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Engaging the Unengaged

Andrew Gaines

Many of the people in MAHB are academics or activists. In my view most activists need to raise their game, and more academics need to become activists. What is needed is a new kind of activism that aims to *catalyse a mindset shift* to change the direction of our culture. We can all contribute to this by communicating with people we know.

Our proper shared intention, I suggest, is to *transition to a life-sustaining society*. A life-sustaining society will operate within planetary boundaries, and it will be organised to support the well-being of individuals, communities and nature.

The needed changes affect every sphere of life in a positive way. Rather than thinking just of a few specific changes, we would do well to think of a *whole system change*: changing all the major driving forces that exacerbate global warming and social imbalance. The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an informal network of people committed to helping folks understand this.

The prospect of changing the direction of our whole society can seem daunting. However, neoliberals have been consciously aiming to shape society according to their worldview for decades.

My paper [Understanding Whole System Change](#) makes the idea of whole system change mentally manageable in a way that supports real-world transformative action. There are also excellent articles, book, videos and study guides that cover the ground of whole system

change. Two of them are Paul Raskin's *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* and Annie Leonard's *The Story of Stuff*.

The problem is: *their reach is limited*. Without informed, passionate public will to transition to a life-sustaining society, we won't. Muddling along won't get us there. So our great challenge, for those of us who care, is to *engage the unengaged* – people who do not seek out information about environmental trends and their consequences. This can start within our own, personal networks.

The intention behind the Great Transition Initiative is to coalesce a global communication initiative that will transform society. I would not dream of considering a project of such scope if it weren't – clearly – the overarching need of our time.

We are not starting from scratch. As [Paul Hawken](#) and others have pointed out, a great wave of positive change is already occurring. It involves millions of groups. If it fulfills its promise, historians of the future may describe our time as the Great Transition to a life-sustaining society.

My paper [Accelerating the Great Transition – Engaging mainstream commitment to a life-sustaining society](#) outlines a communication strategy whereby a multitude of groups and their members can align around communicating to inspire mainstream commitment to transition to a life-sustaining society. We can communicate about transformative change while still carrying on our own particular projects. And we can align without requiring contentious strategy meetings (what a relief!).

The top-level strategy is very simple. It is to use the meme 'transitioning to a life-sustaining society' wherever possible, so that people see it often, coming from many sources. This is Marketing 101, of course: get your brand (or meme) seen everywhere.

[Inspiring Transition](#) is an open source platform to support people in communicating about transitioning to a life-sustaining society. It has ready-to-use tools make communicating as easy as possible. Inspiring Transition has a variety of tactics including workshops, presentations, simple emails, inexpensive guerrilla marketing, and [Kitchen Table Conversations](#). And there is a section on the [Inspiring Transition website](#) about how academic institutions can contribute to accelerating the Great Transition.

Generally academics are not accustomed to being activists, and the prospect can seem uncomfortable. However, if you are an academic I urge you to consider being an activist along the lines I am describing here: *communicating to affect people's mindsets*.

In addition to communicating with their personal networks, an important potential role for academics is reaching out to engage leaders of organizations. Engaging as many

organizations and their members as possible as citizen-educators/Great Transition Champions is the way to take the idea of transitioning to a life-sustaining society to scale.

Conducting conversations to engage leaders is not necessarily easy – the first time. There can be internal resistance (*I don't want to proselytise; this could feel uncomfortable; I would rather just continue doing my own thing*). Well, we have all learned to do uncomfortable things in the past, and our times require that we rise to greatness. If you are an academic, you likely already have the communication skills to do this. Together we can get better at it with experience.

Everything you need to get started as a Great Transition Champion is available at www.inspiringtransition.net. We have provided ready-to-use tools to make communicating as easy as possible without stifling your initiative or research. A good place to start is with the [Briefing Points](#). And I would be happy to talk with you about what roles you might wish to play.

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Accelerating the Great Transition to a life-sustaining society!

P.S. Like Paul Ehrlich, I am under no illusion that we can completely avoid the coming disasters. But the more we can do to blunt the savage destruction of the Earth, the better prospect we leave for coming generations. And if we let our uncomfortableness get in the way, then of course we are complicit.

The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/engaging-unengaged/>