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**Cultural Maturity Part I:
The Concept of Cultural Maturity
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The [Institute for Creative Development](#) is a Seattle-based think tank and center for advanced leadership training that addresses critical challenges facing the . Its primary focus is the maturity of thought and action that will be needed to effectively address future human questions. Environmental issues have always been a central concern.

Our work provides big-picture perspective for understanding what addressing environmental issues wisely will require of us. The concept of Cultural Maturity, a notion at the center of the Institute's work, proposes that doing so will require ways of thinking and acting that are new to us as a species. It goes on to examine just what those new ways of thinking and acting entail.

In the article below I have excerpted a piece from the [Cultural Maturity Blog](#) that introduces the concept of Cultural Maturity. The piece in its entirety can be found [here](#). Next week, I will turn briefly to the particular new skills and capacities that the concept argues will be needed for the specific task of confronting new environmental realities.

Concept of Cultural Maturity –Brief Reflections from the [Cultural Maturity Blog](#)

I approach addressing the future differently than most futurists. The larger portion of people whose work addresses what may lie ahead focus on technological advancement, or perhaps on obstacles that might present themselves in our efforts to advance. The kind of perspective I find

most useful is more “developmental.” It draws on ideas about how cultures change, and about how changes happening today are altering how we think and act.

Increasingly my attention has turned to an essential recognition: The most critical challenges ahead for the species will require not just fresh ideas, but a fundamentally greater sophistication in how we understand and relate. I see our times demanding what I call a new Cultural Maturity—put most simply, a critical “growing up” as a species. Today I devote the larger part of my life to making sense of this necessary growing up, and to training leaders in the new capacities it requires and makes possible.

The fact that I might think as I do comes in part from my background as a psychiatrist—we are trained to look at questions developmentally. It comes also from being a student of history. And most of all it comes from a deep fascination with understanding what makes us human. The concept of Cultural Maturity is a formal notion within Creative Systems Theory, a comprehensive theory of change, purpose, and interrelationship in human systems developed by myself and colleagues at the Institute for Creative Development over the last thirty-five years.

Cultural Maturity is not as easy a notion as the simple phrase “growing up” might suggest. But most of us appreciate—whether consciously or not—that something like what the concept of Cultural Maturity describes will be necessary. When we look at essential issues ahead for the species, we get that a sane and healthy future will require at the least that we be more intelligent in our choices. For example, we recognize that dealing with nuclear proliferation in an ever more technologically complex and globally interconnected world will be very difficult unless we can bring greater insight to how we humans relate. Similarly, people recognize that addressing the energy crisis, or other environmental concerns, will require that we be smarter in our engagement of hard realities. We also see a beginning appreciation of the need to be not just more intelligent, but more “grown up” in how we think. With growing frequency, people today respond with disgust—appropriately—at the common childishness of political debate, and at how rarely the media appeal to more than adolescent impulses.

Most of us also recognize something further. At some level, we get that it is essential, given the magnitude and the subtlety of the challenges we face and the potential consequences of our decisions, that our choices be not just more intelligent and adult, but more wise. Cultural Maturity is about realizing the greater nuance and depth of understanding—we could say wisdom—that human concerns of every sort today demand of us.

The concept of Cultural Maturity challenges the common assumption that Modern Age institutions and ways of thinking are end points and ideals—only needing further refinement. It describes how our future human well-being hinges on turning first pages in an essential next chapter in our human story. It also describes how, today, we are beginning to do so.

The observation that gives the concept its name provides a first glimpse of Cultural Maturity’s changes. Human culture in times past has functioned like a parent in the lives of individuals. It

has provided us with our rules to live by—shared absolutes—and, in the process, a sense of identity and connectedness with others. These cultural absolutes have also protected us from life’s very real uncertainties and immense complexities. But in today’s increasingly multi-faceted world, unquestioned cultural guideposts serve us less and less well. They are also having diminishing influence.

The implications of this loss are Janus-faced. Certainly it can bring a disturbing sense of absence. Combined with how our world has become more risk-filled and complicated, this weakening of familiar rules can leave us dangerously overwhelmed and disoriented. But at the same time, these changes reveals possibilities that before now we could not have considered. Importantly, this is not just possibility in some postmodern, “anything-goes” sense. The concept of Cultural Maturity describes how the same change processes that generate today’s loss of past absolutes also create the potential for new, more mature ways of thinking and being in the world.

The concept of Cultural Maturity assists us in four ways that together provide essential direction for going forward:

First, the concept of Cultural Maturity helps us make sense of the easily confusing times in which we live. It puts the challenges and changes we face today in larger perspective.

Second, it provides a new guiding narrative. Having a new, more mature story to guide us becomes increasingly essential as the stories we’ve traditionally relied upon—from the American Dream to our various political and religious allegiances—cease to serve us.

Third, the concept helps clarify the new skills and capacities that we will need if we are to successfully address the challenge before us. In doing so, it also provides guidance for practicing those needed new abilities.

And **fourth**, the concept of Cultural Maturity points toward needed changes not just in what we think, but how we think. Culturally mature perspective does more than just provide greater clarity—it involves specific cognitive changes. These cognitive changes make possibility new, more dynamic and encompassing ways of understanding.

Accordingly, Cultural Maturity holds critical implications for bringing to bear the wisdom that environmental concerns increasingly demand of us. Next week, I will briefly introduce the particular new skills and capacities that the concept argues will be needed for the specific task of confronting new environmental realities.

The Cultural Maturity Blog can be found at culturalmaturityblog.net. The main ICD website can be found at creativesystems.org. My two most recent books each specifically address culturally mature perspective and what it asks of us. [Hope and the Future](#) is a short book (130 pages) designed to introduce the concept of Cultural Maturity. [Cultural Maturity: A Guidebook for the](#)

[Future](#) is a much longer work (630 pages) for those interested in developing the new leadership capacities that addressing challenges ahead will require of us.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/concept-of-cultural-maturity/>