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## OUR WORLD NEEDS A DIFFERENT HUMAN STORY

Jakob von Uexkull

"It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisibly. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell: subtly at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world". Ben Okri

Twenty years ago I founded the Right Livelihood Awards (the Alternative Nobel Prizes) to honour and encourage those who have dared - sometimes at great personal risk - to think the supposedly unthinkable, to break the taboos that prop up unjust systems and empower others with new ideas and opportunities. Today there are few certainties but - paradoxically - there is great pressure to conform with systems that do not meet our needs. Many resist these pressures as best they can. An inspired few have the vision and strength to cut a different, more hopeful path, worthy of our abilities and values.

Over the past two decades almost a thousand individuals and organisations, working in many areas in the majority of the world's nations, have been nominated for and over eighty have received the Right Livelihood Award.

Together they represent a unique overview of the challenges we face and the solutions available.

They have convinced me that something more is needed, if we are to change course in time to avoid the collapse of our planet's life support systems and the ensuing "barbarization from within" (Lewis Mumford) of our societies. The old paradigm will not release its hold until a new one becomes and remains more clearly visible. We need to tell a different human story, for the present one can have no happy end. We need to understand the processes we have unleashed and rediscover our place in the world.

We have elevated increased consumer "choice" to the highest societal goal. Yet this goal is in direct conflict with the task of maintaining a liveable planet: Global Consumerism would destroy us all. It repeats the Marxist error that liberating the forces of production solves all problems.

Our current human story describes a world created by chance where the material level is the ultimate reality and morals are mere 'emotions'. It declares itself to be in unique possession of the truth, able to tell us "what it is to be human" (the Human Genome Project) and "how the universe works" - courtesy of the CERN atom collider. Yet what is the meaning of this story which the triumphant West imposes on the world? What do the biological and physical theories of everything tell us? That we are meaningless "robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes" (Richard Dawkins) in an equally pointless universe.

Our (post) modern story sees all other human stories as fairy tales. Previous cultures have been "wrong, always wrong" (E.O. Wilson) and thus can teach us nothing. The status quo

triumphs for no moral argument against it can be taken seriously. Only appeals to greed are recognised as serious arguments: if it makes money it must be right.

Our ruling story is cynical and skeptical about everything except cynicism and skepticism. It substitutes markets for politics, ethics and faith. The world has become a Western theatre where this dismal story is played daily, supported by all the skills and billions which Madison Avenue can muster. There is no escape - not even in Mecca: "Nothing, absolutely nothing is left of the history of the city or its invaluable cultural property. A city that is supposed to give a sense of direction to the Muslim world has become a post-modern image of Los(t) Angeles". (Ziauddin Sardar, "Postmodernism and the Other").

The result is paralysis - at a time when we can least afford it. Never has the gap between short-term thinking and long-term consequences been wider. Restoring environmental security is by far the most difficult challenge we have ever faced and the most morally compelling issue of our time. Yet the "minimum which is environmentally and scientifically necessary is more than the maximum which is politically feasible or even thinkable" (Al Gore). After several decades of "Environmental Action Programmes", the wealthy EU still laments the "slow but relentless deterioration of the general state of the environment of the community over the past 20 years". (Preamble, 5th EU Environmental Action Programme).

More of the same will obviously not be enough. We need to go deeper, to deconstruct and replace the modern myth which has brought us to this impasse, deeply wounding our outer and our inner environments. Economic Darwinism has created a culture of mistrust and distress, increasingly drug-dependent to fill its inner void.

To remind ourselves how quickly our story can be changed it is only necessary to look back at the cold war. Until little more than ten years ago the accepted consensus of the major Western political parties included the willingness to press the thermo-nuclear button and, in effect, incinerate the human race - the greater part of which was neutral - in case of a threat to Western liberty.

A few years ago a prominent former Thatcher advisor and "nuclear deterrence" supporter looked back in horror: "Would some historian emerging centuries later from the post thermonuclear war dark ages have judged (pressing the button) morally justified or so evil as to dwarf even the most monstrous inequities of Hitler, Stalin and Mao?... How could we have believed anything so preposterous?" (Sir Peregrine Worsthorne).

We may have won the Cold War but our war against nature and community cannot be won without losing. We cannot afford to wait for hindsight to ask "How could we have believed anything so preposterous?" about the destructive myth which has brought us to this turning point. This myth has several parts. I will focus briefly on two - the US "example" (or the myth of wealth creation) and scientific materialism (or the paranoia of constant struggle).

The Japanese have savings of \$90,000 per capita. From 1990-98 real wages increased by 15%, while they fell in the USA (OECD). Manufacturing output exceeds that of the USA. Japan's current account surplus grew in the 1990s at twice the rate of the 1980s. Net external assets increased in the same decade from \$294 billion to \$1153 billion, while the US deficit and liabilities grew even faster. Since 1991 Japan has been the largest donor of foreign aid, giving 70% more than the USA (1999).

Yet the daily story we hear is that the Japanese economy collapsed in the 90's and the country is now an almost hopeless economic basket case. Why? Because its citizens, having decided that they are rich enough, are "dangerous" low consumers. Living in an ageing society with a weak social net, a large public deficit and a polluted environment, they sensibly prefer to save. Yet their frugality and adherence to such "outmoded concepts as honour, fairness and civility" are constantly lambasted in the Western media for endangering the

global economy - and especially its glorious forerunner, the USA, the example we are today all told to follow.

While the income of all US sectors grew between 1947 and 1979, since then the share of the bottom 80% has fallen - the poorest losing most - while the richest 1% have gained by far the most. According to government statistics, most US workers now earn less than in the 1960s and 1970s but work longer hours. Fossil fuel use is still increasing but the government will do nothing "to jeopardise the American lifestyle" - as the US representative at the Hague Climate Summit put it. Even the richest Americans consuming vastly more than their share of global resources still do not see themselves as rich, but as needy. The top 5% think they are only in the top 40%.....Meanwhile the working vocabulary of the average US 14 year old has fallen by 60% since 1950 (World Watch Jan/Feb 2000).

The story we now urgently need is clearly not the one currently told all over the world about how the Japanese and everyone else can follow the US example. It is on the contrary how we can learn from Japan and how our economies can be rebuilt so that frugality is experienced as a bonus, not a threat. This involves, for example, looking at the environmental and social effects of current discounting, accounting and tax regulations. It means looking at the legitimacy of Third World debts "imposed without the consent of the people" - the reason the US Government gave for reneging on Cuba's debt to Spain in 1898.

Our new story needs to include the manifold externalised "takings" of our economic success stories - and the absurdities and costs of a "wealth creation" built on the depletion of nature and ethics, "selling the family silver", securitisation and the monetarisation of non-market wealth.

We need to understand how economic theory has become the "opium of the bourgeoisie" (Thurman Arnold) to the extent that we accept cost-benefit analyses which value human lives in poor countries at a fraction of our own - because the poor can afford to pay less to save themselves from the climate catastrophes we have caused!

Our human story needs new numbers for we have learnt only to value what we can count. The implications go beyond GNP alternatives. It has been calculated, for example, that the decision of a German to be single costs extra resources sufficient to support thirty additional Namibians....

Our story needs to challenge the naive nonsense of market populism, portraying us all - from workers to corporate raiders - as daring rebels against governments who want to take our money. We need a story which prepares us for the huge structural adjustments required in the rich economies and societies so that we can cut fossil fuel use by the necessary 90%. Denial of natural limits - despite the mounting evidence - has cost us over half our global forests and species in the last 50 years. We obviously cannot afford a repeat.

If the economic Darwinists were right about human nature, our selfish acquisitiveness would have made us extinct long ago. Morality could not have survived. We now need an "ethos, emanating from a rediscovered sense of global responsibility" (Vaclav Havel) but how can such an ethos be built on a human story which portrays us, with all the authority of science, as chance products of purposeless mutations? If our free will is an illusion what is the point of appealing to it? We need to regain a sense of balance and move this mechanistic vision back where it belongs. Modern biology and economics have much to teach us but no right to monopolise the interpretation of our human story.

Randomness is irreconcilable with the interactive and dynamic structures and functions of living organisms. Integrated systems cannot be put together piecemeal. As technology enables biochemists to study life in ever more microscopic detail, the evidence for its irreducible complexity and intelligence becomes overwhelming.

Genes do not act independently but have many different functions activated in different ways. "Engineering implies an understanding of how causal mechanisms translate action into effect, but we are far from understanding how genetic patterns turn into organisms. Biotechnology not only speeds up genetic changes by about a billion fold - far too fast to ensure safety before release - but also changes their goal from evolutionary success to economic profit. This industrialisation of life is carried out by people generally ignorant of key biological fundamentals - ecology and evolutionary biology.... Genetic manipulation, far from being the pinnacle of industrial modernity, is actually the last gasp of industrial primitivism, applying a reductionist and mechanistic mindset to living systems that don't work that way". (Amory and Hunter Lovins)

Blinded by our successes, we have lost our place in the larger story of life:

"There is a great difference between a Universe which exceeds me in size alone... and one which exceeds me in depth of purpose and intelligence... (The first) excludes me and crushes me... (The second) places me". (Jacob Needleman)

Nothing better illustrates our hubris and megalomaniac belief that we have somehow stepped outside history than the claim that you cannot stop progress or turn the clock back. The past is full of examples of extinct (mono) cultures. Shortly after the Roman poet Juvenal declared that "wealth is our divinity", the clock was turned back to such an extent that some technologies widely used in ancient Rome were lost and not re-introduced in Europe for over a thousand years.

We may of course decide to trust the authors of our current human story that their knowledge will grow fast enough to deal with the consequences of their actions. But that would not just be bad science - it would be bad religion! Alternatively we can begin to write the new story of the world as a family rather than a business opportunity.

The challenge is huge. Where do our responsibilities end as despairing environmental immigrants leave their degraded lands and appear at the doorstep of the global rich - who rarely feel rich? Many of them are Christians but how many will follow the biblical admonition not just to give relief but "that he may live with thee". (Leviticus 25:35-37)?

We do not have all the answers. But it is vital that we start asking the right questions. The old joke about the man asking for directions only to be told "I wouldn't start from here!" makes a serious point. Some routes are almost impossible. If we start our global dialogue with the assumption that we hold contradictory value systems - and are united only by greed - then we are guaranteeing that any action will be too little too late. But such a perspective is too pessimistic and superficial. There is ample evidence that a global citizens' community with common values does not have to be laboriously created. It already exists! Research by the Institute for Global Ethics and others have found a remarkable global convergence and even consensus on common values. This basic consensus overrides diverse world views. It is shared by believers and non-believers of very different social backgrounds and countries.

Of course there is diversity in how values are interpreted and implemented. "For the hungry, God is a loaf of bread" (Gandhi). For the poor, the most important human rights are economic. As we satisfy our material needs, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of values holds true. War and peace, tradition, even climate and geography will also influence our priorities.

But that is a far cry from the story of irreconcilable Western vis a vis African or Asian values. When examined, the claimed disdain of Asians and Africans for political and civil rights reveals itself to be a convenient excuse for local dictators and their Western backers reluctant to grant democratic rights which might endanger their economic privileges. Significantly, the only Africans and Asians accusing me of not understanding their different values have been

the representatives of the former Nigerian and Indonesian dictators, complaining about Right Livelihood Awards given to human rights activists in their countries.

Another alleged conflict concerns the emphasis on community values. This "conflict" is usually stressed by those trying to destroy community values in the West in the name of individual freedom. Their ultimate goal is to replace representative with direct instant cyber democracy. But apparently reasonable individual decisions can lead to unwanted and socially irrational consequences.

The main values gap today is not between most Europeans, Americans, Asians and Africans - but between all of us and the values of the ruling economic fundamentalism - which even in democratic countries is presented as sacrosanct and without alternative.

I have asked very diverse audiences whether they would pursue a poor African for compound interest on the money they had lent him - once he had repaid the loan - even at the expense of his children's health and education. Of course no-one would. But this is what our governments, banks etc. do day after day in our name. They value current financial accounting practices and bank regulations above the lives of African children - but these are hardly European or North American values! "Donor fatigue" is a consequence when a hungry person less is presented not as a brother or sister more - but as a potential future customer for our exports.

Our problem today is not a "values vacuum" but that widely agreed human values are not acted on. Indeed, they have often been rendered invisible by the refusal of commerce and finance to accept that they should be restricted by the values of the societies in which they operate.

As a result we become less confident about our moral judgments. Our values consensus is increasingly strained, as is the trust in our leaders as governments no longer treat us as citizens but only as consumers to be blamed when market rule goes wrong. Thus the BSE crisis is blamed on UK consumers' "demand for cheap meat".

It is a sign of the trivialisation of our sound-bite public debate that the distinction between our value judgments as citizens - which turn out to be remarkably similar all over the world - and our preferences as consumers is hardly ever articulated. It is simply assumed that the latter govern the former, that our overriding value is competitive greed. But this is simply not so. In "The Economy of the Earth", US Professor Martin Sagoff describes his students' reactions to the decision by the US Forest Service to lease a wilderness in the middle of a National Park to Walt Disney Enterprises to develop a ski resort. Asking his students how many had visited or would visit this wilderness as it was, he received only a few responses while many responded positively when asked if they would go if the area was developed in the way Disney planned. "The class got really excited". The consumer demand was clearly there.

Sagoff went on to ask his students if they thought the government was right in giving Disney a lease to develop this wilderness. "The response was nearly unanimous. The students believed that the Disney plan was loathsome and despicable, that the Forest Service had violated a public trust by approving it, and that the values for which we stand as a nation compel us to preserve the little wilderness we have for its own sake and as a heritage for future generations".

This is not an isolated example. Questioned in depth in a recent international study about current priorities and future preferences, large majorities in the USA - as well as other industrialised countries - wanted less emphasis on "economic opportunity" and more on cultural and educational opportunities, emotional and environmental security and the "spiritual dimension". (Journal of Human Values 5:1, 1999).

Citizen values come a poor second to consumer preferences when policies are set on the national level. On the global level, where more and more decisions affecting us are now taken, citizen values are seen by the corporate globalisers as an undesirable impediment to trade. Those TNCs who agreed to join the UN Global Compact stressed their conditions: the principles they sign up to must be non-binding and their compliance with them must not be monitored, nor must they be "expected to take on responsibilities outside their own spheres".

But such isolated "spheres" do not exist, least of all for global corporations who insist on the right to penetrate every area of life of every country - but want to be shielded against the ensuing responsibilities. Global values of honesty, compassion, fairness, community etc. apply to everyone and especially to those benefiting from the huge privileges of incorporation and limited liability. If forceful international agreements are possible to protect the values of commerce, then they are also possible to protect more fundamental human values, including the right to protect diversity against the threat of a global monoculture made in Washington and Hollywood.

We urgently need structures which articulate our common global citizen values on an ongoing basis and press for their incorporation in the global order. That is why I have proposed a World Future Council, giving a voice to our common future. The Council members would be 50 to 100 respected and open-minded individuals from various countries, backgrounds and beliefs. While they would serve on the Council in their personal capacity, the aim will be to include recognised political, religious and civil society leaders as well as representatives of business, the sciences etc. who have shown an awareness and understanding of global values.

The World Future Council would not claim to "represent" others, but rather to express and manifest common values and goals - as citizens taking responsibility for the future. The Council would aim to be a catalytic force that crystallises and manifests universal concerns and formulates value-based responses. Its power would be moral. As the voice of Global Stewardship it would restore confidence in our ability to act together and could become a powerful change agent. It could stimulate the creation of regional and local councils who would bring their issues and propositions to the World Council for debate and promotion.

The responses I have already had to this proposal have convinced me that it is an idea whose time has come. If and when democratically elected structures are created on the global level, the council would have an important advisory role.

The response to skeptics has to be "If not now, then when - and if not we, then who?" It was that question which inspired me to initiate the Right Livelihood Awards - because I saw the need and was able to do something about it. The ultimate success of any such initiative depends primarily on:

1. The credibility of those participating
2. The ability to get the message out - already assured in the case of the World Future Council by the commitment of German Television to transmit its meetings worldwide and;
3. The continuity of its work. This will require substantial ongoing funding.

I invite anyone thinking or working along similar lines to consider joining forces and help strengthen the open "conspiracy" ("breathing together") of global citizens to ensure that "globalisation" does not mean the worldwide imposition of the values and interests of a small privileged minority.

The most serious threat to us all today is not the (impossible) continuation of "business as usual". It is the collapse of our societies as our leaders lose their credibility and are replaced by preachers of intolerance and obscurantism, leading the reaction against market radicalism. In an increasing number of countries, this is no longer a distant prospect. Growing conflicts

threaten to paralyse decision-making processes but we are too inter-dependent for global anarchy to be viable option. Even local diversity needs a global voice to speak up for its values. For it is on the local level that the victims of global economic Darwinism have to be cared for and the costs have to be met - all from an eroded tax base.

The alternative is terror on a global scale - not just by a few fanatics but by the many hundreds of millions who see their livelihoods and lands destroyed, their families and futures threatened by the West's unwillingness to change.

If we wait too long, if "the great historical moment encounters too small a human race" (Ernst Bloch), then the West may be confronted with very different global values as the poor majority lose their patience and decide "the time has come for destroying those who destroy the earth". (Revelation 11:18).