

Moving to the Ecozoic Era

By T. Jack Heckelman

As we humans seek our proper role on this planet, we are drawn to the epic of evolution and the challenge of moving to the Ecozoic Era. When we tell the new story of the Epic, we must remember that it has three distinct parts, all interconnected—*how we came to be here, where we are, and where we're going*. Each part of the story must be told with physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions . . . in human terms of body, mind, and spirit which all can understand.

How We Came to Be Here

The first part, *how we came to be here*, is the exciting chronology of the 15 billion years of evolution, just becoming known to our generation for the first time in human history. It is the story of the first flaring forth of energy, the formation of stars and galaxies, of Earth, life, and of humans. It is the story of science, of how we have come to know the physical story, and are continuing to learn it's dimensions. It is also the psychic story of spirit, of consciousness, of God, of the ultimate unknowable mystery which surrounds the beginning of our universe, the continuous creativity which shapes it, and the mystery which lives today.

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We can tell the story in myriad ways, with few or many details, but cannot but stand in awe and wonder at the marvel of its intentionality, diversity, and beauty. Out of it must come, for each of us, a knowing and understanding in our hearts and minds of our integral relationship with the Earth from which we have come, and to which we return; of our intimate interdependence with the Earth in all its being, in all its processes; of our oneness with the Earth, and with the universe. This awareness is the basis for us to understand the second part of the story.

Where We Are

The second part, *where we are*, acknowledges our devastation of the Earth, our huge and still growing human population, our highly developed technology, our massive use of Earth's resources, the incredible amount of waste and pollution we have created, and the resulting environmental degradation. It also must acknowledge the thought processes and attitudes that have brought us to this point—the belief that the Earth exists for our use, that all other life is inferior, and should be subservient to our needs or wishes, and that technology can solve every problem we encounter.

Again we must understand, deep within our psyche, the magnitude and impact of the power over the rest of nature we have developed. We have changed the chemical balance of the Earth, the water, the atmosphere, to the point where we are causing the end of our present geological era, the Cenozoic. The future of life now depends on the decisions we make. We must recognize the urgency and immediacy of the crisis we have created. And this leads us to the third, and for us the most significant, part of the story.

Where We Are Going

The third part, *where we are going*, has as many answers as there are people on the planet, over six billion of us at this moment. It depends on the choices we humans make. It is not predestined or preordained. Everything each of us does or says or thinks changes the Earth, and changes the universe. In the composite of all these decisions hangs the fate of the Earth.

While there is an infinity of possibilities for our common fate, they can be generally coalesced into two main groupings, keeping on as we are, or changing directions—what Thomas Berry calls the Technozoic or the Ecozoic paths.

The *Technozoic* path, business as usual, is directed by “more” and “better” in strictly human terms. More people, more technology, more “stuff,” more consumption, more waste. Yet many are already seeing the end of that path. The realities of human-induced climate change, ozone depletion, massive species extinction, and ecosystem degradation are becoming more evident. The natural world is in the worst condition it has been in for 65 million years, or for at least the last 20,000 years of direct human influence.

Some basic resources, like food, clean air, and clean water are becoming scarcer. In our societies, a few are becoming richer, more are becoming poorer. Ancient enmities and antagonisms are growing, tearing people and nations apart. Crime and terrorism are growing as more of the disenfranchised seek these routes to achieve their aims.

Continuing to follow the Technozoic path can only lead to more massive environmental degradation, social upheaval, and eventual collapse of human civilization.

The *Ecozoic* path, a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship, and living in harmony with Earth processes, is absolutely essential if evolution is to proceed forward rather than backwards. This path is possible and achievable within human intellectual capacity, but will require almost unimaginable changes in our thinking, direction, and behavior. As Einstein stated so clearly, “You cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created the problems in the first place.”

The path must start with solid grounding in the first two parts of the story—awareness of our total integral interdependence with all living and nonliving Earth components, and acknowledgement of the magnitude of the problems we have created on the planet, and the need to change directions.

How We Shall Proceed

How shall we proceed? May I postulate twelve guiding principles to help us achieve the essential shifts in our thinking and behavior? Some relate to us as individuals, some to human society.

1. *Take a Long-Term View.* We have just turned over the calendar to a new millennium, at least the Western calendar, which is most widely known and used. I propose we think not in terms of the next quarter (as corporations think), the next year, the next decade, or even the next century, but the next thousand years. Let us envision, with our most brilliant minds, the life processes that will enable not only survival but life enhancement of all beings on this unique planet in this corner of the universe until the turn of the fourth millennium. This will totally change every aspect of our thinking and behavior, and turn us in the direction of a sustainable future.

2. *Think and Live Sustainability.* As a direct result of our grounding and long-term view, we are constrained, and motivated, to think sustainability in our every decision. Will this enhance or detract from better Earth-human relationship, a more sustainable path? Is there an alternative I could follow that would be more sustainable? How can I reduce, reuse, recycle, repair, and restore, rather than replace? Live not only by “thinking sustainability,” but by “living sustainability,” wherever possible.

3. *Take Individual Responsibility.* We must get beyond the mentality of “It doesn’t matter what I do,” or “I can’t do anything about it.” Each of us has a responsibility, a role to play. Each of us makes a difference, either positively or negatively, for the planet’s evolution. If we take individual responsibility for educating ourselves, acting out of our values and beliefs, and working for a better world, we *can* make a difference.

4. *Stabilize Human Population.* An urgent task is to stabilize, and eventually reduce, human population. We are already in a condition of overshoot—more people than the planet can sustain with even minimum levels of consumption commensurate with a “human” existence. There is no question that human population growth will eventually cease at some point—every species expands until it reaches the carrying capacity of its environment, then it overshoots and collapses. Unless we soon figure this out in an intelligent and compassionate way, we’ll face population collapse by other means—war, famine, disease. We still do have a choice now, but our time to act is very limited. Let’s act now!

5. *Redefine the American Dream.* Ever since the pioneer days, Americans have dreamed of their own home on their own land. Then they’ve added automobiles, televisions, and “white picket fences” to our dreams. It constantly wants “more” in the sectors where the economy and affluence are growing, but more and more are being left behind, both humans and non-humans. Thus we create a society of greater and greater disparity between the “haves” and the “have nots.” We need a more enlightened way of ensuring at least a minimum standard of living for every person to build a more equitable and sustainable society. We also need a radical redefinition of our materialistic standard of living, and a replacement of our reverence for material wealth with a simpler, but higher quality of life for ourselves and for future generations of all life. We’ll all end up happier in the long run.

On a related issue, we urgently need a new understanding of “property rights,” rights that have become entrenched in our American society and in our constitution as inalienable human rights. We need to consider them first as “Earth rights,” since they are part of Earth, and ensure that they continue to serve Earth needs. We need to develop ways by which both Earth needs and human needs can be met, but give priority to Earth, on which all life, including our own, depends.

6. *Preserve Bio-Diversity.* Here is where the greatest paradigm shift is required. We need to recognize the inherent rights of every living being to have food, to have habitat, and to be able to fulfill its role in the great Earth community. While we have made progress in preserving some endangered species, we are far from achieving any viable relationship between the human community and other communities of life. Instead of the governmental structures we now have, designed primarily for the betterment of humans, we need a “Council of All Beings” to adequately represent the needs and rights of other-than-human life. In the process we also need to recognize the rights of non-living beings—rivers, mountains, rocks—to exist and fulfill their roles too.

7. *Revise the Economic System.* Our present economic system, which has become the driving force of all human activity, is fatally flawed, in that it is totally based on money, a human invention. It ignores environmental and social costs. We need a new ecological economics, one in which preserving the health of the Earth is the primary concern.

8. *Recover from our Addiction to Growth.* Ever since the beginning of our present industrial society we have seen “growth” as the key desirable goal. Growth is deeply ingrained in our society and culture. Growth of population, wealth, and consumption are considered virtuous. We have never faced the reality that there cannot be continued growth in a finite world. We have failed to recognize that we are dangerously close to exceeding, and may have already exceeded, the carrying capacity of the Earth.

So we need a significant cultural change to find happiness and satisfaction in a stable, sustainable society, where we substitute “better” for “more,” where we use “quality of life” rather than “standard of living” as our criteria for measuring success. Again, quantification is more difficult, but we can develop the tools if we have the will to do so.

9. Recover from our Addiction to Fossil Fuels. During the past two centuries we have become addicted to fossil fuels, starting with coal and then petroleum. Use of these fuels underlies every aspect of our industrialized society. We depend on them for energy, transportation, plastics, medicines, and in a thousand different ways. We have acted as though we could continue this way indefinitely, assuming we could continue to discover other sources. Just recently, however, we are beginning to be conscious of the effects on air quality and climate change, as well as the impact that the automobile and other aspects of the petroleum economy has had on our culture, living patterns, and life styles.

Recovering from this addiction will be a very formidable task, but again it is possible if we have the will to do it. We can start by being conscious of the issue. Then we can begin reducing our energy consumption, supporting public transportation, and promoting alternate energy sources.

10. Redirect our Institutions. Nearly all of our societal institutions, particularly our governments, corporations and educational systems, are devoted to perpetuating the industrial growth society that we have created. Only a limited number of non-governmental institutions are devoted to building a more sustainable future. These must be supported; more need to be started. Organizations, like The Natural Step, which counsel corporations to adopt more sustainable practices, need to be supported and encouraged.

11. Draw on our Best Sources of Wisdom. There is the capacity within human intelligence to redirect our society in more sustainable directions. We, however, tend to be driven by capitalist thinking of creating more jobs, profits and human “progress” at the expense of the Earth and other beings. We still practice patriarchy in most societies. This male dominance perpetuates our thinking about the need and virtue of unrestrained competition, enhancing national security through militarization, and autocratic governance.

We do, however, have within our societies, sources of wisdom that are not yet listened to or valued sufficiently. These include women, with their intuition; scientists, with their understanding; indigenous people, with their ancient truths; and classical humanistic and religious traditions, with their understandings of value and meaning in human life. Listening to their voices

and views will definitely make a real difference in our decisions and directions.

12. *Recapture our Spiritual Roots.* Through the epic of evolution we are finding a new story, a synthesis of modern science, spirituality, and ancient wisdoms. We are also becoming aware of what a miraculously unique planet we inhabit. While there may well be other life in the universe, even other intelligent life, we must appreciate how the self-organizing Earth has collected just the right elements, in just the right amounts, at the right distance from the sun, with the appropriate length of time and stability to have evolved us, homo sapiens sapiens, with the self-aware consciousness of the universe in our beings. Let us be joyous, constantly filled with awe and wonder at this paradise we have, and celebrate with the universe that we are here.

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