

## PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS: WHAT IS INVOLVED IN OUR TRANSFORMATION IN THINKING?

### ABSTRACT

Since the Scientific/Industrial Revolution, the Western world has experienced a high level of economic development. Much of this success has been attributed to our emphasis on science, technology and classical economics. This has been made possible through the incredible capacities and development of the human mind ---our logical, rational and analytical capabilities.

However, we are now experiencing a rapid and worrisome breakdown of our highly developed conventional systems and thinking, and seem unable to “solve” our problems utilizing our conventionally successful “way of thinking” that created this apparent success story.

Where is the blockage? What has gone wrong?

This discussion (based on book, “The Blockage”, publication, fall 2007) traces the roots of our dilemma by looking below the level of our policies and practices, to examine the principles and values which form the foundation of our thinking on which policies and practices are seated. Our blockage appears to have its roots somehow in our “way of thinking”, that is, the principles and values we have accepted over time as unquestioned truths or assumptions. This has led to emerging new interpretations of our reality, and examination of some new (or rediscovered) deeply rooted principles and values which appear to be at the heart of some positive results in many areas ----ecological, social and economic, and directed towards long term survival. These emerging principles and values are gradually being accepted as a solid foundation for a diverse range of models which are developing in many different regions and cultures in the world.

One of these models includes our organization, CANSEE, and the emerging Ecological Economics universal principles and values on which it is seated.

### INTRODUCTION

As we all know, neo-classical economic philosophy and values , based on positivism, has penetrated very facet of western thinking for many generations, including business organizations, governments, education systems, and health systems, to mention a few. This has become the one and only “king” so to speak. As a result, we can certainly recognize its success in producing extraordinary economic achievements for a significant number of people, and the concept of progress and success has increasingly been associated with “money” as its central core.

However, as we all know, a new situation has been arising rapidly over the past 30 years which is resulting in a serious and rapid breakdown of our ecological and social base in societies, and our conventional “philosophy” does not seem to be able to deal with it. Many attempts are being made using tools based on neoclassical economic thinking, but with mostly disappointing outcomes (with a few notable exceptions).

Another worrisome aspect is the question of time ----events related to these breakdowns are moving very rapidly, and many experts in the scientific field are warning us that we have a relatively short time frame to act if we are to avoid major ecological (and related social) breakdowns which can seriously affect life of earth as we know it.

This paper is based on the insights of a number of highly respected “visionaries”, and it attempts to provide an alternative approach which could be helpful in coming to grips with the roots of our dilemma.

This emerging alternative approach is divided into 3 sections:

- A. Our present situation
- B. The transition period
- C. An emerging alternative

This paper concludes with some observations of what appears to be an alternative worth seriously considering in our search for the roots of our dilemma. This includes indications of the dependency of policies and practices on the underlying principles and values on which they depend. For the first time in many generations, we are beginning to realize the depth of this transformation in thinking if we are to rethink the roots of our democratic system in its overall sense.

## A. OUR PRESENT SYSTEM

Let us firstly look at our present system through the eyes of some highly respected visionaries. Questions which may be related to our present situation could include: What is the common thread which seems to connect all of these different visionary views?

What does this tell us about the depth of our dilemma?

ALBERT EINSTEIN:<sup>1</sup>

“We cannot solve our problems by using the same kind of thinking that created them”.

“Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts”.

It appears that this towering figure in the scientific world was also very conscious of the serious need for us to transform our thinking if we hope to come to grips with our problems. This Einstein seems to have understood at a very deep level, and encouraged us to rethink our conventional assumptions (principles and values), in order to hope to deal effectively with our dilemma.

WILLIS HARMAN:<sup>2</sup>

“The industrialized world, having lost any consensus on ultimate meanings and values, steers itself mainly on economic and financial signals serving pseudo-values.....The key step in our bringing about change is eschewing the negative vision (of purely objective positivistic thinking) to which we have unwittingly been contributing, and choosing a vision that benefits our inner purpose and that of those around us”.

Harman appears to indicate clearly the need for us to rethink our present day deeply held truths and principles.

DAVID KORTEN<sup>3</sup>

“Successful as capitalism has been in creating a mass consumer culture, the fact remains that its values are largely alien to our basic nature”.

Korten certainly seems to believe that we cannot hope to transform our existing practices effectively without looking seriously at how our present principles and values are in conflict with our deep human nature.

E. F. SCHUMACHER<sup>4</sup>

“The purely quantitative approach misses out on everything that really matters”.

Schumacher indicates clearly that a purely scientific quantitative approach will not solve the very deep dilemma we face. Something more is needed.

There appears to be a common thread which runs through these insights related to our present dilemma. That refers to the inability of our present values and principles to deal

effectively with our present problems. They all point it seems, to something much deeper in the human mind that we need to reach in order to locate the roots of our problems. This exposes us to an uncomfortable and dramatic situation which is essentially questioning the values or beliefs which we have been brought up to believe as almost unspoken “truths”.

These insights also seem to point to the tremendous capacity of our deep human consciousness as having the capacity to actually find a viable solution deep within every human being. There also appears to be, within these insights a positive note related to the human capacity far beyond what we are presently utilizing.

This is certainly encouraging, especially when we take into account the powerful sectors of society at present. As is accepted by almost all economists, the business sector is presently the sector of society which has the most influence in how a country or region will develop. Therefore, the magnitude of this transformation or change appears to require a deep transformation within the hearts and minds of key decision makers if we hope to make fundamental transformations in organizational values and behaviours.

## B. THE TRANSITION

In this section some visionaries are pointing in a direction which reveals the deep involvement of every human being, and especially decision makers. An alternative approach appears to point to the need to delve deeply into our own thinking (root values) in search of a solution.

Presently most people and sectors find themselves in a complex period of transition. We are mostly aware that the “conventional” system no longer is adequate, and we are faced with a multitude of alternatives. Many of these alternatives are still seated on conventional principles and values, with superficial adjustments being incorporated mainly in the ecological and social areas, but without disturbing the underlying values of conventional thinking. Some valuable steps are being taken based on this approach, but it appears not to be sufficient to provide deeply seated long term positive results, as conventional thinking for the most part still remains in tact. It appears we need to expand more deeply into our human consciousness (especially amongst decision makers) to find the roots of our dilemma. Here lies one of the most difficult challenges for Ecological Economics (EE) and the principles and values on which EE is being developed and seated.

Following are some visionary views related to this period of transition:

WILLIS HARMAN:<sup>5</sup>

“ The contemporary reassessment of basic assumptions (conventional principles and values) is a consequence of the growing suspicion that without some sort of fundamental change, modern industrial society appears to be unable to resolve the socio-political and ecological dilemmas that beset us.....The change that is required is not simply a shift from one form of industrial society to another (such as capitalism to socialism) but rather a major change in the basic assumptions (values and principles) underlying both versions of industrial society”.

ERVIN LASZLO:<sup>6</sup>

“We are attempting to cope with the conditions of the 21 Century with the thinking of the 20 Century.....Ultimately , such a “shift” (in human thinking) lies in changes in hearts and minds, in the values and conduct of us all”.

DAVID KORTEN:<sup>7</sup>

“That which cannot be observed or measured, such as spirit and consciousness, came to be excluded from consideration by science – and therefore from the scientific perspective does not exist”.

E.F. SCHUMACHER:<sup>8</sup>

“A civilization that deprecates the heart, which idolizes objectivity in the forms of scientism, positivism, and rationalism, which bases the entire education (in its broadest sense) on the notion that decisions must be taken without interference with the emotions, inevitably exposes itself to the dangers of unlimited violence.....modern civilization can survive only if it begins again to educate the heart, which is the source of Wisdom”.

These insights are far reaching and complex. The common thread appears to be the necessity for us humans to expand our thinking to include the deep reservoir of human capacity beyond our customary “objective, logical” minds, if we hope to find genuine transformation in ecological and social sectors of society. It also points very directly to those of us who are involved in the process of teaching and research, and the difficulties

of accepting the “whole person” as a factor in research, with outcomes being affected both by the observer as well as the observed.

We in CANSEE are trying diligently to promote “sustainable” ecological economics as a way of making inroads into the ecological and social dilemmas we presently face. These efforts have been very valuable and should be positively recognized. This has been especially true in Europe where some significant changes are being made for example in instituting new regulations governing ecological issues. On the other hand, in North America, we see very few of these steps being taken as yet.

However, it is interesting to learn that much of this valuable work in especially the environmental and social areas, are taking place in the “middle” levels of organizations, but very few are penetrating to the top decision makers in organizations, governments or universities. This is a source of frustration for the efforts of many researchers, as they often do not see the expected outcomes, due to what appears to be “blockages” in the thinking of decision makers related to their deeply rooted conventional principles and values which control their thinking. It appears that most top decision makers cannot or do not wish to contemplate the need for fundamental rethinking of their deeply held conventional neoclassical economic principles or values. (This whole concept is one that Peter Soderbaum refers to as “interface”).<sup>9</sup>

The situation seems to indicate that without the transformation in thinking by decision makers particularly, our hopes for fundamental long term genuine transformation in how organizations behave is still a huge challenge.

It also appears, based on the insight of visionaries that we need to have this fundamental transformation in thinking at the top decision making levels, as an essential ingredient for genuine “sustainable” economic development for future generations.

Clearly, what has been happening to date is positive, but not sufficient to “solve” our deep ecological, economic and social ills.

### C. AN EMERGING ALTERNATIVE

A new (or rediscovered) alternative is emerging in some sectors to deal with the deep roots (or blockages) of our dilemma. It is complex, as it involves a great deal of personal reflection relating to our most deeply held “truths”, beliefs or values. This complexity is often made more difficult as we struggle to find words to describe concepts that apparently come essentially from our deep consciousness, or “unconscious” areas of our mind, as opposed to the relative ease in finding words to describe the concepts which we hold in our objective “conscious” mind.

A number of visionaries have tried to provide insights into what is involved:

ROGER WALSH:<sup>10</sup>

“ This physical world we live in and see and touch is not all there is to reality; that underneath it – at its source – is another world, a sacred world, a world of spirit, or consciousness or Mind .....coming to know this sacred realm and coming to recognize it as ourselves is the highest good and the highest goal of human existence --- that it is the means by which we can best serve ourselves and others”.

Walsh also summarized a comparison between ‘knowledge’ (using our conscious objective mind), and wisdom (using also our unconscious spiritual mind):

1. “Knowledge requires information, but wisdom requires understanding”.
2. “Knowledge informs us but wisdom transforms us”.
3. “Knowledge empowers, but wisdom enlightens”.
4. “Knowledge is something we have, but wisdom is something we become”.

ERVIN LASZLO<sup>11</sup>

“Values and beliefs determine the way we perceive the world and suggest the ways we prioritize the responses to our perceptions. They affect almost all areas of our judgment and behavior”.

“A planetary ethic (or universal values) respects the condition under which all people in the world community can live in dignity and freedom, without destroying each others chances of livelihood, culture, society and environment”.

KENNETH BOULDING:<sup>12</sup>

“Spirituality involves the spirit and “spirit” is a code word for what lies at the deepest levels of consciousness .....Spirituality, as distinguished from religious dogma, is a kind of consciousness, one that is characterized by a ‘noetic’ sense of unity and ultimate reality, the fruit of which is compassionate, unconditional, universal love”.

E.F. SCHUMACHER:<sup>13</sup>

Schumacher had a dramatic experience of transformation from “conventional thinking” to “sustainable thinking”. He explained it briefly:

“I don’t think it was arrogance that made me think that at long last we had discovered the only possible method for acquiring valid knowledge ---the scientific method, and that therefore people who adhered to pre-scientific faiths or beliefs were simply behind times, to be pitied rather than despised”.

Schumacher describes what began to happen to him, as he began his process of transformation (mainly through a form of meditation):

“The inward parts started to react and in fact to 'burn' as soon as my mind found itself in contact with the real thing .....what shall I call it? with Truth?”

Over a period of a number of years Schumacher had a complete transformation in thinking. Following this life changing event he stated:

“The inner organ with its indwelling spirit of Truth is really the most wonderful thing. It tells me whether something is the Truth .....sometimes long before my reason is able to understand how it ‘could’ be such”

ALBERT EINSTEIN:<sup>14</sup>

“My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind.”

"Imagination is more important than knowledge".

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed”.

WILLIS HARMAN<sup>15</sup>

“The Western neglect of the realm of subjective experience has had serious consequences in our confusion about values. For it is ultimately in the realm of the subjective (consciousness), the transcendent, and the spiritual that all societies have found the basis for the deepest values, commitments and sense of meaning”.

Willis Harman believed in 3 ways we can learn (or know):

- a) The reasoning process of the Intellect.
- b) The perception of our experiences through the senses.
- c) The intuitive, spiritual or inner ways of knowing.

Common threads of the Emerging Alternative:

----- There appears to be an imperative involving the importance of the development of our “spiritual” capacities, (or Mind or consciousness), and to balance this with our objective mind and capacities.

---- There appears to be an important need for decision makers to take personal transformation seriously in order to be able to effectively rethink organizational and institutional values and principles for a “sustainable” foundation on which to seat viable policies and practices.

---- There appears to be a need to recognize the importance of meaningful experience as an important source of learning and “knowing” for human beings.

---- It appears that individuals and organizations who have made the transition to accepting the importance of developing the whole human person (including the conscious and unconscious mind) , are also finding totally new ways of approaching policy development. In education, the purely scientific path to valid research is being expanded to accept other ways of “knowing” as also valid. All of this seems to point to the benefits available of deep seated transformation, involving the acceptance of our deep human capacities, including the huge reservoir of wisdom coming from the unconscious, “spiritual” area of every human being.

#### Emerging Values and Principles:

Next we need to identify the actual values and principles which form a new rethought foundation: the basis for genuine EE thinking it would appear.

In this process of identification of values and principles, we can gain assistance from various sources, such as the UN Earth Charter and the Parliament of Religions, to mention two sources. Interestingly, these deep universal values which seem to be emerging appear to be fundamentally in agreement with the key values which form the basis for practicing Ecological Economics.

Some insights into key values come from our visionaries:

ALBERT EINSTEIN:<sup>16</sup>

“The ideals which have lighted my way, and time after time have given me new courage to face life cheerfully, have been Kindness, Beauty and Truth. The trite subjects of human efforts, possessions, outward success, luxury, have always seemed to me contemptible”.

“Only a life lived for others are a life worthwhile”.

“A person starts of live when he can live outside himself”.

“Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding”.

E.F. SCHUMACHER:<sup>17</sup>

Relating deeply rooted human consciousness to everyday work, Schumacher states:

“ There are three things healthy people most need to do –to be creatively productive, to render service, and to act in accordance with their moral impulses.....In a big organization our freedoms to do so is inevitably severely restricted”.

DAVID KORTEN<sup>18</sup>

Relating our deep spirituality with the importance of community development, Korten states:

“One of the greatest challenges is to create caring communities that nurture our wholeness. Wholeness and coherence in one’s own life and relationships are essential foundations of both personal freedom and the coherence of society”.

### Some key Universal Values

The visionaries quoted above are only a few of many, that all seem to point to some fundamental universal human values we have in common.

These universal values can be viewed as our individual worldviews related to: the self (personal level); family, work and community (community level); the universe and spirituality (the cosmos).

Universal Values: Personal Level

LOVE: This overarching value appears to form the foundation for many other values. It includes a wide range of values including compassion, kindness, generosity, forgiveness and joy.

**NON-VIOLENCE:** This value is viewed as absolutely essential, and includes non-violence in our personal thinking and feelings, in our attitudes, in our behaviours and naturally in our actions.

**TRUST:** It appears especially important in our present situation, as we are bombarded by all kinds of different situations where personal or small group agendas can often overshadow the common good for the majority of the population. As a result the general population tends to mistrust many large business organizations and governments.

**TRUTHFULNESS/ HONESTY:** This value is especially complex in cross cultural situations, where the concept can have different interpretations.

**HUMILITY:** To recognize our “smallness” in the universe is difficult, when the western world has prided itself on our outstanding intellectual capacity to, in time, unlock all the secrets of the world. We need to find ways of seeing humility in the light of personal strength rather than weakness.

Universal Values: Community Level

**FAMILY, COMMUNITY, WORK:** The community is viewed as a central pillar of a fulfilling, meaningful life. This includes the central core of family, co-workers and community members. Here lies the core for the “sustainable” development of the larger region and country, involving key personal values, in addition to cooperation, solidarity, personal responsibility and tolerance.

Universal Values: Nature and the Cosmos

Our relationship with Nature and the Cosmos appears to become increasingly meaningful as our “spirituality” and inner meaning becomes manifest. Visionaries generally view our human capacity of consciousness as an incredible gift which many of us do not fully understand we possess. As a result, in developing this consciousness, our sense of spirit and oneness with Nature and the Cosmos becomes central to making sense of the world and our place in it.

Our human capacity to comprehend and “live” these values is indeed exciting and awe inspiring. Many visionaries have obviously seen and felt this, and they can be a beacon of hope for the rest of us.

## CONCLUSIONS

It appears quite certain that some kind of new paradigm in thinking or worldview is emerging, and the roots of this new thinking appears to involve values which are different from values and principles on which our conventional paradigm is seated.

It appears that many of us are doing valuable work in dealing with the most urgent aspects of ecological and social issues present today, as time limitations appear to be coming increasingly urgent.

But is this enough? Due to the continuing “blockages” we are seeing in the minds of especially many decision makers, it appears that the transition to “sustainable economics” or EE will need to go more deeply into our human thinking and to “rethink” the deep root values on which policies are based and actions taken.

In this whole alternative process, there appears to be a need for plurality of ideas, models and cultures, and that we cannot find a “one model fits all” solution. However, what appears also is that at some very deep level, we also need to have some very deeply seated commonly held universal values which provide a solid foundation for healthy plurality.

No one knows exactly how this will unfold or what the new model(s) will look like, but from the deep human perspective, we can begin to feel some peace of mind as we seem to be moving closer to a positive “solution” to our deep seated BLOCKAGE.

WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD OF “SUSTAINABLE THINKING” WHICH WE CAN ALL SHARE, AND APPEARS TO UNDERPIN ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS PHILOSOPHY FOR OUR LONG TERM SURVIVAL.

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- <sup>1</sup> Albert Einstein, “The Expanded Quotable Einstein”, Alice Caprice, Ed., Princeton University Press
- <sup>2</sup> Willis Harman, 1998, “Global Mind Change”, Barrett-Koehler Publishing
- <sup>3</sup> David Korten, 1999, “The Post Corporate World”, Barrett-Koehler Publishing
- <sup>4</sup> E.F. Schumacher, 1997, “This I Believe”, Green Books
- <sup>5</sup> Willis Harman, 1998, “Global Mind Change”, Barrett-Koehler Publishing
- <sup>6</sup> Ervin Laszlo, 2001, “Macroshift”, Barrett-Koehler Publishing
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- <sup>10</sup> Roger Walsh, 2001, “The Seven Practices of Essential Spirituality”, Noetic Sciences Review, Dec. 2001-Feb. 2002. Also refer to complete book, “Essential Spirituality, 2000, John Wiley and Sons.
- <sup>11</sup> Ervin Laszlo, 2001, “Macroshift”, Barrett-Koehler Publishing
- <sup>12</sup> Kenneth Boulding, 2003, from address delivered to the “Dancing with Machines”, panel of the World Futures Conference, San Francisco.
- <sup>13</sup> E.F. Schumacher, 1997, “This I Believe”, Green Books
- <sup>14</sup> Albert Einstein, “The Expanded Quotable Einstein”, Alice Caprice, Ed., Princeton University Press
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