

A New Ethic for Humankind

Searching for solutions
in a troubled world

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"It is wise to look ahead, but it is difficult to look further ahead than you can see."

Winston Churchill

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to show that in view of the increasing population, energy shifts, resource consumption and pollution, the creation of a sustainable world will need massive change in human attitudes and actions, in fact a “new ethic” for humankind.

The 21st century emerged with a gradually increasing public awareness that the world was entering a troubling age and we had better pay attention if we wanted to be assured of a sustainable future. It was pointed out as early as 1972 by Dennis and Donella Meadows that there are “Limits to Growth”¹⁾ and if we were to continue at the then current rate of consumption of the Earth’s resources we would not have a sustainable world in the longer range future. Aurelio Peccei, the founder of the Club of Rome - which commissioned the Meadows’ book - called for a “New Ethic for Mankind” and that is what this present document presents as a new and significant reality.

The Golden Age of Greece, from around 500 to 300 BC, was built on the energy of slaves. We are now in another Golden Age blessed with energy from an abundant supply of oil and natural resources. But this will of course not be so in the longer range future. Warning signs are abundantly apparent. We will need to plan now for a true transition to a new age and a new ethic.

Ethics is defined in Webster’s dictionary as:

"The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation", or

"The principles of conduct governing an individual or a group."

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It is the principles of conduct that have to be changed to create the New Ethic.

The transition from a growth society that we in the developed countries presently enjoy, to one with a stable world population and economic sustainability could require the greatest evolutionary change in the history of humankind. The changing conduct and ethical base of the world's population must indeed change. This is no exaggeration as will be pointed out in the text that follows. This book therefore will show why this is so and why we must begin now to find ways to ease this transition for the good of the future of the human species on this finite planet.

As Marshall McLuhan was heard to say, if a system is too successful it will flip on itself. As our societies get more complex they are very likely to do just that.

Another way to express this phenomenon is to look at the Chaos Theory²⁾. By this process, a system (society, population growth, etc.) will be proceeding along a smooth path when some perturbation is introduced and it goes into wild disarray, or chaos.

The Queuing Theory can also be described as useful to understand how systems can collapse. Take for example a large metropolitan city that depends on constant delivery of supplies beyond its borders to feed itself. Think of a shortage of fuel available to the transport trucks and what could happen to the supplying of a city's needs.

The Queuing Theory says that a small restriction in supply can not just slow the process by a small percentage, but that it comes to a complete stop. For example, a busy highway is loaded to capacity but flowing rapidly. Then some car or truck slows down to look at an accident at the side of the road. No obstruction is in the way of the flow, but it has been slowed by a very small percentage and the

whole system comes to a dead stop. Similarly, the housewife stocks up on sugar when it is announced that sugar will be rationed. Result: no more sugar on the shelves and the system shuts down. When such a phenomenon occurs to supplying a large city, it may well shut down. A power blackout is an example of such an overloaded system and consequent shutdown. Now, all this is to give a glimpse of what could happen as resources worldwide get in short supply. The urgency then is apparent and must be dealt with well before it happens.

Another phenomenon of the future is the “lifeboat principle” or Triage. In this case a lifeboat is loaded with people and others in the sea are clamouring to climb in. If compassion rules and the residents of the lifeboat try to let them in, then most likely all will be lost. So, the fortunate few must be preserved and the others let go. Cruel it seems, but otherwise all will be lost. All this is part of the content of a “New Ethic” and must be learned in the long term interest of a sustainable planet and indeed the human species.

In 1995 Charlotte Waterlow produced the book *The Hinge of History* ³⁾ It told about the mega-change that occurred in Western history due to a shift from dependence on God, to explain the things we don’t understand, to the new discoveries of science. It was the Renaissance or rebirth, or Enlightenment for Western society.

It would appear now that the years 2008-9 represent a similar shift in Western thinking that is an equally major change. A second hinge of history. At the same time globalization has arrived, accelerated by the speed of communications, information and transportation. This shift is accompanied by climate change, population growth, increasing resource consumption and beginning to see the “limits to growth”.

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The following Chapter will present the “Cassandras”⁴⁾ of the past that have warned us of the directions that the world is going. This will show the urgency of re-structuring the course ahead.

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- 3) Waterlow, Charlotte, *The Hinge of History* The
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- 4) see Chapter 1 that follows

Chapter 1

The Cassandras

This chapter will tell of a number of people who were concerned about the way the world was and is unfolding in its track to the future. They are the “Cassandras” foretelling the future.

According to Homer’s Iliad, Cassandra was a beautiful young woman, blessed with the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo, who was infatuated with her. Unfortunately, because she shunned Apollo, at the last minute he added a twist to her gift. Cassandra was doomed to tell the truth, but never to be believed. As Laura Fitton says in her internet article: “... we call a 'Cassandra' someone whose true words are ignored, since Cassandra’s doom was to predict what others refused to believe.”

Some of these Cassandras that I have found of interest are described below.

Rachel Carson

One of the early Cassandras was Rachel Carson born in Pennsylvania in 1907. She was a writer, scientist and ecologist who worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other government agencies. She retired from the government in 1952 to devote full time to writing. Two of her outstanding books were “The Sea Around Us” ¹⁾ in 1951, and “Silent Spring” ²⁾ in 1962. The first book is a lyrical account of the beauties of the sea. However in her “Silent Spring” book in 1962 she exposed the hazards of the pesticide DDT, and eloquently questioned humanity’s faith in technological progress and helped set the stage for the environmental movement. Her efforts succeeded in making significant changes and reductions in the widespread use of this pesticide.

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However since that time, the banning of DDT has been questioned because of the benefits it provides in the control of malaria.

Jonas and Jonathan Salk

A report in 1982 to the United Nations by Jonas Salk and his son Jonathan ³⁾ took a look at population growth over the long term future and identified the period before the start of the decline in growth as Epoch A and that after as Epoch B. The shift from Epoch A to Epoch B would, they said, require a tremendous shift in world attitudes, in fact it would require an evolutionary change. It would require attitudes to change from one of competition to one of cooperation. How, then, would society and particularly the economic world deal with that? It would indeed require a New Ethic for humankind. A profound observation for its time.

Alvin Toffler

A book that caused a lot of people to be introduced to the futures movement was *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler, published in 1971 ⁴⁾

Toffler is essentially a journalist, writing for many well-known periodicals, has been an editor of *Fortune*, has taught “sociology of the future” at the New School for Social Research, and the author of several books on sociopolitical topics.

Future Shock was a runaway best seller and a good read even for today. He defines “future shock” as “the distress, both physical and psychological, that arises from an overload of the human organism’s physical adaptive systems and its decision-making processes.” Another way of saying this is that future shock is the reaction to the rapidity of change, in both experiences and information.

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