

(Excerpt from *Global Shift: How a New Worldview is Transforming Humanity*, pages 7-14. New Harbinger/Noetic Books, 2008.)

Global Crisis

Humanity is looking for a new story. The one it has embraced since the Renaissance is no longer viable. Despite all of its positive contributions to modern life, three hundred years of scientific-technological development has left our civilization in an untenable position—at odds with its natural environment and ultimately its own deeper, collective soul. Only a global shift in fundamental perceptions, values, and corresponding actions will allow humankind to resume an evolutionary path in alignment with nature and the larger cosmos. This book represents one attempt to explore the dimensions of what a new story for humanity might look like. It concludes with practical actions each of us can take in our personal and collective lives to promote the emergence of a new story.

This book took root in the year 2000. Some of the seminal chapters were written at that time—before September 11, 2001, and before the onset of eight years of political conservatism in America. In its first conception, this book was influenced by the more optimistic current of thinking in the late 1990s, when many people were envisioning a new century of positive social transformation. Bookstores at that time featured many popular books on spiritual transformation, from authors such as Neale Donald Walsch, Deepak Chopra, James Redfield, Wayne Dyer, and Miguel Ruiz.

At this writing, several years later, consciousness continues to expand around the globe, but the context has changed. The collective mood is more serious, if not somber. It appears that the last three decades of the twentieth century were a time when the world was seeded with an enormous variety of spiritual teachings and a new holistic perspective. Now, in the new century, humanity has entered a time of increasing global

distress when such teachings—and the values that go with them—need to be applied on a large scale if the earth is to avoid a path progressively downward.

Gone is the plethora of spiritual-growth books and the vision of a new age. In their place is a growing awareness of an unprecedented planetary crisis on multiple fronts: global warming, environmental degradation, massive loss of species, dwindling natural resources, difficulties in switching to sustainable forms of energy, rapidly increasing population, and widespread poverty, hunger, and disease. At mid-decade, the year 2005 saw three major natural disasters: the Indonesian tsunami, the inundation of New Orleans and the Gulf region by Hurricane Katrina, and a catastrophic earthquake in Pakistan. New disasters of equal proportion took place in 2007 and 2008. Human suffering is widespread in third world countries, while an increasing subjective malaise affects many people in more technologically developed nations. There is more insecurity and uncertainty on the planet, especially with reference to the future, than there was when this book was first conceived.

Global shift—a basic shift in perceptions, core values, and priorities—is beginning to happen for people throughout the world at this time. More than ever, there is a belief that such a shift is urgently needed to forestall an unraveling of the fabric of civilized life as we know it. Though many predicted world crisis ten and even twenty years ago, the crucial moment has now arrived. Without a fundamental shift in beliefs, values, and consequent actions of a large number of people, the earth seems headed toward an era of increasing darkness.

Twenty years ago, visionary philosopher Willis Harman spoke of the “world macroproblem”—the interrelated series of challenges that the earth is facing—in a book far ahead of its time called *Global Mind Change* (1988). This book follows in Harman’s footsteps and owes much to his work. What are the dimensions of the world macroproblem twenty years later?

[A]Global Warming

For many, the term “global crisis” means the deterioration of the earth’s environment, mostly as the result of adverse human impact. As this time, global warming appears to be emerging as the most critical of these man-made environmental problems. Consider some of the facts: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (basically all of the world’s leading climatologists) reports that in the past fifty years human activity has raised the average temperature on earth about one degree, Fahrenheit (with the Arctic area seeing an increase of four degrees). If this trend continues unabated, the average temperature is expected to rise precipitously—another three to ten degrees—over the course of this century. Some of the possible outcomes of such a drastic increase in temperature include the displacement of up to a *billion* people due to floods and rising seas in some of the earth’s most fertile regions; dramatic climate destabilization, with droughts and floods playing havoc with harvests and the habitability of large areas of the world (including the United States); increasingly larger, more violent, and more frequent hurricanes; drastic cooling of Great Britain and northern Europe; desertification of presently fertile areas; the spread of tropical diseases into temperate zones; and a rapid dwindling in the oceans’ supply of edible fish. The reality of global warming is no longer seriously questioned in the light of multiple lines of evidence:

- In the past thirty years, the number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has doubled, with Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans and surrounding areas in 2005 being the most blatant example in the United States (increased hurricane intensity is caused by warmer oceans).
- Of the twenty-one hottest years on the planet since measurements began in 1860, twenty occurred in the last twenty-five years.
- The Arctic polar ice cap lost a record amount of ice cover in September 2005; in September 2007 this record was surpassed by an additional 23 percent (2008). In the summer of 2007, an area of ice twice the size of Britain disappeared in one

week. Greenland's summer ice melt has similarly increased dramatically in the last few years, with glacial ice moving into the sea at the rate of six feet per hour in some areas. If all of Greenland's ice were to break up and melt, global sea levels would rise 18 to 23 feet.

- Approximately 30 percent of the world's coral reefs have died due to bleaching, with another 40 percent in imminent danger. *Bleaching*, the exposing of the white calcium-carbonate skeleton of the coral, occurs when microorganisms supported by the reef die due to rising ocean temperatures.
- In the northern hemisphere, the growing season has been extended by eleven days, allowing more organic material to decay and emit carbon into the atmosphere. Shorter winters and longer summers have also upset many delicately balanced ecological cycles. For example, massive numbers of pine and spruce trees in North America are being killed by the extended range of bark beetles whose numbers used to be contained by colder winters.
- The earth's seas are becoming more acidic as a result of rising carbon dioxide levels. By 2050 the seas may be acidic enough to dissolve the minute aragonite shells of phytoplankton. If large amounts of phytoplankton die off, the earth will have lost one of its major resources for absorbing greenhouse gases as well as the primary foundation of the entire marine food chain.

What is most alarming is that warming appears to be accelerating faster than many scientists anticipated. While immediate action is needed, the United States, currently responsible for 25 percent of global carbon emissions, has (at this writing) done little to cut back. The effort of the United States to reduce its dependence on oil by increasing ethanol production as a source of fuel is unlikely to have significant impact on its total carbon output. In fact, a lead article in *Time Magazine* (April 7, 2008 issue) suggested that corn-based ethanol may actually have a larger carbon footprint than

gasoline refined from oil. India and China, currently enjoying rapid economic development with little regard for its side effects, will undoubtedly increase their carbon dioxide outputs significantly over the next decade. Without dramatic curtailments of carbon emissions in the next ten years, the earth may pass a tipping point beyond which catastrophic consequences are inevitable.

[A]Other Environmental Problems

There are major environmental issues beyond global warming. In many parts of the world, forests, which help to absorb extra carbon dioxide, are disappearing fast. In two decades, the Amazon rainforest has decreased by *one-fourth* as a result of gratuitous clearing of land for agriculture. Another 20 percent has been weakened by logging and road building, allowing enough sun to reach the forest floor to set the stage for widespread fires (Worldwatch Institute 2005, xiv). In recent years air pollution has become a serious health hazard in many Asian cities, from New Delhi to Shanghai, while in the United States a haze from air pollution blankets the entire region east of the Mississippi River much of the time. Finally, the destruction of animal habitats by industry, pollution, and global warming has substantially decreased the number of viable species. One study noted that if the average global temperature rises by just two to five degrees, up to 35 percent of the earth's species (all of which have been around for millions of years) could be gone by the year 2050.

To sum up, human beings are making their home less habitable at a fast pace. Some climatologists believe we have already passed the point beyond which devastating consequences for the planet are inescapable.

[A]Population Growth and Diminishing Resources

Unfortunately, environmental deterioration is far from the only problem the earth faces. Unchecked population growth also presents serious concerns. The population of the earth

quadrupled from 1.5 billion to over 6 billion people in the twentieth century, and is expected to reach 9 billion by 2050. Almost all of this population growth is expected to occur in developing countries affected by severe poverty, disease, and diminishing access to food, water, and other basic resources. As of 2007, about 50 percent of these people were living in cities, up to half of these in slums that lack adequate housing, sanitation, transportation, clean water, or health care (Worldwatch Institute, Vital Signs 2006-2007, 74). The implications of such rapid population growth are especially grim in the light of diminishing resources; these include water, oil, and food (due to rising prices and climate destabilization).

At present, 80 percent of the earth's natural resources are used by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population, and the situation is expected to get even more lopsided. To give just one example, it is estimated that by 2015 as many as 3 billion people will be living in water-stressed areas, subject to limited availability of water for drinking, let alone agriculture. At present, 20 percent of the world's population lacks access to clean drinking water. Hundreds of Chinese cities already face severe water shortages, with many households limited to a mere trickle of water a few hours each day. With the prospect of an increasingly radical division of the world between a wealthy minority and impoverished majority, the risk of unrest, conflict, war, and terrorism increases.

Impoverished people are subject to disease. The statistics are horrific. Approximately 15,000 Africans die each day of preventable diseases—mainly malaria, HIV/AIDS, or tuberculosis. The poor die in hospitals that lack basic drugs, in areas that lack antimalarial nets, and in towns that lack sanitary drinking water. In the past fifteen years, HIV/AIDS has killed 20 million people and sickened an additional 34 to 46 million. By 2010 the number sickened will reach 75 million worldwide. In parts of Africa the adult death rate is so high that there are not enough teachers for schools.)

Looking at disease in general, up to 7 million people, mostly in poor countries, die each year of diseases that could easily be prevented by immunization. The situation

has begun to turn around due to widespread humanitarian efforts, though eradication of disease and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa still has a long way to go.

Lastly, across the world, approximately a billion people are presently subject to malnutrition or semi-starvation. The combination of rapid population growth and environmental instability from global warming is likely to increase this number over the next decade.

All of these conditions—climate change, diminishing resources, population growth, poverty, disease, and hunger—interact to produce an increasingly dismal picture for a large proportion of the earth's population. The Worldwatch Institute sums up this situation as follows: "Nations around the world, but particularly the weakest countries and communities, confront a multitude of pressures. They face a debilitating combination of rising competition for resources, severe environmental breakdown, the resurgence of infectious diseases, poverty and growing wealth disparities, demographic pressures, and livelihood insecurity." (2005, 5)

In this brief chapter it's possible only to touch on some of the factors of the present global predicament. Twenty years after Willis Harman coined the term, our planet's macroproblem has worsened on a variety of fronts. If conditions continue along this trajectory, the quality of life for *everyone*—not just those in impoverished areas—is likely to decline.

[A]Source of the Problem

What is the ultimate origin of this global crisis? Harman's answer still rings true today: Having lost any consensus on ultimate meanings and values, the industrialized world steers itself primarily on the basis of economic values. Governments, in combination with all-powerful multinational corporations, base policy decisions on a misguided vision of unlimited future economic development. While problems such as climate change, poverty, and disease are becoming more salient to public awareness, it is still economic

values that drive the most powerful corporate and political institutions on the planet. The primacy of economic considerations shows up in a multiplicity of ways, one of which is the commercializing of institutions not intended to be commercial. For example, science is justified and funded on the basis of the technology it can produce; education is justified on the basis of the jobs it can prepare youth for; and medicine—specifically managed care—is regulated more by economic constraints than patients' needs. Economic values also dominate humanity's relationship with the environment, which continues to be degraded in order to ensure the maintenance and continued expansion of industries dependent on fossil fuels.

On a positive note, there is some good news on the horizon. European governments such as those of Germany, Denmark, France, and Spain are taking climate change seriously, making far-reaching efforts to develop alternative sources of energy based on wind, solar power, and biofuels. Specific states and regions within the United States, such as California and New England, have established guidelines to cut carbon emissions substantially by 2020. Both at grassroots and governmental levels, many efforts are currently underway to mitigate both climate change and pressing social issues such as sub-Saharan poverty and disease. On the downside, developing countries such as China and India, which together include more than one-third of the world's population, are just beginning their phase of rapid economic growth. While acknowledging climate change and other environmental problems, they show less initiative to constrain the adverse environmental impacts of their growth than many developed countries.

A future based on continuing economic expansion and growth is, of course, unsustainable. It is widely recognized that natural resources, particularly oil, will simply run out at current rates of utilization long before this century ends. Even by optimistic projections, worldwide oil demand will exceed production in the near future, with the global oil supply likely to top out before 2015. Without rapid, widespread conversion to cleaner forms of energy that do not rely on fossil fuels, global warming will accelerate,

and the continuation of petroleum-based transportation, power generation, and industry as we know it will grow increasingly tenuous. As the demand-to-supply ratio for oil increases, the rising cost of oil is likely lead to serious economic consequences in many places.

If the prospect for economically developed countries is not favorable, the situation for third world countries is likely to be far worse. The continued economic expansion of multinational corporations owned by the wealthiest countries can only lead to increased misery and conflict in less-developed areas. Industrial growth has multiple impacts, including increased carbon emissions (that can cause flooding and droughts in the third world), widespread air and water pollution, increased disparity between rich and poor, increased pushing of peasants off the land into urban slums, and increased unemployment because of the breakdown of local agriculture in a global economy.. In general, the prognosis for a global society based primarily on economic and materialistic values is poor.