

The Only way to Grow is Up:  
Reflections on the Deep Civilizational Work of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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*“Learn the future faster in order to cooperate with our own evolution.”*

After five decades of reading and pondering what I have come to call *the literature of cultural crisis and transformation*, for me, these twelve words are the heart of the matter. What do I mean to convey by them?

First, as a species, we are in way more trouble than we know. True, we have a litany of issues that preoccupy a growing number of us – water, food, climate, demographics, governance, the money system, jobs, economic growth, security, etc. But sadly the common belief is not true – that these are separate issues that if “solved” will assure our sustained success. Rather, these *problems* are symptoms of a yet deeper and far more threatening systemic malady.

I now believe that our modern/Industrial form of civilization has no future as a modern/Industrial form of civilization. The path we are trying to stay on – economic growth forever for everyone – leads only to species death. As Thomas Homer-Dixon has so eloquently argues, *there will be a down; the only interesting question is whether there will be an up.*<sup>1</sup>

Happily, there is also good news. Our modern/Industrial form of civilization is slowly and incoherently evolving into a truly new form of civilization. In this sense, all we need to do, as persons, families, communities, organizations, whole jurisdictions and a species, is learn to see, think through and cooperate with our own evolution. By doing so we will begin to meet the overriding requirement of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – to fundamentally alter the substance and trajectory of our form of civilization and embrace ways of being that lay the foundation for the next form of human civilization.

If this sounds outrageous, it is. No culture on the planet has even a vague notion that this work needed to be undertaken. It escapes us still. Today, this idea appears nowhere on the agendas of any significant official body.

But, this is not the worst news. We must not only learn to transform our form of civilization, we must do so openly and reflexively, relatively rapidly and globally, knowing that this is a requirement of our time in history. We ignore these truly novel requirements of our situation at our peril.

*Fast:* In the past, all transitions to new forms of civilization occurred over long time-spans measured in many centuries, if not millennia. We no longer have centuries to adapt to the emerging conditions that now face us.

*Global:* In the past, all transitions were local or regional. Today, we know that for many purposes nothing less than a global scale will do.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization*. Toronto, Knopf Canada, 2006.

*Required:* In the past, all transitions were optional. Today, we have out of options. Civilizational evolution and transformation is now a requirement.

*Reflexively intentional:* In the past, all transitions were made unconsciously. Today, we face the new requirement that we must act openly, consciously and reflexively.

And, as of today, no society, culture or nation on the planet knows how to alter its trajectory through history in ways that will add up to its fundamental transformation into a truly post-modern/Industrial form of civilization. In short, as large groups we do not yet know how to cooperate with our own evolution. We must learn our way into this work.

I would place my bet on a new *Manhattan-type project*. Creating the conditions that would make such a project possible is the first hurdle.

In any case, for humans at every scale, the only way to grow is up.

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