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Thinking like a Cancer

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William Blake "Auguries of Innocence"

After Rio, the Earth Summit, and the Kyoto Protocol and its revisitation in Buenos Aires, are we finally ready to admit that we can expect little ecological wisdom and political will from national leaders and global conferences? Is it possible that we will have to depend on ourselves for wisdom and will?

It is, of course, an awful lot to expect humanity, in all its frailty, to demonstrate wisdom and will by acting on the central challenge of most religious traditions—self-transformation. We may well be a species ill suited to idealism. But even if we are not up to the timeless challenges of our ideals, we are still confronted by the stark reality of a growing *scientific* consensus: If we value life on earth, we must change our lives. We human beings must embark on a kind of collective metamorphosis. Yet even in the face of harsh, material realities, we deny and resist.

Given the state of biotic health on land, sea, and air, an objective observer from, say, another planet might be forgiven for assuming that most of us most of the time think like Donald Hodel, President Reagan's Interior Secretary. We squint up at the sky. "Well," we say, "maybe we are damaging the earth's ozone layer, but we don't have to worry or change much; it's no problem if we'll just all agree to wear broad-brimmed hats and sunglasses!" As Barbara Bramble put

it at the gloomy end of the United Nations' "Earth Summit + 5" conference in June of 1997, the slow progress we make represents a "total disconnect in time scale between what is being done and what is really needed."

I hope to demonstrate, if the reader will indulge me with a little patience, that the best legacy of the nineties, however, may turn out to be that researchers in a variety of disciplines have challenged us to rethink profoundly our whole relationship to the earth. Some startling new convergence is afoot. Those investigators who take a visionary or mythic approach to our global environmental crisis are reinforcing the conclusions of those who take a scientific or materialistic approach. It is as if faith and science might become strange new bedfellows. It is as if William Blake and Isaac Newton were by dire Necessity finally sitting down together—like two aged colleagues who had decided to throw aside their old collegial enmities—in order to confront some wholly new catastrophe under the sun.

Rather than one more dreary "review of the literature," I want to start with two representative researchers, one from each tradition as it expressed itself in the final decade of the 20th century. Let's look first at what we might feel most comfortable with, the scientific point of view. Donella Meadows, co-author of *The Limits to Growth* (1972) and the sequel *Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse, Envisioning a Sustainable Future* (1992), wrote a column recently for *Timeline Magazine* that efficiently sums up the results of her team's long research. Meadows constructs a dialogue between Economics and Earth—a sort of latter-day dialogue between Body and Soul.

She begins her Dialogue: "The first commandment of economics is: Grow. Grow forever. . . . The first commandment of Earth is: Enough." Of course she is talking about our current system, our biotically ignorant system, of economics, a system she suggests is merely about 200 years old, a system John Muir termed "the gobble-gobble school of economics." An arrogant economics that has one rule: "Do whatever makes sense in monetary terms," as Meadows puts it. Every other conceivable value and priority is negated. An economics that is gleefully ignorant of anything but itself—like an adolescent striking attitudes before a mirror.

"Economics says: Use it up fast. . . . That makes the gross national product go round. . . . Grab materials and energy to make more. Shave the forests every thirty years. Get the oil out of the ground and burn it now. Make jobs so people can earn money, so they can buy more stuff and throw it out. The Earth says: What's the hurry? Take your time building soils, forests, coral reefs, mountains.

Take centuries or millennia. . . ." As Meadows points out, the first rule of Earth is *give to the future*; of Unconscious Economics, *take it now.* Moreover, as *Beyond the Limits* demonstrates, our human populations and material systems grow by a mathematics of exponentiation, by a doubling and redoubling and doubling again that we are astonished to discover when we look at the available data.

Meadows, I begin to understand (though she doesn't say it outright), is suggesting that we have so far denied Aldo Leopold's admonition for humanity to be "Thinking Like A Mountain"—like a fragile but complete ecosystem—that we are, on the contrary, "Thinking Like a Cancer." Of course we might just as readily have evolved an economics of much greater complexity and consciousness. An economics of consequences. An economics of sustainability. An economics of self-examination and ethics.

But we chose not to. We have affirmed only the economics of exploding populations and proliferating earth-waste, of undifferentiated cells, of an entity that reproduces itself exponentially out of itself, or out of something driving it to so reproduce.

Thinking like a cancer.

When Leopold coined that phrase "thinking like a mountain," he had been using the example, still relevant and symbolic, of extirpating predators off mountains in the Southwest. "I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anemic desuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddle-horn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise." And then of course the deer herd begins to starve, dying as any over-consumptive species "of its own too-much." Even the farmer, the cowman who cleans his range of wolves, has failed to realize that he has taken over "the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range." His inability to think like a mountain leads to "dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea."

In *Beyond the Limits*, Meadows and her team collected massive documentation from disinterested scientists (non-partisan, non-nationalistic) from around the globe, demonstrating the results of our own "too much":

> world populations are about to double in forty years,
>
> merely in the last twenty years industrial output grew by 100%,
>
> because of waste and inequitable distribution of food and wealth, 500 million to 1 billion people are chronically hungry,
>
> 13 million people die every year of causes related to hunger (that's 35,000 deaths per day, most of them children),
>
> global water resources will run down to crisis limits at our current rates of doubling (i.e., exponential) demand in about 30 years,
>
> in U.S. waters alone fourteen major fish species are so seriously depleted as to require, variously, from five to fifteen years to recover if fishing stops completely,
>
> half of the global forest loss occurred since 1950,
>
> the U.S. has destroyed 85% of its continental primary forests and China 75% of its forests,
>
> half the original forest cover of the tropics (containing 50% of all global species) is gone,
>
> independent biologists' estimates of species collapse range from 10 to 100 per day,
>
> every single ton of the millions of tons of waste produced by consumers produces 5 more tons at the manufacturing stage of the stream and 20 more tons at the resource extraction site,
>
> such greenhouse gases as methane and carbon dioxide are far higher than they have been for 160,000 years,
>
> every day 3 to 5 new chemicals enter the marketplace and 80% of them are not tested for toxicity, just as toxicology data are unavailable for 99% of the 65,000 industrial chemicals now in regular use,
>
> and, finally, 90% of the hazardous wastes are generated in the industrialized world.

When we hear such data, who among us is not tempted to go into denial. It almost becomes understandable why some would turn to cults or other escapism, just as some would turn even to terrorism.

Who among us, moreover, has the continuing strength to fight, often alone, not just for clean air and water or economic equity or the rain forests, but for nothing less than the *de-commodification* (if I may coin a word) of the world, of every material resource and living being in it?

The forces arrayed against any individual with a different vision, a vision opposed to global market economics, are enormous, but tragically these forces come from us. Is it any wonder, then, that a

more mythic (is it too much to say millennial?) vision struggled to find expression in the 1990s? And here I want to introduce my second example, a researcher from an opposite tradition—a tradition of psyche, of vision and soul. Dr. John Mack, author of *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (1994), and my second researcher, incidentally recommends Meadows' *Beyond the Limits* as a "well-researched" depiction of the destructive consequences of our habits of consciousness.

I want to suggest that we might view Mack's and Meadows' books as parallel texts from the last decade, as two different approaches to the same problem. The former is a philosophical-visionary approach, the latter a scientific-materialist approach. The striking thing is that they both arrive at the same conclusions about our ecological crisis and about the causes of that crisis embedded in modern culture. We might even say that Mack's mythic narrative emerges in spite, or because, of our denial of the data and science. No challenge to transform ourselves is more strange and potentially more unsettling than this Harvard psychiatrist's clinical examination of what is popularly known as "the abduction phenomenon." And surely no one has taken greater professional risks than Dr. Mack.

Of course Mack's *Abduction* might be just one more case of conglomerate-publishers cynically pandering to what they see as the ignorance and superstition of the masses. But I think we might do better to look at Mack's work—at the visionary warnings of his patients—as simply one more in an ancient and honorable line of mythic narratives of transformation. The stories Mack's patients bring to us are above all reminders of human arrogance and hubris. We are a global species with enormous pretensions. But we are also a species that has managed to devote the last three centuries of the millennium to a process of separating biosphere from ethics.

I can't of course reproduce here the scores of case histories documenting the repeated essential narrative that emerges from the hundreds of pages in Mack's book. Readers can read the book and judge for themselves. Suffice to say that again and again patients speak of a penetration by "other presence and consciousness," a journey outward, and a revelatory (often aerial) vision of the earth in ultimate catastrophe. The abductees' revelations are apocalyptic, biblical: images of volcanic eruption, towering and thundering surf, global warfare, toxic heavens, shifting plates, the "Earth shuddering in anguish, crying, weeping at the stupidity of humans losing contact with the inner soul of their being." One of the alien figures tells a young man, "Listen to the earth. You can hear the Earth. You can hear the anguish of spirits. You can hear the wailing cries of the imbalances." You can hear the wails of the dying, the cancer-stricken.

Out of the messages his "abductees" bring to us from their trials and adventures, Mack identifies four patterns of our destructiveness: 1) corporate acquisitiveness, 2) economic injustice, 3) "ethnonational" violence, and, above all, 4) "ecological destruction on a scale that threatens the survival of the earth's living systems." Such patterns are getting harder to deny every year.

There are several possible explanations for the extraordinary visitations between human beings and something Other that about a hundred of Mack's patients describe. (And there are thousands of people with similar experiences whom Mack has of course not examined clinically). Are they all, as humorist Dave Barry would say, making this up? Is this a vast, cross-cultural fraud of epic proportions?

Or, a second explanation, is Mack dealing with a mass psychological, even religious, experience—the archetypal imaging of the collective unconscious with striking similarities for scores of people in different places and from different backgrounds? Or, finally, is something more real happening—a phenomenological event we ought to be heeding? "Yikes, Ma, even ET's are environmentalists!" There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio . . . .

Frankly, I don't see why it should really matter whether we are witnessing mass fraud, collective psychological imaging, cosmic visitations, or something else still. Or, I should say it matters only slightly what the source is of a particular truth being revealed. For whatever reason, and from whatever source, perhaps we are *in need* of the revelation being offered. For thousands of years the deepest truths, and humanity's moral truths in particular, have been embodied in fictions—in parables, myths, epics, and allegories, and in poems, novels, and theatrical dramas from ancient amphitheater to modern movie theater. The real issue we need to consider is the transformative vision being offered. The subsequent and very real question (the lives of future generations and millions of species depend on it) is: What should we do with the vision?

The answer may lie in the most significant dimension of the revelation. More than any research he has undertaken in his career, Dr. Mack reports that his investigation of abduction phenomena has led him to challenge the "consensus reality" he himself had so long embraced and indeed practiced in his clinical endeavors. The whole "Western, Newtonian/Cartesian, or materialist/dualist scientific paradigm," Mack believes, is now being challenged. We have cut ourselves off from a universe that, as world religions have so long taught, contains intelligences beyond our material realm.

Even for those rationalist readers who could never accept such a formulation—religious or otherwise—the prevailing message Mack discovers in most abduction experiences should give anyone pause. The repeated warning is as follows: It is our very world-view, our *separatist materialism*, to coin another phrase, that lies behind most of "the major destructive patterns that threaten the human future." More, the collective abduction experiences are reminding us that revelation comes not only to those who seek it. On the contrary (and this too is a religious tradition) it can knock on any door at any time. We live in a universe that, perhaps, will not allow us to exempt ourselves from participation in it; will not allow us to exempt ourselves from our deeper humanity, and certainly from our moral (that is to say global, spiritual, and ecological) obligations. If we have spent several centuries contracting human consciousness to reap the enormous material rewards of technology, capital, and industry, could there not by now be something in us or outside us (or both) that is pressing for an expansion, perhaps a renewal, of human consciousness?

As we read the stories, the journeys and quests, of Mack's patients, we can not help being reminded of the willing and unwilling heroes of old—traveling among gods and demons, descending into underworlds and ascending into heavens, to return with "the boon," as Joseph Campbell called it, the prophetic utterances, of larger consciousness. Are those of us who live in technologically developed, materialist cultures, especially, being confronted not only by a new scientific paradigm but a new ontological paradigm (what Mack calls "ontological shock") as well? At the very least, as his patients repeatedly report, whatever has happened to them is something beyond mere cognitive process; it is something that reaches deep into their emotional and spiritual lives, changing perceptions of themselves, the world, and their place in the cosmos.

Moreover, is it possible for non-abductees (like you and me, reader) literally to have something of the view of ourselves and the earthscape that alien visitors, especially if they were to come from other solar systems and galaxies, would have? Our astronauts certainly have had something like a transforming perspective. Following the Apollo 11 landing on the moon, for example, Buzz Aldrin wrote a monograph with his minister Dean Woodruff entitled *The Myth of Apollo 11: The Effects of the Lunar Landing on the Mythic Dimension of Man.* Here Aldrin argues that we need not more science and technology alone, but "cultural symbols" by which we can live, and through which we can embody the "experience of the whole." Most of us flying in and airliner or private plane could have such a

view if we looked out the window consciously.

In fact, I was reminded of this possibility by an article entitled "A Hawk's Eye View," which I came across in the same issue of *Timeline* where Meadows' dialogue between Earth and Economics appeared. The author, a helicopter pilot named Richard Rathbun, describes the revelatory view from above. In the realm of birds, as Rathbun puts it, the world looks "more like a system of relationships." Once removed from ground-level, he no longer sees merely the linear strips of roads and paths, but the "more spatial, more contextual, more related" actualities of human interaction with the landscape. Freed from "our earthbound ways of seeing the world and ourselves," he feels compelled to contemplate "the consequences of our species-centered view." Consequences. Another name for ethics.

"From the air, a pattern emerges," Rathbun writes. "Every desirable place draws people. . . . Now it seems we are even taking the less desirable places. We establish a foothold and from there things grow. You can see this most clearly flying at night. Because of the stark visibility of the lights and the patterns they portray, you can see how our intrusion develops. . . . The lights look like a strangely beautiful cancer, spreading out along the veins and arteries of roads and highways." Rathbun has seen from above the same pattern in his own bioregion—San Francisco Bay—as he has seen in Brazil, Mexico, Nepal, Kenya, Oregon, Montana, and South Dakota. Even in the Sahara, he saw that traditional, nomadic peoples replicate the pattern. Population and cattle grazing are so dense around rare African wells that no new trees or grass can gain a foothold during drought periods. The Sahara takes over pastureland at the rate of about a thirty-kilometer leap every year.

But we busy human beings don't really notice such changes from the ground. Things seem pretty normal, Rathbun points out. Time unfolds in our linear way; growth occurs bit by unnoticeable bit. *And Growth Is Good.* "It all seems normal and benign." But the birds, he assures us, know otherwise. From the birds' perspective, surely a kind of "alien" perspective, another pattern is obvious. The people Rathbun takes up into the sky often begin to wonder about consequences.

Meadows' description of economics reminds me of Rathbun's flights over the central California coast, when he veers off into relatively untouched areas. "Some days, as a meditation," he reports, he listens to beautiful music in his helicopter as he escapes "the grip of the city, climbing out over the windy hills toward the coast. This is steep, rugged country. Topping the hills, the land opens up, and the

ocean takes over the horizon. The lack of roads chokes back the chokers, and there are more cattle than people. The red-tailed hawk still owns this territory. One sees deer, coyote, bobcat. It is beautiful .... Wild and untamed and very alive. Here it is still dark at night. But the humans are coming—unless we decide not to." Unless we decide enough is enough. Unless we begin to think like a mountain.

In the spring of 1997 as I read of Rathbun's flights over California, I was reminded of my own trip to California that April, a sorrowful trip all the way from New Hampshire where I live. I recall driving up from Big Sur with my mother and three sisters. We had been exploring that rugged, sublime coast for a place to scatter my younger brother Richard's ashes. Many years ago he had lived in Big Sur for a time, and he always returned when he felt in need of regeneration. Once he and I hiked redwood forests where he showed me great rusting hulks of abandoned engines used a century ago to haul massive trunks out of the woods. But he also showed me the giant ferns that endure the dance of butterflies when the sun breaks through. Another time when I was visiting California, we hiked those coastal mountains, where the seawind sweeps up the grassy hillsides and blow-dries the sweat off your body and out of your clothes. Where you look down thousands of feet to the wild Pacific below.

Driving back from Big Sur in the spring of 1997, my mother and sisters and I felt relief for the first time since we came together to arrange for my brother's memorial service and disposal. We felt relief because we had finally stumbled onto a place that my seventy-five-year-old mother could walk to, less than a hundred yards in on the eastern side of Highway 1. Here we found a stream cascading in a true forest glade, an opening in redwoods. Ferns abound. Green plants of all kinds, many I do not recognize, spread within and up along the sides of this canyon whose stream leads under the highway down a steep ravine to the Pacific. My sister Suzanne, ostensibly the least spiritual of my sisters, swears she had an experience upon finding the trail to this spot, for it was she who found it. She heard my brother, in his unmistakable growly voice, say, "Ahh, little sister, this is the place." No one else heard the voice, but even before she told us about it we were all convinced immediately that it felt right. It felt like Richard.

At his packed memorial service, the priest my mother arranged for had been delayed, so some of us had to get up—sisters, cousins, friends (there were scores of old pals)—and painfully speak our personal memories of Richard. They were authentic and poignant memories, all of them. He was a man whom many loved, but he was an

outsider to the system—a glazier by trade who drank himself to death when he lost his job due to injury and then lost the woman he loved. As one of his best friends said, "Richard was a man born about a hundred years too late." I would have said about two hundred, but I, we all, knew the friend's truth. My brother was more at home in Big Sur than anywhere else, save perhaps the Sierras where he went with his buddies on fishing trips.

But then as Suzanne drove the car north, I noticed a hawk, perhaps one of Rathbun's California red-tails? It seemed to accompany us. We were astonished because just as we were leaving the site where we had decided to spread Richard's ashes once the funeral home gave them to us, I looked up over the roof of the car and a great hawk circled above the very ravine we had chosen. "I can't help feeling that's Richard's spirit," the same sister who heard the voice said when I pointed out the hawk. "That this is the spot, and everything's okay. He's telling us." For a while the hawk flew along the coastal road above the car, while we watch amazed. Finally it veered off over the ocean like a pilot dipping his wings to his kids below at an air show.

I don't know what to make of it; I try not to say or think much about the hawk. Talking about such experiences one starts to sound a bit loony, like one of Mack's patients. But the point is that I felt the cancer as we entered Carmel again and then Monterey—the burgeoning population and ceaseless development, the crowds, the glib suntanned shoppers, the convenient malls, the packed highways, the high-density housing, the water-crises and diminishing aquifers. The cancerous culture of unchecked, exponential growth. The culture my dead brother loathed. This is a feeling I recognize from my experiences of driving down Interstate 89 when I've spent a few days in our family camp among the old hill farms of Vermont, three miles off the paved roads and up an old carriage path. What we human beings have wrought is wrong, deadening, alien to the best spirit in ourselves. And we know it. But perhaps now we need some apocalyptic revelation to be reminded of it. We need that perspective of the Other. We need something much larger and more threatening than ourselves to be able to see again, to be able to think like a mountain, rather than like a cancer.

Are we at the point where something larger has to come to us, or into us, and transform us—by vision, by fear, by whatever it takes? Maybe our minds and souls are responding finally to this deep need. Maybe Mack's patients are instigating not quite a classic dialogue between our bodies and our souls, but a dialogue between our best and worst selves.

We have been avoiding the "land ethic" Aldo Leopold propounded a half-century ago. "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. . . .When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." Each of us is a member of an ecological community that includes soil, land, water, plants, and animals. To abuse any part of the community for self-gratification or self-indulgence or even for mere convenience is not only anti-ecological, it is anti-survival and therefore anti-social behavior; it is bad citizenry. It is, in a word, unethical.

The extension of ethics to the land, to our "land-relation," in Leopold words, is "an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity." We have in our long evolution as civil beings developed, first, an ethic between individuals and, later, between the individual and society. But we have balked at taking the next step, an ethic of our relation to land that is as far evolved beyond commodity or chattel relationships as is our modern ethic of anti-slavery. It is not an easy evolutionary leap, Leopold knew. Much is being demanded of us. "No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions." Everywhere around the globe we human beings are being asked to transform our whole world-view, which is wholly, disproportionately, cancerously economic.

Leopold again: "A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are . . . essential to its healthy functioning. It assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts." This is the lesson at least as deep in our own English-language tradition as Wordsworth, Thoreau, and, earlier in our own century, Rachel Carson and Leopold himself. Yet we have chosen to ignore the fathers and mothers of this new ethic. We have dutifully strapped on our blinders and cast our lots with the manufacturers and millionaires, hoping we too might glory in such material wealth, or at least in the golden crumbs falling from their tables.

The question keeps returning then: are we somehow (even in a nomadic state) destined to think like a cancer? Is our industrial and post-industrial system in the developed world simply a product of something disproportionate and cancer-like in our deepest, primitive being? Or is it the *system* that is now out of control by some mistake or overloading (or to use the term Meadows borrows from William Catton, Jr., "overshooting") the carrying capacity, a system that may

still be correctable if we change in fundamental ways—change our thinking, behavior, dreams, desires?

We Americans, at least, are so totally immersed in a powerful and seductive Business Culture that we often blame the government or the messengers (the concerned scientists, alarmists all) for the various fixes we are in, whether local, national, or global. We want to say that the only inhibitions for responsible corporate behavior are those terrible government regulations. But if we insist on allowing prices not to reflect social and environmental costs (what economists call "externalities"), if we weaken our regulations so that they can be bought off or finessed, if we continue to reward businesses that (like bloated infants) get someone else (taxpayers) to clean up their messes, if we are more obsessed with our stock prices than our stock of wild plant and animal species (whose biotic health and chances of survival reflect our own), it may be high time to stop our old habits of thought long enough to re-examine the American and increasingly global Business Culture we by now so thoughtlessly accept and evangelize. It may be time to listen to some Alien Messenger from within or without. But who could be more alien now (whether scientist or visionary) than a Thoreau, a Leopold, a Rachel Carson, or a Meadows?

Can any of us really know whether it is even now too late? Meadows and her co-authors argue for the possibility of healing, sustainability, and development (as opposed to mindless growth) if we act radically and promptly, if we can marshal the required "maturity, compassion, and wisdom." They provide examples of individuals and corporations acting with maturity, and in some cases saving money as a result. They provide a flexible, broad program of restructuring, and the first order of restructuring—the key to social and personal transformation—is *information*, changing the "information links" and "flow" from the current system.

The corruption of information links is an essential element of our problem, and it is the very subject of another book, *The Heat Is On* (1997), by Pulitzer-Prize winner Ross Gelbspan. As if to reaffirm the point Meadows makes early in the '90s, Gelbspan unearths and scrutinizes the propaganda campaign waged by OPEC governments and fossil fuel companies (propaganda which, as Gelbspan convincingly details, was swallowed whole by the news media) to discredit the scientific consensus on global warming. Never mind that 2,500 scientists of the United Nations Panel on Climate Change have issued massive, science-based warnings to governments around the globe. The fossil fuel lobby by its own testimony, in a 1991 planning memo, revealed its determination to "reposition global warming as theory

rather than fact." They began by paying off a handful of toady academics to dispute the scientific panel's findings and present their minority view before Congressional committees, *as if* they represented the principles of balance and equal time. Congress and the mainstream press bought the greenhouse skeptics' story-line. And they bought it all the more readily for the added activity of industry front groups with titles like "The Information Council on the Environment" specifically formed to spread further disinformation and create the appearance of uncertainty among scientists. (Isn't it telling, by the way, that the insurance industry, whose *profits* are threatened by climate and weather change, now lobbies for reduction of greenhouse gasses?). Like the aging tobacco giants no one really believes anymore, the fossil fuel lobbies are now taking their turn at mis-educating the Congress, the news industry, and the public. Must we accept their "educational" program?

Such disinformation and "brownlash," as Paul and Anne Erlich have called it in their own massively documented book *The Betrayal of Science and Reason* (1998), is why Senate leaders and White House aides declared the tentative agreement in Kyoto Dead On Arrival well before it arrived in 1998. And they can get away wit such arrogance because although, according to a *New York Times* poll, 65% of the American people believe we should take steps unilaterally to limit our own greenhouse gas emissions, only one percent of Americans believe the environment is the most important issue facing us. And business, labor, and agriculture campaigned hard to defeat the Kyoto Treaty. As Senator Joseph Lieberman told John Cushman of the *Times*, the presence at Kyoto of big corporations with revenues larger than many of the countries attending, of the labor unions with more members than some nations' armed forces, and of industrial trade associations with headquarters more grand than embassies, made the conference look "as if a large chunk from the capital has been transported from Washington to Kyoto for two weeks." And the Global Climate Information Project, an industry coalition, spent tens of millions of dollars on anti-treaty advertising to scare Americans with warnings of economic hardships and disasters. Apparently such advertising works; so far we seem to be afraid of change, or afraid to demand change.

As Leopold argued two generations earlier, and Meadows did so recently, we need qualitatively different information and education; we need to know the data and the trajectory of our current behavior and growth. How else will we be motivated to change and act wisely?

authors argue, are attainable. I can't help believing that we need a public discussion, finally, of the program they outline at length in their final chapter, a program they summarize under five headings: Visioning, Networking, Truth-telling, Learning, and Loving. The revolutionary goal is sustainability. And "information is the key to transformation." I want to believe we have it in us to change.

And there are other voices of hope we might turn to for solace. One is Jan Tinbergen, Nobel Laureate economist. Writing of Meadows' book, Tinbergen says it convinces us that "sustainable development, a clean environment, and equitable incomes can be organized." For this Nobel economist, at least, Meadows' work reveals "the consequence of our failure to understand the limits . . . of natural resources"—that "the highest present incomes" can not be maintained and "market economies are obviously in need of some intervention in order to provide public goods, to avoid too much inequality, and to approach sustainability."

Another hopeful voice is Dr. Willis Harman, President of the Institute for Noetic Sciences: the science of transformational potential in the human mind. His speech to an audience of the Center for the Evolution of Culture in 1996 emphasized, in language not unlike Dr. Mack's, our current limits of thought and the signs that we may be preparing to transcend those limits.

Our chief limitation, Dr. Harman argues, is that we are not yet serious enough about planning for the future—our children, our grandchildren, and the generations to follow. Either we approach problems at a merely superficial level or we approach merely a part of a problem when a holistic approach is required. (The level of dialogue in the 1996 presidential campaign is one of his examples of our superficial and partial thinking). Harman sees, however, the beginnings of a global dialogue that is challenging our most cherished assumptions—most of which sound to me like the assumptions of a global Business Culture and its simplistic (that is to say willfully ignorant) vision of economics. The force for transformation, Harman believes, is a growing sub-culture of spiritual, ecological, and feminine values that are beginning to challenge our old materialist-economic values. In part, this subculture is beginning to emerge as a force around the globe because it is getting more and more difficult to fool ourselves that our problems are local or soluble by a little better management or a little more technology. Instead, we are being forced to admit by a growing mountain of evidence that "there seems to be an interlinkage of problems [social, political, environmental] that get progressively worse." Harman's hope is that our species will begin to [illegible] and deeper vision of the world, its resources,

and our place in it.

Can any of us say whether we are now capable of realizing (before catastrophe forces us too late to realize it) the potential Willis Harman sees in us? Probably not. But without hope, we'd simply continue our denial or give up. And before long what would be left to us but to end up dancing and fornicating in the streets like the soon-to-be victims of some medieval pandemic. Yet this time Death will not be borne on ships and rats from afar. The plague will be of our own making, the result of our failure of vision, of the failure of several generations now to attend to any consequences beyond themselves, beyond their own moment, beyond their material benefit and convenience. It will be, in the purest sense, an ethical failure.

Yet it seems also important to be clear that there is always a danger pursuing false gods and prophets as well: that we careen off into another disproportion, into cultism and utopianism, toward Never-Was and No-Where. Flying away, as it were, out of our bodies and therefore out of our tougher responsibilities to the living here-and-now, to each other, to the earth and its entire still-viable species. It is a kind of fanatical quietism that some religious traditions may at times lead to. Yet is anything more amoral than fanatical quietism in the very teeth of destruction? That is, I think, the warning example of the Heaven's Gate suicides during the convergence of the vernal equinox, a partial lunar eclipse, and the Hale-Bopp comet in the spring of 1997. If, like such cultists, we believe that our leader is the living Messiah, or even if we believe we have God's e-mail address, and if we add to that a strange and literal mix of extraterrestrial show-biz and web-chat, we are already mixing the vodka and phenobarb cocktail for ourselves. And probably for most of the species on this planet as well. Through our fanatical quietism and escapism. Through our denial of our bodies, our here-and-now humanness, our animal connections to the biosphere and to every creature great and small within it.

The solution, if there is one, certainly is not in the denial of our bodies and our connections to terrestrial nature. Nor is the solution to be found in the glinty-eyed righteousness of flesh-denying fundamentalisms. Any way out will have to come through the humble admission of our bodies, of the body's essential, unavoidable, and therefore ethical connection to the earth.

But it is hard to blame people for going into denial or desperation these days. We are in desperate circumstances, after all. At rare, lucid intervals we look at our own cancerous disproportions and we feel like aliens indeed, aliens in our own landscape. We wonder: When and

how did all this happen?

Perhaps, after all, this is the message of the voices Dr. Mack brings to us—from wherever they arise. "The result of all these experiences for abductees," Mack reports, "is the discovery of a new and altered sense of their place in the cosmic design, one that is more modest, respectful, and harmonious in relation to the earth and its living systems. Emotions of awe, respect for mystery and nature, and a heightened sense of the sacredness of the natural world are experienced along with a deep sadness about the apparent hopelessness of the Earth's environmental crisis." Think, the alien voices are telling us, like a mountain.

Because of capital and industrial forces put in motion two hundred years ago, because of our own limited, linear experience of those forces and their contemporary instrumentalities and impacts on our lives, we are now denying our own highest principles and traditions; we are failing ourselves as well as others; we are capitulating to our worst potential—to every childish greed and self-centeredness, to every manipulated adolescent-consumer impulse, to every condition of self-indulgent blindness. We no longer even know just where we are and how we fit into larger schemes—biotic, spiritual, cosmic. As Bill McKibben put it in a 1997 op-ed piece in *The New York Times* entitled "The Earth Does a Slow Burn": "If we were looking through a telescope and seeing the same things happen on some other planet we would find it bizarre and fascinating. If someone's watching us, they're doubtlessly bewildered." Despite the magnitude of the changes and the scientific evidence, McKibben says, our responses have "been feeble." McKibben suggests forcing our leaders to convene on the crumbling edge of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet to get them moving. But it would of course be up to us to send them there, even in a metaphorical sense. Will we? Not if we don't first change ourselves.

Not if we keep going as we are. If we look at the history of the growing scientific consensus on just the ecological issue of global warming alone, ignoring all others for the moment, we see a perfect single example of our patterns of denial for decades now. Individual scientists picking up indicators for years got together finally as early as 1979 to issue a National Academy of Sciences report on the dangers of humanity-induced, significant climate change. And by 1985 the United Nations, the World Meteorological Organization, and the International Council of Scientific Unions sponsored a conference and report making similar warnings. By the beginning of the 90s, 49 Nobel prize winners joined the 700 members of the National Academy of Sciences to emphasize their consensus that we are

dangerously amplifying the Earth's natural greenhouse effect. Worse, they estimated that significant, effective reductions of emissions could still be made at a relatively "modest cost." Our failure to do so, the scientists warned, "would place stresses on natural and social systems unprecedented in the past 10,000 years." These warnings were repeated again and again, but the scientific consensus is not getting through to us. Whose countervailing messages *are* getting through, and why? What is feeding our denial and displacing the scientific consensus with contrary information? Who is glibly assuring us that "the evidence is not all in yet," that "oh, surely, things are not that bad"? Those are questions we had better begin to answer for ourselves.

For Dr. Mack, the abduction phenomenon invites us to participate in nothing less than an evolution of consciousness precisely because it defies the limits and paradigms of our current astrophysics and psychiatry. And we should not take that defiance of the norm, Mack argues, as grounds to negate the urgent, transformational imagery his patients report. Nor does such defiance negate the power of the regenerative myth (in the old, respectful sense) these patients seem, through Mack, to be telling all of us. The "alien beings" stand like Blake, Wordsworth, Lawrence, Carson, Leopold and a minority of other sons and daughters of Western culture (outsiders and renegades all) on some distant, more life-affirming shore of our humanity. You can almost see them still looking at us, shaking their heads in puzzlement at the "damned human race"—at our choosing not to think like a mountain, but like a cancer, choosing, in Mack's words, "aggression . . . and mindless or gratuitous destructiveness." The Other voices bear a hard lesson to Mack's patients—to all of us—about the necessity of ego-death, or at least ego-restraint, in our currently constructed consciousness.

Our choices now seem to be between acceptance of oneness *or* continued imbalance, disproportion, and collective insanity; between humility and harmony *or* continued disharmony; between corrective action *or* continued betrayal and destruction; between continuing to view the earth and all its resources as nothing more than a market *or* viewing it "as the jewel in the crown of our being . . . and the place where we experience our connection with a cosmic Source," as Mack ultimately phrases it.

Mack is no innocent, however; he fully acknowledges the forces—psychic and physical—arrayed against any transformation of consciousness. "Huge corporate, scientific, educational, and military institutions consume many billions of dollars of material goods and

. . . But there are psychospiritual vested interests that resist change and that are perhaps even more powerful than these material ones, ... [which] might explain why it is the intellectual and political elite in our culture that seems most deeply wedded to perpetuating the materialist view of reality . . . . For it is, to a large degree, the scientific and governmental elite and the selected media that it controls that determine what we are to believe is real, for these monoliths are the principle beneficiaries of the dominant ideology." It is our obsessive materialism, as much as our "human greed," that is at the root of our destructiveness, the impetus to think like a cancer. The impetus, if you will, for the biotic, social, and spiritual failure—so far at least—of "the human experiment."

The question remains: Can we transform ourselves? As I have suggested, there are many like Meadows who think we can. But there are more who think we need not transform ourselves, that we can continue pretty much as we are. All we need is a big hat and sunglasses.

And there are others who confess skepticism about our species' collective courage, about our resolve to change fundamentally, before we are confronted with a debilitating biotic correction or utter collapse. There are others, in short, who are suggesting that the necessary long-term, self-less vision seems to be at a dangerous premium in human beings. After all, are these not the lessons of history as well as the nightly news? Are we not tempted to say with Dante: *This is the place I told you to expect./Here you shall pass among the fallen people,/Souls who have lost the good of intellect.*

Return for a moment to where we began—the international conferences and politics. As Razali Ismail, president of the General Assembly, put it at the end of the United Nations' Earth Summit, "both rich and poor nations had shown a lack of political will to force more than convoluted compromises." Not only, he went on to say, are the indicators of environmental destruction "worse this year" than five years ago during Rio, but "the spirit of Rio is gone." The Union of Concerned Scientists was no less stunned than any of us by the lack of progress on all fronts, but the scientists particularly singled out Clinton's, and therefore America's, failure when the Union's Executive Director Howard Ris told Barbara Crossette of the *New York Times*, "We need to tackle global warming now, not tomorrow."

Perhaps we should forgive the skeptics' view, then, of human selflessness, our potential for transformation. For the sake of my own daughters, at the least, I hope my own skepticism is proved to be

work with patients who have suffered *something*, and about the traditions, ancient and modern, that run counter to our current consensus of reality, the "extraterrestrials" feel to me like figures in a prophetic dream. They feel like the ghosts of some Ur-race of humans, waving and calling to us who would deny their prophetic vision, even as they drift back into the very cosmos whose physical and spiritual order, on this humanity's only planet, we have tried so long, so avariciously, to deny.