

Governance in the Planetary Age

**Insights from history, human development and ecology
point to our possible next steps**

by Catherine Burton

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ONE WAY we can get a perspective on how governance might develop in the future is to step back a minute and take a broad evolutionary view of the different modes of human governance and culture, from the hunting and gathering epoch of human history, through the agricultural era and the Industrial Revolution, up to our current transition into the planetary age. From such a perspective, we will observe that with each new era in evolution, *homo sapiens* experience an evolutionary identity crisis as it makes its transition to a new world view and values, new technology for meeting human needs, new modes of relating to one another, and new cultural patterns for governance, the economy, education, religion, etc.

For millions of years, humans existed through hunting and gathering, foraging for food in nomadic bands. These early humans existed in an undifferentiated unity with their environment. Their numbers were small (perhaps 10 million on the planet), their technology consisted of simple hand- made tools, and their economic and governance forms centered around the procuring and sharing of food. Conflicts were settled either by one band moving onto a new foraging region or through sharing and cooperation with food. Some of the more developed forms of governance from these cultures still remain in aboriginal societies, characterized by an ecological consciousness and a strict adherence to traditional law.

Between 8,000-10,000 B.C., *homo sapiens* came out of the bush onto the savannah, forsaking the mobile hunting and gathering lifestyle to procure food through the planting and harvesting of stored seed. These early farmers began to make a direct intervention in the natural order, although still recognizing their ultimate dependence on the sacred web of life. The economy centered around the land and those who controlled it held authority. Authority also resided in the major religious teachings and the power of the church.

As early civilization grew and humans moved out of a state of symbiosis with the natural order, the deeply felt connections to the earth expressed in the early religions were gradually replaced by cosmologies which, like the new technologies, extended human dominion over the earth.

In the fifteenth century, new modes of exploration, transportation, and communication resulted in a drastic shift in world view. The Copernican Revolution, Galilean astronomy, the Baconian scientific method, the Cartesian split between mind and matter, and Newtonian clockwork universe brought a separation between human law and natural law as the materialistic world view gained ascendancy and paved the way for the Industrial Revolution. Machines soon replaced domesticated animals, farms were left for city factories, and smokestacks replaced steeples. The enclosure of the common land signaled a shift from feudalism to capitalism which retained its feudal inheritance in the form of slavery. Power shifted from those who owned land to those who owned capital to finance industries. Land was now viewed as an inert substance, an economic commodity which provided the basis for the large-scale rise of the two forms of industrialism - capitalism and socialism. With the rise of industrialism, came the rise of independent nation states as power began to shift from local community centers of power to state and national centers.

The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima signaled the entrance into yet another new era for humankind. The physics of Einstein and findings in other disciplines led to the recognition that matter, energy and mind were not separate and that the universe was more like an organic web of flowing interconnections than Newton's well-behaved clock. Communication and expanded transportation technologies turned us into a "global village." We suddenly became more intimately aware of the neighbors who shared our planetary house. National economies became interdependent with the rise of multinational corporations. The planet saw the birth of the first attempts towards planetary governance in the form of the League of Nations, and after World War II, the United Nations.

This evolution of human civilization displays a marked similarity to personal stages of growth which are also characterized by transitional identity crises. Like the development of a living organism, the collective human system has moved from a stage of initial undifferentiated unity with its environment (hunting and gathering), through a stage of dependence (agriculture/imperial colonies), to the adolescent stage of developing independence (industrial/independent nations), and now could be ready for maturing and integrating itself in the adult stage of interdependence (planetary/ecological age).

As we consider possible forms of interdependent governance for the planetary age, we might ask ourselves if there are any clues to guide us in our efforts. Indeed there are. One set of clues is provided by Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist, who wrote on "Patterns of Good Culture." Benedict introduced the idea of synergy (that the whole is more than the sum of its parts) into the social sciences. She found that the idea of synergy discriminated "good cultures" from cultures where there was much aggression and economic hardship. Specifically, she found little aggression in societies which "provide areas of mutual advantage and eliminate acts and goals that are at the expense of others in the group." Societies which were low in aggression occurred when "the individual by the same act and at the same time serves his own advantage and that of the group... Nonaggression occurs not because people are unselfish and put social obligations above personal desires, but when social arrangements make these two identical." High synergy cultures were not only defined as peace-abiding or nonaggressive but also had a "siphon system" as

Benedict calls it. This syphon system kept wealth circulating through the culture and away from any single point of accumulation or concentration. In such a high synergy culture, "if a man has meat or garden produce or horses or cattle, these give him no standing except as they pass through his hands to the tribe at large." (Ruth Benedict, "Patterns of the Good Culture', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 72, 1970).

A second set of clues is provided by the Haudenosaunee - the Six Nation Confederacy of the Iroquois - whose Great Law described the philosophy and mechanisms for a government of peace. Governments were to be established, according to their legendary Peacemaker, to eliminate war and injustice. Peace came through the establishment of universal justice according to the principles of:

- 1) Righteousness, which considered the gifts of creation to belong to all equally;
- 2) Reason, which enabled human beings to settle their differences without force or violence, and
- 3) Power, which is "the product of a spiritually conscious society using its abilities to reason," through education, public opinion, political will and the power of a dedicated and united people towards absolute and pure justice (from the *Basic Call To Consciousness*, Mohawk Nation).

The Great Law attempted to anticipate and eliminate the group or class interests which were the basis of most conflicts, and was based on the law of Nature. It provided for direct democracy such that decisions were made by the people themselves and transmitted to the leaders who served the will of the people. The law provided that the different nations would give up part of their sovereignty to become part of the confederacy of nations. In so doing, the nations recognized all people as one people and abided by the abolishment of exclusive national territories and the idea of national minorities. Each individual had full rights within any nation. If attacked, the confederacy agreed to military force to repel the invader until a truce was called, negotiations started, or the attacker ceased military aggression. The invading nation was required to do nothing, such as giving up land, but was only required to cease its war-making. The Great Law was written to outlaw war and replace violence with a negotiated dispute settlement process. The Great Law of the Haudenosaunee found its way into the checks and balance system of the U. S. Constitution and served as a model for the formation of the League of Nations.

Let's move now from a historical focus to our present situation and see how these clues for peaceful synergistic governance apply in the planetary age. In looking at our current planetary situation, one finds that the problems human civilization is currently experiencing - the threat of nuclear annihilation, ecological destruction, the inability of economic systems to meet human needs and continued social injustices - are symptoms which indicate the growing dysfunction of current institutions based on a materialistic world view. Underneath these symptoms, *homo sapiens* are experiencing their latest evolutionary identity crisis.

What is attempting to emerge out of this identity crisis is a new perception of the world, a new sense of purpose which in turn provides new principles and values for organizing societal structures. As our awareness expands in time and space, we begin to experience ourselves, however awkwardly and crudely, as a planetary organism. We begin to sense life's evolutionary thrust toward wholeness. The principles of holism and ecology arise as signposts for life's process of self-organization. Such self-organization is synergistic - a hopeful alternative to the entropic chaos of the material order. Translated into guiding principles, the process of self-organization maintains the integrity of the whole-system through mutually enhancing, cooperative relationships which sustains and nurtures the evolution of all parts as well as the system as a whole. In this new context, a reverence for life becomes a superordinate value. Such principles and values foster new processes for organizing society. A whole system ecological approach is evoked which balances decentralization with planetary communication and coordination.

A vision of the form or pattern that these principles and values might take is also beginning to emerge around the edges and through the cracks in the current structures. This is the sense of Earth as *Gaia*, a living being which, according to space scientist James Lovelock and the Gaia hypothesis, exhibits the characteristics of a self-regulating, self-organizing living system. What is humanity's role in this sacred web of life? Some have suggested that humanity could be the nervous system of the Earth organism, a kind of "global brain" to use physicist Peter Russell's phrase, that allows life on earth to be conscious of itself. We are perhaps only in our infancy as a planetary nervous system screaming out messages of pain that we sense with our eyes (television), ears (radio), hands (print) and feet (transportation). However, as we begin to build the nerve bundles (human connections) which will serve as a kind of corpus callosum connecting the eastern (right) and western (left) hemispheres of this planetary brain, the nervous system will become more refined and hopefully more mature.

Where is the focal point of human activity in this emerging planetary awareness? It would appear that person and planet find each other in those naturally occurring ecological domains - called bioregions - that are like cells of the planetary skin. These bioregions transcend arbitrary human political boundaries, reconnecting human beings with the biosphere. Kirkpatrick Sale defined these life territories as a "part of the earth's surface whose rough boundaries are determined by natural rather than human dictates, distinguishable from other areas by attributes of flora, fauna, water, climate, soil and landforms, and by the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to. The borders between such areas are usually not rigid...(and) will probably be felt, understood, sensed or in some way known to many of the inhabitants, and particularly those rooted in the land...to those that knew the earth as sacred and its well-being as imperative." (p. 10. *Bioregionalism: Mother of All*, Schumacher lectures, available from the Schumacher Society).

To know our bioregion is to know and connect with our home planet. It is to breathe with the earth and to know ourselves as part of the sacred web of life. To know this place - where its waters come from, its trees, its wildlife, its food, its energy, its wisdom and its spirit is to know ourselves as whole.

Translating the natural law of the planet into human activities means organizing society much as ecosystems organize themselves:

- Following a mindful policy, like nature does, of conservation, preservation and sustainable use of water, air, soil, forestry, land and wildlife systems.
- Using local organically produced foods from the region's food chain.
- Depending on renewable energy sources particular to the region.
- Practicing an ethic of earth stewardship through land trusting or land-valued single taxes, for example.
- Creating self-reliant regional economies which circulate capital and resources within a region while dispersing surplus resources to help other parts of the system become self-reliant, not dependent.
- Setting up local/regional systems of production and distribution that are scaled to human capacity and use appropriate ecological conscious technologies.
- Supporting economic democracy which creates local worker and community-owned and managed enterprises.
- Restoring power to local community/regional governments as the most efficient means for meeting the basic needs for food, shelter, energy, health, and education of its people.
- Redesigning local communities to reintegrate community functions, thereby eliminating much automobile use, and emphasizing efficient mass transit systems for the transportation needs that remain.
- Using the media to inform and enlighten members of the community rather than hypnotizing and numbing them.
- Supporting preventive whole system health care and education which integrates mind, body and spirit in an ecological awareness of life.
- Developing a consciousness of peace which seeks to settle differences on all levels internal, interpersonal, intrafamilial, international through negotiation and not violence.
- Recognizing and accepting the identities of cultures different from our own and empowering them, rather than infantilizing them, in their own process of growth.
- Recognizing the right and dignity of all species to share in the gifts of creations.
- Returning each person to the sense of self as an artist and sculptor of life.

There is something else, however, which is a part - a crucial part - of this vision of planetary governance. This is a new accounting system, a new bottom line for the planet. No longer will the health of a nation be measured solely by a Gross National Product which declines with longer-lasting products and better health care and increases with accidents and war. Instead, life's own accounting system will provide a planetary health index, a mature process of whole system accountability. Such an index recognizes our accountability to life, to the planet, to our human family, to the elements, to our children and to future generations who will inherit this earth.

Such a health index will provide an increased awareness of the current state of planetary health, disease, and stress. I am fully aware that there are difficulties with constructing such a scale, finding meaningful indices for the different variables and providing accurate

measurements. However, this should not stop us from making the attempt and beginning to think in these ways. To know how well we are doing in restoring the web of life and in meeting human needs, I would like to offer the following regional/planetary health index as a preliminary attempt of conceiving a new life accounting system (see end of article). Some of the variables of this health index are those advocated by the bioregional and green-sustainability movements and have served as the basis for report cards on legislative voting.

The sense of Gaia, the sense of humanity as Gaia's self-reflective consciousness, the sense of planetary cells and ecosystems and a life accountability index came together for me in an image I once had which provided me with a sense of this emerging possibility of planetary self-governance. There were two images superimposing themselves. One image revealed a huge lit-up board displaying an enormous representation of the planet. Computer data banks provided inventories of populations and their needs as well as existing resources (energy, food, water, medical supplies, education) to meet these basic needs. Visually-lit graphics detailed the changing needs and resources showing the health of the ecosystems on the wall-sized map. The interesting thing about this map was that eco-systems or bioregions were highlighted as foreground focal points while national boundaries were in dimmer background lighting. There was a sense that we were taking stock of our planetary health - something like what Bucky Fuller must have imagined with his World Game. In this image, I noticed that there were spreadsheets of critical variables for each eco-system or biographical province of the planet using some life accountability index. This was not a control center but a communication center. The world had finally constructed a library dedicated to planetary health, full of the kind of information that was needed to make wise decisions.

But there was more. There was another image. There were people in their local communities and regional centers, people concerned about the health of their planet, people who made decisions based on sustainable values, using the wealth of information available to make decisions that future generations could live with. Regions could access the data banks and try out their decisions getting an instant idea of the environmental, economic and social consequences thereby enabling them to use resources in a way that fostered self-reliance as well as sustainability for the whole system.

In another part of the image, groups of people gathered in living rooms, neighborhood and community centers. One time there was a city-wide debate on a land development issue which was being conducted as an electronic town meeting. Questions that citizens had posed were broadcast over the television, discussed in neighborhood groups, and the outcome or consensus of the group was reported in by phone and instantly fed back to the city dwellers at large.

At another point in the image a national debate was occurring in terms of the future of nuclear weapons. This time, the debate was conducted again over television, with local communities discussing the various aspects of the issue and its effects on other issues (information was made available from the life accountability communications center

showing the various relationships and consequences of using nuclear arms). Results were either telephoned in or relayed through computer telecommunications capacities.

As individuals became more responsible for their own lives, communities and regional forms of governance reassumed the responsibility and power to make the decisions affecting them. Decisions which involved other regions were debated at a Confederation of Bioregions whose participants were stewards or deputies of the will of the people in their bioregion and who were recalled immediately if they failed to faithfully voice the will of the people.

The world was, indeed, operating as a self-organizing process. Governance forms, like natural systems, were evolving bi-directionally toward both regional differentiation and autonomy as well as toward planetary communication and coordination. Communication (rather than military power, censorship or even representation) was the major process being used in the self governance of the planet. We were becoming stewards not only in our daily lives but in our collective political lives. We were evolving beyond the separations inherent in representational governance and evolving toward true, responsible participatory democracy.

I want to say at this point that, having just finished describing a future that I would like to see, I am very well aware of the specter of breakdown and catastrophe that we currently are facing. The question arises as to just how we will handle this planetary identity crisis and make the transition into our next phase of growth. Homo sapiens have, to date, not been able to pull off a major transition without serious disruption, including violence. Beyond the question of how, the transition itself is not guaranteed. We don't know whether we can ease our way through this transition without aborting the whole enterprise through a nuclear winter.

We are just beginning, as a planetary system, to move into that phase which is beyond ignoring, discounting and resisting the change, and reaches the crisis point where the old and new patterns meet. This phase is usually characterized by the best and worst possibilities, as the system, in Arthur Koestler's words, regresses before it leaps to a new phase and a resolution at a higher level. Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures offers three alternatives for such a transition:

- 1) the old system dampens change to the extent that we muddle through and nothing is really transformed,
- 2) the reaction happens too fast and becomes explosive, or
- 3) the elements have a sufficient critical mass to establish a new more complex order and thereby transform the existing structure.

I would like to share a few thoughts about how this transition into the next order might take place. The change from the dependence mode (childhood, territorial colony) to the independence mode (adolescence nation-state) has often occurred through either fighting

with the existing order, at times leading to revolutionary overthrow, or through leaving the home territory and setting up a new mode of life. These fight or flight responses were perhaps inevitable in terms of the development and evolution of human consciousness - when population numbers were smaller and the technological power was below the level capable of producing a planetary abortion. The transition from independence to interdependence is a process not of rebellion but of maturation. The new order will emerge through *evolution* not revolution. It is a process toward the development of *both* autonomy and compassion, which Gandhi called the truth force or *satyagraha*.

This transition is, in fact, already occurring. What are some of the ways? It is occurring through efforts toward autonomy and differentiation, through a process of rebuilding culture in relationship to the current system. Just as an individual reclaims his or her own unique identity within one's family, so too must regions and their cultures reclaim their identity and power within a nation. This process restores the connections and support system for individuals, families, and communities that were often undermined with the rise of national and corporate centralization.

The transition is occurring through connections between previously separated elements of the system into an expanding and intimate awareness of our wholeness and interconnectedness. Networks reach like a fishnet covering the earth, holding it secure within its fabric and woven knots. Many people are responding to the pull to meet the *other* in different parts of the world, recognizing that both we and they are, underneath the physical and personality differences, parts of the same planetary self. International two-way television "space bridges" allow us to rehumanize the *enemy* and begin to re-own our projections. New connections are forming which, as in any system, raises the intelligence of the system. Efforts towards planetary coordination and communication are underway which move us beyond nationalism.

The transition is occurring through the creation of new structures and forms based on the emerging planetary/ecological world view. New economic institutions are being designed to be self-organizing and self-regulating that practice workplace democracy using human-scale ecologically conscious technologies. New approaches to peace are being created beyond deterrence and detente toward communicated understandings of each other's needs and fears, with a mediation of and not a violent eradication of differences. New schools fostering the growth of the whole person, natural methods of medicine, new forms of spiritual celebration of life are all ways in which the new order is being manifest.

The transition is also occurring through the transformation of existing institutions and rules of the system. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect requiring integrity, compassion and a good sense of *aikido*. This transformation occurs through the introduction of a new context and new values into the old form. This kind of transformation also occurs through the attraction and shifting of energy and resources (money, votes, human energy, media attention, ideas, and political will) from the industrial order toward the ecological order as human culture, institutions and civilization reorient themselves, voluntarily or involuntarily, toward life's own agenda. The

transformation also requires leadership on all levels, grounded in sustainable vision, values and principles providing a strong voice in moving the rules of the system in a sustainable fashion. Such leadership necessitates individuals whose integrity places principles and relationships before personalities and vested interests, and who ask, to rephrase Kennedy's statement - not what your planet can do for you, but what you can do for your planet!

Perhaps most fundamentally, this transition is occurring through those people from all walks of life who are becoming conscious of themselves as a planetary species - who are shifting from part-centered consciousness to whole- centered consciousness.

The time of transition is upon us. Growing pains bespeaking our current identity crisis are everywhere, yet life is there, presenting the species with a clearer sense of purpose and direction in preserving, sustaining and fostering the evolution of the planet and human species. The transition is not guaranteed, but the power *is in our hands* to weight the jostled system in favor of a more sustainable vision of the future. The planet's voice is attempting to speak through us, to us, and from the life intelligence within us, guiding us home. Will we heed its call?

Elements of A Life Accounting System

species endangered/species safe	renewable energy use
soil erosion/preservation	automobile/mass transit use
soil demineralization	toxic/organic fertilizer use
soil remineralization	population growth
desertification rate	urban/rural population density
deforestation/reforestation	land distribution per capita
non-renewable mineral consumption	land speculation/productivity
recycling	income distribution per capita
water pollution levels	infant mortality rate
lakes poisoned/cleaned up	life expectancy level
toxic wells closed	deaths through starvation
reopened clean wells	nutrition level
underground aquifer levels	number of homeless
toxic dump index	health care availability
acidity of rain	literacy
air pollution levels	human rights violations
carbon dioxide levels	human rights protection
climate trends	deaths from war or violence
energy consumption	use of mediation
solid waste production	armament levels

fossil fuel use nuclear energy use	nuclear weapons built/dismantled
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