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# Promise Ahead

**Duane Elgin**



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“*Promise Ahead* alert[s] us to important problems and offers suggestion[s] that are genuine and constructive.”

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“*Promise Ahead* offers us a new framework for our conscious evolution.”

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**P**PROMISE

**A**AHEAD



A VISION OF HOPE  
AND ACTION FOR  
HUMANITY'S FUTURE



**DUANE ELGIN**

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 HarperCollins e-books

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DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER,

MARY AND CLIFFORD ELGIN,

WITH LOVE AND APPRECIATION FOR

THE KINDNESS AND CREATIVITY

THEY DEMONSTRATED IN THEIR LIVES

*Introduction by Vicki Robin*

*Chapter One*  
Is Humanity Growing Up?

*Chapter Two*  
Adversity Trends: Hitting an Evolutionary Wall

*Chapter Three*  
A New Perceptual Paradigm: We Live in a Living Universe

*Chapter Four*  
Choosing a New Lifeway: Voluntary Simplicity

*Chapter Five*  
Communicating Our Way into a Promising Future

*Chapter Six*  
Reconciliation and the Transformation of Human Relations

*Chapter Seven*  
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About the Publisher



—  
by *Vicki Robin*

SOME books require no introduction. Within pages a good novel has you in the grip of its plot and characters. How-to books assume that you suffer from the complaint of the day and quickly lure you in with the promise of material salvation through their particular plan. Even many of the recent spate of spiritual books fit into this category. Contemporary nonfiction books, from the political to the prurient, require only that you have followed the news to draw you in.

All of these books, though, tell pretty much the same familiar story. We live short and unpredictable lives, struggling in a world that is often senseless and cruel. Islands of goodness, from romance to family to business success, can take the edge off this reality. So can the millions of consumer products touted from every television screen and billboard. The steady stream of scandals that greets us at the checkout counter of the supermarket week in and week out keeps us equally mesmerized. People who find themselves anchored in some haven of security may tithe a token of their time or money to ease the burden of “those less fortunate.” But the story remains—poverty of every sort will always be with us. Politics—from family to national—is the art of making do.

Isn't this true? Isn't the very repetitiveness of this story, however dreary, somehow comforting? How many of us want to be disturbed by the kind of idealism that rises up among human groups from time to time, hinting that life itself might promise much, much more than thin thighs and fat wallets?

This book, *Promise Ahead*, invites you into that arena of grounded idealism, into the world of dreaming a new dream not just for your personal life, but for a multifaceted, rich and finely detailed unfolding story of our whole species. While this might not seem to matter to your day-to-day life, the promise of such a future can rearrange your personal world in quite remarkable ways.

Not too long ago, when John Lennon and the Beatles invited us to “imagine” a sweet, gracious, and peaceful world, we had the audacity to allow ourselves to dream. Now we have to wade through layers of distraction and demands to gain the ease that imagining requires. So let me invite you to briefly remove your twenty-first-century sophistication and indulge in some very pleasant fantasies.

Imagine that your boss likes your work. Imagine that your responsibilities are such that you can truly clear your desk and close up shop at the end of the day. Imagine that your house is truly a home, a haven of peace, that your commute is short and that you've just paid off your last debt (yes, even your house and car). Imagine that your kids like each other/school/what you fix for dinner and get decent grades. Imagine you have enough time to follow the thread of their curiosity about why things are the way they are. Imagine that every day something happens that makes you smile. It could happen, admit it.

Imagine trusting the media and the government again. The news informs. People care



Politicians are public servants and make a median wage. Imagine ...

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We've arrived, now, at a very special place. The world of possibility. The unknown. Out of the unknown will come everything of real value in your life, because the future is, in reality, unknown. Your children and grandchildren, your next jobs and eventual retirement, your vacations and new friends are all waiting for you—in the unknown. Imagination is like a steering wheel for this world of infinite possibility. If you start to shed the quiet despair about the possibility of your life and our collective life ever making sense again, you might just find yourself with childlike eagerness, peering expectantly into the unknown.

Entering the space of imagination will help you enter the magnificent world that Duane Elgin shares in *Promise Ahead*—not because it's a book of fantasy, but rather because it's a book based in years of research and contemplation about achingly beautiful possibilities embedded in hard reality. He surveys much of what's known about the universe and our place in it, then invites us to peer into the unknown with him and imagine an evolutionary journey that's better than any Hollywood pyrotechnics could evoke.

In *Promise Ahead* Elgin invites us to think in several new ways: First, we are invited to approach living as a member of the human species. Sure, we have our personal stories abundant with friends, family, activities, and significance. But we are also part of a larger identity, the “body” of humanity. As a species, as humanity, we have a history much longer than a few measly decades. You and I are actually thirty-five thousand years old. We've invented tools, language, cities, and civilization. We've puzzled over the mysteries of life and created stories and religions to link us to the unseen world. We've mastered fire, directing it to warm our homes, power our cars, and send us into space. At the same time, our bombs and guns, designed to subdue our enemies, are returning to haunt us as children shoot children and terrorists reduce buildings to rubble. All of us, with all the achievements and contradictions of our species, are part of this human journey. While thinking of oneself as part of humanity is no shocking revelation, thinking that humanity itself can, as a single creature, think—that's the stretch you're being invited to take. What if “humanity” is more than just a designation that distinguishes our species from other creatures? What if “humanity,” like an individual, is on a journey—and is at a crossroads? Elgin asks us to contemplate with awe the beauty and terror of our collective pilgrimage through time and space, take stock and choose, *both consciously and collectively*, our future.

Second, we are invited to see this mighty task in a unique way. Our collective history of social, cultural, and political change has been traditionally presented as an ongoing struggle and clash of ideas and people, all vying for power over the resources of the present and the directions of the future. Elgin, though, sees where we are and where we are headed through a different lens. For him, our historical power dynamics can be seen as kid's stuff—the “terrible two's,” the skinned knees of grade school, the teenage recklessness that is the stuff of parental nightmares. As a species, we've just been kids in the cosmos—making mistakes, making mischief, making friends, and making more of us at an astounding rate. Now we are at that turning point called “growing up.” Will we, like Peter Pan, refuse to mature? Or will we, *as a species*, have the will, good sense and courage to move on to adulthood?

“Growing up” for many teens has about as much appeal as a bath does for a dog. Don't you know a lot of teenagers running around in adult bodies, defying limits everywhere—

overspending, speeding, playing around on their mates, and using various drugs to mute the consciences? But consider traditional cultures (and our own a few short generations ago). Achieving adulthood was more like winning an Olympic gold medal. We endured many trials to prove to our elders we were worthy to be counted as one of them. This is the opportunity humanity now faces, according to Elgin. Growing up, in the best sense of the phrase.

While optional, this choice to mature is by no means window dressing. It is very consequential. Adults, by their very nature, *want* to understand and nurture the world beyond the boundaries of their own self-centered playpen. With all the social and environmental challenges ahead, we need a wisdom crew on Spaceship Earth, not a bunch of unattended children amusing themselves with expensive and dangerous toys.

Third, with the nature of change itself changing, Elgin says our hope lies in the simple power of conscious communication, not in traditional forms of analysis and organizing. As humanity bonds with itself and together faces the future, we'll need to do what all marriage counselors recommend: talk with one another. Talking, though, doesn't mean just chatter. It means purposefully bringing up those tough subjects we'd all rather ignore, listening to opinions that don't match our own, thinking clearly, speaking accurately, and—most amazingly—acting on new information or insights. Just because we started to talk at age two doesn't mean we know how to communicate. This learned art, hard enough by itself, is getting harder by the day as we pour the oatmeal of junk-information all over the wiring of the global brain—the media. Elgin singles out the imperative to communicate intelligently via this collective voice as one of humanity's essential next steps. Enriching the menu of options on traditional media is certainly essential to upping our collective IQ, but the intoxicating wild card is the internet. How we use this precious gift of connectivity can steer our species out of the shallows of mediocrity and into our true brilliance. Our news must broaden again out of the constraints of infotainment, our discussions must foster respect and insight, and our democracy, drowning now in cynicism and consumerism, must actually start to work. We need good information, great conversations, and a sense that our voices can be heard. Our collective brain must hum with the aliveness of millions of bits of accurate data shuttling around, resonate with the pure drumbeat of feelings, crackle with enlightening insights, and be bathed in the water of compassion. To put it simply, we need a good head on our shoulders. So it will be from the stuff of dialogue, not ideology, that the future will be made.

Finally, Elgin invites our imagination (but not our incredulity) to expand into the vast reaches of space and time. He doesn't ask us to take any leaps of faith that have no basis in science. Rather, he lays before us what science has unearthed about our more-than-earthly reality. He explores recent findings in physics that point to the possibility that our universe is a single, living system and may not be all that exists "out there." Taken together, these insights reverberate with meaning. Our lives—including our most mundane decisions—are part of a coherent, purposeful unfolding. Yet nothing is assured. *We* must wake up to our personal and social wholeness and act like ... well ... grown-ups!

We seem to be on the brink of as big a shift in our collective understanding of the cosmos as people faced back in the "flat earth" days. Those flat-earthers, though, had several centuries to make the shift, whereas all of us alive are headed into this new reality at breakneck speed. We are walking—no, racing—into the unknown together. With courage

imagination, and knowledge, we can embrace this mysterious wind that is blowing in from the future. We can enjoy the journey and thrill at the *Promise Ahead*. Whaddya say? Are you on board?

Vicki Robin is the coauthor with Joe Dominguez of *Your Money or Your Life*.

## IS HUMANITY GROWING UP?

Life is occupied both in perpetuating itself  
and in surpassing itself;  
if all it does is maintain itself,  
then living is only not dying.

—Simone de Beauvoir

### HUMANITY'S AGE

HOW grown up do you think humanity is? When you look at human behavior around the world and then imagine our species as one individual, how old would that person be? A toddler? A teenager? A young adult? An elder?

As I've traveled in different parts of the world, speaking to diverse audiences, I've begun many of my presentations by asking this question. Initially, I didn't know whether people would be able to relate to or even understand my question, much less agree on an answer. To my surprise, nearly everyone I've asked has understood this question immediately and had an intuitive sense of the human family's level of maturity. Whether I've asked the question in the United States, England, India, Japan, or Brazil, within seconds people have responded in the same way: *at least two-thirds say that humanity is in its teenage years.*

The speed and consistency with which different groups around the world have come to the intuitive conclusion were so striking that I began to explore adolescent psychology. I quickly discovered that there are many parallels between humanity's current behavior and that of teenagers:

- Teenagers are *rebellious* and want to prove their independence. Humanity has been rebelling against nature for thousands of years, trying to prove that we are independent from it.
- Teenagers are *reckless* and tend to live without regard for the consequences of their behavior. The human family has been acting recklessly in consuming natural resources as if they would last forever; polluting the air, water, and land of the planet; and exterminating a significant part of animal and plant life on the Earth.
- Teenagers are concerned with *appearance* and with fitting in. Similarly, many humans seem focused on expressing their identity and status through material possessions.
- Teenagers are drawn toward instant *gratification*. As a species, we are seeking our own pleasures and largely ignoring the needs of other species and future generations.
- Teenagers tend to gather in groups or *cliques*, and often express “us versus them” and “in versus out” thinking and behavior. We are often clustered into ethnic, racial,

religious, and other groupings that separate us from one another, making an “us versus them” mentality widespread in today’s world.

Other authors have noted that we are acting like teenagers. Al Gore wrote in his book *Earth in the Balance*, “The metaphor is irresistible: a civilization that has, like an adolescent, acquired new powers but not the maturity to use them wisely also runs the risk of an unrealistic sense of immortality and a dulled perception of serious danger....”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Allen Hammond, senior scientist at the World Resources Institute, who has been exploring the world of 2050, has written, “Just as parents struggle to teach their children to think ahead, to choose a future and not just drift through life, it is high time that human society as a whole learns to do the same.”<sup>2</sup>

If people around the world are accurate in their assessment that the human family has entered its adolescence, that could explain much about humanity’s current behavior, and could give us hope for the future. It is promising to consider the possibility that human beings may not be far from a new level of maturity. If we do develop beyond our adolescence, our species could begin to behave as teenagers around the world do when they move into early adulthood: we could begin to settle down, think about building a family, look for meaningful work, and make longer-range plans for the future.

Adolescence is a time when others—such as parents, schools, churches, and so on—are generally in control. As we step into adulthood, we enjoy a new freedom from control, and a new responsibility to take charge of our lives. In a similar way, during our adolescence as citizens of the Earth, most humans have felt controlled by someone else—especially by big institutions of business, government, religion, and the media. As we grow into our early adulthood as a species, we will discover that maturity requires taking more responsibility and recognizing that we are in charge. Instead of waiting for “Mom or Dad to fix things,” an adult pays attention to the larger situation and then acts, recognizing that our personal and collective success are deeply intertwined.

Is it plausible that humanity is truly on the verge of moving beyond our adolescence? Not only do I consider it plausible, I would like to offer a rough timetable for the maturing of humanity. I estimate that we awoke in the *infancy* of our potentials roughly thirty-five thousand years ago. Archeologists have found that, at that time, there was a virtual explosion of sophisticated stone tools, elaborate burials, personal ornaments, and cave paintings. Then, with the end of the ice ages roughly ten thousand years ago, we began to settle down in small farming villages. I believe this period marks the transition to humanity’s *childhood*. The food surplus that peasants produced made possible the eventual rise of small cities. I estimate we humans then moved into our *late childhood* with the rise of city-state civilizations roughly five thousand years ago in Iraq, Egypt, India, China, and the Americas. At that time, all the basic arts of civilization were developed, such as writing, mathematics, astronomy, civil codes, and central government. Still, the vast majority of people lived as impoverished and illiterate peasants who had no expectation of material progress. With the scientific-industrial revolution roughly three hundred years ago, humanity began to move into our *adolescence*. Beginning in Europe and the United States, industrialization has spread around the world, particularly in the last half-century. Now, with the industrial revolution devastating the whole planet and challenging humanity to a new level of stewardship, it seems plausible that

we are on the verge of moving into the communications era and our *early adulthood*.

This timetable gives only a rough estimate of the average level of maturity of our species but it does make an important point: that human beings are growing up, becoming more seasoned and wiser through hard-earned experience. Despite humanity's seeming immaturity in the past, I believe we could be close—within a few decades—of taking a major step forward in our evolution as a species.

## HUMANITY'S HEROIC JOURNEY OF AWAKENING

IF we look beneath the complexity of human history and culture, there seems to be a story that humanity shares regarding the purpose of life. Joseph Campbell, a world-renowned scholar who spent a lifetime exploring the stories that have brought meaning to people throughout history, described the common story at the heart of all the world's cultures as the "hero's journey." Although the details vary depending on where and when it has been told, it is essentially the story of an individual who grows up by going through a series of tests that teach him or her about the nature of life. The person then brings this precious knowledge back to his or her personal life and life of the community.

If we assume that the overall human family is on an heroic journey of development, then the pivotal question becomes: "Where are we on the hero's journey?" To explore that key question, it is important to know that the hero's journey usually consists of three stages: separation, initiation, and re-turn.<sup>3</sup> It begins with the hero (or heroine) leaving home in search for the deeper meaning and purpose of life. This is the stage of separation. Then eventually comes a time when the hero undergoes a supreme test, whereby he is initiated into the nature and ways of the universe and no longer feels separate. With initiation, he experiences the deep unity and aliveness at the foundation of the universe and his sense of life purpose in relation to it. He returns from his adventure with that hard-won knowledge and the capacity for personal renewal or even, says Campbell, "the means for the regeneration of society."<sup>4</sup> The core purpose of that sacred knowledge, according to Campbell, is to "waken and maintain in the individual a sense of wonder and participation in the mystery of this finally inscrutable universe."

Just as all major cultures share the story of the hero's journey, all have customs of initiation as well. Initiatory rites of passage around the world have at least two things in common.<sup>5</sup> First, for the individual, the initiation marks a decisive transition from one stage or kind of life to another (such as from adolescence to adulthood). Second, initiation rites are also stressful social situations in which new ways of relating to other people are learned and established. The experience of initiation forges bonds of connection among those who have gone through it, bonds that transcend previous distinctions based on status, age, or kinship. Long after the rites are concluded, these links and emotional bonds persist and provide much of the social glue that holds the community together.<sup>6</sup>

Let's look at humanity's journey in terms of this simple model of separation, initiation, and return.

- **Separation**—By my reckoning, a complex phase of progressively divorcing ourselves

from nature has extended over the last thirty-five thousand years—from the time of our initial awakening as gatherers and hunters up to the present. During these millennia, humanity has increasingly pulled away from nature in order to develop our unique capacities and talents as a species. The last half-century seems to mark our final severance from nature as we cause, for example, the mass extinction of other species and the disruption of the global climate.

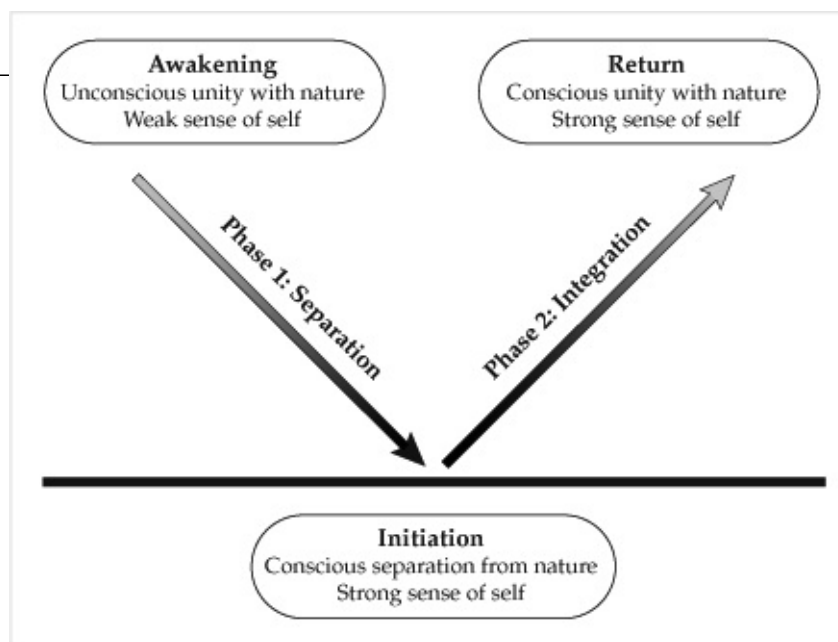
- **Initiation**—To undergo initiation is to make a major transition to a new and larger life, and it often involves going through a powerful experience. As we confront challenges such as climate change and species extinction, humanity seems poised to undergo an initiation that will give us the opportunity of becoming an authentic human family—in feeling and experience as well as in name.
- **Return**—To pass successfully through our initiation, we will have to forge new bonds both within our species and with nature as a whole. This phase marks our passage into our early adulthood and the beginning of a long process of reconnecting with nature. A promising future lies ahead as we begin a task for grown-ups—building a sustainable planetary civilization.

Figure 1 illustrates this description of our evolutionary journey as separating from and then reconnecting with nature. It is important to note that there is no negative implication in the downward direction of the first arrow. Its purpose is simply to show that we pulled away from nature. We shall soon enter a period of initiation, in which we see that we have a choice of connecting consciously with nature and the universe. Making the transition from separation to integration, without losing the scientific understanding and technical sophistication we have gained, is perhaps the most important evolutionary turn that humanity will ever have to accomplish.

When we view humanity's evolution this way, our times take on new significance. Humanity is about to move into a stage of initiation—a period of stress and testing in which we will be challenged to discover ourselves as a single family with responsibilities to one another, the Earth, and future generations. Although the challenges we face may seem to be evidence of humanity's failures, reaching this stage is actually an expression of our great success over the past thirty-five thousand years. I believe that the apparent crises we face are, in reality, part of our initiation into a new relationship with one another and the Earth. The rapidly approaching initiation represents a time of birth—a stressful but entirely natural process.<sup>7</sup>

FIGURE 1

Two Major Phases in the Human Journey



When we began our journey of awakening roughly thirty-five thousand years ago, we had only an indistinct sense of ourselves and a strong but largely unconscious feeling of connection with nature.<sup>8</sup> Over the millennia, we have acquired a strong sense of ourselves but at the cost of separating ourselves from nature. Looking ahead, we have the opportunity to reconnect consciously with nature and the larger human family. As in the hero's journey, our challenge is to return to where we started, but with a new level of insight, compassion, and creativity. T. S. Eliot foretold of this return when he wrote: "And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."<sup>9</sup>

### INITIATION: HITTING THE EVOLUTIONARY WALL

HERE is how William D. Ruckelshaus, the former director of the Environmental Protection Agency, describes the evolutionary task that we are facing:

Can we move nations and people in the direction of sustainability? Such a move would be a modification of society comparable in scale to only two other changes: the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution of the past two centuries. Those revolutions were gradual, spontaneous, and largely unconscious. This one will have to be a fully conscious operation ... If we actually do it, the undertaking will be absolutely unique in humanity's stay on the Earth.<sup>10</sup>

What would motivate us to attempt such an undertaking? I believe it will take both the push of environmental necessity and the pull of evolutionary opportunity for humanity to attempt to overcome thirty-five thousand years of progressive separation from nature and discover how to live in conscious harmony with one another and the Earth. Like adolescents pressing to find the limits of their parents' authority, we are pushing up against the limits of nature, as though seeking to discover just how much abuse our planet will tolerate. But we face much more than physical problems; we face equally great challenges in our own consciousness and character. The historic path of development is being confronted not only with an environmental wall but by an even more formidable evolutionary wall. It would be useful to distinguish here between the two:



- An **environmental wall** refers to the physical limits of the global ecosystem that support our species. We are fast approaching these limits because we are rapidly consuming more resources than the Earth can renew and polluting the environment with more toxins than it can absorb. Given an abundance of resources, nearly every organism exploits its environmental niche to the fullest extent; thus, overshoot and collapse are a common occurrence in natural systems. Human beings learn through experience, and we have no experience exercising restraint as a species and being mindful of the overall biosphere. Since we have never encountered this situation before, it seems only natural that humanity would reach, and then extend beyond, the limits of the Earth's ecosystem.
- An **evolutionary wall** refers not only to the physical limits of the Earth's ability to sustain humanity, but also to our own social and spiritual limits to sustain functional and constructive behaviors. Modern, industrial civilization is breeding pathological behavior—alienation from others and from nature, extreme competitiveness and greed, cynicism in politics, and despair for the future. How much poverty, alienation, and misery can humanity experience before we eventually damage our collective psyche and soul? An evolutionary wall presents humanity with an identity crisis at least as great as our environmental crisis: Who are we as a species? What is our larger story? Are we going to allow “overshoot and collapse” to happen to us? Do we see ourselves as separate, isolated beings or part of the large web of life?

In seeing the initiation that awaits us, it is clear that we have come to a great choice-point in our journey. Although human beings have been faced with challenges throughout history, we have never before been confronted with a challenge to our entire planet and species. *Our time is unique in one crucial respect: the circle has closed—there is nowhere to escape.* For the first time in our history, the entire human population is confronted with a common predicament whose solution will require us to work together.

This book looks beyond the possibility of a destructive evolutionary crash to the possibility of an evolutionary bounce. I believe that in the coming decades, there is the distinct possibility that we may surpass ourselves and evolve to a level of maturity that we could not attain without confronting these trials that I am calling “initiation.” How might an evolutionary bounce look? I see it as a leap forward in our collective maturity to build a life together that would be harmonious in three ways. It would be:

- **Sustainable**—in harmony with the Earth's biosphere (the *physical* ecosystem)
- **Satisfying**—in harmony with others (the *social-cultural* ecosystem)
- **Soulful**—in harmony with the “life force” (the *spiritual* ecosystem)

There are two compelling reasons for making this evolutionary turn. First, it is eminent and desirable and will lead to a higher quality of life for all. Second, it is necessary if we are to avoid creating a planet that is hotter, hungrier, poorer, and more polluted, diseased, and biologically impoverished than it already is.<sup>11</sup>

IF we do get through these difficult times and grow into our early adulthood as a species, how long might we then survive? We can gain some perspective by looking at the longevity of early humans and other animal species. The typical life span of a species is estimated to be between one and 10 million years.<sup>12</sup> For example, our early ancestor *Homo erectus* survived more than a million years before becoming extinct. Some species live far longer. Dinosaurs survived roughly 140 million years before a natural catastrophe wiped them out. If humanity is as capable of survival as the dinosaurs were, our species would be able to endure for more than twenty-five thousand times the span of recorded human history. *If we can make it through this evolutionary initiation and begin building a sustainable, satisfying, and soulful planetary civilization, we have the prospect of a long and promising future.* Just as every child makes missteps on the path to adulthood, humanity has made and will continue to make painful mistakes as we evolve. We learn through our mistakes, however, and we keep moving ahead step by step. We are ever more experienced, ever more seasoned, and ever more mature. Although our future is uncertain, we already have the resources and capacities we need for success. The biologist Lewis Thomas describes the promise of our species beautifully:

We may all be going through a kind of childhood in the evolution of our kind of animal ... If we can stay alive, my guess is that we will someday amaze ourselves by what we can become as a species. Looked at as larvae, even as juveniles, for all our folly, we are a splendid, promising form of life and I am on our side.<sup>13</sup>

I too believe that humanity has a promising future. The word *promise* has its origin in the Latin word “to send forth.” A promise, then, is a sending forth of a declaration, vow, pledge, or commitment. I believe we are reaching a unique point in our evolution where we can make a promise to future generations. It is a declaration that we will not forget them in the rush and busyness of our day-to-day lives. The promise is our marriage with the larger flow of life—both past and future—and our recognition that we are now a critical link in maintaining the integrity of that flow. It is our sacred covenant with the future whereby we send ahead not only our good intentions, but also our commitment of active engagement to turn the direction of our evolution in favor of a promising future. It is our vow to future generations that we shall hold them in our hearts and minds as we make decisions, recognizing that we all share the same Earth and a common journey through eternity.

### LOOKING AHEAD

THE remainder of this book explores humanity’s journey toward our young adulthood. We begin in [chapter two](#) by taking a hard look at the world and at the key adversity trends that we face. Then in chapters three through six, we explore four equally powerful opportunity trends. Next, we look at the convergence of these trends and consider two basic outcomes—either an evolutionary crash or an evolutionary bounce. In [chapter eight](#), we step back to consider the big picture of the human journey. An evolutionary bounce means the human family will pull together for a common purpose. But what purpose is so compelling that it overcomes historic divisions and differences? Sustainability alone promises little more than

“only not dying.” Is there a higher purpose that describes our journey? Finally, with perspective for the journey ahead, we return in [chapter nine](#) to where we started, to consider how we can collectively awaken and mobilize ourselves to realize the promise ahead.

### ADVERSITY TRENDS: HITTING AN EVOLUTIONARY WALL

What is difficult is to imagine how to get out of the situation we're in right now in a time frame that is in line with the rate of deterioration that we're seeing.

—Paul Hawken

If we do not change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed.

—Ancient Chinese Proverb

### ARE WE ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH NATURE?

ASSUMING that our species is in its teenage years, I don't think we will easily turn away from our rebellious, reckless, and shortsighted behavior. In fact, we seem determined to run headlong into the consequences of our adolescent actions before deciding whether to make the turn toward a higher maturity. Like many teenagers, we will likely face a time of testing and initiation before moving into our early adulthood.

The question is whether we will pull together as a human family under the extreme pressures of approaching the time of initiation. To answer this question, we need a much clearer sense of the driving trends that will intersect in the next few decades. We begin by considering the problematic trends that promise great misfortune for humanity if we do not face up to them squarely. I call them adversity trends. Two questions seem paramount: How difficult might our situation become? And how soon might we encounter an unyielding evolutionary wall?

After studying driving trends for more than thirty years, I am all too aware that no one can predict the future with certainty. I also know that we can make educated guesses about how the major trends—population, resources, and environment—will unfold in the decades just ahead. Where disagreements emerge is in interpreting the overall meaning of the combined trends. On the one hand, there are some who believe that, with engineering, biotechnology, and human ingenuity, we can solve the problems we face and realize an ever-improving future. On the other hand, there are those who conclude from these same trends that we have already overreached our relationship with life on our planet and, to secure a sustainable future, we will need a profound change in human culture and consciousness as much as a change in technology.

Writing about the “coming age of abundance,” Stephen Moore is an economist who epitomizes the perspective of technological optimism: “Every measurable trend of the past century suggests that humanity will soon be entering an age of increasing and unprecedented natural resource abundance.”<sup>1</sup> Fred Smith, president of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, writes that while “doomsayers” think there are too many people consuming too much for the planet to sustain, “cornucopians, in contrast, argue that humanity faces no real problem

technological and institutional advances have and will continue to make it possible to address any shortages.”<sup>2</sup> The late Julian Simon, a former professor of business, is another optimist. “The standard of living has risen along with the size of the world’s population since the beginning of recorded time. There is no convincing economic reason why these trends toward a better life should not continue indefinitely.”<sup>3</sup> His rationale for this optimism is that historically, the opportunity for people to make a profit has spurred human ingenuity and problem-solving—and we end up better off.<sup>4</sup>

The rosy views of the future portrayed by these economists benefit from the fact that, over the last few decades, various predictions of calamity have not materialized. For example, the global “population bomb” was projected to result in massive famines by the turn of the century. As dates for ecocatastrophe and global famine have come and gone without the disastrous events occurring, people’s patience for ominous predictions has worn thin.

But can even the most optimistic among us afford to brush off the warnings of the world’s leading scientists? In 1992, more than sixteen hundred of the world’s senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences, signed an unprecedented “Warning to Humanity.” In this historic statement, they declared that “human beings and the natural world are on a collision course ... that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know.” This is their conclusion:

We, the undersigned senior members of the world’s scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. *A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated*<sup>5</sup> [emphasis added].

Is this a valid warning? Are we on a collision course with nature and perhaps our own human nature? As a way to explore this vital question, let us look one generation into the future—roughly the next twenty to thirty years—and picture the world that a child born at the turn of the millennium will likely inhabit as a young adult. What kind of legacy are those of us who are alive today leaving for the next generation?

There are dozens of trends that we could consider, such as ozone depletion, rain forest destruction, topsoil erosion, and the over fishing of the world’s oceans. To keep the inquiry manageable, however, let’s consider only five key driving trends: climate change, population growth, species extinction, resource depletion, and global poverty. These five adversarial trends will be sufficient to reveal whether the warning from our leading scientists is valid, and, if so, the time frame within which we risk “irretrievable mutilation” of the biosphere.

## GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

IT is no accident that, of the ten warmest years on record, all have occurred in the last fifteen years. In 1995, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—the international body charged by the United Nations to study global climate change—reached the conclusion that “there is a discernible human influence on global climate.”<sup>6</sup> They found that the primary cause for these climate changes is the increase in greenhouse gases that trap heat in the atmosphere. The principal greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide, which comes from burning gasoline, coal, and natural gas. [Figure 2](#) shows how accumulations of carbon dioxide have

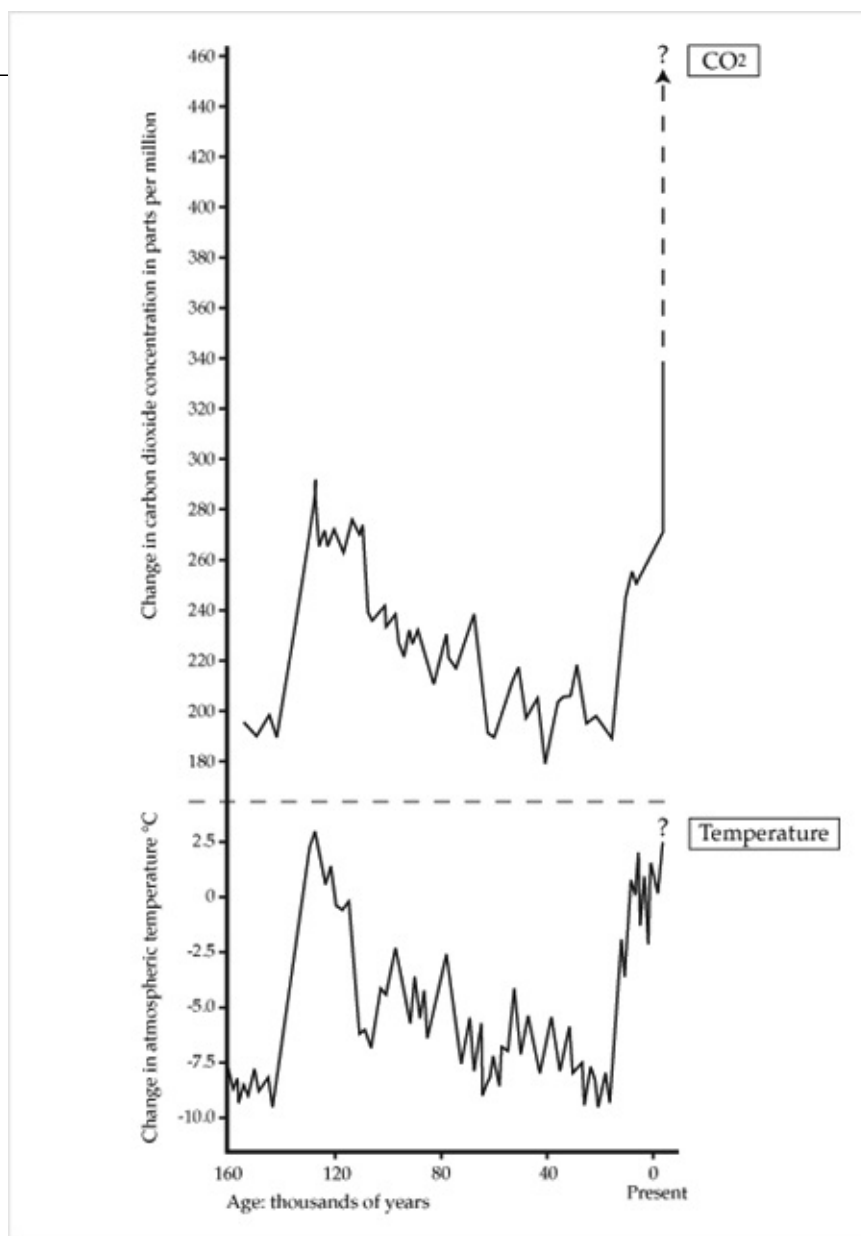
recently skyrocketed compared to levels during the last hundred thousand years. It also shows how, over the millennia, the rise and fall of global temperatures have corresponded closely with the rise and fall of concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Lastly, this figure suggests that we should expect a major disturbance in the generally favorable weather the world has experienced over the last ten thousand years (since the beginnings of agriculture and a settled way of life).

The several thousand scientists involved in the IPCC study have determined that preindustrial levels of carbon dioxide will at least double by the middle of the next century. This is very bad news, because there is a growing scientific consensus that anything more than a doubling of greenhouse gas concentrations beyond preindustrial levels poses an unacceptable risk.<sup>8</sup> If the levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide should double as the IPCC scientists predict, here are some of the impacts that we could expect:

- Widespread disruption and dislocation of agricultural growing regions
- More rain in some areas, more drought in others
- Stronger storms, more floods, stronger hurricanes
- Stronger effects from El Niño
- Heat waves that kill people, animals, and crops
- Expansion of the Earth's deserts
- Melting of the polar ice caps, with a destructive rise in the sea level
- The spread of infectious diseases that endanger human and animal health
- Stress on the rest of the ecosystem (forests, wetlands, natural habitats)
- Enormous financial burdens placed on individuals, communities, insurance companies, other public and private financial institutions, and nations

FIGURE 2

Global Temperatures and CO<sub>2</sub> Levels



The increase in greenhouse gases is already affecting our climate in two distinct ways: it is producing greater variability in weather patterns and increasing the average global temperature. Even now, we are experiencing greater variability in weather patterns. This instability, which is expected to increase considerably, is particularly harmful for agriculture. An early frost in the fall can kill some crops and freeze others in the ground. Heavy rains in the spring can delay planting. A shift in rainfall patterns can change the kind of crops that can be grown in a given area. Because an erratic and unstable climate jeopardizes the productivity of global agriculture, the melting of the global ice caps is not required for the greenhouse effect to have a disastrous impact on the human family.

Here are just a few examples of how global warming might affect agriculture. Canada's climate could improve the area as a wheat-growing region, although its soils are not as productive as the prairie soil in the United States that was built up over millions of years. More frequent droughts in the "breadbasket" of the American Midwest would make it difficult to maintain current levels of productivity in growing wheat and corn. Agricultural productivity will also likely fall in sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Asia, and tropical Latin America—the regions where many of the world's poorest people live. With these kinds of impacts occurring around the world, climate change could cause a dramatic restructuring of

the economy at all levels, from local to global.

How rapidly might major changes in the world's climate occur? Scientists are reaching the stunning conclusion that the increase in greenhouse gases is producing a warmer world much faster than expected—so fast that even present generations could feel the dire impacts of global warming. The last great ice age began roughly 120,000 years ago, with a period of abrupt global warming that was followed by rapid cooling. Evidence now indicates that within a hundred-year span, there was a period of global warming that caused oceans to rise as much as twenty feet, followed by a period of rapid cooling in which the oceans fell by nearly fifty feet. If the human family were to be taken on such a breathtaking roller-coaster ride of massive and sudden climate fluctuations, the consequences would be disastrous.

Instead of there being a gradual warming trend over decades—one to which we could adapt—the world's climate could change abruptly, becoming suddenly much warmer or cooler. For example, dramatic cooling could occur in Europe if the North Atlantic Current—the enormous flow of warm water from the southern hemisphere to the north—were disrupted. Roughly the equivalent of a hundred Amazon Rivers, this current is a conveyor belt of warm water that slowly flows from the equatorial region up to the North Atlantic, giving Europe an unusually warm and favorable climate. Were it not for this flow of warm water, Europe would have the climate of Canada, and its now bountiful agriculture would be reduced to a fraction of current levels. Global warming could bring the North Atlantic Current to a halt, with catastrophic consequences for Europe. Professor William Calvin has researched the possibility and has concluded that “the abrupt cooling promoted by man-made warming looks like a particularly efficient means of committing mass suicide.”<sup>10</sup>

This first adversity trend—global climate change—is so powerful that it could, by itself, constitute an environmental wall that forces humanity to change directions. Climate change promises to be a persistent force in our collective future as we will run up against its consequences for centuries to come. Although we cannot predict the degree of fluctuation and disruption that will occur in the next several decades, a growing body of research indicates that the changes could be far more rapid and substantial than anyone previously thought.

## WORLD POPULATION GROWTH

CURRENT trends in world population growth give reason for both optimism and concern.<sup>11</sup> There is cause for optimism because we are moving toward global population stability. There is cause for concern because there remains so much momentum in population growth (with so many young people now reaching child-bearing age) that the human family will increase by several billion more people in the decades ahead before we reach stability. Mid-range estimates are that population will grow for another fifty years before it peaks at around 12 billion—four billion more people than the number alive at the year 2000. The predicted range in global population in 2050 is between 8 and 12 billion people, with 10 billion being the mid-range estimate.<sup>12</sup>

FIGURE 3

Trends and Projections in World Population Growth: 1750–2150 (in billions of people)



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