

CLUES TO OUR COMMON FUTURE

by

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With jarring suddenness, millions of people in dozens of countries are becoming aware of global changes that are liable to affect them personally. What people do half a world away is now relayed through sensitive and complex webs of atmospheric chemistry, ocean currents, and human communication to our very doorsteps. Magazine covers and TV and radio newscasts give capsule metaphors like rape of the forests, famine alert, global warming, acid rain, the drugged generation, the AIDS epidemic, the population bomb. In the spirit of our branches-and-twigs mode of learning, we study these problems in different disciplines, read and hear about them in separate stories, allocate them to specialized agencies (or "czars") -- and act on them with less-than-global perspective. Wouldn't it be useful, for a change, to think about them all at once?

Two assertions can be made about these fundamentally similar "problems." They are global; they require people everywhere to widen to world scale what they worry about and try to do something about. They are behavioral: global change is produced by what we (humanity) have been doing; its pace and direction can be changed by what we do, or stop doing, next. That's a new way of thinking about evolution: Evolution is not what happens to us, it's what we (humanity as a whole) decide to do next.

On this first day of the rest of our lives, it may be useful to raise our periscope for a 360-degree look around. My sweep of the horizon shows 10 worldwide revolutions that have transformed our world since the last surge of international creativity, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. All these revolutions seem to be the consequence of spreading awareness of four kinds of knowledge -- "know-what" (science), "know-how" (technology), "know-why" (conscious values, conflicting values), and "know-who" (organization, persuasion and authority). The revolutions of our time are concurrent but not parallel; rather, they are intermixed, interwoven, interactive.

1. The sudden increase in explosive power has clamped a lid on the scale of warfare. The invention of weapons too big to use has converted much of military strategy into an expensive information game.
2. Biotechnology, made possible by deciphering the information in our genes, presents humankind with a vast range of new ethical and political puzzles. Human cloning, which now captures the headlines, is only one of them.
3. Computers, prosthetic extensions of our brainpower, are replacing much of the repetitious drudgery people have always had to do. (They bring in their train a new kind of problem called "technological unemployment" -- but the elimination of drudgery can't be bad news for humanity in the longer run.)

4. Our growing capacity, with the help of computers linked to telecommunications, to model and simulate vast systems (such as the global atmosphere) has sensitized us to the consequences of what we the people do to our natural environment.

5. The widening spread of knowledge is creating a revolution in the technology of organization: pyramids and command-and-control are out, consultation and consensus are in.

These five revolutions are driven quite directly by scientific discovery and technological innovation. The other five are facilitated, even intensified, by science and technology, but are driven by universal aspirations of the human spirit -- by a sense of entitlement to "enough" (the fulfillment of basic human needs), and beyond that by human desires for a sense of achievement, justice, solidarity and participation.

6. The idea of human rights for everyone has become the world's first truly universal idea-system. It has come to mean rights not only for political prisoners and the poorest of the poor, but for women, children and the aging, racial and religious minorities, immigrants, and all manner of untouchables.

7. A global fairness revolution is spreading as the spread of knowledge shows the disadvantaged in every society what they are missing -- and provides them with new political tools to express their rising resentments and help them "overcome."

8. Fierce loyalties to cultural identity with less-than-global communities -- bonded by nationhood, ethnicity, religion, ideology, and even occupation -- are colliding everywhere with the homogenizing cultures of "modernization."

9. An emerging ethic of ecology is producing a revolution in human self-control -- based not on "limits to growth" but on limits to thoughtlessness, unfairness and conflict. (The resulting international cooperation can, if we try, produce a "growth of limits.")

10. Openness, market incentives, and the practice of pluralism are currently on display in some of the unlikeliest places. Authoritarian and totalitarian systems are simply unable to cope or compete with looser systems that "go with the flow" in the global flood of knowledge.

None of these trends is brand new. But all of them are enhanced by the widespread and continuous feedback of knowledge -- and especially by the power of ever-faster computers hitched to ever-more-reliable telecommunications. We are heirs nowadays to problems of a new kind: we have to be able to imagine them well before they slap us in the face. From global warming to the urban homeless, they require leaders and followers to develop strategies before the alarm sounds, to think and act in concert without waiting for something dramatic to happen, because then it may be too late to change course.

Our common future will only be assured by lots of people changing their behavior, and in time changing the minds -- or at least the policies -- of their leaders. And this means, of course, that whatever bells are tolling at this open moment in world history don't just toll for "leaders." They toll for thee and me -- because we can't expect our leaders to lead us in new directions until we decide we want to go there ourselves.