

GREAT TRANSITION STORIES FOR BECOMING A GLOBAL ECO-CIVILIZATION

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Humanity's Journey to Great Transition

In recent speeches, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has described our world as moving through a time of “Great Transition”:

Throughout the ages, people have said that the world is in the midst of big change. But the level and degree of global change that we face today is far more profound than at any other period in my adult lifetime. I call this period the Great Transition.

How can the people of Earth make this “great transition” by coming together in common effort while respecting and honoring our diverse cultures and traditions? One important way is to recognize that, despite our many differences, we have been on a common journey.

According to genetic evidence, all of the humans alive today apparently descended from a very small community of several thousand persons living in southern Africa around 65,000 years ago. Around this time, members of this community moved out of Africa and spread rapidly around Earth. In the space of roughly 65,000 years, we have developed from a small band of hunter-gathers to the edge of a planetary-scale civilization of more than seven billion humans. This is an extraordinary story of success that has led to enormous challenges for our future.

Looking back, we see that we are all cousins on a common journey. Looking ahead, we see that we are coming back together into a global eco-civilization after an epoch of geographical separation and that new challenges face us as we move from separation to community.

We cannot avoid the urgency and importance of the collective effort of imagining and building a global “eco-civilization”—one which honors that we all inhabit the same Earth and want the ecosystem to be strong and resilient to sustain a global civilization into the distant future. We already see portents of the looming challenge of coping with simultaneous climate disruption, unsustainable populations, peak oil and the end of cheap energy, a massive extinction of plant and animal species, the depletion of topsoil and fresh water in glaciers and aquifers, and many more. Humanity is over-consuming Earth and creating the conditions for our breakdown as a functioning global civilization.

The collapse of civilizations is not uncommon. Throughout history we have seen the rise and fall of numerous great civilizations. From the Roman Empire to the empires of Mayans, Aztecs, Easter Islanders, Anasazi, Mesopotamia, the Soviet Empire, and so on, more than 20 major civilizations have collapsed through history, often due to climate change and unsustainable agricultural practices. Collapse is nothing new.

Today is different. The circle has closed. When we put the adversity trends of climate disruption, peak oil, population growth, species extinction, and more together, I estimate that by the decade of the 2020s, the human community will encounter the perfect storm of a world in systems crisis. We will be pushed either to pull together and work collaboratively for a promising future or to pull apart in conflict as we seek to continue a separated existence. I fear the latter course could lead to a new dark age for the entire Earth community

Frontiers are gone. The world is an integrated system—economically and ecologically. Never before has the entire planet been at risk of collapse—taking *all* of the world’s civilizations down at the same time. The key point is that the transition we are in now *is* truly a *great* transition, *unprecedented* in human history and profoundly *determinative* of our long-range future. And we are so inside of this great transition that it is only now becoming perceptible.

If we misjudge our situation, the results will be catastrophic. There are no “do-overs.” We cannot bring extinct species back to life. We cannot re-freeze the Arctic and recreate the climate of the past ten thousand years. We cannot refill oil wells that are pumped dry. We cannot refill ancient aquifers of water that are pumped empty. We cannot give back responsibility for caring for billions of people beyond the carrying capacity of Earth. Therefore, our first requirement—as individuals, communities, nations, and a species—is to step back and take an unflinching look at what is happening with key trends such as climate change and running out of cheap oil.

Once we have a working grasp of individual trends, we can then explore how they interact with one another in mutually reinforcing ways to produce a world in systems crisis—ecologically, economically, politically, culturally, and more. We can continue the inquiry and look even deeper and ask, “What does this interacting pattern of trends say about us as a species?” What is the underlying narrative or story that we humans are living out with our lives? How can we explain to ourselves in a way we all comprehend what is happening to Earth? As we understand and describe to ourselves the magnitude of transition and choices before us, we can mobilize ourselves more swiftly and effectively.

Visions of Transition to a Global Eco-Civilization

What visions of humanity’s journey are powerful enough to transcend age-old differences and bring us together in a common venture of inhabiting Earth in ways that are sustainable? What narratives can step outside our many differences and honor our common journey as humans and our unity within the Earth system? An invisible bond of mutual understanding is the social glue that can hold some form of “civilized” world society together when stretched to the breaking point by multiple crises.

Transition stories serve as important beacons of hope. Without a common story to guide our efforts we are lost, confused, and disoriented. However, if we can imagine it, we can build it. A great transition story can awaken our collective imagination and orient our actions.

With a common story, we can see our place and our part; our lives become more meaningful; change is less overwhelming and stressful; and we can see how to cooperate more readily.

Because no single story is adequate to communicate the richness and diversity of the human journey, I and a team of editors have gathered together an “ecology of narratives” of more than a dozen stories of “Great Transition.” (See www.GreatTransitionStories.org) These stories are drawn from a range of trusted sources including biology, cosmology, mythology, technology, and psychology. Importantly, these narratives are not “owned” by any one part of the world or people—they are drawn from the collective wisdom of humanity. All of these stories have four key qualities; they are universal, simple, emotionally powerful, and evocative of our higher potentials. To illustrate, here are four stories of great transition:

- Humanity Is Growing Up
- The Global Brain Is Waking Up
- Humanity Is on a Heroic Journey
- We Are in a Process of Planetary Birth

Story 1. Humanity Is Growing Up

Over tens of thousands of years, the human species has been learning and maturing. Most people recognize intuitively that the human family is growing up and can relate to the following questions: “When you look at the overall behavior of the human family, what life-stage do you think we are in? If you estimate the social average of human behavior around the world, what stage of development best describes the human family: toddler, teenager, adult, or elder?”

My informal surveys with groups around the world over nearly two decades indicate that *the vast majority of people share an intuitive sense of the human family’s level of maturity.* Whether in the United States, England, India, Japan, or Brazil, people have responded in the same way: *at least two-thirds say that humanity is in its teenage years.*

The speed and consistency with which different groups around the world have come to this intuitive conclusion has encouraged me to explore many parallels between humanity’s current behavior and that of teenagers, including the following:

- Teenagers are rebellious and want to prove their independence. Humanity has been rebelling against nature for thousands of years, trying to prove that we are separate, superior, and independent.
- Teenagers are reckless and tend to live without regard for the consequences of their behavior. The human family has been acting recklessly in consuming natural resources as if they would last forever, polluting the air, water, and land of the planet, and bringing extinction to a significant part of animal and plant life on Earth.

- Teenagers are concerned with appearance and with fitting in. Similarly, many humans seem focused on expressing their identity and status through material possessions.
- Teenagers are drawn toward instant gratification. As a species, we are seeking our short-term pleasures and are largely ignoring the needs of other species and future generations.
- Teenagers tend to gather in groups or cliques, and often express “us versus them” and “in versus out” thinking and behavior. Much of humanity is clustered in ethnic, racial, religious, and other groupings that separate us from one another, fostering an “us versus them” mentality in today’s world.

Although many people see our species behavior as rebellious, reckless, and short sighted, many others point out beneficial aspects of the adolescent stage of development. Adolescents have substantial energy and enthusiasm and, with their courage and daring, are ready to dive into life and make a difference in the world. Many teenagers have a “hidden sense of greatness” and feel that, if given a chance, they can accomplish wonderful things.

Overall, the archetype of a maturing species explains a great deal about our current behaviors and contains within it the promise of a hopeful future. As we move beyond our adolescent consciousness and grow into our early adulthood as a species, we will develop greater capacities to consciously work to restore the resilience and integrity of our Earth’s ecosystem, consider the impact of our actions on the rest of life as well as generations in the future, and bring fresh awareness and sacred regard for the living universe that is our home.

Story 2. The Global Brain Is Waking Up

After experiencing tens of thousands of years of geographic separation, the human species is moving with lightning speed into almost instantaneous global communication and connection. Humanity has developed immensely powerful electronic tools that are supporting a quantum increase in our collective communication—and our collective consciousness—as a species. Our ability to communicate has enabled humans to progress from nomadic bands of gatherers and hunters to the edge of a planetary civilization. Just as we are in the midst of an unprecedented revolution in the scope, depth, and richness of global communications, the impact of this revolution on our future will be equally unprecedented. Perhaps most importantly, the spectacular growth in global communications offers humanity the possibility of communicating our way through this time of supreme planetary challenge.

The awakening of collective consciousness is a theme in all of the stories of great transition. In this narrative, the Internet, television, cell phones, and other social media all combine to provide the technological infrastructure that supports global awakening. The “global brain” is a metaphor for the worldwide network formed by people coming together with communication technologies that connect them into an organic whole. As the Internet becomes faster, more intelligent, more ubiquitous, and more encompassing, it increasingly ties us together into a single communications system that functions like a “brain” for planet Earth.

In particular, television combined with the Internet is creating a transparent world that is bringing a new level of accountability and ethicality into institutional conduct. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, so too does a rising level of global communication lift all injustices into the healing light of public awareness. What we see and hear through the new media may challenge the emotional intelligence and maturity of the species. As our social consciousness awakens, deep psychic wounds will emerge that have festered through history. We will begin to hear the voices that we have ignored and the pain that we have not acknowledged. Awakening will bring with it awareness of the dark shadows of human history in the form of racism, ethnic conflict, and religious discord. Yet, as uncomfortable as this process will be, it is a vital stage in our collective healing, which will enable us to move on consciously in our collective journey.

For the first time in human history, we are acquiring a way to listen to and talk with one another as members of one family. For the first time, all the human cousins can communicate with one another. In awakening to ourselves as a planetary species and seeing ourselves directly and as a whole for the first time, we see that we have the potential for an evolutionary leap forward. The question is whether we have the collective maturity to seize this precious opportunity.

When the people of Earth are not simply receiving media, but are also capable of offering their collective voice for change, then a new and powerful force for creative transformation will be awakened in the world. When people are empowered to speak, they are also empowered to listen—we can listen, and be a collective witness, to stories of genocide, climate disruption, intense poverty, species extinction, and many more. As the people of Earth learn how to use the new media tools to come together as a global community and express their voices, a new era in human maturity and development will be born.

What kind of communication is required to give the citizens of the world an authentic collective voice? Critically important, it must be nearly instantaneous and global in scope. An authentic “Earth Voice” must reach the vast majority of the people of Earth, and it must reach them virtually all at the same time. Seven billion or more people need to be able to offer their feedback about critical concerns if they are to feel part of an *Earth Voice* conversation. This level of functioning of a “global nervous system” would have been completely unthinkable prior to the emergence of a new capacity for computing and networking that places information in “virtual clouds” rather than on individual computers.

As cloud computing accelerates, by the decade of the 2020s, the world will have the technologies with which to acquire real-time feedback and knowledge of humanity’s collective sentiments—and humanity will move into a new phase of collective transparency, self-reflection and self-discovery. With communication capacities that are intensely interactive, highly intelligent, and virtually instantaneous, the citizens of Earth will have the power to communicate together and express common support for a future of sustainable prosperity supported by a global eco-consciousness.

Story 3. Humanity Is on a Heroic Journey

Another deep story that can assist humanity in envisioning a positive future is to see ourselves as being on a heroic journey of collective awakening and development. With this narrative, we can step back from seeing ourselves as “evolutionary villains” who are ruining Earth and, instead, regard ourselves as “evolutionary heroes” who are facing a supreme test of our collective evolutionary intelligence. We are moving through an unprecedented, collective rite of passage and confronting the supreme challenge of building a new relationship with Earth, with one another, and with the living universe that is our home.

The archetype of the hero’s journey is widely recognized around the world and is found in stories and myths across history. The distinguished scholar Joseph Campbell summarized the hero’s journey as follows: An adventurer hears a call to discovery, separates from the everyday world, and sets out on a search filled with dangers. The hero experiences many difficult challenges and tests, each rich with learning. Ultimately, the hero confronts a seemingly insurmountable challenge—a supreme test that cannot be overcome with physical capacities alone. To be successful, the hero must reach beyond his ego where he or she awakens to a new and more soulful relationship with Earth, with other people, and with the universe. With this profound initiation, the hero then makes a journey of return, bringing these gifts of insight back to the larger community.

The hero’s journey of separation, initiation, and return can be expanded from the scale of an individual to the scope of the entire human community. Looking at the human journey, for roughly 50,000 years we have been on a path of separation. We have been pulling back from nature and gaining ever more power and control as we learned to hunt, farm, domesticate animals, build cities, make wars, and transform the planet. Because our power is now so great, we are obliged to be conscious of our connection with nature and use restraint in the exercise of power.

4. A Planetary Birth Is Underway

The "Planetary Birth" story uses the patterns and archetypes associated with human birth to describe the experience of humanity as it goes through a powerful and difficult process that can be likened to being squeezed through a birth canal. This story offers hope and direction in the face of what many experience as a world in contraction, producing great suffering and confusion.

Storytellers from around the world have long used the birthing metaphor to give meaning to suffering: The pain is worth what is being born on the other side. We can use this same metaphor to understand how to move through the collective pain of our time of global transition. We know from lived experience what giving birth is about. We know how to endure the process and how to help it along. And we know how to love what is born. Below are two perspectives on what humanity as a whole could be birthing.

The following quote is taken from Dr. Betsy MacGregor's book, *In Awe of Being: Stories from the Edge of Life and Death*:

Bringing a new human being into this world is not an easy matter. The ordeal that must be endured is huge, and it can take a significant toll. The life of either mother or child, and sometimes both, may be lost if all does not go well. This is because it is no small thing for two bodies that have lived as one for many months to separate. Tremendous forces must be set in motion in order to expel the infant from the comfort of the womb, and the going can get extremely rough. Powerful maternal muscles create rhythmic waves of contraction that force the baby along, while the youngster's head leads the way, stretching apart tight maternal tissues and pushing past rock-hard bone, bearing the brunt of the work. The amount of pressure exerted on the infant's head is so great that the soft bones of its skull are squeezed hard against each other and made to overlap, only slowly regaining their normal position days after birth. Collections of blood may form in the infant's scalp from the battering as well. For hours upon hours the formidable process goes on, testing the limits of endurance for both mother and child. It's enough to make an observer exclaim, "Good Lord! Why has nature made it so hard for us to enter this world?"

We may ask ourselves, why has nature made it so hard for us humans to give birth a global eco-civilization? Why is it so difficult for us to develop into a mature species that has collective regard for its own wellbeing? Could it be that, without this time of supreme challenge, we might not rise to our collective maturity and promise as a species?

Another view of planetary birth comes from Barbara Marx Hubbard who, in 1966, had a visionary experience in which she witnessed Earth as a whole, living body giving birth to a higher-order planetary life form. She saw humanity come together and play an essential, coordinated role in the birthing process. The result of the "planetary birth" was a harmonious planetary body interacting more fully with the rest of the galaxy through an evolved Universal Human species that saw itself as one. Hubbard writes: "Our story is a birth. It is the birth of humankind as one body. We are one body, born into this universe." Moreover, what is being born is not a helpless babe, but an empowered and awake planetary community: "We are waking up to ourselves as a collective humanity." With the global Internet and communications revolution, the collective consciousness of the species, the "noosphere," is coming alive. We can take a leap forward in love and become co-creative participants in birthing humanity as an integrated and healthy organism.

Stories Offer Beacons of Hope

Humanity has entered a rare period, filled with immense opportunity and danger: We are collectively between stories with a break in the narrative describing the overall human journey. Around the world, old institutions of business, government, education, and more are breaking down. New institutions fitted to the new era are rising up, but seemingly at a slower

pace than existing institutions are breaking down. As a consequence, there is a growing void or felt sense of absence of guiding narratives for nearly all humans who are alive today. For example, the "American Dream" that pulled the United States forward for at least three generations is fast becoming the world's nightmare as the excesses of consumerism produce climate disruption, the depletion of cheap oil, growing income disparities, and more. Now, instead of a different "dream," people want wide-awake visions of real possibility told in ways that are believable and compelling.

We face big challenges and it will take an equally big vision to transform conflict into cooperation and draw us into a promising future. The most difficult challenge facing humanity is not devising solutions to the energy crisis or climate crisis or population crisis; rather, it is bringing stories of the human journey into our collective awareness that empower us to look beyond a future of great adversity and to see a future of great opportunity.

Without stories to orient us, we are literally lost. When we are lost, it is easy to be frightened and to focus on security and survival, to look for threats, and to pull together into "safe" enclaves. Policies for energy and climate will not go deep enough to change our mind and change our direction. A collective and powerful story of the human journey can serve as the social glue to pull us together in common effort and take us in a regenerative direction. We do not seem to have those common stories now; however, the stories we seek are already present in biology, psychology, cosmology, mythology, technology, and more.

It is time to gather wisdom for the human journey from diverse sources so that we can better understand our time of profound transition and the promise that lies ahead. As the UN Secretary General has stated, we are in a period of "Great Transition." This is a rare moment in human history when we are beginning to develop, for the very first time, the "story of, by, and for all of us." There may be no more important task for humanity than to cultivate narratives in our collective imagination that can serve as beacons for guiding us into a promising future. Without a common story we are collectively lost and destined to struggle against ourselves. If we can imagine a common journey into a future of sustainable prosperity, we can build it. With a common story, we can see our supporting roles, our lives become more meaningful, and change is less overwhelming. Our story is our future. Let the stories we tell be worthy of this time of great transition.

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