

CHAPTER ONE

THE INNER DIMENSION OF SOCIAL AND PLANETARY TRANSFORMATION

In early April 1988, in my late teens, I experienced a profound shift in perspective that radically disrupted the trajectory of my life. After several years of intense striving for academic and sporting success, something broke through my awareness about the futility of pursuing happiness that way. Nothing dramatic had happened to me in the external world. I simply had started to notice that no matter what I achieved, the resulting happiness and contentment would be remarkably brief. For example, I had spent months studying with driven intensity for final law exams and had been elated when I scored a wonderful result, yet the satisfaction had lasted for only a day or two before I noticed myself feeling vaguely restless and empty again, needing to move once more toward another horizon. I started to realize that I felt a subtle anxiety in relation to *everything* in my life I had previously assumed was necessary for happiness: friends, family, external achievements of all kinds. They were all fleeting. I could not hold on to any of them for even a moment without knowing they were simultaneously slipping away through the inexorable flow of time. One otherwise unremarkable Monday evening this realization about the impermanence of things entered my mind as a very big thought that seemed to burrow its way down into the foundation of my very identity. Time and death would take everything away. This was real. In light of this existential fact, I could no longer feed my inner hunger for meaning with any mere temporary fix from the world. In an instant, my motivation for external success utterly withered. For more than two weeks I could hardly eat. I could not watch television or read a book. All external

pleasures seemed like mere tranquilizing diversions from the profound but disturbing reality of impermanence. I thought I was going crazy.

Yet amid the dissolution of my old achieving identity, I began to encounter some very interesting experiences of peace. Moments came when, out of despair, I simply gave up my efforts to salvage meaning or happiness from the world. In these moments I was surprised to discover the despair slowly transform into a simple but wonderful state of restfulness. I was still here, without any effort to create myself. And there was something intrinsically significant about this state of just being. I began to read teachings about Eastern mysticism and was amazed to find many descriptions in them that corroborated my experience. Thus began my (ongoing) journey on the “pathless path” of spiritual realization and personal healing.

The incident I have just described was the first of many initiations into deeper dimensions of being that I later experienced. At first I regarded the process as entirely personal—the outcome of my personal trajectory and relevant primarily to my personal life. In time, as I increasingly came to experience myself as part of something larger, I became more and more curious about the extent to which my personal journey might also be an expression of a collective evolutionary development occurring all over the world. Since I was a child I had been fascinated by the great saga of human history, that tale of the dramatic currents of collective public life, shaped by key individuals who seemed propelled by a mysterious force of destiny. Like many others, I was deeply stirred by those rare instances when men and women of courage—a Mahatma Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, or a Rosa Parks—made a stand in the public arena on profound moral and spiritual grounds. Their stories produced in me a strong desire to contribute in some way myself to shaping the direction of society, especially in the realm of politics. Following that impulse, I completed my law studies and practiced for a few years as an environmental lawyer in Sydney, Australia. In my short career, I was involved in several legal battles against egregious development proposals (and succeeded with one of them). I also became more politically engaged. My earliest experiences in meditation of an underlying field of loving awareness had led me to embrace a much more inclusive political vision than the conservative perspective I had absorbed from my upper middle-class upbringing. I participated in numerous rallies for peace and environmental issues and helped out with a progressive national political campaign.

Yet amid these efforts, I sometimes wondered how much of our activism was truly effective in bringing about the world we desired. Many of the legal and political actions I was involved in, although well intended, seemed only to add to the cycle of reactivity and suffering we were attempting to resolve. For instance, many activists I encountered appeared to be clearly “acting out” their inner conflicts through their activism work, frequently

discharging their anger reactively toward political opponents or people in positions of authority, and showing little empathy for the complex challenges those people might have faced. (Of course, I was also guilty of these tendencies at times.) And although many of us were motivated by our concern about global social and ecological trends, our passion was inevitably channeled into small regional clashes in which the big picture conversation was largely obscured by the details of the local conflict. Although these local battles seemed necessary, it felt dispiriting at times to be investing so much energy in trying to put out small fires here and there while the mighty engine of the industrial growth society continued to fan the flames of social and environmental injustice everywhere. Was it possible, I wondered, to engage in the work of social change in a way that targeted the underlying consciousness that kept reproducing these problems all over the planet? And what was the connection between the profound process of individual transformation and the nature of sociopolitical change? Could we somehow invite the healing balm of awakened consciousness into the public arena to support collective transformation?

Following these questions led me to study the ideas of many scientists, philosophers, and other visionary thinkers who have attempted to discern a deeper pattern of meaning amid the complex currents of our contemporary global situation. One of the most striking features of our age is the widespread sense of the precariousness of our condition, a narrowing of vision Wendell Berry (2003) once called “the loss of the future.” Although millennial movements predicting the imminent demise of civilization have appeared quite regularly throughout Western history, in our times the threat of nuclear holocaust and evidence of catastrophic climate change, species extinction, and many other symptoms of a global ecological crisis provide considerable empirical support for the possibility of a cataclysmic breakdown of order absent a fundamental change in our present course. Anxiety about the viability of the human species has accordingly become in our age far more than the preoccupation of religious extremists but rather a broadly shared concern of the international scientific and political community.

Yet the deepest threat of all might be located in a subtler and much less frequently acknowledged dimension of the global situation: the crisis of meaning. Were we able to situate our present challenges in a context that gave them meaning and intelligibility, we might be able to summon the deep resources of the human moral and spiritual imagination to meet them. Yet so much of the modern and postmodern project (of the West) has involved the deconstruction of the great cultural stories and frameworks that previously provided humans with a meaningful orientation toward the cosmos.¹ The loss of this context is directly linked to the profound sense of alienation that so many writers have rightly seen to pervade and even

characterize the modern mind. Social theorists from Emile Durkheim to Max Weber, novelists from Fyodor Dostoyevsky to Franz Kafka, and philosophers from Soren Kierkegaard to Jean-Paul Sartre have all relentlessly exposed the condition of estrangement as the dark underside accompanying the advances of modernity. As philosopher Richard Tarnas (2006) points out, at the very root of modern alienation lie the cosmological discoveries of modern science, starting with the Copernican revolution, which overturned the ancient presumption that human and Earth existed at the center of a divinely ordered cosmos and paved the way for a purely mechanistic conception of the universe. Friedrich Nietzsche dramatically caught the world-shattering implications of these developments in his famous passage from *The Gay Science*:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? (Nietzsche 1974, 181–182)

As Tarnas (2006) notes, one of the most consequential effects of these early cosmological discoveries—an effect extended and amplified by the whole subsequent arc of modernity—was the deep impression these developments left in the modern mind that the more we learned about the cosmos, the more it was revealed to be random and meaningless. Indeed (to put things in very general terms for our introductory purposes here), a crucial outcome of modernity was to establish in the modern mind the presumption that the universe has no inherent purpose, consciousness, or interiority. Although we humans might experience ourselves to possess these qualities (e.g., we experience ourselves as having an inner world, as being conscious, soulful, meaning-seeking beings), from the dominant perspective we are seen to be unique in this regard in a cosmos that is utterly indifferent to our inner concerns. In this view, there is no intelligent principle in nature supporting the unfolding of the cosmos in any meaningful direction. Any human perception of meaning, consciousness, or purpose in the natural world is seen, from this dominant perspective, to be necessarily an anthropomorphic projection, a regression to a superstitious or sentiment-

tal stance that modernity is supposed to have outgrown. French biologist Jacques Monod (1970) spoke for many when he said: "Man knows at last that he is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance" (180).

Although the dominant mechanistic perspective has brought forth unprecedented technical mastery of the natural world, its continued hold on the modern psyche has been recognized by a host of ecologically sensitive writers as now constituting one of the gravest obstacles to our capacity to overcome our current challenges. By dismissing as naïve any human perception of sentience or intelligence in the natural world, the dominant view is deeply implicated in the ecological crisis insofar as it has permitted and justified a profoundly irreverent attitude toward nature. With no part of the natural world regarded by the modern mind as sacred, nothing has inhibited humans from treating the Earth solely as a resource to be exploited for short-term economic gain. At the same time, by rejecting even the possibility that a larger sense of purpose may be involved in the evolution of the cosmos, the dominant perspective has profoundly diminished the capacity of humans to make sense of the crisis, thereby draining the collective imagination of the moral and spiritual depth that could inspire more deeply creative and courageous responses to our situation.

In the radically pluralistic milieu of contemporary academia and today's global marketplace of ideas, however, the dominant modern paradigm no longer possesses quite the same hold over the cultural imagination as it once did. Although the mechanistic perspective continues, of course, to be profoundly influential, postmodern arguments as to the historically and culturally mediated nature of all knowledge have radically undermined the notion that the modern scientific worldview represents a purely objective insight into reality.² The highly creative yet fragmented postmodern intellectual environment has allowed the assertion of a bewildering multiplicity of perspectives and paradigms, including the reemergence of many elements of the West's intellectual heritage that had previously been marginalized by the dominant view. In this context, a number of writers have returned with particular interest to sources within the Western tradition that have articulated holistic alternatives to the mechanistic perspective in the hope that these approaches might contribute to shaping a cultural vision better adapted to the realities of our contemporary global situation. Throughout modernity, we can observe the periodic flourishing of a significant strain of countercultural thought that, in creative and dynamic tension with the dominant rationalistic and mechanistic paradigm, has played a major role in constituting the Western sensibility. Esoteric scholar Wouter Hanegraaf (1998) identifies the modern origins of this countercultural tradition in esoteric elements of the Renaissance and traces subsequent expressions to

the European Romantic and Idealist movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, American Transcendentalism, the 1960s countercultural movement, and contemporary New Age or New Paradigm thought.³ Following much the same thread, philosopher Sean Kelly (2010) points out that although there is a substantial diversity of views within this lineage, common elements tend to include the adoption of the organism (as opposed to the machine) as the root metaphor for the cosmos as a whole, the associated intuition that all parts of the universe are interconnected in a living unity, and a (re-)enchanted worldview in which the cosmos is seen to be permeated and organized by soul or spirit.

From within this countercultural tradition, a number of thinkers have articulated a vision of evolution that posits a meaningful direction to the unfolding of both nature and human history. Beginning with the German Romantic/Idealist philosophers Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel,⁴ this perspective is also associated with early to middle twentieth century figures Henri Bergson, Teilhard de Chardin, Owen Barfield, and Sri Aurobindo, and contemporary philosophers like Jean Gepser, Ken Wilber, Richard Tarnas, William Irwin Thompson, and Duane Elgin. Although the more sophisticated advocates of this approach acknowledge a substantial degree of contingency to the evolutionary process, they all nonetheless discern an overarching evolutionary purpose involving the production of ever higher, deeper, or more complex forms of consciousness. Although not widely recognized as an established school of thought, this view has been called “evolutionary panentheism,”⁵ or simply “the evolution of consciousness.”

The proposition that human civilization and consciousness might be developing in a purposeful direction is, of course, very much out of favor in today’s academic circles. I have already mentioned the broad materialism of the mainstream scientific perspective, which interprets evolution in purely naturalistic terms and tends to regard metaphysical notions (like purpose or meaning) as unprovable hypotheses at best. Skepticism might also be expected from thinkers informed by the postmodern sensibility, who tend to suspect all “grand metanarratives” of obscuring—and thereby maintaining—the privileged position of a particular gender, culture, species, or other group within a supposedly universalist scheme. Others might be especially wary of the disastrous consequences that ensued from earlier misguided attempts to apply evolutionary ideas to human cultural development, as in the so-called Social Darwinism associated with figures like Thomas Malthus, Herbert Spencer, and Francis Galton (whose theories many regard as the foundation for the racist policies of Nazi Germany).

Nonetheless, I believe that an evolution of consciousness perspective, especially insofar as it takes into account certain postmodern intellectual developments, can offer a crucial unifying context that can help us to rec-

ognize a deeper meaning to our current precarious situation and thereby support us to face the coming challenges with more equanimity, faith, and resolve. Although postmodern concerns of totalitarian outcomes emerging from “totalizing” discourses are well founded, in a world that requires urgent, coordinated global action to respond to the multifaceted crises of our age, the extreme relativism and fragmentation that have frequently accompanied the postmodern mindset are not without their own pernicious real-world consequences. By developing a narrative about the evolution of consciousness that is transparent to its own potential biases, open to dialogue and continual revision, and committed to principles of diversity and inclusivity, I believe we can rescue the potential of this line of thought to provide shared, meaningful, yet nonexploitative cultural stories that can help to inspire heartfelt collaborative responses to the challenges of our times.

Let us now enter into this perspective on more intimate terms by examining the thought of three of its leading representatives.

THE PLANETIZATION OF HUMANKIND: TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Our first example is the new vision of evolution advanced by French Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard recognized that the discovery of evolution enabled humanity to comprehend its place in the cosmos in a new and profound way. This new self-understanding, however, was not the deflating view that followed for many from Darwin, in which the human was seen as having been reduced from a noble creation of God to a mere intelligent animal. For Teilhard the story of evolution offered humanity a way to recognize its own journey as an expression of an immensely ancient unfolding drama charged from the outset with spiritual purpose.

Teilhard (1959a) identified a purpose to evolution through completely reappraising the role of consciousness in the evolutionary process. He argued that consciousness, or the “within” of things, far from being a mere epiphenomenon of biological processes that emerged late on the scene with the human, is a fundamental property of the universe present from the beginning. He claimed to be able to observe, amid the flux and complexity of evolutionary development, a continual rise in consciousness that corresponded with the development of increasingly complex physical forms. For example, when the vastly more complex living cell emerged from simple molecules, one could observe a “thrust forward in spontaneity,” “the luxuriant unleashing of fanciful creations,” and “the unbridled expansion and leap into the improbable”—circumstantial evidence, for Teilhard, that an internal change of “consciousness” had accompanied the external change of

form (89). Or, claimed Teilhard, the development of ever larger and more complex brains in the evolution of primates paralleled an interior development of consciousness that eventually resulted in human self-awareness. The tendency of the universe to evolve toward ever-more conscious and complex modes of being was not, for Teilhard, simply an accident but revealed a clear evolutionary direction.

By elevating the role of consciousness in the story of evolution from negligible extra to central protagonist, Teilhard cast a new light on the place of the human in the cosmos. For him, the development of human self-reflexive consciousness was not a strange biological accident, but a crowning evolutionary achievement for which the universe had long prepared. After crossing the threshold of self-reflection, the evolutionary process continued to operate, claimed Teilhard, but now acted primarily in the realm of consciousness through advances in human thought and culture. Teilhard argued that the instincts of the animal world, as they crossed the threshold of reflection, underwent a metamorphosis and became “hominized” into cultural codes of behavior. For example, the sexual instinct became the evolution of human love, the need for nourishment (with its accompanying seizing and devouring behaviors) became the evolution of war, animal curiosity became human research, and so on. Thus Teilhard developed a vision of evolution (consistent with the ideas of German Idealist philosophers such as Schelling and Hegel) in which the unfolding drama of the cosmos, the Earth, life, and human civilization could be recognized as a single continuous process, governed by common evolutionary principles. As people came to recognize the essential unity of the evolutionary process, Teilhard believed they would realize that they are participating in larger evolutionary dynamics of immense grandeur and that this realization would infuse human life with tremendous dignity and meaning.

One key pattern Teilhard identified is that throughout the story of evolution, there are critical moments of transformation in which a quantum leap occurs to a fundamentally new level of organization. Teilhard noted that these evolutionary tipping points predictably take place when the elements of the existing level bunch progressively closer together to reach a critical degree of compression and complexity. Then a new “granule” emerges as the basic unit of the new level. For example, the granule of the living cell emerged from molecules binding together on the confined surface of the Earth; multicellular organisms from the grouping of cells; the human from the growth in brain size and complexity in primates.

Applying this axiom to humanity’s contemporary situation, Teilhard observed several basic facts: Humans are exponentially increasing in population, living on a finite sphere, and growing ever-more complexly intertwined through an increasingly sophisticated global communications network. From

these facts, Teilhard concluded that humanity is headed inexorably toward another evolutionary tipping point, a quantum leap comparable in magnitude to the great transitions from nonlife to life, or from life to human consciousness. This next historic step is the *planetization of humankind*: the gathering together of the human family into a single, balanced whole, a “harmonized collectivity of consciousness equivalent to a sort of super-consciousness” (Teilhard 1959a, 251). Teilhard also introduced the concept of the *noosphere* to describe a new “thinking membrane” or “living tissue of consciousness” that had enveloped the Earth, formed by the ever-increasing interconnectivity of human thought. The planetization of the human family would involve the “completion” of the noosphere so that the Earth would become “enclosed in a single thinking envelope so as to form, functionally, no more than a single vast grain of thought . . . the plurality of individual reflections grouping together and reinforcing one another in the act of a single unanimous reflection” (251).

Teilhard’s work was an undeniably bold and brilliant attempt to synthesize the scientific account of evolution with a religious sensibility, and the hopeful context his vision provides continues to be a source of inspiration for many. Yet Teilhard also inherited certain problematic assumptions of the French Enlightenment that have limited the wider reception of his ideas in contemporary academic circles. For example, Teilhard’s abundant (and very modern) faith in progress and human ingenuity led him to overemphasize scientific discoveries and technological achievements as signs of positive evolution, while overlooking their frequently negative social and ecological consequences. In his description of humans as the culmination of the entire evolutionary process, Teilhard tended toward an anthropocentric outlook inadequate to appreciate the intrinsic value of the diverse expressions of life on Earth. He also overstated the unique significance of Christianity compared with other religions as a central axis of the evolutionary process. Many of these criticisms were taken up by cultural historian Thomas Berry, who affirmed Teilhard’s core insights while significantly adapting them in an ecological reworking of Teilhard’s vision.

THE INTEGRAL EARTH COMMUNITY: THOMAS BERRY

Berry (2000, 2003) agreed with Teilhard that our era involves a transition of such enormous magnitude that it cannot be properly understood as just another historical period. But for Berry, the significance of the transition did not derive primarily from humanity’s progress toward a collective super-consciousness. Although he acknowledged the extraordinary achievements of modern human civilization, Berry argued that our era is at least equally momentous for the unprecedented scale of the human’s desecration of the

Earth: “The glory of the human has become the desolation of the Earth” (2003, 57). He maintained that, from the perspective of the Earth as a whole, the chief significance of our moment is that a 65-million-year period of unparalleled evolutionary inventiveness is coming to a close. Not since the extinction of the dinosaurs (which marked the beginning of this period) has the Earth experienced a contraction of biological creativity comparable to the one we are living through—and human activity is the cause of it. Berry argued that the imperative for the human is to appreciate that the Earth and all its living and nonliving components forms an integral community, that the human is a member of this community, and that we will find our greatest fulfillment by advancing the well-being of the total community. For Berry, the highest expression of the evolutionary process is not, as Teilhard believed, an integrated human community (reigning supreme over a degraded planet) but an integrated Earth community. Thus, the convergence of the human community predicted by Teilhard to form “a single, vast grain of thought” was extended by Berry to include the functional convergence of the entire Earth community, so that the Earth can operate “as a single cell” (2003, 65).

Berry pointed out that, for the first time in the Earth’s history, one species is now extensively in control of the entire Earth process. Humans are no longer just one species among many but have acquired a macrophase power of a unique order of magnitude. The task of the human, for Berry, is to enter into a new mode of consciousness in which we become aware of this new planetary dimension. Along with the awesome capacities of our macrophase power comes a new responsibility to develop the corresponding macrophase wisdom. According to Berry, we must learn to evolve out of our competitive, territorial, microphase instincts and instead start to think and act from the perspective of the whole system. As Berry’s colleague, mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme (2003) puts it, in this new understanding we are not first and foremost Americans, or Westerners, or even members of the human family, but earthlings in interdependent relationship with all the human and nonhuman members of the Earth community. One way, therefore, to evaluate people, programs, and activities is “the extent to which they foster or obstruct the creative functioning of the larger Earth community” (Berry 2003, 64).

THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF THE COSMOS:
RICHARD TARNAS

Philosopher and cultural historian Richard Tarnas (2001) interprets our present condition from a perspective that integrates Hegelian dialectics and philosophy of history with depth and transpersonal psychology. Just as countless

individuals in recent decades have discovered the importance of bringing to consciousness, through psychological self-exploration, those unconscious forces from the past that shape our individual lives, Tarnas emphasizes the crucial need for our entire civilization to engage in a similar undertaking. In a Hegelian spirit, he asserts that self-reflection for a civilization involves an examination of its interior cultural history—its philosophy and science, its art, its cosmology, its myths. For Tarnas, these are the deep unconscious forces from our collective past that shape our contemporary global situation.

Focusing on the worldview of the modern West (principally because of the West's central role in determining our current global condition), Tarnas argues that the chief trait that distinguishes the modern mind from virtually all premodern perspectives is the sharp division it has created between the human self as subject and the world as object. In line with thinkers like Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell, Tarnas claims that most members of ancient and indigenous societies experienced themselves as living in an "ensouled" universe that communicated personally to them through meaningful signs and symbols. The features of the ancient or indigenous landscape were not simply physical objects; they were alive with spiritual or mythic significance. Thus, according to Tarnas, the ancients saw spirits in forests and perceived meaning in the flight of eagles across the horizon. The outer world of nature and the inner world of the human soul participated equally in the *anima mundi*, or world soul, which imbued both dimensions—inner and outer—with archetypal significance.

Tarnas notes that the modern worldview tends to regard such a perspective as a childish fantasy. For the modern mind, Tarnas points out, the universe possesses no intrinsic meaning or significance. All spiritual qualities and moral sensibilities reside solely within the human self. To see soulful qualities in nature or to interpret its signs as meaningful personal communication is, from the modern perspective, simply an error—a naïve projection of human attributes onto a soulless and indifferent universe.

Tarnas traces the evolution of this modern worldview through a series of intellectual developments beginning with the pivotal Copernican recognition that the Earth revolves around the Sun, thus displacing the Earth (and the human) from the center of the cosmos and setting the stage for a mechanistic interpretation of the universe. He argues that Galileo, Descartes, and Newton continued the process by building a model of the cosmos as a machine governed solely by physical laws of motion and force. Darwin extended the perspective by demoting humans from their unique spiritual status and representing them as just another animal species—not spiritual beings in special relationship with God but merely advanced products of biological evolution. Kant, notes Tarnas, is widely thought to have introduced a kind of Copernican revolution to philosophy by recognizing that

human perception of the world is unconsciously determined by the ordering structures of the human mind, thus uprooting human knowledge from any certain foundation in the world at large. Finally, Tarnas lists numerous postmodern developments in a variety of intellectual disciplines that have extended Kant's insight into the relative and uncertain nature of human knowledge to complete the picture of the thoroughly alienated postmodern self.

At each stage of this journey of the Western mind, Tarnas identifies a dual development. On the one hand, the intellectual and moral autonomy of the human self was further differentiated out from the larger matrix of nature and community and radically empowered to act on the world according to its own will. On the other hand, each step forward in autonomy was simultaneously a step away from the primordial cosmic unity. The outcome, for Tarnas, is the fundamental condition of the modern human: the supremely individuated and empowered self who at the same time experiences himself to be profoundly alone in a spiritually barren and meaningless cosmos.

With the development of depth psychology, however, Tarnas claims that the Western mind took a pivotal turn. Although Freud's discovery of the unconscious at first further relativized the status of the human being (by revealing that even the human's own conscious ego was unconsciously influenced by powerful instinctual drives), the finding (especially by Jung) that the psyche is informed at deeper levels by archetypal structures opened up the possibility for a new interpretation of even the modern worldview itself. For if, as Kant proposed, the deep structural principles of the human mind decisively shaped our reality and if, as Jung argued, the archetypes were those very structural principles, then, notes Tarnas, even the disenchanting character of the modern worldview could itself be interpreted as an expression of a particular archetypal constellation and not an absolute reality. And indeed, for Tarnas, the alienated condition of the modern psyche bears a remarkable similarity to a crucial phase in the archetype of the death–birth initiation process that was initially explored by Jung and later investigated in detail by psychologist Stanislav Grof and mythologist Joseph Campbell.

Initiation processes in indigenous and ancient cultures throughout history typically put initiates through a trial involving their physical removal from the community and an intense confrontation with suffering and death before allowing them to return to start a new phase of life as initiated adults. Tarnas contends that the estrangement of the modern human from the community of being—in an intellectual and spiritual sense through the epistemological “prison” of modernity, but also in a pragmatic sense through the threat of nuclear annihilation and the global ecological crisis—can be seen as a kind of collective dark night of the soul analogous to that experienced by the initiate during his or her removal from the community. For Tarnas,

this suggests that the whole trajectory of the Western mind—in which it has forged the intellectual and moral autonomy of the self while growing increasingly alienated from the ground of being—can be understood as having been meaningfully informed all along by archetypal dynamics, which are now drawing things forward to a critical phase of the process. Tarnas maintains that human civilization is passing through its own evolutionary rite of passage, a collective initiation through the death–rebirth process into a new way of understanding and relating to the cosmos. What is on the other side cannot be predicted with any precision but, claims Tarnas, seems likely to involve a new vision of our relationship to the universe, one in which we will recover our sense of participating in a larger matrix of meaning and purpose but from a new position of mutuality. In this vision, we will understand ourselves to be neither separate subjects imposing our will on a soulless cosmos, nor simply puppets acting out the predetermined intentions of the world soul, but creative co-participants in a dialogical dance with an intelligent universe.

SUMMING UP

These frameworks suggest ways for us to perceive more clearly a coherent thread of meaning running through the particular events of our contemporary world. For Teilhard, the deep significance of our times lies in the process he called the “planetization of humankind”—the progression toward an increasingly integrated human consciousness spanning the Earth. For Berry, it is the awakening of humans to our planetary dimension but also to our role as benign stewards for the entire Earth community. For Tarnas, our moment is best understood as a collective rite of passage, one that may require humanity to pass through some form of collective death, but which offers the promise of a rebirth into a re-enchanted cosmos.

What these perspectives share, firstly, is the fundamental notion that we are living through an historical period of momentous transition, rather than one of relative stasis. For Teilhard, Berry, and Tarnas, our moment is one of those highly unstable yet vitally creative periods between eras, when the decisions we make have disproportionate consequences down the ages. Our times are not like those of, say, an average Roman citizen living in the middle of two hundred years of *Pax Romana*, or a north European living in medieval feudal society in the twelfth century CE when the social structures and rituals of life followed a relatively well-established and predictable groove. These authors suggest that our times are more analogous to critical historical turning points when the old order was running out of steam and sweeping changes to all facets of society were imminent (such as the periods just before the fall of Rome or the Industrial or French Revolutions).

Moreover, Teilhard, Berry, and Tarnas share a conviction that the cultural shift we are called to make is one of a distinct order of magnitude. Teilhard believed the process of humans becoming “planetized” would be an evolutionary leap equal in magnitude to the great transitions from matter to life and from life to human self-reflexive consciousness. For Berry, the significance of the shift could be appreciated only by seeing it from the perspective of geological time. Due to the current extinction spasm caused by the impact of human industrial civilization, he claimed that we are effectively ending the Cenozoic Era, a 65-million-year period of unparalleled biological creativity that began after the age of dinosaurs.⁶ For Tarnas, the rite of passage facing humanity represents a critical fulcrum point in the evolution of the Western psyche, containing the potential to fulfill the “passion” of the Western mind by reuniting it with the ground of being, thereby bringing to a certain completion the whole trajectory of Western thought. These authors clearly view our times as more than just another transition, but the stage for a potentially rare and profound historical drama.

Teilhard, Berry, and Tarnas maintain that the cultural transition we are called to make is most fundamentally a shift in consciousness or worldview. Although we will, of course, require many specific new laws, policies, scientific discoveries, technological breakthroughs, and so on, to meet the collective challenges we face, these authors stress the underlying shift that must take place at the level of the collective human imagination: We are called to revise our entire cultural story about what it means to be human and what our relationship ought to be with each other, the planet, and the cosmos. As Tarnas points out, such a shift will need to involve all the dimensions of the human imagination: not just intellectual, but also psychological, ethical, and spiritual. Teilhard, for example, emphasized love as a crucial ingredient in the transition (specifically, the love of humanity for the emerging planetary “being”). Berry urged the development of a wider sense of ethical responsibility for the well-being of the Earth community to correspond with our planetary-sized power. Tarnas suggests the need for us to develop the “epistemologies of the heart” (such as the capacity to listen more empathetically to the voices of the “other”) and the importance of our being willing to undergo a sustained process of grieving for all that has been left behind and damaged in the lopsided advance of Western civilization. For all of these authors, it is only through such an integral act of imagination—entailing a great collective turn of heart, of soul—that we will be able to navigate our way successfully through the current crisis.

THE PATH OF SUBTLE ACTIVISM

In light of these frameworks, let us now return to the questions posed at the start of this chapter. How might we engage in the work of social change in

a way that targets the underlying consciousness that keeps reproducing our problems all over the planet? What is the connection between the processes of personal and collective transformation? Can we invite the transformative power of awakened consciousness into the public arena to support social change and, if so, how? This book is about a path that has emerged for me as an answer to these questions. I call it the path of *subtle activism*.⁷

What Is Subtle Activism?

I define *subtle activism* as “spiritual or consciousness-based practices intended to support collective transformation.” Examples include a global meditation intended to help promote a peaceful solution to an international political crisis or a prayer vigil to bring healing to a region after a major natural disaster.

The first point to highlight in the definition is that subtle activism involves various forms of practices, where the practices themselves are seen to constitute a subtle form of social or political action. The practices are thus regarded not merely as a means to prepare for social activism out in the world, but are themselves seen as a subtle form of activism. These practices are not a substitute for physical action, but they may offer a crucial form of support that complements more concrete initiatives in the context of a more integrative approach to social change.

The practices can take a variety of forms: meditation, prayer, ritual, chanting, ecstatic dance, mindful movement, shamanic journeying—any spiritual or consciousness-based practice, really, from any tradition. I am deliberately adopting an inclusive view of spirituality and do not seek to associate subtle activism with any particular spiritual perspective. Many spiritual traditions have developed elaborate maps of the inner terrain involving various types of subtle beings and realms. Others have been more concerned with transcending intermediate forms to realize total emptiness or nonduality. And still others emphasize the cultivation of the direct presence of God, rather than total identification with the Absolute or divine. My intention is to create a broad framework where a variety of perspectives and practices can be welcomed, united in shared commitment to collective healing and transformation. For this purpose, the field of subtle activism is best served by a participatory and pluralistic vision of human spirituality that affirms the possibility of many valid spiritual realizations and goals.⁸

The second point to notice in the definition is that the practices are intended to support collective, rather than individual, transformation. Thus, meditating for the purpose of one’s own liberation should not, in my view, be considered subtle activism, but meditating for peace in the Middle East should be. Praying for the health of one’s personal friend or family member is not subtle activism, but praying for a community struck by natural

disaster is. There is a deep connection, of course, between the processes of individual and collective transformation, and it would be artificial to draw a rigid boundary between them. Whether the purpose of a practice is to heal oneself, a personal friend or relative, or a community or nation, the same fundamental principles are involved. Nonetheless, it is specifically the extension of these principles to the collective domain that constitutes what I mean by subtle activism.⁹

A third aspect of the definition is that the practices are spiritual or consciousness-based. These words are notoriously difficult to define and there are no widely accepted meanings associated with them. I consider a practice to be “spiritual” if it helps to facilitate a transformation of the individual and/or community toward fuller alignment with that which is “sacred” and expresses such universal values as love, compassion, and peace.¹⁰ A practice need not be explicitly spiritual to be included in this definition. For example, a practice that evokes a sense of awe and reverence for the natural world would be “spiritual” by this definition.

The term *consciousness* has been used to mean so many different things that some thinkers have recommended abandoning the concept altogether. Hundreds of scholarly books on consciousness have been written in the last few decades, without any consensus being reached on a precise definition. We can, however, develop a sufficient, if rudimentary, understanding of the term for our purposes by pointing out that it is often used synonymously with words like “awareness,” “experience,” and “subjectivity.” A distinction is frequently made between the content of experience and experience itself, with the latter being equated with consciousness. For example, Kurt Johnson and David Ord (2012) assert that a mind is conscious when it is aware of another state of mind, such as thought. A practice could thus be said to be “consciousness-based” if it facilitates a heightened or deepened awareness of subjective experience.

The fourth and final point to note in the definition is that the practices are *intended* to support collective transformation. A broad interpretation of intentionality is called for here. Some spiritual practices explicitly incorporate an intentional statement or thoughtform as part of the practice, but others specifically exclude intentional elements. A number of Eastern meditative traditions, for example, emphasize letting go of all mental content, including intentions, in order to rest in a state of total emptiness, or pure consciousness. However, even these methods can be applied in a way that includes a meta-level intention for the practice to support collective transformation. For example, although focusing on mental intentions is discouraged during the practice of TM, large TM group meditations have often been located near war zones and other trouble spots in the belief that these events would help bring peace to those regions. The organizers of these events clearly design them with an intention to benefit the com-

munities in question, even though this intention is not incorporated into the practice *per se*.

Let us consider some real-world examples of what I am calling subtle activism. In 2002, an estimated 650,000 Sri Lankans participated in the world's largest ever peace meditation, hosted by the Sarvodaya organization to support the ceasefire that had recently been negotiated between the Sinhalese-identified government and the Tamil Tiger secessionist party. For more than an hour, in excess of half a million people, all dressed in white, sat together in deep meditation in the public parks of the sacred city of Anuradhapura. The event was clearly intended to have a political impact, yet there were no placards or speeches—simply silence. During World War II, as many as 5 million people throughout the British Commonwealth united daily for a minute of silence during the chiming of Big Ben on BBC radio at 9 p.m. (just before the evening news). The practice was intended to strengthen the moral and spiritual resolve of the allied forces during the ordeal of war. In recent years, the expansion of the global interfaith movement and the emergence of the Internet have given rise to countless global meditation and prayer events that link individuals and communities around the world in shared silence and prayers for peace. For example, in early 2003 during the buildup to the Iraq war, the Global Interfaith Prayer Vigil united more than 100,000 monks, nuns, and other practitioners from a variety of faiths for a fifteen-week vigil to support a peaceful solution to the crisis. My own organization, the Gaiafield Project, organized the WiseUSA 2008 and WiseUSA 2012 subtle activism initiatives. These programs brought together dozens of socially engaged spiritual leaders and thousands of participants for a series of online meditation and prayer events intended to call forth wise and compassionate leadership in America from the 2008 and 2012 US electoral processes. Instances involving smaller groups include the “Magical Battle of Britain,” in which a small group led by esotericist Dion Fortune met weekly in a house in London during World War II to engage in magical practices designed to protect Britain from the Nazi threat. For subtle activism by individuals, there is the example of Indian philosopher-sage Sri Aurobindo, who claimed to have played a role in affecting the outcome of World War II through applying a kind of spiritual force from his bedroom in Pondicherry. In all of these cases, the focused mental and/or spiritual attention of the individual or group is seen as having the potential in and of itself to positively influence events in the sociopolitical realm.

“Weak” and “Strong” Versions of the Hypothesis

Needless to say, the hypothesis of subtle activism goes beyond currently orthodox scientific theories. An understanding of consciousness as a nonlocal phenomenon is highly controversial within science because it transgresses

the materialist paradigm and carries historical associations with religion and magic, modes of thought that science is supposed to have left behind in its emergence from premodern superstition. But before we examine the plausibility of nonlocality as an explanatory principle let us consider the more modest proposal that subtle activism could support social change through influencing the subsequent (overt) actions of the practitioners involved.

Take the case of a meditation or prayer circle that dedicates its practice to supporting a peaceful resolution to an impending international conflict. Regardless of any perceived or actual impact on the worldly situation, the practice will typically have a transformative effect on the participants themselves. For example, participants in the hundreds of subtle activism processes I have helped facilitate since 2004 often report experiencing a sense of empowerment from having meaningfully engaged with a socio-political situation they would otherwise feel powerless to influence. These effects inevitably carry over into the participants' lives, influencing their subsequent actions and interactions in mostly subtle, but occasionally striking, ways. One person might re-engage with her work for social justice from a place of restored hope. Another might be inspired to implement an idea for a creative social action that came to him during the meditation. And another might simply radiate a little more joy toward her friends and family. Although these effects may seem minor, a regular practice can significantly shape the nature of a person's contribution to society. If the practitioner happens to be a person of significant social or political standing, the effect may be especially consequential. Probably the most famous example in this regard is that of Mahatma Gandhi, who received the inspiration for his massively successful Salt March in an intuitive flash while meditating on the direction of the movement at his ashram. Here, the social benefits of the practice are seen to be mediated through conventional channels of action and communication. Such a principle represents the common view of socially engaged spirituality, where the role of spirituality in the work of social change is understood primarily to be one of inspiring wise (outer) action in the social sphere. For our purposes, the notion that subtle activism practice leads to social change through the subsequent overt actions of the actual practitioners involved can be seen as the "weak" version of the subtle activism hypothesis, to be contrasted with the "strong" version, which maintains that the social effect is immediate and nonlocal.

As for the strong version, a healthy place to start, in my view, is with the recognition that any nonlocal social effects of spiritual practice are highly and irreducibly mysterious. While acknowledging that we have much more to understand about these effects, I would like to offer some speculative comments as to their nature. First, I do not believe that the practice of subtle activism directly produces obvious, macro-scale effects on the physical plane or necessarily results in instant, radical changes to the

social sphere. As powerful as our focused collective intention might be, we can't use it to pick up the Empire State Building and move it to China. I am more inclined to regard the effect as a kind of quantum event, whereby the consciousness of the practitioners involved participates at very subtle dimensions of reality in energizing or co-creating certain forms of awareness and thought, thus making them more accessible to collective levels of human consciousness. These thought forms or awareness states are so subtle that their effects on complex modern social systems might appear to be negligible. Yet the action is occurring at very fundamental (and causal) levels of reality, and may create a ripple effect that amplifies in magnitude to an unknown extent as it translates from subtler to more manifest dimensions. I propose that the act of intending a practice to benefit a particular social unit (city, state, nation, world, etc.) creates a bridge that connects the subtle phenomena elicited by the practice with the layer of collective consciousness associated with the targeted social unit. For example, in our WiseUSA initiatives in 2008 and 2012, our intention was to call forth "the deepest wisdom and the highest compassion" from "the heart and soul of America." According to the hypothesis of subtle activism, this intention would have created a channel that facilitated the transmission of the qualities of wisdom and compassion into the collective consciousness of the United States. Once transmitted, these subtle phenomena may then begin to activate corresponding forms of thought and awareness in the consciousness of individual members of the targeted social unit, causing those thought forms or spiritual qualities to rise more prominently into their conscious awareness. Individuals who resonate with these ideals may be inspired to enact them in the outer world. Men and women of great social, economic, or political influence, in particular, could give expression to these principles in ways that lead to significant social change.

It is important to bear in mind that, like any force, this subtle power is likely to be more or less effective depending on a number of factors. Some of these factors are quantitative, such as the number of practitioners involved and the duration and consistency of the practice. But qualitative elements, like the degree of coherence, depth, or love generated by the practice, could also be expected to affect the outcome. Indeed a certain quantitative and qualitative threshold undoubtedly needs to be surpassed in order for effects to manifest in the sociopolitical sphere. Although it might strain credulity to suppose, for example, that a handful of people engaged in half-hearted prayers for humanity will make any difference to the world, the effect starts to become more believable if we imagine the involvement of very large numbers of participants, and/or teams of highly experienced practitioners with advanced knowledge of how to work with the dynamics of the collective psyche. With the exponential rate of development of the global telecommunications infrastructure, the rising planetary awareness,

and the proliferation of groups dedicated to convening global meditation and prayer events, increasingly sophisticated technologies and initiatives for harnessing the power of collective consciousness are emerging all the time. As higher-quality programs develop and more people become involved, the social effects of subtle activism practice are likely to become stronger and more evident.

BROADENING THE SCOPE OF ACTIVISM

For many who feel that there is an urgent need for humanity to make a fundamental course correction to avoid social and ecological catastrophe, participation in some form of activism represents a natural calling. The conventional understanding of activism is usually limited, however, to direct, frequently confrontational, forms of engagement with the overt structures of the economic or political establishment, as in a street demonstration or a worker's strike. For example, *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines *activism* as "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue." Similarly, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines it as "the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one."

A broader definition of activism, however, can be found on Wikipedia: "[any] intentional action to bring about social and political change." If we adopt this expanded view, traditional methods of frontline activism involving marches, demonstrations, putting one's body in front of bulldozers, etc., can be seen as only the most immediate and direct expressions of actions taken for social change. As philosopher Sean Kelly (nd) points out, we can identify a spectrum of social action that ranges from the more concrete or overt forms down a graded scale of increasing subtlety (as in Figure 1.1).

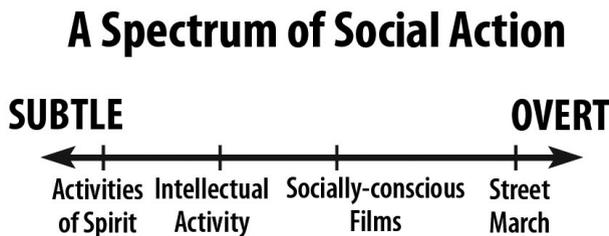


Figure 1.1. A spectrum of social action.