

Chapter 5

THE NEW METANARRATIVE: AGENCY

There can be no soft landing for any transition to an ecologically secure and fertile future. Implicit in this assertion is a tension between reality and aspiration which can be expressed in terms of competing scenarios for the future, specifically, the business-as-usual (BAU) scenario versus a new globally sustainable development trajectory. The former foreshadows climate chaos, widespread social-ecological turbulence, and an existential shock to modern civilization. The latter anticipates a revolutionary shift in shared perceptions, attitudes and values which will at least attenuate, and at best resolve the accumulated effects of human profligacy over the last three centuries. Which one prevails will depend upon the respective power of the competing positions. Either way, hard times lie ahead.

I've distanced myself in this book from any engagement with the brick-by-brick, bottom-up approach to sustainability because it inevitably hits the hard ceiling of a dysfunctional metanarrative which co-opts to its own purposes or otherwise renders ineffectual any material changes forthcoming. Progress, prosperity and economic growth are deeply entrenched, popular and attractive ideas against which incremental adjustments have made a barely discernable impact. The reason for this is crystal clear, if embarrassingly simplistic. The incumbent metanarrative promises more of everything for everybody, imposing a redistributive burden on no one. For so long as the world economy grows without constraint or restriction, there is no need to share anything – with the poor who will soon be rich, with future generations who will benefit from the abundance of a technological legacy, or with other species who will surely enjoy the commodious attitude engendered by wealth. Today's story of human life on Earth is the story of freedom from responsibility. It's a juvenile, amoral agenda which appeals to the callow mind of an immature society.

The metaphysical, top-down strategy, in the guise of a newly evolving metanarrative, has not fared any better, so far making no impression at all on our collective psyche. A substantial constituency of people around the world is now in the process of trying to create a new metanarrative by drawing on extant documents such as the Earth Charter as well as a plethora of cultural narratives which speak to various aspects of sustainability. By extracting expressions of value from each of these, a universal set of core ideas, sometimes called memes, might be put

together which would resonate strongly enough with people everywhere to overwhelm the opposing set of ideas which now constitute the structural elements of the incumbent metanarrative. A multitude of such memes has been identified, including virtues such as holism, interdependence, stewardship, well-being, equity, sufficiency, respect, ecocentrism, inclusiveness, dignity, and humility. The hopeful expectation is that the widespread dissemination of these memes in the form of a coherent narrative will generate the transformative change required to achieve the necessary trajectory correction. But many of these words are obscure, almost sanctimonious and without immediate relevance; they don't resonate in the public mind as clearly or as personally as does the siren song of Progress and Prosperity, and they're certainly not heard in the halls of power, even with environmentally literate, progressive governments such as those which typically represent the Canadian polity. I warned in chapter 3 that it is futile to project a bucolic fantasy into a future which will inevitably be more unstable, less accommodating, and more dangerous than is optimistically envisioned. Any new metanarrative, to be relevant now and to the future unfolding before us, will be tougher, cognizant of the wrongfulness that brought us here and more vividly expressive of the moral maturity without which our potential will remain unfulfilled.

It may be that a pronouncement reflecting the viewpoint above (to paraphrase, 'Brace for impact'), insinuated into the public domain with whatever gravitas can be mustered might garner some needed attention. A life-and-death polemic might cut through the bustle of everyday life, giving reflexive pause to people everywhere, laying the groundwork for a new story about the human experience on Earth. But, evidently, this won't work. Urgent warnings and graphic scenarios highlighted by respected professionals from multiple disciplines have had no lasting effect. Warnings and fear don't penetrate the public consciousness. As well, deniers, profiteers and self-serving political actors work actively to portray such scenarios as alarmist and irresponsible, therefore lacking credibility. And, of course, brutal honesty can cause negative responses such as despair, panic or violence, rather than constructive, cooperative action.

And here's an anecdotal counter-punch to honesty: I heard of a woman once who was an ardent environmentalist. After years in the trenches she lost all faith in the future and one day blurted out her existential angst to her daughter who, to her mother's surprise, was not sympathetic. "How can you do this to me?" she said. "You have no right to take away my future. You have no

right to take away my hope!” This is a wrenching and very personal point, not to mention a strong argument. So, one has to navigate between perceived reality and the right of others to see the world in a different, more hopeful light.

It’s common knowledge, after all, that optimism is enabling. It may misrepresent the real world if overblown, but it’s hard to argue with the observation that pessimism can be self-defeating while optimism keeps enthusiasm alive in the face of setbacks. And, it’s free – free in the sense that it does not arise from, nor is it dependent upon, any empirical referent. No matter what the brute facts of the world may be, we retain the capacity to maintain a positive attitude.

Having said this, it’s sobering to see that for many, hope is not far removed from cynicism.

According to at least one survey¹ more than seventy-five percent of sustainability experts around the world agree that planetary sustainability can only be achieved with a stick, not a carrot. They believe that concerted political action to avert ecological catastrophe will not occur until a truly awful, unmistakable event takes place – a massive, drought-driven famine of historic proportion, say, or a shockingly violent tornado swarm, or perhaps an abrupt change in oceanic currents.

Only then will we be spurred to action in a last desperate drive for survival. This is a morbid kind of hope to be sure, but it does seem typical of human behaviour. The point is that facile thinking can’t be squared with ever-mounting planetary stresses and the constant breaching of worst-case scenarios. A more honest approach is to take ownership of the consequences of irresponsible behaviour, to confront the damaged relationship between people and planet as a real-life spectre instead of dismissing dire scenarios as incompatible with a positive attitude, as counter-productive to progress.

I have conflated optimism and hope in the foregoing, but it’s commonly recognized that they’re not the same thing. Optimism is simply a confident attitude that a desirable outcome will be achieved regardless of any empirical referent. Hope also looks forward to achieving something desirable, but it’s tempered by an assessment of the measure of possibility. We can rationally believe that the chances of success are low, we can be pessimistic, expecting the worst outcome,

¹ SustainAbility/Globescan, *The Regeneration Roadmap: Global Expert Perspectives on the State of Sustainable Development*, June 2012., p.20. Available at <http://www.globescan.com/component/edocman/?view=document&id=8&Itemid=591>

but persist nonetheless because the outcome we seek is valuable, and because it's possible. Unlike optimism, hope is vulnerable to disappointment and failure, but its exercise helps us to ascertain what is valuable, and what price is worth paying.

Vaclav Havel agrees, but puts a somewhat different spin on the meaning of hope. He suggests that "Hope is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."² This point of view does not turn on the possibility of success, but only on an achieved understanding of what has happened so, at a minimum, we are not confounded by life or confused by the outcome of our actions; and this opens a new way of looking at our planetary predicament. If we can 'make sense' of what we're doing to ourselves and to the planet, if we can find comprehensible reasons for having taken the path we're on now, then a new conceptual frame may come into view which can drive a more incisive and effective kind of agency for change. For example, a hopeful posture in the Havelian sense may help shift the analytical terrain from how questions (How can we solve the problem of planetary sustainability?) to why questions (Why do we face an existential predicament?), adding a different kind of impetus to the quest for transformative change. Far from being an exercise in epistemological futility, this shift could encourage an exploration of deeper currents and more profound truths which may lead to new understandings, even to new modalities of global governance and to the breakthrough we clearly need on the road to planetary sustainability. The search for meaning is an underdeveloped aspect of the modern human experience. A new effort to make sense of a dire situation may very well hold useful surprises for us, revelations or even an epiphany, a shared awakening to the meaning of the life-and-death struggle in which we are now engaged.

On the Search for Meaning

I The Ontological Status of Metanarrative

Because they're immaterial, stories (like ideas in general) can only exist in the noumenal domain.³ Whether that domain is a mental construction with no meaningful extension beyond

² Vaclav Havel, *The Politics of Hope*, 1986. Available at https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/V%C3%A1clav_Havel

³ 'Noumenal' refers to entities not perceptible by human senses. It stands in contrast to the phenomenal world of sense perception.

the individual, or whether it can be shared among multiple people, or whether it is joined with a more perfect (Platonic) realm with which it interacts – these are questions without definitive answers. I have suggested in the previous chapter that the last of these possibilities is the most useful in terms of understanding the status and meaning of metanarrative and, more importantly, how it might evolve into something better suited to the objective of achieving planetary sustainability and a fruitful future for human society on Earth.

Perhaps the earliest expression of the interactive unity of the individual with all else occurred with the ancient Hindu Upanishads. Swami Prabhavananda tells us, for example, that “The little space within the heart is as great as the vast universe. The heavens and the earth are there, and the sun and the moon and the stars. Fire and lightning and winds are there, and all that now is and all that is not.”⁴ References to various forms of ‘higher consciousness’ which link the individual to the cosmos are by now pervasive in modern religions, though without any agreed upon understanding of their ontological status. Kantians, idealists and some transcendentalists tend to be of the view that ideas, whether individual or shared, are somehow lifted out of the material world and therefore not susceptible to scientific inquiry. Sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, on the other hand, take the contrary view that ideas are no less natural than material reality; that they exist as ‘social facts’ such as liturgical practices, legal codes, money, property, marriage and so forth, the real presence of which can be inferred from objective indicators of their social expression; and this grounding allowed him to remain within a conventional positivist framework. For Durkheim, then, a social consciousness was not a reified entity with an independent and unknowable existence, but merely a set of ideas common to many individuals. Philosopher John Searle agrees, arguing that collective intentionality does not require “the idea that there exists some Hegelian world spirit, a collective consciousness, or something equally implausible ... because intentionality remains in individual heads, existing in the form ‘we intend’ and ‘I intend only as part of our intending.’”⁵

Any number of alternate interpretations of the status of a shared consciousness, and therefore of a dominant metanarrative, might be found. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s bipartite expression of a

⁴ *The Upanishads: Breath from the Eternal*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, New York: Signet Classic Books, 2002.

⁵ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press, 1995, pp.25-26.

‘will of all’ versus a ‘general will’ offers a useful way to summarize these competing viewpoints.

It’s a common fact of life in modern times that we are much more comfortable with the notion of individual sets of experiences and preferences which may be aggregated into sum totals, but which do not together constitute an independent entity with unique characteristics. Rousseau called this sum total the ‘will of all.’ Interestingly, it is precisely this will of all, this aggregation of personal experiences and preferences, now called utility functions, which provide the rationale and raw data for our consumer-oriented economies. The opposing point of view, however, stipulates that the characteristics of a human group cannot be derived simply by aggregating the attributes of individual members. The ‘personality’ of a group is generated by the pattern of organization and dynamic interdependencies among members of the group. That personality is an emergent phenomenon with an independent ontological status and unique causal powers. In support of the notion of a shared consciousness and in contrast to the will of all Rousseau posited the existence of a ‘general will’, a unified expression of social concern about the common good, a collective impulse to achieve the best interests of society as a whole. Rousseau’s famous social contract was intended to create the political space in which this impulse might flourish.⁶

The metanarrative of Progress and Prosperity might be described as an expression of this general will – but its ostensible purpose to realize ‘the best interests of society’ has missed the mark because its widespread influence rests largely on a radically oversimplified mantra (more of everything for everyone) as previously discussed. A more mature, sophisticated story could not build upon such a crude aphorism, but instead would have to fairly and persuasively express (among other things) the contingencies of cultural diversity, economic inequality and all sorts of other important differences between peoples and civilizations. But we’re a long way from that. Instead of an informed and progressive general will we are more likely to see in the global polity a continuation of simplistic expectations and crass, self-serving behaviour along with indiscriminate waves of fear and panic, anger and excitement, guilt and sympathy spreading fast across large sectors of society, sweeping up individual sentiments in the

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Roger D. Masters (ed.) and Judith R. Masters (trans.), New York: St. Martin’s [1762], 1978.

psychological volatility of the undisciplined ‘mind’ of large groups of people. We are more likely to agree with Carl Jung who said, “The masses always incline to herd behaviour, hence they are easily stampeded; and to mob hysteria, hence their witless brutality and emotionalism.”⁷ And, in a similar vein, William Ophuls in his most recent book has said that “The greatest weapon of mass destruction on the planet is the collective human ego.”⁸ These harsh observations seem closer to reality than the putative benevolence of an unformed general will.

Nonetheless, emergent properties carry the indispensable features of innovation, adaptability and evolution and therein lies the possibility of positive and productive change. This hasn’t happened yet, but complex adaptive systems and their peculiar ability to spawn such properties do sensitize us to the possibility that the human population may in fact be capable of generating such a phenomenon as a shared consciousness, however crude or unformed such a thing might be now. The impression offered here is that this is indeed the case: a nascent collective consciousness does exist and, like Rousseau’s general will, it could under the right circumstances take the form of a common intention to ensure the vitality and stability of the social-ecological complex. If this were to occur, our future would be greatly benefited.

To elaborate briefly on this, emergent properties are extra, unanticipated features which emanate from the synergistic interactions of a complex system’s component parts. The familiar expression ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ loosely captures this phenomenon. The ability to perceive and engage with intangibles such as ideas, values, beliefs and worldviews is an emergent property of the individual human body and brain, and the supposition at play here is that a similar property can be ascribed to the human population as a whole.

Emergent properties become manifest as one moves (synchronically) up the ladder of complexity from atoms to the cosmos,⁹ or as one moves (diachronically) through time with respect to, for example, biological evolutionary history. Novelty and wholeness are clearly

⁷ Carl G. Jung, *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, Gerhard Adler and R. F. C Hull (trans.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.6.

⁸ William Ophuls, *Plato’s Revenge: Politics in the Age of Ecology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011, p.72.

⁹ Arguably, the universe as a whole is a complex adaptive system.

visible features of unique phenomena which occur at each new level of organization, at each step in the progression from physics to chemistry to biology to psychology to sociology and beyond. Such features are not reducible to components, or to previous levels or stages. Moreover, all are affected by and have the capacity to affect the behaviour of adjacent structures. The larger picture, then, presents a series of nested systems, each unique unto itself, each involved in a dynamic whole/part relationship with its neighbours according to which that duality is mutually constituted, and according to which the behaviour of parts is influenced by supervening emergent structures.

So-called ‘downward causation’ doesn’t compel activity by adding new forces of nature to the four already known; rather emergent structures such as a putative collective consciousness (and the metanarrative it instantiates) make constituent parts behave in ways they otherwise would not by guiding and encouraging, by imposing determinative influences within the bounds of physical law. Contextual effects, constraints and novel patterns of organization are the result. Just as the environment affects biological development, society affects the personality and preferences of individual people, and propensities of the conscious mind affect physical health and intentionality, so a shared worldview affects the evolutionary development of human society on Earth.

There is an important linkage between this descriptive ontology and the key issue of agency. According to this brief review, the individual person is implicated with the cosmos through a series of complex structures and emergent features, all dynamically linked in an evolving whole. More broadly still, this continuum stretches not only from person to cosmos, but from the very primordial stuff of existence to, from a Platonic point of view, “a sentient universe charged with moral meaning,”¹⁰ that is, to the foundations of moral order implicit in the natural world. And herein lies the key to agency with respect to the evolution of a new metanarrative. Notwithstanding the level of abstraction inherent to the idea of a metanarrative, and despite the fact that my focus in this book has been on human society writ large, there can be no doubt at day’s end that true agency begins with, and emanates from, the individual person. That person, however, can reasonably be construed as being at one, so to speak, with an implicate Universe,

¹⁰ Ophuls, *Plato’s Revenge*, p.21.

and it is this relationship which joins individual consciousness with the shared ideational domain, and with the supra-human virtues which also inhabit that space.

II *Agency and The Evolution of Metanarrative*

In his well-regarded book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* American political theorist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr¹¹ explains that individual people are reasonable and morally sensible, but that reason and morality diminish from individual to group, and diminish even further as group size grows larger.¹² Values important to individuals lose their salience in the context of group behaviour, so larger groups are less responsive to reflexive evaluation of what they're doing. This means that reasoned, morally sound supervision of our collective behaviour is weakest when the group is biggest, and the biggest group of course is the human population as a whole. The result of this is that human society on Earth is easily tantalized by simplistic ideas and momentary impulses, easily stampeded into unreflective, emotion-driven behaviour which lacks subtlety, sophistication and direction.

But change is possible. Unlike machines, complex adaptive systems and their associated emergent properties evolve over time. Thus it may be true that, like the individual human mind, humanity's collective consciousness can evolve through developmental stages, from a rudimentary awareness of the world around, through a kind of adolescent excitement and vulnerability, and finally to a more mature and stable form characterized by empathic care and a sense of adult responsibility. This latter stage of consciousness – the stage at which something like Rousseau's general will, or a new metanarrative, might emerge – would be well suited to serve the public interest by constraining or enabling the macro-behaviour of human society as circumstances require. It seems clear enough, however, that we are currently at the middle stage of development: excited, vulnerable and easily diverted from serious consideration of the long-term health and vitality of human society on Earth.

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, [1932], 1960.

¹² This suggestion by Niebuhr is contradicted by myriad examples of communities which, by way of social mores and pressures, corral and guide the otherwise disruptive behaviour of recalcitrant individuals. While such communities exemplify a desirable form of governance which might possibly be scaled up, Niebuhr is referring to societies in which the appropriate cultural infrastructure is absent, and to societies which have grown so large that interpersonal communication, empathy and cohesion are beyond human capabilities.

This has clear implications for the instigation of change. If humanity's collective consciousness is now at an intermediate phase of development and maturation; if, as such, that consciousness is susceptible to Panglossian ideas; and if, consequently, human society has embraced the ecologically unsustainable notion of unbounded progress and prosperity; then a way must be found to move the process of social evolution forward, to countermand this juvenile agenda and to put in place a more responsible plan. This means subsuming the incumbent metanarrative within one which serves the better aspirations of people, and encourages the pursuit of those aspirations with a certain sense of ecological modesty.

One may speculate that this process of maturation is natural, organic – it occurs as the result of accumulated experience and the gradually improving ability to assess the value of that experience. Such a pleasant journey, however, seems out of the question. Humanity is rushing headlong into tremendous social-ecological turbulence which may or may not be survivable. This is not an avoidable fiction. Biophysical indicators are all pointing in the wrong direction, powerful forces are arrayed against change, ethics are a devalued commodity. And, the creation of a new metanarrative usually requires a decades-long process of social learning.

William Rees is not sanguine about the chances of success:

Do we have decades and the resources to pull this off, particularly since the traditional means for social learning are retreating from ... the legitimization of 'fake news' [and] the self-serving echo-chambers of social media? ... [A] new global metanarrative is, in fact, taking hold but one rooted in tribalism, individualism, competition, social discord, science denial and populist discontent ... I cannot imagine a real-world process whereby the great fractious heterogeneous mass called 'we' can create a new world order of progress and prosperity shaped by a stable, ethically informed socio-ecological metanarrative. Stability is no more; ethics are for sissies; there is no socio-ecological compromise.¹³

A first response to this bleak assessment would hearken back to the point made in chapter 1 that metanarrative evolution is not necessarily reliant on the coercive tools usually available to powerful political and corporate interests, such as money, material resources and media

¹³ William Rees, personal communication.

ownership. People also respond to the creative humanities in the form of stories, metaphors and allegories which facilitate a morally sensitized emotional engagement. Ideas, in other words, especially those disseminated by omnipresent social media platforms, can inspire rapid, even revolutionary change, sometimes virtually overnight. One is reminded here of the Arab Spring, the Occupy and MeToo rebellions and, more recently, the Black Lives Matter movement. These are all suggestive of real possibilities for transformative change.

Second, in a world dominated by self-interest and materialism, and by the political exercise of the crude philosophy that ‘might is right,’ still there remains in human society, and in the hearts and minds of individual people, a lingering notion that ethics do matter; that morality does matter and that the aspiration to a morally-grounded society is a worthy objective. The challenge of course is to operationalize this aspiration and thereby to impel and re-direct the co-evolutionary process which binds us to the Universe.

And third, we need not wait – indeed we dare not wait – for ‘social forces’ to come together in an ecologically auspicious moment. As noted above, change must inevitably begin with the individual. Personal agency is a radically underestimated resource. The potential to enact transformational change is neatly captured by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human Condition*. That agency begins from her observation – profound in its simplicity – that the birth of every child represents a new beginning by bringing novelty into the world. She calls this ‘natality.’

It is the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man (sic) is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is *infinitely improbable*. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.¹⁴

Arendt, of course, is not insensitive to the context in which each person acts, a context she refers to as ‘plurality.’ This term expresses both equality, inasmuch as we are all of the same species inhabiting one planet, and distinction (novelty) because “nobody is ever the same as

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp.177-178. Italics added.

anyone else who ever lived, or will live.”¹⁵ No two people are interchangeable, no two have the same relationship with the living world. Uniqueness and sameness (the individual and the whole) exist simultaneously and in fact agency requires their union because

[bringing the unexpected into the world] ...is not something that can be done in isolation from others, that is, independently of the presence of a plurality of actors who from their different perspectives can judge the quality of what is being enacted. In this respect action needs plurality in the same way that performance artists need an audience; without the presence and acknowledgement of others, action would cease to be a meaningful activity. Action ... can only exist in a context defined by plurality.¹⁶

Writing in a similar vein, philosopher Arran Gare captures the dynamic element of the relationship between embodied subjects and contextual parameters in his quest for a new cosmology. Individual action, he writes, should “neither atomize the world nor dissolve each part into the totality ... [people should] experience themselves as processes of becoming, actively participating in the becoming of the world ... by identifying and comprehending the dynamics of and interrelationships between a multiplicity of semi-autonomous processes.”¹⁷

The successful operationalization of these comments and observations – which is to say, the realization of our own quest for a new cosmology – will surely begin from, and draw upon these notions of natality, plurality and participation in interwoven processes of becoming from which, together, creativity will emerge. An early burst of human creativity, well-intentioned but morally unsound, has already spawned the Anthropocene epoch and the serious challenges it portends, so the new story we tell will unavoidably feature self-inflicted danger. But it will also offer the opportunity to re-imagine the exceptionalism that ennobles the human animal, and to rejoin our unique endowments to the planet that gave us life. The Chinese trope about the coincidence of danger and opportunity may be appropriate here, so long as opportunity is defined with regard to the moral transfiguration of the iniquity which brought us to this dangerous juncture, and not in terms of returning to the mythical cornucopia of Eden. Our first challenge as adults will be to face the consequences of past behaviour with courage and grace.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.7-8.

¹⁶ d'Entreves, Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves, "Hannah Arendt", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition) Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/arendt/>, p.17.

¹⁷ Arran E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp.155-157.

Only having done so will we be able to fully engage the possibility of exploring at our leisure the true and unlimited potential of all that we are, and all that we can be.

III *Do Not Go Gentle*

Among the elderly, conversation often drifts to matters of health. Ailments are described, treatments discussed, prognoses hopefully compared. These conversations happen because the various medical experiences of the old and infirm tend to be top of mind, and because the cumulative effect of them suggests the inevitability of a casket, which puts a sharper edge on things. It's not a question of losing faith, or hope, or one's verve for life; dealing with health issues is simply a matter of prudential care, and to some extent a matter of academic interest in the process of waning physical vitality.

For some, these conversations serve no useful purpose other than as something to push off from the better to squeeze the very most out of the remainder of life. Dylan Thomas captures this sentiment in his well-known poem:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.¹⁸

This is sage advice, and a nice remedy for the kind of morbidity which some poor souls may fall prey to. It doesn't recommend a happy forbearance and it certainly doesn't advocate a comfortable slide into dotage; it calls for a rebellion against closure, a refusal to go quietly, a demand to be allowed to continue to live. It's a call to arms against a process already deemed decided.

It's tempting to apply the energy and enthusiasm aroused by Thomas's poem to the problem of planetary environmental degradation, with regard to which a positive, damn-the-torpedoes frame of mind is also called for. And in fact this attitude is common among activists, and many others who take environmental issues seriously, simply expressed as "We know we're in trouble but it's not too late, solutions are available, so let's roll up our sleeves and get to work!" This is the popular slogan of the practical school of change. Motivated people display a steely optimism, a

¹⁸ The full poem, a 19-line villanelle, is available at <http://poets.org/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night/>

determined conviction that with hard work things will turn out well. But this indomitable approach to change isn't actually compatible with Dylan Thomas's poem, which illuminates the harder question of how to respond to the inevitability of death. Things don't necessarily turn out well. His point is to face what's unavoidable with fierce energy, with all remaining strength, to challenge it and in that way to exact a kind of triumph over something beyond our control, knowing all the while that "Wise men at their end know dark is right," as Thomas writes in his second verse.

But of course, these admirable phrases apply to an aging person, not a degrading biosphere, which is not the same thing. For the latter, is it really the close of day? Is the light really dying? Earth isn't trending to death, even though the extinction of many thousands of species at the careless hands of *H. sapiens* is certainly death to those whose termination has been effected. Barring the worst case in which Earth becomes permanently and completely uninhabitable the biosphere will not die; it will rebound and teem once again with life, albeit after a recovery period of many millions of years. In what sense, then, might this poetic verse be relevant to planetary degradation?

The relevance begins from the observation that the human/nature complex – often referred to as the social-ecological complex – is indivisible (from an anthropocentric point of view). We are irrevocably embedded in our natural surroundings, so if the environment degrades, we will too. This is simply a matter of fact, but it takes on an interesting moral cast with the additional fact that our species is responsible for that degradation which inflicts harm not only on Earth's ecosystem as such, but on our own well-being and survival chances. I've used the phrases environmental crisis and existential peril in this book and, as a matter of public policy, the expression 'environmental emergency' is gaining a foothold in political discourse as well. In that foreboding context, 'the dying of the light' might refer to the precipitous weakening of the vitality of Earth's ecosystem and, simultaneously, to the reduced possibilities available for us to explore and realize our full potential.

Nor, however, can an aging person be precisely compared with society in general – to the human population at large – because the former will surely die even as the latter lives on, perhaps even in spite of itself. Human society on Earth may never die. And herein lies the still-open possibility that, unlike the individual but like the biosphere, society might actually rebound from decay –

might learn lessons from errors of judgement and behaviour, might even achieve a higher level of social consciousness replete with benefits, both material and psychic, never available to the now departed individual person. Humanity might grow up, and this surely is something worth fighting for, losses notwithstanding. Thomas's poem, then, calls us to rave and rage not against the death of Earth's biosphere, or the death of human society on Earth, but against the inevitable loss of our naïveté, our youthfulness, and the carefree immaturity which has brought us to the edge of environmental tragedy.

IV *The End and the Beginning*

This book does not address the myriad practical concerns shared by many with respect to securing the long-run relationship between people and planet. Instead, it's intended as prologue to a formative, catalytic discourse about the implicate universe we inhabit, about our place on Earth, and about the clear and present existential dangers that threaten our tenure here. We have delayed too long, missed too many opportunities for change, and failed to come to terms with the prospect of grievous harm inflicted by ourselves on ourselves, and on the planet which gave us life. Notwithstanding the hard work and commitment of countless people around the world, the business-as-usual trajectory still dominates the global agenda, still informs the system of global governance which steers us recklessly and rapidly in the wrong direction.

The physical and biological sciences provide information and new tools for practical action, but the social sciences and humanities must also be more effectively engaged if we hope to change the underlying suite of attitudes, values and worldviews which shape and give meaning to the modern human experience. Notwithstanding the better future promised by the story of Progress and Prosperity, today our shared mindset is uneasy. Our relationship with Earth is precarious. We have no clear sense of why we're here or where we might be going, and undercurrents of fear and fatalism are beginning to corrode the positive, hopeful sentiments inherent to human nature. Who will lead the way?

Much is expected from the individual person, according to insights offered by Hannah Arendt, and justly so inasmuch as individual people are the primary loci of agency; and this accords well with the bottom-up, citizen-oriented quest for change which I have often mentioned. Even when that personal agency is embedded in a social context, however – Arendt's plurality – it tends to fall short of its objective because, without aggressively tackling the transformation of

the world's ideational superstructure, it remains essentially pragmatic. It amounts to people rising against a status quo they deem unacceptable, people rising against the holders of power and the institutions which normalize and legitimize their superior position in society. This battle is being undertaken in earnest, but only by a minority, and with only limited success.

Agency now needs to be rethought, recalibrated and rebuilt according to the principle of self-transcendence, meaning to see beyond ourselves as individuals, and to see beyond our own species to the Universal context of our shared existence. In this regard Vaclav Havel reminds us

of what we have long projected into our forgotten myths and what perhaps has always lain dormant within us as archetypes. That is, the awareness of our being anchored in the Earth and the universe, the awareness that we are not here alone nor for ourselves alone ... This forgotten awareness is encoded in all religions. All cultures anticipate it in various forms. It is one of the things that form the basis of man's understanding of himself (sic), of his place in the world, and ultimately of the world as such ... This awareness endows us with the capacity for self-transcendence.¹⁹

And, crucially, this unique capacity gives us privileged access to supra-human virtues which form the anchor and the foundation from which renewed moral evolution might proceed, and from which a new metanarrative might emerge – a new story featuring us as co-participants in a play whose meaning we will both discover and determine.

Though often disparaged as prone to abuse and corruption, the alternative to a mass citizen-led movement is vanguard leadership. A top-down force for change is in fact a necessary complement to bottom-up public pressure; each is (or should be) reciprocally constituted by the other, each gains its legitimacy and cogency from the other; and both together are necessary components of the thrust to a new reality. This possibility is most often discussed in a political context. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were all, in their way, proponents of elite political leadership. Madison, for example, said

¹⁹ Vaclav Havel, *Acceptance Speech* for Liberty Medal, Philadelphia, USA, July 4, 1994. Available at https://constitutioncenter.org/libertymedal/recipient_1994_speech.html

The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men (sic) who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust.²⁰

The context today is of course entirely different, but the fact remains that, to be successful, a blunt force for change needs a sharp point, without which the veneer of normalcy which protects the status quo like so much chainmail will remain impenetrable. And this is especially so if the challenge at hand is to expedite the moral evolution of modern human society in order to render the global environmental crisis manageable; or at least to arm ourselves with the courage and foresight needed to cope with radical disruption without turning violently on ourselves. If we are unable to accomplish these objectives, then we surely will have failed ourselves, failed as partners in the teleonomy of the Universe, and failed the opportunity to truly enjoy the exploration and fulfillment of the extraordinary potential of a uniquely exceptional species.

Though one may hope for timely political leadership, I expect this vanguard to arise instead from practitioners and theorists of the humanities. Where are our moral leaders? Where are our modern philosophers? I am certainly not referring here to the narrow, and usually exclusive, religiosity of institutionalized belief systems; nor to the technical wizardry of sophists whose words are incomprehensible, and therefore meaningless, outside the academy. I'm referring instead to a new generation of thinkers and doers, people who can see at a glance, feel in a moment, do the impossible, and know the unknown ...

“Human beings cannot live without challenge. We cannot live without meaning. Everything ever achieved we owe to this inexplicable urge to reach beyond our grasp, do the impossible, know the unknown. The Upanishads would say this urge is part of our evolutionary heritage, given to us for the ultimate adventure: to discover for certain who we are, what the universe is, and what is the significance of the brief drama of life and death we play out against the

²⁰ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, ‘Federalist #57’ in *The Federalist Papers*, Seattle, CreateSpace, 2010, p.165.

backdrop of eternity.”

— Anonymous, The Upanishads