

## **A "Central Project" for Humanity** by Duane Elgin, May 1996

### **The Need for a Centering Vision for Humanity**

In 1992, over 1600 scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences, signed a Warning to Humanity. Together they warned that "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course" and said that, "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."

An unyielding ecological challenge confronts humanity with a deeper challenge--that of building a future together that is: sustainable--in harmony with the Earth's physical ecology; satisfying--in harmony with others or the social ecology; and soulful--in harmony with the spiritual ecology. Where can we look for guidance in imagining such a pathway into the future? Are there deep "design principles" built into the universe? Is evolution "going somewhere?" Is there a "central project" that can mobilize the cooperation and creativity of the human family? Are these the "right" questions? For example, should our concern be with a "centering process" instead of "central project?"

### **Evolutionary Insights from Nature**

An arbitrary or artificially constructed central project will not have the power to draw us together as a species. Therefore, we need to explore the depths of nature's wisdom if we are to discover our most authentic direction and aligning purpose for moving into the future. Our challenge is to not fight against the natural world, but to look at nature with an open mind to discover the evolutionary pathway that is most in accord with nature's preexisting intentions. If we fight against nature, we will ultimately be struggling against ourselves--and our evolutionary journey will be one of frustration, stalemate, and alienation. If we cooperate with nature, we will be serving our deepest essence and character--and our journey will be one of joyful flow and rewarding experience.

The most direct way to learn about our evolutionary direction is by inspecting nature's designs expressed throughout the physical universe. Wherever we look in the natural world there is a pervasive "signature" or "organizing pattern" that reveals the presence of self-

referencing and self-organizing systems. At every level of the universe, we find nature building self-referencing and self-organizing systems-- from the microscopic realm of atoms, through the middle-scale of human experience, and then on to the galactic scale.

The characteristic physical structure of self-organizing systems is the "torus" or a donut shaped pattern that is continuously regenerated (as in a tornado). The torus is the simplest geometry of a dynamically self-organizing system--and this easily recognizable form can be seen at every level of the cosmos.

**Figure 1: The Torus as the Most Common Shape Found Throughout Nature**



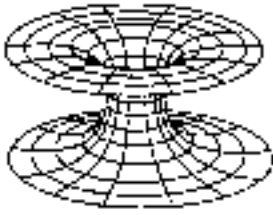
Earth's Magnetic Field



Air Circulation in a Tornado



Magnetic Field Around a Person



Curvature of Space Around a Black Hole



Cross-Section of an Orange



Magnetic Field Around a Spiral Galaxy

If throughout nature, we find a characteristic structure that is being pervasively replicated or regenerated at every scale, then it points to a deeper dynamic at work: The universe has its own "central project"-- that of growing self-referencing and self-organizing systems throughout. Therefore, if we want to choose an evolutionary direction that is most congruent with nature's deepest intentions, it will involve developing our species-potential for self-organizing and self-referencing systems at every scale--from the personal to the planetary. But what does this mean? Self-organizing systems have a number of unique properties that can help us discern the "natural" direction of evolution throughout the cosmos:

*Identity.* A self-organizing system requires a center around which, and through which, life-energy can flow. A self-organizing system is self-creating and therefore must be able to reflect upon itself and continually "get ahold of itself."

*Conscious.* A self-organizing system has a reflective capacity appropriate to its nature. With self-organizing systems present throughout the cosmos at every scale, it implies that consciousness must also be pervasively present throughout the cosmos.

*Freedom.* In order to be self-creating, we must exist in a context of great freedom. Quantum cosmology describes our existence as probabilistic, not deterministic. Freedom is present at the very foundations of existence. We can create ourselves any way that we want without arbitrary interference from the universe.

*Paradoxical attributes.* Self-organizing systems are both static/dynamic (flowing systems that appear to be stable structures); open/closed (continuously opening to the flow-through of energy and continuously closing into an identifiable entity); and unique/integrated (uniquely manifesting themselves at each moment while being completely immersed within and connected to other systems).

*Community.* Systems grow in concert with other systems in a mutually supportive process of co-evolution. Communities of free beings/systems are the building blocks of existence.

*Emergence.* Surprising potentials emerge as communities of self-organizing systems grow to higher levels of integration (e.g., from atoms to molecules to organisms to whole beings). We cannot to predict the nature of the new organism (or organization) that will emerge from synergistic combination of smaller systems.

*Enlarged experiences.* An expanded scope of community self-organization support new levels of existence and experience for members of that community. We can enlarge and deepen our life-experience by co-evolving whole new orders of systems with others. By becoming a global species, we dramatically enlarge and deepen our potentials as individuals.

The universe does seem to have a central project--that of growing self-referencing systems that are able to combine into larger synergistic communities that offer ever more opportunity for learning and expression in a context of ever-broadening freedom. This systems

view of the idea of "a central project for humanity" is exciting because it generates as many questions as insights, and so invites a broader and deeper inquiry into our evolutionary direction and intention.

## **Humanity's Central Project**

What of humanity? Do we have a central project? Our very name refers to our central project. Humanity's scientific designation is as homo sapiens sapiens. To be "sapiens" is to be wise, but we are more than that--we are "sapiens sapiens" which means to be doubly wise. It has often been remarked that where animals "know," only humans "know that they know." One way of describing our highest potential as a species is our ability to achieve full self-reflective consciousness or the double-wisdom of "knowing that we know." This is not a utopian agenda for humanity--with self-reflective consciousness we can become self-directing agents of the co-evolution of our global culture.

When we combine nature's wisdom and humanity's wisdom, the core evolutionary direction seems to be summed up in the phrase, "to be of soul-growing service." In the words of the Dalai Lama, "The aim of the awakening mind is twofold--to attain enlightenment and to benefit all sentient beings." Profound service to others and profound awakening for oneself are inseparable goals. The evolutionary direction is toward higher levels of soulfulness and service: Soul-growing as enriching, deepening, and broadening the spiritual sense of self. Service as supporting other beings in their discovery and development of themselves as soulful beings. If we conclude that we are here to be of soul-growing service, then the question becomes "What will nourish, strengthen, deepen, broaden, and enrich the life of our souls and our capacity for service?" How can our cities, neighborhoods, places of work, media, and so on, all contribute to this goal?

## **Conclusion**

There is a direction to evolution in the universe--at every level the cosmos is generating self-referencing and self-organizing systems. Our core challenge and central project as a human family is to realize our initial maturity as a self-referencing and self-organizing species-civilization. Embedded within this core project is the personal, central project of every being--to unfold our soulful capacities for self-reflective knowing--which is to become full members of the species homo sapiens sapiens.