

Healing Our Sick Society



The basic reason why Western civilization is dying, as this cartoon published in the ecological journal *Resurgence* in March/April 1996 illustrates quite clearly, is that it is suffering from a fatal illness. This great civilization is dying because it is based on the assumption that we human beings are separate from God, from Nature, and from each other, instilled in us by Christianity (and Judaism and Islam), materialistic and mechanistic science, and capitalistic and communistic economic ideologies.

This is not my experience, or the experience of a rapidly growing number of people in the world today. Whether or not we share similar experiences, the fundamental fact of existence is that at no instant in our lives are we ever separate from the Divine. It is the Divine that gives us life, that distinguishes us human beings from machines such as computers.

Therein lies the root cause of the death of Western civilization. For this exquisite, mystical experience cannot satisfactorily be accom-



"We'd like to end our recital this evening with a final death-knell for Western civilization."

modated within the traditional religious, philosophical, scientific, or economic world-views that are taught in schools, universities, churches, businesses, and governments today.

Even though only a miracle can save humanity from becoming extinct before the children born in this millennium have time to grow old enough to have children of their own, we can help this miracle to come into being by drawing on the insights of earlier investigators into the dynamics of human society. Arguably, the most penetrating writer in this respect was Erich Fromm, who initially was inspired by the works of Marx and Freud, but who in his later works turned to Buddhism, in conjunction with D. T. Suzuki, and to the pre-eminent Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart.

In 1942, Fromm published a book called *The Fear of Freedom* in the UK, showing that we do not live in a free society, as the politicians claim, but that we are actually afraid of freedom. Then in 1956 he wrote a book called *The Sane Society*, which challenged some of the most fundamental assumptions of our society. In the first two chapters of this book, he asked "Are We Sane?" and "Can a Society be Sick?", answering these questions with a resounding 'NO' and 'YES', respectively. What is regarded as the normal behaviour of a society can be considered to be pathological.

We can see quite clearly why this is so from the root of the word *sane*. This comes from a Latin word *sanus*, meaning 'sound' or 'healthy'. In English, *sane* usually means 'mentally sound' because *insanus* in Latin always referred to mental condition. However, *healthy* can refer to our bodily, mental, and spiritual well-being; all three.

So are we a healthy society, whose members are healthy individuals? Well, the word *health* comes from an Old High German word, *heilida*, which is cognate with *heil*, meaning 'whole', and *heilag*, meaning 'holy'. But we are very far from being fully integrated in body, mind, and spirit, as the many millions of people seeking Wholeness in the world today can affirm.

In his greatest masterpiece *To Have or To Be?*, published twenty years after *The Sane Society*, Fromm looked at the conditions that

could save us from psychological, ecological, and economic catastrophe, viewing our sick society in a similar way to a medical practitioner looking at a patient, a process he likened to Shakyamuni Buddha's Four Noble Truths:

1. **Symptoms:** We are suffering and are aware that we are.
2. **Cause:** We recognize the origin of our ill-being.
3. **Cure:** We recognize that there is a way to overcome our ill-being.
4. **Remedy:** We accept that in order to overcome our ill-being we must follow certain norms for living and change our present practice of life.

So, in this first chapter, here is a strategy for cultural transformation based on these four steps, a process that Life has been applying to my own individual transformation for the last twenty-four years. Maybe in this way we can trigger an apocalyptic earthquake in the depths of the ocean of Consciousness and thereby reveal the delusions and inhibitors that drive and limit so much of our behaviour today. As far as I can see, this is the only way in which we can make the transition from the global economy to the Sharing Economy in as loving and peaceful a way as possible.

Identifying the symptoms

The human race is suffering today from severe psychological distress, most obviously anxiety, stress, and burn-out. However, as a society, we are also suffering from delusional, obsessive, and schizoid disorders, defined for individuals in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), published by the American Psychiatric Association. All these disorders are causing acute ecological damage, which will lead to the premature death of the human race if we are not aware of our suffering and do not engage in healing ourselves.

It might seem strange to say that a whole culture can be deluded, for *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* says that only individuals can be deluded, not a culture or sub-culture. But if psychologists were to admit that the culture within which they are working is deluded, this would bring into question much of their work, which not many are willing to consider. And there is no better evidence of our obsessive behaviour than our infatuation for the antics of the financial markets. Our schizoid behaviour arises because of our separation from Reality, believing that what is called the 'real world' has independent existence and enduring substance.

Recognizing the cause

This brings us to the fundamental reason for our malaise. Because we are separate from the Truth, Western civilization is based on false assumptions about God, the Universe, Life, humanity, money, justice, and reason, which we can call the seven pillars of unwisdom, a term introduced by Arthur Koestler in *The Ghost in the Machine*.

The first pillar of unwisdom arises from our separation from God; the next three arise because we see Nature as other; and the fifth and sixth pillars support our notion that we are separate from each other. These six pillars of unwisdom are encapsulated in Western reason by Aristotle's Law of Contradiction, which is the seventh pillar of unwisdom, lying at the heart of mathematical proof and deductive logic.

Pillars of unwisdom

Separation from God

1. God is other: there is a great gulf between the Creator and created that can never be bridged. Each of us has our own personal God, with whom we can have a relationship and conversations. Human beings are created in the image of God. God does not exist.

Separation from Nature

2. The physical universe is the primary reality and all phenomena in the Universe can be explained in terms of the laws of physics, including Consciousness, which arises from the brain as an epiphenomenon. It is the task of science to master and control Nature, viewed as an objective reality, for the egoic benefit of certain groups of human beings alone.
3. Life is a property of the DNA molecule and first emerged on Earth some 3.5 billion years ago. Consequently, evolution is a process that has come about solely by purposeless transformations of the DNA molecule, aided by natural selection, without divine intervention. Human learning is not biological and is therefore not an evolutionary process.
4. Human beings are biochemical machines and nothing but machines. Physical and psychological disorders can therefore only be cured through either mainstream or alternative medication, not through spiritual, subtle, or mental healing energies. It is also possible for computer scientists to create artificial intelligence, artificial consciousness, and even artificial life.

Separation from each other

5. Technological development can drive economic growth indefinitely, and money is a commodity with value that can be bought and sold. We can understand everything that is happening in business through econometric, financial, and management accounting models. If we are to survive as individuals, we must selfishly compete with our fellow human beings for the precious resources of our beautiful planet Earth, including the money supply, which must be limited to hold its value.
6. Individual human beings have the free will to decide their destiny and how they behave. So people can be blamed for what are called immoral, antisocial, or criminal activities, and can claim

credit for what society regards as praiseworthy. Such a divisive society is characterized by individuals adopting litigious and vengeful attitudes, on the one hand, and, on the other, seeking recognition through prizes and awards.

Logical implications

7. For reason to be valid, it must reject paradoxes and self-contradictions, a principle encapsulated in Aristotle's Law of Contradiction, which underlies mathematics and deductive logic. Thus, to see both sides of a situation is a two-faced sign of weakness, of indecisiveness; a dualistic view that inevitably leads to war.

Finding a cure

The cure for our delusional, obsessive, and schizoid behaviour is obviously to become consciously unified with God, Nature, and each other. Specifically, to make the transition from Western civilization and the global economy to the Paragonian Society and the Sharing Economy, we need to replace the seven pillars of unwisdom that underpin the West with seven pillars of wisdom. In summary, these are:

Pillars of wisdom

Union with God

1. Every one of us is in union with the Divine for every instant of our lives. There is only one absolute Whole, which provides the overall context for all of us as individuals. God has no image, for Wholeness is the union of all opposites, including form and formlessness.

Union with Nature

2. Consciousness is all there is, the only Reality. Everything in the relativistic world of form, including the physical universe and

ourselves, is an illusion, an appearance in or abstraction from Consciousness, with no permanent existence; this is called *maya* in the East. We are thus all an integral part of Nature, inseparable from anything else in the world of form.

3. Evolution, from the most recent big bang fourteen billion years ago, through the evolution of the species, to human learning, progresses accumulatively through the synergistic effect of structure-forming relationships, the whole process being driven by the creative power of Life, whose origin is the Divine. The ultimate destiny of evolution is ineffable, nondual Wholeness, whence it began.
4. In essence, human beings are divine, cosmic creatures. Our true nature is thus Wholeness and the Truth, Love and Peace, Life and Freedom, Consciousness and Intelligence, and Stillness and Emptiness, capitalized words to denote Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, and God. The power of Life, alone, is quite capable of restoring us to health, wholeness, and holiness.

Union with each other

5. All growth processes in the Universe are limited, following an S-shape. To trade in financial products is, like buying and selling kilograms and metres, an absurdity. We can best see what is happening in business today by integrating all the semantic models developed by individual information systems architects working in separate enterprises. We can only survive as a species, and thereby realize our fullest potential, if we learn to cooperate with each other synergistically.
6. We human beings are the products of some fourteen billion years of evolution, which has been brought about through the power of Life, acting in the timeless, constantly refreshing the blind, mechanistic evolutionary processes that take place in the horizontal dimension of time. There is thus no doership or ownership, no separate entity who can be said to do or own

anything. What we call 'justice' is thus an egoic concept, which arises because of our inability to see our personal lives in the context of the Whole.

Logical implications

7. The Universe is inherently paradoxical, a situation that we need to incorporate in a hologenetic, noninferential, self-reflective science of reason that truly reflects the world we live in. To see both our own and the other person's perspective is a sign of intelligence, leading to peace and harmony in personal and group relationships.

For myself, the way in which evolution has become fully conscious of itself in this being that I am is that I have been guided to conduct an experiment in learning that starts afresh at the very beginning. In this way, I have learnt to integrate all knowledge in all cultures and disciplines at all times, past, present, and future, into a coherent whole. I am thus privileged to look at myself and the world I live in through the eyes of God, rather like taking a bird's-eye view of our surroundings. This, for me, is the ultimate cure for the sense of separation that is instilled in us by the fragmented and deluded world we live in.

Applying the remedy

Applying the remedy is not so easy. This is because the cognitive structures in our individual minds, incorporated in social institutions, tend to act like the immune response of the body. Our bodies attack anything they regard as alien to themselves, including life-saving organ transplants. So from the perspective of the leaders of Western civilization, there is no distinction between terrorists—malignant organisms invading the body politic—and those who embody life-enhancing ways of being quite different from the majority. We can see this most clearly in the Christian fear of the gnosticism of the New Age movement, which is seen as being con-

nected with a New World Order, perceived as authoritarian, not liberating.

This fear goes very deep in all three monotheistic religions. As F. C. Happold tells us in *Mysticism*, "To Jew, Christian, and Moslem, a gulf is felt to exist between God and man, Creator and created, which can never be crossed. To assert that 'Thou' art 'That' [as the Hindus do] sounds blasphemous."

So the mystics of these religions have needed to be very careful about what they said if they were not to incur the wrath of the Church authorities. As Elaine Pagels tells us in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, "Even the mystics of Jewish and Christian tradition ... often are careful to acknowledge the abyss that separates them from their divine Source."

So when the pre-eminent Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said, "The eye with which I see God is the same as that with which he sees me," he was found guilty of heresy and would no doubt have been excommunicated or burnt at the stake if he had not died before sentence could be passed. The Sufi Mansur Hallaj did not escape so lightly. In tenth-century Baghdad, he suffered a gruesome death when he declared, "I am the Truth."

But it is a mistake to think that the monotheistic religions no longer believe in the first pillar of unwisdom. Western religious leaders are still perpetuating this split between the Divine and the individual, leading inevitably to schizoid behaviour out of touch with Reality. For instance, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Faith and Reason* published on 14th September 1998, said that if reason is to be fully true to itself, it must be grounded in the "fear of God", a fear that arises when God is other.

Then, as recently as 3rd February 2003, the Vatican published a report on the Christian view of the New Age movement, *Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"*, the title being an obvious reference to the Age of Aquarius.

The central issue of this report is that "man is essentially a creature and remains so for all eternity, so the absorption of the human

I in the divine I will never be possible.” The Christians claim that the word of God, as expressed by the authoritarian priests, has a higher claim than people’s experience of the Divine, a subject much discussed by Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels*. According to this Catholic pamphlet, such a divine experience “results in distorting His Word and replacing it with purely human words”.

But are the priests not human? What gives them the right to claim that they alone know the word of God? Isn’t it the essence of scientific inquiry that it is based on human experience rather than on dogmatic statements that have no basis in Reality? Are we to deny our experiences just because they do not conform to the scriptures or to scientific paradigms?

In this respect, there is a marked contrast between Western and Eastern religious practices. For instance, Christianity is a religion designed to *prevent* its members from revealing Christ Consciousness, which is the birthright of each of us, in contrast to Buddhism, the central focus of which is to *empower* its followers to realize full Buddhahood.

But it is not just the monotheistic religions that have kept us separate from God, Nature, and each other over the millennia. We can see this from the word *physics*, which has a Greek root, *phusike*, meaning ‘nature’. As I mentioned previously, *nature* has a Latin root meaning ‘birth’. But materialistic science does not study the birth of beings, including our own thoughts, since to do so it would need to include God the Creator in its inquiries. So what was called ‘natural philosophy’ in Newton’s time and what is called ‘natural science’ today are very far from being natural. Science today studies only the superficial appearance of beings, not their innate essence.

We can also see from the way in which we human beings have treated each other over the millennia that healing our grievously sick society will not be easy. Because our sense of security has been based on the seven pillars of unwisdom during much of recorded human history, we human beings have been incredibly cruel to each

other when our existential beliefs have felt threatened. For instance, the British psychiatrist Anthony Storr wrote in *Human Aggression*:

With the exception of certain rodents, no other vertebrate habitually destroys members of its own species. No other animal takes positive pleasure in the exercise of cruelty upon another of his own kind ... The sombre fact is that we are the cruellest and most ruthless species that has ever walked the earth.

In a similar fashion, Erich Fromm quotes these words of Nikolaas Tinbergen in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*:

On the one hand, man is akin to many species of animals in that he fights his own species. But on the other hand, he is, among the thousands of species that fight, the only one in which fighting is disruptive ... Man is the only species that is a mass murderer, the only misfit in his own society. Why should this be so?

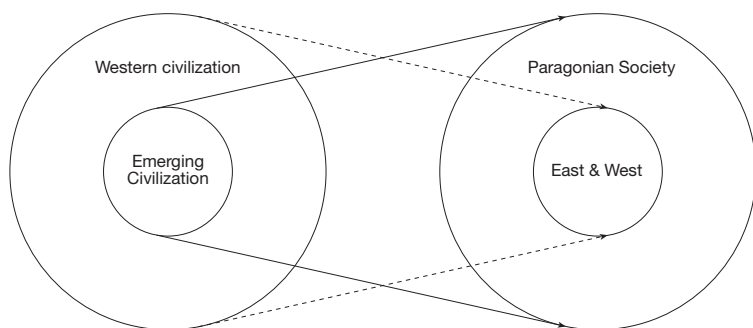
But we human beings are not born miserable sinners, as the Christians believe. Our innate Essence is Love, for at no instant in our lives are we separate from the Divine, and God is Love. So we human beings are quite capable of the most amazing acts of kindness when we do not feel threatened. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the native English word for *nature* is *kind*. Kindliness is our natural state of being.

Once we see the seven pillars of unwisdom for what they are, we can see that it is quite possible to heal our sick society. To this end, there are many individuals in the world today who are questioning the fundamental assumptions of Western civilization. The energy for this transformational process is coming from Life itself, arising directly from our divine Source. But this is an energy that is not acknowledged by either reductionist or holistic science today; it is generally only recognized by the many seekers who have turned to the East for spiritual fulfilment.

It is through the power of Life, Love, and Intelligence that we can transform our global society and hence create a life-enhancing, ecologically sustainable environment that accepts everything, and

rejects nothing. In essence, what we need to do here is to recognize that the West is upside down and inside out. The West believes that the physical universe is the primary reality and that consciousness is an epiphenomenon, when the truth is that Consciousness is all there is, as has been recognized in the East for millennia.

This diagram encapsulates this process of contextual transformation, the emerging civilization expanding to become the Paragonian Society, with all the diverse cultures and unique individuals of the world living within this all-embracing global context.



Today, many individuals and organizations are engaged in the emerging civilization. But they are all living within the overall context of the global economy; they are still sending their children to schools and universities that are teaching them the seven pillars of unwisdom; and they are still obeying economic laws that are driving the human race to the brink of extinction. They are doing this, of course, because if they broke these laws, they would be regarded at least as outlaws by the prevailing culture, which would seek to stop their life-enhancing, peaceful, and integrative ways of being; the blind immune response of society.

Indeed, I don't think that many have understood that this is how they are behaving. Many are still following the Sufi maxim 'Be in the world but not of it', not motivated to build a society in which we can be both in and of the world. Some in the alternative

movement are thus still suffering from many of the delusions of the predominant culture. So we need to help liberate and awaken the cultural creatives just as much as the mainstream. Furthermore, we all need a common vision. Today, the alternative movement is terribly fragmented, with each individual and institution doing their own thing in their own way. This is perhaps natural. But it does not create the synergy that we need to heal our grievously sick society. It is vitally important that we each recognize that our personal destiny is inseparable from that of society as a whole.