

## A MAHB Dialogue With Author, Humanist Duane Elgin



**Geoffrey Holland - You have said that by 2020, we will be immersed in a perfect storm of existential threats....Never before has the entire planet been at risk of collapse.’ What makes it that bad?**

Duane Elgin - I don't see our situation as "bad" as much as I see it as one of unyielding difficulty that must be addressed at a global scale. In my view, hitting an evolutionary wall is not a mistake. Reaching limits to material growth is a recurring and predictable progression for all species that seek to exploit their ecological niche. Humanity's "niche" or operating domain is now the entire Earth—and we are exploiting it to the extreme. Overshoot and collapse are a common story in evolution. We humans are not a special species, immune from the lessons experienced by the rest of life. Although human societies have confronted major hurdles throughout history, the challenges of our times are unique in one crucial respect: they are planetary in scope—global warming and climate destabilization, the depletion of fresh water, the rapid and massive extinction of animal and plant species, overfishing the world's oceans, growing disparities between the rich and the poor, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, waves of climate refugees that are destabilizing entire nations, an unsustainable and growing world population, and much more. The circle has closed and there is no escape. Like it or not, the Earth has become a single, tightly interconnected system that is measurably breaking down and moving toward collapse. The overall manner in which we humans live on the Earth must shift rapidly if we are to create a viable species-civilization: the energy we use, the levels and patterns of consumption we choose, the work we do and skills we develop, the homes and

communities in which we live, the food we eat, the transportation we use, the education we acquire, and much more.

**GH - You call this era we are immersed in ‘the great transition’. Transition to what?**

DE - We are making a transition from the adolescent exploitation of the Earth to one of mature care and regard for our home. More fundamentally, the “great transition” I see is moving from a paradigm of deep separation in a non-living universe without meaning or purpose to a paradigm of communion within a living universe with deep meaning and purpose. This transition has an important precedent: The Gaian understanding that the Earth is a single, living system was initially ridiculed and rejected but, increasingly, is seen as a valid description of the Earth as an integrated, self-regulating system. Now evidence is emerging from the sciences that the universe is a unique kind of living system and, although dismissed as fantasy by scientific materialists, is increasingly validated by findings from science. My book, *The Living Universe*, assembles this evidence including, for example, the understanding that universe is a unified system that is 95% invisible, contains an immensity of background energy, appears to have a centering subjectivity at every scale (consciousness), seems able to reproduce itself through the budding off from black holes, and much more. The shift of perspective from a dead to a living universe represents a profound paradigm shift with enormous consequences for our lives. If we think we live in a dead universe, without aliveness at the foundations, then it makes sense to exploit that which is dead for what we think is most alive—ourselves. However, if we regard the universe as a living system, then it makes sense to bring conscious regard and care to that which is alive—all that exists. The “great” transition is from deadness to aliveness transforms our understanding of ourselves, the rest of life, and our evolutionary journey.

**GH - So, for this great transition to go well, we need to be able to visualize something like a global eco-civilization. How do you envision this?**

DE - To visualize a global eco-civilization, we need to look wide, deep, and long:

- **Look Wide:** Look beyond single issues/factors such as climate change. Include a wide range of forces and consider them as a whole system. Integrate across a number of areas—from CO2 levels rising, population growing, resources depleting, and species dying to include humanity maturing, communications growing, reconciliation advancing, community restructuring, and much more.
- **Look Deep:** Look beneath the outer trends of material challenges and include the deeper realities psychological, cultural and spiritual changes underlying those trends. In addition to the powerful dynamics of climate change, species extinction and more, an eco-civilization includes regard for the ecology of life, the evolution of consciousness, the ethics of how we relate to ourselves, and much more.

- **Look Long:** Look far into the future—much further than the next few years. Trends that are uncertain and ambiguous in the short run of, say the next five years, become much clearer when extended out to the longer run of the next fifty years. Therefore, an eco-civilization looks ahead a half-century or more where trends become much more distinct and well-defined and our actions can adapt accordingly.

When we look wide, deep, and long, we can see more clearly the nature of an ecologically conscious species-civilization. For an in-depth description, see my book, *“Awakening Earth”* which is available for free download on the front page of my website: [www.DuaneElgin.com](http://www.DuaneElgin.com)

**GH - What role can the arts play in inspiring us with ‘beacons of hope’?**

DE - Humanity is being called beyond sheer survival to a flourishing future on a journey of “evolutionary artistry.” The paradigm shift from a dead to a living universe brings with it a dramatic change in our understanding of who we are and where we are going. We are moving from a mechanical system that is dead at its foundations and without any deeper purpose to an organically alive system that is inviting us to grow into greater aliveness, awareness and community. Evoking the wonder and mystery of the invitation to participate in a greater aliveness is a challenge for the arts as well as sciences. Portraying a more mature species-civilization with much higher levels of freedom and creativity is an artistic enterprise as much as a material one.

**GH - You have developed what you call, ‘an ecology of narratives’ that are taken from the collective wisdom of humanity. What are the four key qualities found in these stories?**

DE - We cannot build a future together that we have not imagined together. Without stories or narratives of a promising future we are lost and will wander aimlessly into the future. Our stories are our future. To be most effective, narratives need to be: 1) **simple**—able to be told in just a few words (for example, “humanity is growing up,” “the global brain is waking up,” “we are learning to live in a living universe,” “this is a time of planetary birth,” and so on); 2) **universal**—understood immediately by nearly everyone on the planet; 3) **emotionally powerful**—able to draw out of feelings of care for the future and encourage us to realize these potentials in our individual lives, and 4) **evocative of our higher human potentials**—able to guide us on a larger journey and describe how we are “going somewhere” as a species. The most foundational challenge facing humanity is not devising solutions to the energy crisis or climate crisis; rather, it is bringing visions and narratives of the human journey into our collective awareness that empower us to look beyond a future of great adversity and to see a future of great opportunity.

**GH - You say we need an ‘Earth Voice’, an unfiltered voice that can reach the vast majority of the world’s people at the same time. Why do we need that, and what would it look like?**

DE - The next great superpower will not be a nation or even a collection of nations; rather, it will be the billions of ordinary citizens who encircle the Earth and who are able to call for unprecedented cooperation and creative action to bring practical vision and policies to our endangered planet. This new superpower is emerging from the combined voice and conscience of the world’s citizens mobilized through the global communications revolution. When the people of the Earth are more than passive recipients of information (as *witnesses* to climate disruption, intense poverty, genocide, and more), but also are able to offer our collective *voice* for change, then a new and powerful force for creative transformation will be unleashed in the world. A genuine “Earth Voice” movement must be able to reach the vast majority of the people of the Earth virtually all at the same time. Seven billion or more people need to be able to offer their feedback about critical concerns if they are to feel part of an *Earth Voice* conversation. This level of functioning of our “global nervous system” would have been completely unthinkable prior to the emergence of the internet that now includes 60 percent of the world’s population—and is growing rapidly. In the decade of the 2020s, the world will have the technologies with which to acquire real-time feedback and knowledge of humanity’s sentiments and views — and humanity will move into a new era of collective transparency, self-reflection and self-discovery. This could develop into crowd-sourced global conversations with democratic flash mobs of hundreds of millions — or even billions — of people joining in the dialogues. In this way, the collective intelligence of our global nervous system could take on a life of its own in a process that transcends artificial boundaries of communities and nations. We are vastly over endowed with all the communication tools we need. All that is required is to step up—from the local to global scale—and make use of these powerful tools of communication and social transformation.

**GH - The sub-title of your book, *Voluntary Simplicity is ‘Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich’*. Can you explain what that means?**

DE - Simplicity does not mean turning away from progress; to the contrary, it is at the heart a maturing civilization. Arnold Toynbee was a renowned world historian who invested a lifetime in studying the rise and fall of civilizations. Based on his voluminous studies, he summarized the essence of a civilization’s growth in what he called “The Law of Progressive Simplification.” He wrote that a civilization’s progress was not to be measured in its conquest of land and people; instead, the true measure of growth lies in a civilization’s ability to transfer increasing amounts of energy and attention from the material side of life to the non-material side—areas such as education, psychological maturity, spiritual depth, cultural and artistic expression, and the strength of democracy and society. Toynbee also coined the word “etherialization” to describe the process whereby humans learn to accomplish the same, or even greater, results using less time, material resources, and energy. Buckminster Fuller called this process

“ephemeralization,” although his emphasis was on realizing greater material performance for less time, weight, and energy invested. Drawing from the insights of Toynbee and Fuller, we can redefine progress *as a two-fold process involving the simultaneous refinement of both the material and non-material side of life*. With progressive simplification or ephemeralization, the material side of life grows lighter, less burdensome, more easeful and effortless and, at the same time, the non-material side of life becomes more vital, expressive, informed, knowledgeable, and artistic. In short, simplicity involves the co-evolution of both inner and outer aspects of life. Simplicity does not negate the material side of life but rather calls forth a new partnership where the material and the non-material aspects of life co-evolve in concert with one another. Outer areas include the basics such as housing, transportation, food production, and energy generation. Inner areas include learning the skills of touching the world ever more lightly and lovingly—from our inner life to our relationships, work, community life, and more. By refining both outer and inner aspects of life—outward simplicity and inner richness—we can foster genuine progress and build a sustainable *and* meaningful world for billions of people without devastating the ecology of the Earth.

**GH - How important is it to embrace gender equality and see ourselves as part of a human family as we try to bridge the existential threats we find ourselves immersed in?**

DE - Our future depends on gender equality. Integrating a relational, feminine perspective is vital for our reconciliation as a species and developing our pathway ahead. Also critical is reconciliation across other great divides:

- **Racial and ethnic reconciliation**—Discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation profoundly divides humanity. Our future depends on developing mutual respect for these differences and healing the deep wounds of humanity’s history.
- **Generational reconciliation**—Sustainable development requires meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. At present, we are consuming resources at a rate that will profoundly handicap future generations yet unborn.
- **Economic reconciliation**—Disparities between the rich and the poor are truly enormous and growing. It is imperative that wealthier individuals and nations voluntarily simplify the material side of life and shift increasing energy and attention into the cultural, and spiritual side of life.
- **Religious reconciliation**—Religious intolerance has produced some of the bloodiest wars in history. With the democratization of the world’s wisdom traditions, we can

discover the core insights of each and see they offer a different facet of the larger jewel of human spiritual wisdom.

- **Species reconciliation**—Our future depends on the integrity of our ecological system; whose strength depends on a broad diversity of plants and animals. It is vital that we reconcile ourselves with and preserve the integrity of the larger community of life on Earth.

**GH - Is it possible to achieve a ‘Great Transition’ when governance and public policy are shaped and controlled by bankers, billionaires, and multinational corporations?**

DE - No, it is not. Throughout history, vast differences in wealth and power have been a consistent precursor to civilizational collapse. If these differences persist, we will be so divided that breakdown and collapse will be inevitable. The distraction and delay produced by elites seeking to perpetuate their advantage will assure that we will run out of time. The half-measures offered by the elites will prove to be “too little and too late”—the lament of nearly all the world’s earlier civilizations that have gone extinct.

**GH - If it is time for humanity to wake up, recognize our collective responsibility and behave like caring planetary citizens, how do we begin to do this? Are there any role models we may look after?**

DE - Two, critical requirements for moving into a more promising pathway ahead are to mobilize our collective vision and voice. Vision without a voice to communicate that to others is a recipe for alienation and disempowerment. Voice without a vision is a recipe for confusion and chaos. Bringing vision and voice together is a recipe for empowered action in our time of great transition. We have an abundance of role models for both “vision and voice” in today’s world but they are not yet highly visible in our mass media. Countless groups such as MAHB are freshly envisioning the future. Other groups such as the Extinction Rebellion are demanding that citizens of the Earth have a voice in our common future. In the pivotal decade of the 2020s, I expect vision and voice to come together and bring a powerful, new force to constructive evolution.

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\* In the spirit of full disclosure, I do not fit the traditional definition of a “humanist.” as one who rejects a capacity for extrasensory perception. The reason is I had an unusual opportunity to explore this capacity in a scientific setting in the early 1970s with a series of scientific experiments over a period nearly three years, from 1972 to 1975, at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International), in Menlo Park, California. Although my primary work at the time was as a senior social scientist in the futures group at SRI, for nearly 3 years, I was also a consultant to NASA in the SRI engineering laboratory, tasked with exploring a wide range of experiments regarding intuitive capacities. Experiments included the “remote viewing” of

diverse locations and technologies; extrasensory connection with a random number generator, and more. I dropped out of these fascinating experiments in 1975 when they were taken over by the CIA and declared secret (research apparently continued for another 20 years according to Freedom of Information Act disclosures). Based on these scientific experiments, I concluded that *everyone* has an intuitive faculty and literal connection with our unified universe. An empathic connection with the cosmos is not restricted to a gifted few, it is an ordinary part of the functioning of the universe and is accessible to all. We have barely begun to develop a literacy of consciousness utilizing sophisticated technologies to provide feedback (similar to learning with bio-feedback but with extended, bio-cosmic feedback). A description of some of these experiments can be found at: Russell Targ, Phyllis Cole, and Harold Puthoff, *Development of Techniques to Enhance Man/Machine Communication*, Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, California, prepared for NASA, contract 953653 Under NAS7-100, June, 1974. Also see: Harold Puthoff and Russell Targ, "A Perceptual Channel for Information Transfer Over Kilometer Distances," published in the *Proceedings of the I.E.E.E. (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers)*, vol. 64, no. 3, March, 1976.

Duane Elgin has invested his life encouraging a life-affirming relationship between humanity and the natural world. He is the author of *Voluntary Simplicity*, *Awakening Earth*, *Promise Ahead*, and *The Living Universe*. His website is [www.duaneelgin.com](http://www.duaneelgin.com)