INTUITION, LOGIC, EGO, SUSTAINABILITY
By Steven Lambeth

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All living beings, including humans, are necessarily embedded in physical environments, or ecosystems, which both enable and limit population growth. This is the basic concept in the study of ecology, which has shown that every ecosystem has a carrying capacity expressed as the “number of [individuals], living in a given manner that an environment can support indefinitely.” (William Robert Catton, Overshoot, 1980, 4)

The State of Our World as It Pertains to Industrialized Consumption

Humans have a long history of working to increase the carrying capacity of their environments. The advent of agriculture allowed us to greatly increase the population levels our ecosystems could sustain and technological advances have led to further increases in the carrying capacity of our environments throughout the subsequent years. To use Catton’s language, however, since the mid-nineteenth century, industrialized societies such as the United States have switched their approach from using “methods that permanently enlarged human carrying capacity” such as the western expansion in the United States that gave more territory and resources to exploit, to “methods that have only enabled us temporarily to evade the world’s limits.” (Catton, 4) Indeed the populations of industrialized societies have surpassed the carrying capacities of their ecosystems at the expense of the environmental resources that are ultimately necessary for sustaining those populations. The great loss of biodiversity we have seen in recent years is perhaps the most prominent, currently observable consequence of this excessive ecological footprint.

When a population surpasses the carrying capacity of its environment, it goes into a state of “overshoot,” from which the only way out is a decline back to a sustainable level. (Jorgen Randers, 2052: A Global Forecast for the Next Forty Years, 2010, 307). Further, it only takes the depletion of one vital resource to cause population growth to give way to population decline. (John Michael Greer, The Ecotechnic Future: Envisioning a Post-Peak World, 2009, 5)

While one of the many resources upon which human life is dependent is the biodiversity that allows for productive ecosystems, the Western way of life is far more likely to be put into decline by the depletion of cheap energy that we harness from the burning of fossil fuels. The world production of conventional petroleum has been declining since 2005, a decline that has been masked by an increase in the production of natural gas, tar sand extractives and biofuels. (Greer, 9) These alternatives, however, are not a viable replacement for petroleum as our natural gas reserves are subject to rapid depletion and liquid fuels from tar sands and biofuels require large energy inputs, primarily from petroleum, to yield usable energy.
Developments on the level that would allow renewable energy sources to replace our dependence on fossil fuels are unlikely to occur as their research requires significant energy inputs and all of our current “energy sources are fully committed to existing needs[,] any attempt to free up resources for some new project will conflict with the demands of existing economic sectors.” (Greer, 9-10) It seems, therefore, that industrialized societies are on a crash-course as they are depleting the resources on which they depend. Furthermore, “Even the less industrialized societies have become so dependent on the industrial system that their survival too is in doubt as fossil fuels run short.”(Greer, 9) For the first time ever, humanity as a whole is confronted with a predicament from which there is no escape and there are no winners.

We have the choice to willingly scale down our energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions so that this decline is more easily manageable or to continue with “business as usual” and experience a greater amount of loss in a manner that will be far more jarring to our everyday lives. The former option offers humans the opportunity to make meaningful connections with their fellow humans in the experience of community and with their environment through practices such as gardening, while experiencing population decline gradually.

The latter option, while permitting a more luxurious life in the immediate future, will likely find humanity experiencing this decline in a series of sudden, acute instances of great suffering and loss that will leave parts of the human population helpless and hopeless as they attempt to persist under conditions that are drastically different from the ones they have learned to cope with throughout their lives. Having experienced the loss of my Mother in a gradual process I could prepare for, and two grandparents rather suddenly, I can say from experience that it is much easier to find meaning in loss when you can do so through a grieving process rather than in the midst of a sudden shock, and it is precisely the meaning we find in life that makes one’s subjective experience worthwhile.

In order to take the prudent route of willingly reducing our consumption, we must relocalize by grounding the economy in resilient communities. When we become more able to provide for our needs from sources closer to home and begin to identify with a shared experience of life, our communities will be much more able to adapt to the problems they will face. It is my sincere intention to help, to the best of my ability, in the building of community-centric nets that will catch us as we pass over the edge of this cliff.

A Critique of Our Institutionalized Education System

While studying planetary crises and transition movements as a part of my university education, I have been introduced to a vast amount of information that has led me to form the perspective I have just laid out. Perhaps the most influential class I have taken in my college studies was on the concept and application of systems theory. From the very beginning of my formalized education, I have been taught to consider the world through the lens of cause and effect. Indeed, the principle of cause and effect lies at the very heart of science, which is a cornerstone of Western society. Scientific understanding is advanced through experiments in
which the effects of a particular action on a particular variable are observed and measured so as to support or refute a hypothesis about the cause of a certain phenomenon. Central to these experiments is the ability of the experimenters to control for outside variables. Trials are repeated numerous times and in different ways so as to isolate the variable of interest by showing that the experimenters’ action is the cause of the phenomenon rather than another, uncontrolled variable. For instance, when studying the effects of different types of music on the growth of plants, an experimenter would have to show that each plant tested was planted in the same soil and received the same amount of light and water each day as the other plants, so that the only difference in the growing conditions of each plant was the music that was played. By isolating the variable of music, the experimenters would show that playing different types of music causes variations in the growth levels of plants.

While this cause-and-effect approach to understanding our physical existence is functional for describing more rudimentary and even some very complex phenomena, it imprudently suggests that humans have the intelligence to fully understand the effects of various phenomena including our own actions. The fact that we cannot possibly conceive of all of the causes and effects of any action was made painfully clear to me during the class I took on systems theory. The essential tenet of systems theory is that every phenomenon is embedded in a system of innumerable interrelated elements and that a change in any single variable within that system will ripple throughout by way of the interconnections between variables, thereby changing the system as a whole. Studying the systems theory approach made evident to me that humans are incapable of conceptualizing living systems in their totality.

Furthermore, classroom education tends to be limited to introducing students to abstract concepts. Lecturers can relate ideas but cannot transmit understanding to students. Indeed, evidence of this truth can be seen in the fact that our universities require students to supplement lectures in the hard sciences with concurrent laboratory studies. A student can memorize science’s conception of how a cell functions in the abstract realm of the classroom, but it is not until they observe real cells in motion that they begin to see, much less understand, the complexity inherent within that system (which is undoubtedly far greater than is expressed in that student’s concept of how cells work). This disconnect between classroom lectures and experience is no shortcoming of our professors, but rather is due to the inherent limits of language on which we all rely for communication. For instance, an individual can be introduced to a concept by reading a book, listening to a lecture or engaging in conversation, but it is not until he is able to reinforce that concept with examples from his or her own experiences that he or she may begin to understand how that concept is embedded in reality. Because understanding is necessarily grounded in experience and every individual’s life experience is different, we cannot directly transmit meaning and understanding to each other. Rather, we are limited to dancing around meaning and understanding through the use of language, thus transmitting abstracted concepts which an individual can then begin to ground in his or her own experiences.

Herein lies a fundamental flaw of our institutionalized education systems: In the classroom students are taught concepts that are abstracted from the reality in which they are
grounded and, because humans do not have the intelligence or knowledge to conceptualize the innumerable interrelated variables that comprise the systems of that reality, we repeatedly fail when imposing changes that we conceptualize from those abstractions onto our experienced realities.

Cells do not operate as they do because they follow the patterns we have been taught in school, but rather the only reason we have knowledge of those patterns is because we have observed their behavior, which occurs regardless of human awareness. Indeed, many philosophers such as Marcel Mauss, have warned that “it is essential to move from the concrete to the abstract, and not the other way around.”

There are, however, many instances of humans imprudently disregarding this advice, imposing ‘solutions’ that were dreamt up in the abstract realm onto real, material living systems, and failing miserably. For instance, cattle were imported in mid-20th century Australia as a desired agricultural commodity, but it was not anticipated that the cattle defecation would not deteriorate on account of the native dung beetle preferring smaller, kangaroo dung. To remedy this problem, it was decided to import African dung beetles, which are accustomed to cattle dung. While this led to the deterioration of the now rampant cattle dung, the African dung beetles, who had no natural predators in Australia, proliferated and caused a further imbalance within this ecosystem. To remedy this, the Australians brought in cane toads, which are natural predators of the African dung beetle. As the beetles, however, tended to live at the roots of sugar cane and the cane toads at the top, the cane toads did not serve to contain the beetle population but instead, as they also had no natural predators, proliferated and still are seen as a problem in Australia today. It is easy to see how humans, particularly those who have excelled in the abstract realm of their formalized education, might egotistically think they can impose ‘solutions’ conceived within their abstract conception of a living system onto the physical reality of that system. Time and time again, however, we have seen how limited our intelligence is when these solutions failed and led to greater problems.

The planetary crises we currently face are of historically unprecedented magnitude and are embedded in systems comprised of an inconceivable number of variables and connections between those variables. I know that I am not alone in having experienced frustration, despair, headaches and the loss of my sense of grounded identity many times when trying to conceive of the state of the world, much less trying to come up with any sort of solution to these crises.

Yet, as I sit in classes that address planetary crises, I cannot shake the feeling that my generation is expected to solve the problems created by those that preceded us.

From Logic to Intuition

By relying on education in the abstract, this country is raising a generation of individuals who might conceptualize the state of the world, but will not genuinely understand the problems that we face. I for one do not trust that a generation armed only with abstract concepts will be able to improve the resilience of our nation so as to minimize our own suffering and that of future generations. Furthermore, our political system, which is the most
prominent outlet for changing the American way of life, is comprised of individuals who are a
product of our education system, a system which tends to instill in students an egotistic idea
that we can successfully impose abstracted ‘solutions’ onto physical systems.

I understand that there is little value in pointing out a problem without proposing a
solution, and I do not have any feasible suggestion for changing our educational and political
system from the top-down. I do, however, see a legitimate opportunity to change the minds
and behaviors of American citizens which could, in turn, affect larger changes by moving from
the bottom up. As I am myself an American citizen, I have come to realize that the best starting
place on this journey is to change my own approach to understanding. After graduation, I will
be accepting a much less luxurious way of life and will begin learning organic farming practices.

I am driven to know what it feels like to work directly with the land for sustenance.
Furthermore, the strongest communities in this nation seem to be centered on the localized
food movement and I yearn to know what community actually feels like. I want to know what it
means to depend on my neighbor and the solidarity that comes through that experience. For I
know that it is only after experiencing this way of life that I will be able to understand how to go
about manifesting the changes I want to see in the world.

As the logic-centered approach to problem-solving embodied by our institutionalized
educational system falls short of giving individuals the tools to successfully create resilient,
sustainable communities that live harmoniously as a part of their environment, we must shift to
a more experience-based approach that will instill a deeper understanding and appreciation of
life in coming generations.

Rather than relying on a logical system which teaches in the abstract realm and assumes
that humans have the intelligence to comprehend living systems on the level that would allow
us to successfully impose abstracted ideas onto those physical systems, I propose we begin to
approach education in a way that focuses primarily on providing individuals with real life
experiences which will allow them to feel rather than to conceive that their actions are aligned
with the work we must do. In short, I am proposing that we emphasize experience and intuition
rather than logic.

On account of the capacity to singularly master it, an identification with logic very
frequently leads individuals to understand themselves as self-contained, separate individuals.
This identification feeds the ego, which is an attachment to a concept of self that revolves
around the idea of “look at what I can do.” The ego thrives off of individualism and does not ask
for help. In a capitalistic society in which short term gain is valued highly and one can frequently
gain the most at the expense of the common good, a mastery of logic and a strong ego can be a
perfect combination for individual monetary success. Individual success is, however, not
enough. We got into this predicament together and we must work collectively if we are to have
any hope of improving our future trajectory. We must look out for our neighbors and likewise
be comfortable asking our neighbors for help if we are to build resilient communities that work
for the betterment of all.
Whereas logic is an abstract invention that can be mastered, intuition is intrinsic to human nature and is necessarily grounded in our physical experience of life. It is felt rather than conceived. Furthermore, intuition is a guiding force that acts on us as pieces of a larger, universal process rather than as egotistic, individualized selves. Throughout the history of the universe, as far as we can tell, there has been one overarching theme: a “tendency toward complexity.” Immediately following the Big Bang, there were only tiny bits of matter, which then came together to make particles, and then atoms from which molecules were formed, which came together to make stars. As the first stars lived out their life cycles and exploded, new atoms came together to make more stars and planets. Indeed, everything on this planet, including ourselves, is made of stardust and this same tendency toward complexity has been the pattern of life on Earth. The first life forms were single-celled organisms, which gave way to multi-celled organisms and then to worms, which led to fish and then plants on land, eventually ending up with mammals and then humans.

A similar progression has dictated human history, which has seen our species move from hunter-gatherers, through the agricultural and industrial revolutions, all the way to the complex civilizations of today. However what separates humans from other beings, consciousness, is essentially the ability to choose how we act, and furthermore to choose to work in harmony with or against this universal tendency toward complexity. (Gregory David Roberts, Shantaram, 2004, 479) There is a universal intelligence far greater than human intelligence that guides all processes of the universe toward this greater complexity.

Do you think that you have such a high level of intelligence that you could guide the growth of a tree’s limbs so as to maximize the solar radiation that tree receives, or, to bring it closer to home, dictate the functions within and between the trillions of cells in your body? The expression of this universal intelligence within us is what we call intuition. Despite the frequency with which we have historically chosen to function outside of this universal intelligence through acts of warfare and exploitation, the time has come where working only out of narrow self-interest is in direct competition with the universal tendency toward complexity. We must begin listening to our intuition and cooperatively stop ruining the diversity of Life on which we depend or we might just destroy 200,000 years or more of progress in the universe.

It might help to think of intuition as a voice or feeling that guides you in the direction that is ultimately best for you as a member of the web of Life. However, the problem for most of us is that we don’t hear just one voice and know it as intuition. Rather, when considering how to act in any given situation we might find that human identity is a multiplicity. Even if we identify primarily as members of the web of Life, there is still a part of us that knows and identifies with logic and the ego. Therefore the question we must ask ourselves when trying to follow our intuition is not if we can hear it, but rather which voice is that of intuition in the midst of other voices representing a logical conclusion or our egotistic wants and drives. This can be a tough question to answer, but a trick to making it easier rests in where we ground our identity.
To explain this trick to being able to more readily hear and feel intuition, I will first share part of my own life. I have been learning and practicing Qigong, an ancient Chinese form of moving meditation, for just over a year and consider this practice to be the most important use of time in my life. Indeed, one of the primary reasons for the level of importance I have attached to this practice is that I feel it has helped me strengthen my ability to discern intuition so that I may follow it. When I was first learning Qigong, I remember relating to my teacher that “it is amazing just how much I get from this practice and yet how little I get about it.” Qigong is rooted in the epistemology of traditional Chinese medicine, which was completely foreign to my mind which had been trained primarily in the Western, logical tradition. Yet, without the slightest understanding of how it worked, I was experiencing an incredible feeling of centeredness during and after practicing. I was thinking less and appreciating more. By engaging in a practice which worked entirely outside of the bounds of logic, yet still provided me with very real results, I began to disidentify with my logical mind. I gave up the drive to explain what it was that I was doing, but rather joyfully submitted to my movements in the moment and I began feeling intuition more strongly. I started to feel and follow how my body and soul wanted to move rather than acting purely as a result of logical processing.

While it may seem imprudent to follow this feeling of intuition at the occasional expense of logic, I have had uplifting and fulfilling results from doing so. For instance, I spent last summer driving around the United States by myself. I drove nearly 11,000 miles alone, camping along the way and never staying in a hotel. You would sympathize with my father if you worry that a trip like this might have put me in harm’s way, yet rather than finding danger on this journey I was consistently met with serendipity. I practiced Qigong every day during this trip and feel very strongly that this practice helped me hear and follow my intuition, which allowed me to have the most fulfilling experience I’ve had to date. There were many days on this trip in which I woke up not knowing where I would camp that night, but by trusting in my sense of intuition, I never ran astray. One day I found myself camping alone by the East Rim of the Grand Canyon in an area that was not a formal campground. There was no one patrolling the area and, to my liking, no one to pay to camp there. After setting up camp, I drove back to a bathroom I had seen on my way in and passed a man and woman on the side of the road setting up camp about a mile away from me. Ordinarily as a lone camper, I would not have felt safe putting myself out there to two complete strangers, but I felt a strong intuitive pull to offer this couple to come and join me camping. After approaching them and explaining that I had found a campsite with a much better view and that I would love to have them join me, they followed me to my campsite and set up there. I was previously completely unaware that there was to be a solar eclipse that day and that I was about an hour’s drive north of the best place in the world to view this eclipse. Luckily, these new friends of mine knew exactly what time the eclipse started, had already scouted out the best place in the area from which to view it, and had with them a pair of glasses that allow you to stare directly into the sun. I was blown away by the experience of viewing the solar eclipse and ended up staying up late into the night sitting by a great fire sharing food and deep conversation with this wonderful couple. Had I given favor to the logical voice telling me it was not safe to approach strangers as a lone camper, I would have missed what I still consider to be one of the most amazing days of my Life.
I am not trying to suggest that everybody should begin fervently practicing Qigong and then traveling alone, but rather I feel that within these stories lies a trick and an assumption that might help individuals understand and embrace this intuitive approach. I believe the strengthened sense of intuition I have gained from my Qigong practice lies precisely in my disidentifying with the logical mind. By engaging in a practice which I could not explain or even comprehend and, more importantly, embracing how a practice that provided me with such real results works was beyond my comprehension, I was able to disidentify with logic and thus quiet the voices of logical processing in my decision making. Furthermore, as the ego is expressed through thoughts about a narrow sense of self and how to improve that self and Qigong helps me to think less generally, I find that it also helps me to quiet the voices that represent my egoistic wants and drives. I would like to point out that while these logical and egotistic voices have been quieted through my Qigong practice, they by no means have gone away entirely. Logic is still a tool I have at my disposal and the ego is certainly still an influence in my Life.

While the benefits I have found from practicing Qigong may not be readily applicable to your life, a genuine consideration of the predicament currently facing humanity offers a strikingly parallel entry point for adopting this intuitive approach. The convergence of the many planetary crises that we are currently facing is a problem far greater than any human can comprehend. Rather than approaching the state of our world from a place of supposing we can fully understand our situation, as occurs within our formalized educational system, I suggest that we openly admit this predicament is embedded in a system which is far greater than we can fathom. I am not suggesting we turn a blind eye to this predicament, but rather simply do away with the notion that we can conceive of a detailed solution to these problems. In recognizing and even celebrating these limits of our intelligence, I think we will find it a little bit easier to hear and follow intuition when deciding our actions moving forward. Furthermore, it is obvious we must act collectively and cooperatively if we are to build the sort of communities that will be resilient to the many troubles we are to face. In strengthening our communities, we will begin to identify more strongly as members of those communities rather than as separated individuals. I believe that in this re-seating of identity on the community rather than individual level, humans will find their identification with the ego will diminish which will further allow intuition to surface more clearly.

Just as the assumption that human intelligence is adequate for conceptualizing living systems fully enough to successfully impose abstractions onto material life underlies the logical approach embodied by our educational system, there is a large assumption that underlies the intuitive approach I am proposing. This assumption revolves around trust. In order to align your actions with the pulls of intuition, you must trust that your feeling of intuition is guiding you in a direction that will meet your best interests as a member of the web of life. You must trust that if you act in accordance with this universal intelligence that your needs will be taken care of. Because you are no longer identifying as an autonomous individual but rather as a piece of a larger, universal process, you must also accept that what you want may not be the same as what you need, but trust that what you really need will be provided for. This level of trust will require a leap of faith for all individuals and will certainly move most people outside of their
comfort zones, but I believe it will ultimately help humans live harmoniously with their environments and foster a much healthier Earth system.

If you find yourself resisting this proposed embracing of intuition I urge you to ask yourself whether this resistance stems from a genuine belief that it is wrong to hold trust without the assurance of knowledge, or if you simply find it too daunting to be comfortable in the midst of such uncertainty. If you feel the latter to be the case, take comfort in knowing that this transformation toward intuition will not happen overnight, but rather will be the result of your taking manageable steps in your own time, the first of which is as simple as admitting to yourself that you do not comprehend this world in its totality and you must act on what is uncertain.