

“GLOBE, WE HAVE A CULTURAL PROBLEM”

An astute observer of Planet Earth in the early 21st Century might well summarize their observations by paraphrasing the commander of the ill-fated Apollo 13 spaceship and announcing: “Globe, we have a cultural problem.” A series of events including but not limited to: the tsunami in south Asia, the war in the Middle East, the monsoon floods in Western India, California wildfires and the Category 5 hurricanes in the southern United States have drawn global attention to the lack of a contemporary understanding and structures to deal with the current natural and social realities.

To unravel this problem, we need categories for understanding “culture.” The research of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), an international organization devoted to the human factor in global development, analyzes culture under the headings *wisdom*, *styles*, and *symbols*. This essay sets forth proposals for creating a cultural foundation adequate to the realities we are facing in the 21st Century, the first century in the third millennium of the Common Era. At this juncture of Earth’s history the scope of change may be more dramatic than any time since the appearance of the human species 4 million years ago. Cultural historian and cosmologist Thomas Berry goes so far as to say that we are now beginning a new geo-biological era, the “Ecozoic Era.” In his understanding, the Cenozoic Era, which began when the flowers and mammals took over from the ferns and dinosaurs 65 million years ago, is in its terminal phase and all elements of the Planet are now participating in the beginning of a new era marked by a new role for the human, one of self-conscious interrelationship with all species, or as he would say, an era of “mutually enhancing relationships between humans and the larger community of life systems.”

If the transition to the Ecozoic Era is to succeed, it will require a cultural transformation, a global change at the species level. The dominant culture that carried us through the 20th Century no longer serves individuals, nations or our Planet well. The *wisdom* of the 20th Century was dominated by science, and it was a particular kind of science that came into being in the modern period, one that was mechanistic—based on a linear form of arithmetical logic. The *styles* of social interaction in the 20th Century, even characterized as “democratic” were typified by the procedures outlined in Robert’s Rules of Order. Finally, the religious *symbols* which empowered individuals and groups emerged from the great traditions that had been founded at the beginning of the agricultural age more than 4,000 years ago. Though amended through various reformations as societies grew in size and sophistication most of the foundational symbols remained in tact over multiple millennia. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, Moses’ 10 Commandments have been used in churches and court houses to remind people of the essence of a rich tradition. While each of these cultural keystones continues to provide valuable guidance and insight to a society moving into the Ecozoic Era, in each case a richer and more inclusive approach is required.

Robert’s Rules of Order, as a manual for conducting the business of a group of people, definitely marks an improvement over numerous previous alternatives founded on the use of brute force or overt coercion. For several centuries, this approach provided a stable platform on which to grow and expand the capacities of human community. Nonetheless, in a time when sizeable portions of the Planet’s population possess high levels of literacy and ever increasing numbers of residents of all nations have access to one another and to knowledge bases of gigantic proportions through the Internet, the process of counting yes/no votes on one proposal or its amended version fails to tap the immense creativity available within any group or the human community as a whole. The *Technologies of Participation*[®] which the Institute of Cultural Affairs has formulated from its 35 years experience in community and organizational development provide an example of an inclusive participatory approach to decision-making that taps the broadest wisdom of groups of diverse perspectives. The *styles* of the new cultural understanding need to reflect genuine participatory decision-making.

School children around the globe learn to count – 1, 2, 3 ... – at an early age and so begin their introduction into a rational-number arithmetic which typifies the scientific framework of the second millennium. Indian philosophers of the first millennium popularized the concept of zero which found its way into the mathematics of the Muslim world with the development of the decimal number system.

Finally, scientists, accountants, businesses and government from the middle of the second millennium and continuing through today have used the number line and decimal arithmetic to run their growing economic enterprises and to comprehend the workings of the natural world. This approach made considerable progress in expanding the body of knowledge and improving the general standard of living of the human species using two assumptions: that (1) the number line, and by implication social progress, grows and changes in a discreet sequence and (2) nature, both living and non-living, can be quantified by a consistent counting system. Nonetheless, physicist and geometer Robert L. Powell, Sr. has pointed out in his work on "The Rest of Euclid" that a richer set of numbers becomes available to science when the plane, rather than the line, is taken as the primary framework for mathematics. This allows precise meaning to be given to Φ (the diagonal of a pentagon), Π (the circumference of a circle), $\sqrt{3}$ and $\sqrt{2}$ (the diagonals of a cube) and a host of other numbers that are incommensurate with the integers and their fractional parts. When combined with the quantum understanding of change through discontinuous leaps to differing levels of energy, this enriched calculus provides an expanded lens through which to comprehend the world in which each individual lives and grows.

The religious traditions which gave meaning to the various sectors of the human community into the 21st Century continue to provide both insight and wisdom. Yet these, too, require extensions which resonate with the scientific findings of previous centuries and acknowledge the insights of previous generations from each area of the globe. In a conversation over dinner, Thomas Berry once said to me that "the problem with contemporary religion is that doing good, isn't." He went on to note that one can follow all of the scriptural texts normally taught in Sunday school, do all the good things that your teacher taught, and still foster global warming, consume stores of non-renewable resources and wantonly destroy habitats of endangered species thereby putting the health of future generations at risk. As the gap between science (what we know about the material world) and religion (what we know about the spiritual world) widened through the last few millennia, important interconnections and perspectives disappeared from both dimensions. By the end of the 20th Century, each of the major religious traditions had codified its insights in Holy Scriptures – mostly written one to two millennia earlier. These canons definitely assisted in spreading the truths they contained. However, the extent to which the texts became the final source of eternal truth correlates directly to the propensity to fight among faith communities over texts which seem to be contradictory. When the astronauts sent back their photo of the earth rising over the moon, the human community received an unmistakable image of the oneness of the people and the Planet on which they lived. The Universe in which we live provides the primary frame of reference for understanding the significance of our daily lives as well as the practical means by which the human species interacts with the living and non-living world. This most comprehensive of all possible contexts – the text without a context – provides the framework for inter-religious cooperation and for deepening the spiritual capacity of each individual and of global society as a whole. Through sensitivity to the beauty, awe and wonder of every place and moment, the realms of spirit and matter unite in an experience of ever-present meaning.

When the Apollo 13 astronauts realized they had a problem, they drew on their interior resources, revised their mission and began to work with their compatriots to devise the practical steps to safely complete their journey. Likewise, astute observers of the Planet Earth in the 21st Century can change various aspects of their cultural patterns to develop a human community that embodies Sustainable Environmental Practices, Participatory Social Processes and Inclusive Spiritual Practices. A confrontational style, in which the strongest elements gain dominance over the resources of the weaker minority, will be replaced by an inclusive participatory *style* which promotes the well-being of all species. A mechanistic approach to the natural world which turns natural processes into potential resources will be replaced by *wisdom* about perpetually creative properties of the Universe in which we live such that people relate to the environment in ways that ensure that future generations, too, have the same or expanded creative potential. Finally, instead of serving as some kind of final authority, the religious texts of all of the world's peoples will provide a pool of insight and guidance to foster spiritual practices within each element of the human family that serve as a *symbol* of the deep interrelatedness that permeates all.