

Archetypes of Humanity's Collective Future

by Duane Elgin



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Archetypes as Evolutionary Tools

The first step in building a promising future for humanity is to visualize it together. As the bible says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Although many people can visualize a future of catastrophe and ruin, far fewer can imagine a future of opportunity and renewal. This is understandable as daily we are fed news reports of global climate disruption, running out of cheap oil, species extinction, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and more. Not surprisingly, a future of conflict and suffering is easy to imagine while a future of harmony and health is still a vague and unformed possibility in our collective imagination.

We face big challenges and it will take an equally big vision to transform conflict into cooperation and draw us into a promising future. To engage in the unprecedented task of envisioning a workable and meaningful future for humanity, we require tools of imagination that enable us to stand back from current crises and see the human journey in a larger perspective. I believe the most difficult challenge facing humanity is not devising solutions to the energy crisis or climate crisis

or species extinction; rather, it is bringing images and archetypes 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.

In a self-fulfilling prophecy, we actualize who we think we are. The images and archetypes that we hold of ourselves act as a magnet to draw us into the future. Here are four empowering archetypes that provide us with the tools for collectively imagining a positive pathway into the future.

Archetype I | A Maturing Species

One way of regarding ourselves is as a maturing species that is growing up and going through the growth pains of our collective adolescence. Our self-image could therefore be that of a young species that is capable and gifted with untapped potential. We could see ourselves as immersed in the predictable struggles and turmoil of our adolescent years and ready to move into our

they did, how they would answer. To my surprise, nearly everyone has immediately understood the question and their responses show that, around the world, there exists an overwhelming level of agreement about humanity's life-stage—we are in our teenage years. To illustrate, in 1999 I was in New Delhi, India, speaking in an auditorium filled with several hundred young schoolteachers who were just graduating from college. When I posed this question, there was no hesitation or confusion. The overwhelming majority voted confidently that humanity is in its adolescent years. I received a similar response from business leaders in Brazil, spiritual leaders and futurists in Japan, and audiences of all kinds in Canada, Europe, and the United States. All have immediately responded in the same way: approximately three-quarters vote that, as a social average, the human family is in its adolescent stage of development. Although many people were quick to point out that this is an average and therefore some people and cultures are well advanced beyond

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early adulthood where we are concerned with the well-being of the Earth and the long-term future of the human family. To explore this possibility, as I have traveled in different parts of the world giving talks about humanity's future, I have often begun with a simple question for the audience: “When you look at the overall behavior of the human family, what life-stage do you think we are in? If you estimate the social average of human behavior around the world, what stage of development best describes the human family: toddler, teenager, adult, or elder?”

When I first began asking this question, I had no idea if people would understand it and, if

this stage, there was clear agreement that, putting us all together, the human family is exhibiting many adolescent behaviors.

When people are asked to describe the kinds of behaviors that demonstrate we are in our adolescent stage of development, here are the kinds of replies that come back. Teenagers are *rebellious* and want to prove their independence. Humanity has been rebelling against nature trying to prove that we are independent from it. Teenagers are *reckless* and tend to live without regard for the consequences of their behavior, often thinking they are immortal. The human family has been recklessly consuming natural resources as if they would last

forever. Teenagers are concerned with *appearance* and with fitting in. Similarly, many humans seem focused on expressing their identity and status through material possessions. Teenagers are drawn toward instant *gratification*. As a species, we are seeking our own pleasures and largely ignoring the needs of other species and future generations.

Importantly, many people also pointed out beneficial aspects of the adolescent stage of development. Adolescents have a huge amount of energy and enthusiasm and, with their courage and daring, are ready to dive into life and make a difference in the world. Many teenagers have a 'hidden sense of greatness' and feel that, if given a chance, they can demonstrate their ability to accomplish wonderful things. Overall, the archetype of a maturing species explains a lot about our current behaviors and contains within it the promise of a hopeful future.

Seeing ourselves as a maturing species that is now moving through our adolescence often brings a collective sigh of relief. Instead of condemning humanity for our destructive behaviors there is new understanding and compassion for our journey of awakening and a sense that we could grow up together and create a more workable world. As we grow in maturity and move into our early adulthood as a species, we will recognize that we are an integral part of the natural world, consider the impact of our actions generations into the future, place meaningful work over pleasure seeking, measure ourselves by our soulful character, and patiently work to restore the Earth.

Archetype II | A Heroic Species

A second archetype that can assist humanity in envisioning a positive future is to see ourselves on a heroic journey of collective awakening and development. With this archetype, instead of seeing humanity as evolutionary villains, we can regard ourselves as evolutionary heroes who are now facing a supreme test of our capacities. We can see ourselves as a pioneering species that is blazing an evolutionary trail, moving through an unprecedented rite of passage, and confronting the supreme challenge of building a new relationship with the Earth, with one another, and with the living universe that is our home.

The archetype of the 'hero's journey' is found throughout the world and through history, so this tool for mobilizing our collective imagination is widely understood. The renowned scholar Joseph Campbell popularized this archetype and summarized the hero's journey as follows: An adventurer hears a call and separates himself or herself from the everyday world, setting out on a path of discovery. Along the way, he or she experiences many tests and trials, each rich with learning. Finally, he or she confronts a seemingly insurmountable challenge that cannot be overcome with the capacities of the ego. Our hero confronts a supreme test and, if met successfully, awakens to a new and more soulful relationship with the Earth, the rest of life, and with the universe. With this initiation, the hero or heroine then makes a journey of return, bringing these gifts of insight back to the larger community.

We can expand the hero's journey of separation, initiation, and return from the scale of an individual out to the scope of the entire Earth and human community. When we regard ourselves in this way, it seems evident that for tens of thousands of years, humanity has been on a path of separation—pulling back from nature and growing our sense of differentiation and empowerment as a species. Now our powers have become so great that they threaten the integrity of life on this planet and confront us with an unprecedented test of our species' character. If we move through this time of initiation successfully, we can make our journey of return back into a harmonious relationship with the Earth and the universe that is our original home. The soul of the species is being challenged to come forth and shine into the world so that we might become an authentic human family, in feeling and experience as well as in name. The archetype of the hero's journey is very helpful because it recognizes our time of immense challenge as vital for our collective awakening.

Archetype III | A Witnessing Species

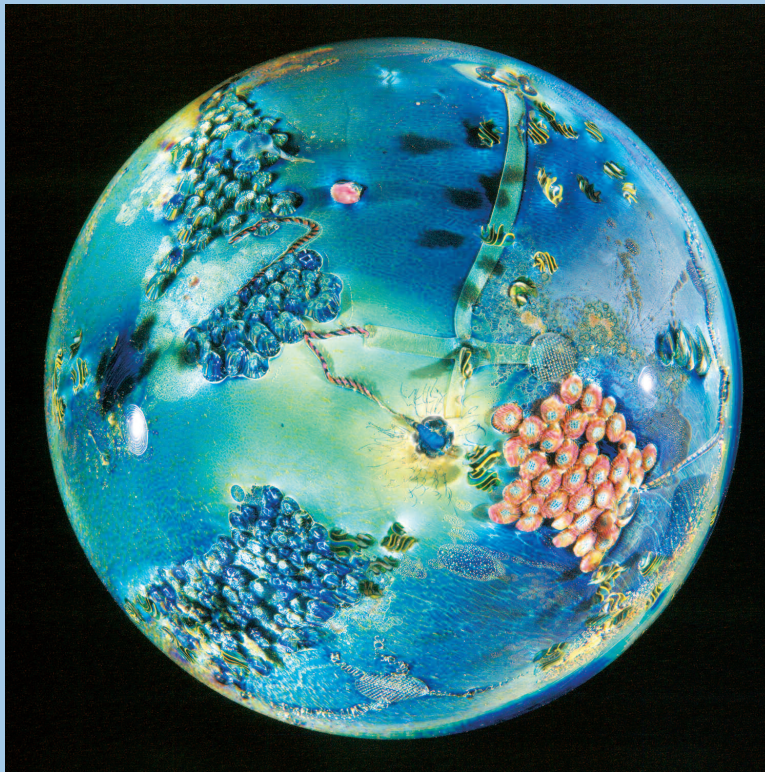
A third archetype that provides a powerful tool for envisioning a constructive journey portrays humanity as a witnessing or observing species. This archetype follows from our scientific name, which is *Homo sapiens sapiens*. To be 'sapiens' is to be knowing, so

our name means that we are the species that is doubly knowing. In other words, where animals 'know,' we humans have a unique capacity for 'knowing that we know.' We are endowed with the capacity to bring conscious reflection into choosing our pathway into both the personal and collective future.

A unifying insight in all of the world's spiritual traditions as well as in psychotherapy is that the first step in awakening and healing is to simply see 'what is.' In other words, we begin by becoming an objective witness or impartial observer of our lives and telling ourselves the truth about our situation. Honest reflection and nonjudgmental witnessing are fundamental to both individual and collective awakening. In paying attention to our lives in the mirror of consciousness, we gradually make friends with our soulful nature and come to greater self-possession. The capacity for honest self-reflection provides a way to cut through the surface chatter of our lives and to discover the deeper voice of our soul. We can begin to take soulful responsibility for our lives and relationships as we progressively unfold our capacity for living more consciously.

At a global level, the world is becoming transparent to itself and seeing itself as a whole system for the very first time. No longer operating largely on automatic, the entire human family is increasingly conscious of the simple fact that we can be conscious of ourselves—seeing ourselves daily in the mirror of mass media, the Internet, and other tools of the global nervous system—and this changes everything. People in both agrarian and industrial societies are being rapidly enveloped in the communications revolution with its capacity for a witnessing or observing consciousness. Whether we live in cities or villages or on farms, all humans are becoming 'witnessing earthlings.'

Injustice and inequities that previously flourished in the darkness of inattention and ignorance are being brought into the healing light of public awareness. When everyone knows that the 'whole world is watching'—when economic, ethnic, ideological, and religious violence is brought before the court of world public opinion through the Internet



glass planet by Joshua Simpson

and the mass media—it will bring a powerful corrective influence into human relations. The archetype of a witnessing species that is waking up is an empowering metaphor for envisioning a more workable and meaningful future.

Archetype IV | A Cosmic Species

A fourth archetype that provides a powerful tool for envisioning a promising future is seeing ourselves as a 'cosmic species' that is learning to live in a living universe. The world's wisdom traditions describe the universe as being continuously regenerated as a unified whole and, because we are inseparable from the flow of the ever arising universe, it means we are beings of both biological and cosmic dimension. As we discover that we are intimately connected with a living, regenerative universe, we grow a larger sense of identity and this transforms how we relate to the world. In seeing ourselves as part of the seamless fabric of creation, we awaken to a sense of connection with and compassion for the totality of life. We no longer see ourselves as isolated beings whose identity stops at the edge of our skin; instead, we regard ourselves as interconnected beings who are immersed in a vast ocean of aliveness. In seeing that we live

within a living universe, we tend to treat everything that exists as uniquely alive and worthy of respect. Every action is felt to have ethical consequences as it reverberates throughout the interwoven field of the living universe. We can tune in to this living field and sense, as a kinesthetic hum, whether our actions are in harmony with the well-being of the world. As we see ourselves as the offspring of a living universe, we awaken to a new sense of identity, ethics, and potential for the future.

Using Archetypes to Create a New Story for Humanity

We can use these four archetypes to tell ourselves a new story about the human journey. We are a *maturing species* that is entering a rite of passage that can take us from our adolescence to our adulthood. We are a *heroic species* that has been progressively separating ourselves from nature and becoming ever more differentiated and empowered and now we are beginning a journey of return to the living universe that is our original home. We are a *witnessing species* that has been moving through history half awake, not fully utilizing our unique capacity for being conscious, and now—aided by the global communications revolution—we are

becoming more fully awake and choosing our pathway ahead more consciously. We are a *cosmic species* that is on a journey to reclaim our participation in a living universe. In seeing ourselves as a species of both biological and cosmic dimension, we are taken beyond the bounds of the Earth and into the spaciousness of a vastly larger journey.

These four archetypes invite us to ask, are we: Adolescents or adults? Heroes or villains? Sleeping or awakening? Biological or bio-cosmic? As we get clearer about who we are and where we are going, actions can then come quickly and easily where, before, they were paralyzed by confusion and conflict. There may be no more important task for humanity than to grow archetypes in our collective imagination that can act as beacons for drawing us into a promising future.

Duane Elgin is the author of *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity's Future*, *Awakening Earth: Exploring the Evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness* and *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. He is a former Senior Scientist at the Stanford Research Institute and Senior Staff Member for the Presidential Commission on the American Future.

Participatory Partnerships for Sustainable Development

by Caroline Hartnell



Peggy Dulany, founder and chair of Synergos Institute

Peggy Dulany founded the Synergos Institute in 1987. Synergos is a widely acclaimed global non-profit organization that facilitates cooperation among communities, civil society organizations, governments and corporations in collective problem-solving and sustainable development.

What were your motives in founding the Synergos Institute?

There were two reasons. One was that I had been working with the New York City Partnership. It addressed education, youth employment, housing and public safety issues, working together with government, labor, non-profits and business. It occurred to me that partnership could be a useful strategy for addressing problems in the South too, particularly those related to poverty. The partnerships I knew about generally didn't include those who were affected by the problems being addressed. So the idea was to start something that would promote inclusive, participatory partnerships. We found that the southern hemisphere was not prepared for partnerships and so for a number of years we worked to strengthen their capacity to engage in partnership rather than in building partnerships directly.

Which of your goals do you feel you have achieved?

What I would really like to achieve is an end to poverty. Obviously that hasn't happened. But in my view, several things must happen in order to reduce poverty. One is for all the stakeholders to be involved. In many countries now, there is more of an acceptance of the notion of working in partnership, and to some degree more of an acceptance of an inclusive, participatory approach. I think there is also much more data available about how partnerships work. So in a way the ground-work has been done. But there's a long way to go in terms of significantly reducing poverty.

What are you most proud of?

I am most proud of having played a role in shifting the paradigm so that partnerships and participation are almost the norm for approaching problems. I'm so proud of the partners that we've worked with over the years. They're extraordinary people. They've created amazing organizations and achieved remarkable results, in which we've had some role. I would definitely give them the lion's share of the credit, however.

Have things changed in the years since the climate for partnerships wasn't the norm?

Yes! To give a very graphic example, in Brazil we were trying to promote a partnership approach to dealing with children living in poverty without access to basic children's rights. We were able to get a major private bank to host a reception for activists working in this field. They hosted it in a nightclub in a fashionable part of town, which activists didn't frequent. I remember with horror that there was a group of society ladies invited by the private bank, all in their finery, on one side of the room, and the activists, who were wearing their normal clothes, or maybe

slightly fancier than their normal clothes, clustered on the other side. No one crossed the room other than the woman who was starting the Brazilian initiative and myself. It symbolized the lack of communication and the lack of ability to reach out across divides that existed in Brazil in those years. Now it is completely different.

What are you most disappointed by?

The time it all takes. It has always taken a very long time to figure out what the next step should be. That's because these are incredibly complex issues and unfortunately, I think social change happens slowly.

What will change at Synergos in the next 20 years?

One of the things that I think will happen is that we will bring more business and entrepreneurial approaches both into partnership formation and into ways of solving problems. I think that, by and large, civil society has not sufficiently availed itself of the cutting edge organizational strategies for change that the private sector has been using for some time.

I also think that civil society tends to look at money as something distasteful rather than as a means to an end. The climate is now right for social entrepreneurs as well as business entrepreneurs to do the difficult work it takes to learn to speak the language of the other. I'm hopeful that there will be better and more respectful civil society-business alliances that will lead to more sustainable change.

At the same time, I think business, and governments for that matter, still have a lot to learn about the knowledge, wisdom and resourcefulness of communities that are poor or marginalized. Everyone has something to contribute in addressing the most critical issues we face. Everyone stands to gain if we can identify more effective ways to connect