although we need it for everyday life, the ego shell is not our true being: we are more than our body, our mind, our memory and our social roles, but all too often we identify with these as our all-encompassing, reductive identities. All these aspects of our lives are parts of what we are, but our deeper being is beyond these formal appearances.

The proof of our more complex identity and reality is that we can observe our body, our mind and our memory and the way they function or what they produce. Because we can observe them, we are aware that we are not them but that they are only some (minor?) parts of us; just as we can look at our hand and know we are not the hand, even though the hand is part of us (our body). By analogy, we may say that the core of our being is beyond these formal aspects of our person, for the very reason that we can observe them.

Our True Self is beyond the social construct of the false self; it draws its identity from our relationship with the Ground of Being or the deeper Consciousness that animates us. The True Self is the actualisation of our deeper essence and identity, which move our being and take root in this mysterious source of the Ground of Being; we subtly experience it but never can grasp it clearly. In Buddhism it

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is called *Buddha nature*; in Christianity it is called *the image of God in us*. It acts in us without us knowing exactly what it is. We are much more than a closed shell (like the false self); we are more like an open skeleton that supports us and is animated by a form of life energy (kundalini?). Although we perceive it as an inner force, this energy comes from elsewhere (i.e. it is not generated by our own body), or maybe from deeper inside. Because of our necessary openness (the skeleton and not the shell), we remain constantly exposed to the essential energy that nourishes and inspires us, and to other rich external influences.

In a simplified way we could say that our lives run through three different levels: being, doing and having. Being is evidently the most essential because it is rooted in our essence, while doing is experimental – a means of relating with the world where we live as incarnated beings. This incarnation is a privilege because it makes perceivable what otherwise is not visible (see the metaphor of the wind I used in section 01 of this chapter) to show that the Ground of Being can only be perceived in its effects (like the leaves of the tree that the wind moves) and not as such, because it remains invisible (immaterial). Having is the less important level; it does not provide any, or very little, experience or life.

- 1) Being is the first (in time and importance) essential experience of life: breathing in and out, feeling what is inside and around us, being aware of oneself and one's surroundings, just being a witness of what is, and nothing else. Or even better: a witness of being just a Being.
- 2) Doing is action that provides experiences and interactions with our surroundings. It should be rooted in being in order to make life a deeper experience. Doing without awareness is like running on automatic pilot.
- 3) Having is of little importance once one has ensured the livelihood of oneself and of one's own dependants. Rather than having (owning), we need preferably easy and direct access to essential means that open on a meaningful experience of life; this could easily be through shared property. In our modern world focused on materialism, having has too often become an

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escape into a form of security that relies on material status more than on true essence (being) and experience (doing).

Step 3: beyond desires, discerning what is a construct of the mind and what are our true needs

Another step in our growth is to review our desires and needs. Much of our suffering is “self-inflicted” because it depends on the way we have “chosen” to look at the world. It is impossible for us to change the world, but possible to change the way we look at it.

“When we observe the nature of...” our mind – this is an expression (a way to address an issue) the Dalai Lama frequently uses in his teaching – we notice how much our mind creates the reality in which we live. Our perception is shaped by our desires and by what we want the world to be in order to satisfy these desires. The world we see, or rather our relationship to it, is much less defined by what it is than by what we believe it is; because of our emotions, feelings, expectations or desires. When we become aware of how our mind creates an illusory reality, we also learn that we have to educate our mind and to discover a way of being that does not depend on satisfying all its caprices. We learn to distinguish the ability of the mind to guide us in rational choices from its tendency to generate fictitious pictures of our surroundings. We learn to be cautious of its ability to create a false world (i.e. a mere fiction). This change in awareness, which reveals the relative ineptitude of our mind’s creations, has a deep impact on the way we experience life. We become witnesses rather than actors, or, in other words, we focus our attention more on the way we relate to the world than on the way the world responds to our expectations.

As I described earlier in discussing the chain of transformation (facts-perceptions-interpretations-choices), our perception and understanding of the world is more the product of our mind than the objective translation of what it is. Despite being an unreliable product fostered by our mind, our subjective perception is the main driver of our knowledge and behaviour. We have no other tool! Once

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we observe this systematic twist and become aware that our mind is ceaselessly constructing a world that does not exist except in our head, we can learn to observe our mind as a creative energy that is not always reliable because it continually invents new ideas and concepts.

For instance, when we hear a rooster crow we immediately forge an image of it according to what we know about roosters. It will appear white in our mind if our own rooster is white, although the one that crows is perhaps red. And if we do not have any ready-made image in our memory, our mind will immediately create one which will be pure invention. The mind is afraid of the void. It will invent anything in order to avoid revealing its own ineptitude.

Most of our own representations and desires now appear to be irrelevant – they are purely creations of the mind (for which we have no existing data in memory storage) and not rooted in our essential being. We can observe in ourselves how daily consumption to satisfy made-up needs becomes a way of escaping the true issues of life.

Growing from egocentric to hetero-centric vision, into higher (or deeper) consciousness

Life is a long process of growth into deeper consciousness. We slowly learn to observe our interaction with the world; how our mind functions and how our desires arise. This evolution and learning curve can be observed from early childhood.

For instance, we discover first (a few months after birth) that we are distinct from our surroundings, and then (another few months later) distinct from our mother. At a later stage (around 8 years old) we also learn that other people are not only distinct from us but have their own personality, perceptions, perspectives and will. We discover the power of conceptual thought and introspection. Our being continues to develop, throughout the whole of our human life, by stages into further experiences of higher levels of consciousness. We come to perceive and experience the Universe as a whole of which we are a part and with which we are one.

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Growth of consciousness leads us from a limited, egocentric, separate perception of our person to a hetero-centric (or world-centric) perception. The world comes to be perceived as a whole, rather than from our specific individual point of view. This wider perception develops into an extended sense of union with the wider reality – there is no longer “inside and outside”, “me and the world”, “me and them” but only a global consciousness of being in which all parts are integrated. There is, eventually, no more observer and observed, no more seer and seen; there is only One consciousness.

Ken Wilber³³ wrote a brilliant description of this maturation process in nine successive stages. Although it is challenging, I try here to summarise his description. For a deeper understanding, I recommend his book *A Brief History of Everything*. It is interesting to observe how here the Without (physical complexity) and the Within (depth of consciousness) of Teilhard de Chardin evolve together, hand in hand. Wilber’s nine stages are:

A) Birth of the self:

- 1) Hatching of the physical self (4 months): the baby discovers that s/he is distinct from the physical environment.
- 2) Birth of the emotional self (15–24 months): the baby discovers that s/he is emotionally distinct from his/her environment (separate self, especially from the mother).
- 3) Birth of the conceptual self (2–4 years): images and concepts emerge in the mind and represent an external reality (the idea “dog” as a concept or image of what a dog is in reality).

B) Rational stages:

- 4) Birth of the role self (socio- or ethno-centric / 6–7 years): the child learns that the other is in a different position, sees the same objects but from another angle (e.g. from the back or the side) and acts differently. S/he discovers his/her own roles (rules, scripts) in an attempt to adapt to the social context and learns how to be in tune with them (conformism), i.e. in harmonious relation with others. This does not extend further than to the group to which one belongs (my tribe).

33 Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, Shambala, Boston, 1996.

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- 5) Hetero-centric or world-centric or mature ego (11–15 years): capacity develops to imagine different worlds and discover the impact of thoughts onto perception and behaviour; ability to examine one's own thoughts (introspection, thought about thoughts). Develops judgement; critical attitude about inherited roles and values. Moral stance moves from conventional (the rule) to post-conventional (beyond rules). Evolution from ethnocentric (the tribe) to world-centric (beyond Us/Them): discovery of diversity and multiculturalism. Only a minority of people reach this stage.
- 6) Body–mind integration (Centaur as metaphor of unity between the horse-body and the man-mind): the self adds up the parts and sees networks of interactions. The self is conscious of the body and the mind as experiences; discovery of the role of observer; the self is looking at the world, the body and the mind. It is integrated in its networks of responsibility and service.

C) Transpersonal stages: transition from the gross-oriented reality into the trans-personal domains

- 7) Psychic: awareness not confined exclusively to the individual ego. The observer disappears because he becomes one with the surroundings. He does not look at the mountain – he is the mountain (nature mysticism). “I am.”
- 8) Subtle: experience of inner peace, light and blissful state (divine mysticism); experience of pure love. Interpretation of this real depth-experience is yet needed.
- 9) Causal: going directly to the source of the observing self or witness. Absorption in the non-manifest and non-dual; subtle identifiable state of awareness as un-manifest absorption or cessation; pure Self and pure Emptiness. “No more Seer.” “One Taste.”

The path to higher consciousness should lead, as a priority, to inner transformation

In this “escalation” through the successive stages of higher consciousness, there is nothing to perform. There is no prestige either.

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This is not the place to describe these different stages of consciousness in more detail. The summary of Ken Wilber's levels is sufficient. In his own way, with an emphasis on the progression and integration of these different stages, Wilber's description sometimes resembles (a bit awkwardly!) a kind of race towards a performance. But this is a misleading interpretation – there is nothing to achieve on this path; it is rather an urge to dismantle our own strategies of achievement (performance) and of resistance (denial or non-adaptation) and to open to the unknown and to the Ground of Being.

This is no special glory in getting to higher (or deeper) levels of consciousness. It is just a choice (a question of life and death, for us today) to be open, to sit where we are and to reconnect with our deeper essence. Anybody can do that if they want to.

It is like going to Timbuktu. There is no glory in getting there, but it cannot be done if one does not decide to start moving that way, by finding the right camel or truck or bus that will take one there. And when one arrives there, on the edge of the river Niger, one notices that one was already there. But it is nevertheless good to become aware of it. There is a deep joy and revelation that allows one to be truly and fully in the here and now.

What matters most here is that this “ladder of consciousness” is no real ladder. There is no climbing to be done, although there is a progression into higher consciousness taking place; everything is already within us, although the discipline of following the path is certainly necessary. We must understand that the essence of this path is not the “performance”. Instead, we must make an effort *not* to focus so much on our own projects and achievements. For the path is surrender – accepting our powerlessness and that life happens to us more than we lead it. It resides in the progress of our own transformation, like a caterpillar surrendering to become a butterfly. What is the point of reaching the top rung of the ladder if we are not transfigured?

If we accept it as a metaphor, progression on the ladder brings a deeper discovery of what life is, in its essence. It should bring new insight while we evolve from an egocentric perception (as originally

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identified with our body-mind-memory) to a hetero-centric or world-centric view and an all-encompassing experience of unity with all sentient beings and the whole Universe.

We soon notice that this revelation is not so much the fruit of our effort but rather a gift of grace. When we open to the whole dimension of Mystery (deeper consciousness) we also open to the love that is the true essence of this world. When we learn what love truly is – the energy that leads the Universe – we are transformed into humble receivers of this wonder. We are no longer actors but only receptors with an ability to pass this sense of wonder on to others. This learning process is never exhausted – we are always at the beginning of the path.

The final aim is not the last rung of the ladder but this deeper metamorphosis that happens within, without us knowing really how to achieve it. It is given to us by grace. The transformation is more important than reaching the last rung, although they go partly together. It is better to be truly transformed and not reach the top of the ladder, than the contrary!

We will come back later to this evolution in consciousness, when we investigate the confusion between pre- and post-rational consciousness in our conventional rationalist approach to life.

The urge to become the witness of our own body, mind, emotions, thoughts and reactions

When, on this path of deeper consciousness, we thoroughly observe what happens in ourselves, we may notice that emotions, feelings, thoughts, representations, desires, pains, joy, imagination, etc. are not of our own production. They happen within us, like dreams do, as something we are not the agents or makers of, and which we cannot control. They arise in a mysterious way. Why did I feel this or that? How did this thought arise in me? How did I have this very creative

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idea? I did not make it happen but it happened in a part of me: in my body, in my memory, in my mind, in my heart, or elsewhere.

Of course it is then my responsibility to know what to do with these thoughts or emotions. In most cases we are driven by them, and they sometimes lead us where we do not want to go. But as we learn to observe and become aware of these processes in ourselves and others, we also become more able to impartially witness what happens within us and to use the energy of these ever-rising emotions as a creative rather than destructive power. For instance, instead of leading us on a destructive path, anger may energise us to become active defenders of the rights of the oppressed. We can wonder about these processes and marvel at how the mind can produce such strange and imaginative forms, even when they seem weird or unreliable.

Our dreams are probably among the most inventive forms we may “produce”. How does it happen? How could this form emerge and from where did it rise?

When we learn to become witnesses of all that happens in and around us, we can fully enjoy the beauty and creativity of all these never-ending processes, and no longer be driven by them. Rather than being slaves to their impact, we receive their deep wealth and meaning, even their pure absurdity, with joy and peace. It is great cinema! And at a further stage, there is no more “watching at”, because the watcher has dissolved and there is only One whole. There is only witnessing happening.

The awareness of a pure state of being brings inner peace and joy

In this way an important shift may happen in our own life: the awareness of a sort of pure state of being, of a deep inner peaceful joy, becomes the dominant dimension of our life. Doing and having recede into the background as more minor (almost anecdotal)

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dimensions; they remain important and serious in expressing who we are and in generating more love in the world, but are no longer our purpose, but rather our core experience of being. Our actions beautify our lives but our essence no longer relies on them, because we are now rooted in the Ground of Being. This is truly a very mundane experience (i.e. it seems *natural* – by opposition to *supernatural* or *miraculous* – in our daily life), but it has infinite depth. It is the core of inner peace and joy. It is the true experience of love in our very incarnated life.

The mysterious essence of life

This path of deeper consciousness and becoming a witness leads us to the partial discovery of what life is in its essence. Of course this search is without end because life will always remain a mystery. Yet the transformation in our way of perceiving ourselves and the surrounding world brings a fundamental change in our understanding of what life is. When we integrate the truth that life is a flow we cannot grasp, rather than something we achieve, we gain peace and joy – we can detach from our false desires and remain rooted in the deeper experience of life itself.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this progression on the path of liberation is that we never know where we stand. We cannot clearly evaluate our position on the ladder's rungs, for two reasons:

- First, these rungs are not distinct, but gradual and progressive.
- Second, we know already the quality of a further stage of evolution before we reach it. The stages can only be described because we already have them within ourselves. This inner knowledge, which has not yet been realised, leads and guides us on the path of liberation and transformation.

The solution is simple

Chapter 6:

Our embodiment in the world

04 – Integrating into natural cycles – belonging to a wider body

Relationships, not material issues, are the true substance of life

If what has been described here is true, the material aspects of life are then reduced to a very simple expression. What matters most is remaining in the flow, in being the swimmer in the river, fully aware of the energy of the river that sustains him/her. To remain fully aware, we no longer need to accumulate and own, but only to gain the subsistence or livelihood we need, which while simple is not limited to what keeps us alive physically; it also includes most of our emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs.

The great leap forward happens when we discover that life depends on developing the right quality of relationships – with our surroundings, with one another and with the source of life (the inspiration from our inner Being). Finally it becomes clear that relationships are the substance of life and that matter, although we constantly interact with it in our incarnation, is relatively

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insignificant – it is “only” the intermediary stuff, never the core. In becoming witnesses we become aware of all the bonds that link us to the whole Universe; we become one with it. The role of matter is not at all diminished by this fact; it needs to be reinterpreted, but it remains essential – matter is what makes the links and relationships visible and graspable. Consciousness cannot happen in a pure void. It needs matter. That is why we are incarnate beings.

Simplicity as the radical way of stripping the superfluous from life, and as the root of true generosity

We see then naturally how, in opposition to the trend of accumulation in our society, simplicity, self-limitation and generosity become the leading forces in handling material issues. We are no longer attached to possessions.

It is important to see that simplicity does not consist in just less material comfort. It is a fundamentally different way of perceiving life. Simplicity is a radical way of stripping life of everything that does not bring true joy and inner growth. It therefore opens us to life as an unexpectedly full experience. Comfort is a bubble that insulates us from life. We need to break the bubble in order to be in direct touch with Reality.

In poorer countries, we can observe how many people live in this way (mainly not by choice) and how it is in deep contrast with our own way of life, which relies so much on comfort. Without denying the harshness of a life in extreme poverty, we may still wonder where the smile of the young beggar girl in Delhi comes from.

This essential shift of focus from comfort to authentic and truthful experience reveal that the discovery and practice of simplicity are stages of our personal and collective development into deeper consciousness.

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The Universe as a book that shows us the path towards diversity, subjectivity, interdependence, meaning and depth

If the cosmos is a kind of book that we learn to read, we may identify the action of these basic laws of simplicity and generosity and decipher the deeper meaning of small things that our surroundings, and especially nature, make visible. Especially if we can see that a discreet and loving presence “hides” behind the visible signs we perceive and a very powerful wisdom reveals itself even in tiny details.

We can then notice, by contrast, how our modern society is impoverished by the constant search for more and tends to evolve in contradiction with, or in the opposite direction to, the cosmos. Our conventional way of living (sadly) seems to always choose the poorest possible ways of doing (i.e. the most meaningless – flatland) although the teaching of the Universe (or nature) shows us the path towards more diversity, complexity, complementarity, consciousness, subjectivity, community, depth and meaning.

Nature is an excellent teacher. It emphasises the following four main contrasts (among many others), which demonstrate how much our society is running against the laws of nature:

- 1) **Diversification:** Diversification generates an extraordinary variety in nature, where no two things are quite identical and diversity continually grows through new species; in this way nature shows us the path towards multiplicity and personalisation. By contrast, our society tends towards standardisation and globalisation.
- 2) **Subjectivity:** Intention and consciousness orient the evolution of the whole universe, aiming at a mysterious end we do not know; in this way nature shows us the path towards subjectivity, intention and accomplishment. By contrast, our society tends to make all choices equal and insignificant, without orientation and meaning.

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- 3) **Interdependence:** We are one body in complementarity and interdependence in the relationship of the You and Me; we can relate to each other in terms of differentiation, subjectivity and diversity, which make us ever more complementary and interdependent upon one another; in this way nature shows us the path towards communion and cooperation. By contrast, our society becomes more individualistic and competitive, encouraging struggle, egocentric accumulation and self-centred dominance.
- 4) **Depth:** Differentiation, subjectivity and communion (the 3 points above) lead us towards less materialism and more consciousness, less matter and more spirit; we become less focused on appearance and more on conscious content; in this way nature shows us the path towards discovering more depth and mystery. By contrast, our society tends to create a flat, materialistic landscape of undifferentiated freedom; this is flatland instead of an affirmed or consciously chosen hierarchy of values or clear priorities – your life being more important than my glass of wine, for example.

The laws of diversity and unity of the Universe, and the laws of interdependence of life

All that I have explained so far shows that the Universe is much more than a heap of resources we can exploit ceaselessly, without restriction. The same goes for nature. The universe, and more directly nature, are the wider bodies to which we belong, the larger entities with their own identity and intention, our mothers that embrace and nourish us, and on which we depend.

This means that we are not at all the masters of nature, and nor are we the final and supreme accomplishment of nature we believe ourselves to be, as the so-called top species. The world has not been created for our own enjoyment as we believe; just like other species, we are not entitled to take what we wish without giving anything back. The myth of our superiority has driven us for centuries, but it is far from true. Not only we are indivisibly part of nature but we are

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even, like a kind of parasite, very much at the periphery of the circles of interdependence. Humankind depends on all the other species (minerals, plants, animals) but none of them depends on us, except maybe in terms of consciousness, in which we are called to play a certain role.

The Ojibway tradition (North American Indian) describes the world in the form of successive concentric circles of different species which depend for their survival on the species represented in the preceding inner circles. In the first inner circle we have the minerals; then in the next circle the plants, which depend on the preceding circle (minerals); then the animals, which depend on the two inner circles (minerals and plants); then human beings come at the periphery, depending on all three inner circles (minerals, plants, animals).

As we belong to nature and the whole Universe, we have to respect their laws. I explained earlier how I believe the Universe is guided by an Intention that leads its evolution towards an aim without imposing a constraining will onto the free creatures that we are. This Intention translates itself into the reality we observe concretely and makes itself visible through all the laws – the laws of nature and life – which foster our world. These laws are the invisible threads that sew our reality.

Six main major laws of nature: intelligence, generosity, change, difference, cooperation and unity

The laws of nature are so numerous that it is impossible to list them all, but at least six major laws appear to be fundamental and dominant:

- 1) **Intelligence:** beyond many unaccomplished forms and temporal flaws, everything in the Universe has a meaning and a purpose.
- 2) **Generosity:** everything is given to us freely and abundantly – life, air, water, culture, inspiration, creativity, love, etc.

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- 3) **Evolution:** nothing is permanent; everything is meant to evolve in never-ending cycles of transformation, of death and new life.
- 4) **Difference:** our world is made of contrasting and almost antagonistic forces that combine and cooperate to keep one another in balance.
- 5) **Cooperation:** all parts of creation are complementary and need each other to survive and thrive.
- 6) **Unity:** despite differences and because of complementarity, the whole forms a unity that reveals a community towards which we all (in our diversity) tend as a further stage of our common evolution.

The tragedy is that our civilisation does everything possible, not only to resist these main laws, but also to create an antagonistic reality that denies this original reality. It would be much more adequate, fruitful and mature to let these laws lead us towards deeper accomplishment and personal or collective growth.

We need to integrate into the whole and adapt to these laws if we wish to know harmony

If we want to live in harmony with the Universe, integrating into the dynamic and orientation defined by its Intention, we must adapt to these laws. If not, we continue to swim against the stream and will eventually be destroyed – the whole is immensely more powerful than we are.

In order to stop destroying the source of our livelihood (exhausting resources, devastation, pollution, climate change, etc.) and in order to keep our natural surroundings in a state that does not change the nature of the teaching they address to us (the book about truth and Reality), we urgently need to make our ways of thinking and living more compatible with the equilibriums and laws of nature. As so much scientific research has proved, it seems that humankind can

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only live in true harmony with our natural surroundings, with one another and with ourselves, if we do our best to adapt to these fundamental laws and rhythms and learn how to act and create in “the spirit of nature”. This goes beyond the principles of ecology; it is a revolution of our deep beliefs and culture.

The necessary integration of all our activities into natural cycles (resources, wastes, energy)

We urgently need to integrate all of our activities into the many natural cycles of transformation (resources, wastes, re-creation, energy, evolution). This means much more than just restraining our consumption by detaching from superfluous desires. It means that each of our acts will have to radically comply with natural cycles, leaving no unresolved impact behind.

We can no longer remain independent judges of how we want to behave and how far we intend to adapt. Nature is our true ruler, imposing laws we have to respect and into which we must fit. We may always invent new ways of doing, but technology alone will never save us. These new technical ways of doing – even those with great potential in responding to the crisis – must also strictly respect the fundamental laws.

The ways we eat, build, dress, transport ourselves or obtain goods, all these many ways to satisfy our “needs”, must respect the laws of cycles: resources can only be consumed at the rate they reconstitute; wastes can only be released at the rate they can be absorbed or recycled. And, more radically, these processes of reconstitution or absorption must also be *qualitatively* integrated into the cycles and ways of nature. They must not disturb how the cycles run, for instance when wastes are discarded that cannot be absorbed or processed; or when our activities impact on our surroundings by destroying what makes them resilient, such as deforestation, which fundamentally changes the biotope of the place and condemns many

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species to disappear. It is also essential that these conditions be met by us all: privileges or exceptions can no longer apply to richer or more powerful people, actors or interests.

This requirement to integrate all our activities into natural cycles is an objectively drastic and powerful rule that will completely re-shape our behaviours and our social relationships. For instance any food coming from a long distance away, any clothes produced in conditions of exploitation, any standard of living that is above world average bio-capacity, any form of energy produced out of fuel combustion for heating, cooking or transport, etc. is no longer acceptable, since it overrides natural cycles.

Needs depend on means, which in turn depend on cycles. This new rule will radically transform the definition of our needs and desires. Luckily we have many tools to help us measure our quantitative and qualitative harmony with our environment, such as the ecological footprint, which measures our impact on the Earth (i.e. how many resources we consume and how much waste we generate).

The ecological footprint is measured as the theoretical total surface of ground needed, for each one of us, to produce the resources (such as food, forestry, fishing, building, energy, etc.) that we use to cover our needs according to the standard of living we have adopted.

It is simple: if our footprint is bigger than the available average world bio-capacity (1.6ha/person) we know that we are part of the problem; if it is smaller than this average, then we are part of the solution. In our rich Western countries the average footprint is 3 to 7 times bigger than it should be (around 11.3ha/person in Australia; 8.1ha/person in the US; 4.4ha/person in Europe). This means that we have to reduce our standard of consumption by a factor between 3 and 7 (and we speak here only of averages, not extremes; and only in terms of quantities, not qualities). This is a huge challenge! We need to learn from nature how to consume only what is available and to choose what matters most in life. The ecological footprint is of

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course only a quantitative approach, so it does not consider the qualitative integration of consumption into natural cycles.³⁴

Nowadays harmony is far from being practised. In rich countries we consume some 3 or 7 times (on average) what is truly and equitably available, or up to 50 times the average consumption of the “poorest half” of the world’s population.

Many people in our rich countries speak of demographic growth as being the source of increase and of excessive global consumption. They insist that the poorer countries, with their high birth rates, are the cause of the problem. This ignores the fact that a rich American consumes as much as perhaps 10,000 poor Bengalis! The rich are the problem, not the poor. Certainly an increase in consumers participates in increasing global consumption, but it is a gigantic twist of the problem to hold demography responsible – the main cause of the exhaustion of our planet is not overpopulation but over-production and over-consumption by the small minority of rich people (one-seventh or even one-tenth of the total population).

I have already described in the first chapter the striking contrast of wealth that exists between the 12% of world population who own 84% of world wealth and the half of world population (54%) who lives on only 1.4% of total wealth. The following estimate is very significant: After deducting about 1 billion of the richest consumers from the global population, we see that the remaining 85% of the world’s population (about 6 billion) barely consume more than 20% of the existing wealth, i.e. a level of consumption that is below the present bio-capacity of the planet. Hence the rich (us) are the problem.

The three measures of adaptation: integrating, finding harmony and living in radical simplicity

We may summarise our approach to nature with three parameters that allow us to measure the degree of our adaptation.

34 For more information or complete data (free of charge) see, as already mentioned:

<http://www.footprintnetwork.org>

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- 1) **Integration:** The first one is how much we integrate into natural cycles (resources and wastes), both quantitatively and qualitatively. This is the basic principle of ecology: not to consume more than the environment can produce; and not to disturb the environment with more wastes than it can absorb, at the same rhythm as we produce them.
- 2) **Harmony:** The second principle consists in measuring how much we listen to nature as a teacher; and how much our behaviours are inspired by the rules of nature and life that observing nature allows us to discern. These are rules such as intelligence, generosity, change, difference, cooperation and unity, as described earlier. It is also about how much we adopt these laws for ourselves and in our relationships, as a means for harmony and adaptation to a wider context (the universe) and especially as a means to live in the truth.
- 3) **Radical simplicity:** The third measure is based on the principle of "chosen poverty". We only need a minimum of resources for our lives, and this quantity must be in harmony with the universe. We are only one species among many. The problem is that we have adopted the power of technology as means to extract what we desire from our natural and social environment, mainly without considering the impact it has, long term, on the equilibrium of nature and the wider world.

This use of technology at the service of our greed – this is the right word to describe our desires when they are not limited by self-restraint! – generates a powerful imbalance in our relationships with other species, and even with other social classes or ethnic groups. We invade their space and destroy their conditions for livelihood and survival.

We have also split the natural world into so many small bits and pieces that it cannot survive. Nature is a complex system with many forms of interdependence. When we cut it into "islands" by clearing forest to cultivate fields or build cities and highways, we prevent the

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remaining islands from communicating with one another – thus destroying the balance of wider systems that need all their parts and interconnections on a broad scale to survive. The disappearance of so many species today is mainly the consequence of this extreme fragmentation or splitting of the natural world, as a major impact of our ways of living on the planet. This is even true for many natural reserves or national parks, which appear to be too small to allow the protected species to thrive or even survive.

In *The Song of the Dodo*,³⁵ David Quammen brilliantly describes the laws of interdependence and shows how the survival of most species is threatened by the decomposition and fragmentation of the web of life into so many islands that cannot survive by themselves once the population drops below a certain number of individuals. This is true for all species; just the conditions, numbers and areas vary from one to the next.

To ignore the effect of the fragmentation of biotopes, like ignoring the impact of climate change and our responsibility in its causes, is just blindness, stupidity, cruelty and even suicide.

The only solution is to practice radical simplicity, which will reduce drastically our impact to the necessary minimum. This is not a depressing constraint. It is choosing to live life to the full by integrating into the whole and living in harmony with other sentient beings, instead of depleting and destroying everything we touch.

These three measures of harmony are the key to healthy relationships with nature and the universe and will come to guide our behaviours. They not only allow us to measure how much we live in harmony; they also teach us wisdom and the practice of truth.

35 David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinction*, Cornerstone, London, 1996.

Limitation in quantity: the same equal average basic needs for all people on Earth

The form of necessary self-limitation we urgently need to practise is not at all, as it seems at first glance, a self-harming process. Instead, it is a creative way of returning to a balanced and equitable way of living that is fundamentally healthy for all of us. Despite very minor variations in their life choices, the 7.3 billion different human beings on Earth all have roughly equal rights to the same quantity of resources. Each of us has very similar basic needs, of equal importance.

We have seen in the first chapter how, as rich people, we consume 8 times more than the average share, while poor people consume only one-thirtieth of it. This means we consume, on average, 240 times more than they do. And they are the majority! Despite these facts, we are still mad enough to believe that our wealth gives us the right to have more needs and to consume much more (84% of the total wealth) than the others. This is a vicious circle that will kill us in our deeper being more than it kills them physically.

We all need some basic food and protection, as well as some essential emotional qualities such as love and (self-)recognition or possibilities to express our identity and creativity. The huge privilege we all have, as humans, is that nature teaches us how to share because it shows clearly – if we are willing to see – what is available, and what is not and that true wealth arises from cooperation and sharing. When there is abundance we can indulge but when there is scarcity we have to restrain ourselves and pay more attention to sharing things equally. Various research has been done to define the parameters which could guide us in finding how much should be available for each of us.

The 2000W society³⁶ is a concept elaborated at the Swiss Institute of Technology (Zurich) that indicates we should cut our yearly energy

36 As described in Herbert Girardet and Miguel Mendonça, *A Renewable World: Energy, Ecology, Equality*, Greenbook, Totnes, 2009.

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consumption to 2000W per person, i.e. a total global consumption of about 17,520kWh a year. In addition, non-renewable or climate-change fostering energies (fossil fuels) are limited to one ton of CO₂ emissions per person per year (the equivalent of 8,000km by car). By comparison, the average consumption today is around 12,000W in the US and 5,000W in rich Western European countries. The 2000W quota is an interesting reference because it gives us a general idea of what is available. But, of course, it is a simplified approach; we must use intelligence, common sense, ethics and imagination to guide our choices.

Limitation as quality when radical simplicity means not less but more

When we are in touch with natural cycles, nature teaches us mere simplicity and happy living with “little”. Think of how hunter-gatherers or Aboriginal people used to live. Paradoxically, living with *little* leads to more happiness and wider or deeper perspectives. This core teaching – which we find it very difficult to receive, in the age of over-production and over-consumption – asks us to radically review our needs in light of what truly matters in our lives. The great challenge is not about stuff but about finding meaning.

Many people have already understood that we have to restrain our pressure on the environment and to become less greedy if we want to be happy. But only a few believe it is essentially healthy to go much further than just giving up what is superfluous and does not require much change in our standard of life. Our comfort is generally the main measure of what we call our needs, but too often it reveals a servile dependence on technology that deprives us of a direct experience of life. Comfort is like a bubble of protection that keeps us at the stage of development of an assisted foetus. When we dare to break this bubble of comfort and artificial protection, we get in touch with a certain degree of roughness in confronting the natural environment, and discover a form of liveliness that is new to us. We will experience relative discomfort that does not threaten us, but keeps us alert, aware and present. There is nothing bad in this. We might become aware how much we can enjoy conditions that do not depend on the market or technology. These conditions that do not

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depend on consumption are extremely rare in our present way of living. How many pleasures in your life today do not depend on market or technology?

Only a spirit of simplicity can lead us back to this deeper meaning. Our radical change of mind in accepting the truth of authentic simplicity awakes a deeper stage of our personal and collective development in consciousness.

Land as a guide that shapes us; landscape as a visualisation of our society

Another great breakthrough happens when we understand that the land on which we live, or rather to which we belong, is our living guide for finding the right degree of simplicity. It is our guide not for ecological reasons but because it is the physical support and effective transmitter of the energy of life. Life comes mainly through the land. Aboriginal people discovered this truth many tens of thousands of years ago. The land is what forms us and defines what is available and what is not. It is the holy book that reveals the laws of life to us; the truth that is not directly visible but can be deciphered in it. It makes alive in us what we have received from time immemorial and what has shaped our bodies, souls, spirits, hopes and love.

The land is the link between all of us. It is shaped by spiritual forces that act in our lives. Since we have reshaped the landscape, the land also becomes a visualisation of our society, revealing what we have made of life. Look at your town, at the surrounding landscape, and observe what you see and what is most striking. Depending what is predominant in the landscape – whether the sprawling supermarkets or the welcoming small city squares, the highways or the small neighbourhood streets, the high rise office buildings or the lower convivial housing projects – you can interpret what the leading values of your community are. The land is the master and teacher (as the expression of life, not as a god). It reveals that we are not the

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masters but only the servants of each other. When we give up the will to dominate and destroy, we may yet see the light.

Our body as an open book about ourselves and how we live

If nature is a book about life, the same can be said of our bodies, which are another aspect of nature in us. We are spiritual beings who happen to live in bodies – rather than being bodies which happen to have a mind, soul and spirit. Our body expresses our deeper being or essence (our spirit) by adopting a physical form with different physiological components (parts, organs, systems), all interrelated by complex relationships and means of communication. The body, with all its complexity and its manifold layers of subtle nature, reveals who we are and how we live.

Everybody knows that illnesses have a psychological dimension and a deeper meaning than just the disturbance of some organs or functions. They emphasise what we ignore and what we have to change. Modern medicine mainly uses pharmaceutical means to silence our symptoms, as if eliminating the signs of dis-ease would mean a return to health, instead of treating the cause of the dis-ease, which is often existential rather than purely physical. Yes the body is a physical entity that needs to be repaired when it has been damaged, but it is also the field where the soul and spirit meet the dimension of our incarnation which allows us to see what is happening, to become aware of what needs to be transformed in our inner conflicts or attitudes and of how to reach a better level of peace in our being. The physical entity makes our inner troubles visible and allows us to react because we feel very concretely threatened in our physical but also spiritual survival.

Modern medicine has completely twisted the way we understand our body. It has “made” of it a machine (certainly complex but still a machine) composed of organs, in a similar way that a car is built out of parts. And it has also “made” illness into the enemy to eliminate. But it is fundamentally wrong to stop the revelation that illness tries to make understandable from being expressed. Despite appearances,

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illness is our compassionate helper; it tells us about the disturbances in our being and reveals them physically so we become more aware of them.

Our body as a guide that tells us the path out of suffering

We need to learn to listen to our bodies as our most precious friends. Even illnesses are there to teach us how to live a better life. They are not foes to eliminate but friends to take care of and listen to. Once we have adapted to the changes made visible by illness and required by our deeper being, the imbalance in our body will change and disappear, and the illness will recede after a time of recovery. This is the main principle of the body's capacity for healing.

Of course it is more complicated than that, because we feel powerless when faced with illnesses and they may destroy us physically. But these few considerations show that we must transform the relationship we have with our bodies, becoming aware of how much they talk to us and reveal. We cannot heal without looking beyond simple symptoms and addressing the true causes of dis-ease.

Our body is inhabited by an invisible force that rules over it – the force of our own spirit, our True Self, our deeper essence. This energy works ceaselessly, so not to take account of it in the recovery process is pure madness. It is the dominant energy that holds the whole together – the main actor.

In our culture, we often blame the body for our problems. All the pleasures we cannot resist are declared to be its fault! We crave chocolate or more cake or sex, and say this is because our body is weak. But it is not true. The body is only the place where our senses are used to capture sensation. They register facts, but our mind is responsible for deciding how to react.

The mind is the place where attachment occurs. It immediately judges whether the signal sent by the senses was pleasant or not, and

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thus whether it wants more of it or not. More cake? It is not the mouth that claims it, but the mind.

Attachment is more than sensation; it is a judgement, typically a product of the mind, not the body. Our mind leads and we evolve in the direction of our attention, in the same way that our car tends to drive in the direction we focus our eyes. If the attention is positive our evolution will be influenced favourably; otherwise it can be profoundly disturbed by a negative set of mind. Mind and body are closely interwoven, influencing one another. Our incarnation mirrors our state of mind. Both are in constant dialogue, dynamically influencing one another.

New practical ways of living: healthy food, shared knowledge, slow mobility, beauty, experience

These considerations about the teaching of nature and of our body show that we have to change our way of thinking and living if we want to be more in touch with life. I believe it is possible to radically convert our way of life in only a few years if we decide to, and truly want to.

A new perspective will fundamentally transform the way we practise agriculture and medicine and lead to reinventions of mobility (slowness), energy (sustainability), education (free), science (transparent), knowledge (shared), art (beauty and truth), religion (experience and transformation), and so on. In terms of agriculture, we will feed one another with products that are not meant to increase profit but are destined to enhance our health and our perceptions. We will come to practise a true medicine that respects all aspects of our being as a deep, mysterious, complex whole relying on so many dimensions, not only on chemistry and on an artificial or simplistic division of the body into organs and functions (as intricate as this understanding can be). All this will deeply transform and enrich our relationships, both between each other and with other sentient beings.

05 – Economy at the service of all

The fundamental generosity of nature and society: most resources are offered free of charge

Economy should not be the dominant driving force of our world but, rather, an instrument to make what we receive from nature (and what we transform and invent collectively) accessible for all. It is urgent that we follow this general intention.

At the root of this statement is the evident truth that most resources we need are provided freely by nature. Life is given; air and water are abundant in nature; plants provide the basic food. Without these basic gifts we would not remain alive. As a complement to these gifts, work originally consisted only in gathering what had grown naturally – collecting what could be extracted and hunting or fishing for animals – and then transforming these basic products into more suitable forms for consumption or use.

Society (or the tribe or family) is equally generous because it provides each person with the necessary care and skills. We learn to walk and talk in our families, and to respect each other in a community setting. School teaches us to read and calculate and develops the normal skills and special gifts we received free at birth.

In other words, life, air, water, culture, knowledge, ethics, love, wonder and spirituality are gifts from nature or from our common human heritage. This fundamental generosity calls for a deep transformation of all our exchanges and the way we perceive them.

As described above, every resource is provided freely by nature or society: wood is free in the bush; water in the river; fruits on the trees. Human work is a necessary complement to make wood available as a board or a table, to bring water to the tap, to put knowledge in a book or teach it at school. As human beings our work is only to transform. We do not produce (nature does) but we make new shapes in combining given and already transformed resources

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(i.e. resources that incorporate past work). We use skills which were provided freely at birth or developed by opportunities in the social context. These skills have been enriched by common knowledge, such as the arts of laying bricks or of practising medicine. Diverse forms of training provide us with knowledge inherited from past generations, to which we contribute in turn. Training is provided by society (school, university, vocational college, etc.) in general (or at least originally) free of charge. Thus, even when work is done by a single person, it remains a common creation. Nature and society are the most generous sources of gifts for all, if equity is practised.

The Commons as our common wealth: knowledge, care, wisdom, space, time, silence, nature

The more we share qualities such as knowledge, equity and peace, the more these qualities take shape, multiply and become accessible for all, and the more we thrive as a community and as individuals. This is a fundamental law of life that we forget too often: our personal wellbeing depends on the general wellbeing of our community, and of all its members, and is measured by the level of equity we can achieve, as seen in the care a community takes of its weakest members – the “widow and the orphan”, as it used to be expressed.

Most wealth belongs to the Commons: most of (if not all) natural and social resources. The Commons consist in fact in the heritage of all the resources we have to manage as a community. They are made of all the general equilibriums of nature, of all the resources and skills, knowledge and know-how, wisdom and wonder that nobody can own (because they are the fruits of common effort) but that everybody should be able to access. The Commons are the true wealth of a community. This shows us that direct and effective access to means and goods is much more fruitful than formal ownership of these means or goods. In comparison to access and use, ownership seems rather restrictive: I can access mine but not yours; you can access yours but not mine. Private property deprives, while free access for

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all through the Commons generates infinite possibilities for evolution and mutual enrichment. This is why public (or community) services should be the cornerstone of our society instead of being continually eroded by privatisation. This is only the basic principle; the management of these common goods is a more complex issue.

The twist of profit leads to overproduction, which destroys our quality of life

Instead of making the Commons accessible for all and aiming to satisfy our basic needs for livelihood, creative expression and deep caring relationships, the present economic system is geared towards increasing individual or corporate (i.e. private) profit at the expense of others. The private sector tends to absorb the public sector as a source of private profit, instead of public service for the general good. This means equality and protection of the weakest by the community (or the state) is dismantled and denied, with the weakest left without support. The dominance of profit in every field of life implies the “necessity” to exploit one another and to produce ever more, well beyond our needs, in order to sell more and accumulate more capital. While this is called growth, it is merely senseless, immoral overproduction; it has become the great disease of our way of life.

Overproduction has nothing to do with the basic function of economy, which is to satisfy essential needs for all. On the contrary, it is only implemented to generate profit, for which goods are only insignificant intermediaries or even meaningless pretexts. Overproduction is the true cause of surpluses, excessive competition, over-consumption, advertising and fashion to stimulate false desires, pressure on prices and wages, the infinite need for expansion on a limited planet, globalisation, delocalisation, unemployment, bad quality products, waste, extreme poverty and indecent wealth, etc. Instead of satisfying our basic needs and offering generous life conditions for all, our economic system destroys our surroundings

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and the quality of relationships between people. To stop this dreadful evolution, we need to rethink our ways of “production” (i.e. transformation) at the scale of self-limited needs on a more local level.

Not only is the focus on profit destructive for nature and society but it also goes against the elementary laws of classical economics, which say that a community thrives when goods circulate the most rapidly (i.e. are accessible to all instead of being stored), and when equality is strong. When there is equity, people have an average wealth that is sufficient to cover their needs and the whole common wealth is used by most people. This is the most efficient way of sharing what has been “produced” (i.e. transformed) by mostly common effort and means (land, knowledge, creativity, infrastructures, tools, energy) and should therefore remain accessible to all.

Equity is the best way to increase common wealth that will be shared, while capitalism is the best way to generate growth that remains in the hands of a minority. What do we prefer: common shared wealth or privately diverted growth?

The many forms of work should allow the expression of our respective creativity

Work, rather than being an anonymous good, called workforce, to be sold on the market, should instead be an instrument (opportunity) for creativity and imagination, for deep personal expression, for creating relationships and generating social recognition. Its meaning and purpose reach well beyond earnings and livelihood. It takes all possible forms and includes all the activities we do daily: ensuring livelihood but also things like cultivating the garden, repairing the roof, cooking, telling a bedtime story, spending time with one’s partner, reading, painting, singing, dancing, practising sport, going bushwalking, meditating, doing nothing, etc.

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These activities are all work, not because they are painful but because they are all expressions of true creativity.

In French there are two different words for work: 1) *Travail* (labour) means the hard work. The origin of the word is the Latin *tripalium* (literally “three posts”), which describes a form of torture! 2) *Oeuvre* (opus) is the creative work of art. Of course some forms of work are harder than others, requiring more effort or pain, but this is mainly a twist of our economic system in reducing work to a form of exploitation that goes against human dignity on the pretext that it is paid and that the worker needs money to survive.

Work involves all the most precious parts of our being and should be valued as a fundamental opportunity for generating and improving human relationships. Or perhaps relationships are even the essential thing and work is only the way (the pretext) to shape them and make them more intense and meaningful. Work, instead of making us slaves, is meant to allow the deepest expression of each of us and to develop these links between us. As a means of expression, it becomes a very personal way to practise one’s own creativity and be recognised for the new forms of creation or transformation we provide to others. When subsistence is ensured, work becomes leisure and gift, detached from any need for income. Work is no longer extracted from the worker by a controlling agent, but offered freely by the worker to their community.

Livelihood as a duration, independent from work efficiency

Before it can develop into wider creativity, work has to provide what we need: food, clothes, shelter, relationships, love, contemplation, etc. It is important to notice that these needs are more or less constant, more or less equal for all, and not proportional to the quantity of work we do but linked mainly with duration, i.e. with the duration for which we need to keep alive and in good spirits. We need roughly three meals a day, thirty days a month, and so on, no matter what we are personally capable of “producing” with our work.

The solution is simple

More importantly, we need to satisfy these basic needs before we can work, because we can only work if we are fed and sheltered.

Society (our family, our community) provides us with what we need in order to be able to work and give back to the community what we have received freely. Subsistence (livelihood) comes first, before work, because we need to subsist and to be alive in order to be able to work. Subsistence is often confused with income, as a reward for work. Work does provide further subsistence, but subsistence must come first.

Although resources are free in their state of origin (tree in the bush, water in the river), our subsistence or livelihood cannot be free, because work is necessary to make these resources available; and work has to be compensated for, because livelihood costs. This is a vicious circle. In fact everything could be free, including work and subsistence. But this is not the case.

Subsistence is the necessary condition that allows us to work for the community. This understanding that subsistence comes first justifies what we do for our children: we care for them so they can thrive; we provide what they need, and they can develop without worrying about subsistence. The community does the same for us. Of course there is a need for a return in order to close the circle.

This whole system of interdependence is the reasoning behind the idea of giving a basic income to all members of the community so that they can live fully and be able to freely give back to the community, after receiving their own skills and creativity. It's a fascinating way of thinking!

This understanding of work leads to very different behaviour. Livelihood (if linked with our needs) is not proportional to the hours we work; it remains constant for a given duration, proportional to the number of dependants (members of the household), whether we work or not. This means that work can stop once the needs of all dependants are covered for the given duration. For the rest of the time, one can work for free or consecrate one's time to pure creativity or celebration. This is what hunter-gatherers used to do. They had much more leisure time than we do today in our modern

Our embodiment in the world

society where both partners have to work full-time, if not more, to be able to make ends meet.

Alexander Chayanov was an economist in the USSR under Stalin. He was killed for demonstrating that the kolkhoz system was not compatible with the mentality of traditional farmers. Chayanov's law says: "The greater the ratio of workers to consumers in a household, the less each worker produces; production stops as needs are covered". It means that the intensity of production per worker decreases in proportion with the reduction of the number of consumers per worker. In other words the intensity of work depends on the range of needs per person, multiplied by the number of dependants and divided by the number of workers. Production will stop when needs are satisfied or when abundance is provided. As a corollary of Chayanov's law, when needs are satisfied one may spend time celebrating life (making friends, dancing, worshipping).

As we can see, this principle of work linked with basic needs is in stark contrast to the modern practise of work. In our society, work has been converted into income, i.e. money, but it is an appalling short-circuit, because it does not consider the many other aspects of work: "shadow work" (unpaid tasks necessary for subsistence, such as housework, child rearing, etc.), self-sufficiency, family time, friendship, volunteering, leisure, contemplation, etc.

When money is truly a commodity: my ox in my pocket

Money was invented to make life easier. Barter is a rich and lively way of exchanging goods and services but it means that two actors have to find an agreement with what they have to exchange. It considerably limits the possibilities. Money – in its function as a commodity – allows me to transport my ox in my pocket, to sell only one leg, to sell the leg to the butcher and buy my tools from the hardware shops, to compare the different items I can acquire and to choose which one I prefer, independent of who sells them.

The solution is simple

When money becomes a tool for speculation: the price defines the value

But money has become much more than a commodity, because using it requires a conversion of value. When I use it, I have to decide how much of the local currency my ox (or its leg) is worth. This conversion is constantly open to speculation, because I can play with the amount according to what is acceptable in the market, with no real link to the true value or real cost of the good. The estimated value becomes a price. And my egocentric interest is of course to get the best price for me (i.e. the highest possible) at the expense of the buyer (as long as he agree to buy it). But values are different from prices and vary from one person to another; and prices are subject to influences by market trends. Many values, such as love, justice and peace, have no price. Many qualities, because they have no price, seem to lose their value (the great natural equilibriums, wisdom, agricultural land, etc.). Obviously this is complete nonsense. And many prices have no value because the item sold is rubbish. In the logic of money speculation, fluctuating prices should mean fluctuating value, which is also nonsense. Value has very little to do with price; conversions are always questionable. How can one measure value with a yardstick that, like a rubber band, varies in length all the time (currency, exchange rate, market value, etc.)?! It is nonsense.

A few more words about the twist of money:

- 1) Money increases power, because the rich can buy more than the poor and can buy *from* the poor, using their power of being stronger (richer vs poorer).
- 2) Money allows us to buy what we cannot produce. Complementarity is certainly the reason for exchanges, but when the exchange happens at the cost of one partner, something is wrong.
- 3) Money is used as a yardstick to measure the wealth of nations (GDP). This is absurd because: the same activity (e.g. the repair of a pair of shoes) may cost very different amounts in different

Our embodiment in the world

countries; many factors cannot be measured by prices; producing weapons enriches the GDP of a nation more than does education; exchange rates vary and senselessly modify any comparison between nations, etc.

- 4) Above all, value and price are very different things that we tend to confuse. Most decisions by governments and corporations are made according to prices or cash flow. This is why we buy Chinese products and destroy our own conditions of livelihood by exporting all the activities that can be delocalised in order to get cheaper goods produced elsewhere. We destroy our own resources and become slaves to prices.

When money becomes power, domination and exploitation by the wealthy become the rule

When we have money we can buy numerous goods which we could not access if they depended on self-sufficiency, i.e. our ability to produce them ourselves, given our limited available time (24h/day) and our limited skills. Money provides power. As rich people we can take advantage of our position to access what we could not without this power. Exchanges should of course continue to allow complementarity – if I can do something for you that you cannot do by yourself, and vice-versa. But to keep our exchanges in balance, we should not buy more than the equivalent of what we can produce ourselves (in terms of time and skills). This very drastic rule brings us back to simplicity: beyond fair exchanges of complementarity, nobody would use others as their slaves.

In the introduction I explained how our current way of life relies on us exploiting many slaves. If we divide the total quantity of energy we use on average by the quantity of equivalent manpower that we can provide as a human being (muscle energy of a strong man = about one quarter horse-power), we obtain the number of slaves each one of us uses in daily life to accessing the resources necessary in maintaining our standard of life: an American uses 110 slaves, a European 60, a Chinese eight and a Bangladeshi one (based on 2008 data). Only money, and wealth differences, allow us to do so.

The solution is simple

We have to be aware that prices may be unjust and learn how to discern what is ethically correct. Prices are a rough simplification that hides most of the reality. We should see each of our acts in a wider context, with all the impacts it has on our way of living, and that of others.

And finally, despite and beyond all these negative aspects of money when used for speculative purposes, it is also important to recognise its positive potential. It can be used as a vector to redistribute wealth and offer untold opportunities to people who would not otherwise have them: small credits, subsidies, social help, education, health, etc. When its use is understood in a wider frame based mainly on ethics and metaphysics, rather than on profit and accumulation, it is no longer the means for oppression. It can become a tool for justice and equity in sharing for the common good.

When finance becomes power: speculation and stock exchange as institutional forms of robbery

Work has always been the principal human means of transforming resources into usable goods or services; and the way to satisfy needs and generate what we call wealth, whether in material or immaterial forms. Our present use of money has disturbed this by introducing the possibility of unchecked speculation, playing on the market values (prices) of “things”. Originally these “things” were goods that needed to be produced, which meant a serious involvement of skills, know-how, effort, work and tools to transform resources.

Progressively the practice of investment (ownership of capital) developed as a trade; not as a necessity for economic activity but as a lucrative business, allowing richer people to gain a consistent amount of interest by providing the necessary capital for a given duration of time. Usury (unethical lending) was tolerated in ancient times but has been condemned by most spiritual traditions as a long-term practice.

Our embodiment in the world

Islam clearly forbids it, while Judaism asks a lender to cancel debts on the seventh year.

Today the play with brands has replaced the production of goods. For example, the firm Nike no longer produces sportswear. They just define the style of the brand³⁷ and make it fashionable, i.e. attractive through publicity. Clients are ready to pay much more, just for the label and the illusory prestige it brings them to use this fashionable product that is not very different from others with no special brand. Such a corporation becomes free from any bother with production, subcontracting it to sweatshops in Asia that do not pay their workers properly.

The economy has lost its purpose. Nowadays one does not even speculate on the production of goods but on brands; or most fundamentally on the stock exchange, which no longer plays with the true process of production but rather with the perspectives of corporations to accumulate more or less profit. The speculation is no longer on goods, but on profit itself; profit on profit! The shareholders get a share of the profit just because they provided capital. One may get rich while one sleeps! This is clearly a form of robbery, since any accumulation of capital is based on profit (i.e. keeping for oneself, above one's merited income, part of the value of the good that is due to common effort or knowledge). Profit also deprives the workers involved in the transformation process from an important part of their income.

It is important to make a clear distinction between income and profit:

- 1) Income is the compensation for work (subsistence as a duration) that allows the worker to gain their necessary livelihood (for further subsistence and work).
- 2) Profit, by contrast, is the part of value attached to the good that can be detached from it and kept for oneself when the good is sold for a higher price than what it has cost (i.e. after deducting

37 See Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 2001.

The solution is simple

all costs for resources, work, tools, overhead expenditures, etc.). This inherent value should remain attached to the good, because it is the value of common knowledge and effort. Profit is therefore a form of robbery that deprives the community of its wealth. Through the generalised practice of speculation, this has become a major source of wealth accumulation today. Wealth always has (though it is hard to recognise) a very suspicious aspect. How can exchanges not create equality of wealth? How can they generate an increased flow in one direction at the expense of the one who becomes poorer? How can wealth accumulate in private hands (individuals, corporations) and not flow freely both ways, being accessible to all? Robbery.

Even worse: the financial sector now tends to speculate on speculation, creating special funds that play on the interest rates of debts or other speculative, more or less imagined “values”.

Objectively the proportion of national income from capital tends to grow at the expense of the proportion of national income from work. This means that work loses its “value” while speculation proves to be ever more rewarding. And wealth therefore provides more and more possibilities for income from capital (which can also be inherited, causing even more differences in wealth between people) and less and less from useful skills and creativity.

When money becomes illusion: the creation of cash as fictive material wealth

When money is just a temporary support of value for easy exchange (direct transfer of value), it remains a very pragmatic tool and makes daily life easier. But the value of money is closely linked to the potential it provides for acquiring goods and power.

As I explained in the first chapter, huge quantities of additional cash are created by many different means in our market economy. Usually this is through credit, when my banker grants me a loan to buy something I can't buy with just my own wealth. The loan will create and liberate some cash that did not previously exist. Creation of cash

Our embodiment in the world

by the central bank is similar. Budget deficits also liberate more cash than is available. The same goes for devaluation of the national currency, which provides better purchasing power to foreign nations (increasing exports) or revaluation, which increases the purchasing power of the home nation (increasing imports). The products of any speculation have the same effect: a building sold for more than it cost; dividends from the stock exchange; interest from invested capital, etc. all provide new cash. Credit cards, too, produce cash that does not exist.

The fascinating thing is that we all have become accustomed to these practices and no longer see that they are speculative. We allow them to create a fiction (new cash) that provides power to the rich (us). And, most fascinating, it transforms the way we think. It has become normal in our minds that, when we go to India, we have better purchasing power than we do at home. It seems normal to us that, since we are rich, we can spend more and acquire more goods and pleasure than poor people.

The poor Malian farmer has no less time in his day and no less skills than I have. But he has no cash, because he can't access cash ... because he has no cash. My banker will not grant him a loan, as he would to me... because I have cash. This shows us clearly how money creates a fiction and, worse, a twisted way of thinking.

There will be no change if we cannot recognise this blaring evidence and act upon it. We will not be able to see what is truthfully real as long as we do not free ourselves from this false logic.

Each choice is a vote: we elect by plebiscite what we consume, use, promote, do

Each good I consume is the product of a chain of transformation that implies different resources and many workers (living human beings like you and me) in given ecological, social (local or far-away) conditions. Each time I choose to buy a good, I express that I agree

The solution is simple

with the way it has been produced, with the values it represents, with the impact it has (ecologically, physically, socially, spiritually).

For instance, if I buy my books online, I get them in a week for the best price but, while doing so, I'm relying on falsified prices and I'm destroying the capacity of local businesses where I live (i.e. local people and services) to survive. Soon there will no longer be any local bookshop. The price I pay online is based on exploitation (we know the conditions under which the slaves of Amazon and similar are working) and I also cut out any human contact (money replaces relationships!) because the transaction does not involve anybody alive. By contrast, if I buy my books locally, I'll enjoy my contact with the local bookseller, which is warm and personal. I'll have to wait longer to get my books and I'll probably pay almost one-and-a-half times or even twice the price, but I'll be living in the truth. So, why do we become slaves to price and impatience and lose any ability to make the right decision?

It is my responsibility to choose what is truthful. Without us (i.e. our support as consumers) corporations (even Amazon) would be nothing and have no power. Of course, we all tend to ignore the truth when to recognise what is hidden in these goods would go against our interests, privileges or desires.

Marketing is based on whitewashing corrupt goods produced in unjust conditions

When products sit on our supermarket shelves, they no longer show the conditions in which they have been produced. Their clean appearance makes them look innocent. This is a form of whitewashing that encourages sales. If they reflected the injustice and exploitation (of nature or people) that they went through, we would feel too guilty to buy them. Whitewashing goods also whitewashes our conscience and our capacity to choose how we want to live and what matters most in life.

Our empowerment is proportional to our inner freedom

We tend to feel powerless, and that we have to adapt in order to earn our subsistence – but we do have the power of our own choices, especially if we do not live on the minimum necessary for survival; and this power allows us to transform the way we live. Too often, we are trapped by our own desires and give up our own empowerment for some minor advantages the system provides for us.

We are all responsible for the world we shape

The world is what we make it; as people we are the main actors – even corporations and governments are made up of people. We cannot blame big corporations; we ourselves have established their power by consuming the goods they produce. We are responsible for the world in which we live, because we made it this way. Even if we do not all enjoy the same level of power, we are all deeply involved, especially if we are richer than the average. There is nothing more participative than our market and democratic society, even in their unaccomplished forms.

This fundamental truth does not deny that there is also, more fundamentally, a basic systemic injustice. The system is shaped by the interests of clans or classes, and the whole structure of society is defined by clan or class privileges, clan or class know-how or ideology and clan or class defence mechanisms or strategies. These disparities must also be urgently fought against and abolished. Yet the awareness of our involvement and responsibility remains the basic necessary condition for this change. When we see that we are the only possible actors, change can happen. And it then happens bottom-up, from a grassroots level.

The solution is simple

We have to choose between egocentric accumulation and relationships of reciprocity

In traditional societies without money, the pattern of exchange is ruled by reciprocity: I help you repair your roof and you teach mathematics to the son of the neighbour and his mother will provide me with eggs and vegetables from her garden. This is the never-ending cycle of reciprocity, where each exchange compensates the imbalances resulting from the previous exchanges. The beauty in this system is that the chain never stops. As the balance can never be truly established, exchanges always call for further exchanges, allowing more and deeper relationships to develop between people.

In opposition to this, money creates a break: each exchange is believed to be compensated for (i.e. complete) and therefore the payment puts an end to it. It says: now that I have what I want from you I do not need you anymore; disappear! Money has replaced relationships.

The power of attraction (love) and the energy of relationships (spirit)

But relationships are the core of life. Matter is in fact insignificant in our universe and this universe is mainly a form of void inhabited by an intense energy (force of attraction) which is holding it together; see how much void in the atom and in the solar system! It means that the Universe is made of empty space but in its essence tightly built on relationships, or more exactly on relationships of attraction i.e. of love. Reciprocity shows us the true way to focus on what is truly human, i.e. our connections, and not on stuff that is lifeless. True exchange or gift represents the person of the provider or the giver (what in anthropology they call the *mana* or the *hau*).

Our embodiment in the world

The French ethnologist Mauss³⁸ describes how, in Polynesia, the object that is given is inhabited by the spirit of the person (*mana* or *hau*) who gave it. This is why it has to circulate, to be given away again or given back. If it does not circulate, it is said to bring bad luck, because of the *mana* that can't be liberated. Beyond superstition there is something deeply true in this insight. It brings deep meaning to our exchanges, based on human qualities.

What are we and what do we want to be: takers, leavers, receivers or givers?

In our consumption-oriented society, we have learned to live as takers.³⁹ We take what suits us for our egocentric needs and do not care much about what is left for others, or what kind of impact our taking has on the environment.

By contrast, in traditional societies people learn to live as leavers, just taking the necessary minimum and caring for the equilibrium of their environment, because their survival depends on it.

We need, it seems, to learn a third attitude: to be receivers. Everything is given and we could not live without this generosity of nature and society. Each thing we receive is therefore a gift that should foster a great sense of gratitude and wonder. When we open to gratitude and wonder, we see life as the true miracle it is – ever new, ever changing, ever opening us to further evolution and transformation. Only an open mind, able to receive, can sense the unfathomable wonder of life.

Then, when we are aware of the generosity of life, we become givers; this is the fourth possible attitude. Which we adopt is our choice.

38 Marcel Mauss: *Essai sur le don* (The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies), 1925.

39 Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael*, Bantam Doubleday, New York, 1995.

The solution is simple

Radical generosity as the means to shape our relationships

Radical generosity is the most powerful tool to change our relationships one with another. It combines a focus on the pre-eminence of relationships with authentic detachment from material bonds. Generosity allows every gift to flow freely from one to another.

It means we may practise a form of fluid exchange where wealth is shared and circulates, where the Commons remain the collective wealth that makes basic goods and services available for all. Patterns of subsistence and reciprocity are much more creative. As much as possible, they should replace market exchanges, avoiding the use of money, every time the opportunity presents itself. The product of reciprocity is grace and “grace makes the face of the other shine”.

06 – Beyond restrictively rational science and technology

The three stages of evolution: from pre-rational to rational to post-rational

As discussed earlier, the personal evolution towards consciousness can be described as a ladder with successive steps.⁴⁰ All the steps have three main characteristics:

- 1) Each new step leads from a more egocentric to a more heterocentric perception which is able to integrate more diversity and interdependence. One becomes less focused on oneself and more

⁴⁰ See chapter 5, section 03, and Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, Shambala, Boston, 1996.

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aware of others – how they are different from us, have other points of view and how we are all related to and parts of the whole.

- 2) Each new step integrates the qualities of the previous steps and adds a new dimension in depth of perception that becomes more complex (deeper Within in a wider Without⁴¹) as more subtle aspects of reality become perceptible.
- 3) Each step represents a radical change of paradigm and generates a new interpretation of the world that also reinterprets and reorganises what has been learned or remembered previously.

Not only do we, as individuals, evolve in this way but our society, as a whole, also evolves on a similar path from the more egocentric to the more hetero-centric, towards more depth and through successive changes of paradigms.

One can distinguish three main stages in this global evolution:⁴²

- 1) **The pre-rational stage:** the magic and superstitious behaviour of primitive societies, which believe that nature is like a god that punishes and to which sacrifices must be made (the avalanche as destruction wanted by the god, the goat thrown into the volcano to appease it).
- 2) **The rational stage:** the rational management of our modern society through science, technology and market, where our society considers the world as a mechanical entity (Newton's clockwork), running according to permanent rules, which has to be controlled and transformed.
- 3) **The post-rational stage:** the deeper perception of a larger Reality which is not visible but still integrates the visible world.

41 See the previous mention about Teilhard de Chardin and the Intention in the Universe (small fonts in section 01 of chapter 5).

42 This distinction in three stages is also inspired by Ken Wilber.

The solution is simple

It can be experienced when one observes physical reality, becoming a witness aware of what is, without judgement, and finally becoming one with the whole: *I am That*; where consciousness of the *I* as a distinct entity progressively disappears, reduced to the non-dual state of *Being*.

As each preceding stage always includes the later ones, these three stages may well coexist simultaneously. They frequently do, even in our modern society; behaviours may represent a vast range of levels of consciousness and even combine in the same person.

Enlightenment and rationalism as blocks to further evolution

Our modern society, since the Renaissance and especially since Enlightenment, has been deeply marked by a rational way of thinking. The tool of rationalism has allowed amazing developments in observation, science and technology, but it also imprisons us – we reject anything that does not appear rational. This seems to be caused mainly by our fear of falling back into the pre-rational stages of perception (magic and superstition). There are many examples of popular or even institutional religious trends leading to regression instead of provoking the great breakthroughs and inner transformations they are meant to. The danger of regression is real but does not erase the fact that a further evolution beyond rationalism (post-rational) is necessary as the next stage of our growth.

The great confusion between pre- and post-rational stages

In our modern culture, there is a deep confusion about the differences between the pre- and post-rational stages. Through fear of regressing, we refuse to see that we are caught in rational shackles; they prevent us from seeing that our reality is much wider and deeper than just

Our embodiment in the world

what we can see and measure. We do not want to fall back into magic beliefs and sacrificial practices. But we must still escape from our imprisonment and evolve through the further stages of consciousness described.

There is a very important difference between the magic beliefs (superstitious practices) and the higher stages of consciousness which open to the invisible reality (observation of the mind, oneness with the whole). It is true that an important part of today's fascination with spirituality does not make a clear distinction between these two forms of perception (pre- or post-). The New Age perception is very often more of the former than the latter type. And many expressions of fundamentalist or even simply traditional religion have fallen into the regression of the pre-rational state.

Scientific materialism as mental imprisonment

Science is certainly one of the most fascinating experiences of humankind in researching and discovering the mysteries of our physical world. It has opened a deeper understanding of where we come from, who we are and the world in which we live. Yet, just as the market has transformed the field of our exchanges into a competition denying our human generosity and our natural ability to care for one another, science has made its rational approach the exclusive tool to investigate reality. It reduces reality to what it can measure and reproduce, invalidating other ways of apprehension. Quantifiability lies at the core of scientific practice, expressing its rigour and proving the seriousness of its contribution. Yet science's claim of exclusivity (there is no way other than our rational way) also demonstrates the fragility of a one-dimensional approach.

The solution is simple

Daring to take the next step in evolution: towards world-centric and post-rational perception

The criticism here does not negate rationalism – it is a powerful tool for mankind. Yet it is nevertheless obvious that the next step of evolution (post-rational) will require us to integrate rationalism into a wider, more complete, broader view that will fundamentally change our paradigm for understanding life and the Universe. This change of perception will not only happen from a scientific point of view but on a much broader level, in terms that describe the general frame of evolution.

Of course this new paradigm will not change the results of all the physical experiments constituting the substance of science, but it will fundamentally change the understanding we have of them – according to the three characteristics of each step of evolution described earlier (i.e. more hetero-centric / ante-post integration / new paradigm). It will not only propose a new general frame but also allow us to review how we interpret previously accumulated knowledge. As just explained, our evolution will lead us beyond the rational stage in which we seem trapped. It will lead us from an ethnocentric to a world-centric or mature ego stage that can envisage many possible approaches as simultaneously complementary to one another. It seems that humankind is only halfway (?) through its development⁴³ on the path to full maturity. If we wish to evolve and survive, we must attempt to reach the further stages of our personal and collective growth.

43 At least according to Wilber's ladder.

To a higher level by the cooperation of complementary approaches: science, culture, art, religion

As I said earlier, science, culture, art and religion should be complementary, supporting and inspiring each other, instead of denying each one what the two other approaches have to offer. This is far from the case nowadays; constant competition and conflict demonstrate just how egocentric a stage we are still in. The stage of evolution that comes just after the rational ethnocentric perception consists in the change to a world-centric perception that considers and appreciates the world's diversity. The new understanding (new paradigm) becomes multicultural, rejoicing in the diversity of perceptions and interpretations each category of people (whether ethnic group, social class, culture, party, denomination, church, club, etc.) contributes to a larger polyphonic symphony, enriched in many dimensions and depths. This does not mean, of course, that all contributions are of equal value. They will differ drastically, in quality and in level of maturity.

The failure of technology: simplistic meanings and universal solutions

Science is the great mother of technology, which translates scientific discoveries into practical and technical means. Tools, in their variety, complexity and efficiency, contribute much to our wellbeing. But to be used properly, they must remain only tools, with minimal effect on decisions. A similar inversion to that generated by economics (profit above human values) seems to characterise technology: practicality above meaning. Good technology must go together with, and be submitted to, a mature consideration of how to use it. If not, it goes astray.

We should ask ourselves three essential questions before using technology:

The solution is simple

- 1) What is the meaning and purpose of this action, and is it compatible with human, ethical and metaphysical values?
- 2) Which are the simplest, most gentle and minimum means available to reach this aim?
- 3) What are the consequences of using these means? On the environment, on the social network, on quality of life and on the positive evolution of humankind?

We could add to these three questions the six interrogations by a Tibetan monk who, long ago, invented many things. Every time, he put them back into his drawer because he was not convinced they would help and support the spiritual evolution of humankind. Inspired by this wise monk (and by Socrates) we can enumerate a few questions we have to ask ourselves in order to check the adequacy of any process:

- 1) Authenticity: is it true?
- 2) Evolution: is it good?
- 3) Adequacy: is it right?
- 4) Harmony: is it beautiful?
- 5) Need: is it necessary?
- 6) Purpose: does it assist human and spiritual progress?

We need to ask these questions with a very critical mind. This is far from being the practice today. Nowadays, technology is generally used to call for still more technology. For instance, in facing the disaster of climate change we believe that more technology will solve all the problems, without us having to change the way we think and live. The problem is that technology has come to replace meaning. Problems are only solved on a technical level and we constantly avoid the challenging question of what the real meaning is (the first question above).

Our institutions are designed like machines although they are living cultural and human dynamics

When we allow technology to lead our evolution and replace meaning, we do similar with institutions. Institutions are designed like big machines, so our attitude towards them very much resembles our attitude to technology. We believe that they will solve our problems if we intensify their action.

In fact they have evolved as mechanical entities that have forgotten their true meaning and purpose. When an institution seems to be failing us, more subsidies are usually supplied to sustain its further development into what it is already (and beyond), instead of reassessing its purpose, its means, its impact:

- What is the real cause for its inefficiency?
- What is the real purpose of the institution?
- What does its rediscovered mission mean in terms of deep transformation of the whole concept of this institution?

Ivan Illich⁴⁴ has demonstrated how institutions such as the health, education and transport systems have developed beyond the stage of efficiency.

- 1) The health system is performing highly technical interventions but has lost the sense of basic treatment and the awareness of the dynamic of the body and its own capacity for healing. Highly chemical or technical treatments generate many secondary effects, which are often worse than the illness itself (see the end of point 04 of this chapter). The costs explode. The system has become the problem, instead of providing the solution.
- 2) In a similar loss of purpose, education delivers certificates that make people adaptable to the “needs” for profit of the economic system in general or at least to be able to fit into jobs that are not conceived in terms of human needs. It forgets to recognise

44 See Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, Bantam Books, New York, 1977.

The solution is simple

people's unique gifts and skills, and give them opportunities to develop in maturity and consciousness. It is no longer a support for personal growth but rather the fitting of cogs into the big machine. Once again, the solution has become the problem.

- 3) Similarly, city transport has developed to a point where it is constantly overloaded; people spend hours each day in trains, or queuing in traffic jams; transport has become the problem, not the solution.

We must urgently rethink the purpose and role of our institutions. Institutions cannot solve our problems; they can only support us in our attempts to solve them. This means that the main capacity is ours, as citizens and users; institutions have to help us to develop and implement this capacity. Institutions must take into account the fact that the people who need their support are by themselves already able to satisfy many of their basic needs. Also, institutions are there to serve people, not vice-versa.

Concerning our health, our bodies have their own capacity for healing; medicine is only a support for this natural faculty.

Concerning education, we all have curiosity to motivate us and our own experience to build upon. Education has to provide the methods and contents to nourish what each of us wishes to develop, before any other external purpose, such as feeding the economic systems with the necessary cogs, can be proposed, and even be accepted or rejected.

Concerning transport, institutions must answer first the needs of people, and not of corporations wanting a workforce brought to them, or consumers ready to spend their money. And they must offer an answer to the fact that, by the service they propose, they foster change and will be expected to deliver ever more complex services. This is a trend we must oppose, limiting mobility to what is really efficient and meaningful.

These few examples show that the purely technical and restrictive approach we have nowadays, whether about institutions or

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technology, is sterile; it does not include any search for meaning and purpose. It leaves no room for a change of paradigm, which should characterise each new step of evolution. It means we are stuck in our faith in technology and institutions, deprived of any possibility to evolve creatively. Being unable to step back and get an overview, we cannot see the state of our world clearly.

This obtuseness and this superstitious belief in an infinite power of science and technology go against science's principle of objective observation, but nevertheless science has brought us here, to this false ideology. Without connecting to ethics and anthropology (the search for the meaning of life) science is reduced to no more than an objective description (the heavy weight of exclusively rational thinking), preventing us from taking the necessary stand and step forward. Subjectivity is not the enemy of science; it is its indispensable complement.

When tools make us slaves instead of serving a shared quality of life

Our human intelligence has developed high-performing tools, but we have lost the capacity to use them wisely. Transport has developed to some extremes that negate its purpose; cars and planes have completely altered our perception of space and helped to standardise the world according to modern Western materialist norms. Cities grow extensively, absorbing the surrounding rural regions. Cars become a form of second identity, an external false representation of our egos.

Although cars are the products of a fantastic invention, the way we use them has generated major problems, because of their inherent violence and the illusions they create. We can mention 12 main characteristics:

- 1) Their capacity to reach far places in a short time (speed) abolishes distance and flatten differences between places and between people or cultures (colonisation).

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- 2) The increasing range of reach they allow creates polarities between places of power and their periphery, generating a daily rhythm of traffic that makes people more and more dependent on centres (waste of time, exhaustion, stress, centralisation).
- 3) The possibilities of speculation they offer, through transport over a long distance, by playing on the differences of prices of goods and workforce, they encourage greed and exploitation, which profit the rich and powerful and destroy the poor, although this potential could be also a tool for fair exchange and cultural openness.
- 4) Their violent invasion of public space (streets, squares), destroys social life and dissolves the value of commons (public outer space) as meeting places, although this public space and common good should belong to all and remain accessible for anyone; motorised traffic transforms the town into a gigantic highway.
- 5) Their weight and speed creates accidents that kill people or traumatise them for life. Although we despise cultures that used to practise human sacrifice, we sacrifice many lives to our goddess Mobility, believing she is more important than our own children.
- 6) Their use of fuel and combustion exhausts natural resources, pollutes our atmosphere and our environment (smog, noise, climate change), and creates so much disturbance that the surroundings become inhabitable.
- 7) The dependency on fuel they create generates wars to ensure supply and pollutes sea and earth when tankers sink or platforms or pipelines leak or break.
- 8) Their economic importance (production, sale, maintenance, fuel, accessories) means they guide human activity according to profit more than to real needs or ideals.
- 9) They create the illusion of an artificial cocoon, which isolates us from our surroundings (no perceivable effort for covering distance or altitude, air conditioning, mobile home); we lose contact with, and awareness of, physical reality (no sweat).
- 10) As a tool driven by external energy, they create an illusion of, and fascination with, false power, which often reveals itself as

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very destructive, being beyond our ability to control (more speed and power just by a light pressure of the foot).

- 11) By their design and all the gadgets they enable, they become an illusory representation of the social ego, based simply on the power of money.
- 12) The small space inside and the high mobility provided develop our tendencies for individualism and a false representation of what freedom is; they reinforce gaps between social classes, especially between poor and rich.

It is fascinating to notice that each of these 12 flaws, when combined with the idea of slowness and sustainability, becomes, in contrast, a quality for a better sense of community and cooperation. I let you re-read the precedent lines and describe these flaws in the opposite form: they become real qualities for a thoughtful sense of mobility. For example, 1) Their capacity to reach far places slowly, when the sun is shining (solar car), creates a gentle link which is respectful of distance and differences, in harmony with what is made available by nature. And so on ...

The fascinating power of computers becomes the source of an illusory world built on pretence

Information technology offers some extremely powerful tools that have transformed our working conditions. They allow incredible innovations and help us design many important new creations and transformations. They have radically and deeply transformed our social landscape.

They offer new methods and power for design and for analysing data. This increases our capacity to master our environment; we become more adventurous and presumptuous, although the environment often demonstrates that our action is inadequate.

But information technology has also fostered a kind of virtual landscape that has little to do with reality; we habitually use it to escape, cut off from true life. We become slaves to these tools that

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now rule over our lives instead of serving the common good and helping us thrive personally.

Information technology creates a virtual world that exists only in our minds.

This can be very creative when it is soon or later confronted with the true materiality of our world, but, in so many uses we have today of this tool, it generates an illusion and an escape into pure fantasy, cutting us off from life. Social media is a good example: people project an image of themselves and make it public. What loneliness there is in this practice (despite its time intensity) compared with truly sharing active life and our true Self with friends we can touch and hug!

It is also the ideal means for producing fake videos and spreading false news or fundamentalist beliefs. Anonymity allows hidden actors to influence the public scene without being identified for who they are and which interests they represent.

This is a tool for control (face recognition and surveillance). It allows the collections of precious personal data which should remain confidential. Algorithms allow corporations to influence the freedom of choices of people and even to make them do what they would not by themselves or even act in a devious way.

Nevertheless computer use, being such an extreme simplification of life, can also be relaxing when it leads us into play or repetitive, settling tasks, rather than into illusion and false beliefs.

Thinking in a new, deep way about the role of artificial intelligence in our lives will transform how we handle it and restore our capacity to evolve according to the true meaning of what we think life is meant to be. As truly controlled tools these technologies will be much more powerful, delivering the right service for the right cause. This revolution of the mind has much to do with rediscovering simplicity, which will radically redefine our true needs and purposes and how we satisfy them.

Chapter 7: Synthesis in diversity

07 – A mature expression of diversity

Domination is based on the fabric of the victim and the ritual of sacrifice

Development on a limited planet with an increasing population does not mean infinite growth. We need to self-limit, to search for ways of living that bring harmony between all sentient beings (rocks, plants, animals, human beings), beyond and through the great gifts of diversity. Domination by one species, ethnic group or social class over another is never a solution. Nonviolence must be the absolute rule for solving all conflicts.

In order to manage eruptions of discontent, our society tends to divert the general tension of conflict towards selected scapegoats, making victims out of minorities and repressing diversity.

This leads to forms of sacrifice, whether executed plainly (as in primitive religious rituals of goat killing) or hidden behind a social dynamic that condemns and oppresses a minority (the Holocaust or any process of ethnic cleansing, such as in Bosnia or Rwanda). So many minorities have paid, and continue to pay, for the general state of fear, anger and resentment against them by dominating clans and even average social groups. We urgently need to look at our common

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behaviours with open eyes and deep honesty; we need to become aware of these terrible hidden currents leading our collective behaviours.

In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, René Girard⁴⁵ explains how mimetic acquisitive behaviours (wants for the same things) bring competition and conflict. Since the beginning, societies have learned to cope with this growing tension by instituting prohibitions and ritual sacrifice. According to old traditions and the appalling ritual described in the Bible (Leviticus 16), a scapegoat is chosen, symbolically loaded with the guilt of the whole community and sent into the desert, meant to take away the sins of the people. Peace returns as the community finds new unity in colluding against the victim which becomes sacred in the way it has brought back cohesion and peace. The same ritual repeats in our modern world, in a less formal way: minorities, refugees, strangers and indigenous people are oppressed, marginal peoples are excluded, religious identities are rejected, ethnicities are “cleansed”. It seems that our world constantly needs victims in order to disperse the violence generated by greed and the lust for power.

From a Christian point of view, one of the most fascinating things that Girard illustrates is how Jesus’ death should not be understood as a sacrifice, but rather as murder. There is no vengeful god that a sacrifice would appease, because there is no vengeful god. Jesus was not sacrificed to clear our sins. Jesus’ mission was not, as is often taught, to die on the cross – but rather, to reveal pure, radical love, to the limits of the possible. His death was not his life’s aim but rather the consequence of what he stood for. It happened as a result of his practice of love. The high priests wanted to get rid of Jesus because he was challenging the power structure and hypocrisy of their authority. Facing this, he could either defend himself and become violent in turn, like his oppressors, or else follow the path of pure love and total surrender, accepting that true love is powerless and completely self-giving. He chose love and to be on the victims’ side, thus becoming a victim himself. This example shows the absurdity of sacrifice.

45 René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford University Press, 1987.

Sins cannot be redeemed through false sacrifice to a false god; but pure salvation is on offer, because love is total and limitless. Offering one's life in total powerlessness expresses the true nature of life (and our own true nature) as love. Because of that unlimited love, we are accepted as we are, with all our twists and flaws; our misdeeds of yesterday and our constant detours away from true consciousness do not matter; we just need to be who we are, here and now. Each day is a new start.

Love's great transformation is not so much an action of God that changes our reality. Rather, when we suddenly discover the real power of love, it completely changes our understanding and mentality (our consciousness). Revelation is not a change from God but a change in our mind-heart: we suddenly see what life is all about. It is called salvation because it is true liberation from our false beliefs. It is a deep change of mind, a change in our way of thinking and understanding life. This is called *metanoia* in Greek: a turnaround of the mind.

Search for harmony and awareness of the divine has fostered the wisdom of traditional societies

Ancient traditional societies, in general, based their behaviours and social rules on the most precious values of human relationships – a respectful relationship with nature, in a constant search for balance, or even equity between beings, and awareness of the divine. Of course these societies were not perfect, and their priorities were motivated by their fragility more than by idealism.

By contrast, our modern society has become violently dominant and has used principally materialistic means to impose itself in a simplistic way. Colonisation was not possible because of any cultural superiority or so-called civilisation, as too often claimed, but only because the colonisers had good ships, good weapons and little moral restraint. Through domination and violence, Western countries (we) have brutally conquered “newfound” lands and eradicated most of the traditional societies that still existed a few centuries ago. It is urgent now to save what can still be revived.

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Traditional perceptions and know-how are the fruits of many millennia of human experience in adaptation, with minimal means, to nature, climate, accumulated tribal know-how as fruit of past experience, social rules of harmony, spiritual teaching, etc. Languages, in their diversity, are the rich inheritance of so many different sides of our common humanity, and many will be lost if we do not protect and revive them. Traditional cultures that have been destroyed by colonisation or by expansion of the dominant, Western way of living – by technology, by attraction to material comfort, by market and globalisation – need to be brought back to life. They should not be revived as some interesting historical relic, nor as a means to better integrate people into the Western way of living, but in a fundamentally transforming way. This will teach us different perspectives on life and help us (not unilaterally or exclusively) to deeply convert our degraded ways of living and rediscover wonder, which will better suit our true common human vocation, beyond diversity.

We define our own identity through the monolithic view of “us and the others”

To attain the stages of personal and collective evolution beyond the ethnocentric perception, we have to rediscover the fascinating potential of living in diversity, like a body made of many specialised organs, each with specific roles to play and a wealth of skills and specificity to contribute. Evolution will lead us towards less egocentrism and more hetero-centrism – towards inclusion of others who are different, accepting the diversity of the whole Universe as a precious contribution to the wide range of what life can represent.

This will break the trends of our individualistic, self-centred culture and lead us to transform our society into a true human community that does not fuse all individualities into an undifferentiated whole or magma, but allows diversification and personalisation. This leads to perfect differentiation, complementarity, a capacity for sharing, and a

depth of care and service for one another. A community where each one is the unique being he/she is.

Teilhard de Chardin neatly describes how the development of a real form of living in community is the next and further step in our human evolution. In other words, community is the next stage in the chain of “holons”. A holon is the small unit that, like a box, fits by combination with similar units into the next bigger box, then into a still larger box, etc. Particles, for instance, combine into atoms, then atoms into molecules, then into cells, then into organisms, then bodies, into persons. As a further development of these holons combining with each other into a wider body, a still more complex body organises persons into a bigger holon: community. Just as organs combine to build a body, people, with their respective special identities, combine to form a wider social body that relies on the reciprocal care, sharing and love that animate its members. Community is a reality towards which we all tend as a further and more mature stage of evolution.

Today, instead of accepting this natural form of living together, we tend to develop an antagonistic and monolithic view of the others (“us and them”), which makes “them” a caricature in black and white. When we project our own hostile representation onto others, it also has strong negative repercussions on our self-image (“us”), which becomes more rigid and caricature-like too.

See the work of Israeli author Dan Bar On, *The Others Within Us: Constructing Jewish–Israeli Identity*.⁴⁶ Dan Bar-On’s psycho-social approach sees identity as dynamic, constructed in contra-distinction to various “Others”. He depicts, through case studies and analysis, various stages in identity formation, in opposition to Others such as Diaspora Jews, Jews from Muslim countries and Arabs, who represent repressed aspects of the collective self. Monolithic identity disintegrates over time, in ways that are often confusing and painful. The perception of threat often creates a “neo-monolithic backlash”. Yet there is the possibility of a constructive dialogue, internal and among groups in society, that will give rise to a better-integrated and more inclusive identity construction. This has led Dan Bar On, with

46 Dan Bar On, *The Others Within Us: Constructing Jewish–Israeli Identity*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2008.

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his Palestinian friend Sami Adwan, to organise reconciliation meetings between descendants of Holocaust victims and descendants of Nazi persecutors, as well as between Israelis and Palestinians, who tell each other their own “stories” in order to make each participant aware of their resemblances and their common humanity.

Welcoming strangers allows wealth distribution and a richer shared experience

Knowing the other means that we learn how to welcome them, listen to them and share what we each have. Historically, migrants have always been a source of cultural enrichment for the ones who “dared” to welcome them. Migrations throughout the centuries have nourished all civilisations, introducing new trades, new knowledge and new understandings.

In today’s world of intense communication and mobility, increased migration is a response to past colonialism and present globalisation. It has to be understood as a reaction to the extension of the market system onto local populations in the South. Why should goods and capital move freely, if people can’t? How can we fish to the east and west of Africa without feeling responsible for depriving the people of these regions of their traditional subsistence as fishermen, by intruding into their fishing areas? And the same goes for all natural resources imported from southern countries.

Migrations are therefore a natural form of regulation for sharing wealth. If we had a right to take the resources of these poorer countries (and we never restrain ourselves from doing that) there would be no reason why these people should not also desire to share our wealth. From the historical and ethical points of view, there is a fundamental right to mobility. Migration should be free in order to re-establish justice and equity between diverse people from the South and people from the North. This is even more powerfully true in the case of persecution, but it can also be considered true for economic reasons or the hope for a better life. Of course we resist this truth,

unwilling to share our privileged wellbeing, partly so we can continue to exploit poorer nations and also due to fearing “the other”.

Many governments today try to surf on the wave of populism and xenophobia. Fear is always the easiest way to govern, dominate and remain in power; there is little incentive to create compassionate policies for welcoming people in need. Migrants don't tend to leave their country unless they are under threat. Each of us generally wishes to remain at home, with our family and friends, in our own culture, speaking our own language, in our well-known environment. The best remedy to prevent excessive migration (which is the source of much suffering, especially for the migrants) is equity, justice and good conditions for livelihood at home. As Westerners we are therefore responsible for helping other countries implement good living conditions for everyone. When we promote globalisation, import natural resources from southern countries or export harmful activities into foreign lands, we participate in creating unjust situations – and become responsible for the deteriorating living conditions in these countries. Equity requires a fundamental change in all our activities and ways of thinking. This is probably the first condition in helping people stay where they are rooted and well-integrated. Of course this does not prevent anybody from developing fruitful exchanges that can be grounded on equity and care for all.

The complex process of discovering plurality as the integration of diversity in unity

Having described the principle, we must still recognise that the problem is extremely complex, involving many parameters that are hard to control. Due to this complexity, it is understandable to be cautious and to use discernment in the ways we welcome strangers and open our borders to migration, in the spirit described above. It is a delicate matter to practice hospitality when the reactions of home populations may endanger newcomers, due to attitudes of more or less violent racism, or social rejection.

Nevertheless, it remains true that integrating foreigners helps us recognise the multiplicity of our common humanity. It helps us develop true complementarity through diversity and, in a much

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broader sense, to better grasp the variety of our own personal and social components: he, she, you, me; body, mind, spirit; art, science, sociology, politics, spirituality; education, self-observation, personal development, collective unconscious; and so many other various perspectives. We urgently need to become more familiar with what multiplicity can mean under so many aspects and perspectives. The more we open to diversity, the richer we will be and the more mature our social construct will become. But we also have a responsibility not to bring our own national communities to breaking points.

Diversity inside the community as a pattern for integrating minorities

More significant for our growing maturity than welcoming refugees and strangers (however urgent this need is) is probably the need to learn how to integrate all the categories of people who are already part of our local communities, however contrasting, small or large these categories are.

In our so-called democratic countries, we are used to a decision-making system that imposes the will of the majority. But minorities play a very important role, and we need to learn how to improve their opportunities for expression. Not only because they have a right to thrive and to express their uniqueness but also because they help to break the uniformity of the social construct and open up other ways of perceiving, thinking and living that are also parts of our reality. Their difference is precisely why they are minorities.

Learning new ways of perceiving and thinking enriches the community. Integrating difference into the stream of local life is challenging. We first need to listen to and understand the differences, and learn from them. Then we can come to accept differences and see a better way to cohabit, with the will to share and live a common life as far as community is concerned, even with some very different sensibilities and beliefs.

Synthesis in diversity

We mainly consider differences of opinion and different ways of living as problems, but they are truly sources of opening and enrichment – they teach us to include antagonisms into harmony and to make plurality a living force of cohesion. Authentic development is not simply endless growth, but rather a progressive evolution towards more maturity, more width and more depth. Learning to live in diversity is a major step on this path.

Diversity, because of differing levels of consciousness, does not mean that all is equal

It is important to understand that diversity is not the plurality that puts everything on the same level, flat and without distinction. Diversity does not give up discernment; it does not justify all behaviours and beliefs in the name of difference. There is no acceptable levelling in the name of diversity, no flatland that considers all people equal and equivalent in maturity. In most cases, conflict is not fostered by differences of origin, race or culture, but is the fruit of contrasting levels of personal or collective maturity and consciousness. The Neo-Nazi and the wise monk are not at all at the same level of consciousness and therefore cannot be accepted in equal ways, nor their opinions considered as “equivalent” in weight, although they have, as human beings, the same weight; and the same intrinsic human worth.

Diversity is fascinating because it has many possible sources; it can be caused by origin, by ethnic or cultural context, by belief, by social belonging, by personal experience, by character, by genes, by gender, etc. But, in the end, it mostly becomes visible through contrasting expressions related to differing levels of evolution, maturity and consciousness.

On the ladder of evolving consciousness and personal growth, we are not all on the same rung. Some people behave in a regressive and primitive way, with violence and hate, while others are welcoming

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and tolerant, recognising the wealth of potential in others. To live harmoniously in diversity we need to develop our faculties of discernment. Discernment is not necessarily judgement, but the capacity to understand, in a more subtle way, the causes and conditions of what one sees.

The growth in consciousness only has meaning if it translates into transformation and love

As explained earlier, what matters most is our own transformation – more than reaching the highest levels of consciousness, it is the way we practise what we have discovered; how we integrate into our lives the new paradigms of each new stage of evolution. Our discernment should allow us to see where each one of us, in our diversity, is standing. Degree of maturity can only be measured through our daily practices. Who practises love? Who has been transformed? Our discernment tries to identify authenticity.

Theories about consciousness are meaningless if they are not translated into real-life actions. Beliefs can guide us, but they have no value if they do not foster change in our daily life, or affect our incarnated reality as human beings among other fellow beings. There are so many examples of religious beliefs that do not lead to any change of ways of living. These beliefs remain mere superstitions or idolatrous attitudes or social mimetic behaviour. Our transformation is truly measured in terms of a hetero-centric attitude, of practising kindness, of attention to the other, of an ability to integrate with others, or even to transform our life in the service of others.

Growth into maturity as self-discovery, or discovering the pearl hidden within us

Each of us is on a path of personal evolution that develops slowly and reveals, step by step, the treasures inside us, which we discover

progressively as we come to know ourselves. We are aware of what is possible (because it is within us) and yet we don't know exactly (because it is not fully actualised). In this way we are always at two different levels of maturity or consciousness: one is potential (unrevealed but perceivable) and the other is more fully expressed (made visible). Full expression is probably never reached. Nevertheless, without knowing exactly where we are going, we recognise the path.

This is why the “ladder” of evolution is no ladder – because the treasure is already inside us, and there is no climbing. We just need to open to it. Climbing is only the metaphor of our progress, linked with the image of the ladder. The pearl of knowledge is a seed within us. This authentic potential hidden in each of us is probably the true root of our capacity to love and be loved, and what is meant by the Buddha nature or the image of God in us. This is the true ground for growth and diversity. We are all in charge of making this potential more explicit, at the highest possible level of maturity, and the community's task is to help each member fully develop their own potential and make it available to all.

In this way all are accepted and integrated – but this does not mean that all behaviours and beliefs are acceptable. Some acts are very harmful. We learn to make a distinction between the person (with their full unknown potential and sacred dimension) and their acts and behaviours (with their temporary awkwardness and violence that is not acceptable but may evolve into more depth and awareness).

One could say that there are three (or more) pearls of great price – or measures of evolution – in each of us:

- 1) Our potential; the Buddha nature or image of God hidden within us, a kind of spiritual DNA that guides our evolution, inspiring rather than constraining us. Perhaps starting as a small seed, it may later grow into a huge tree.
- 2) Our level of consciousness, which roughly follows the “ladder” described earlier.

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- 3) Our practice, which expresses the corresponding level of maturity. For example, a Mother Teresa is more advanced (if one can compare them!) than a writer who knows everything about consciousness but does not practice what they know in the world. Washing the poor and the dying, as Mother Teresa did in Calcutta, is a sign of a very evolved perception and way of being. Of course, higher-level consciousness can translate into many different ways of being.

The great challenge of diversity is to be inclusive without being permissive, to go beyond egocentric interests and to see the global (inclusive) picture. Once we have found the inner pearl, we are able to see beyond immediate appearances and egocentric perceptions.

Totalitarian systems based on alienation vs community projects grounded on personalisation

Here we must introduce an essential nuance. There is often confusion around concepts such as individualism, personal freedom, integration, belonging, conformity, alienation, existentialism, dominating ideology, consensus, empowerment, totalitarianism, community, nationalism, and so on. These concepts all concern the way we belong to a local or wider community, how we adapt to a given context, and how we remain free to take a personal stand, whether out of egocentric interest or hetero-centric vision. Let's examine these concepts and the way they translate into daily life in different ways.

First let's talk about totalitarianism. Totalitarianism generates a kind of unity that is fundamentally different in nature from community building. It mainly relies on destroying the person as free-minded and unique, to make it powerless and integrate it as a cog in a global project. These projects are generally insane, such as the dominance of Aryan people, genocide of part of the population, or exclusive supremacy by any dominating ideology. In order for individuals to comply with the national project, the totalitarian apparatus first has to convince them they are worth nothing. This step makes repression

“necessary”; it tends to generate meaningless situations and disempower its victims.

Repression relies precisely on this lack of meaning, which defies the healthy mind and destabilises it destructively. In the second stage, a global project is imposed that will replace personal expression by a form of herd action where nobody is distinct from their neighbours. The project will be more easily accepted, although it relies on pure insanity, because adherence and participation is the only way left for the people to regain a sense of identity; though not a personal identity but a herd identity. The more one participates, the more one has to forget one’s own critical faculties; and one has to participate fully. The totalitarian project is based on destroying and alienating the person, which makes participation possible.

It is important to notice that this totalitarian ideology can be of any kind: Nazism, communism, capitalism, neo-liberalism, market ideology, technological thinking, individualism or hedonism ... all are mainly based on mimetic behaviours. It is important to notice that dominating and repressive ideologies are not always accompanied by armed repression; they are often self-accepted and self-entertained. The destruction remains very real, because it relies on resignation – on abandoning one’s own personality.

Opposite to totalitarianism, the communitarian project is – in principle – based on authentic contribution by each member to its implementation; each person plays a personalised, irreplaceable role. Each actor is more or less unique and their contribution no longer relies on destroying or annihilating the person but, on the contrary, on their special skills and emphasis.

This is the form of community that Teilhard de Chardin describes. He says that our evolution towards new forms of community – as a new way of better living together, sharing and caring for one another – will be the next stage of our evolution as humanity; more Within into a more complex Without. This evolution is based on personalisation, not standardisation. The community takes shape because of the diversity and complementarity of its members, and not by fusion into an indistinct amalgam of generalised alienation, as with totalitarianism.

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How, then, do individualism and personalisation relate with one another in this communitarian project? This is the question that existentialism asks in other terms. How much can we, as persons, be free to shape our lives according to our deepest insights and experiences? How much are we constrained to adapt to a given social frame and culture (ideology) if we want to belong to a wider group of people and friends? How much must we be alienated each time we adapt to the existing context and give up our dearest desires or hopes? This essential (existential) interrogation tries to trace a clear line between individualism and personalisation. It seems to me that this line, although it does not and cannot exist clearly, has something to do with egocentrism and hetero-centrism.

Egocentrism is focused on one's own interests, desires, pleasures, perceptions, projects, ideas, etc. as a single individual. It thinks and plans according to a limited view, which does not try to integrate any global trend concerning the general context. This attitude does not necessarily exclude altruism and generosity but is nevertheless limited; it cannot rise to a higher level of inclusion of other members of the same social group or look at parameters that concern the whole. When one thinks on a cellular level, one loses sight of the more general level of the organ or the whole body.

Authentic freedom is not the ability to act according to individual preferences; rather, it is a broader view that integrates some more general parameters on higher levels of inclusion or totality. If I act as an individual in the crowd, I am just one dot among many; if I act according to a wider vision that can see this crowd from the top, I get a better and more appropriate vision that describes the general movement or trend of the crowd. Then, according to what I see as a general evolution or risk, I can act as the little dot in the crowd, but – and this makes a huge difference – I now act in the interest of the whole, or at least after becoming conscious of what the whole needs its members to contribute. This is proper personalisation, not just pure self-interested individualism. This is the difference that higher consciousness (with a higher level of inclusion, i.e. more hetero-centrism) may bring into our lives, as persons, and as a community. The contribution of a person with this wider vision helps shape the

community and encourage cooperation, while a self-centred individual generates competition and conflict.

This distinction between individualism and personalisation gives us insight into alienation. When I adapt to my social group in adopting its ready-made views, I alienate myself. When I adapt to the views of my community because I accept them as they are but I also try to evolve them towards a freer state of thinking and behaving, I contribute to the wellbeing of my community and help it to take shape in the terms described by Teilhard de Chardin. This is the freedom that existentialism looks for, but it is not individualistic, like Sartre's existentialism ("l'enfer, c'est les autres"); rather, it is personal and self-giving. A personal contribution to the common good – when led by a global vision (whether philosophical, political or spiritual) – comes at the price of letting one's own interests come second to the general interest. This is not necessarily a high price to pay; it is just another perception of priorities and an increased ability to be more enriched when the common good is enriched.

The debate about individualism and personalisation, about alienation and true freedom of being is essential, because it shows exactly where the great challenge of our time resides. Shall we build a better community based on higher consciousness and deeper personalisation? Or shall we remain in a state of relative totalitarianism, where market and technology lead? These two forces are based on pure functionalism (more growth and more means) and do not take care of meaning or humanity at all; they do not ask where we are heading.

08 – Consensus as a shared social vision

The land makes the whole network of relationships visible, as present reality and future potential

As composites of many contrasting tendencies, local communities are made up of much more than just the people who use the same shops and local services. The land in which the local community is

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rooted makes visible the whole network of relationships, past and present, that create and express all the conditions of everyday living, and the potential of today and tomorrow, in action or latency. The land is the ground for our living relationships.

Similar to the body as a visualisation (i.e. making visible what is not) of what happens within us, the landscape expresses our collective identity. We can read the landscape as a book that shows how we interact with one another and the environment. It reveals the major centres of attention and gravity in our lives. The development of cities, the privileged accessibility of shopping centres, the impact of cars on the landscape, the centrality of places which play a major economic role are signs of the dominant forces which lead our development. By revealing these major trends, the landscape demonstrates who we are as a community, and the nature of our relationships. Being able to see what happens in relationships between people allows us, if we are attentive, to act upon them when they need to be changed or improved. Local community living has a transparency that we lose when we integrate too much into the globalised world of anonymous exchanges – then, external impacts cannot translate into landscape so directly.

Consensus: a form of compromise in expressing our diversity, cooperation and empowerment

Any local community needs to facilitate internal dialogue between all members. They have to reach, between them, a minimum degree of consensus in order to thrive. Consensus does not mean that all members have to absolutely agree about everything. It is made possible by the level of compromise all members are ready to make to find a relative degree of unity with each other. This allows all parts of society, including minorities, to integrate with their real originality into the whole of the community. Consensus allows the community to keep collective control over its common destiny, yet maximise the

possible diversity of its members, and their interests, perceptions and opinions.

Whatever consensus is unable to include will be controlled by external actors at their own profit – very probably against the interests of the local community. This is why consensus is vital: it allows the community to choose priorities and then implement the necessary conditions. The community can also review the terms of agreement, re-examine how far the aims have been reached, and adapt procedures as needed. It is a dynamic process.

Consensus is true empowerment and it maintains transparency, for all members. It requires personal maturity and tolerance – an ability to listen to the other and understand another point of view. It trains community members to become better informed, to better understand the main issues and to become more aware and responsible, and more open to diversity. It is a process of (self-)education, discovery, imagination, expression and listening that allows most aspects of life to develop and to deepen. Local life is ideal for developing our faculties of consensus, because it reflects, clearly and concretely, what happens when a quality of transparency can be gained.

Human rights are fundamental, and require us to take responsibility

Since the end of World War 2, the movements towards independence by colonised countries, the various struggles for racial emancipation and women's liberation and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) have had a very strong impact on the way we understand the fundamental needs of each person and human group. We all, including minorities, deserve to live in decent conditions, able to fully express our own potential. This understanding has led to a better restraint of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and other forms of ostracism.

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Yet in our egocentric and individualistic society it has as well soon been turned paradoxically into greed and self-promotion at the expenses of others. If our evolution towards deeper consciousness requires truly that we mature into more hetero-centric forms of cohabitation in building true human communities based on care and sharing, we urgently need to develop a sense not only of our rights but also of our responsibilities.

A Universal Declaration of Responsibilities was accepted by the UN in 1998, but it is far from having the same impact as the Declaration of Human Rights.

Responsibilities are much more than duties.

“The word *duty* indicates compulsion; the word *responsibility* indicates freedom. Duties lead one to demand rightfully; responsibilities lead one to command respectfully. Sense of duty is out of attachment; sense of responsibility is out of love. Duties can be thrust upon others; responsibilities are taken up by oneself. There can be unwillingness in performing one’s duty; responsibility is always taken up willingly.” (Maa Purnananda)

Unless they focus on defending and promoting the rights of oppressed categories of marginal people, ethnic minorities, exploited workers, etc., rights tend to be rather egocentric, while responsibilities are genuinely hetero-centric. A sense of responsibility is a dominant and necessary complement to the awareness of our given rights. The community can truly be a body that provides for each one, but it also needs each one to contribute to the Commons. This is a huge step in our evolution and will take us out of our selfish imprisonment.

Empowerment consists in the way we live: each choice is a direct vote for what we choose

The motto “each choice is a vote” was explained earlier. It describes the way we may give shape to our local community as a place for responsibility, empowerment and consensus about our common

future, as a place of resilience (self-reliance). When we consume local goods and services, we restore our faculties for creativity (trades) and for sharing, making our land a place that integrates all dimensions of a full life, for our youth and the future generations. We may reorganise local life in order to become more self-sufficient, not only in terms of what we produce for ourselves locally but also in terms of skills and the means of creativity we offer to different members of the community, especially youth. Another extreme priority is to restore the systems of regulation of our land and climate (forests, water, soil, ocean, sun, wind).

I believe that our empowerment lies in the way we live and the choices we make every day, in each act of our life: our own life is in fact our true power.

Yet our society tends to believe that big corporations are powerful.

They control most of our economic development and they strongly influence most political options, because of their economic power and political pressure through lobbying and their important impact through their own financial means. A few powerful corporations control the main sectors of food production and distribution (e.g. Nestlé, Unilever, General Mills), of GMOs and seeds (e.g. Monsanto, DuPont, Syngenta), of pharmaceuticals (e.g. Johnson, Pfizer, Roche, Novartis), of banking (e.g. Bank of China, JPMorgan, HSBC, Paribas), of information technology (e.g. Google, Facebook, Apple, Samsung, Amazon, Microsoft), of fossil fuels (e.g. Shell, ExxonMobil, BP, Total), of media (e.g. Walt Disney, Fox, CNN), etc. which turn into kinds of quasi-monopolies.

These sectors are in the hands of these giant firms which, according to the law of greed for maximum profit and power, manage their interests at the price of our wellbeing. This means that most aspects of our lives (how we feed ourselves, how we take care of our health, how we communicate, how we move, what we think, etc.) are strongly influenced, if not shaped, by interests that do not care for our wellbeing. This is the big inversion: clients are no longer kings, but slaves to their providers.

But the picture of all-powerful corporations does not exactly represent the truth. In fact, we (all together) are the real actors who

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make these corporations so powerful, when, a little bit more every time, we rely on their services and goods.

Each of these firms would be nothing if nobody bought their products. Of course, our ability to choose what we consume is not an easy power to handle. Most of us, as people with a high standard of life, feel less constrained by the strict conditions for survival. Our difficulty to be free lies in the fact that our desires lead us to make compromising choices that reinforce the power these firms have on us; any resistance is at the expense of the advantages we get from what we buy from them. This is precisely where our power lies: everybody is responsible for their individual choices. It is sometimes disheartening that each personal choice has only a very small impact on our surroundings and that each personal sacrifice seems huge, especially compared with its real effect. Yet it is also true that, cumulatively, these personal choices form the world in which we live today.

Because, together, we form the entire body of consumers and citizens, we are truly empowered to decide where we want to confer power. Each choice is a vote. Our empowerment comes through being aware that each of our choices is a vote that encourages a type of good, a way of producing, a way of thinking, or the intellectual, ethical and spiritual values embedded in the goods or services we consume: what we eat, watch, read, love. The same is also true for what we provide, produce, share and sell, and the conditions attached to that.

The local food shop that answers our basic subsistence needs (if it is not a big shopping centre) is not here in question. The problem arises for goods of secondary necessity, when we are faced with choices. Which providers are ethically trustworthy (fair-trade)? Do I buy my goods online or do I support local businesses? It will cost me more to buy fair-trade or local products, but doing so will sustain the quality of fair exchanges or local living instead of discouraging local skills by buying Chinese imports to save a few dollars ... and get worse quality. Our main problem is that we have servilely accepted the simplistic logic of a market which reduces the wide range of criteria to a single measure – price – which is said to summarise them all. In accepting price as the one indicator and criterion of choice, we have lost our ability to judge according to qualitative aspects such as work

conditions, social security, wages, ecology, equity, creativity, beauty, quality, etc. On the other hand, the money we pay for foreign goods goes far away and does not sustain local life or circulate wealth that benefits us locally. The cheapest way is never the cheapest in the long term. The bill just comes later!

Politics as a wider vision that describes what our community is meant to become

Politics, instead of the competitive struggle for power it is presently, can become the common place where we meet as citizens to foster the society we want. Politics is both a guiding vision of the social quality we wish to implement together as a community (consensus) and a place of debate and invention for the ideal ways to implement this vision. It is the frame that helps us collectively control the evolution of our community (whether local, regional, national or international) and better channel our many diverse forms of creativity.

It is the field where we learn how to master economy and technology, or similar specialised fields of activity, in order to keep them at the service of the community and avoid their destructive dominance. It is also the field where natural leaders arise, not because they have been elected but because they have a superior level of maturity and understanding.

Nikolai Berdyaev has described how a fascinating social force called the Intelligentsia took shape in tsarist Russia.⁴⁷ It was not a group of privileged intellectuals but a social force that developed across all divisions of class and contrasts of education, wealth, status, power, age, gender, belief, etc. The members could be simple workers or farmers as much as academics, thinkers or scientists; plebeians or aristocrats; poor or rich. It formed a kind of “monastic” order that searched for the best form of society based on justice, equity and

47 Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, University of Michigan Press, 1960.

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truth, acting as a kind of “external” (independent) critical eye on society as well as a force of positive invention.

Democracy is not a constitutional system (regular elections and law of majority); it is a culture that needs to mature through experience, a dynamic practice in which all members of the community should be involved. The search for consensus is its strength and its cohesive force.

When we look at our present practice, we see that there is no more elaborate system of participation than our modern society; it involves a vast worldwide network of exchanges: the most participatory system of all! Of course, each one of us does not have the same range of power; and our individual power is inversely proportional to the number of people involved. Yet, if our individual power is almost insignificant, it becomes much stronger when we find consensus and unite. In our Western world, the average person has much more power than most people in poorer countries, and our power tends to grow in proportion to our standard of living. This is ethically problematic, but it emphasises our increased responsibility. Living in a democracy with a liberal market system, we are “free” to choose what we consume and the price we are willing to pay (in dollars, in remorse or nightmares, in joy of sharing and being responsible, or even in having to pay the price of our freedom of mind!). We are free to create the society we want. This means that we are also responsible for the current state of our society: we have collectively sown what we reap now. We are all involved, and initiative and resistance are the two main means of creativity. Our freedom depends on our maturity and spirit and how we nourish them.

Friendship as a link: being truthfully who we are and accepting others as authentic beings

A better perception of complexity and a healthy collective dynamic can help us practise communication in a way that does not depend so much on technology but more on direct human contact. Despite the powerful way it can generate links between people (yet only virtual links, not true, direct, personal links) social media is also an

opportunity for all kinds of excesses, from bullying to the spread of hate and violence and the exploitation of personal data. We need to develop authentic forms of friendships, with less technology, generating true links of trust between us, so that we dare to reveal ourselves as we are, instead of trying to elaborate a false persona that aims to impress.

When we know ourselves and the other, reciprocally, with our many respective weaknesses as well as skills and qualities, we can become true personal supports, relying on one another. It is a relief to be free to simply be ourselves, with all our vulnerability, without pretence, and to be accepted as we are. Friendship is truly an art, especially in our modern society where so many factors prevent friendship from growing naturally through everyday life. It takes a willing awareness to re-establish this quality in our relationships.

Money (replacing kinship), technology (replacing meaning) and individualism (replacing sense of belonging) are the tools of our own ejection from social interdependence, which should form the core of our life experience. Everything we need is provided by our market society and social state, and paid for with money: through private businesses (with cash) or through public services (by taxes).

We have lost the ability to provide for our essential needs through direct action shared with neighbours (dependents, friends) meeting similar needs. We are alienated from society because it provides everything for cash and only involves us as consumers. When we try to reintegrate into a network of interdependent relationships, we have the opportunity to rediscover the true meaning of friendship.

As long as we do not reverse this tendency, friendship will only remain a leisure activity. We will enjoy good times together over a glass of wine, a delicious meal, a BBQ, a swim, a ride, a dance, while watching a show or listening to a concert together. But none of these activities provide the opportunity to be truly concerned with or involved in each other's lives. Nothing in leisure relationships confronts us with the test of veracity of what we share (mainly talk). In leisure we do not directly confront the true nature of reality or the hard struggle of life in its materiality.

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By contrast, true friendship means the interaction and involvement of each in the life of the other. Involvement should be understood in a positive way, as a deep concern for what the other experiences in their most essential concerns. Involvement does not mean intrusion or invasion. Privacy remains what people wish it to be, to the degree they wish it. Deeper concern leads to more understanding, better listening, more empathy and also, inevitably, a readiness and a wish to participate where there is room for participation. Friendship means deeper sharing and involvement, because there is something to share through life experience.

If we do some building work together, I will know you better than if we only spend time together around a table, drinking, eating and talking. If you visit me when I'm sick, you'll discover aspects of my person, of my fragility, that you would never encounter without me being sick. Being with people during terminal illnesses is a very powerful way to connect deeply, on a level touching the essence of life itself. Even without looking for extreme situations, practical involvement in each other's lives creates a spark that produces real light. So why not practise this form of intimacy?

09 – The search for a “new” anthropology

Living in the truth instead of conforming to dominant values

Quality relationships with friends, and with anybody who belongs to the same community, even if they are very different from us or have a nearly opposite way of thinking, can only become reality if we are free enough to develop our own personal and collective vision. We have a personal responsibility to try and live in the truth, instead of conforming to the values of the society around us.

Vaclav Havel wrote “The power of the powerless” in 1978.⁴⁸ He was the founder of Charter 77, a “dissident” who became the first president of the Czech Republic after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is addressed to the Polish trade union Solidarność, to help them find the right attitude in order to be free witnesses and not reactive to any form of official power. Havel describes the path of living in the truth as the true power we have when we do not engage in conflict but stand rooted in truth. He says that this discovery of how to live in the truth arises and develops in the private sphere.

The text is fascinating because it can be read on many levels: 1) historically as a political paper of that time, 2) politically as a description of the role of ideology and the attitude of resistance under totalitarianism, 3) philosophically as a demonstration of what true freedom is, independent of whether the ideology involved is totalitarian or market-oriented, and 4) spiritually as a (tacit) description of what our personal evolution and growth means.

“Living in the truth” does not clearly define what should be done. It encourages a spirit of search and questioning that aims at bringing one into tune with the Universe. Truth (with a capital T) remains mysterious and inaccessible. In our efforts to search for Truth, we do our best to glimpse it and to reshape our personal lives in consequence. When they are constant and persistent, these attempts and their fruits cause us to reconsider many practices of our current society.

Our new personal insights on this path generate radical changes of perception and attitude. These insights will likely lead us to resist the dominant trends of our society. This happens as soon as we start living according to another way of thinking, another mindset – as soon as we choose to live in the truth. Resistance is not grounded in a principle of opposition to society, but this change of attitude towards the social context is inevitable. It is a natural fruit of the changes of

48 If you want to read this inspiring text, see [Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, Taylor & Francis Ltd, UK, 2009;](#) or download it from: <http://www.desertcreekhouse.com.au/texts/powerless.pdf>

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mind and heart calling us to adapt our lives to a deeper vision. More than a stance of opposition, this is a new (re)creation.

Seeing the flaws of our own (individual and collective) perceptions and behaviours

We need to be aware that we can only discover more about truth if we are first ready to see the flaws that impregnate our usual perceptions (our personal ones as well as the ones dictated by ambient conventional wisdom). When we notice flaws in ourselves, in our way of living, in our social construct – or when we experience suffering – we start observing and thinking differently. Without breaking the shell of appearances, we cannot see the light that comes in through the cracks.⁴⁹

Most spiritual teachings help make us aware of the flaws of our perceptions and teach us how to “observe or examine the nature of ...”⁵⁰ things; the nature of anger, desire, suffering, relationships, of our context, of love, our own nature, etc. We have to observe the nature of ... (something) because we know very well that our first perception is not correct and induces error or suffering. This is the flaw. By observing the nature of ... (something) we learn how to become aware of the flaws and probably also how to correct them somewhat.

The role of ideology, not as a totalitarian tool, but as a wider vision guiding our evolution

We awake to notice how much the dominating ideology that surrounds us is damaging our human evolution. Ideology is well-known as the powerful tool of totalitarian regimes, which use it to

49 Leonard Cohen

50 His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

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give their project a coherent appearance and pressure citizens to conform and be involved in the madness. Yet ideology is also a very strong tool in our rich Western societies, with its own flavour of madness. It is not imposed in such a blatant way, but is more subtle and insidious: the myths of pleasure, of limitation of effort, of wealth, power, prestige, youth, speed, fashion, consumption, etc. are widely accepted and represent clearly endorsed leading energies in our rich societies. Advertising is the best illustration of this dominant ideology.

We need to notice how these insidious forces affect the way we live and our relationships; especially how they can act to distort and invert our life conditions when not grounded on care and sharing. If we choose to resist these energies, we do it as a means of self-protection and even survival. A constant effort to live in the truth becomes our personal responsibility, a question of freedom, ruthless self-honesty and courage.

We can then develop a positive ideology which, no longer repressive or misleading, becomes an inspiration – a creative and constructive guide in our daily choices. It becomes a vision to structure our lives. I'm convinced that, if ideology can consolidate an oppressive regime, it can also, when conceived in positive and life-giving terms, become the path of liberation for a community. Ideology is not bad in itself; everything depends on the content and its subtlety. If repressive, it represses. If creative, it becomes life-giving. Ideology is always there in our lives, whether openly or unconsciously. That's why we must make it an active and conscious tool of liberation. This is a dimension we have to (re)discover. We too often ignore the need for a constructive and creative vision to lead us.

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An urgent need to protect recessive feminine (Yin) values and attitudes

To live in the truth, we need more gentleness. It can be difficult to find gentleness in our modern society, because our culture is very much oriented and driven by male (Yang) values. This male domination deprives us from being more receptive, more understanding, more caring. Feminine (Yin) values of welcoming and care need to be protected and given more opportunities for expression, since they tend to yield – I call them *recessive* – when confronted by Yang values. They lose ground and let the dominant forces rule the game. They also tend to lose their creative potential when marginalised or repressed by stronger dominant Yang trends: competition prevents cooperation; domination excludes welcoming; noise destroys silence; exploitation hinders care; action diminishes our faculty of being; etc. The first in each of these pairs is Yang, while the second is Yin. The first dominates, while the second is recessive. Oppression of and violence towards women is rooted in the same repressive masculine force that negates or exploits, through domination, a form of hidden, resilient femininity.

When I use the word “recessive” to define Yin qualities, I do not mean to express a weakness; they can also be described as “gentle”. This usage is inspired by Mendel’s law of dominance in biology, which states that certain genetic characteristics are recessive (like blue eyes), so that two similar genes must combine together in order to bring the character to expression, while dominant genes (for brown eyes) can combine with similar (brown) or different ones (blue) and nevertheless bring their own character (brown) to expression. Yin attitudes, being recessive (gentle), need protection in order to be expressed.

It is also important to understand that when I write “masculine”, I do not mean “men”. And by “feminine”, I do not mean “women”. I mean a tendency that is certainly linked with the differences of experience of each gender (Yang as protecting, Yin as giving birth, as they are described traditionally). We all have both Yin and Yang

tendencies, independent of our gender, but also in a proportion usually influenced by our gender.

I intentionally speak of gender where others would speak of sex. For me gender is more than our biological sex; it is also the experience that goes with it before it becomes also a social construct. When a woman gives birth with its excruciating pains and incredible joy, it is a life changing experience which happens because of (but also mainly beyond) sex (female or male). This means that sex fosters our gender experience before it can be reshaped by society (customs, values, hierarchies, behaviours) as a social construct that does not necessarily fit with nature. This contrast between the given difference (biology and the experience of it) and the interpretation of it (social construct) is for me the starting point for a reflection about gender. In the whole of nature there are males and females, men and women. There is also a kind of continuity between Yin and Yang, with one also always present in the other, in varying proportion, as contrary tendencies that combine harmoniously. The graphic sign of Yin-Yang in black and white represents this well: where there is the maximum amount of one, there is still a tiny dot of the other. But what does this mean in terms of experience? This is not a matter of opinion; it is about the experiences that reveal reality to us and how we react to them. There is no fixed norm; there is no normal. There is freedom to express what is real. But the real is not something of our making. It is a mix of reality and interpretation; not a fictive world for us to create.

Femininity (Yin) as a necessary complement to dominating masculine (Yang) values

We need urgently to integrate, into our rather imposing and competitive (Yang) attitudes, more feminine (Yin) values, in a society in which masculine (Yang) priorities dominate and are given priority. Yin qualities include cooperation, care, sharing, listening, welcoming, slowness, self-limitation, and so on.

Surprisingly, the general prioritisation of Yang values is, in our market- and technology-dominated Western society, accepted by both women and men, so our social construct conforms principally to a

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male-dominant model. For instance – I speak here in terms of generalities I can observe around me – women are as keen as men to travel quickly (Yang), to accumulate wealth (Yang), to be efficient (Yang) and are also (though perhaps less) reticent to live simply (Yin), to waste time or be patient (Yin), etc. Women still do generally display more Yin qualities in their behaviours, such as resilience and patience. This prioritisation of male-dominating values by women seems to be a deep contradiction, apparently fostered by our conventional social construct.

Some of the dominant Yang values or priorities include: domination (vs cooperation), control (vs care), profit (vs sharing), dictating (vs listening), exclusion (vs welcoming), speed (vs slowness) and accumulation (vs self-limitation). These dominating Yang attitudes are in deep antagonism to the Yin qualities mentioned in brackets, but could still combine with their opposed equivalent if the Yin qualities are given some protected space for expression. They are not mutually exclusive but complementary in keeping a just balance (the law of balanced antagonisms).

Given today's frenetic way of life, self-limitation and gentleness, care and sharing will help us redefine our needs into something that makes more sense, is sustainable and does not generate disparities between people. To help these feminine attitudes come to expression, we must create a protected space where they can thrive: a space of silence, care, tolerance, listening, inclusion, gentleness and slowness. Without this protection, which can control and restrict Yang energies, these qualities are lost: silence is not possible amid noise, but tolerance does not allow exclusion, for example.

Gender issues and the present unisex model as hindrances to the true expression of gender identity

Beyond the deep imbalance between feminine and masculine attitudes, modern society has other problematic issues linked with

gender identity and experience; or with the all-too-often conflictual relationships between genders. Ever since the women's liberation movement impacted so positively on our critical views of gender imbalance, we have been creatively searching for new forms of expression for each gender. It seems that, without questioning the imbalance between feminine and masculine attitudes (Yin and Yang) as leading forces, we cannot find a satisfying answer to gender issues (exploitation of one gender by the other, domestic violence, differences of income between women and men, the "glass ceiling").

In order to propose a new form of equality, we have developed a unisex pattern of development – *unisex* means here a denial of gender differences, mainly in purpose of economic efficiency. A unisex pattern proposes a uniforming (flat land) practice more than a range of true positive diversified possible behaviours and expressions for each gender. Such a diversity of expression linked with gender can only develop if one accepts that gender makes a difference. Our market system has played a large part in the unisex forgery. The unisex pattern adapts each of us, whatever our gender (or personality), to become equivalent cogs in the system, reducing gender (and personality) differences. All people are meant to work in the same way and make the machine run smoothly. This is a resounding victory for the male-oriented system that still prevails after so many years of attempt to change the model; and that still searches only for efficiency, domination and profit – a predominance of masculinity (Yang) over femininity (Yin).

Our experience of life is rooted in our respective gender experiences (or differences)

Our modern world has tried to abolish the differences between genders. They do not matter anymore. Only sex remains, the residual pleasure of a form too often degraded into reciprocal exploitation. We have lost sight of the rich treasure hidden behind our (gender) differences. The poor gender relationships we mostly practise today

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call for a drastic change – we must reinvent true relationships between women and men, between feminine and masculine, for queer people too.

Traditional societies (as Ivan Illich illustrates in *Gender*)⁵¹ have always recognised differentiation between people that is rooted in genders. Having no choice not to, especially when faced with rough survival conditions, in constant confrontation with harsh natural settings, these societies recognise that gender differences deeply affect one's personal experience and skills in handling life and daily tasks, and consequently these differences come to define roles. In a traditional society our gender becomes recognisable just through the tasks one executes, even from a far distance from which one cannot distinguish whether it is a woman or a man that is acting. The experience of each gender, in its deep essence, is very different. To have life developing in one's womb or having to secure an environment for one's growing family are two very different roles that natural processes impose onto us, even in the modern world, according to gender. Even if we want to, we cannot change these fundamental differences; men cannot become pregnant! Women have a different physical metabolism, allowing better resilience but less physical force. Of course this is only a general tendency and distinction; there are also many exceptions!

The social constructs created around these differences have fostered, beyond a mere and rich difference of experience, a hierarchy of roles, and often a terrible exploitation of one gender by the other. Yet in terms of genetic differences, there is no innate supremacy of one gender over another. Giving birth has no less value than providing security. But human culture has artificially created hierarchies and trends of domination that are not always evident at first glance. Nevertheless, there are many societies in which women are all-powerful, behind external appearances of being submissive. African women on the market place detain an economic power (and money) the man does not access so easily, despite an appearance of male domination. And there are still matriarchal societies in which the forms of domination look different. Or cases like our modern Western society, which seem to be egalitarian but treat women in the

51 See Ivan Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon Books, NY, 1982.

worst possible ways, for instance through the image of publicity, or as sex objects.

We should face the evidence: gender is not a choice, it is a given. But, in my understanding, we may still choose how we want to experience, interpret, express and live with it.

In recent years there has been a tremendous gay liberation movement, and this is a very happy development. Yet it seems that also, mixed with this authentic need for necessary liberation, there is a deep awkwardness in the public debate that confuses many different aspects linked with the gender issue; for instance about the form of union, about the rights of queer people, about the possibility of choosing or changing one's own gender, about the possibility of raising children, etc. All these aspects should not be treated as one single problem, as it tends to be in the public debate, but as many dimensions, which each require their own solution.

It is first essential to recognise that queer people truly need to be in same-sex or other relationships because they feel like they are another gender (identity?), in a body that does not fit them, or for another reason. And it is essential that they are recognised and that their union can be celebrated.

In a nutshell, the core question might be the following:

- Is the choice concerning our gender restricted to the way we experience and express it, because it is assigned at birth and can't be changed? As I mentioned before, this would mean our biological sex defines the basis for our gender experience, before it becomes a social construct. This does not exclude for instance transgender identity or same-sex relationships.
- Or is this choice extended to the possibility that we may change our gender identity? Then gender would be only a social construct, independently of any given biological character.

This is evidently a question that goes well beyond how we have sex! It is about who we are and how we express it. Gender seems to me to be like race or age or the place where we were born or the culture in which we have grown up or our mother tongue; these characteristics (constraints or potentials?) are given, we did not choose them and we cannot change them. It is like the colour of our skin, of our eyes, of our hair. They become then parts of ourself and challenges to the

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way we interpret them and we handle them. The creativity is not in changing them but in accepting and making them tools of what we are. When I mean that they are given, I speak about the fact (gender, race, age, colour) and not the interpretation by our society. The experience is then about the fact: gender and race as such, not about how other people see us through this lens or what seems “normal” to do. It means we are free to reinterpret and handle the fact as we want to, independently from the way these characteristics are perceived as social constructs. Our creativity finds then its expression in the way we invent new forms of behaviours – that are not defined by the interpretation projected by our social context – and we do this in using what we have been given as it is.

But – apparently in a way that seems to indicate it is a social construct – some people seem to turn to same-sex relationships, not because it is in their genes or their deep nature, but mainly by confusion, because of bad experiences with the other gender, often in a previous relationship. Their need for tenderness or love is very legitimate. In this case the cause is not truly same-sex attraction, but rather, other-sex repulsion, i.e. the problem is the relationship between genders as it has been experienced, or generally between men and women in our social practices. Unless their negative experience has revealed something much deeper.

If the problem is with relationships between genders (between men and women), we need to reflect on this. As cross-gender relationships degrade, each gender seems to take refuge in single-gender clusters, at war with the other gender. Single gender schooling obviously does not help children to learn how to relate with the other gender. But many interactions between genders in daily life teach us also to accept contrast, tension, conflict and division, but also attraction, fascination, seduction. I’m amazed how, in Anglo-Saxon cultures, people live separate lives according to gender definitions. This is in my eyes one main cause of the present conflict: the question remains how to live together enjoying differences.

Choosing to undergo a change of sex characteristics through surgery or hormonal treatment also seems to be on the rise. I understand that some people, even as children, feel they are another gender, or even no gender at all. Is this a natural desire, or an artefact of culture? I believe it to be strongly influenced by the possibility we have, nowadays, to change (choose?) our gender identity (as a social

construct), beyond of course the consideration that without strict repression (thanks to liberation movements) many more people now feel safe to come out. This more recent tendency seems also to be linked with our Western excessive focus on so-called “individual freedom” (the right to choose what one does or who one is) and even, at the extreme, with a form of self-obsession with identity as if this identity could be simply defined by identification with a category (straight, gay, transgender, non-binary, queer) instead of being fostered by a creative way of interpreting reality? Then it would be a form of conformism in reverse. Refer to previous comments about identity (in chapter 1, number 9).

I’m aware that these few considerations are very incomplete, yet this is not the place to develop a broader reflection on gender. I only intended to indicate some directions in which to search.

My comments express the deep confusion (and sadly, corruption) of gender relations, and the debate we have about these essential issues. I feel we need, as a wide public debate, to deeply, radically reconsider the whole question, rooting it first in the original sex difference given by nature that cannot be denied. From there we’re able to invent new practices where each gender and person – “straight” or queer – can find their own path and authentic expression; true liberation and happiness. And a way to relate in difference and harmony.

The need to balance Yin and Yang attitudes and the recognition that gender impacts drastically on the way we experience life will help us define a path where every gender can be valued and contribute with its own attitudes, aptitudes, perceptions and special qualities for the common good of the community. Instead of us being all identical cogs in a system, there is a way to practise each form of work, skill, creation, etc. in a special way related to our gender and personality. There is a unique, special, valuable way for each of us. There are so many ways to be mother, father, builder, lawyer, architect, nurse, neighbour, clown, shopkeeper – even to be oneself! Feminine and masculine ways, or any combination of the two, in personal ways.

The solution is simple

A new anthropology – our endless search for the meaning of life

This other way of looking at who we truly are and what matters most in life opens up new ways to be creative. But, more broadly, I believe that we need to discover a whole new anthropology – new ways to search for the meaning of life. Life is more than a simple physical and chemical process; it is more than pure survival or economic achievement. It has meaning and purpose that remain a mystery. Maybe the meaning of life is precisely to discover this mystery, in our own way!

We cannot plumb this mystery and we will never agree upon what it is. Our respective traditions, cultures and religions are a sign of the diverse perceptions and interpretations. The mystery is complex, with multiple aspects. But, in the antagonisms of our many different approaches, we too often find a blatant expression of our lack of reciprocal tolerance or ability to learn from one another. We must urgently rediscover how to search for meaning in a way that honours our diversity, yet enables unity. We might accept that we will never find a common answer, yet nevertheless agree upon the importance of searching for meaning, and do what we can to help each other prioritise this search, leaving each of us responsible for the answers we find personally. Then we could share what we discover, in a way that confronts and also stimulates each other's discoveries.

The search for meaning (not the answers) generates the right attitude

Prioritising the search for meaning will radically transform the way we understand life, guiding us on fundamentally different paths from the materialistic, pragmatic one we currently follow collectively. We will journey towards a true anthropology that can provide sketches of answers and help us make real choices in our lives.

Synthesis in diversity

Climate change, violence, war, oppression, hunger and poverty are not problems we can answer without first daring to ask what the meaning and purpose of our way of living is or should be, and where our common humanity lies.

I propose that we engage on a path that asks questions more than it provides answers. All of us, as persons or as communities, can then form our own opinions and make our own choices, in response to new ways of understanding the world.

This search for a new anthropology provides a sense of meaning which is the ground on which we build our lives.

This new anthropology will be a very personal and subjective interpretation, but a positive ideology like this can guide us throughout our life – and being built on truth, instead of fear, we can trust it much more.

Truth (capital T) does exist, although it may be out of reach or difficult to grasp. This means that there is “something”, a kind of unifying force perhaps, hidden behind the curtain, which may guide our search if we are committed to being radically honest. This something can unite us, beyond our differences. We have the chance to further evolve, developing our humanity – and this is where we start to form a true and authentic community that might overrule our individualisms.

Chapter 8: Between spirit and matter

Preliminary remarks

At the beginning of this new chapter, I wish to make something very clear. The whole second part of this book (from chapter 5 on) concerns the meaning of life, approached in a very subjective way. It is not absolute truth but my personal approach to truth, according to my own experience. And this present chapter focuses mainly on the spiritual dimension of life according to my intuition. My own personal experience incites me to recognise a Presence that leads the evolution of the cosmos in a creative (not constraining) way. As I explained in chapter 2, it seems very clear to me that our universe cannot be the result of mere chance and necessity. Something more immaterial (a form of Presence, Intelligence and Intention) has shaped it and shapes it still. I do not believe that this universe is solely the fruit of probability – it would not be able to produce such complex life forms, even after 14 billion years. Hence my personal conclusion and observation that a form of Presence, Intelligence and Intention leads its evolution. Nobody can prove or disprove such an understanding, and I do not intend to try; I will simply describe what I understand, and investigate what it means, in practical terms, for daily living.

The very likely and plausible reality of this Presence or Intelligence or Intention makes it the leading energy of the cosmos. Consequently this Intelligence with its spiritual dimension is essential because it is

the principal acting cause. For me, it then becomes critical to know more about it, in order to understand the real nature of the cosmos. This is my personal choice and, for me, a necessary condition if I wish to discover the deeper meaning of life. I am convinced that ignoring the sacred dimension of our universe means missing what is most important in our evolution as human beings. We would miss the central point – the energy that is the source of life.

Some readers are likely to have difficulty following me down this path – not because it is too steep, but because they either have a hang-up about spirituality and religious matters, or some other reason to reject my approach. I certainly understand why one can refuse to delve into this dimension. Many religious institutions and figures have been frightening forces, and even I share an elementary reserve and cautiousness about many forms of religious expression, from institutional rules to fundamentalist extremism. So many forms of spirituality and religion have turned what should be a subtle, free, personal experience and perception of our true origin (the Presence) into rigid, exploitative, sterile forms of domination or repression that completely negate the true nature of this Presence. Consequently, many people have been discouraged from searching in this direction.

But, even if your school biology teacher was uninspiring, you likely did not stop believing that nature was an effective reality, and even a fascinating manifestation. This is quite similar to what I have called the Ground of Being – the unknowable, invisible source that is always active in evolving the universe, and acts in our everyday life too. Just because religious institutions propose a poor, threatening, frozen image of this Presence, it does not mean that no sacred dimension exists in life – it only means that the teaching is bad (like your uninspiring biology class) – or even devious. The deeper, hidden Reality nevertheless subsists, untouched and unchanged, despite the bad teaching and its fundamental twists, which negate Reality as a free space for life. The bad teaching does not change Reality – only the message about it and our chance to receive it in a positive way.

The solution is simple

It is important to recognise that most people who reject religion have been burned by the repressive attitudes of clerical leaders, or by abuse; or been repelled by the negative image of a bearded, narrow-minded god who threatens and controls. It is essential that they understand how right they are to reject these repressive attitudes of clergy and this falsified image of a god that obviously does not exist. This repressive, angry god is a false image created by sick institutions. There is no love in this hostile image; it is incompatible with the essence of a self-giving and nurturing Source of creativity and compassion, as I experience it.

If this Presence, Intelligence and Intention is a Reality, I believe that it makes itself very discreet and does not impose. It is a self-effacing, contracting Presence that leaves a maximum of space and freedom for the creation (us and all other sentient beings) to evolve as responsible entities. If there is a real Ground of Being, it is discreet and self-effacing – not threatening. It is welcoming inasmuch as we may decide to welcome Him/Her/It. And above all, it is not imposing.

I hope that you can accompany me on this journey – if not, you can skip to the next chapter – and that we can, together, try to formulate the right questions about our essence, without necessarily answering them. I will try to provide some elements for further research. These elements do not close the debate – they start it, and open it. And they lead to many more new questions. Questions matter, because only questions can keep us awake and alert. Easy answers only put us to sleep.

Two great inversions of institutional religious thinking: starting from beliefs (not from reality) and representing God as distinct/distant

Before describing this spiritual approach in more detail, I must clear up a deep double misunderstanding that institutional religions have created.

At the core of most conventional religious teaching, there are two main twists that, in my opinion, deeply perturb our human understanding of the nature of the Ground of Being. I speak here only of mainstream institutional religion, not of the beautiful insights most deeply spiritual people and communities experience.

- 1) The first twist concerns the way religions tend to approach reality. Their teaching does not start by observing the world around us, which we experience every day, but from the beliefs (doctrine or catechism) of official teachings; they start from “ready-made” representations pre-defined as the divine. In following this logic, we start with predefined beliefs and representations, instead of our own direct observation and experience of Reality itself. Our ancestors and tradition taught us who God is. We read sacred texts and receive official teachings from religious institutions, whether Temple, Church, Synagogue or Mosque. We have created our own image of God (almost a kind of idol) and we try to fit this self-made god into the existing world. I do not mean here that these beliefs are wrong or these representations false. They are what they are. But they are not the reality we observe, or the Reality we experience. They have been processed – they are not direct experiences, but interpretations. The experiences have been filtered and expressed in a specific language that each tradition has developed. It has become doctrine. This interpretation or doctrine doesn’t fit well with our everyday experience, unless we have already learned to translate our experience of Reality into this new language. Because of this

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discrepancy we conclude that God (or rather our image of him) must be at war with the world. God and the world seem to be antagonistic, and the world does not obey God.

There is another argument in favour of starting from our experience of Reality and not from beliefs or doctrine. It is linked with what I explained earlier about dialogue (in chapter one, subtitle 1). Dialogue is not about confronting others' opinions, beliefs, perceptions, doctrines, etc. It is an opportunity to become searchers, instead of knowers; to become co-helpers on the path to revelation. And for this, we must start from Reality, not beliefs. Dialogue is not about persuasion; it is about revelation concerning this "third part" that exists beyond you and me, and our respective opinions; it is about Reality and Truth, there, beyond us – and how we may open to it.

When we open dialogues with other religions, we usually start from our own representations, and the others do the same. We can never meet, since none of us starts from Reality but only from our respective representations, which are partly fictions or at least codes of understanding. We find ourselves at odds with one another even though our daily reality is basically the same. Religious conflicts are terrible, and religious wars probably the most cruel ever.

We are in control of what we believe, because we decide by ourselves what to believe. The problem is that we cannot fit our beliefs into the world – and they do not help us live harmoniously in the world. We are at war with one another, and God is at war with the world. Often we are also at war with God – and all of us are at war with the world. I doubt it is very helpful on our path to wisdom, being in such deep conflict with all of life.

To correct this first twist concerning representations of the divine, we need to start from basics – from what we observe and experience in our daily, mundane lives. If God is truly real, we

cannot avoid meeting him in our daily lives, i.e. in our respective personal experiences of what life is!

- 2) The second twist by religious institutions is a representation of God as being somewhere out there, far away from us, a kind of floating entity above the clouds. We believe we must find him in this remote celestial sphere. The Jewish tradition, which has powerfully participated in shaping our Western Christian doctrine, has reinforced the idea (God living on the top of Mt Sinai, surrounded by clouds). While this was only a metaphor, the far, remote existence has been accepted literally.

On top of this image of a remote being who lives far away from us, we have also designed our god in human form, as a respectable, old, bearded man. The paintings in the Sistine Chapel have reinforced this image of God. Michelangelo's artworks are fascinating and extraordinarily beautiful from an artistic point of view but are nevertheless very misleading from a spiritual point of view. They create a false, anthropomorphic image of the divine. And any image of the divine is already an idol (a trap), or at least a powerful limitation to a deeper understanding of the essence of the Ground of Being. Not only we have adopted an anthropomorphic image of God but the Christian message of incarnation (Jesus as God made flesh) – when understood in a too-literal way – has restricted our image of God even more as an anthropomorphic being, rather than us seeing Jesus as a concentrated, temporary expression of a much wider, invisible, ungraspable reality.

To correct this second twist we need to see that the Ground of Being acts in our world because it is the source of any life. It is present everywhere and in everything, if it is truly the source of all things living. God is no longer a remote, anthropomorphic being, but Life itself, or life's essence. Without that, the whole universe would turn into formless dust. The Ground of Being is the energy that gives form and coherence, the Intelligence that

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generates transformation and evolution, and the Intention that gives meaning and purpose to Life.

So let's construct another approach – another method, not another representation – that avoids these two twists just described.

First, if the Ground of Being is real, we have to accept that we can experience its presence in our daily lives because, if it is real and the source of life, it inevitably acts in our world. God is not some remote presence we can hardly experience, nor at war with the world. God is a Presence everywhere and in everything, sustaining all forms of life. We can thus discover God in all the big and little things of daily life.

As I said, I understand the Ground of Being (my own representation!) as a Presence, an Intelligence and an Intention:

- 1) A Presence because, without the energy of life, nothing could exist. Even the atoms would crumble into dust without the energy holding them together, and the whole world would be a kind of fog without any structure, movement or cohesion, due to the total absence of energy. It is the energy of life that generates attraction, gravitation, cohesion, movement, and even change. And this energy is much more than just energy in its physical form as observed by science; it is mainly the energy of life that animates all forces of peace, justice, compassion, beauty, etc.
- 2) An Intelligence because the Universe, in its evolution, has an orientation. It is constantly transforming, evolving from simplicity to more complexity and deeper consciousness. As I said earlier, chance and necessity cannot explain the tremendous complexity and diversity in the life forms we see today. Without the Intelligence that leads evolution, there would only be a big cloud of shapeless dust that could not change, evolve or create new forms.
- 3) An Intention because life is impregnated by many values, such as beauty, goodness, justice, compassion, solidarity and love. Life, and the many evolving forms it takes to express itself, are not

only material; they have content, and a general Intention guides their evolution. Love is the great attractive force, the immaterial parallel to gravity (the material expression that makes love visible). The Intention reveals a continuity between the material and the immaterial. It generates relationships between the elements. Life is mainly made up of relationships – consider how little effective matter (protons, neutrons, electrons) there is, compared to the vast empty space that separates those grains of matter. Gravity (relationships) holds the whole together. Without the relationships between the parts, there is only dust.

By introducing relationships into the process, Intention generates quality. Because of this power to relate, all that does not remain indifferent becomes a full participant in the whole and its wider evolution. The process of evolution is an expression of growing consciousness; it is directed towards more unity, more compassion, more inclusiveness. It leads to true community which represents, according to Teilhard de Chardin, the furthest stage of our evolution as human beings. And even, surprisingly, relationships become so personal; they become more personal between all members of the community and also more real in the way we relate, as people or communities, with the Ground of Being. Although the Ground of Being has no anthropomorphic shape, we can develop a personal, unique relationship with it – although this is very different from the personal relationship we might have with our partner, children, relatives or neighbours. It's an amazing mystery!

A spiritual approach based on observation and experience

As you can see, these three dimensions (Presence, Intelligence and Intention) are visible in material aspects of our world (attraction, complexity, evolution). Science has described them very carefully and, despite science being based, principally and restrictively, on measuring physical processes, it tends still to recognise these less

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visible dimensions of cohesion, harmony, beauty and unity. Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking both spoke of discovering the mind of God. Carefully observing our physical world allows us to discover its more hidden aspects – aspects of the Mystery at the core of the Ground of Being. This new dimension has more and more relevance in today's science, especially quantum physics. This is not as something quantum physics can grasp but, on the contrary, as something which is out of the reach of physics. Science and spirituality do not intersect, although they both try to discover reality. Their respective methods are fundamentally different and, therefore, likely to be complementary.

So, instead of starting from assumptions (as I described earlier in talking about the first twist), we need to start from direct observations of reality, in everyday life. This pragmatic, experiential approach includes scientific rationality but also goes far beyond it, into the realm of intuition and consciousness, which are not at all opposed to perceiving our material world, as I made clear earlier. Science and religion, in their most evolved practices and expressions, are complementary because they concern complementary aspects of reality and use complementary methods, revealing the unlimited existence of complementary fields of influence. Matter and spirit are truly two sides of the same coin: one visible, the other invisible. Think of a coin lying on a table: you can only see the top side; the other remains hidden – but it does not stop existing. The same with the hidden side of the moon.

All too frequently there is a confusion when we speak of spirituality or religion. Because of the two twists I just described, we often understand religion to be a system of beliefs. This is wrong – or at least not right in the case of its mature expression, cleansed of the twists mentioned above. Religion is mainly meant to express a world view: an understanding of the cosmos, of how it functions in real terms; an understanding of the origin of life, of all the energies involved, biological and inanimate, material and immaterial. Spirituality (and religion, its formal expression) is like science in that

it tries to describe reality in the widest possible understanding. But it does it so with a different mindset, and different tools. Thus observation, whether through the lens of science or of spirituality, is a powerful tool. It can radically change our representations, when it goes beyond first appearances.

Let's use an example. We can observe the Sun travelling through the sky and consequently believe it to be circling around the Earth. This is what mankind had observed and believed for many centuries. But science tells us this is not the case, and that the Earth is in fact circling around the Sun and rotating on its own axis. Science has made us aware of the illusion we may see (our own experience), replacing it with a teaching describing what really happens. We can then abandon our first illusion (the Sun moving) and recognise the real phenomenon (the Earth rotating). Science teaches us to go beyond appearances in order to discover dimensions of reality we were not aware of. Our own experience shifts from an illusion (what we apparently see) to a deeper understanding of what happens. Our experience gains depth, illusion giving way to a more real observation, which becomes in turn true experience thanks to the new explanation. Reality has not changed, but our awareness was transformed when we learnt to escape illusion, decipher experience correctly and discover a deeper meaning.

In the same way, it is essential that we learn more about the laws of nature that lead evolution and guide the world in which we live. If we ignore the laws of gravity, we can fall flat on our noses, which hurts. It is the same with the laws governing the immaterial aspects of life. When we ignore forces like attraction and love, we also suffer. This is why we need to learn to decipher what is not evident (as in the example of the Sun). We need to adapt our awareness to the surrounding world – not the reverse, as we tend to do when we try to master the world according to our own ideas and representations (twists 1 and 2).

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When we start by observing what we experience in our daily lives, all people are on common ground, no matter that they come from different cultures, races, religions, levels of instruction, etc. Then, instead of fighting each other over reductive representations issued by our respective traditions, we can come together. We do not compete against each other, and we can support each other in discovering what the world truly is, what life is and what it teaches us. There is no longer a Christian god struggling against a Muslim god or a Hindu god. There is only one Ground of Being, the source for all. Of course our respective traditions each throw different lights onto this Reality, and they are precious! They help us interpret what we do not see clearly or understand properly (as with the example of the Sun). Our traditions are different paths, different ways to look at Reality (points of view), or different interpretations of the same Reality. They can become complementary, helping us be enriched by one another. They are all different and open different windows, but they are all looking out at the same Reality. They try to interpret and describe it, although it is not feasible with words.

Only personal experience can teach us what we need to learn. Traditional teachings are only a finger pointing in the direction we should search. But their role is essential, in breaking our blindness and inner resistance to seeing what truly is. We need help to generate this shift from conventional thinking to a broader (free) way of perceiving Reality as a complete whole, unimaginably broader than we conceive it to be.

There is continuity between the scientific and spiritual approaches because these two sides are one (two sides of the same coin). When we discover this continuity and the unity of all aspects of Reality, we undergo a deep change of mind, a radical turn-around in our way of thinking. We come to perceive Reality as one. The two twists have vanished: the twist that made us start from our preconceptions instead of by observing reality in our daily experience; and the twist that made God an enemy of our world. The Ground of Being is the Presence, Intelligence and Intention that make this universe alive and

consistent (instead of dust), deep and mind blowing (because of its intensity).

A turn-around of mind at double cost

But this change of mind comes at a double cost.

First we have to acquire an open mind, in order to make this deep transformation possible. We need to learn to observe reality with our whole brain and heart and body. We need to use more than our left rational brain. We need to perceive with the global approach of our right intuitive brain; and with our whole heart as the seat of our emotions and subtle perceptions; and with our whole body and its five senses, without which there would be no perception at all.

The second cost is the necessity of detaching from the main values of our modern Western society. The values of mastery, domination, technology, market, profit, accumulation, exploitation, etc. are not compatible with the spiritual search I describe. We must make a choice: do we prioritise material comfort as our main focus, or the search for meaning and truth? Of course we do need basic material conditions to follow our search. But these basic conditions are very simple; they don't require us to adhere to the exploitative values of today's society. To be free, we need to clearly see the fundamental antagonism between an authentic search for meaning and the pervasive values of exploitation leading our present evolution. We have to sacrifice the latter to the former. "Freedom is the fire which burns away illusion", as James Baldwin writes.⁵²

Beyond first appearances

To summarise: I affirm here that authentic religion practises the same method of observation and interpretation as science does. A

⁵² James Baldwin, *Nobody knows my name*, Doubleday Books, New York, 1961.

The solution is simple

complement to science, it also teaches us to look beyond the appearances of the material world in order to perceive another predominant order behind it. This spiritual teaching, if free and authentic, does not deny the real world we experience in our daily life. The world remains unchanged, but the teaching can open our eyes to a wider, broader or deeper interpretation of reality. We could not discover this untold depth by ourselves – or not to the same extent. This is why religions are said to contain revelations – they reveal the existence of hidden immaterial dimensions we did not perceive.

It is important to see that such teachings are not merely intended to transmit theoretical beliefs – their main purpose is to open us up to personal experiences of the unknown reality. They can help make us aware of this invisible reality at the source of our own experience of life. This reality is not opposed to our material experience, but complementary – it throws another light onto the whole complex of existence. This fundamental change of mind allows us a new understanding of what life is. Life is no longer a simple physical experience; it is also a spiritual experience. In order of importance, the spiritual dimension actually trumps the physical one. As Teilhard puts it, we are spiritual beings with a human experience, rather than human beings with a spiritual experience.

We are, then, confronted by two possible explanations of our world. One is material; the other spiritual. Fascinatingly, they both combine very well, and can even fully integrate together. But this integration is also a revolution, because it reveals the cosmos to have a completely different organisation from what we thought we could observe, even though external appearances (what we see in daily life) have not changed.

It is essential that this new knowledge through revelation soon becomes experiential for us – as with the Sun running through the sky, which we suddenly see as the reverse movement of the Earth running around the Sun and revolving around itself. If not for this

radical inversion of our understanding (a mental revolution), the new knowledge would remain theoretical – an abstract belief. Spiritual teachings only become real for us when we learn to recognise the hidden dimension in our life and experience it as a true, though not visible, reality. We can learn to search for it, and to identify it when we encounter it.

In a nutshell, this is the purpose of spiritual experience: it is meant to radically widen our world view and transform it – even flip it upside down. It is important to remember that spiritual progress is not at all opposed to science. On the contrary, science is a part of the revelation that shows us the world and cosmos as they are, i.e. as a real source of permanent wonder.

10 – The great contradiction

Myths and metaphors

We all know that words and concepts are too short to describe deeper truth. Throughout human history, people have used symbolic stories to describe the mysteries of life. These stories were not true in the sense of describing actual events as they really occurred – but they were even truer than reality in the way they cut through illusion to reveal the hidden dimensions of life. We call these stories myths.

Going beyond our true material everyday reality, myths describe what cannot be put into words. They map a symbolic world of which we could not otherwise be made conscious. Almost everybody knows the myths of Oedipus and Prometheus. Both stories tell us much more than a historical story would. They reveal an unknown dimension of life, teaching us about the deep and hidden meanings of human destiny. In modern psychology, Oedipus has come to symbolise the complex relationship we develop with our parents. In sociology, Prometheus has become a symbol for our will to conquer

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and dominate – in terms of technology and nature as well as in our social environment.

In this chapter I use myths and symbols to describe invisible truths. First up, a mythical or metaphoric description of Reality itself!

The three worlds

As a metaphor (or myth) we could say that we live at the same time in three different worlds that, together, shape a complex Reality:

- 1) **World 1 = the Energy or the Source:** this is the world of our own Source and origin (the Ground of Being) that is not visible and is nevertheless continually active, keeping us alive and inspiring us. This is the immanent and spiritual source of our deeper being. The Energy of Life.
- 2) **World 2 = the Intelligence or the Expression:** this is the physical world in which we live – our natural and social environment. It is the book that reveals the true essence of World 1 (the Source) when we dare to look for meaning beyond mere appearances. It is the Source's impact on our surroundings – the visible expression of the invisible through external, physical, material signs. The Intelligence that guides evolution.
- 3) **World 3 = the Intention or the Interpretation / the (inspired or twisted) Construct:** this is the world we construct ourselves (in our heart-mind) as a representation of the world (W1 and W2) in which we live: this is a man-made construct that more or less fits Reality (W1 and W2) when our representations and interpretations are adequate. But most of the time World 3 is an awkward image or even an illusion we have built to protect ourselves from our fear of the Mystery (W1) and from the harshness of an environment (W2) that we wish was more gentle and comfortable. Or we create this kind of fiction (an illusory representation) because we need to feel that we understand the world in which we live. But, most important, this is not only our

1) World 1: The Energy = The Source of life

Invisible – Our Essence.

Emptiness which is Fullness.

No way to represent it.

*In this world there are two orders of being,
the perishable and the imperishable.*

The perishable is all that is visible.

*The imperishable is the invisible substance
of all that is visible.*

(The Bhagavad Gita)

2) World 2: The Intelligence =
The Expression: visible +
impermanent

Nature – the world we see.

Makes the Source visible.

Signs that help us to grow.

Incarnation: see and do / be.

3) World 3: The Intention =
The Interpretation: our own
(inspired?) construct

Our projections – fiction.

The meaning we impose.

The world of our making.

**The world we change / have
changed.**

The solution is simple

own inner representation but also, as a consequence, the world we build artificially and physically (no longer in our heart-mind but in our physical or social environment) through our actions, since we relate more to our preconceived representations (W3) than to reality (W1 and W2). We transform our environment (W2) physically, mentally and socially to make it “more compatible” with our artificial representations (W3) than with the Source (W1). This forced adaptation of World 2 into World 3 makes World 2 less perceivable as the Expression of W1 but more representative of W3. Thus our actions hide the Reality (W1) more and more, through the screen we interpose between us and World 1 in transforming World 2 into World 3. But when we let it be what it is truly, W3 or our understanding is identical to the Intention.

The great contradiction of materialism

If this myth or metaphor (and it is only that!) describes a true relationship between spirit and matter, it means that World 1 (the Source) is the origin of everything.

Yet we do not start our own evolution from this source – we start from the experience we have of World 2 (the Expression), which does not reveal all of its true source (W1) but is only an image or incarnation of it. We cannot directly see the source itself. The Expression, beyond which is the Reality it reveals, may even hide the source in many ways (because it is not a complete revelation), revealing only glimpses. This unclear perception leads to confusion about what the world truly is, and strongly affects the way we try to explain (W3) the nature of our world (W1 and W2).

This distortion is pretty evident in science, religion, art and culture (especially if culture means what we call liberalism or humanism). Each of these ways of thinking and acting pretends to deliver a

complete and exclusive explanation of our world at the exclusion of the other approaches.

Science, culture, art and religion have each tried to propose their own descriptions and interpretations of reality. As such they belong to World 3 as interpretations (the Construct), but each is concerned with only one of the three worlds, to the exclusion of the others. Religion focuses on World 1 by describing the Source; science on World 2 by describing what we see (the Expression); and culture (humanism or liberalism) on World 3 by describing what we made of the world (the Interpretation).

Art, as a description, is similar to science but relies on a fundamentally different approach – it is not rational, but intuitive; in this way it stands apart and can bridge the gaps between the three worlds, depending on the sensitivity of the artist to their presence.

- 1) Science has adopted a very rigorous path that only accepts what it can observe, measure and prove as consistent through experience. It has decided only to accept what belongs to World 2. This is not a problem as long as it is able to see, in World 2, an image of World 1. But it becomes a serious limitation when science refuses to accept that there is anything *other* than World 2. What you see is what you get; this excludes World 1 and World 3. And therefore science decides that World 2 is all there is, and refuses to see that what science generates as knowledge is not an all-encompassing description of World 2 as such, but only an interpretation of what we can grasp, and that it therefore belongs to World 3.
- 2) Religion (in its institutional, often very rigid and sclerotic forms) adopts a pretty similar path, but inverted, when it declares that World 2 is despicable because there is only World 1. Or at least this is what it is perceived to do. In other words it affirms that matter is bad (or inferior) and only spirit is good. In this way it denies the reality and wonder of World 2, and the whole mystery of incarnation (despite this being a fundamental dimension of Christianity, Hinduism and even Buddhism). This denial actually contradicts the core religious message, and is a regression into pre-rational thought, especially when narrow, formalised religion prescribes simple beliefs and rites, and a closed package of “complete revelation”, denying that all of World 1 is pure Mystery.

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- 3) Culture, or humanism (often called liberalism), does the same when it rejects both science (too narrow) and religion (regressive), proposing the basis for a new ethics and social reference – with humankind as the central actor (the new god).

These three approaches (science, religion and humanism) are each very rich and creative in their own specialised fields – but mistaken in excluding one another from their processes. The other approaches could easily make complementary (rather than competitive) contributions. But science, religion and humanism all tend to deny what is not their own focus, thus denying the other two worlds.

I would like to add a few remarks about *liberalism* and *humanism*. The English word *liberalism* is an ambiguous expression; on one hand, it describes a radical freedom of speech, an ability to criticise existing social settings in order to re-establish justice over inequity; on the other hand, it also describes the neo-liberal free market tendency, which precisely creates this inequity.

The ambivalent meaning is linked with historical developments that, because they generated the concept, make it understandable. In the 19th century, when liberalism was challenging the remaining monarchic forces of society, it became a revolutionary force of liberation from absolutism. But it was restrictively in the hands of the bourgeoisie, which defended then (and also later) its own privileges against the working class, which they would exploit from the Industrial Revolution on. The Revolutions (Industrial and French) reversed the social pattern of power in the hands of nobility into dominance by the bourgeoisie. The liberal movement, begun to liberate the middle upper class against absolutism, turned into an exploitation of the working classes by a privileged class of land owners and industrialists. The liberal movement became a conservative force, defending its own privileges against the more radical force of the Jacobins, who defended the working class (ordinary people). A big clash between Girondins and Jacobins happened in France, and to a lesser extent in Britain.

The Anglo-Saxon culture has always had difficulties in critically distancing itself from capitalism and liberal economics – probably because this type of economics has generated its fantastic wealth, allowing its domination to spread over the world. Hence the word *liberalism* has acquired an ambiguous meaning.

It would be less ambiguous to use the term *humanism*, as we do in French cultures. This refers to the deeper nature of our common humanity (in ethical terms), mainly as distinct persons, but also as members of an extended community (humankind). Just like *liberalism*, *humanism* does not tend to acknowledge science or religion; both deny their relevance.

Techno-liberalism seems to have become the dominating force today; an alliance of market and technology with human domination over creation. Man makes himself God (Homo Deus) by his own power. Or even his power over humankind.

The great dance of the three dimensions

It is very important to understand that our description of the three worlds is only a myth or metaphor, and that, in the metaphor, these three worlds are not separated but inter-meshed. They are like the three dimensions in space: not length nor width nor height can exist without the two others. Each one of the three worlds hence penetrates the other two, ever present in everything. Each one affects the two others.

The Ground of Being is in everything we see, and it is in us – it is the energy that sustains life itself. Without it, there would be no life, no energy, no atoms, no matter, no nature. World 1 is the Source; but World 2 expresses what it is (makes it visible) and is therefore also present in everything we see or experience. World 3 (interpretation) tries to describe and to explain what one understands about Worlds 1 and 2. In doing so, World 3 changes what World 2 is and likely affects World 1 as well, by ripple effects. These three worlds exist as complementary reflections (mirrors) of what is - at least, this is the intuition and meaning of the metaphor - and are closely related. They all need each other: World 1 needs World 2 to be perceived, and World 2 needs World 1 to get any content. World 3 needs to become explicit to show how far we have understood or twisted the perception of Worlds 1 and 2. Without World 3, Worlds 1 and 2 would be pure abstractions.

In a similar way, these three worlds are within us: body (W2), mind (W3) and spirit (W1). We urgently need a way to integrate the three

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approaches (W1, W2 and W3) in a synthesis: an understanding that can situate itself on three different levels or from three different points of view simultaneously. For this we must elevate our understanding to a higher level that can join them without conflict. It is a great dance. The image we then get will be in three dimensions – more complete and trustworthy.

Metaphors are not to be taken literally, but to emphasise one aspect among many. The three-world metaphor tells us that the leading energy is the Source – but that it is not a constraining power that pre-defines everything. The influence of Spirit is restrained by how much we accept its influence. It is a source that “only” contributes to the extent we allow it. It is only the source of energy, life and inspiration, and we can each draw our own originality from it, at will. How much do we let life, beauty, hope, love and justice inspire and move us in everyday life? That depends on us – on how much we decide to remain open to the unknown; nothing is forced upon us.

This also means we are meant to go back time and again to the Source, to understand what happens in our world. This will lead us to a regular spiritual practice of “reading” the Universe. Everything that happens has a visual form that makes it perceivable (while partially hiding its true content) and a deeper spiritual meaning related to its Source. In other words, every event has both formal appearance, and spiritual content, and can thus be read in two different modes, as a material or as a spiritual interpretation, preferably as both at the same time. To understand what is at hand, we need to seek the spiritual meaning, which is not always apparent but may be deciphered when we bother to search for the true cause. Although we are aware that our reading and interpretation may not be correct, we must nevertheless trust that we are rightly inspired.

Everything is natural; nothing is supernatural

To make more explicit what we mean by a spiritual reference to the Source (W1), we need to say that there is no supernatural process that makes the action of this Source different in nature from the laws that govern our physical world. Each phenomenon is natural, i.e. the natural expression of what it is, according to the law of causes (W1)

and consequences (W2). Most people in everyday life and even on a spiritual path do not experience any special, so-called supernatural events (visions, lights, apparitions, etc.). The Ground of Being is, as I have said, not separate from us and the world around us. It is present everywhere (although discreet), precisely because it is the natural force that leads everything, like the force of attraction within an atom, like gravitation, like the force of life and of love. The action of the Source is not distinct from these forces we experience daily in our physical interaction with the world, which means that there is nothing supernatural that is set apart.

Everything (all three worlds) is involved in everyday life. Life is therefore the natural thing and the unique and true miracle that happens again and again at each instant for each of us. There is only one Reality. When we grasp this truth, we open to the true wonder of life, instant by instant. A bird is a good metaphor for this magic instant that is full of liveliness, of beauty and immateriality, yet incarnated, despite or thanks to the few grams of its light body. Life is magic. This is the wonder – simply breathing in and out, here and now. There is nothing else that matters more! The episodes and anecdotes of our everyday life are what reveal the true meaning of everything.

The Trinity and the anti-trinity

Let's now look at some Christian theology. There is a striking resemblance between the three worlds I just described and the Christian myth of the Trinity. Of course, this is not by pure chance. The myth of the Trinity intends to describe the complex perception that confronts us, as incarnated human beings living in a tension between dualism (Me and the world) and unity (the Source in me).

Remember, a myth is a metaphor that tries to describe reality using an analogy. The myth is not the reality but only evokes it. It is a description that does not strictly represent what is to be shown (how

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could one show the ultimate Reality?) but only evokes a deeper, unfathomable truth that cannot be grasped. A metaphor is a kind of incomplete poetic illustration, not intended to fully encompass the topic but only to orient our glance in the right direction, so that our sight is not limited by a closed description.

The Christian Trinity describes God as three persons in unity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As a single unity composed of three persons, it may also be compared to fire, which has three different natures (energy + light + heat), yet remains one single entity; in this equation, $3 = 1$.⁵³ Likewise the Godhead or Ground of Being, according to theology, is composed of three persons and yet remains One.

1) **The Father (World 1)** is the invisible energy of the fire, the Source and force of life which gives itself freely and animates everything. He is the Origin but remains invisible. He is the Creator, not so much because he made the Earth and the Universe in seven days (another poetic metaphor that does not negate the Big Bang theory), but principally because he is the constant source of all life, the strength of love, the deep nature and consciousness of everything that exists. He is, at each instant that passes, the energy and life that supports everything. In this way, he is in the Big Bang but also in the small transformations of every day. He is the energy of life itself. Without him, everything would return to nothingness.

He gives himself unconditionally, yet leaves us free to choose whether to recognise him, to accept him in our lives or to ignore him. He does not impose himself. He is all-powerful but remains discreet (powerless), hidden in a way that also remains accessible. Like our own heart, he is not visible but is essential to maintaining our life. Like the wind, he cannot be seen but can be

53 In this analogy with fire, the three entities are not at the same level: the energy is the fundamental essence, and light and heat are its perceptible expressions.

noticed and observed through effects. If we let him, he will nourish our lives, lift us up, guide us, inspire us. He is the meaning of our own evolution, which we have to trust because it will lead us to peace and joy. When we trust in him and let him guide our lives, his power of life (which is not imposing) can flow through us and be given to others.

- 2) **The Son (World 2)** is the light of the fire, the Expression or incarnation which makes the Father (the energy of the fire) visible. The Son gives himself, in humility and gentleness, to reveal the Source. He is the Expression and materialisation of what is invisible. He is even more than the mere expression; he is the action or materialisation of World 1 into World 2. Since the beginning of the world, he has been the transformation of what cannot be seen into what can be perceived. He is the expression of creation into signs and matter. He is the expression of love – true love – which helps all beings to grow, to become more real and mature, more aware and integrated into the general movement of creation of the cosmos. Light makes things visible. Shadow is what remains where light does not shine.

The man Jesus is only the human figure who incarnated the person of the Son into a human being, at a certain time in history, two thousand years ago. By giving himself he made the generosity of the Father perceptible, as well as his own, because they were united in one will. He made known that the Father is a gentle power who gives himself. He did this not so much by obedience to the Father but because he was of the same nature as the Father and therefore also love. He gave himself of his own will, because it was his true nature – and it is also our (same) true nature that he reveals to us.

The Son is present in us, in our surroundings, in nature, because these material realities (nature as much as us) are expressions of who the invisible Reality is, just as we, in our essence, are also the expressions of this true love that needs to find outlets. He is

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the Revelation. He brings about a deep change in us when we slowly start to understand the true nature of his gift, and therefore of our own essence. He is the Action of transformation. Salvation does not magically erase our awkward nature. No, it is a very different process; it is mainly this deep transformation within ourselves (metanoia or turn-around of our mind), our perception of the sacred and true dimension of life, and the true essence of ourselves, and others. Salvation is not a sponge wiping out our debts; it is a fundamental revolution in our understanding of life.

- 3) **The Spirit (World 3)** – as interpretation and inspiration, rather than the illusory world of our making - is the heat of the fire, the energy of love that unites everything and inspires in the search for Truth. He is the Movement that leads us in the everlasting dance of life. The power of the Spirit is a unifying force that creates Unity, beyond the frequent fragmentation of our perceptions and the inevitable tensions generated by differences and complementarity. Love is the linking force between what we perceive as antagonistic tendencies. We see “Either/Or” when we should perceive “And/As well”.

Rather than being established by a single monolithic power, unity relies on the balance of different, and often opposed, forces. Antagonisms are the best way to manage balance; they do this much better than an authoritarian power attempting to control all the forces alone. Antagonisms are necessary to maintain balance; they help keep an equilibrium between acting and antagonistic reacting forces. For instance, the human arm has two muscles which appear to work against each other, but the arm remains one, kept in balance by the equilibrium and the interaction of the two forces.

On the other hand, the Spirit is also the energy of transformation, because life is constant change. Nothing lasts, nothing remains, all is flowing. Transformation is growth in maturity and awareness, adaptation to the flow of life. Like the wind, the Spirit

leads us where we go, without us knowing where that will be. He is the guide on our spiritual path.

Remember: this is only a metaphor, a myth that tries to reveal an unfathomable depth and mystery that remains beyond words. It so happens, today, that these three persons are known by masculine names. This is very disturbing, because these entities are as much feminine as masculine; all three have yin and yang natures in equal measure. The Hebrew and Greek traditions – which were shaped on the patriarchal model of the early centuries – have distorted and narrowed the extent of their true identities by giving them dominant masculine attributes, except for the third (Spirit), which had a feminine name in Hebrew (ruah), and neuter in Greek (pneuma).

Another aspect of this trinity is also of interest. Our market society has twisted the original image of our Source of life into an illusory search for profit, wealth and power. As Ivan Illich⁵⁴ used to say, the most dangerous evil is not the force of destruction that bluntly opposes revelation, but the slight twist of the truth that may, by mimicry, reverse this truth into its contrary. This is precisely what our market society has done, mimicking the original pattern we just described, with a false appearance that seems to be built on the same premises, but is not.

The anti-trinity of our materialistic society is also composed of three elements – three idols which are also leading forces, yet very different in nature. They are:

- 1) Power, not as a force of life, which is the discreet source of vitality and love, but as a force of domination, exploitation and destruction. Also invisible in itself.

54 See *The corruption of Christianity: Ivan Illich on Gospel, Church and Society*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000.

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- 2) Technology, not as a force of gentleness that gives itself as a servant, but as a force of control and manipulation that subjugates. Also an expression and materialisation of power.
- 3) Market and Consumption, not as a force of love that inspires and unites, but as a force of greed, accumulation and retention that fragments and divides. Also a force that moves us, but where we do not want to go.

But this anti-trinity is only a false image, an illusion, a virtuality. What matters is the original Trinity and what it represents for our daily life. In this opposition between Trinity and anti-trinity, there is a hidden aspect that is pretty vicious, because of some symmetries or analogies (the mimicries or twists). We have absorbed the logic of the anti-trinity too well, being immersed in it during each moment of our urbanised life. It colours most of our representations, in ways we are unaware of. It is essential to cleanse our perceptions of this influence. Because the Trinity and the anti-trinity are not compatible, we need to choose which one we will trust. This is the great metanoia or turn-around of mind we described earlier.

If you look closely at this metaphor, you will discern a striking parallel with the experience of Brahman, Atman and Purusha in Hinduism or with Emptiness in Buddhism and Zen. Emptiness is Form; Form is Emptiness.

11 – A radical change of perspective, leading to transformation

The great transformation

When we recognise that life is much more than a material process, we begin to search for, and go back to, the original cause. This is the

path of spiritual growth and liberation that will lead us to personal transformation.

As we saw above (section 02), most scientific, philosophical or religious systems have two contrasting roles to play:

- 1) to explain what we see and experience directly, by reference to a paradigm that makes our surroundings more understandable, bearable and compatible with our present way of life;
- 2) or/and as a paradigm shift, revealing that the existing paradigm is only an illusion, based on real premises but false interpretations, and that a fundamental personal transformation in the way we perceive the world and interpret what we see is required. As soon as we reinterpret our vision in the light of the new paradigm, our inner transformation will enable us to see more deeply.

Both of these functions are essential and combine with one another. The first leads slowly to the second, but usually only for the few people who feel they are called to follow this path and who focus on this alternative way. But, despite it is followed only by a few, the second path remains accessible to all. We need only make the personal choice to follow it (which, I believe, is currently a question of life and death).

This transformation is the fundamental change of mind or worldview when the core of meaning shifts from World 3 (interpretation) to World 2 (expression) and then back to World 1 (source). This constitutes a deep alteration in our understanding of life – and consequently in our behaviour as well. World 2 and World 3, although real, are no longer the fundamental, unique references. When World 1 becomes the focus of our attention, our behaviour changes fundamentally because the practicalities of daily life, which earlier seemed so important, fall back into their relative significance. This great inner and personal transformation may lead to further external changes when it helps transform our ways of living. And when many people undergo the same shift of mentality together, it may well impact on a wider social level, as well.

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Let's return once more to the metaphor of the Sun. In our everyday life, we experience the Sun as rising at the East and setting at the West, after travelling through the whole sky. Before the Renaissance, humankind believed that the Sun was circling the Earth. This was a logical deduction from direct human daily experience. But when Copernicus discovered that the Earth was only one of many satellites of the Sun, which was the real centre of our small solar system, there was a big paradigm shift. It was a tremendous transformation in our understanding of the Universe and our place in it. For better and worse, it fundamentally changed our attitude. This was the great transformation.

Strangely, instead of becoming more modest upon discovering our relative unimportance in the whole system, we became much bolder. This new knowledge seemed to reveal our true power – that of understanding, and being rational. We decided that we could learn to handle the world, and even master and transform our environment, through science and technology. This metaphor shows that our experience (the daily course of the Sun) sometimes needs an external influence (Copernicus' teaching) to become relevant and be revealed in all its depth, triggering the necessary transformation that allows us to better fit the logic of cosmos.

Even after this transformation, we still experience the Sun as running through the sky (our sky) from East to West. But we learned to accept that our own experience is illusory and that the process is very different from what it seems to be.

Unfortunately, we completely missed the real lesson of this deep transformation. It had the potential to teach us to accept that we are only a marginal species on a marginal planet in a marginal solar system; and that consequently we should remain humble and simply adapt to what is defined by this huge, powerful system with its dominant natural laws, and to integrate into natural cycles. Yet we did exactly the opposite. Copernicus' discovery awoke the dream of further mastery thanks to scientific knowledge and technical hubris. This shows how blind we can remain, against all the evidence.

A new interpretation of evolution

This shift of understanding, which leads us to focus on the work of the Spirit, rather than on material appearances and phenomena, can

radically change the way we perceive the process of evolution. Our own personal evolution, and the long evolution of all species in our environment, might now be reinterpreted not as a process of growing complexity (from material to spiritual) but as an increasing expression of the Ground of Being in his or her intention to be revealed to us and through us (from spiritual to material). We have then two possible approaches:

- 1) Science describes an evolution that tends first towards ever more complex physical forms (a more complex Without). And spirituality sees in this same evolution that it subsequently allows the spiritualisation of matter (a deeper Within), seated in the more complex Without. As a synthesis of both descriptions, one can see a complexity growing from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit.
- 2) There is yet another interpretation for this double move. Evolution, when understood as an ever more explicit expression of the Ground of Being, is something very different – maybe not in facts but in terms of interpretation; it is not physical complexity allowing spiritual content to arise, but spiritual essence finding new forms of expression.

In the new (second) interpretation I propose here, exactly the opposite of the first seems to happen. The expression of the Ground of Being is principal, as revelation; and the arising of complexity is secondary (although very significant), while, according to the traditional scientific interpretation, the arising of complexity is principal and the spiritualisation secondary.

Usually evolution is understood as a slow metamorphosis of elementary physical forms into ever more complex composite bodies. From the particle to the atom to the molecule to the cell to the organism to the body to the person to the community. This is the holon theory (Ken Wilber explains this very clearly⁵⁵), which says

55 Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, Shambala, 1996.

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that elements combine in ever more complex compounds, with a hierarchy from the simplest to the most complex compound. At each new level all the qualities present at the precedent lower level are integrated, but the new combination (which characterises the new compound) has another special quality, a sort of synthesis of the total quality of the assembled lower parts. The whole is always more than the sum of the parts.

This is also our practical experience of evolution. We can concretely observe that living cells are more complex than particles of rock, and that birds are more complex and evolved than protozoa. In a similar way, our consciousness evolves from matter to body to mind to soul and to spirit, as we experience the path of liberation, in which our awareness grows, developing a deeper, less egocentric perception of what is.

Yet this conception of evolution, as just described, seems incomplete when considered in light of the previous explanation, which says that the Spirit is the first cause of everything. If the metaphor of the three worlds is right, then evolution is more than what we perceive when we observe World 2. It is, then, not only the creation of new forms that spiritualise matter (matter → body → mind → soul → spirit) but it is essentially the Ground of Being that makes herself or himself more visible or more understandable through more subtle and nuanced physical expression. Materially it looks the same (i.e. evolution), but the intention behind it (or rather, how we interpret the nature of this intention) is very different. The spiritualisation of matter that we observe reveals a loving intention that wants to make itself known and be shared. This is the other Reality itself (the Ground of Being) which tries to reveal itself to us by a material expression that takes the shape of evolution in order to make itself visible and understandable, expressing in this way his/her power of love.

Thus, evolution is no longer understood as the main transformation that leads to the spiritual realm. It becomes simply an image of the true nature of the Spirit revealing itself to us. This can be explained more clearly using Teilhard de Chardin's terms. Not only is the complexity of the Without (i.e. the complexity of the external physical form) accompanied by a deeper level of consciousness of the Within (i.e. ever-increasing inner complexity and depth). But, more radically, the complexity of the Without becomes in fact the consequence (the expression or visible sign) of the deeper

consciousness Within. This is a fundamental inversion: the latter is the cause of the former. This is more than concomitance; it is cause and consequence, source and expression.

This means that there is an order or orientation (not a hierarchy of value) between Without and Within. The Without expresses the Within (not the reverse), yet both are necessary for evolution to happen. Thus, the complex form is not only the product of spiritualisation but it is also the expression of this fundamental intention of the Spirit to make herself known.

This is of course one more interpretation (W3) that does not seem provable scientifically, but resonates deeply with what the metaphor of the three worlds tries to express. Would Teilhard de Chardin agree with it?

Matter and spirit: two sides of the same coin

This latter form of understanding concerns the way matter and spirit relate one with another.

One could say that there are three ways of considering the relationship between spirit and matter. Either:

- 1) matter is the only true reality and there is no spirit (what we see is what we get); or
- 2) matter evolves into more complexity, generating more subtle levels of materiality that acquire by extension a spiritual content (evolution from matter into body into mind into soul into spirit); or
- 3) the true essence of everything is spirit, and it expresses itself through matter; Spirit is the energy that gives shape; it is the origin and leading force that expresses itself in ever more complex forms in order to be better known (revealed) as the energy of Love.

To avoid any misunderstanding, it is important to notice that this other interpretation, which emphasises the role of the Spirit, does not create any hierarchy of value between spirit and matter – for instance by saying that only the spirit is principal and that matter is despicable – but only an order. This is not about a hierarchy but about a

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relationship between these two different dimensions of our Universe. We are used to understanding this relationship as an opposition, or even more often, an absence of relationship.

My new interpretation brings back an intense relationship between the two dimensions. Matter is the formal expression of the spirit, which constitutes its original paradigm. This other understanding creates a fascinating tension between spirit and matter, because they are each the complementary aspect of the other, in the same reality – like two sides of the same coin. This tension is the fascinating challenge of fields of activity such as medicine or architecture, which combine spirit and matter as the two basic components – always antithetic, yet allied, in what they attempt to express or understand.

Emptiness and relationships

As a consequence of what has just been explained, we can formulate a new hypothesis about the nature of life (no less!). Another metaphor will help us. We will consider the structure of the solar system and the atom. As we can observe, there is very little matter in our solar system. The size of the Earth is almost negligible and the distance to the Sun reveals a gigantic proportion of void between our planet and that star.

Paradoxically, although it is material in nature, our physical world (W2) is also principally made up of empty space and only a very small quantity of matter, inasmuch as the atom is also built on the same pattern as the solar system (a few grains of matter, lost in a huge empty space). Forces of attraction hold the whole together, inhabiting the emptiness between the grains of matter. This means that matter is only present in negligible quantities – energy is the main agent in this system.

In other words, our world is made of energy, of relationships, more than it is made of solid stuff. What matters is not matter (the wordplay is a sign of our resistance to see the essence!) but the

relationships between the elements. Putting it more strongly, we could say that everything is relationship or energy, which binds or relates, and that matter does not play any important role, except to make the relationships visible. It only allows relationships to happen and develop.

Take a grain of sand of 1mm in diameter (the Earth) and a grapefruit about 10cm in diameter (the Sun). Place the grapefruit about 10m from the grain of sand. This shows roughly the proportion of matter and void we have in the solar system. Of course, between the Earth and the Sun, there is also Venus, a tiny bit smaller than the Earth (or rather, it is somewhere on its orbital, which runs at around a third of the distance from the Earth to the Sun). And also Mercury, less than half the size (somewhere on its orbital, which runs at two thirds of the distance to the Sun).

The same proportions of almost total emptiness can be described for the atom: the electron is more a probability of matter than a real mass, and the nucleus is made of a few grains in the middle of a proportionally very large empty space (similar to the void of the solar system) between nucleus and electrons. This means that matter is almost empty of consistent material. It is principally made up of energy, attraction or relationship.

Grains of matter are like hooks on which relationships are anchored. The forces of attraction that hold the Universe together are “hooked” on planets and stars, but the forces themselves are the main constituents of what exists: everything is relationship. And this attraction that holds the Universe together is nothing other than the physical expression of what love is, in an invisible way. This idea is inspired by astrophysicist Brian Swimme’s book *The Universe is a Green Dragon*.⁵⁶

The new hypothesis: love in the in-between

The metaphor of the solar system tells us that relationships happen in the in-between. Thus we have to focus our attention on this space in-

56 Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story*, Bear & Company, 1984.

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between, the space of emptiness, which is not void but inhabited by attraction (love), the energy that holds the Universe together. This other way of describing the Universe is only a hypothesis (which is fully compatible with science), and nothing more than an attempt to see more clearly: the true essence of life remains mysterious and ungraspable.

This interpretation says that the essence of everything is love, which develops into relationships, in the in-between. This seems like a very good reason to stop focusing on matter and turn our attention to what happens in-between. Relationships constitute a flow – always changing, transforming, in constant flux, never stopping. We cannot grasp them, as we could something frozen or immobile; they always escape our control. We can only experience them in the instant, as lively movements of never-ending creativity and transformation.

The corollary of this hypothesis: growth as discovery of love

We can formulate a corollary to this hypothesis: we have been created incomplete and must still discover the fundamental essence of love as the main force that leads the Universe. Our choices (our degree of clear-sightedness) will direct the way we live and experience life. The spirit is a discreet, mostly invisible presence that works to inspire us – never as a totalitarian power. Our creativity is left untouched.

If we were given spiritual perfection we would be “forced” by our perfect level of maturity to recognise the essence of love. This would not be free acceptance but a form of constraint imposed upon us at birth by our own perfect nature. Therefore it would not be love! Love is free acceptance and free movement of the heart. This is why we had to be made imperfect, and begin at the start of the path of liberation. Our personal and spiritual growth is to be found in our search for deeper meaning, and for the true essence of love.

When we evolve and discover what has been exposed above (if it is correct!), we come in touch with a deeper Reality that reveals the depth of love to us. We experience love as our “own” choice to open to it, beyond any constraint. This radical distinction makes the whole difference.

Of course the risk is that we go astray. Evil and suffering in the world are probably just a result of our incapacity to detect the authentic source. Evil is never, I believe, the work of the Ground of Being. It is never created for in an attempt to harm us. I believe that when we act in a harmful way, it is a consequence of our inability to love truly and to be compassionate to our fellow sentient beings. At other times, suffering is a consequence of physical spasms in the natural world, such as typhoons, earthquakes or landslides, because nature is also undergoing constant transformation, on the laborious and painful path to perfection. If love is truly our choice, then evil can be defined as our lack of capacity to love. I believe that love and evil are never imposed on us by the Ground of Being; we encounter both on our path and have to deal with both in the most inspired way possible (i.e. with love).

True freedom (the ability to choose where we go) gives sense to love, when it is our own free response to the Source. Maybe it is the purpose of life to discover how to positively respond to this discreet offer of love by the Ground of Being. And yet love remains a mystery. We do not know what it is; we must discover its true essence by practising it and deepening our knowledge of it.

In Greek there are three different words for love:

- 1) *Eros* is the energy of desire that moves us towards the other. It's very self-centred, being mostly concerned with satisfying one's own needs. It's the root of sexual attraction but it's much more than that; it's the force that drives us forward to discover the world and truly connect with it – and thus with all other sentient beings.
- 2) *Philia* is a selective love, the love of friendship that chooses who we want to love. Our elected friends are usually very compatible with us and do not disturb our way of being; but we can also, at a further stage, choose to extend this feeling to people who challenge us and call us for change of our ways of being.

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- 3) *Agape* is the fatherly or motherly love that extends to all children, or to all people, without distinguishing of who they are and how they behave. This is unconditional love – the rain that falls onto both the good and the wicked.

These three forms are all components of the way we love, and all are necessary. *Eros* leads us to *philia*, which develops into *agape*, and there is some *eros* and *philia* in *agape*. They are all intertwined. This shows us that the true nature of love is very deep and complex; we will never exhaust our ability to discover new aspects of it. And love is the core energy of life.

12 – The loss of attachment

The further step

To be able to live fully and to discover the true nature of love, we need first to make a decisive step. That is, we need to learn to practise detachment. This is absolutely critical to our growth in maturity, and an unavoidable precursor to our further evolution, into deeper stages of being. For attachment is the great obstacle that prevents us from living fully. It is not an ethical reason that impels us to cross this line; it is the fact that attachment is the wall we have to break through in order to access life, because true life is beyond attachment.

Immanence and personal relationship

Before we investigate what attachment is, we should notice that we tend to view our relationship with the Ground of Being from a very self-centred point of view that hides the most important part of the picture. Even when we come to believe in the love and gracefulness of this caring Presence at the root of our life and energy, we do it from a point of view centred on our person. This is for the simple

reason that we can only perceive the world from this self-centred, subjective point of view.

We know by experience that this Presence is, on the one hand, transcendent – distant and impersonal in its ungraspable power and mystery. But we know that it is also, on the other hand, immanent too – near and personal in a loving proximity, within our deepest inner being. Personal means intimate and unique, because it was shaped for who we are.

This proximity of a loving presence is in fact the most intimate part of ourselves – we do not know whether it is us (me) or Him/Her. And even this so-called *me* does not seem to exist as a properly distinct entity, because it only becomes alive through our True Self, which has its essence in the Ground of Being more than in anything we could create and manage by ourselves. Hence the question: who am I truly?

A relationship with the Ground of Being oriented towards “profit”

This most private part of ourselves is in deep relationship with the Ground of Being, without us knowing clearly how it happens. A sense of joy, trust or love often arises that expresses this connection, without any clearly visible agent seeming to take part in it. This, it seems to me, is how we experience the presence in a personal and intimate way. It is deeply interior, yet it is not fully ours. This is the mystery.

We may have learned to meditate or pray. These are traditional, ritualised, practical ways to communicate with the Ground of Being. Silence, meditation and prayer offer methods of expression and ways to relate that we can truly practice and experience. The ability to be in a personal relationship with this Presence corresponds very much to an experience in our deepest inner world, as a receiver rather than an actor; we do not really know how it happens or what it is. We do

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innately seem to know that we need to interact with this Presence and that we receive everything from it – the Ground of Being is, by nature, radical generosity and the source of life.

We have therefore developed a way to interact that is principally egocentric (without any pejorative meaning), which is to say, centred on our own needs and expectations and projections – because we expect everything we need to come from this source. Prayer and meditation become paths to receive (or grab?) what we desire, whether that is the answer to a request or simply some peace of mind. The Ground of Being, being so generous, and with abundant grace, becomes the addressee of our requests.

This is a rich source, but our egocentric process completely limits our experience; it misses the point that meditation or prayer should principally be a form of surrender, rather than petition. Prayers of request may well be answered but they should not focus principally on our own will and our “profit”. Rather than being a request, a truly contemplative attitude helps us find our authentic root and ground in being. When we are able to forget about our own worries and needs, we can surrender fully. We can tune in with our own root in the Ground. And celebrate what is.

His/Her will as our nature and vocation

It is more appropriate for us to try and adapt to the Ground of Being, rather than expecting Him/Her to adapt to us in our endless (mostly self-centred) petitions or expectations, because, at the end of the day, our own human will is not so essential. Our root and origin in this presence are the essential dimensions that define our nature (True Self) and destiny (our vocation for freedom); i.e., the nature of our spiritual path. If we want to be enriched by the authentic source of life, our need for rootedness means that we must prioritise finding the source, rather than giving preference to our will being answered.

In forgetting about our own desires and opening to the true nature of this Presence, we may better discover our own nature. And we may also better find our true vocation. In using prayer as an egocentric way to fulfil our desires and wishes, we fail to see what matters most on our path. The Ground of Being is not at our disposal, a servant to answer our false needs and illusions (although S/He probably does sometimes or even often); but S/He has a general intelligence, will or intention, as described earlier, which aims at a special quality in our life; and this is where our true wealth lies.

Is S/He in charge?

There is an expression often used in common language referring to the sacred or the divine: “S/He is in charge”, meaning that we must abandon ourselves to Her/His will. While I believe this is true, we must understand it in terms of quality rather than actions.

S/He is the Ground and the origin but S/He cannot, for the reason of being pure intention, be made responsible for everything that happens in our daily experience or that is caused by human beings; this would also make Her/Him responsible for all and each of our acts, especially the mishaps and evil we commit as a species. S/He cannot be made responsible for Auschwitz, for persecution, for the destruction of nature by our greed. We have generated this ourselves, by mere awkwardness, by misconception and ignorance or, more drastically, by consciously choosing hate and vengeance.

I believe that, in situations of suffering, the Ground of Being stands by the sufferer, as a force of resilience and a form of consolation and compassion (presence), with a deep understanding of what suffering means.

Walter Ciszek SJ (author of *He Leadeth Me*⁵⁷) was arrested by the Soviet police at the beginning of World War 2 and imprisoned at the

57 Fr Walter J. Ciszek, SJ, *He Leadeth Me*, Ignatius Press, 1995.

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Lubianka in Moscow, condemned to work in a camp in Siberia for 23 years. In his book he recounts reaching a breaking point under police questioning when, completely broken, he was forced to sign a confession to crimes he had never committed. Feeling that he has betrayed everything, especially his faith, he suddenly realises that, so far, he had always prayed for support in his resistance, using God in service to what he thought was right. His breakthrough is the discovery that, by contrast, he must completely surrender to His Will. He discovers that it makes all the difference to accept and trust what will come, whatever it is, without judgement as to whether it suits him or not.

This spiritual breakthrough is about surrendering to His will – because His will is what we need the most – rather than remaining trapped in our false representations and preferences. Surrendering to His/Her will means renouncing one’s own will (based on the false self) and tuning in to our true essence and root (our True Self). His will does not concern what we do – S/He does not have a plan for each of our actions – but how we do it.

At first glance, this seems to be a deep contradiction. We usually believe that our own will is the basis of our freedom, and this is partly true, because we need our will to make decisions in everyday life. But, paradoxically, by renouncing our own will, we can adapt to the true nature of life; and this adaptation is much more life-giving than the lonely path of individualistic freedom, even when it is well-intentioned and hetero-centric. Not only is it much more life-giving, it also leads us much further, to where we can experience life as an essence, no longer as an action. We then find true solid ground under our feet, the unfathomable quality of the Ground of Being. When we become rooted in His/Her will – which concerns a quality, rather than facts – we are in tune and can thrive. We now swim with the flow of life – no longer against it. This is deep and true harmony; the harmony of love.

It is important to note that we do not lose our capacity for discernment, or our ability to make decisions. We continue to have discernment and to decide what our “duty” is. The great transformation I described does not mean we become indifferent or abandon our freedom to be a true witness to what matters, but it does mean that we take on a new perspective: a trust that everything that is here and now represents the best conditions for our personal expression of trust in Life, even in the harshest of hardship.

The Ground as an everlasting quality of solid compassion

More than a well-defined plan for action, His/Her will seems to be rather qualitative. It is this unfathomable quality of firmness and of love that sustains us and the Universe at any time and without exception, whatever the conditions may be. It is the unfathomable liveliness and power of love, the permanent presence on which everything is grounded and founded; and to which everything can go back and find solid and trusting support (even, or especially, the victims of Auschwitz).

As a solid base that never fails, it is truly the rock, the energy, the intention, the will in charge. It is the real foundation of what we are and on which we stand. This permanent presence remains beyond the deep suffering, beyond the crimes of Auschwitz, beyond the destruction of nature. It is there, always, whatever happens. And, to find it, we must learn how to recognise it, since this presence often seems to be denied by extreme circumstances; it is very discreet, even hidden, as I explained, in order not to impose itself. When we find this solid ground, or even only a feeble perception of it, beyond the turmoil of everyday life, beyond the suffering we go through, we find the secure and loving base on which we can stand firmly. This is why the expression *Ground of Being* seems so appropriate. It describes the true nature of that which never changes, but remains permanent in this world where nothing is permanent and everything is ever changing.

Attachment as greed

Having tried to describe this unfathomable quality, let's now return to the theme of attachment. Once we recognise the trustworthy and permanent solid Ground that supports all life, attachment suddenly appears absurd. It is a form of imprisonment that prevents us from being "Grounded". Attachment is not love; it shackles us, and prevents our movement.

The solution is simple

The most invasive form of attachment is greed. This is when we feel that we need more than we have, or than what is given. As rich people we consume so much more than other people on this Earth, yet still we want more. Greed is killing us. It is often accompanied by other unresolved emotions, such as fear, anger and anxiety. Greed is the first major obsession we have to get rid of. As long we are not free of this inextinguishable desire, we prevent ourselves from finding the Ground. Our desires call us elsewhere and prevent us from seeing the Ground where it is – around us, in us, in the others, here and now. It is not somewhere else. The conditions for peace and joy do not depend on something we still need to get.

Attachment as projection

Another of the principal forms of attachment we practise is linked with the expectations we project onto reality and onto others. We expect others to behave in a way that fits our desires. We can describe this form of attachment as follows: we have a tendency to write the script for the actions and attitudes of other people. This is because we perceive our own life in an egocentric way, as a form of personal action (project), as if on a stage (public life), where we feel that every other figure of the show (all others) should adapt to our script (our will or desires). It is as if we have already written the scenes and want each one to play their role as we have planned it. This attitude is mainly unconscious, but very influential on the way we lead our lives. Of course we do know that this narrowly defined expectation is out of place, but we nevertheless “decide” ceaselessly how we expect others to behave and to fit into our projects. Our projects become projections of our expectations onto others. It is true that most projects require the participation of others. But how do we dare to define what that participation should be? They are free agents, as much as we are ourselves.

But implementing our little projects does not work as we wish. People do not behave according to our perceptions, judgements,

desires, hopes, etc. They have no reason to act according to our script; they have their own. And consequently, we must all learn to face the unexpected – because reality is meant to develop along surprising tracks, and these will mainly go against our desires.

See the method of Byron Katie (*Loving What Is*)⁵⁸ and the four questions she invites us to answer to make us aware of the way we twist reality and deprive ourselves from enjoying what is.

She first asks us to write down what we think of a person who causes us trouble. Then secondly we must answer the following questions about what we have written:

- 1) Is it true?
- 2) Can you absolutely know that it is true?
- 3) How do you react when you think that thought?
- 4) How would you be without the thought?

Then, in a third stage, called the *turnaround*, we're asked to turn around the sentences we've written, putting them in the negative form, inverting the truth, or exchanging the object and the subject, for example. When we consider the new versions of our sentences, they are surprisingly very telling. This method with its simple questions can very powerfully reveal how much we trap ourselves in false perceptions and expectations that prevent us from seeing the light.

The first step in becoming free is learning to practise detachment – opening to the unexpected, refusing to plan the future, and discovering how to love what is, as it is. Suffering is never far away, and it tends to cover our reality with a film of pain, which can be very strong and real. Yet beyond and underneath this pain, the Ground is always there – maybe not visible, but present and perceptible in its depth, steady presence and faithfulness. It offers a firm support for our deeper Self.

58 Byron Katie, *Loving What Is*, Ebury Publishing, 2002. Or see Byron Katie's website: <https://thework.com/instruction-the-work-byron-katie/>

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Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch woman who died in Auschwitz at 29, showed a powerful example. The letters she wrote during her imprisonment⁵⁹ describe her deep joy (gratitude) and trust, although she saw suffering all around her; she was deeply involved in alleviating it as much of it as she could. This is a true example of deep rootedness in the Ground of Being.

Another example of true, firm groundedness was Sri Ramana Maharshi⁶⁰ (the Hindu sage). He was in enlightened bliss from an early age, and the natural compassion and peace that radiated from him inspired countless others.

In a more normal setting, there was the example of Sri Nisargadatta (*I Am That*)⁶¹. He was well rooted in the peace that relies on solid Ground, well beyond the passing and changing events or aspects of everyday life. He was able to take part in life fully, yet not be disturbed or be frustrated by unfulfilled expectations, because he had none, knowing the everlasting joy (the Ground).

Attachment as denial of time flow

Apart from the attachments of greed, and our own expectations and projections, we practise a further form of attachment. We see this mainly in our conflictual relationship with time. We refuse to see that things are changing ceaselessly in our lives, and we resist change. We mainly get attached to what was and is no more, because we have loved it in the past.

It is great to love what is given, but this joy in receiving should not be turned into punishment or self-flagellation when the object of our love has disappeared – whether it has passed away, been destroyed or

59 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: Letters from Westerbork*, Random House, 1984.

60 Although Ramana Maharshi did not write, you can read transcripts of his teachings: *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, translated by Arthur Osborne, Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 2006.

61 Sri Nisargadatta, *I Am That*, Chetana Pvt. Ltd, 2003.

gone elsewhere. Instead we should celebrate what we loved, and the great joys we received from it. Too often, we turn it into a cause of deep sorrow when it is no more. When we lose a dear one, we should celebrate his or her life and rejoice about what he or she was for us, instead of mourning the absence, which is of course well understandable. The joy is exclusively in the *being* of this loved one; nothing else. The source of joy (the being) is the real cause; the disappearance (the non-being) is only a shadow, which emphasises the real source more clearly. We should remain focused on this indescribable quality, this source of joy, instead of focusing on our loss. This is probably the best possible way to mourn; because we evidently do need to mourn when we lose a dear one.

Attachment does the opposite. It keeps us anchored in time. We get attached or stuck at a certain point in time, believing that nothing should move anymore but all remain as it is, lifeless. By contrast, if we could flow with time and enjoy what is given without getting attached, we would be in bliss at each instant for what we receive. This would be the perfect way to flow with life, without hindrances.

Attachment is the prison that prevents us from flowing freely. It is the concrete block that immobilises us at a given point in time (in the past), incapable of moving on. When I learn to flow with time, I can rejoice about who my loved one is or was. When he or she disappears (goes away, leaves me or dies) I can celebrate his or her life in bliss, because it has been a true source of joy to me. In the same way, when my house is destroyed by natural forces, I can celebrate the beautiful place it was yesterday and be ready to move on.

Of course I have an instinctive tendency to feel the loss (what is no more) and to worry about my future life without my loved one, or about the place where I will live, but this worry is not sorrow. It has nothing to do with attachment. It has rather to do with trust, or lack of trust, in the firmness of the Ground of Being – trust that should even allow me not to worry anymore, but to surrender more deeply.

The solution is simple

Detachment is not indifference for what was, but passion to live in the present, focused on the gifts of the present time, on flowing relationships. As the saying puts it, the present moment is a constant gift; that is why it is called present. This new way of perceiving life, as a flow that must leave behind the past, and focusing instead on the present, is evidently the core of most spiritual teachings. But between hearing the teaching and practising it, there might still be a long path.

Attachment to the false self

The source of these different forms of attachment – our greed, our illusory expectations, and our attachment to what was and is no more – is probably our basic attachment to the false self.

We tend to identify with our body-mind-memory because it appears to be an independent entity that moves through time and space, as if it were our distinct and total identity. But this trinomial is only a hull – the physical support or envelope, in our incarnation, for what we are truly, which is infinitely broader and goes much beyond this narrow physical envelope. We are physically distinct from one another as bodies but we are also, at the same time, all part of the same wider whole, as a living body in unity. The cell is distinct from its neighbour but also, at the same time, one with it; they belong to the same organ. This is precisely the role of our evolution into further (higher or deeper) stages of consciousness – to lead us to discover our deep bond with other sentient beings, with the Universe and with the Ground of Being, of which we are a tiny part yet also a discreet form of expression.

We can be freed from our illusory identification with the false self (the trinomial body-mind-memory). This does not mean that we will not protect our body-mind-memory from harmful impacts on the physical or psychological levels, or simply from interaction with the material context of our daily life. The ego does have a positive, necessary function of protection; but this does not mean we must

identify with this ego. It is far from representing our true being – it is only an empty shell of protection.

When we get free of such false identifications, we can learn to detach from our false identity as a separate creature and experience the bond that links us all together. We can discern the discreet signs and subtle reality of the oneness of creation. We can try to let go of our sorrows and false attachments as a distinct individual, and open up instead to the full experience of life, practising true love.

We discover that we live at the same time in both dualism (our distinct bodies) and in unity (our oneness of nature). These two simultaneous experiences do not play out on the same level. That is why they are not antagonistic, but complementary. Dualism and unity are not opposed; they are concomitant, in a tension that helps us to grasp Reality. It's a bit like a string on which we may slide from one extreme to the other – from the most dualistic state to the most unified state. When we learn to live in the tension between these two poles of reality, we truly open to life. Once again, matter and spirit combine.

The great liberation

Detachment on all these different levels becomes our true freedom. It opens us to be ever more deeply transformed by the Ground of Being, who becomes the truly active and creative energy within us. We can truly surrender; and detachment becomes life and trust, as well as real freedom to be what we are meant to be; and to discover what it is; and to better love what is. This is an inexhaustible wealth.

It is important to see that our daily activities do not lose in importance in this process. Quite the contrary. They become a deliberate focus for our attention as we attempt to make them expressions of this deeper reality, and opportunities to learn more about the nature of the source.

The solution is simple

Attachment is no longer the wall we hit against continually. We are rooted in the Ground of Being and we become the ever-changing expression of His/Her nature, which is our True Self. And yet we continue to lead our daily life in the material world. Matter becomes the support for this experience.

All this might seem purely theoretical. But when we reflect, we can notice that many of these very discreet aspects already inhabit our daily life, often without us noticing them. They are small everyday glimpses or discreet calls. We do not need to deny our incarnation. We can continue to chop our wood, draw our water, go to the market place and meet our fellow sentient beings. This is precisely what life is – to be here and now, in flowing relationships, aware of the wonder of life. And especially, in letting it flow as it comes.

This experience will, of course, deeply challenge the false representations our modern “civilisation” has developed over the centuries; we have remained deaf to perennial wisdom teaching; and this new clear-sightedness calls us to adopt radically different practices. This new practice of liberation can be revive the true experience of living together, as a society or community. It is simply a new way of living to the full. Let’s start now!

Chapter 9:

Starting a move towards change

13 – Breaking resignation and passivity

Life is not a belief, but simply the practice of truth in everyday reality: choosing how to commit

As this book draws to a close, I want to emphasise the fact that the search proposed here does not have to generate a new, well-fenced chapel; on the contrary! It must generate unity in diversity and differences, at a higher level of consciousness. What we learn through this search for meaning should be translated into a manifold practice of this diversity. Without practice, any knowledge or belief is just empty theory. That's why the strategy I described at the beginning of this book is the real backbone of my vision. We need to practise what has been described above, but also create our own practices; we need to invent forms of cooperation, beyond our differences; and enrich these forms with our fabulous complementarity and our different ways of being, thinking and living.

In the second part of the book, I've expressed things in a peculiar way that is sometimes very much related to my personal and specific

The solution is simple

experience; it does not answer, in all details, our usual need for complete agreement. But I hope that, beyond my peculiar expression, you can make out the shape of a truth centred on the pre-eminence of life as a flow of energy and an ever-moving experience, which should be the focus of our personal and common social perspectives. This summary of my vision proposes core values that can bring us together to find new meanings and new ways of living in a fracturing world.

How shall we act this truth out? Each one of us, as a person, in his/her own community, is now invited to choose the leading threads of their new creative life priorities and to commit publicly to this new collective experience. The general proposal of a bottom-up move towards change illustrates the general dynamic. And the options I proposed earlier (in chapter 4) give examples of possible practical acts and attitudes in everyday life. Of course they will need regular revision and re-adaptation.

I hope this will be the dynamic of a spreading movement that does not intend to create a new group of people but, on the contrary, to inject a fresh energy into what already exists in our daily life; not creating new distinctions but generating more unity in diversity. An alliance to help foster more convivial communities.

Starting the move towards change; a change of mind, an end to resignation

As I have said, our biggest handicap is not that we do not know the problems we confront, or cannot find the right solutions. We know all that (the problems and solutions) but still we doubt – or else we lack the courage to take a stand, to break out of resignation and inertia, leaving behind our addictions or attachments, and start the move towards change. As I have said many times, the problem is not the change but the start.

Starting a move towards change

Among many other things, we're well aware that our wellbeing and happiness depend on the welfare of our community – on the care we take for, the love we give, one another – and yet we care principally for our own egocentric comfort, or the comfort of our relatives. We also know that life is more than survival – that it is sacred – yet we focus mainly on material and practical issues. As Westerners, we know that we consume forty times more than three-quarters of the world's population does; and yet we want more and remain dissatisfied. We also know that our over-consumption is generating climate change and that the wealth differential between rich and poor is the source of increasing violence – yet we're desperate for more things to consume and believe that all our “needs” are essential. We know, too, that our own blindness will finally kill us – but still we do not change. This list of what we know can go on for ever, without us ever implementing fundamental changes in the way we live.

It seems we're waiting to be awakened by something strong; because we have a good heart we believe or hope it will come soon. Yet we expect it to come from outside ourselves; we want it to shake us, bringing ready-made truth and happiness with it. If possible, without changing anything in our standard of life. The market has trained us to become consumers. Spiritual teaching has also developed this tendency in us – we think that teachers will lead us on the path to salvation. We're stuck in a passive, consuming role.

The need to think freely and find the right words, in order to become free

Passivity is a huge mistake. We are in charge of our own lives, and we are the agents of change, the only possible actors. Change comes from inside each of us, from our own personal maturity, from our own heart and mind, from how we feel about life. The true energy of change is our own love for life, and nothing else – and we are responsible for our own awakening.

The solution is simple

Nowadays, there seems to be a kind of numbness in the air, especially in our modern Western libertarian world – an incapacity to take a stand or commit to anything. This is mainly caused by indecision, ignorance, laziness, and a lack of ability to think for ourselves. We wait for the thing that will decide for us, but it never comes. So the numbness remains.

We urgently need to learn to think for ourselves, without imitating others. We need to forge our own personal understanding and develop our own opinions (our own anthropology). Freedom of mind and of spirit is the key. We must not only learn to think freely but also have the courage to act according to our thoughts, beliefs and hopes. But these thoughts, beliefs and hopes must be rooted in an authentic search for truth; if not, one falls into confrontation of self-made opinions. So, we need to search for truth – even independently of others' support. We must learn to bear the consequences of our stand and to pay the price for our freedom, even if our stand provokes animosity or repression. We need to go on, even if we are not helped by others. Even if we are the last who thinks as we do, we continue alone.

This may sound pretentious and wilful, but it is not. Free thinking is not our own creation. This is not like personal projects based on our own egocentric desires and representations. Free thinking is the fruit of independence to recognise what is, as it is. It arises by itself when one searches for it. It is a huge step, not only into freedom but also into clear-sightedness, courage and transformation.

Free thinking also means expressing what we see, as we see it. This means we have to rediscover the power of words – words that are not twisted by false use at the service of power and corruption, but free speech as a powerful force to reveal truth as it is. Words also have the power to help us discover truth; they are conceptual tools that forge our reality and the way we grasp it. We learn to use our own words to describe what we see and what we believe in. They become also tools to test whether what we say is true. Words are essential tools for

our subjectivity in exercising our freedom. Freedom is the path, but truth is the content. The path has to follow the content, not the reverse.

14 – Our relationship with evil and suffering

Mimetic behaviour as a confused collusion with inertia and evil

The state of numbness that paralyses us and prevents us from thinking freely is reinforced by our tendency for mimetic behaviour. We tend all to adopt the values and habits of our own society as if they were true, fundamental laws. We want to belong and are ready to conform in order to be loved, as I said earlier about totalitarianism and community. This is a basic trend of all societies – we tend to imitate each other in order to belong and also excel. Mimetic tendencies provide a very strong energy for conformism, which at the same time brings about personal blindness and alienation. We lose our ability to be freely ourselves: to observe, to understand, to find words that express our perceptions. We lose the creativity to design our own path; the daring to take a personal stand.

More importantly, in endlessly conforming, we lose the possibility of distancing ourselves from the evil that impregnates so many aspects of our society. It is well-known that our Western way of living generates numerous imbalances, forms of exploitation and destruction. In remaining passive and following the herd, we share responsibility for the evils our society commits.

In any totalitarian regime, the tendency to follow the herd is clear and frightening for those forced to conform. But collusion with evil is also strong in our market society. Whitewashing of goods and processes hides the true conditions of production and exploitation.

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Whether in order to preserve our own privileges or for fear of repression (or just of being different) we remain in the herd and follow sheepishly or just lazily. We thus become the involuntary actors and supporters of a process that, deep in our hearts, we disapprove of.

Or, more likely, we refuse to make a connection between the way we behave and what we know about the impact of our way of living, such as climate change, the destruction of nature, injustice, exploitation, and the gap between rich and poor. Our thought process is marked by a disconnect between what we know about the consequences of what we do and, on the other hand, how we decide to do what we do.

This tendency to perpetrate evil, without wanting to be involved in its cruel processes, remains a form of personal resignation or even submission to the dominating agent. We know it is not right – but we do it anyway. We never stop consuming that which causes pollution, or is produced under conditions of exploitation. In truth it is hard work to question all these aspects of our daily life and act accordingly.

The banality of evil: the enemy has come in slippers

How can we break free of this terrible, humiliating compromise and resignation and truly awake, right now? How can we become aware of what we are truly doing or participating in? This is a crucial question for our moral wellbeing. As soon as we rediscover our freedom to think independently, we will clearly see the frightening gap between our wisdom and our practice. We'll become able to react, to tell the truth and to take a stand. But the great difficulty seems to be how we can awake – it is the necessary condition, before we open to other ways of being.

Awakening is difficult, because nothing in our everyday life offers a powerful and striking revelation. Evil is banal and often lacks a

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distinctive impact that can be clearly noticed. Evil is sneaky and acts in hidden forms; “it comes in slippers”, slowly, discreetly, without us noticing – and then it is here, in our lives.⁶²

Evil is empty and boring. It is ugly, unclear, disguised, incomplete, rarely radical, and often just insignificant and banal. So we don’t see it coming. Especially if our attention is diverted towards other concerns: our next holiday, the wellbeing of our children, our need to pay the mortgage, etc.

Thomas Merton writes: “There is nothing interesting about evil as evil. Evil is not a positive entity but the absence of a perfection that ought to be there. Sin as such is essentially boring because it is the lack of something that could appeal to our wills and our minds. What attracts men to evil acts is not the evil in them but the good that is there, seen under a false aspect and with a distorted perspective. The good seen from that angle is only the bait in a trap. When you reach out to take it, the trap is sprung and you are left with disgust, boredom – and hatred. Sinners are people who hate everything, because their world is necessarily full of betrayal, full of illusion, full of deception. And the greatest sinners are the most boring people in the world because they are also the most bored and the ones who find life most tedious. When they try to cover the tedium of life by noise, excitement and violence – the inevitable fruits of a life devoted to the love of values that do not exist – they become something more than boring: they are scourges of the world and of society. And being scourged is not merely something dull or tedious. Yet when it is all over and they are dead, the record of their sins in history becomes exceedingly uninteresting and is inflicted on school children as a penance which is all the more bitter because even an eight-year-old can readily see the uselessness of learning about people like Hitler, Stalin, and Napoleon.”⁶³

62 Hubert Butler, *The Invader Wore Slippers*, republished by Notting Hill Editions, London, 2012. A powerful description of how, in Germany of the 1930s, evil sneaked in without being noticed much until it was too late.

63 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions Publishing, New York, 1972.

The solution is simple

We are mainly good and generous people. But nevertheless, we too often refuse to have a wider look at our surroundings. The capacity of evil to penetrate our lives and to be “tolerated” as a minor flaw is what Hanna Arendt called the banality of evil.

Hannah Arendt wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*.⁶⁴ Adolf Eichmann was the man who, under the Nazi regime, was in charge of transporting the Jews sent to be executed in concentration and death camps. Although not in a very powerful position, he had incredible zeal; with a few collaborators he organised the transport of millions of people to the death camps. In his court case in Jerusalem in 1961, he did not show any regret but expressed only a sense of zeal to conform to what was expected of him in the criminal logic of that time. Hannah Arendt, in her report of the trial, described this attitude as the *banality of evil*. She described also how even Jewish leaders had participated in selecting those to be executed, mainly for fear of being taken to the death camps themselves, but also in zealously trying to integrate into what seemed to be the new coherence of their society; they tried to adapt to what was required of them, without wanting to see what was really at stake.

Eichmann of course represents an extreme case of collaboration under extreme totalitarian conditions (Nazism). Yet the lesson of Arendt’s book is also relevant today; it describes a destructive tendency to collaborate with evil acts, which we could call *Eichmann’s syndrome* – the tendency to conform freely with the logic of our society, even when it perpetrates extremely destructive acts. Eichmann’s syndrome seems to describe our general tendency for integrating the destructive logic of our social group as part of something we (believe we) have to adapt to and cannot avoid or fight against. This mad logic comes to appear not only unavoidable, but we feel we need to adapt to it as well as we can (even with zeal).

Our ability to conform with destructive, evil logic in our social milieu is made possible by our inability to think for ourselves, or to deeply understand the moral stands of others who think and live differently, because they belong to other social classes, groups,

64 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Viking Press, New York, 1963.

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cultures or religions (Nazism's Jews and Gypsies). Or perhaps for some other reason they have differing values and a logic incompatible with the dominant one. Other ways of understanding life are rejected as the peculiar ways of marginal and strange people who do not belong to the dominant social group, to the dominant logic – even when this dominant logic is pure evil. Conformity in this case means rejecting the ones who are different (yet who remain “normal”) and are already rejected by social norms, and adapting to the law of the strongest (no matter if evil). Eichmann's syndrome is characteristic of a monolithic society. Diversity and inclusiveness are its antidotes.

The problem is that we are imprisoned in the logic of our own social context, to such an extent that we accept its destructive behaviour as unavoidable. As shocking as it might seem, our behaviour becomes an expression of Eichmann's syndrome; it happens each time we conform to a destructive logic, representation or behaviour of our social group, even if we are not aware of the impact of our attitude. Even if our behaviour is much less harmful than that of a Nazi executioner. Are not our passivity in facing climate change, the marginality of minorities, the rejection of immigrants, in ignoring the gap between rich and poor, all signs of Eichmann's syndrome, even if its expression appears much milder?

Fundamental familiarity with evil, in our own lives

Evil is a dreadful energy. We do not want anything to do with it. Nevertheless, it is always present in our lives, in one way or another – mostly in a very discreet, insidious way. We must learn to recognise this presence in ourselves, even though we are not fundamentally bad. It is a very challenging question to ask why evil may take these many forms and how people (others, but also ourselves) may commit such dreadful acts. It seems that all of us practise collusion with evil, without being truly aware of it. For me it is a deep enigma that people can act in such a destructive way, even knowing that it will not bring happiness into their lives.

It is intriguing to trace the origin of evil in the lives of evil-doers. It seems there is always a root of suffering at the origin – some direct

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repression or existential threat that might explain the origin of the violence, although it does not excuse it. We may recognise in ourselves the diverse forms of suffering which cause angry or jealous attitudes or feelings, even if we learn to master our negative reactions.

The example of the monks of Tibhirine who were killed in Algeria in 1996 illustrates an inspiring lucidity about this collusion with evil that penetrates all of us, and that we all know too well.

In 1996 the GIA (the Armed Islamic Group, an extremist terrorist organisation in Algeria) abducted and killed the eight monks of a Trappist community (Tibhirine) which was living in great harmony with local Islamic people in the Atlas mountains. The abbot of this community, Christian de Chergé, wrote a will before he was taken prisoner, expressing his deep love for, and connection with, the people with whom they were sharing their lives and his choice to stay among them despite the explicit threat of being killed that was expressed to them.

His will is the following: “Should it ever befall me – and it could happen today – to be victim of the terrorism swallowing up all foreigners here, I would like my community, my church and my family to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. That the Unique Master of all life was no stranger to this brutal departure. And that my death is the same as so many other violent ones, consigned to the apathy of oblivion. I’ve lived enough to know I am complicit in the evil that, alas, prevails over the world and the evil that will smite me blindly. I could never desire such a death; I could never feel gladdened that these people I love be accused randomly of my murder. I know the contempt felt for the people here, indiscriminately. And I know how Islam is distorted by a certain Islamism. This country, and Islam, for me are something different. They’re a body and a soul. My death, of course, will quickly vindicate those who called me naïve and idealistic, but they must know that I will be freed of a burning curiosity and, God willing, will immerse my gaze in the Father’s and contemplate with him his children of Islam as he sees them. ... This thank-you which encompasses my entire life includes you, of course, friends of yesterday and today, and you too, friend of the last minute, who knew not what you were doing. Yes, to you as well, I address this

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thank-you and this farewell which you en-visaged. May we meet again, happy thieves in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen. Insh'Allah. *Tibhirine, 1st of January 1994.*"⁶⁵

Our own search for meaning fosters our resistance to totalitarian influence

In order to resist this sneaky form of evil, we need to reconnect with meaning. Hence this need to seek a new anthropology – to search for meaning. In fact, this second part of the book can be summarised in a single phrase: rediscovering meaning.

We all know that the strength of any totalitarian power relies mainly on its capacity to destroy meaning. In the context of concentration camps, people are arrested for no reason and punished for what they have not done (or just for being who they are), then forced to work on processes that have no meaning – at the limit of, or even beyond, absurdity. By breaking our sense of meaning, the totalitarian power breaks our humanity and our capacity for human dignity.

Resisting therefore consists in reconquering meaning⁶⁶ in our own lives. And meaning is inevitably a link between people, because the meaning of life depends on the quality of our relationships and on the respective or common intentions that lead our life together. In societies dominated by market and technology, there is the same crawling extension of absurdity, and therefore the same need to rediscover meaning. We believe our society practises freedom, but in fact it has just abolished meaning. Everything seems possible and of equal value, i.e. meaningless.

65 Christian de Chergé: *L'invincible espérance*. Bayard / Centurion, 1997.

66 See Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997.

The solution is simple

Do not resist evil; your own freedom and self-chosen powerlessness as the invincible force

Some sacred texts⁶⁷ prescribe that we should *not* resist evil. At first glance this seems to contradict wisdom. Yet this instruction not to resist evil does not mean we should abide and let evil act freely. It instructs us rather that, if we intend to resist evil, we will be condemned to resist it on its own ground – to adapt to its strategies and use the same weapons, which is contrary to what is needed. This is why we should not resist it on the same ground.

By contrast, our strength is in our own freedom to be creative. Life and love are the real weapons to undo evil. Our vocation is to be fully alive and loving, to stand on the side of the victim and to remain powerless. Freely chosen powerlessness is our true strength and power – it does not rely on force, but on the energy of life as an energy that nothing can destroy. Light destroys obscurity; but obscurity does not impact on light. So too with evil. Life destroys evil; evil does not impact on life. It can kill our body, but it cannot destroy life.

15 – Truth and reconciliation

Nonviolence, forgiveness and reconciliation are the necessary tools for solving conflicts

This incredible power of life over evil is well demonstrated by the power of forgiveness. Anger, resentment and a need for revenge are the main forces constantly pouring fuel on the fire of conflicts. It soon becomes clear that violence is no solution. Violence can only

67 In the Bible: Matthew 5: 38–42.

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foster more violence; and then it becomes ever more difficult to escape the vicious circle and find solutions to conflicts.

There is only one path: nonviolence. And nonviolence is based on telling the truth. Truth, reconciliation and true healing go hand in hand.

Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town (South Africa), chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, explains it very clearly in the commission's report.⁶⁸ He shows how, while a court case encourages the culprit to hide the truth, in order to escape punishment, a true process of reconciliation favours expressing the truth – the whole truth – because only then can forgiveness be given. And the victims are there to testify that truth has been told. A true reconciliation process brings the two parties together in telling the truth and learning from it, while a court case invites opponents to take diametrically opposed positions that become irreconcilable; the conflict remains total.

The truth and reconciliation process aims at restorative justice (repair), while the usual aim of a court case is retributive justice (punishment). The restorative process heals the perpetrators as much as the victims, whereas the retributive process increases tension and fosters new violence.

A flexible, personalised strategy made of options we choose ourselves, freely and creatively

The vision expressed in these pages will evidently change neither the difficulty we have in breaking out of resignation, nor our collusion with evil, our difficulty in practising nonviolence, the obstacle of attachment, and so on. But it can offer each of us, and especially you, the reader, an opportunity to resonate with what is said in these pages, and to become more aware of the need for a new anthropology

68 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 1998, Vol.1, chapter 5, *Concepts and Principles*.

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that will help us focus on meaning in our lives – and reorient according to that new understanding.

Each of us is responsible for our own life and standpoint. That's why the purpose of my vision is not to explain what is, but only to create an opportunity to start a move towards change. When we, together, recognise that this is our common calling (from inside, from our own heart-mind), we'll feel impelled (in our own heart-mind) to come together and develop new forms of living.

Reader, the ball is in your camp. Will you respond and join me, him, her, all of us? It is not about idealism; it is just about our own life, mine, ours, yours – the choice to live fully and bring life to others too, and save the planet from destruction.

I believe it will be a very rich experience, a new discovery, a path of liberation. Peace be with you!

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