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Sea Change cultural evolution in the early 21st century

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NOTES FROM THE ROAD

For years now, lecturing, and taking part in conferences, or just traveling throughout North America and around the world, I've been asking a particular question at every opportunity. I've posed it to countless individuals, hundreds of groups, and – most often – to myself. The question itself is simple enough but seems almost invariably to open up complex conversations, and occasionally, to trigger surprising releases of emotional energy. Here it is:

Do you feel (or think or believe) that we're living in an age of moral growth or an age of moral decay?

Now of course there's nothing too remarkable about the question. In one form or another, we confront it at least subliminally every day, simply because we are daily confronted with at least one piece of reasonably persuasive evidence in support of one position or the other. But what's really happening? Are American culture, western culture, and world culture all caught in some mad downward spin or are they engaged in a progressive, if often deceptive, upward spiral

It is perhaps not too surprising that the most common response to the growth/ decay query is that we are indeed caught in a disheartening and even frightening decline. I've heard almost every conceivable variant of the lament. Its most common American expression may well be the overheard complaint about the disappearance of ordinary civility and the decline of a once proud ethic of service and community solidarity. Almost as frequently expressed is a deeply felt concern about the increase of violence in our streets and across our world. The horror is present in many forms: the senseless destructiveness of youth gangs, the icily purposeful mayhem wrought by terrorists, and the carnage of ruthless and imperialistic state violence. In almost every group with which I have taken up the growth-decay dichotomy, we come eventually to a deeply emotional consensus that something has gone horribly wrong.

Yet I've become quite convinced that in each case the negative response misses a critical dimension of the times in which we live, the dynamic of cultural evolution. Ours is indeed an age of transition; but it is a period characterized not so much by declining morals as by shifting values, an epoch of potential transformation marked by an emerging global struggle to define and embrace profoundly challenging new moral standards, in short, an age of moral growth.

This is an essay about cultural evolution, about the refinement, enrichment, and change of values and culture in the early 21st century. While it focuses primarily on American life, the analysis offered has implications for most cultural contexts in the world today. The central thesis is that we are living in an age with extraordinary potential for a dramatic transformation of prevailing patterns of human knowledge and understanding and, as a direct consequence, a colossal shift in the dominant moral, social, and spiritual values that shape human culture. In short, we live in a time that could witness an enormous forward leap in cultural evolution. Sadly, other, less desirable, outcomes also loom on the horizon. This is a rather a work of hope than optimism; still, the hope is real, healing action is possible, and we can all make a difference.

The principal focus of this article is the description of two waves of cultural influence, each a complex of values, habits of thought, predispositions, models for understanding, visions of the future, fears, hopes, and dreams. One wave, long dominant in western culture – and thereby often (and especially in the past century) profoundly influential throughout the world – now begins to decline in amplitude and persuasive power. At the same time, a second wave begins to rise, carrying with it many of the most positive and

resilient values of the older wave, but giving much more powerful expression to a set of countervailing values more in harmony with the changing realities and lifeways of the 21st century. The interaction, interference, and crossing of those two culture waves is the great dynamic, the “sea change,” that shapes our moment in time.

“SEA CHANGE”

Not so surprisingly, it was Shakespeare who coined the term, “sea change.” In *The Tempest* (I, ii), the air spirit and trickster Ariel sings this song to the character Ferdinand, misleading him into believing that his father has died in the shipwreck that cast them both onto an enchanted isle.

“Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made: Those pearls that were his eyes; Nothing of him that doth fade, But doth suffer a sea-change Into something rich and strange.”

Originally the phrase clearly suggested a dramatic change wrought by the sea, but with the passage of time it came to emphasize the sweeping scope of a change rather than its agency. By the nineteenth century “sea-change” had become an English idiom in occasional usage. For years, I’ve loved the imagistic power of “sea change” as an expression of sweeping systemic transformation,

The phrase is particularly evocative when one envisions the passage of a huge wave leaving no feature of a body of water, no life form, and no molecule undisturbed. Most dictionaries offer a definition of this sort: “a striking change or transformation, often for the better.” I’ll be using the term with a somewhat sharper focus to refer to a comprehensive evolutionary change in a culture, a transition to a higher order of complexity that affects its every level and dimension. The concept of a “sea change” seems particularly suited to bear the semantic weight, carrying with its strong flavor of the sweeping and dynamic nature of an interdependent system undergoing a thorough transformation.

DEATH KNELL OR CLARION CALL?

Why would anyone choose to write about moral growth and cultural evolution against the backdrop of the early 21st century? Our moment in history doesn’t seem very progressive. Violence, poverty, injustice, ethnic and religious intolerance, crowding, and disease debase the lives of the majority of Earth’s people. The life-sustaining systems of the planet itself suffer daily abuse on a scale once unimaginable, an antiecollogical assault that is too little understood and too often ignored. Where is the evidence of cultural advance? What we celebrate as progress – with waning enthusiasm, it should be noted – has rather the character of ill-conceived technological sprawl than movement toward a clear goal or a clearly better world.

What’s more and worse, as becomes increasingly apparent, western culture in particular seems at times caught in some awful downward spiral of diminished quality and abandoned values. If our age really has the character of evolutionary cultural advance, it has a strange way of showing it. The bad news of global violence, social and economic injustice, intolerance, religious extremism, ecological abuse, and cultural decline is compounded by the widespread perception that things get worse every year, if not every week. That perception is in turn exacerbated by the sheer scale of socio-cultural change to which human beings in almost every part of the world have been exposed over the course of the past half-century. But are things getting worse or are they perhaps becoming more complex, more confusing, but somehow better?

Inevitably, we return to the question with which we began: are we living, in other words, in a time of moral and cultural growth or moral and cultural decay, of cultural evolution or civilizational erosion, of promise and hope or hopelessness and surrender?

We wonder, if we have attended to the awful news all around us, whether we have arrived at civilization’s edge. How indeed does one find the ground of hope today? Isn’t it true that ours is in so many ways the worst of times? Isn’t it obvious that the human condition is irremediable? Isn’t it time to repair to the

fortresses...to circle the wagons? Shouldn't we now, finally, throw up our hands in despair and surrender to the inevitable? Isn't it time to give up? The not so obvious answer is "No." It's neither the time to despair nor the time to quit. It's the time to clarify our understanding of complex human-human and human-earth dynamics and to get to work. It's time now to acknowledge the outrages that surround us and still to recognize and even to cherish the sense of moral outrage that such horrors have produced.

If the chaos of our age had given rise only to a general lassitude, we might despair. If the all too apparent decay of those institutions, customs, and conventions on which we have come to rely had yielded only a planetary apathy, we might well surrender. But, happily enough, that's just not the case.

We have the good fortune to live in an age of consternation in the face of increasing complexity. On every side is critique, in particular, critique of our guiding institutions: the nation-states, the corporations, the schools and universities, the media, the religions, and civil society. The critique is, of course, largely unfocused, but we share – globally – the sense that something should be and might still be done differently. The complexity of modern (or, perhaps, postmodern) life is without historical parallel. That very complexity is the source of much of our current moral anguish and yet, perhaps, it is the wellspring from which the next stage of cultural and moral evolution – the next wave – may even now be emerging.

LITANY OF HOPE

Clearly, those who feel that humankind has entered an age of civilizational decay have a point. Perhaps the death knell of the all too brief human experiment has indeed been sounded. Certainly the dirge is familiar and depressing, but an alternative outlook exists; on all sides one can begin to hear a different refrain and to discern signs of change, growth, and even evolution. Perhaps what we've been hearing is not a knell but a clarion call. The following litany of hope offers a brief but thought-provoking counterpoint to the lament of resignation and despair. Imagine it, if you will, as a series of intonations: each a focus of commitment and action, each a reason for hope, and each a manifestation of one or more of the most salient of the trends, themes, dynamics and players that are helping to shape an new wave of interwoven ideas, values, hopes, dreams, and commitments.

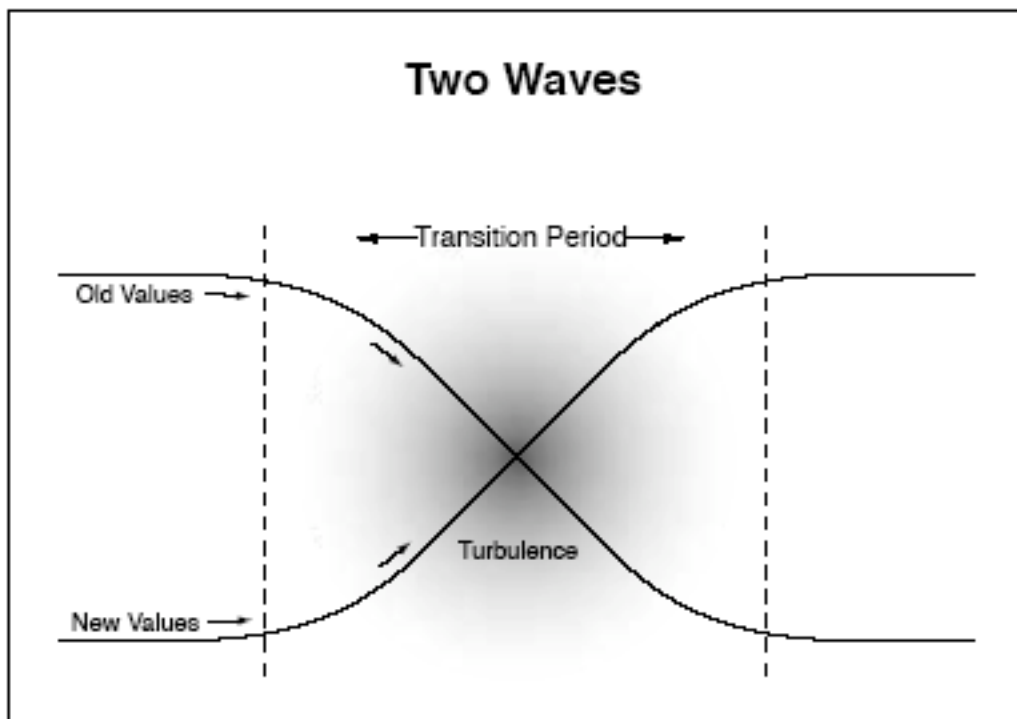
• An emerging global consensus with respect to the world problematique – the interdependent character of the most critical issues of our time – and a rapidly developing list of appropriate and convergent strategies to address these problems • Dramatic evidence that the valueshift is not confined to northern developed cultures but is becoming planet-wide • Positive demographic suggestions that the growth rate of the human population may be declining • The birth of a worldwide movement of unprecedented scope opposing war as an instrument of state policy, coupled with the advance of non-violent approaches to conflict resolution • The decline of patriarchy and the rise of new models of gender partnership • Feminist contributions to the emerging culture: in the arts, politics, philosophy, religion, theology, spirituality, science, psychology, healing, and development • New initiatives to combat the universal problem of intimate, coercive violence against women and children • Growing recognition of and efforts to address the crisis of hopelessness afflicting over one-half of the children of the world • A new global awareness of and focus on universal human rights • The strengthening of global civil society, through the efforts of non-governmental organizations, inter-governmental organizations, and individuals working to address systemic crises of social and economic injustice • A resurgence of environmental awareness, new models for and commitment to ecological sustainability, and unprecedented planetary activism in opposition to discredited but powerful anti-ecological values • Efforts to develop and advance a comprehensive inter-species ethic • Developing research and applications in ecologically sustainable agriculture, food production, building, housing, energy, and transportation • Ongoing exploration of the mindbody connection as it relates to health, spirituality, and personal well-being • A gradually emerging but already worldwide openness to interreligious encounter, dialogue, and engagement: the growth of inclusivistic and pluralist thinking as a counter to exclusivistic and fundamentalist intolerance • The global interreligious movement, bringing religious communities together to address issues of peace, justice, and sustainability • A variety of serious efforts to shape multiple "dialogues of civilization" as a real alternative to self-fulfilling prophecies of an impending clash • The new interspirituality, active awareness of and engagement with the unique but convergent spiritual paths that have shaped the world's great traditions • Rising spiritual hunger, a revitalized spiritual search, and deepening of spiritual practice •

The rediscovery of the dimension of the sacred: understanding the ancient links between “wholeness” and “holiness,” spirituality and service, humanness and divinity. • The convergence of wisdom teachers, experts, dreamers, and activists from a multitude of disciplines in new efforts to produce truly integral approaches to learning, personal and social development, activism, service, spirituality, and the channeling of evolutionary energies.

This brief list can only hint at the scope of the sources of energy and hope that sustain countless persons and groups that are committed to trusting forward (as Martin Buber might have put it) toward a better world. To be sure, many or even most of the invocations in the litany represent young initiatives, early efforts, and the struggle against seemingly impossible odds. That is, however, the nature of a movement, a value shift, and a period of accelerating cultural evolution, in short, of the rise of a new wave.

TWO WAVES

Imagine an ocean moment...two waves converging in the same time and space. One is powerful but subsiding, the other just gathering momentum and presence but not yet cresting. At the moment of their meeting they are nearly equal in amplitude and influence. As they cross, who can say which is rising, which descends? In that moment there is only the chaos of wave interference, as the medium of interaction is utterly changed. Now take another moment and imagine modernity as a powerful wave of cultural values that crested half a century ago and is now slowly beginning to subside. A second wave of countervailing values rises equally slowly, building until its cresting amplitude begins to rival the declining energy of the older wave.



In world culture the modern wave with all of its interrelated values, models, assumptions, and predispositions has long been dominant; but in our own time we have begun to discern evidence of the weakening of its essential dynamics and to recognize the growing strength of a newer value wave. Take the example of patriarchy. There's certainly no more characteristic feature of modernity than the cultural assumption of the native superiority of the male and the concomitant notion that men should dominate every aspect of public and private life. To be sure, patriarchal assumptions have been part of the human social order for most of recorded history. Today, however, patriarchy's long dominance has been so

powerfully challenged that it seems particularly unlikely to continue. The example of the declining influence of the long-dominant complex of cultural values, behaviors, and institutions that we identify as “patriarchy” is just one of many manifestations of the passage.

To the elements of the new wave we can add: a new commitment to human rights, an unprecedented range of concern for social and economic justice, a profound awakening of the long dormant human sense of respect for the Earth, and a growing and vocal movement insisting that war has outlived its usefulness and legitimacy. Before you protest that the state of the world seems to reflect just the opposite, consider that we live not in the time of the ascendancy of the new wave but in a time of crossing. The values, assumptions, and habits of thought that nurtured patriarchy, harbored racism, tolerated injustice, presided over the rape of the planet, and refined the arts of war have been challenged as never before. Their influence has sharply lessened, but their institutional and cultural infrastructures remain powerful and largely in place. At the same historical moment, however, a compelling array of contrasting values, understandings, hopes, and dreams is taking shape in a new cultural evolutionary wave ascending to take the place of the ebbing older tide.

Evidence of the transition abounds. Consider the dramatic transformation of cultural attitudes and structures in the wake of the movement for the liberation of women or the hesitant but persistent “greening” of global values that found expression at the Johannesburg Earth Summit in 2002. The current global anti-war movement, to cite a more recent example, has given rise to protests and concern on a scale never before witnessed yet tempered by a range of thoughtful new analyses of violence and the human condition. The struggle for human rights, in the 55 years since Eleanor Roosevelt, Peng Chung Chang, René Cassin, Charles Malik and many others fought for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the floor of the new United Nations, has brought issues of racism, sexism, and social injustice to the fore in global politics. The growth of interreligious and interspiritual movements in America and around the world has shaped a powerful counterpoint to regressive and reactionary religious fundamentalism. Taken as a whole, the address to issues of peace, justice, and sustainability now forms the core of a new world activism confronting the dangers of what one could term “globalization from the top down.”

In a sense, the younger wave represents a new global order of a different sort, a “globalization from the bottom up.” The transition is evident in an emerging worldwide consensus of values sharing a central focus or pulse. We can discern its animating presence in each of the developments we’ve noted: the long, slow shift from ethnocentrism to worldcentrism. Each failing cultural dynamic of the older wave—sexism, racism, intolerance, fundamentalism, injustice, imperialism, eco-abuse—manifests the essential blindness of ethnocentrism, the conviction that one’s own group, gender, race, class, nation, or species is somehow inherently superior to every other. Make no mistake. The values of the declining wave still possess tremendous influence and command significant institutional infrastructures; but their radical disconnect with changing human and planetary realities becomes more and more apparent. The belief that the other is “alien” and always deficient in some critical regard requires at the very least a deep ignorance of that other, an ignorance that becomes more difficult to maintain with every new interhuman network link or interspiritually shared “aha” experience. Perhaps the clearest mark of the steady progress of cultural evolution shows itself in the reaction we begin to feel in the presence of stark ethnocentrism. The unapologetic hater – the racist, sexist, homophobe, ecopredator, warhawk, or cultural despoiler, the cultured despiser of the spiritual – every day becomes more of an anomaly and an embarrassment to those who realize that they live in age of transition. In an age that learns more every day about other ways of life and about the wonderful complexities of interdependent existence, the emerging integral value complex has just the right wavelength.

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