Ecology: Breaking Free from Economic Mind to Eco-Mind

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Humanity in the industrialised world of the 21st century is held fast by the dominant and destructive paradigm of the economic mind. We can expect no possibility for sustainability if we don't break free from it. But what to replace it with? Frances Moore Lappé suggests the eco-mind. What is that?

Richard Louv1 has given us the "nature principle"—seeing ourselves and nature as inseparable. That's similar to Lappé's eco-mind. She says that humanity's only path to a prosperous future for all is to break free from our current "mental map." That's what Canadian environmentalist, David Suzuki, calls the destructive mindframe "locked inside our skulls." We shall hear more from Suzuki later. Let's begin with Lappé.

You may know of Frances Moore Lappé from her 1971 bestseller, *Diet for a Small Planet* with its transformational message about how to think about food. Her new book2, *EcoMind: Changing the Way We Think to Create the World We Want,* published forty years later in 2011, offers us hope that we can break free from the "thought traps" that keep us locked in the destructive ways of the economic paradigm. We must look at our lives through "an ecological lens" and take "thought leaps" that can unleash our hidden power as we embrace an eco-mind.

Developing an Eco-Mind

Lappé is writing mainly for a US audience. She begins with the conviction, backed up by evidence, that Americans do care about the environment and that it is deteriorating in front of their eyes. They "yearn to be part of the solution." But things don't seem to change for the better. Why? Because "too many of us feel powerless," says Lappé. This paralysing mindframe comes in part from the sense that the problem is too big for the individual to even think about, let alone influence. But it also comes from something deeper in the American psyche—"the premise of lack, the notion that there just isn't enough—of anything."

Lappé argues that this sense of lack comes from an upbringing filled with the message from modern economics, now become the equivalent of a dominant world religion, which defines itself as the science of allocating scarce resources. People grow up feeling they are in a struggle against scarcity—and not just scarcity of the things needed to live well, but also scarcity of "goodness." People define themselves as a caricature: "We are selfish, materialistic, and competitive. . . The worldview we absorb every day is driven by a *fear of being without. . .* Within this Western, mechanical worldview that we absorb unconsciously, we are each separate from one another, and reality consists of quantities of distinct, limited and fixed things." Lappé calls it "the three S's: separateness, scarcity, and stasis. That's our world."

For Lappé that's the reason why so many Americans say that "government is the problem." They are encouraged to see themselves in "endless competitive struggle," so they turn against the "essential tool that we have in common to meet our common needs." Americans accept policies that hurt them, like "massive cutbacks in services and the refusal to tackle the environmental crisis," says Lappé, because they are locked into limiting "thought traps," which are preventing them from finding a different sense of meaning in their lives. "We must see a new path in order to leave the old." Lappé's book and the movement she is encouraging through it are imbued with the hope—indeed, the conviction—that human beings are capable of "gigantic shifts of perception. . . By probing the thought traps that disempower us, we will realise the most stunning implication of an ecological way of seeing: endless possibility."

Thought Traps and Thought Leaps

Lappé describes seven thought traps and seven thought leaps to get out of the traps. Change the mental map. Embrace the eco-mind.

Trap number one is an improper framing of our major problem as growth versus no-growth. What we need to recognise, says Lappé, is that what we've been calling "growth" leads to waste—and that's our problem: wasting energy, water, food, just about everything—it's a nightmare of excess. We are deathly afraid of scarcity, but everywhere we turn we see nothing but waste. That's our problem. If we call it for what it is, then we can see—and here's the "thought leap"—that the way out is to focus on limiting waste and addressing the positive question: What does it mean to flourish? As we answer that question, we must then look for ways to measure what we are seeking in a successful society. The Genuine Progress Indicator is one such existing measure. Growth is good, but it has to be the right kind of growth. Not wasteful excess, but qualitative growth in relationships, education, health, social harmony, etc.

Thought trap number two is related to number one. Lappé says we are confusing symptom with cause. We say consumerism, too much stuff, is our problem, but in reality it's just a symptom of forces in the economy that deny us choice. The thought leap is to imagine and create the things that will give us true enjoyment—"rich, stimulating, and beautiful lives honouring the laws of nature".

Focusing on limits, **thought trap number three,** is not helpful, says Lappé, because it falls flat in the minds of people who feel that they were never invited to the "Too Good" party in the first place. Again, the way out of this trap is to focus on "what brings health, ease, joy, creativity—more life," which means aligning the way our societies operate with the laws of nature.

This leads us to the next trap, **number four:** believing that we have to overcome human nature to save the planet. Sure, we know that people can be selfish and fixated on material gain, but "we've also evolved deep capacities for cooperation, empathy, fairness, efficacy, meaning and creativity." So let's focus on those qualities and change the norms and rules of our societies to bring out the best in us.

But people don't like rules. This is **thought trap number five.** It's not that people don't like rules; it's just that they don't like rules forced on them that they had no participation in shaping. Knowing this, says Lappé, "we can go beyond rules that limit harm and establish rules that avoid harm to begin

with." If people are engaged in this kind of decision-making, our societies will flourish within the laws of nature.

But isn't that the problem?—**thought trap number six:** We have lost our sense of connection to nature. Not true, says Lappé. People are engaged in a multitude of activities all around the world that show their appreciation for nature. What we have to do is acknowledge this and focus on nourishing it, rather than throw up our hands in despair at the abuses that some human activities impose on nature.

But it's too late—**thought trap number seven.** "Too late for what?" asks Lappé. "It's never too late for life." What people need is a sense that they have a real voice. Most of us want to contribute to solutions that turn our planet towards life. So "the mother of all issues" is removing the power of concentrated wealth from public decision-making and infusing citizens' voices instead.

Thinking like an Ecosystem

Essentially, what Lappé is asking us to do is to break free from limiting thoughts about how big and difficult the problems are, and how small and insignificant each one of us is—to break out of that mindset and focus on questions of what we need to do to make life rich and enjoyable.

She is encouraged that our understanding of life's rich complexity and human nature itself is expanding exponentially as the concept of ecology gains traction in our culture: "It is a new way of understanding life that frees us from the failing mechanical worldview's assumptions of separation and scarcity."

Thinking like an ecosystem means understanding that everything is connected and each organism comes to life with the potential to flourish through its vibrant connection to everything else. So our question to ourselves and each other is, "What conditions enhance life?. . . What specific conditions bring out the best in our species?" The answer, from the perspective of an eco-mind, is that we create the essential context for our thriving by ensuring the well-being of all other species, and seeing that the "key dimensions of our wider ecology remain conducive to life."

Thinking in this way leads us to see the contradictions and absurdities that go on in industrial society. She takes the American food industry as an example. Beginning with the rule that all corporate activity must bring the highest return to the shareholders and executives, the industry degrades its products, stripping them of nutrition, selling them as junk food through convenience stores, and maintaining the process through effective lobbying on government to get huge tax subsidies for corn so that ubiquitous high-fructose corn syrup shows up everywhere, contributing to the obesity epidemic in the American population.

Lappé's main point in citing this example is to say that the issue for Americans is thinking about how they can "reclaim democratic decision-making to shape smarter rules, rules that align the food corporation's and the farmer's incentives with our well-being."

But people to a large degree are afraid to act, so Lappé says that "among all the human traits we need to cultivate, we must place first what I now call 'civil courage'. . . Humans are plenty *good enough*, but we do need to work on one thing: more backbone." This means cultivating passion so that it trumps fear, and aligning our sense of power with the experience of co-creating with nature.

If we reframe our thinking, boost our passion for life, strengthen our backbones to act with courage, and, above all, see ourselves as part of nature, not separate from it, Lappé is confident that we can rise to the great challenges facing us. We will know "that we've evolved precisely the capacities we need now, along with our greater clarity on the conditions essential to set them free."

In conclusion, she urges her readers to put their eco-minds into action by banding together, forming their own "eco-mind thought-to-action" discussion groups. In doing so, she assures them that they will by no means be alone, for there are already thousands of great organisations in place ready to help—and she concludes her book with an impressive list of organisations, books, magazines, and websites that people can turn to for help and encouragement.

The Most Important Conversation of Our Time

Frances Moore Lappé's hope for the future is essentially grounded in people power—a belief that Americans can reclaim their democracy and break the control of concentrated wealth over public decision making. History tells us if they are going to do that, they need to be prepared for a very tough fight, and a lot of sacrifice along the way. Replacing economic mind with eco-mind is not going to come easily.

No one knows that better than Canadian environmentalist, David Suzuki. Now 75 years old, he has spent half a century on the front lines of the environmental movement as a scientist, author and broadcaster. He still despairs that his message is not being heard.

Suzuki is the author of more than fifty books. His latest3, written with Ian Hannington, communication specialist at the David Suzuki Foundation in Vancouver, recaps many of the issues Suzuki has spent a lifetime elaborating. This time he frames the message as a conversation, which is still not properly engaged. It is the same topic that Frances Moore Lappé agonises over: how to cultivate the eco-mind so that things really do begin to change. The title of Suzuki's book is *Everything under the Sun: Toward a Brighter Future on a Small Blue Planet (2012).*

In the Preface Suzuki repeats a warning he has given countless times before: "With pollution and climate change, species extinction, and destruction of ocean and land ecosystems, we are nearing catastrophe . . . We have been blessed with a beautiful planet that has everything we need to survive and be healthy. It is up to all of us to care for it and to keep it liveable for ourselves and all the living things that share it with us."

How to do that, says Suzuki, is the subject matter of "the most important conversation of our time." Yet, where do we hear that conversation engaged? Certainly not on the front pages of our newspapers (unless there is a new catastrophe to report), or in prime time on television, or as the main topic in political debate. It won't come up either as a popular topic of conversation in our coffee shops, unless someone boldly introduces it, at risk of upsetting the chatter about things less formidable. No, we are still a very long way in our culture from talking about the issues that will have the greatest impact on our grandchildren. But David Suzuki is still there, pushing the envelope.

The perspective that he is urging us to adopt he calls "biocentrism." It is Lappé's eco-mind with a different label. "In this view," says Suzuki, "life's diversity encompasses everything, and we humans are a part of it, ultimately deriving everything we need from it. Viewed in this way, our well-being, indeed our survival, depends on the health and well-being of the natural world . . . The most pernicious aspect of our anthropocentrism, has been the elevation of economics to the highest priority." Of course, there's nothing wrong with focusing on economics—as long as the discussion is about how to run the human economy so that the natural world continues to flourish. That's what it would mean to have a "biocentric" perspective.

But that is not the perspective of the dominant economic paradigm. Suzuki describes it as a "global economy that exploits the entire planet as a source of raw materials and a dumping ground for toxic emissions and waste . . . We have become a new kind of biological force that is altering the physical, chemical, and biological properties of the planet on a geological scale. Indeed, Nobel Prize-winning chemist, Paul Crutzen, has suggested that the current geologic period should be called the Anthropocene epoch to reflect our new status as a global force—and a lot of scientists agree."

So how do we come to grips with the overarching existential crisis that we ourselves have created? Suzuki's answer is clear: "Understand that we are biological creatures with an absolute need for clean air, clean water, clean food and soil, clean energy and biodiversity . . . The truth is that the only factor or species

we can manage is us. We have no choice but to address the challenge of bringing our cities, energy needs, agriculture, fishing fleets, mines and so on into balance with the factors that support all life. This crisis can become an opportunity, if we seize it and get on with finding solutions.

A Grumpy Old Man Ponders the Past

Suzuki wonders if he has just become a grumpy old man, but, if so, he makes no apologies. "Is the world a better place than when he was born in 1936?" he asks. He answers his own question. "Reflecting on what we leave to our grandchildren, I have to answer with a resounding no! . . Yes, we leave to our children and grandchildren a world of technological marvels and personal hyperconsumption, but at the expense of community, species diversity, and clean air, water, and soil."

Suzuki laments the negative changes that have occurred to the natural world in his lifetime, but still argues at the end of his book that "together we can create a brighter future for our children and grandchildren. We know where the problems lie, and science offers many solutions. Now it's time for action. If I've learned one lesson in my seventy-five years, it's that everyone, including those in government and business, must pitch in if we want to change things for the better." His hope is that his latest book will help stimulate the conversation that now needs to be fully engaged.

The Problem of Denial

Both Frances Moore Lappé and David Suzuki are right when they argue that humanity has to shift perspective to biocentrism and the eco-mind. Nature demands that we do so or suffer severe consequences. So why don't we see more action on the biocentric objective? There is no simple answer, but another well-respected scholar and outspoken critic of the industrial paradigm points to a large part of the problem. Dr. Bill Rees from the University of British Columbia is the originator of the concept of the ecological footprint as a way for an individual or community to measure their impact on the environment. In a recent article4 entitled "Big Picture: The Jeckyll and Hyde of 'Resilience'" (2011), he points to the problem of denial caused by the psychological difficulty of cognitive dissonance.

"Evidence of our plight abounds," he says, "but we live in deep denial—indeed, it seems that denial is a universal human trait." Rees cites research that suggests that social conditioning creates brain patterns that reflect and imbed the experiences people have had over their lives. "When faced with information that does not agree with [preformed] internal structures they deny, discredit, reinterpret, or forget that information." This may have been a good thing when people were born and died in societies that did not change much. They needed to follow what had always worked. The problem now, however, is that "today both our socio-cultural and biophysical environments are changing rapidly because of human interventions. . . We need to change our ways dramatically yet we are stuck with our Cro-Magnon brains and inherently conservative group behaviours." Even worse, "we're training a whole new generation to think exactly the same way as the present generation. We can't afford that." No doubt in terms of the last comment Rees is speaking from the perspective of what he sees going on in universities.

Scripting a New Cultural Narrative

So interventions have to be made with conscious, deliberate determination, realising that what we have to overcome are preformed internal structures in our brains. In Rees's words, "We must learn to override our innate expansionist tendencies and abandon our perpetual growth myth. Instead of forcing the environment to conform to our demands, we must learn to adapt our expectations to ecological reality. A good start would be a new global cultural narrative that shifts the values of society from competitive individualism, greed and narrow self-interest toward community, cooperation, and our collective interest in repairing the earth for survival."

This is a call for a new story about who we are and why we are here—a story so powerful and compelling that it will fire up our determination to succeed in the face of the greatest challenge to existence in the history of human settlement on the planet. It is the new story that Thomas Berry called for in *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), forged from a "deeper understanding of the spiritual dynamics of the universe." Berry correctly saw that much of humanity is now caught in a vacuum between the certainty of an old story about human purpose that is now falling away, and the dim glimmerings of a new story yet to crystallise into a compelling narrative to guide us in the years ahead.

The old story was born in ancient religious creation myths, then transformed into belief in limitless human progress through the philosophy of the Enlightenment period in the 18th century. The trauma of two World Wars in the 20th century followed by a Cold War underlain by the possibility of nuclear devastation has shaken human confidence. In response we have fired up a juggernaut of material consumption and technological innovation to assure ourselves that we can enjoy limitless expansion of material benefits. Now the new science of ecology is calling all of that into question, and demanding that we see ourselves as participants in a different kind of story, where the highest good is to live in harmony with the natural world.

We comprehend only dimly that the new story for humanity is to see ourselves as the conscious expression of the physical universe. We are the way the universe becomes conscious of itself. What we are discovering is a creation story much grander than anything the old myths could encompass. Science is revealing the vastness and complexity of the physical universe at such an astonishing rate that our cultural capacity to interpret it through literature, poetry, song, drama and every form of cultural expression is failing to keep pace. We are struggling to see, as Thomas Berry so clearly understood, that it is the human presence on this one small planet that is activating the process for the universe to experience self-awareness. Consciousness elsewhere in the universe might be accomplishing a similar task, but we have as yet no evidence of that, which makes the experience on Earth all the more precious.

Without human consciousness the universe would be a grand, but unknown physical phenomenon. The fact that it is known, that its truths are being revealed daily in astonishing detail by human consciousness, is the most marvelous story of all. We are still struggling to tell that story. But if we can do so, and proclaim it broadly above the din and despair of other things that distract us, then we can indeed envision a great future for our grandchildren whose own fertile imaginations will enliven it more in ways that we can barely anticipate.

How we shape and tell the bold new story is our underlying deep purpose. We are on a participatory adventure on which we know that together we can achieve more than any of us can achieve alone.

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References:

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