

## Our Polycrisis and The Journey to Wholeness



### **We have been living in an age of fragmentation.**

In deeper human history and still in some remaining indigenous peoples there is a direct relationship with the environment. Those people were not separate from nature but a part of nature, both physically and in their shamanistic spirituality. Our difference from that shows in our language. “Nature” is something other than us; “the environment” is something that we live in. These perceptions are not innate. They are part of a cultural history driven largely by science, by seeing the world in parts. There have been great benefits from physics, chemistry, biology, and their subdivisions which investigate the mechanisms and links so that we know in detail how the world functions.

These understandings increased the human ability to produce goods. What a person could do was no longer limited by his own energy or that of a horse. First coal-power producing large iron tools and steam trains, then oil power with complex chemistry created large-scale manufacturing. Tractors and agricultural machines scaled food production. We built mega-cities and global communications with their appearance of being more connected. The creature with the big brain and opposable thumbs transformed the world and dominated it.

This trajectory was not without cost, which was not entirely unforeseen. It is now 60 years since Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” warning of ecological cost, and 50 years since “Limits to Growth” projected the implications of more people using more resources at an exponentially increasing rate. We know now that these concerns were well-founded and we have added in more recent decades the compounding effect of climate change. These and other issues such as economic fragility, underlying health problems both mental and physical, widening inequality, political division and societal stresses are now described by some as a “polycrisis”.

While humans transformed and seemingly dominated the world, we were not only increasing our capacity to do what we desired. In parallel, the unforeseen consequences and our power to cause damage were growing in proportion. We embedded all of this activity in flawed belief systems about how to run the world, the largest of which is what we call “economics”. In origin literally the “laws of the household/estate” what we now have are laws of money. In a household we would be required

to take care of the house we live in. Management of an estate would require that our land could produce food, not only this year, but for future generations. Economics, and the political choices that we base on it, now primarily concerns the growth of money. Through them runs a credo that says we must grow our way out of difficulty now and that growth will always be required.

Since our power to do damage is also growing at a similar rate, this belief is inherently flawed. When, at the same time, decisions are being made not at the level of the whole estate (our planet) but by corporate and national entities that perceive themselves to be competing for financial success, the system encourages short-term choices that are purely for monetary gain. Consequences are externalised or ignored. It is rational in such a system for tobacco companies to ignore the cost of cancer and deny its reality. It was rational for Dupont to poison the surrounding farmland and ignore the health damage to the work-force and community around it. It is rational, when you begin from such a mindset, for nations to evade responsibility for climate issues and to fail to implement even the agreements that they sign up to.

Perversely, where we may recognise the unintended consequences and take on the need for rectification, whether corporately or by governments that pick up the externalised costs, these are counted in as part of our financial growth. Of course, all economic activity meets some form of need – providing food, creating shelter, delivering entertainment, for example. But these should not be problems we ourselves created. Now, the more problems we cause, and the more effort goes into fixing them, the stronger our economies may appear to be. So, the money works just fine. Unfortunately, our soil quality degrades, our waterways and air are more polluted, our resources like rare-earth minerals and copper are depleted. We face the costs of care for those whose physical and emotional/mental health has been damaged.

### **It's the systems, stupid**

This is a systemic problem which is propelled by beliefs. Corporations that step too far outside of the growth and externalisation story can expect shareholders to desert them. National governments that fail to promote the “we must grow our economy” story face electoral obliteration. The narrative of “this is how it has to work” belief is built into the system such that we cannot easily find an exit.

There is an additional economic consequence. Where we originally had a capitalist system in which future development would be financed from past surplus, we now have a debtist system, where not only development, but also present survival is paid for by borrowing from our children and grandchildren. The US national debt is \$32 trillion, around \$95,000 per head of population. The UK external national debt is three times our annual income. Despite a stated intention to pull back on the creation of new money (QE) the response to recent bank failures has been more bailouts. At all levels of governance, the way that the world is dealing with this is to kick the can down the road, to evade and ignore the underlying problem.

Such denial, as we know, is the first stage of the grief that we experience when someone has died. In this case it is our system that has died, and we feel its passing even though there has been no announcement. It is like one of those movie farces where people fake that the corpse is still breathing, only not so funny. Decisions on a global scale are still made based on the illusion of short-term competitive success at the expense of the planet and the long-term consequences. Some people describe the system as a super-organism, perpetuating its life at the expense of its host. Think of the picture of Easter Island where all that remains are the stone heads, because the population consumed the forests that they required to survive.

### **Polycrisis: Living on the Edge**

This narrative simplifies a massively complex picture. Nevertheless, the overall story is hard to challenge. If you are inclined to dispute the detail and to level a charge of over-simplification, I request that you consider whether any such challenge would alter the story as a whole.

Since it is broadly true, where does it place us? There are some trends that I suggest we should avoid.

#### *Trends to avoid: Blame*

Those who have recognised one or more of these challenges, possibly for some while now, may have built up resentment and anger at being ignored. Even those who are newly discovering these issues may look for someone to blame. And we are all accustomed to our top-down system in which the power is taken to lie with a small subset of humanity – with governments, the wealthy, and the corporate leaders.

Blame, even when earned, is unproductive since it does not put our energy behind solutions and it may serve to create defensiveness and resistance among those who might otherwise engage with solutions. But more than that, a problem which is in-built to our systems and to the beliefs that created them, is a problem that we all must own. If you have never borrowed money, never sought to make money grow other than by production (eg property rolling, financial speculation), never taken steps to minimise taxes or voted for politicians promising short-term fixes, never run or worked for a company that externalised its costs then maybe you carry no direct responsibility. Even then, you may not have thought any differently – merely lacked the opportunity. The belief systems are held collectively and the systemic consequences constrain all of us.

#### *Trends to avoid: Belief in Powerlessness*

Even if you are not inclined towards blame or anger, it is all too easy to drop into a belief that we are powerless. We may see ourselves to have been let down by our parents and elders; they should have protected us or made better choices. It may even seem as if they have all conspired in their own interests, and against ours. Whatever the case, it is now presented as their job to put things right. But if the system itself is the problem, they may have the power to operate it, but not to change it. Our expectations for the future (what pensions we may expect, what our standard of living should be, how much we should keep for ourselves or contribute to the collective) are still conditioned by that system. How then can it change?

In case my references to “the system” seem too abstract, I would like to give you an image. In the Wizard of Oz, the great reveal comes when Toto pulls back the curtain and we see that the wizard is only a man. We don’t give much attention to what he is doing, which is operating a machine which runs that world, with buttons to push and levers to pull. Nor have we been concerned that everyone there believes in him, his importance, “because of the wonderful things he does”. Consider though, the fact that you could replace this wizard with another. It is the machine that has the power to do wonderful things. Great investment has been made in its creation and now its functioning is fixed. The nature of the levers and connections determines what it can do. It is how Oz works, and its way of working mechanises the beliefs behind its construction.

#### **Our faulty driving beliefs: Competition**

Thus, there are three more underlying beliefs that I suggest it is helpful for us to be aware of. The first is our attitude to competition. For two centuries, our worldview was conditioned by a sound-bite version of Darwinian evolution, the phrase “survival of the fittest”. Darwin himself avoided it, and now we know with surety that evolution is a blend of competition for resources with

interdependence and networking. It is survival of the most adaptable. Ecosystems are complex, self-regulating collections of living creatures which adapt to each other and utilise each other's by-products such the system itself grows over time in size and resilience. Species diversify and optimise within the system's boundaries.

The relevance of the sound-bite error is that we became accustomed to believing that it is the job of nations or corporations to out-compete each other, to conquer or drive into collapse, with short-term goals that maximise immediate, narrow benefits. That belief has been encouraged for two hundred years by those who benefit; it is a story that favours a few at the expense of the many and values parts even though they are damaging to the whole. Resource over-use and environmental damage are made unimportant, even though their result is a long-term danger to the living system in its entirety. This belief has encouraged the fragmentation narrative and greatly inhibited our ability to address collective or whole-system health and to create systemic self-regulation.

### **Our faulty driving beliefs: Human primacy**

The second faulty belief system is one in which humans are of overriding importance. This has taken various forms. There was a religious belief that God made us uniquely in His image. If it benefits us that means God must approve. There is a scientific view of homo sapiens as the pinnacle of evolution and accordingly, since we have the brain-power to be in charge we therefore should be. And the self-centredness akin to that which once assumed the Sun and stars to orbit the earth, perpetuates an imagined special relationship separate from the rest of planetary creation. All of them have supported an illusion that we can be in control, a hubris about the extent of our power and a self-centred blindness about how we can treat other living creatures, or Mother Earth itself.

### **Our faulty driving beliefs: The Scientific Method**

The third belief system is rooted in our view of the way science should work. A methodological error which arose in part in order to counter the subjectivity of our excessive self-belief. Science saw it as necessary to establish a degree of objectivity in order to deal with errors of perception. Those mistakes might be beliefs based in religious dogma or in our own willingness to take for granted "what I experience, or think, must of course be real". Concern about such weaknesses put both spiritual viewpoints and subjective knowing beyond any possibility of scientific validity and as a result they were excluded. Science became concerned only with that which can be materially identified and measured; anything that could not be measured was, by definition, not real. However, this went too far. It allowed the measurement apparatus to define reality, and the choice of which apparatus is used affects the reality that is revealed. Since human behaviour is also driven by what we know and experience, and since our collective actions are guided by culture, context, mindsets, psychological constructs, science has limited our view of what is real. We do not have a machine that can detect the content of a thought. But you can.

Worse than this, there is abundant evidence that the material world only holds part of the story of creation. In fact, a viewpoint that prioritises the material components is itself fragmenting. An accurate scientific reality is that the ways that matter has formed and behaves are shaped by a governing **field of information**. At root, everything is energy, but the manner in which energy becomes material, and how the material world subsequently behaves, including when it is formed into creatures like ourselves, is governed by and recorded by that field of information. When we prioritise the "thingness" of the universe, we hold the map of creation upside-down. The scientific, philosophical and metaphysical justification for this point of view is not susceptible of representation within the space of this article and can be found in full in my book "The Science of Possibility". But a

“right-way-up” perspective is central to the solutions we need if we are to address the polycrisis, and must not be left out. Beliefs, just as much as material facts, shape our choices. Meanwhile, in the midst of complexity, the facts of individual material connections are too hard to unravel, and at the same time changing faster than we can analyse their interactions.

### **Where are solutions to be found?**

The answer is wholeness. This is simple, but far from easy or trivial. It is as fundamental as the problems that we face. Since the challenges arise from limited mindsets embedded in global systems, upside-down scientific maps and fragmented short-term approaches, the requirement is to see the world in an entirely new way. We cannot cross such a chasm in baby steps. The Earth cannot be partly heliocentric and we can no longer operate as if the Sun orbits the Earth.

Wholeness means what it says. Wholeness means seeing entire systems. Wholeness means seeing the connectedness across all of creation. Wholeness means becoming aware of the effects at all scales of matter, across all living systems and through every aspect of their inter-relatedness. Wholeness demands an awareness of the present, embedded in the trajectories of the past and with the best possible sensing of the effects on our children and grandchildren’s worlds. It is wholeness of perspective in materiality, space, time and information.

### *Reconstruct*

Since the fragmentation mindset is in-built to our systems, these require thorough reconstruction. Since they were not made to encompass a full awareness of all living systems and since they contain perverse incentives that run counter to global needs and sustainable long-term benefits, they are not fit for purpose. Nor can they be successfully rebuilt using the constructs of the past. For example, we cannot reshape economics unless we abandon the polarisation of capitalism vs socialism, since such concepts impose limits and boxed-in thinking. That polarity prevents an integration of money and people. Einstein’s view applies more than ever, that we cannot create a new world based on the mindsets that produced the current one.

### *Bottom-up emergence*

Another thinking habit from the past is to focus on top-down solutions. Nature does not work that way. The trees do not tell the ferns or the fungi how they must grow. Mutual adaptation takes place in the relatedness of all the forest’s component organisms. It is a bottom-up emergence where shifts happen at the level of the components. Our human solutions to the polycrisis will be based on a myriad of lower-level actions, as individuals and smaller groups respond to local challenges, even when those challenges are shaped by a larger context. If there is a top-down requirement, it is to get out of the way, discourage secrecy or hidden agendas, detect and inhibit abuse, and to not destroy or disrupt the creative emergence. This will challenge many people who have a desire to control, but living systems are rarely oriented towards explicit control. They rely instead on self-balancing of mutual interests, which in turn requires openness and transparency in support of responsive adaptation.

### *See the whole picture*

This takes us to another damaging habit. We have become intensely dominated by left-brain, analytical modes of thought. These too, take us in a fragmenting direction. Most education systems train us to operate that way. While our analytical tools are useful, they need to be in the service of larger pictures and deeper wisdoms. The polycrisis is, by definition, complex, and its inherent chaos cannot be unpicked analytically, any more than you can make weather forecasts by only analysing

the movement of clouds. Our human ability to sense patterns, to use our intuition, and to know more than we can describe needs to come fully into operation. Then we need to learn how to trust it and not mentally override what it has to say, and then to also scale it up in collaboration with others, bringing the “wisdom of crowds” into play. This too is a trajectory towards wholeness.

#### *Awareness: Connect with the field*

Since the shape of the material world is a result of what is in the information field, and since what comes next is a consequence of the flow and change in the field, our sensing of the emerging picture needs to be informed by more than what we see with our exterior biological senses. Nor is it sufficient for us to analyse the data and the patterns that we see, not even if those analyses might be enhanced by AI. We can only “see” the whole picture when we are also informed by knowledge of the information field. We have the capability to sense beyond what we can touch but have been trained to discount its value, treat it as “woo-woo”, over-ride its messages when we pick them up spontaneously, and second-guess what we detect when we use it intentionally. Since we are part of the field, awareness is an innate component of who we are, and can be re-awakened.

#### *Choice: Influence the field*

With greater awareness comes the potential for better choices. Our choices shape the field of what is to come, and this happens in two ways, one of them conventional and widely accepted, the other located more on the edge, not yet understood but equally valuable if we make use of it.

The conventional shaping is that as we make our choices in life, from what to eat to how we use our time to how to vote, we are an active component in creating a future. How you eat affects the future of your body and your health, potentially impacting your family or your healthcare provider. It may even affect the planet; imagine the impact of 50% of the population choosing veganism. Our individual choices may seem insignificant, or only personal, but there is a collective effect from many people shifting how they see the world and what criteria drive their behaviours. Even small groups may generate wider influence. We generally have more power available to us than we imagine.

The unconventional shaping derives from the “Science of Possibility” understandings of how reality functions and how it is shaped by what is in the field of information. Since each of us is a part of the information field, we hold a small piece of its intelligence, or of the universal consciousness, or of “God” if you see that word in a panentheistic (God present in and through everything) way. There has been a damaging oversimplification of this principle in much of new-age thinking, and a great deal of presentation that would encourage people to believe in a rather self-oriented way that they can take control of everything. However, the principle itself stands. We do have influence directly in the field itself and we can make use of that.

Choice based in wholeness can make use of either, or both pathways. If the second is simply too strange or difficult or unbelievable for you I encourage you to set it aside for the context of this article. Wholeness is still essential and not at the edge. It is not dependent on that form of edge-walking.

#### *Choice, Wholeness and Relational Being*

Please note though, that neither form is only about fixing the environment because the change is not external. The change must happen in us because we are shapers. Nor is it about fixing ourselves, because our choices are responses to what happens around us. Wholeness demands that we work simultaneously within the relatedness of both aspects. This is where Relational Being lives,

extending the prompt to “be the change you wish to see in the world”, putting alongside it “do the change the world needs done and adding the demand to put it all together in Wholeness.

Many of our static “either-or” perspectives need to be replaced by dynamic “both-and” frameworks. You do not survive by making a choice either to breathe in or to breathe out. If you are unsure about that you can take the time to try it. Living systems, from bodies to ecologies to societal systems are self-balancing. A system which fails in this ultimately pays the price of no longer living. Fragmentation kills.

### **The key to survival**

As a result, wholeness is key to our survival. *Please recognise that this is not about the non-duality debate or about the spiritual quest for “oneness”.* While that non-dual perspective represents a truth about the universe and offers an option to experience our spiritual indivisibility, it can only be accomplished in the spiritual or conceptual realms. As the Buddhists would have it, “after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water”. The wholeness that we need must arise in the material realm unless we are willing to give up our bodies, and those of our children.

Nor does wholeness happen in individual minds. It will not come about though some genius who sees it all and tells the rest of us how to fix it. This is not the realm of an AI system that tells us the answer to “life, the universe and everything”. No brain, whether cells or electronics, can see everything. The injunction to embrace wholeness is not calling on you or me to understand everything, quite the reverse. It requires us to accept and play our part, to allow the rest of creation to play its own and to surrender to that relationship, having simultaneously the courage and confidence to do what we see and the humility and acceptance to allow others, both human and non-human, to do what they do. We cannot manage the whole, so the whole must manage itself.

This is a living, on-going, self-balancing process. At the same time as making our choices, day by day or minute by minute, we must let go of them, not ask whether they were right or wrong. The questions are “what now?” and “what next?”. Whatever the consequences turn out to be, they generate a fresh awareness and become the context for the next choice. There are no conclusions, because life is not concluded.

Wholeness is not static. It is the ongoing continuation of a story that is perhaps 14 billion years long, so far, and that has no foreseeable end. Your part and mine may be an infinitesimal piece of that, and nevertheless of great importance to us. As Helen Keller said, “Life is either a grand and glorious adventure, or nothing”. What’s your choice?

Live long and prosper.



Jon Freeman

