

RETURNING TO THE REAL WORLD: Self, community and the living planet in a time of global crisis

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	Page
Introduction: The Crisis	3
Part one: The way of life and death	
The Machine-world	6
The physical impact of Progress	7
Our way of life	8
The interconnectedness of the Machine-world	9
The death machine	10
The artificial world	12
Money at the heart of the system	14
The invention of time	15
Life mediated by technology	16
Learning how not to see	18
Religion and the desacralisation of the world	20
A road to nowhere	21
Part two: The psychology of the Machine-world	
Trauma	24
Inauthenticity	25
Addiction	26
Alienation	27
Part three: Self, community and the living planet	
Possible futures	29
Strategies	31
A vision for the self and the world	34
Acting from the heart	35
Bearing witness	37

Radical simplicity	38
Living in tune with nature	40
Re-sacralising the Earth	41
Conclusion: Returning to the real world	42

David M James, May 2015, updated and revised November 2017

INTRODUCTION: THE CRISIS

In September 2014 a report by WWF and the Zoological Society of London announced that wildlife populations across numerous species have declined by 50% in the last forty years.¹ The principal causes are exploitation, environmental degradation and habitat loss, all the result of human activity. This astonishing news received modest media coverage for a few days and then vanished from sight, having failed to arouse significant interest.

The report's fate in the public domain says much about what really matters to us in the 'Information Age', the era of the global civilisation. Humans have been altering the face of the planet for millennia and we consider this to be entirely normal. Extinctions of megafauna resulted from the spread of our human ancestors around the world, but the current rate at which we are destroying plant and animal life and natural habitats is without precedent. Our forbears, acting in isolated small groups, may not have been aware of the consequences of their day-to-day actions; we, however, cannot claim ignorance. One might expect this to give rise to reflection, if not outrage, but in fact there is scarcely any debate. For the most part we accept these changes as inevitable.

In recent decades growing concern about the impact of human activity on the planet has focused on climate change. The headline issue has been increasing carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere since the start of the industrial era. The steady accumulation of data has led to a broad scientific consensus about its causation and the probable effects, notwithstanding the efforts of a dissenting minority, largely neoliberal in politics and funded by big business.

Nonetheless, the various attempts to reach international agreement to reduce carbon emissions have failed completely, and there is little prospect of success in the future. No country is genuinely willing to stop economic growth, while some appear to have cut emissions only by shifting industrial production to other countries and importing their products. The fact that the major effects of climate change will be felt in the future, most likely by other people and in other places, reinforces the belief it is someone else's problem.

The war of words about climate change has tended to obscure other, and arguably more pressing, ecological issues. These include: desertification; water depletion; pollution of the land, seas and air; radioactive waste; dwindling fish populations; soil erosion; and declining soil quality. All this is happening simultaneously and across all regions of the world, affecting not only our wellbeing but perhaps even our survival. All of the Earth's life support systems are under stress and all the trends are adverse.

In spite of all this evidence we continue to treat the Earth as though she could meet our demands and cope with our wastes without limit or consequence. Localised pressures and losses are noticed and sometimes challenged, but the forces driving such destruction - population growth, more intensive agriculture, industrialisation, global trade - are too powerful to be halted. Almost no-one sees or understands the whole picture. To the extent that these issues are raised in public, they are seldom considered symptoms of the same underlying problem.

For the first time in human history most people live in cities, and the conditions of life for many are barely tolerable. Millions experience poverty, overcrowding, noise, pollution and misery. In spite of this, economic pressures continue to drive vast numbers into urban areas and industrialised work. People in rich countries rarely see any of this or consider the injustice, even though their prosperity derives from the labouring poor.

Meanwhile we remain transfixed by the economy and what it can and cannot deliver. The capitalist system has been astonishingly productive and effective in spreading a middle class lifestyle, part of

¹ Living Planet Report 2014, at wwf.panda.org. The 2016 update reported a 58% overall decline in vertebrate populations between 1970 and 2012.

a widely accepted story of Progress. The ending of the Cold War marked the start of an era of triumphant neoliberalism, no longer facing any major ideological challenge. Governments around the world enacted largely the same agenda of private enterprise, minimal regulation and free trade. Some countries experienced stellar economic growth during those years, and while this was so, few observers questioned its effects.

The economic turbulence starting in 2007-08 was met initially with shock and disbelief, then frantic efforts by governments to avert a worldwide depression. Inflated by the debt that fuelled the boom, many financial institutions failed and needed to be bailed out by the state. For a while this crisis appeared to undermine faith in capitalism and opened up the possibility of new social and economic arrangements, but bizarrely the outcome has been exactly the opposite. The unspoken consensus across most of the political spectrum is that economic recovery is absolutely necessary and must come first. Concerns about social justice and the environment are still quietly sidelined. It says much about our culture that even the greatest financial crisis in seventy years has failed to change our priorities and direction of travel.

Never have we been so well informed about the state of the world, and yet we persist in living in denial. Why is this? The problem lies in the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what really matters. Passed down through the generations and reinforced through social, religious and political institutions, these stories sketch out our map of reality.

What we take to be normal is in fact a relatively recent development. Our human ancestors lived on this planet for about 2.5 million years, and homo sapiens for the last 200,000 years. Civilisation is only 10,000 years old, and our current way of life began with the industrial era about 200 years ago. We can scarcely imagine there is anything wrong with cities, supermarkets, motor cars and smartphones, or with a continually rising human population and standard of living. On the contrary, we believe, and are repeatedly told, these indicate our success as a species. Our collective stories embody what Daniel Quinn calls the 'Great Forgetting'²; contemporary culture has almost no awareness of how the human species lived in relationship to the planet for almost all of its existence, or how our current ideas and practices are seriously deluded.

The power of these stories derives from the way they operate through us unconsciously, and unless we become aware of them and their consequences, we will continue on this journey toward catastrophe. This paper argues that we need to wake up to reality and find a radically different way to live.

Part One describes the many ways in which the Crisis appears. The principal metaphor is the 'Machine-world', which is contrasted with both the natural world and the culture of traditional societies. Part Two then considers how the Machine-world affects us psychologically, in terms of our wellbeing and our ability to understand what is happening. Part Three suggests how we might face the reality of our situation and find ways to heal the damage to ourselves, our communities and the living planet.

This paper is not a summary of evidence for the Crisis, which is readily available in print and online, and neither is it a systematic survey of the academic literature. It attempts to identify major characteristics generally overlooked by both popular and scientific accounts, focusing on the lived experience of being in the modern world. Along the way it touches on history, politics, economics, psychology and religion, but does not weigh competing arguments. Neither does it aim to satisfy current standards of scientific or philosophical rigour. Such systems of thought, which all too easily distance us from the real world and our own feelings and intuitions, are themselves a major part of the problem. Although we should not casually discard the accumulated wisdom and practice of civilisation, we need to return to our own personal experience to understand what is going on. We should be wary of seeking validation for them in the very ideas that have led to the Crisis.

² Daniel Quinn, 'The great forgetting', at ishmael.com

The paper reflects the author's own experience and beliefs, interests and biases. No single worldview could possibly present universal truths, and this paper is no exception. The argument is more descriptive than explanatory, and the reader is invited to read with the heart as well as the mind. The author's photographs are included to engage feeling and imagination.

The emphasis is on developing self-awareness and taking action in our own lives rather than trying to change society. Unless we first transform ourselves through deeper understanding we will merely replicate the system that already exists, with the same inevitable outcomes. Real alternatives can only arise from people prepared to face the truth about their lives. The processes of healing the damage to ourselves, our communities and the world are all interlinked.

The aim here is to provoke reflection and debate by challenging some of our basic assumptions and rationalisations about the way things are. The question for each of us is:

Am I living by what I know to be true from my own life experience, or am I merely following ideas and rules given by others?

We can sleep-walk through life and ignore what we see, hear and sense every day. It is often easier to go along with the consensus view, even when we know it to be false, than to stand up for what we know to be true and real. In our actions we might have only a small impact on the world, but at least we might discover renewed purpose, meaning and dignity.



PART ONE: THE WAY OF LIFE AND DEATH

The Machine-world

The Machine-world is the term used in this paper to describe the way humans have come to organise themselves and dominate the planet, replacing traditional, nature-based ways of life and creating an increasingly integrated and uniform system everywhere. It is the means of producing and concentrating wealth - food, material goods and ultimately money - from so-called natural resources and human labour, through the imposition of authority, order and control. In the modern era its principal elements are: social structures, laws, political and educational institutions, the global economic system and the mass media. It constructs an artificial world in place of the natural world and calls this “reality”.

All this began about ten thousand years ago with the agricultural revolution, the first settled communities and what we call civilisation. The process has accelerated with each advance in technology, and especially in the last century through industrialisation, urbanisation, electrification, computerisation, and the rise of global corporations, transnational organisations and the all-encompassing state. Its success is evidenced by the dominance of economic and materialistic values over other considerations.



The Machine continues to grow in complexity and connectivity. Its various elements influence each other and present a seamless experience for people everywhere, shaping every aspect of their lives. We have, for the most part unknowingly, absorbed its worldview and reasoning, and this affects us all psychologically. Life outside of the Machine is now almost unimaginable; the Machine-world is synonymous with the modern world. Using similar terminology - the “mega-machine” - Chellis Glendinning describes it as:

The entire psycho-socio-economic system that includes all the machines in our midst; all the organisations and methods that make those machines possible; those of us who inhabit this technological construct; plus the ways in which we are socialised and required to participate in the system; and the ways we think, perceive and feel as we attempt to survive within it.³

Its appearance and dominance are not the result of a formal conspiracy but the cumulative effect of many people’s actions over a long period of time. In some small way each of us plays a role in keeping the Machine operating, because our daily actions such as going to work, shopping or using the internet all connect us to Machine-world processes. Even if we dislike this it is difficult to see another way to live. The Machine has now effectively defined the range of what is possible or imaginable.

³ Chellis Glendinning, ‘luddite.com’

Although we are all part of it, the rich and powerful benefit most from the Machine-world's existence and act more deliberately to keep its grip on society. There can be little doubt that such elites everywhere share a similar worldview and attempt to impose a common ideology through the organisations they control: private sector corporations, media outlets, lobby groups, and international bodies such as the IMF, World Bank, WTO and G7. Through them they shape public opinion, constraining the choices of so-called democratic systems, while consolidating their own power and wealth.

The physical impact of Progress (Personal observation # 1)

For most people it is extremely difficult to gauge the implications of what our society calls Progress. We take it for granted that the physical world will be altered by human activity. In each of our lifetimes we note small changes, but the past is continually erased by the arrival of the new, and it takes a particular effort to recall and assess what has happened.



For many years I lived in North Somerset and Bristol in the south-west of England. The first environmental change I noticed, in the mid-70s, was the building of the six-lane M5 along the edge of the Gordano Valley, cutting through Tickenham Hill down to the Somerset Levels. The transformation was breathtaking. This relatively isolated part of the county was suddenly connected to the nation's busy and growing motorway network, bringing countless vehicles through the heart of the countryside. Over the years both the motorway and its access roads have been widened, and at rush hour and holiday times the traffic volume is so great that all the lanes can come to a standstill.

There is now almost constant background noise for miles around and at night the landscape is illuminated by moving lines of red and white light.

Gradually all the towns along this route have been extended toward the new highway, and fields and woods have become arterial roads, housing estates, distribution centres and retail parks. Weston-super-Mare has grown significantly in size, with new homes being built right next to the motorway, and Portishead's population has almost doubled. Bristol now reaches the very edges of the M5 and M4 with enormous developments at Bradley Stoke, Emerson's Green and Cribbs Causeway. The road has come to define the location, scale and pattern of human settlement.

The ancient fields I walked with a schoolfriend on the edge of the city have long since disappeared under concrete and suburbia. The ring road has been repeatedly remodelled over the last 20 years, and in places is now a vast river of tarmac more than eight lanes wide. Beautiful meadows coloured with wild flowers have become unremarkable "executive housing", and the remaining woods nearby thinned out and cut through with gravel walkways. In the newest developments the houses are built so close together that people look out only onto other buildings, paved courtyards and roads. Everywhere the horizon is being lost; everywhere is becoming a universalised Nowhere.

Humans have been altering the landscape here for thousands of years, but the changes of the last 40 years have probably been greater than during any comparable period. They are almost certainly irreversible, for it is inconceivable these recently built-over landscapes could be returned to a more natural condition. Some changes can appear to be improvements, such as turning industrial wastelands into residential housing and carefully tended parks, but we easily forget that before industrialisation these places were moors and estuaries teeming with wildlife. This generation's actions are systematically obliterating memory from the landscape.

In many areas of the world the changes in recent years have been far more dramatic. The shocking fact is that this same process is happening everywhere; almost no part of the planet remains untouched. Outside of the polar regions and deserts only tiny patches of wilderness survive, and even these are under great pressure from human encroachment.

Our way of life

For several centuries we have pursued economic development above all else, but as the implications become more obvious our political leaders are forced to consider “green issues”. The common view is that in principle we can choose between more development and safeguarding what remains of the natural world. Planning regulations, for example, aim to achieve a balance between economic, social and environmental considerations, as though we could trade trees, fields, rivers and wildlife for factories, office blocks, supermarkets and housing estates.

This balancing act called Sustainable Development results in the continued loss of the natural world. At this point in humanity's domination of the planet, with 65 million people crowded onto our little islands and more 7.5 billion across the world, further development could not possibly be sustainable. The term “development” itself implies a natural and desirable process, in the way a child develops into an adult or a sapling into a tree. In the context of the economy it means something very different: unrelenting and perpetual expansion. When used by politicians and business people it merely justifies our current value system and deflects meaningful debate about alternatives.

Any visit to a supermarket or department store confirms what “development” means. We are confronted by bounteous displays of packaged food, fashion, consumer durables, electronics, giftware and furniture. What these represent is a process of plunder and the proliferation of factories, cities, roads, ports and vehicles. We are oblivious to all this. We casually purchase, consume and discard products without much thought about their origin and impact. In fact it is extremely difficult to know anything, for suppliers want us to remain ignorant, fearing that if we knew the truth we might not buy their goods. They want us to consider them in isolation from the real world, and for the most part we go along with this, as we have been conditioned. This is the first stage of consumer collusion with the system. As David Kidner puts it:



The attractive appearance of consumer goods is foregrounded, while their origins in resource extraction and processes of production are hidden from us, so that the wholeness of the world is veiled.⁴

The second stage of collusion is to avoid thinking about what happens when our purchases become “junk”, which often results from designed obsolescence, boredom or changes in fashion. Notwithstanding efforts to recycle materials, much of what we buy becomes “landfill”. This curious, euphemistic term covers up what really happens. What land are we talking about? Presumably it is

⁴ David W Kidner, ‘Nature and experience in the culture of delusion’

sufficiently out of sight for us not to see what is going on. And what does “land-filling” actually entail? We would rather not think about the noise, ugliness, loss of landscapes, pollution and contaminated groundwater. Again we are conditioned: to believe our problem (“rubbish”, “clutter”, “waste”) can be solved without consequence.

Our culture requires acts of deliberate and continual denial. We mentally place ourselves outside the ecosystem and barely consider it. We rarely see our complicity in the actions of mining and logging companies, manufacturers, transporters, retailers and governments.

Over the last sixty years or so we have been told, and come to believe, that our way of life consists mainly of consuming things, mostly produced by global corporations. The appearance of choice, in supermarkets and on the internet, obscures how we have all been made to conform:

Corporations have a stake in all of us living our lives in a similar manner, achieving our pleasures from the things we buy. [...] All corporations share an identical economic, cultural and social vision, and seek to accelerate society’s (and individual) acceptance of that vision.⁵

Governments and businesses everywhere are united in believing there is not enough economic activity, and as citizens and consumers we can only agree with them. It is not enough that we are already destroying the planet; the prevailing view is that we must do so at an ever faster rate. An economy forever expanding due to technological change and rising expectations is said to provide “opportunities”. We assume that the world will always be able to accommodate whatever we want to do.

Environmentalists reading the warning signs urge us to look after the natural world because our lives depend on it, saying this as though it were a little-known fact. They also tell us that we do not own the planet but merely hold it in trust for future generations. This seemingly enlightened view is incorrect, however, for it considers only human needs and elevates our own kind above all other species. Such a basic misperception will always lead to mistreatment of the planet.

The path of the Earth’s humanisation has been forged via the conceptual, enacted and technologically mediated transfiguration of the natural world as “resources”.⁶

Anthropocentrism - putting human needs and desires first - has opened the way for, and justified, the exploitation of animals and their habitats for human financial gain. This is the fundamental and unquestioned view of our culture, the foundation of our economic system. Animals are “livestock”, sea-life are “fisheries”, trees are “timber” and mountains are sources of “raw materials”, all of which end up as “products” in our shops.

Our lack of sincerity about “saving the planet”, even for ourselves, is exposed by our token efforts at recycling, turning off the lights or installing solar panels. The environmental impact of these measures is marginal, and yet they distract us from wider and more difficult questions about how we live. If we were to cease being distracted, we would readily see that almost everything we are doing is wrong.

The interconnectedness of the Machine-world (Personal observation # 2)

The scale and complexity of the system are hard to grasp. If we only think abstractly we will not be able to relate to what is going on everywhere or understand how we are part of it. One way to overcome this is to examine in detail just one ordinary aspect of our lives and start asking a few questions. This is an example from my own experience.

⁵ Jerry Mander, ‘In the absence of the sacred’

⁶ Eileen Crist, ‘Ignoring nature no more’

One morning in my favourite café in Bristol I looked down at the coffee, croissant and bottled fizzy water I regularly buy and wondered how these things had come to me.



How and where was the wheat grown to make the croissant? What forests or natural grasslands had been cleared to make way for single-crop agriculture? Which animals had lost their habitat and probably vanished forever? What chemical fertilisers had been ploughed into the soil, only to enter foodstuffs and groundwater? How much topsoil was being eroded by aggressive farming methods and where was it going?

What damage was being done by the dairy industry to produce the butter? What were the living conditions of the cows, and to what extent were they suffering? How much trauma did they endure through enforced separation from their calves? How were their lives brought to an end? What effect was industrialised farming having on the workers?

What land in Brazil or elsewhere had been stripped of natural vegetation to grow the coffee beans? How many people had been displaced and traditional cultures debased as a result? How much CO₂ had been emitted to bring the coffee to Britain, and how had the fossil fuels been extracted? How and where were the transportation vehicles manufactured? What metals had to be gouged from the ground, and waste materials and chemicals dumped? What factories, roads, runways and housing for workers now disfigured the landscape?

Why have we been persuaded to consume branded water, often shipped long-distance, in place of local tap water? How were the glass, metal cap and paper label of the bottle produced? How was the electricity generated to keep the chilled cabinet cool? How was this cabinet manufactured and brought to the shop?

I soon realised that any line of enquiry could continue indefinitely. These few trivial items out of the many we consume every day illustrate the interconnectedness of the industrial economy and the people engaged in it. Even a single humble product implies the existence of the whole industrial system. Countless thousands, possibly millions, of people had been involved in some way to bring these things to my table, and I could only begin to imagine the impact on the planet.

My conclusion was this: that every part of the global Machine-world is connected to every other part. This mirrors the interconnectedness of the natural world, but with one awful difference: whereas nature left to itself has allowed life to evolve with breathtaking complexity and variety, the Machine-world is doing the very opposite.

The death machine

The interconnectedness of the Machine-world is certainly a marvel of human invention, but it is based on systematic and relentless destruction. As David Edwards puts it, “business is a form of warfare”⁷, a battle between competitors and against the natural world. David Kidner says with equal bluntness that “what has befallen the world since the advent of industrialism is a catastrophe”⁸. All our unquestioned beliefs about the desirability of economic development cover up a basic and appalling truth:

⁷ David Edwards, interview with Derrick Jensen

⁸ David W Kidner, ‘Nature and experience in the culture of delusion’

Industrialisation is a process of taking entire communities of living beings and turning them into commodities and dead zones.⁹

This is a form of imperialism built on an alliance between business and government. The European empires from the sixteenth century onwards were simultaneously commercial and cultural enterprises setting out to exploit the lands and people they conquered. Although those empires have gone, the same process continues through global corporations and the international financial system. Governments desiring economic growth, jobs and taxes provide the necessary legal and political backing.

Industrialisation is advancing to colonise all corners of the planet:

Our society is characterised by an inability to leave anything in nature alone. Every piece of land, every creature, every mineral in the oceans, every growing plant, every mountain, every inch of desert is examined for its potential contribution to commercial development and exploitation.¹⁰

This system is extending its reach, requiring more land, more “raw materials”, more workers and more consumers. In so doing it produces increasing quantities of waste and pollution, poisoning the environment - the land, sea, rivers and air upon which we all depend - and making it less able to support life. In many cities and regions the air is barely breathable and fresh drinking water scarcely available.

Profits come before people and the environment; that is the logic of the market, where shareholders are far removed from the activities of the companies they own, and managers are paid to maximise the return on investment. The quest for profit will always find the quickest, easiest and cheapest route to getting what is needed, while leaving whatever problems it creates for others to live with.

The drive to cut costs leads to grim working conditions for millions in places like China and Bangladesh, who perform repetitive tasks under constant surveillance and time pressure. The same imperative has given rise to industrialised food production, described by Daniel Quinn as “totalitarian agriculture”¹¹, where wildlife is driven to extinction and domesticated animals may spend their entire brief lives in brutal conditions reminiscent of concentration camps. Yuval Noah Harari asserts that:

Tens of billions of animals have been subjected to a regime of industrial exploitation whose cruelty has no precedent in the annals of planet Earth. [...] Industrial agriculture may well be the greatest crime in history.¹²

The violence inherent in the system is endemic and takes many forms: the living Earth is being covered with tarmac and concrete; plastics are proliferating on land and in the sea and finding their way into the food-chain; nuclear power stations produce vast quantities of radioactive materials that will be harmful to life for thousands of years to come; wireless technology gives out

⁹ Lierre Keith, ‘Deep green resistance: strategy to save the planet’

¹⁰ Jerry Mander, ‘In the absence of the sacred’

¹¹ Daniel Quinn, ‘The great forgetting’

¹² Yuval Noah Harari, ‘Sapiens: a brief history of humankind’

electromagnetic radiation, which may cause serious health problems¹³; urban and industrial landscapes - almost always uniform, sterile and dispiriting - are spreading like a virus.

Industrialism is a machine that brutalises everyone and destroys everything in its path. It is of little consequence to the corporations that the diverse natural world so full of life is being stripped bare, reduced to a monoculture or turned into a wasteland. As consumers we remain largely unaware of this, ignorant of the fact that the very products we buy embody the system's violence.

The artificial world

For ten thousand years humans have been progressively distancing themselves from the natural world. In the era of global capitalism this process has accelerated, to the point where there is a "complete substitution of the real world for the artificial world of urban man".¹⁴ Having no other experience for comparison we think of this as a normal living environment, but from the perspective of pre-industrial cultures it most certainly is not:

[According to Native Americans] white society is the "dead world" because of the concrete environments it creates, where nothing grows.¹⁵

What is the effect on us of living in a dead world? Can it be conducive to our psychological wellbeing?

This substitution is also happening culturally, as ideas and representations intercede between us and the physical world and create an ever more complex alternative reality, which in turn reshapes how we think and behave. With the coming of computers this process is taking on new and more alarming characteristics:

The movement toward a technology based on digital rather than analogue information is consistent with industrialism's drive to develop a world that has thrown off its natural origins. We are educated to think abstractly rather than concretely, discarding context and relevance in order to move within a world of words and numbers.¹⁶

A facsimile of the entire world is being constructed: patents for genetic material, copyrights for ideas and artwork, call logs for conversations, test scores for knowledge, mp3s for songs.¹⁷

Few people have considered how the replacement of analogue representations with wholly unnatural digital ones affects the human psyche, but it can only be disruptive. At a level far below most people's awareness we are being re-attuned from sensual reality to a computerised version of it. The mind's relationship to the body as well as to the world is being restructured.

Artificiality is perhaps the most striking aspect of modernity. Homes, workplaces and transport systems are designed to shield us from weather, temperature variations, differences between night and day, sunlight and seasons. Not only are we removed from these influences, but our attention is ever more caught up in electronic technology, such as computers, mobile devices and televisions.

¹³ Dr Magda Havas & Camilla Rees, 'Public health SOS: the shadow side of the wireless revolution'

¹⁴ Vine Deloria, 'You talk, we listen'

¹⁵ Jerry Mander, 'In the absence of the sacred'

¹⁶ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

¹⁷ CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective, 'Work: capitalism, economics, resistance'

Our lives are being redesigned to enable us to live independently of the natural world 24 hours a day the whole year round.



Two major consequences follow from this. Firstly, we have only the dimmest knowledge of the effect of our lifestyles on the planet, for in the artificial world we are surrounded by stories and images and that do not convey what is really happening. Secondly, our lives are diminished by our isolation from natural rhythms and energies, and from lack of contact with non-human intelligences.

Humans co-evolved with the planet and other animals over millions of years, and our bodies and minds developed for a life embedded in nature. Within only a few generations we have created for ourselves an entirely new

experience that cannot fail to affect how we think, feel and see:

Throughout our lives we are exposed to psychological, physical, biological and cosmic rhythms that determine our existence in an essential fashion. Rhythm and consciousness are intimately bound up together. An alteration of our bodily rhythms creates a change in our consciousness.¹⁸

Instead of responding to the rhythms of nature we are moving, working and living to the relentless rhythm of machines and commerce. Enclosed by human constructions, which are more and more the same everywhere, we are unable to *feel* the land and the qualities of each unique place. As a result we lose orientation and meaning, and are compelled to search for them in the artificial world. However, the loss of what is natural around us also diminishes what is natural within us. It is therefore unsurprising that the world we create, in spite of the achievements of art and culture, too often reflects our own damaged state, making it all the more difficult to find what we have lost:

As we construct our self-made world, we construct projections and metaphors of our own mindscapes. [...] A landscape wounded by acts of man, the fragmentation of the cityscape, as well as insensitive buildings, are external and materialised evidence of an alienation and shattering of the human inner space.¹⁹

What Curtis White describes as “the unrelenting ugliness, hostility, sterility and spiritual bankruptcy that is the suburb, the strip mall, the office building and the freeway”²⁰ is not incidental; it reflects the sort of people we have become.

All this is evident in our ordinary sensual experience. Walking down city streets we have little awareness of being physically on the Earth. Smooth surfaces extend everywhere, interspersed only occasionally with trees or patches of managed greenery. Traffic noise, voices and music fill the air. All around are buildings, straight lines, signs and advertising. Everything informs us that humans are the primary reality, the centre of our consciousness and the source of our sense of selfhood.

¹⁸ Holger Kalweit, ‘Shamans, healers and medicine men’

¹⁹ Juhani Pallasmaa, quoted in David W Kidner, ‘Nature and experience in the culture of delusion’

²⁰ Curtis White, ‘The ecology of work’

We are now so used to this humanised landscape that we rarely notice directly the absence of nature. It may manifest only as an inchoate lack of something that cannot quite be named, that keeps us seeking, consuming, travelling, complaining. What we really, deeply miss is the calming and uplifting experience of being outdoors and in contact with other life forms. We become depressed by the lack of sunlight through spending so much of our lives in buildings, and try to compensate for this by taking expensive vacations. Travelling at high speed disconnects us from the land and all its intimate sights, sounds and pleasures, making us desperate to be constantly entertained. High-rise living leaves us feeling uprooted from the Earth, so we are forever in search of a place where we can feel at home. This restless, neurotic behaviour is what enables capitalism to thrive.

Money at the heart of the system

The connecting and energising force of the Machine-world is money. It signifies the ability to do things, make choices, and gain freedom from necessity, and for these reasons strongly motivates people. We are told that love for money rather than money itself is root of all evil,²¹ but our ceaseless desire for it has become the root of our entire way of life. This makes the economic system and our dependence on it a moral and spiritual issue.

The principal effect of money is to distance us from the consequences of our actions. According to economics textbooks it is a medium of exchange and a store of value, which make it seem natural and innocuous, but this downplays what it actually does in the world. Money enables us to acquire things without having to engage with the people and processes involved in bringing them to us. It thus keeps us many times removed from the facts and makes it easy to avoid thinking ethically about our choices.

While seeming neither good nor bad in itself, it unleashes on the world the immense power of the industrial system. It does this by reducing everything to a common factor and turning all natural and manufactured things, and even people, into commodities to be bought and sold. Forests are felled for profit and workers dismissed to save cost; what happens next, to former employees or the devastated landscape, is no-one's responsibility. Money serves its function and moves on.

The irony is that money itself has no intrinsic value. Governments create fiat currency out of nothing and banks loan it into existence, multiplying many times over as it passes through the economy. Few people really understand what it is, where it comes from or how it works, and this gives it an almost mythical and semi-divine status. What sustains its power is universal belief in its efficacy, reinforced by laws that compel people to accept official currency. It is the focal point of the world's unofficial yet dominant religion.

The high priests of this religion are the economists, who while disputing among themselves have persuaded us to believe their description of the world. Their acolytes are the accountants, market analysts and personal financial advisers who translate our hopes and anxieties into cold, hard numbers. Nowhere in their rationality is there space for the living, breathing, feeling world: the world of actual losses rather than merely financial ones.

For our economics textbooks to be accurate, they would need to be printed in blood.²²

Spending money alters our psychology. We usually feel superior to those providing us with goods and services, and to those with less money, though we recoil from knowing about their poverty, for it reminds us of our own vulnerability. Consumerism is the main form of addiction in this culture, one fully sanctioned by government. It is addictive precisely because, contrary to the propaganda, it brings neither fulfilment nor contentment, so we are soon looking for the next "hit".

²¹ 1 Timothy 6.10

²² Derrick Jensen, 'A language older than words'

The more we spend, the more we have to work, and the more we work at meaningless jobs, the greater is our need to consume by way of compensation. Using debt to finance personal spending creates a second trap, into which millions fall. The national debt and trade deficit are a third trap that ensnares us all, keeping us working for the system.

The question 'how much is enough?' can never be answered from within a culture that knows no limit. Given a choice between money and life, most people choose money every time without realising it. Forests and oceans, air and soil, countless living beings, societies and workers everywhere, even our own creativity and vitality, are sacrificed for the sake of money.



One of the problems with our economic system is that money is valued over all else. That is enough to guarantee widespread misery, degradation and ultimately the destruction of most, if not all, life on this planet.²³

It achieves this by encouraging belief in an isolated self: *my money, my possessions, my financial security*. The economic system assumes people are rational egoists, forever pursuing their own selfish interests to the exclusion of all other considerations. The culture holds out the promise that money can magically transform our lives by lifting us out of mundane physical reality; it appears to be the means of satisfying almost every kind of need. From this is born indifference to the actual world around us, except where it meets personal desires. This perpetuates ignorance of how our lives are interconnected with, and dependent upon, the whole of life. As Mark Boyle expresses it:

Our deluded sense of self is the root of many of our current personal, social and ecological crises. Money is instrumental to maintaining and affirming this delusion.²⁴

It is impossible to imagine modern civilisation without money at its heart, and equally inconceivable that money could create or be compatible with a radically different system. Money, capitalism and the economic and environmental crises - all core characteristics of the Machine-world - are inextricably linked.

The invention of time

The belief that time exists independently of nature is a product of civilisation. The yearly calendar acknowledges the cycling of the Earth around the sun, beyond all human intervention, and farmers must still recognise the turning of the seasons; but for all practical purposes we now live by our invented notions of time. The seven-day week owes nothing to nature, and neither do hours, minutes and seconds.

Clock-time has replaced sun-time and moon-time as well as personal time; the modern world is obliterating distinctions between night and day. How many urban people witness sunrise and sunset, or notice the monthly waxing and waning of the moon? How many are aware of the solar solstices and equinoxes, once so significant in human society? For many traditional peoples the sun and moon were images of the divine, to be respected or worshipped: reminders of powers beyond ourselves.

²³ Derrick Jensen, 'A language older than words'

²⁴ Mark Boyle, 'The moneyless manifesto'

The “imagined order” of time, like money, is an essential element of the artificial world that is rapidly displacing the natural world. This standardised, commodified time is wholly in service to the Machine:

To be of use in industrial processes time has to be “emptied”. [...] For nature, time is inseparable from life, not an abstraction from it.²⁵

Such “empty” time is “a pretty exact measure of alienation”²⁶, and to a very great extent it controls us. The clock tells us what we must do and where we should be, speeding up everything and making us anxious. We are constantly fighting *against* time as though it were an opponent, upset if the train is a few minutes late, when we get stuck in stationary traffic or are late for an appointment. Employers count the hours we work, as we do; we talk about being “on the clock”, meaning that we have *sold* our time and are not free to do as we wish. We are told that time is money and not to be wasted, forgetting that both time and money are merely the result of our way of thinking.

This precise and objective time tells us the hours are uniform, though we know from our own experience that an afternoon at the beach or with a friend is far richer and more expansive than the exact same time spent in the office. As the pace of life quickens, clock-time intrudes even into our leisure. Through constant use of smart-phones and tablets we stay in touch with the ticking world, reminding us always of the arrow of time and what must yet be done. A culture that obsesses about the future is unconscious of what really happens in the present.

Most people rush from one thing to another, as the ideal of modern life is busyness. For all the seconds and minutes measured out by digital clocks, millions experience “time poverty”: not enough time to go around. We imagine that by racing we will get ahead, but our lives are finite and there is no destination to be reached. The unspoken, unacknowledged hope is that somehow we can be freed from the tyranny of time. Meanwhile, the Earth continues to cycle around the sun as it has done for billions of years.

Life mediated by technology

The dominant feature of the artificial world is the ever-expanding reach of technology. Since the industrial revolution people have become used to constant innovation, to the extent that we see it as completely normal. During the last twenty years the lives of most people have changed radically with computers reshaping and colonising more and more of human experience. Digital technology has already transformed the way we work, socialise, maintain friendships, entertain ourselves and learn about the world. In so doing it has also vastly increased the ability of businesses and governments to know who we are, what we do, and where and when we do it.

Any experience mediated by technology is altered. For example, an email, text or phone call is not the equivalent of a face-to-face conversation, and even Skype or tele-conferencing maintains a subtle distance between people which modifies how they behave. Consider also the difference between seeing a picture of trees on a screen and actually standing in a forest; imagine the smells, sounds, qualities of light and shade, and the sense of total immersion. Studies show that people can feel better simply looking at images of natural things, which leads some to say we do not need to encounter the real world. What we miss, however, is the full-spectrum experience in all its otherness, ambiguity and sensory richness: something we can only discover uniquely for ourselves.

Technology therefore comes between us, other people and the natural world. This alters our sense of belonging, our affiliation. The more we respond to representations of the world, the more they become our new reality. Few people recognise how extraordinary this is in the development of

²⁵ David W Kidner, ‘Nature and experience in the culture of delusion’

²⁶ John Zerzan, ‘You may be an anarchist and not even know it’, interview with Derrick Jensen

human life, because we so readily adapt to new technologies and soon forget they are something added. Their advance into our lives happens steadily and stealthily; we are unaware of being swept along into a different way of being.

Jerry Mander and others have written about the impact of single innovations, such as the telephone or television. Within decades they transformed society, for good or ill, and in ways that no-one could have foreseen; but they also changed who we are or could be. Vine Deloria has asked a question about one such technological change:

What effect have automobiles had on our spiritual life?²⁷

Such a question will sound odd to most people, not least because spirituality has become such a degraded notion, remote from actual lived experience. There can be little doubt the car has profoundly changed our relationship to the world and other people, and not for the better (though in our secular religion it is almost heresy to say so). Like money, it has reinforced our sense of separation from nature and other people, of being an isolated and autonomous self. Now the computer, smartphone and internet are driving relentless change, with presumably similar, if not wholly predictable, long-term consequences. We are told by the commercial and political interests promoting technology that it *empowers* us, little realising how it acquires *power over* us:

With each new generation of technology, and with each stage of technological expansion, human beings have fewer alternatives and become more deeply immersed into technological consciousness.²⁸

By subduing nature we have become slaves to technology and its underlying belief system.²⁹

The issue is not change in general but how it moves us in one particular direction: opening up new possibilities, for sure, but closing off others. We imagine we control technology because humans invented it; but almost without our noticing it has become the entire environment, remoulding us and determining how we live.

New technological systems have extended human power enormously; but with increasing technological sophistication, together with the harnessing of technology to economic purposes, the question arises as to whether the power is actually human at all, or whether we are becoming increasingly peripheral adjuncts to an autonomous industrial system that is neither human nor natural.³⁰

In this global techno-grid we are all wired together, drawn toward a common goal that concerns not human and planetary wellbeing but money, power and control.

Technology is not neutral; [...] it comes with an inevitable logic, bearing the purposes and the values of the economic system that spawns it.³¹

²⁷ Vine Deloria, 'Where the buffalo go: how science ignores the living world'

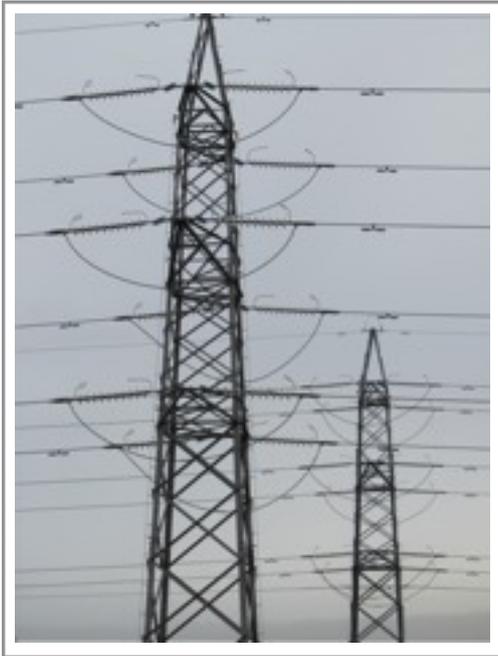
²⁸ Jerry Mander, 'In the absence of the sacred'

²⁹ Vine Deloria, 'Where the buffalo go: how science ignores the living world'

³⁰ David W Kidner. 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

³¹ Kirkpatrick Sale, 'Rebels against the future'

John Zerzan puts this succinctly: "We are the vehicle of the Megamachine, not its beneficiary."³²



Technology alters the way we think, feel and see. Many people have great difficulty concentrating on any task because their attention is being systematically fragmented and debased. Addicted to noise, speed and constant stimulation, few can sit still and be content, or bear silence and simply attend to the world around them. Our bodies are constantly exposed to electrical current and electro-magnetic radiation which disrupt our inner energy and are a potential major health risk, though governments and corporations do not wish to us to know this. Malidoma Patrice Somé observes that modernised people cannot experience the vibration of the natural world, the origin of our wellbeing, in the manner of our ancestors, and as a result have become alienated and distressed:

Machine technology is the spirit of death made to look like life. It makes life seem easier, comfortable and cosy, but the price we pay includes the dehumanisation of the self.³³

It is therefore unsurprising that people's emotional lives seem increasingly stunted. The way we see the world through a screen and at a distance alters how we react to shocking or unreasonable events and behaviours, even those taking place around us. Scrolling and clicking through images of violence and distress we become habituated to watching and not engaging. We can spend hours looking at things to buy and barely notice or respond to people next to us. Alongside passivity and acquiescence, the internet also encourages fake and disembodied concern, as well as anger and rage, as evidenced by people's use of social media and readers' comments on any newspaper article or blog. This sort of emotional reaction can be easily manipulated by others with power and influence.

Learning how not to see

In society we are actively taught to see and believe certain things such that they become natural to us, part of "the way things are". For example, in modern industrial civilisation we are told that:

- Human needs and wants are primary
- Other beings cannot think and feel as we do, so it is acceptable to exploit them
- Human beings are the pinnacle of evolution/creation
- Civilisation in the story of human progress, so we have little to learn from the past
- Our ancestors had lives that were nasty, brutish and short
- People in traditional societies benefit from being westernised and brought into the modern world
- Economic activity is a good thing, and the more of it the better
- Having money and possessions leads to happiness and security
- The harder we strive, the more we will get the life we want
- Competition is the basis for a good society
- The individual is more important than society as a whole
- We need all the infrastructure of the modern world to sustain a worthwhile life
- Human ingenuity will ensure that the future will be better than the past
- New technologies will solve most of the problems we currently face

³² John Zerzan, 'Seize the day'

³³ Malidoma Patrice Somé, 'Ritual: power, healing and community'

We receive such messages from our earliest years, from family and peers, teachers, media organisations, advertisers, politicians, employers and co-workers. Since they are repeated and reinforced everywhere we think they are a description of reality. On some matters there may be small differences of opinion, and debate about relatively unimportant details is held up as evidence of democracy, diversity and choice.

Most of our collective beliefs express the story of Progress. Its basic message is that our forebears lived in ignorance and poverty, from which we have lifted ourselves, and that if we trust the system all our hopes will be fulfilled through more development, more money and faster, better machines:

The utopian future is the same promise we've been handed since the start of civilisation: that we'll go to heaven as long as we do as we're told. And in our time, heaven is a sort of technological, materialist utopia.³⁴

Although the economy tends to expand and each year brings new and more marvellous technology, there are few signs of any collective increase in human happiness or fulfilment: quite the reverse, in fact, as the world becomes busier, more polluted, more stressful and more insecure. In spite of the system's failure to deliver its promises, we are reluctant to lose faith in the story. We tend to blame other people - politicians, regulators, certain businesses - rather than see what is wrong systemically. Often we attribute dissatisfaction with the way our lives are turning out to personal failing. Most people cannot imagine any alternative to what is presented, for we have been told this is the real world.



We are living in an age of denial. Derrick Jensen says this is a "culture of make-believe", while John Zerzan points out the "jarring contrast between reality and what is said about reality"³⁵.

All around us is the evidence of the systematic corrosion of our humanity and the irreversible collapse of our ecosystems, piling up in ways impossible to ignore, and yet most people expend enormous energy to keep themselves from these realities.³⁶

For David Kidner this is evidence not just of cognitive dissonance but of what should rightly be called collective mental illness:

When an individual loses touch with reality we call it 'psychosis'. When a civilisation loses touch with reality we call it 'normality'.³⁷

As Arno Gruen puts it: "We are brought up to obey but not to think or feel for ourselves".³⁸ We look to others for cues as to what forms of behaviour and speech are acceptable, even what can and cannot be discussed.

³⁴ David Edwards, interview with Derrick Jensen

³⁵ John Zerzan, 'You may be an anarchist and not even know it'

³⁶ Robert Jensen, 'Epic fail'

³⁷ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

³⁸ Arno Gruen, 'The insanity of normality'

Capitalism and the state reward those who compromise and conform. They make almost everyone into an employee - even the self-employed must earn the living from other people - but those who depend on the system for their living are never free to speak the truth about it. This is one reason why there is a such an emphasis on getting a job as a sign of personal responsibility, though the actual conditions of employment are part of the problem that cannot be discussed honestly:

Our culture's assumption that there is virtue in work flatters us into thinking that we're doing something noble, when we are only allowing ourselves to be treated like automatons. We all have our place, our "job", and it is an ever less human place.³⁹

Submission to authority is completely normalised because, as Paul Kingsnorth puts it, "civilisation has always been a project of control".⁴⁰ Our much-vaunted "freedom" as citizens mostly consists of the ability to choose between the thousands of products and experiences made available by industrialism, and the opportunity once every five years to select between almost identical sets of politicians, none of whom tell the truth. The symbolic freedom of capitalist democracy is a seductive trap that does not reveal its true nature or the absence of real alternatives.

It is not easy to see the bigger picture of what is going on:

Mass technological society is structured top-down, its fragmented nature keeping most of us from ever grasping an understanding of the whole.⁴¹

We turn to the main media outlets to describe and explain the world to us, but they merely propagate the dominant view. Reporters tend to focus on dramatic, short term events and not on longer term trends; rarely do they offer comprehensive explanations.

Although the planet is being demolished before our eyes, the media remain content to isolate each new disaster.⁴²

The system comes as a whole: a complete package, underpinned by universal materialistic beliefs that give a largely false view of reality. The ever-expanding cities, clogged roads and railway networks, tamed and ordered countryside, near invisibility of wildlife and silent catastrophe of the rivers, forests and oceans: all are evidence of the relentless fundamentalism of our age. We think that in finding our place within this system we are being reasonable and realistic, when really we are in the grip of a pervasive and destructive ideology we scarcely even know exists.

Religion and the desacralisation of the world

One might assume religion would provide an alternative to the Machine-world's ideology. Jesus, Buddha and Laozi, as well as more recent teachers, have undoubtedly been highly critical of worldly and materialistic values. Nonetheless, the main religious organisations founded in their name have largely made peace with the system and tend to focus instead on a narrow interpretation of personal morality and behaviour. Along the way they have become corporatised, reflecting and copying the practices of secular institutions. Many are effectively large multinational businesses, amassing income and assets, and obsessing about market share and competition from other belief systems.

³⁹ Curtis White, 'The ecology of work'

⁴⁰ Paul Kingsnorth, 'Dark ecology'

⁴¹ Chellis Glendinning, 'Technology, trauma and the wild'

⁴² David Edwards, interview with Derrick Jensen

It is therefore unsurprising that the dominant forms of religion tend to reinforce materialistic values. This is most evident in those Protestant sects where financial success is considered a sign of divine favour. Few Christians of any denomination take seriously Jesus' warnings about wealth and power; few Buddhists renounce worldly possessions as Gautama Buddha did; few Daoists follow Laozi in seeking a life of simplicity.

These radical teachings are expressions of a spiritual vision that has been largely lost. Organised religion talks about "salvation" or "enlightenment" as though they had little to do with this world and this life. Both secularised religion and atheistic humanism have displaced any notion of a "higher good". The values that inform society lack any sense of the sacred to define or constrain our actions.

The ideology of the Machine-world sees the world only as material forms to be manipulated for financial gain. The violent replacement of nature with an artificial world is itself an act of desecration and desecralisation:

Today we live in a world shorn of sacredness; [...] mass-produced standardised commodities, cookie-cutter houses, identical packages of food, and anonymous relationships with institutional functionaries all deny the uniqueness of the world.⁴³

Almost nobody now believes the world to be sacred; the very idea of such sacredness has been rendered meaningless, incomprehensible. In traditional societies the entire world - the sun and moon, land, rivers and seas, as well as animals - is alive and worthy of respect. In modern societies both scientific and religious anthropocentrism legitimise human domination and exploitation of the Earth, which partly explains why people do not take the environmental crisis seriously. A desecralised world has little value in its own right and is therefore extremely vulnerable to human misuse and destruction.

Through their inability to encounter the sacred in nature, modern people suffer diminishment; their experience of human-being is limited. Science tells us we are merely our minds and genetic heritage, moulded by environment and history. If this is all we are, if we cannot see and express the sacred in ourselves, how can we find it elsewhere and be truly at home in the world?

A road to nowhere

It has become fashionable in academic circles to assert that our ideas about a pristine, pre-humanised nature are conditioned by culture. This leads some to argue that "nature" amounts to nothing more than the meanings we give to it, which is to say there is no sound basis for halting human intervention; there are no valid criteria, only shifting preferences. Environmentalism has largely come to the same conclusion, that it is entirely appropriate for us to choose which features of the natural world we wish to sacrifice, modify or preserve.

Nonetheless, there are two vital sources of information about the impact of changes taking place in the modern world: the testimony of surviving traditional peoples, and what we have witnessed in our own lifetimes. As David Kidner says:

The view that nature is culturally constructed requires an intense social and psychological effort at forgetting - both of the way nature was before it was transformed and the effort needed to transform it.⁴⁴

The world we are in the process of creating is qualitatively different from nature, though in our urbanised, human-focused societies we barely notice what we have done:

⁴³ Charles Eisenstein, 'Sacred economics'

⁴⁴ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

Our world is not alive; it is a machine, not an animal, and we have become starkly desensitised to the reality beyond the asphalt and street lights.⁴⁵

This extraordinary state of such ignorance has been based on two fundamental flaws in our thinking: firstly, that the world consists only of separable entities; and secondly, that it really only exists for our own kind, which Vine Deloria describes as “the most extravagant pretence”⁴⁶. In the grip of this delusion we are now undermining our own long-term survival, along with that of all the other species. Even more than twenty years ago Kirkpatrick Sale said there was a war between the technosphere and the biosphere, as a result of which:

There is not one life-support system upon which the biosphere depends for its existence that is not severely threatened or getting worse.⁴⁷

As judged by our actions, we actually prefer six-lane highways, super-fast aircraft, personal computers and food wrapped in plastic to a life-bearing, life-sustaining planet.

The same delusion blinds us to the truth about the Machine-world. In seeing only the parts, we cannot grasp the whole and therefore fail to understand what is surely coming, what we have already set in motion:

The denial of higher-order emergent properties allows us to treat nature as an amorphous collection of animals, plants and physical characteristics that are ripe for exploitation by human ingenuity, rather than as a highly evolved system. Equally, and equally disastrously, we deny the emergent properties of industrialism, convincing ourselves that we are somehow ‘in control’, that industrialism exists ‘for our benefit’, and that it has no telos of its own.⁴⁸

It is now evident that civilisation has brought us to an impasse. By its own internal logic it can offer no solutions, only more of the same, and at an accelerating pace. If we wish to find another way forward we have to look outside of the system for a completely different worldview. One such source is shamanic culture, which is thousands of years old and predates civilisation and the Machine-world. Drawing on this heritage Holger Kalweit writes:

Our culture needs a great deal more than a changed lifestyle. In the Western mind, thought-structures and the relationship between consciousness and matter are badly out of balance, so that our world has become wholly pervaded by a materialism that is threatening to squash us to death. We are in a state of materialistic hypertrophy, and our eventual self-destruction would in fact be no more than the logical consequence of our attitudes. Here is what the Indian shaman Lame Deer says on this subject:

Only human beings have come to a point where they no longer know why they exist. They don't use their brains and they have forgotten the secret knowledge of their bodies, their senses, or their dreams. They don't use the knowledge the spirit has put into every one of them; they are not even aware of this, and so they stumble along blindly on the road to nowhere - a paved highway which they themselves bulldoze and

⁴⁵ Paul Kingsnorth, ‘In the black chamber’

⁴⁶ Vine Deloria, ‘C G Jung and the Sioux traditions’

⁴⁷ Kirkpatrick Sale, ‘Rebels against the future’

⁴⁸ David W Kidner, ‘Nature and experience in the culture of delusion’

*make smooth so that they can get faster to the big, empty hole which they'll find at the end, waiting to swallow them up.*⁴⁹

Kalweit and Lame Deer are saying that real change is unlikely to come from within our culture. Humanity took a wrong path around 10,000 years ago, starting with agriculture, then the settled way of life, civilisation, urbanisation, money, mechanised time and ever more sophisticated technology. Those developments have in turn changed our way of being, such that for the vast majority of people it is extremely difficult to be other than the way they currently are.

The question is: are we, or at least some of us, prepared to take up the challenge of finding a different road to travel?



⁴⁹ Holger Kalweit, 'Dreamtime and inner space: the world of the shaman'

PART TWO: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE MACHINE-WORLD

Before we consider how to respond to the Crisis, we need to understand in more detail how the Machine-world affects our own psychology. Collectively we have created the system, but it has then re-created us. The particular form it takes now, and the problems it causes, are a reflection of present-day human-being. This relationship is explained by Glenn Parton and Curtis White:

The environmental crisis is rooted in the psychological crisis of the modern individual.⁵⁰

The crisis of a degraded natural world is a part of the larger problem of the crisis of thought, the crisis of faith and the crisis of the relation of human beings to Being.⁵¹

What exactly is this psychological crisis? In this section we will look at four interconnected aspects of human experience in the Machine-world: the collectively traumatising separation from nature; an inauthentic sense of self; processes of addiction; and feelings of alienation.

Trauma

As we have seen in Part One, human civilisation has been a journey out of the natural world; it is a fundamental break with how our ancestors lived for hundreds of thousands of years. We think the settled, urbanised, technologised world is entirely normal, but that is only because we have so little awareness of what existed previously.

Consciousness has been drastically reshaped to fit an environment that is very different to that in which our species evolved.⁵²

The transformation has been so significant, and so harmful to psychological wellbeing, that Chellis Glendinning and others describe it as a trauma. Its main characteristic is dissociation, a split in consciousness which results in the repression of pain and deprivation. Like most traumatic experiences it remains hidden and unrecognised, and all the more so because it is something we have in common. Its various manifestations appear to us as ordinary aspects of life rather than the characteristics of a particular culture.

What exactly are we missing? The question can scarcely be answered by modern people, especially those whose ancestors underwent urbanisation and industrialisation many generations ago, but Glendinning gives some indication from the experience of surviving nature-based cultures:

The trauma endured by technological people like ourselves is the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the natural world: from the tendrils of earthly textures, from the rhythms of sun and moon, from the spirits of the bears and trees, from the life force itself. This is also the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the kinds of social and cultural experiences our ancestors assumed when they lived in rhythm with the natural world.⁵³

In the controlled and enclosed spaces in which we mostly live, we hardly ever really see the natural world or feel its textures or notice its rhythms. Still less do we recognise the spirits of natural beings or know how to detect the presence or absence of the life force. Few people in the artificial world of human constructions and conceptions even know the life force exists. Accordingly, we have no

⁵⁰ Glenn Parton, 'The machine in our heads'

⁵¹ Curtis White, 'The barbaric heart'

⁵² David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

⁵³ Chellis Glendinning, 'Technology, trauma and the wild'

sense that our lives are part of the totality of Life, which means we experience both loss and grandiosity. The former leads to all kinds of compensatory, destructive and self-destructive behaviour, the latter to a culture that cannot see its own flaws.

Traumatized adults tend - unknowingly - to transmit trauma to their children, and with each successive generation, as we have moved further and further away from the natural world, the collective trauma has deepened. For people in the West this process has happened gradually and over many centuries, whereas for traditional peoples in the Americas, Africa, Australasia and Siberia it has been imposed on them more recently and rapidly by Western imperialism and capitalism. In all cases, the damage done to our psychology prepares us for the unnatural lives we must live in civilisation:

Trauma is a necessary part of civilising someone, because a natural, maturing individual will not otherwise accept the ideals of civilisation. These ideals - hierarchy, property, the State, for example - are so contrary to our tribal nature that they must be forcibly thrust into the human mind.⁵⁴

These notions of private property, enforced inequality and centralised authority are not inevitable. In many societies they have been absent, though the Machine-world would not function without them. As traumatized people we succumb to the roles allotted to us as employees, consumers and citizens of mass society. Our intimate connection with the life force has been lost, so that instead of belonging to the infinite universe we each have to settle for our own small place inside the Machine.

In civilisation we are not connected with the cosmos, nature, community or ourselves. Instead we are separated and isolated so that we can endure being just a commercial unit that functions, consumes and produces.⁵⁵

Inauthenticity

In a world shaped by machines, money, rules and coercion, there is little prospect that we can become complete and authentic selves. We are unable to experience what Arno Gruen describes as autonomy: "a state of integration in which one lives in full harmony with one's feelings and needs".⁵⁶ From our earliest days we learn to fit in, and become distrustful of feelings and needs not validated by others. This society is shaped by a cold rationality, in business and government, and even in educational institutions. We follow guides and role models who themselves have been conditioned in this way:

As long as we are not ourselves, we will try to be what other people are. If these people are also not themselves, the result is terrible.⁵⁷

As described in Part One we are taught not to see or feel for ourselves, not to trust what our senses tell us, but to be rational, reasonable and suggestible. This is how we have become hardened to the violence of the Machine-world, indifferent to nature and the fate of traditional peoples, tolerant of the cruelty of factory farms, and casually accepting of control and inequality. However, this crushes the life out of our inner world:

⁵⁴ Glenn Parton, 'The machine in our heads'

⁵⁵ Jesús Sepúlveda, 'In service to the deities'

⁵⁶ Arno Gruen, 'The betrayal of the self'

⁵⁷ Malidoma Patrice Somé, 'Of water and the spirit'

Lacking an environment that encourages feeling, we become less feeling people.⁵⁸

In the absence of authentic feeling we lose our autonomy and learn to rely on the images, symbols and ideas provided by the Machine-world.

The consciousness shaped by our contemporary stimulus-world is a shrunken one. [...] Proceeding increasingly from the assumption that people are machines with input and output features, it blocks their access to an inner life, preventing the development of their interior world; people will then end by corresponding exactly to the image of them posited in the first place.⁵⁹

We thus become more machine-like and lose the capacity for genuine autonomy:

The deification of the machine has been seen as the acme of our civilisational effort. Yet at the same time it is an expression of our increasingly poverty-stricken inner world. We have placed all our energy in the machine, and now our emptied psychic husks are dependent on the world of machines: hollow within, we must enter into a symbiosis with the cybernetic robots we have created.⁶⁰

In the Machine-world of relentless competition for money and status there is a sharp distinction between winners and losers. Those who reap the rewards are the ones most willing to abandon their humanity, or whose conditioning has already deprived them of it:

In our world it is those who are considered the most successful who adapt best to pseudo-reality. And those who adapt best are also the ones who are most cut off from their feelings.⁶¹

Business and government are dominated by sociopaths: single-minded people able to manipulate others for their own ends. They get to the top by selling inauthentic images of themselves and remaining cut off from their feelings. From their positions of power they influence the development of the whole of society and set the rules by which everyone must live.

The end result of inauthenticity and a lack of autonomy is the inability to recognise, trust and act upon one's own feelings and perceptions. Since the start of civilisation we have all been conditioned by secular and religious authorities to think in the same way. Life has been reduced to working, consuming, accepting orthodoxies and following rules:

The average individual has been socialised to believe that all the thinking necessary to the great mysteries of life is being done for him or her.⁶²

Addiction

The traumatised, isolated person cut off from his or her feelings is in a state of constant need, and in this condition is prey to the market system and the seductions of consumerism. As David Kidner explains:

⁵⁸ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

⁵⁹ Arno Gruen, 'The betrayal of the self'

⁶⁰ Holger Kalweit, 'Shamans, healers and medicine men'

⁶¹ Arno Gruen, 'The betrayal of the self'

⁶² John Mohawk, 'In search of noble ancestors'

The dominant form of selfhood in industrial society is the 'empty self' - a needy, acquisitive self constructed around the requirements of consumer capitalism.⁶³

Capitalism would not function if people were generally content in their lives or if they had a real experience of the sacredness of life. It prospers on selling over and over the illusion that happiness and fulfilment can be found only through acquiring possessions and experiences. Although these do not give us real satisfaction, and cannot, since what we truly need is authenticity and relationship, the hope endures through every disappointment. It is this craving that advertisers cleverly exploit, and so we grasp after the latest smartphone or a faster car or a bigger house or a more exotic vacation. In this culture there is always something more to want, something the system is adept at providing. Consumers and producers are therefore caught in a mutually dependent cycle of increasingly wasteful, pointless and harmful activity:

Addiction, in one form or another, characterises every aspect of industrial society.⁶⁴

Individuals are addicted to consumption, businesses to profit, the economic system to growth, the political class to power, the state to systems of control, and the military-industrial complex to war and conflict. These processes do not lead to good outcomes, but since we have been conditioned to believe they are "normal" we fail to see the underlying pathology.

In many important ways civilisation functions in an addictive fashion: [...] self-destructive, suicidal. The addict denies that there is a problem, [...] is emotionally dependent on things: television, substances, personality routines, other people, mental ideologies, total immersion in some cause or work.⁶⁵

The "normal", well-adjusted person is trying, albeit unconsciously, to fill an existential void, the emptiness where an authentic inner life should be. This is why we can be addicted to behaviours and beliefs as well as to things. All distract us and keep us from noticing the absence of real feeling. The addict is in denial, lies to himself about what he is doing and dismisses evidence that anything is wrong. There are endless ways to rationalise and justify the status quo: "aren't I entitled to some comfort or reward?"; "everyone else is doing it"; and "what alternative is there?" Indeed, the surrounding culture tends to praise the very behaviours that are so harmful to the individual, other people and the world.

Even if we think that personally we are acting with moderation, we are all affected by being caught up in a culture that knows no limits and cannot tell the truth.

Alienation

Why do we not attempt to halt the destruction of the world as the evidence mounts up? The main reason is that the human psyche has been damaged by our collective separation from the natural world and subsequent processes of conditioning. Civilised people have withdrawn into themselves, to the extent that both other people and the world are largely peripheral concerns, seen only indirectly through the Machine-world's own representations, which of course are far from accurate.

The destruction of the natural world has been going on for centuries now; you have to be alienated indeed to drive past felled trees, spewing smokestacks and acres of asphalt every day without noticing anything until it shows up in a headline. People who draw conclusions from news articles rather than the world they see and hear and smell

⁶³ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

⁶⁴ Morris Berman, 'Re-enchantment of the world'

⁶⁵ William H Koetke, 'The final empire'

are bound to destroy everything they touch. That alienation is the root of the problem; the devastation of the environment simply follows from it.⁶⁶

As the Machine progressively takes control, it becomes harder to feel we belong anywhere, or to express human solidarity or to empathise with other beings. We are left with the most attenuated sense of community, bereft of the tribal myths and spiritual insights that once sustained us and explained our participation in the cosmos. In their place we have the ideology of individualism, the cult of personal striving against a hostile world. The alienated person is simply unable to see through the fog of propaganda, reasoning and self-deception.

Individualism combined with technology degrades the environment, and a degraded environment drives us further into individualism.⁶⁷

In the Machine-world we are atomised individuals in a vast economic and social system grown far beyond the human scale. Instead of intimate connections within a community we have communications technologies, which although reaching out across the world do not satisfy our basic hunger:

The techno-culture, with its vaunted “connectivity”, grows steadily more isolating, lonely and empty.⁶⁸

Technology tends to replace real connections: cars and trains disperse communities; televisions and computers displace us from the physical world; and telephone and email abolish the need for face-to-face contact. The individualised self, surrounded and enabled by all this technology, defines himself by the roles and identities he acquires from the market:



In the absence of any broader realm into which we could reground ourselves, identity becomes precariously centred around a private island of personal seclusion, defended by our iPods, our social personas, and the constructed boundaries of our cars and houses.⁶⁹

The end result is a society of people who cannot escape their own separation: who, failing to understand how they became alienated, have nowhere else to turn:

Their connection with other living beings is almost non-existent. They are individualistic, pragmatic, self-centred, unhappy, neurotic, depressed, empty, stressed, anxious and perfectly functional within the system.⁷⁰

The circle is closed; people are trapped wholly within the Machine-world, and the human, social and environmental destruction proceeds apace.

⁶⁶ CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective, 'Work: capitalism, economics, resistance'

⁶⁷ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

⁶⁸ John Zerzan, 'Seize the day'

⁶⁹ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

⁷⁰ Jesús Sepúlveda, 'In service to the deities'

PART THREE: SELF, COMMUNITY AND THE LIVING PLANET

Possible futures

We can trace the development of the Machine-world over the last ten thousand years, from the beginnings of agriculture to today's global industrialised system, but no-one can know precisely what will happen next. One thing is certain, however: that if we do nothing at all the current environmental, economic and human Crisis can only get worse.

Our response will depend on how we think the future will unfold. There are many possible scenarios, but in this paper we will look at four: continued economic growth, supported by technological solutions to emerging problems and ecological limits ("techno-fixes"); economic stagnation, with increased competition and conflict; a slow decline to a more sustainable level of economic activity (the "long descent"⁷¹); and full economic and social collapse.

Continued growth and techno-fixes

The basic delusion of the industrial era is that on a finite planet the economy can continue to grow indefinitely. In fact, the financial system *requires* growth to pay interest on the ever-accumulating level of debt. Even though this will result in accelerating "resource" extraction and more environmental problems (which also make the economy less efficient), there is widespread belief that the constraints are only theoretical, defined by the current limits of knowledge. Humans, after all, have proved themselves time and again to be highly adaptive and inventive.

Both governments and the global corporations want us to believe there is nothing really wrong, that every problem has a solution allowing us to keep our way of life. The answers we have been given include: fracking to produce more oil and gas; trading in carbon permits to combat climate change; "green consumerism" to reduce ecological damage; and corporate ethical statements to address pollution and poor working conditions.

Science plays an important role by promoting the idea that new technologies will remedy environmental degradation and find substitutes for depleted resources. This makes the case for investment in scientific research, and so we get an endless stream of "good news" stories (propaganda) in the media. The more we believe that somehow and at some point in the future we will overcome the consequences of our actions, the less likely we are to modify our behaviour in the present. Techno-fixes are themselves part of the industrial system and therefore not a solution to the underlying problem:

Much thinking in mass technological society is dysfunctional. Many people embrace the "technological fix" as the answer to social, psychological and medical problems caused by previous technological fixes.⁷²

This is the pattern of mass delusional thinking, grandiosity and denial described in Part Two. It is sustained by the cult of optimism, which is sometimes characterised by New Age-style magical thinking along the lines that "reality can be whatever we want it to be". Real action is forever deferred, even as the planet's life support systems become endangered.

The way of life known as Western Civilisation is on a death path on which their own culture has no viable answers. When faced with the reality of their own destructiveness they can only go forward into areas of more efficient destruction.⁷³

⁷¹ John Michael Greer, 'The long descent: a user's guide to the end of the industrial age'

⁷² Chellis Glendinning, 'Trauma, technology and the wild'

⁷³ The Haudenosaunee, 'A basic call to consciousness'

In the short term the system itself is remarkably resilient. The global financial crisis of 2008 seemed for a while to undermine faith in capitalism, but fear of the alternative made governments and consumers agree that “normality” had to be restored at any cost. Today banks and corporations are profitable again and face little political or social challenge in spite of growing inequality. Doubtless the cycle of crash and recovery will continue for some time, though the physical realities of the planet cannot be ignored and overridden forever.

Stagnation and conflict

At some point the global economy will come up against these constraints. This process may already be starting, for in the West living standards adjusted for real-life inflation and debt have been stagnating. As the gap widens between the very rich and everyone else, the majority are working harder and faster just to maintain what they have.

In the competition for resources and market share between companies and countries, the world is polarising, and a more naked individualism is undermining what remains of social solidarity. The global rich have more in common with each other than with their own compatriots, and cities are being ghettoised into areas of extreme affluence and poverty.

In these conditions, the psychological characteristics of the Machine-world described in Part Two will only become more pronounced, making it less likely that any collective action will be taken to address the Crisis.

Long descent

A repeating pattern of crash, recovery and stagnation may obscure for some time the inevitable retreat of the global economy. How resource constraints will affect economic activity is much debated, but the evidence to date suggests they are unlikely to occur as single events. Each recession causes commodity prices to fall, helping the economy to recover; then as demand increases those prices to rise again. This makes it more profitable to search for new sources of raw materials or to exploit high-cost production, such as deep sea oil drilling. Price movements thus affect both supply and demand, leading to the cycle of boom and bust. The descent is therefore unlikely to have a clear or predictable trajectory.

A related question is whether the shift to a smaller economy will be managed or unmanaged, or indeed whether it can be managed at all. Notwithstanding the existence of transnational bodies such as the EU, G7, WTO and IMF, the global system is not controlled by anyone. In conditions of increasing competition there will be less international cooperation. The intensifying struggle between countries may in fact make things worse.

To the extent that the decline is halted or reversed, even temporarily, delusional thinking will continue. Each seeming recovery will encourage people to think that prosperity can return as before; we are, after all, collectively addicted to growth. Falling production is viewed negatively, as few people consider how it might benefit the planet, so from a psychological perspective the descent will be resisted.

How big will a steady-state economy be? We are currently consuming around 1.6 times the Earth’s non-renewable resources⁷⁴, so should we aim to get back to 1.0? Compared to the present that seems like extreme self-denial, but it still assumes the planet exists for us alone and that we are entitled to exploit the natural world to its maximum capacity. Our notions of sustainability are self-referential and self-serving. How do we assess the extent of our imbalance with the planet? In answering this question we cannot avoid thinking about the size of the human population, since the

⁷⁴ www.footprintnetwork.org, accessed 3 November 2017

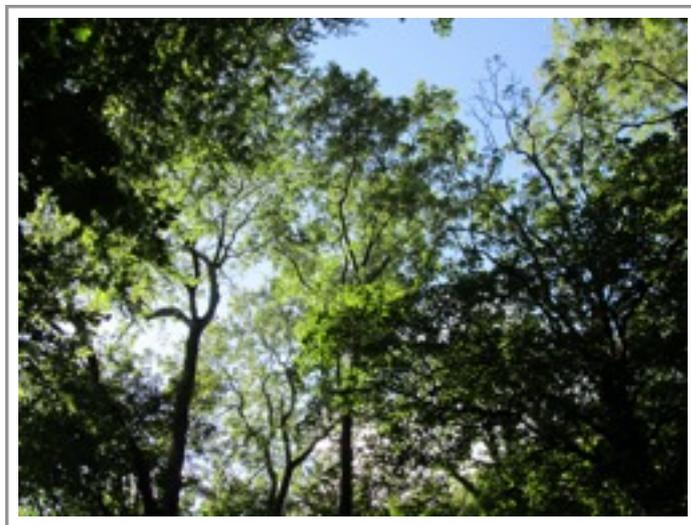
presence of more than seven billion of our kind is a problem for other species whatever the size of the economy. Ten thousand years ago, when our ancestors were last all still part of the natural world, their population was only 5 to 10 million, barely 0.1% of the current total.

Collapse

The more alarmist forecasts indicate a wholly uncontrolled collapse of the global economy, leading to a disintegration of society as we have known it. This may happen if climate change is abrupt and catastrophic, as some computer models suggest. The planet's life support systems comprise complex and subtle interdependencies which we are recklessly disrupting, and much of the damage may be irreversible.

No-one can say if, when or how such a collapse would take place. However, it is worth noting what traditional wisdom has to say about the consequences of our living at odds with the planetary reality:

When the last of the Natural Way of Life is gone, all hope for human survival will be gone with it.⁷⁵



Strategies

If you don't feel despair in times like these you are not fully alive.⁷⁶

Machine-world conditioning prevents most people from becoming aware of what is going on, thinking about the future of the planet and asking fundamental questions. Those who actively support the system and accept its ideology will disagree with the argument in this paper. They will claim it is partial, or not sufficiently scientific or objective, or that all the problems discussed here will somehow be resolved in the future. Denial or obfuscation, combined with glib optimism, is surprisingly powerful in society.

The majority will simply avoid the issue entirely, their lives being busy and the modern world so demanding. The complex chains of interconnection between different processes and effects make it very difficult to form a clear mental picture of what is happening and where. Mainstream news organisations, largely owned by governments and private corporations, do not present the issues comprehensively or offer a balanced discussion. Even with alarming pieces of news, such as the

⁷⁵ The Haudenosaunee, 'A basic call to consciousness'

⁷⁶ Paul Kingsnorth, 'Dark ecology'

50% reduction in wildlife populations mentioned in the Introduction, the media can be guaranteed *not* to give an accurate view or to maintain interest beyond the first day's headlines. As similar evidence mounts up, we can be certain that most people will continue to rationalise that such losses are the price to be paid for Progress.

With responses like these as the norm we have every reason to despair, as Kingsnorth suggests. That is the appropriate human reaction; but if we stay with that nothing will change. If we can move beyond despair, what strategies might be available to us?

Negotiation

Optimists and environmentalists believe they can negotiate with the system to improve regulation, employ better technologies and achieve Sustainable Development. As discussed in Part One, this is presented as a balance between environmental and human needs, a compromise achieved by reasonably-minded activists, business people and politicians. Even though the details and timescales are fuzzy and past experience is discouraging, it gives everyone a sense of acting morally and realistically. It often results in list of things that will "save the world".

Such an approach fails at every level. It would do little more than slow down the rate of destruction, because governments and corporations will always ensure the global economy remains in place. It also distorts the debate by presenting small-scale change as a viable option and giving the false impression that nothing more need be done.

Most of the 'solutions' currently on offer will have the effect of enabling industrialism, rather than the natural order, to survive a little longer. [...] Solutions, if they exist, will emerge out of a more complete awareness of our situation.⁷⁷

The so-called Green Agenda of recent decades has had no real impact. The mainstream Green movement, once so visionary, has adopted much of the Machine-world's language of science and economics to gain credibility, but at the price of making itself irrelevant.

Education

The next strategy is to educate people rather than negotiate on their behalf, in the hope they will then demand or take effective action. The assumption is that when people know the facts they will act rationally in the long term interest of everyone. There can be little doubt we would all benefit from knowing more about the consequences of the way we live, and for that we need the work of committed researchers and communicators.

However, as we have seen, the Machine-world's conditioning ensures most people are disconnected from their feelings, believe the current system is inevitable, and fear any change that might lead to personal loss. The education system has trained people for their roles within the Machine, not instilled the habit of enquiry. Radical thinkers have great difficulty engaging with a wide audience through the fog of media misinformation, propaganda and misrepresentation.

Withdrawal

Trying to opt out of the global economy has greater intellectual and moral credibility, for it recognises the cause of the problem. We could start by living more simply, though in practical terms it is now very difficult for anyone to be independent of the system. Every aspect of the modern world is based on large-scale artificial and technological systems, and the surviving natural world is too small and fragmented to support significant numbers of people.

⁷⁷ David W Kidner, 'Nature and experience in the culture of delusion'

Nonetheless, any viable response to the Crisis will involve some element of withdrawal, if only to safeguard our psychological integrity and wellbeing. The greater our exposure to the system and the people who have power within it, the more likely we are to suffer harm and transmit it to others. Opting out could be part of a vision of a more meaningful and dignified way to live.

Resistance

The opposite stance is to tackle the Machine-world head-on by means of active or passive resistance, aimed at bringing down the system or at least preventing it from working effectively. This is a dangerous strategy, as any confrontation is likely to be met with a determined response. Governments and corporations do not willingly allow disruption or their power to be diminished, and now routinely use legal and covert means, including widespread surveillance, to constrain dissent. Any conflict is likely to result in anger and violence, causing suffering and alienating public opinion. A cycle of aggressive actions-and-responses would also do nothing to heal the harmful conditioning within us.

Awakening

This is the realignment of personal perceptions, values and actions to what we might call “planetary reality”: the dependence of all life on the wellbeing of the Earth. Such an awakening concerns both the head and the heart. While it is helpful to know some facts about life processes, what truly brings about the inner reorientation is the felt and intuited sense of connection with the planet. This is akin to religious metanoia, a waking up from what Thomas Berry calls the “technological entrancement” of our age.⁷⁸



This approach is the most radical and goes beyond trying to modify or withdraw from the system. Any attempt to restructure society that does not recognise how we have been psychologically and sensorily damaged by the Machine-world will almost certainly give rise eventually to the same problems that currently exist. We each need to recover our humanity first, and restore our relationship to the world and the human community.

In all likelihood few will be attracted to this, conditioned as we are to believe that change is either impossible or only results from “leadership” or the imposition of force. Nonetheless, the awakening of what we might call liberated consciousness has an extremely powerful potential. Those who manifest it to a high degree can help others in their own awakening from the Machine-world’s conditioning, and through such connections a new possibility starts to emerge.

⁷⁸ Thomas Berry, ‘The dream of the Earth’

A vision for the self and the world

A common criticism of any attempt at change is that people are naturally selfish, competitive and destructive. We have been told that our pre-modern ancestors lived according to a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" and that civilisation, whatever its defects, is all that keeps us from barbarism.

This view ignores how we have been conditioned by the Machine-world through the trauma of separation from nature. A convincing body of evidence from surviving traditional societies and early European contact with aboriginal people in the Americas, Africa and Australia shows that these cultures did not have these characteristics. Many accounts, some written by Native Americans, describe a way of life based largely on co-operation, sharing, gifting and non-possession. This reflects a relationship to the natural world that respects all life and tries to maintain balance.

Not all traditional societies were like this, and there has certainly been a spectrum of experience related, in general, the degree of separation from nature. However, we would do well to consider what civilisation has forgotten or dismissed as irrelevant in its quest for Progress. The point is not to idealise the past or try to recover some vanished Eden, nor even to drown in self-loathing, but to see if another way is possible. Daniel Quinn has observed that:

It is not man who is the scourge of the world, it's a single culture: one culture out of hundreds of thousands of cultures. Our culture.⁷⁹

The problems we have created arise from a faulty perception of the world, and we will not even begin to address them until we have corrected that error. What did those other cultures see that we cannot? It was fundamentally a sense of nature being sacred: that is, something far greater than ourselves and the source of our being, of value in its own right regardless of its usefulness to us. Since we did not create the world we should not try to control it or impose our ideas upon it:

Indians believe that everything in the universe has value and instructs us in some aspect of life. Everything is alive ...⁸⁰

Paul Kingsnorth expresses this sense of the sacred in contemporary terms:

Some great force that seems way beyond me and embedded in the world itself: a world of beauty and complexity and dark magic that my kind are busy destroying and replacing with a cold dead culture of future-worship and straight lines.⁸¹

In our struggle for survival, comfort, longevity and prosperity, our culture has forgotten what life is:

Nature is just another word for life.⁸²

Awareness of the source of life, the great force of darkness and light, is what we need to recover; this is fundamental to our awakening to "planetary reality". Without it we have only lifeless statements of intent and the dead language of science, politics and ends-justifying-means.

Vision and meaning are not something we create by an act of will, but arise from the mind, heart and senses all working together. We can make a start by educating ourselves about the state of the world and reading what the great thinkers and poets have to say, but we cannot let others

⁷⁹ Daniel Quinn, 'The great forgetting'

⁸⁰ Vine Deloria, 'Where the buffalo go: how science ignores the living world'

⁸¹ Paul Kingsnorth, 'In the black chamber'

⁸² Paul Kingsnorth, 'In the black chamber'

speak for us or take refuge in mere ideas. Vision and meaning must be a *lived experience* based on what we see, hear and feel for ourselves. These direct perceptions should help us to engage our emotions and intuition, feeling distress about what has happened, grief for the losses, and empathy for all beings who are suffering. All this is part of the process of “de-colonising the mind” and “removing the internalised messages of the dominant culture”.⁸³

The will only happen if we can overcome our alienation from the natural world; and the way to reconnect is by allowing the life force to reach us through the senses:

The opening to the experience of the universe is through intimacy with a living planet, Gaia. The doorway to the experience of Gaia is through our sentient animal bodies and our feeling hearts. And the journey - the work, the realisation - can only happen in immediate present time.⁸⁴

This requires silence, patience and receptivity: skills increasingly rare in the noisy, restless modern world. We have to learn the art of *listening to the world*. As Derek Jensen says:

If we listen carefully enough, I believe our bodies, the land and circumstance will tell us what to do.⁸⁵



By attending in this way we throw off this culture’s notions of time, identity and purpose; we discover that the world is not as we have been informed, that we are not the people we were brought up to be, and that life has another intention for us. This is the beginning of a new myth to replace the old story of human domination and conquest, our striving *against* the world. Once we have got to this point we can begin to answer some basic questions, such as: what is the “good society”, and how do we achieve both human and planetary flourishing?

Those who wake up to the real world and attain such a vision know that it comes at a cost: never again can there be a home in the Machine-world, in the collective delusion. This is a one-way journey with no return.

Acting from the heart

Although there are no obvious solutions to our collective predicament, we can nonetheless take some form of action based on our vision for ourselves and the world. Here are some possibilities:

Starting with oneself

All genuine action starts with oneself. We have no right to expect others to act for us, or to do what we ourselves have not learned and put into practice.

⁸³ Derek Jensen, ‘A language older than words’

⁸⁴ Jesse Hardin, interview with Derek Jensen

⁸⁵ Derek Jensen, ‘A language older than words’

Starting with oneself involves personal downshifting and disengagement from the Machine. The aim is to “put our own house in order” as far as possible by reducing our environmental and economic impact, without necessarily trying to withdraw from society. The reality of life is interdependence, and we all need other people for support, friendship and love. For some people, perhaps those most sensitised to what is happening, there may be a greater felt need to be apart from this culture’s collective madness. The challenge is to maintain human contact while ceasing to be an active and willing participant in the Machine-world. Indeed, by escaping from our limiting roles we may have more open and heartfelt contact with others.

One fundamental question is how to survive financially. The first step is to spend as little money as possible, doing things for ourselves and others, and making time for simple pleasures such as walking or face-to-face conversation that cost nothing. Of course we still need money in this society, but there are ways to obtain it that involve minimal harm. Self-employment might be an opportunity to escape from controlling work environments, and at least we could cut our working hours. This means rejecting the culture’s overriding “work ethic”. The loss of income is consistent with the basic truth that we will all eventually have to live at a much lower standard of living, one the Earth can afford. On the upside, working less creates space for other activities bringing more personal fulfilment or pleasure, or for a genuinely leisured life. David Edwards says from his own experience of walking away from a conventional career:

Once you start to see through the myth of status, possessions and unlimited consumption as a path to happiness, you’ll find that you have all kinds of freedom and time.⁸⁶

Limiting our contribution and exposure to the Machine-world means more than minimal working, earning and shopping; it should also make us less dependent on big corporations for entertainment, information and our sense of identity. We will find other ways to amuse ourselves and want to spend much more time in nature. By developing independence of mind and action we will become stronger and more confident. Recognising that most news is propaganda designed to instil fear and maintain the status quo, we will turn our attention to those things we are able to affect directly.

Commitment *to* the world requires finding a place *in* the world. We have become so used to travelling around for work and leisure that few people have a strong sense of belonging anywhere. However, if we do not belong, then all talk of reconnecting with the Earth will merely be an abstract idea. Even the city or suburbia can be a suitable place if our vision and purpose are coming to life within us.

Home is not only where you want to live but how you want to live; and it is the place where you want to be when death finally claims you.⁸⁷

Communities with a shared vision

The challenge of acting alone may not appeal to everyone. The general principles might nonetheless be translated into a more structured setting of communities of like-minded individuals. The image here is of early Mediaeval monasteries, places of refuge and learning in a time of turbulence and conflict, where men and women found meaning in a shared life of common values and aspirations. A modern version need not have any overtly religious element or formal belief system, and would do well to avoid centralised authority.

⁸⁶ David Edwards, interview with Derek Jensen

⁸⁷ Jesse Hardin, interview with Derek Jensen

Communities provide emotional as well as practical support. Many things are achievable together that individuals cannot easily do for themselves, such as producing food and providing transport efficiently. People could also develop small-scale businesses, though it is not desirable to be drawn far into the money economy. Ideally, such communities should interact openly with the surrounding society to mutual benefit, for it is important to avoid becoming exclusive.

Networks of dissent and renewal

For those who do not wish to create separate communities, less formal groupings might emerge through friendships, business connections and networks of shared interests. People can give each other inspiration, advice and support as they move toward a simpler lifestyle and resist the many manifestations of the Machine-world. Some of this activity might be deliberately subversive, criticising the status quo, dissenting from commonly held views and peacefully resisting harmful developments. The point is not just to subvert but to present practical and attractive alternatives that do not involve taking over existing power structures.



Dissent should not turn into confrontation. The Machine cannot be tackled on its own terms, through polarised arguments and aggression. The emphasis is on renewal, expressed through humour, playfulness and modesty. We need to retain compassion for others, even those who appear to be running the system for their own ends. We have a common humanity and a shared home in the world.

Bearing witness

As members of a society we have an obligation to speak the truth about what we see and feel and to share our vision. In so doing we should remember that however convinced we may be individually, there are no right answers and no approaches that suit everyone. We are all conditioned by the particular circumstances of our upbringing and socialisation, and by the historical context in which we live. In responding to the Crisis we need to be aware of three dangers:

1. Being told by someone else what to believe or how to act: this constrains our personal autonomy and responsibility.
2. Telling other people what to believe or how to act: this is disrespectful of *their* autonomy.
3. Being unaware of our impact on others: this means we may overlook our own tendencies to be intolerant or coercive.

The journey out of the Machine-world is not paved with new ideologies and false certainty. To avoid replicating the errors of the past we need to develop skills of self-reflection and self-questioning, and above all the virtue of humility. This is not to be confused with having no voice or opinion. The system expects us to be silent and acquiescent, for in that way its power remains unchecked.

‘Bearing witness’ to what is really happening is a sacred act, a step toward countering the desacralisation of the world by materialism. It derives not from arcane revelations, but from ordinary realisations about the state of the world and our own being, from simple observations such as: the expanding built environment, the spread of noise and pollution, the wastefulness of consumerism, the absence of real happiness.

In a world where people all around us are lying and confusing us, to be honest is a great kindness.⁸⁸

Such witnessing takes many forms. First and foremost there are opportunities to counter the denial and disengagement that are the norm. We can talk about things rarely discussed, such as the lack of soul and the absence of meaning in materialism. We can avoid giving passive consent to conventional viewpoints and assumptions, and suggest alternatives. We can speak of the poor and marginalised, and of the planet suffering silently for our wasteful lives. We can encourage people to step outside the bubble of the artificial world, see possibility and take responsibility. We can use language completely out of place in the rational, materialistic world, language expressing bodily needs, as well as feelings and intuitions.



Concern about the world has to be real. We could endlessly debate the Crisis and what might be done by others or at some point in the future. Conditioned as we are by consumer culture, our rejection of the system might become just another form of identify and consumption: buying books, joining organisations, subscribing to journals and blogs, watching videos, and moving in a circle of people who agree with us. The system encourages us to think we are “making a difference” when clearly we are not.

There is a widespread quasi-magical belief that somehow and sometime, perhaps when enough people have been convinced,

all this insight will be transformed into effective collective action. In spite of the tone of urgency across the sustainability movement, a sense of personal responsibility here and now seems rare. Good intentions alone will not achieve change, and neither will blaming others. We would do well to remember that “we all have our little stake in the world capitalism has made”⁸⁹, through our jobs, lifestyles and the power of money.

Radical simplicity

Any response matching the scale of the problem will have to be based on consuming significantly less than the current average. What might be the required scale of adjustment?

Let us for a moment think like an economist and adopt Machine-world language. The size of the economy in money terms - GDP per person, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) - could be used as a proxy for our impact on the planet. Global per capita GDP in 2015 was approximately \$16,000 (PPP). Collectively our ecological footprint is 1.6 times the earth's capacity (assuming that capacity is used solely by humans), so the maximum sustainable per capita GDP is about \$10,000. However, because the ecological overshoot has already resulted in considerable environmental degradation and resource depletion, sustainable GDP might now be lower, say \$8,000, a 20% reduction from the current level.

The forces driving ecological disaster are also responsible for fundamental inequality between social classes and nations. Global social justice means that all people everywhere have the right to similar levels of economic wellbeing. Rich countries' standard of living is based on both excessive

⁸⁸ David Edwards, interview with Derrick Jensen

⁸⁹ Curtis White, ‘The idols of environmentalism’

plundering of the planet and the systemic exploitation of people in poor countries. Therefore, there is no reason why they should not bear the full adjustment. For example, Britain's per capita GDP in 2015 was \$42,000 (PPP), so its required reduction to \$8,000 is about 80%.

The purpose of these figures, based on very broad assumptions, is to illustrate the enormity of the challenge we face. Few countries have ever endured such a sharp fall in living standards and no political party seeking power would ever advocate it. Even the Green movement does not talk in these terms. However, if we are serious about sustainability and social justice, any collective response on a lesser scale is delusional.

Environmentalists have promoted the idea of “green consumerism”, choosing products and leisure activities that involve less ecological damage than the norm. This idea appeals because we can “do our bit” without having to change our lifestyles in any significant way. Capitalism has responded enthusiastically, seeing this as another business opportunity. The problem is that it does not even begin to address the core problem: our reliance on an industrial and financial system that treats the natural world as “resources”, and the associated belief that happiness comes from buying things. As Mark Boyle points out:

There is no such thing as ethical consumerism. [...] It reinforces the status quo [...] and affirms our separation from ourselves, our community and Nature.⁹⁰

The core principle advocated in this paper is radical simplicity: going back to first principles and examining every aspect of our lives. As beneficiaries of a system of exploitation we have acquired a false sense of entitlement; we think we have a right to foreign holidays, private cars, the latest electronic gadgets, spacious homes, a fashionable wardrobe, costly entertainment, and regular meals in restaurants. We will have to reduce our expectations and cease comparing ourselves with others. Can we make our possessions last longer? Do we need them all, and what could we share? What might we do for ourselves and others that previously we paid someone else to do?

Thinking about the possible consequences of each action could become very complicated and wearying. We might therefore approach the challenge in a number of stages. The first is to cut unnecessary spending. In general terms, the more we withdraw from the money economy, the less we will be propping up the Machine-world system and the smaller will be our impact on the environment. Next, when we do need to spend money we can consider the broad implications of each option: for example, choosing between locally-produced and imported goods, or deciding when to replace things. The final stage is to begin reshaping our lives so that owning and using material things becomes far less significant. Activities such as walking in nature, gardening, meeting local friends and helping neighbours require little material input.

This shift in lifestyle makes it possible and desirable to rely less on computer technology, with its harmful effects on psychological health and wellbeing. The constant updating and replacement of technology is part of the story of Progress, that tells us our lives are made better by shiny new machines. We should note how both the medium and its content shape our consciousness. The less we see images and read messages from the Machine-world advertising an alienated view of life, the more we can see the real world and think for ourselves.

One great obstacle to the simple life is the ubiquity of noise. Technology and industrialism are suppressing silence and natural sounds everywhere, making us anxious, restless and distracted, and therefore perfectly conditioned to be consumers. Simplicity means turning away from all this input, this culture's ideas about who we are, what we should do and how we should live; it is therefore a prerequisite for recovering freedom from the system.

⁹⁰ Mark Boyle, ‘The moneyless manifesto’

A life of radical simplicity should be beautiful and deeply satisfying. If our efforts feel too earnest then we have not yet captured the spirit of living from the heart. If we feel deprived we can examine the emotional and psychological basis for this, and take encouragement from nature's abundance.

Living in tune in nature

The journey from the Machine-world involves not just a return to simplicity but also a conscious reorientation to the natural world. As Chellis Glendinning explains:

Human beings evolved over the course of three million years and a hundred thousand generations in synchronistic evolution with the natural world. We are creatures who grew from the Earth, who are physically and psychologically built to thrive in intimacy with the Earth.⁹¹

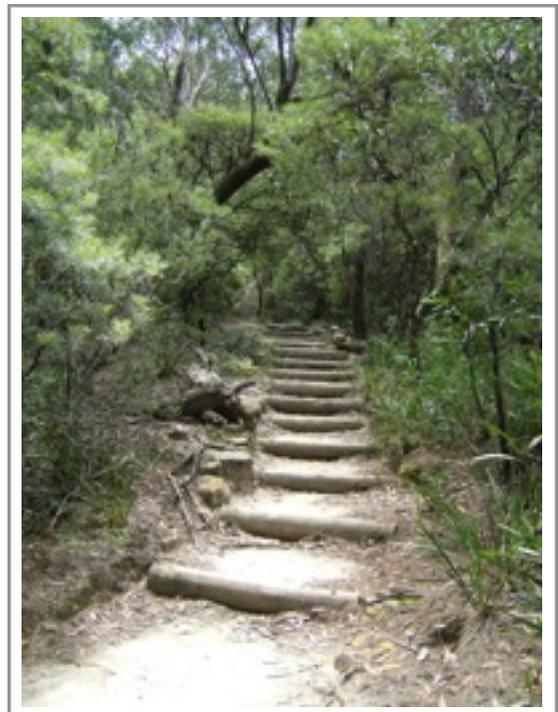
The most important aspect of this is paying attention to nature's rhythms. Everything in nature participates in cycles - expansion and contraction, growth and decline, the turning seasons, the alternation of day and night - and for the sake of our wellbeing we need to attune ourselves to them. Living by natural time, we know when to work and rest. Digital clock-time drives us restlessly forward, whereas sun-time and moon-time restore balance and keep us in the here-and-now. If we follow these principles, the quality of life will improve.

A more natural life will lead us to notice and avoid the disruptive energy of artificial environments and computerised technology. Modern air-conditioned buildings crammed full of electronic equipment and admitting little daylight are especially harmful, yet we spend most of our lives in them. Densely built urban areas deprive us of contact with vegetation, light and fresh air, the fundamental elements of life. Mechanised transport moves us too rapidly and disconnects us from our surroundings.

In general terms the Machine-world causes sickness while nature heals. Forests and meadows, rivers, lakes and seas are naturally health-giving. Our bodies and minds need exposure to sunlight and moonlight, breezes and thunderstorms, and all manner of natural sounds. The more time we are outdoors and in nature, the less likely we are to feel unhappy or that something is lacking in our lives. Physical contact with the Earth enables us to draw on natural energy, which calms and restores balance in us.

Everything natural is alive: animals, birds, insects, fish, trees, plants, rocks, waters and the landscape. The Earth is our Mother and the Sun our Father, for both gave us life. Our response to this wondrous gift is to live respectfully and moderately, ensuring we take no more than we genuinely need. The wellbeing of people and of the planet are interconnected, so we cannot heal ourselves without also working to heal the Earth and restoring the damage we have done, for:

There will be liberation of humans without the resurrection of the natural world.⁹²



⁹¹ Chellis Glendinning, 'Technology, trauma and the wild'

⁹² John Zerzan, 'Silence'

Re-sacralising the Earth

This vision of “resurrecting the world” involves a completely different relationship to the natural order. From the Native American tradition we can learn the following:

People need to break with the narrow concept of human liberation and begin to see liberation as something which needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World. What is needed is the liberation of all the things that support Life - the air, the waters, the trees - all the things which support the sacred web of Life.⁹³

Chellis Glendinning, who has written eloquently about technology and trauma, says:

If there is anything to dedicate ourselves to beyond healing our wounds and community-building, it is to make sure that creation has a few beings who consciously stand in right relation to her, [...] staying in service to the deities.⁹⁴

The deities in traditional societies were understood to be the forces of the natural world that sustain life, but we have forgotten them because we live in a state of separation and alienation. Within some strands of monotheistic religion there is a slightly different view, that of a creator God whose creation - the natural world - is a theophany, and therefore likewise sacred. The “death of God” in modern culture through the dominance of materialistic thought, the denial that anything can be sacred, has created immense psychological inflation. In the absence of belief in the deities, or in the creator and imminent God, there is nothing to halt humans' hubristic advance, and yet any power acknowledging no limits will eventually invite catastrophe. The ego can only be contained by being in relationship to powers greater than itself.

Being in service to the deities means rediscovering the older but deeper sources of meaning, even as the world collapses around us. It comes through reawakening respect for the cosmos and no longer worshipping Man or his works and achievements. The deities are worthy of worship precisely because they exist in themselves, beyond us: because they are life itself.

We believe we are living only our own lives, when really something else - something for which we no longer have a name - animates and speaks through us. When we accept this fully we may find the peace that eludes us and begin to face the horror unfolding all around.

⁹³ The Haudenosaunee, ‘A basic call to consciousness’

⁹⁴ Chellis Glendinning, ‘In service to the deities’

CONCLUSION: RETURNING TO THE REAL WORLD

The Crisis of our times is without precedent. We are destroying the world with appalling speed, but you would never know it from the culture's frenzied preoccupation with money, status and security. The rich survive on the labours of the poor, but everyone's existence is being diminished, and all of us together are undermining the the natural world, the very basis of life.

It is difficult to know in detail how our forebears lived 10,000 years ago, before the development of settled communities and the beginnings of civilisation. We should not idealise them or believe they lacked human failings. However, there are numerous accounts of westerners encountering traditional people before our impact debased their cultures, and the evidence is convincing. These people seemed to have an enviable lifestyle, involving very little of what we would consider work, and certainly none of the stress or symptoms of alienation now so prevalent. Scientific evidence now shows that nutrition and lifespan both declined markedly with the coming of agriculture, cities and the class structure. A similar decline occurred with the start of industrialisation.

Science has of course brought improvements to many aspects of our lives, but almost always at great cost to the environment, which we rarely consider and do not really think important. Modern civilisation gives us comfort, choice and endless stimulation, but still we feel bored, depressed and dissatisfied. The life we are told to want, the life promised by corporate marketing people and politicians, always seems beyond our grasp. Our lives speed up and we lose connection with place, community and the planet. The terrible absence of meaning cannot be filled by buying more things.

The losses are not counted, however. We are repeatedly told the story of Progress and are easily persuaded that in the future all our problems will be solved by science, technology and a bigger economy. We have been utterly brainwashed into thinking our civilisation is superior and inevitable.

There is no turning back the clock 10,000 years, not with more than 7 billion humans on the planet and the Machine so dominant. We cannot leave the artificial world and return to nature because there is nowhere else to go; the wilderness has gone, and almost everything everywhere is owned and fenced in. There are some benefits of modern life, such as science-based medicine, that few of us would wish to give up. However, the Crisis is coming and it is all but impossible to achieve real change within the system. Neither is it feasible to replace the system, for unless we recognise how it has become internalised within us and take steps to remedy this, we would only end up recreating it.

So, how DO we respond to the Crisis? Firstly, we have to understand fully the state we are in, seeing through the lies and misrepresentations of this culture. This is an "awakening" to the reality of the world and our own lives, and it involves the body (sensations, feelings and intuitions) far more than the mind. Only then can we move to the second stage, which is to develop a comprehensive vision, one that honours the source of all life and its many manifestations, and recognises our proper place in the overall scheme. In this way we rediscover what our ancestors knew. A century ago, during a crisis of civilisation that in many ways prefigured our own, C G Jung was able to articulate what few of his contemporaries yet saw:

The task is to give birth to the old in a new time.⁹⁵

This is even more pertinent in the present age. Any response to the Crisis that involves action and not just words must include two related elements: ceasing wherever feasible to give the Machine our active and passive support; and finding more creative and healthier ways to live. Fundamentally we have to stop wanting to fit into the system, defending our stake within it, and

⁹⁵ C G Jung, 'The Red Book'

instead become outsiders, even as we live alongside other people. Contrary to all the conditioning of this culture, there is no other way to become a true individual and find a path that affirms life:

Becoming yourself makes you momentarily the loneliest person on the planet, but as you walk through the door you realise that you're part of everything, and that in the end it's impossible to be alone.⁹⁶

The alternatives we create will include others, be more sustainable, and exploit or coerce no-one; they express the desire to reclaim our lives from the system and restore life to the planet as best we can. This is the most serious challenge of our age, and yet we should approach it with playfulness and humility rather than judgement and arrogance. Our aim should be to embody values very different to those of the Machine-world.

Such a strategy involves individual sacrifice, at least in the sense of not accepting the rewards and comforts that conformity can offer. However, there are communities and networks giving support and encouragement, and many people doing interesting things that can inspire us. Returning from our deluded culture to the real world means creating a life worth living, one truly worthy of humanity, that honours our deep psychological life, our compassion for all people and our fundamental relationship with our planetary home.



⁹⁶ Jesse Hardin, interview with Derrick Jensen