

COMING BACK TO LIFE -
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MESSAGE FROM THE DALAI LAMA

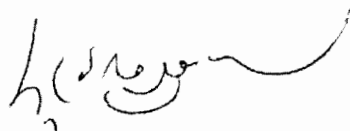
Although it is increasingly evident how interdependent we are in virtually every aspect of our lives, this seems to make little difference to the way we think about ourselves in relation to our fellow beings and our environment. We live at a time when human actions have developed a creative and destructive power that has become global in scope. And yet we fail to cultivate a corresponding sense of responsibility. Most of us are concerned only about people and property that are directly related to us. We naturally try to protect our family and friends from danger. Similarly, most people will struggle to defend their homes and land against destruction, whether the threat comes from enemies or natural disasters such as fire or flooding.

We take the existence of clean air and water, the continued growth of crops and availability of raw materials, for granted. We know that these resources are finite, but because we only think of our own demands, we behave as if they are not. Our limited and self-centered attitudes fulfill neither the needs of the time, nor the potential of which we are capable.

Today, while many individuals grapple with misery and alienation, we are faced with global problems such as poverty, overpopulation, and the destruction of the environment. These are problems that we have to address together. No single community or nation can expect to solve them on its own. This indicates how small and interdependent our world has become. In ancient times, each village was more or less self-sufficient and independent. There was neither the need nor the expectation of cooperation with others outside the village. You survived by doing everything yourself. The situation now has completely changed. It is no longer appropriate to think only in terms of even my nation or my country, let alone my village. If we are to overcome the problems we face, we need

what I have called a sense of universal responsibility rooted in love and kindness for our human brothers and sisters.

In our present state of affairs, the very survival of humankind depends on people developing concern for the whole of humanity, not just their own community or nation. The reality of our situation impels us to act and think more clearly. Narrow-mindedness and self-centered thinking may have served us well in the past, but today will only lead to disaster. We can overcome such attitudes through a combination of education and training. This book by Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown contains a wealth of advice drawn from their own experience for putting such training into effect, both on a personal and on a public level. It gives me great pleasure to express my admiration for such work and to encourage readers not only to give their approval, but to act upon it for the benefit of all sentient beings and this earth that is our only home.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Tenzin Gyatso', written in a fluid, cursive style.

HIS HOLINESS TENZIN GYATSO
THE FOURTEENTH DALAI LAMA OF TIBET

September 7, 1998

Chapter 1

TO CHOOSE LIFE

I call heaven and earth to record this day to your account, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both you and your seed shall live. —Deut. 30.19

WE LIVE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY MOMENT ON EARTH. We possess more technical prowess and knowledge than our ancestors could have dreamt of. Our telescopes let us see through time to the beginnings of the universe; our microscopes pry open the codes at the core of organic life; our satellites reveal global weather patterns and hidden behaviors of remote nations. Who, even a century ago, could have imagined such abundance of information and power?

At the same time we witness destruction of life in dimensions that confronted no previous generation in recorded history. Certainly our ancestors knew wars, plagues, and famine; entire civilizations, such as Phoenicia and Imperial Rome, foundered when they cut down their trees for warships and turned their lands to desert. But today it is not just a forest here and some farmlands and fisheries there; today entire species are dying—and whole cultures, and ecosystems on a global scale, even to the oxygen-producing plankton of our seas.

Scientists may try to tell us what is at stake when we burn rainforests and fossil fuels, dump toxic wastes in air, soil, sea, and use chemicals that devour our planet's protective ozone shield. But their warnings are hard to heed. For ours is an Industrial Growth Society.* Its economy depends on ever-increasing consumption of resources. To maintain its engines of

* We are indebted to Norwegian ecophilosopher Sigmund Kvaloy for his formulation of this term.

progress, Earth is both supply-house and sewer. The planet's body is not only dug up and turned into goods to sell, it is also a "sink" for the poisonous by-products of our industries.* If we sense that the tempo is accelerating, we are right—for the logic of the Industrial Growth Society is exponential, demanding not only "growth," but rising rates of growth. Like Alice on the chessboard of the mad queen, we must run ever faster to stay in the same place. What is in store for our children's children? What will be left for those who come after? Too busy running to think about that, we try to close our minds to nightmare scenarios of want and wars in a wasted, contaminated world.

We've come so far. We have survived so many trials and evolved through so many adventures in our planetary journey, and there is so much promise still to unfold—yet we can lose it all. As the intricate web of living systems unravels, we can bring it all down with us. Jahweh's words through Moses now bear a literal truth: "I have set before you life and death, therefore choose life."

THE CHOICE FOR A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

We can choose life. Dire predictions notwithstanding, we can still act to ensure a livable world. It is crucial that we know this: *we can meet our needs without destroying our life-support system.* We have the technical knowledge and the means of communication to do that. We have the savvy and the resources to grow sufficient food, ensure clean air and water, and generate the energy we require through solar power, wind, and biomass. If we have the will, we have the means to control human population, to dismantle weapons and deflect wars, and give everyone a voice in democratic self-governance.**

To choose life means to build a life-sustaining society. "A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations," according to Lester Brown of Worldwatch Institute. In contrast to the Industrial Growth Society, a Life-sustaining Society operates within the "carrying capacity" of its life-support system, regional and planetary, both in the resources it consumes and the wastes it produces.

To choose life in this planet-time is a mighty adventure. As people in all countries and walks of life are discovering, this adventure elicits more courage and enlivening solidarity than any military campaign. From high school students restoring streams for salmon spawning, to inner city neighbors creating community gardens on vacant lots, from forest activists

* Just as a continually growing cancer eventually destroys its life support systems by destroying its host, a continuously expanding global economy is slowly destroying its host — the Earth's ecosystem." Lester Brown, *State of the World*, 1998.

** World Game Institute, 1997. As of 1997, \$19 billion was spent worldwide on weapons every week. United Nations Human Development Report, 1997. \$90 million would grant access to clean water, social

sitting in trees to delay logging until environmental impact studies are done, to windmill engineers bringing their technology to energy-hungry regions—countless groups are organizing, learning, taking action.

This multifaceted human activity on behalf of life may not make today's headlines or newscasts, but to our progeny it will matter more than anything else we do. For if there is to be a livable world for those who come after us, it will be because we have managed to make the transition from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-sustaining Society. When people of the future look back at this historical moment, they will see, perhaps more clearly than we can now, how revolutionary it is. They may well call it the time of the Great Turning.

They will see it as epochal. While the agricultural revolution took centuries, and the industrial revolution took generations, this ecological revolution has to happen within a matter of a few years. It also has to be more comprehensive—involving not only the political economy, but the habits and values that foster it.

THE GREAT TURNING

Let us borrow the perspective of future generations and, in that larger context of time, look at how this Great Turning is gaining momentum today, through the choices of countless individuals and groups. We can see that it is happening simultaneously in three areas or dimensions that are mutually reinforcing. These are: 1) actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings; 2) analysis of structural causes and creation of structural alternatives; and 3) a fundamental shift in worldview and values. Many of us are engaged in all three, each of which is necessary to the creation of a sustainable civilization.

I. "Holding actions" in defense of life on Earth

These activities may be the most visible dimension of the Great Turning. They include all the political, legislative, and legal work required to slow down the destruction, as well as direct actions—blockades, boycotts, civil disobedience, and other forms of refusal. Covering a wide variety of endeavors, such holding actions include:

- Documenting the ecological and health effects of the Industrial Growth Society, including those of fossil fuels, nuclear power and weapons production, heavy metal mining, clearcutting, incinerators and toxic landfills, pesticides, food additives, and factory farms.
- Campaigning for laws to mitigate the effects of pollution, poverty, and loss of habitat—such as the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water

(and Air and Food) Acts and the raising of the minimum wage in the U.S., and internationally, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the abolition of nuclear weapons, and the protocol on limiting greenhouse gases.

- Promoting appropriate regulations to implement environmental and social legislation, and their just enforcement through citizen monitoring of government and business, participation in public hearings, and litigation.
- Lobbying against international trade agreements which endanger ecosystems and undermine social and economic justice, such as GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), and MAI (the Multilateral Agreement on Investment).
- Blowing the whistle on illegal and unethical corporate practices.
- Boycotting corporations that endanger living systems through pollution and weapons production, or exploit their workers with low pay and harmful working conditions.
- Blockading and conducting vigils at places of ecological destruction, such as old-growth forests under threat of clearcutting, construction sites of malls and motorways, nuclear dumping grounds, weapons labs and testing sites.
- Protesting against the global arms trade at ports, military depots, and arms bazaars, especially in the U.S. (which exports more weapons than all other countries combined).
- Providing shelter and food to the poor and homeless.

This first dimension of the Great Turning is wearing. It is heroic work, and when we're in the spotlight, it can bring respect and even adulation from the many who see what's at stake. We can also get stressed out of our minds by nonstop crises, the constant search for funding, battles lost, and increasing violence against activists. When we assume point position, we take a lot of punishment, and when we step back to take a breather, we often feel guilty. But in truth we are not abandoning the cause; we are choosing to continue the work of the Great Turning in another form—the way the head goose, when she's tired, repositions herself to fly in the windstream of the others, and another flyer takes her place.

Work of this kind buys time. It serves to save some lives, and some ecosystems, species, and cultures, as well as some of the **gene pool**, for the sustainable society to come. It is, however, **insufficient to bring that society about.**

II. Analysis of structural causes and creation of alternative institutions

The second dimension of the Great Turning is equally crucial. To free ourselves and our planet from the damage being inflicted by the Industrial Growth Society, we must understand its dynamics. What are the tacit agreements that create obscene wealth for a few, while progressively impoverishing the rest of humanity? What interlocking causes indenture us to an insatiable economy that uses our larger body, Earth, as supply house and sewer? It is not a pretty picture. It takes courage and confidence in our own common sense to look at it with realism; the rewards are great when we do. As citizens are discovering in an upsurge of teach-ins and conferences on the subject, we can demystify the workings of the global economy. When we see how this system operates, we are less tempted to demonize the politicians and corporate CEOs who are in bondage to it. And, for all the apparent might of the Industrial Growth Society, we can also see its fragility—how dependent it is on our participation, and how doomed it is to devour itself.

In this second dimension of the Great Turning, we are not only studying the structural causes of the global crisis; we are also creating structural alternatives. These two efforts go hand in hand. They use the same mental muscles, the same kind of knowledge, the same itch for practicality. In countless localities, like green shoots pushing up through the rubble, new social and economic arrangements are sprouting. They may be hard to see at first, because they are seldom featured in the media, but if you keep your eyes open and fiddle with the focal length, they come into view—like a faint green haze over things, intensifying here and there in pockets of grass, cress, clover. Not waiting for our national or state politicians to catch up with us, we are banding together, taking action in our own communities. The actions that burgeon from our hands and minds may *look* marginal, but they hold the seeds for the future.

Here are just a few examples of the many diverse initiatives underway:

- Face to face teach-ins and study groups on the nature of the Industrial Growth Society, to expose the workings of the global economy—such as those offered by the International Forum on Globalization (active in North America and Europe) and the Boston-based United for a Fair Economy.
- Educational services on the ecological and human costs of a consumer society, such as those provided by the Worldwatch Institute (Washington, D.C.), the Positive Futures Network (Seattle), the

Northwest Earth Institute (Portland, Oregon), the Natural Step (Sweden), the Schweisfurth Institute (Germany), and think-tanks like the Club of Rome and the Balaton groups launched by Donella Meadows and company, as well as countless groundbreaking university courses on the economics of sustainability.

- Creation of new, more accurate measures of wealth and prosperity, to replace the monetary indices of growth and development (such as the Gross Domestic Product) which have been driving the Industrial Growth Society and ignoring its effects on living systems.
- Community-based services for conflict resolution and mediation, to replace litigation.
- Strategies and programs for nonviolent, citizen-based defense, to replace reliance on military preparedness and retaliation.
- Reduction of reliance on fossil and nuclear fuels and conversion to renewable, cost-effective energy based on wind, solar, photovoltaic, biomass and tidal technologies, such as is occurring in California, Minnesota, Denmark, and Germany.
- The spread of land trusts and conservancies, as nonindividualized forms of land ownership with built-in allegiance to Earth's needs and abundance.
- Collaborative living arrangements such as co-housing and ecovillages which, in a broad variety of legal forms, allow singles, families, and generations to care for each other and the land, while respecting their distinctive needs.
- Local initiatives creating community gardens; consumer and marketing cooperatives; tool-sharing and skills banks; Community-Supported Agriculture; restoration projects reclaiming streams, watersheds, wetlands, and arable land.
- Community and municipal composting and recycling programs.
- Holistic health and wellness methods supplementing medical models of diagnosis and treatment, and enlisting the self-healing capacities of body and mind.
- Local currencies, like the Ithaca Dollar in New York, based on the exchange of goods and services, so that the resources of citizens are cycled within their own communities (instead of being drained away by franchise outlets and multinational corporations).
- Countless new ventures in education, replacing the lockstep model of

schooling created to serve industrialism, opening to children their natural world and the intellectual capital of their community, and encouraging adults to engage in lifelong learning.

- Electronic communication systems enabling activists worldwide to rapidly share information, evolve strategies, and coordinate actions outside of bureaucracies and corporate-controlled mass media.

III. Shift in perceptions of reality, both cognitively and spiritually

These nascent institutions cannot take root and survive without deeply ingrained values to sustain them. They must mirror what we want and how we relate to Earth and each other. They require, in other words, a profound shift in our perception of reality—and that shift is happening now, both as cognitive revolution and spiritual awakening. It is the third, most basic dimension of the Great Turning.

The insights and experiences that enable us to make this shift are like the hub of the wheel: they enable its turning. Profoundly generative, they are present now. In our consciousness and in our lives, they come in many forms. They arise as grief for our world, giving the lie to old paradigm notions of the essential separateness of the isolated, competitive ego. Or they may arise from our glad response to breakthroughs in scientific thought, to the new lens on reality provided by quantum theory, astrophysics, and general living systems theory—as we see, with a sigh of relief, that the reductionism and materialism which shaped the worldview of the Industrial Growth Society are about as useful as the abacus in understanding the nature of the universe. Or we may find ourselves moved by the wisdom traditions of native peoples and mystical voices in our own religions, hearkening to their teachings as to some half-forgotten song that reminds us again that our world is a sacred whole in which we have a sacred mission.

Now, in our time, these three rivers—anguish for our world, scientific breakthroughs, and ancestral teachings—flow together. From the confluence of these rivers we drink. We awaken to what we once knew: we are alive in a living Earth, source of all we are and can achieve. Despite our conditioning by the industrial society of the last two centuries, we want to name, once again, this world as holy.

These insights and experiences are absolutely necessary to free us from the grip of the Industrial Growth Society. They offer us nobler goals and deeper pleasures. They help us redefine our wealth and our worth. The reorganization of our perceptions liberates us from illusions about what we need to own and what our place is in the order of things.

Taking us beyond the tired old notions of competitive individualism, they bring us home to each other and our mutual belonging in the living body of Earth. The ingredients and forms of this awakening are many, including:

- General living systems theory, revealing the self-organizing nature of reality and the presence of mind in nature.
- Gaia theory, showing our planet to be a living system and our larger body.
- Deep ecology and the deep, long-range ecology movement, retrieving us from anthropocentrism and calling us home to community with all beings.
- Creation Spirituality and Liberation Theology, which break through the dichotomies erected by hierarchical religious thought, and invoke the sanctity of all life.
- Engaged Buddhism and similar currents in Hindu, Hasidic, Sufi, Taoist, and other traditions, coming forth now with teachings of respect for Earth and the “interbeing” of all life-forms, as grounds for both spiritual practice and social action.
- The resurgence of shamanic traditions and their enlivening means for knowing our identity with Earth and other species.
- Ecofeminism, blending political critique with the women’s spirituality movement, reanchoring us in the natural world, and refiguring reality and the self in radically relational terms.
- Ecopsychology, lifting the aims and means of psychotherapy into larger concerns of social pathology, and helping us to question our acquiescence to the destruction of our world.
- The simple living, or voluntary simplicity, movement which liberates people from patterns of consumption that do not reflect their needs, enabling them to find more frugal and satisfying ways of connecting with their world.
- Music and art expressing our interconnectedness, and incorporating sounds and images from nature.

Though we hardly have words for it, this cognitive, spiritual, and perceptual revolution is occurring at a **stunning rate of speed**. These lines from the late California poet **Robinson Jeffers**³ capture the flavor of this awakening:

*...I entered the life of the brown forest,
And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of stone, I felt the
changes in the veins
In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries, we have our own
time, not yours; and, I was the stream
Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking; and I was the stars
Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of his own summit;
and I was the darkness
Outside the stars, I included them, they were a part of me. I was mankind
also, a moving lichen
On the cheek of the round stone...
...how can I express the excellence I have found,
that has no color but clearness;
No honey but ecstasy ...*

This shift in our sense of identity will be life-saving in the sociopolitical and ecological traumas that lie before us. All honest forecasts are for rough weather ahead. Because the Industrial Growth Society depends on accelerating consumption of resources, it is unsustainable. It cannot last, for the simple reason that it is inexorably and exponentially destroying itself. In system terms, it is on “runaway.” As its distant markets and supplies dry up, and its interlocked financial institutions collapse, the shock waves wash over us all, tumbling us into fear of chaos.

The realizations we make in the third dimension of the Great Turning save us from succumbing to either panic or paralysis. They help us resist the temptation to stick our heads in the sand. They also help us withstand the temptation to turn on each other, finding scapegoats on whom to vent our fear and rage. But when we know and revere the wholeness of life, we can stay alert and steady. We know there is no private salvation. We join hands to find the ways the world self-heals—and see the chaos as seedbed for the future.

Though we can discern the Great Turning and take courage from its manifold activity, we have no assurance that it will happen in time. We cannot tell which will happen first: the point of no return, when we cannot stop the unraveling of the systems supporting complex life-forms, or the moment when the elements of a sustainable society cohere and catch hold.

If the Great Turning should fail, it will not be for lack of technology or relevant data so much as for lack of political will. When we’re distracted and fearful, and the odds are running against us, it is easy to let the heart and mind go numb. The dangers now facing us are so pervasive

and yet often so hard to see—and painful to see, when we manage to look at them—that this numbing touches us all. No one is unaffected by it. No one is immune to doubt, denial, or disbelief about the severity of our situation—and about our power to change it. Yet of all the dangers we face, from climatic change to nuclear wars, none is so great as the deadening of our response.

That numbing of mind and heart is already upon us—in the diversions we create for ourselves as individuals and nations, in the fights we pick, the aims we pursue, the stuff we buy. So let us look at it. Let's see what this deadening is and how it happens. For the work this book describes helps us wake up from that sleep and come back to life. Then, reconnected with our deepest desire, we will be able to take part in the Great Turning. We will choose life.