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21st CENTURY COLLECTIVE SPIRITUALITY
NEW PARADIGM FOR DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

from our readers

Building the Cloud: Hearing Gaia

by Steven Vedro

The coupling of electricity with our nervous system over a century and a half ago started the process of what the prescient media sage Marshall McLuhan called ‘the outerling of our nervous system.’ From the one-to-one communications technologies of the telegraph and telephone, to the one-to-many forms of broadcast radio and television, and the all-to-all global grids of the Internet and social media, we continue to grow more connected, more accessible and more stimulated. Today, we are moving from interconnected networks to entire environments of distributed intelligence. With that change comes many potential negative outcomes, but I believe that despite the dangers of being seduced into Matrix-like pseudo-environments controlled by commercial interests, our emerging cloud consciousness—driven by these enabling technologies—also gives us an opportunity to reconnect with Gaia herself.

In recent years, we’ve seen the image of the Internet morph from a two-dimensional ‘grid’ to three-dimensional pervasive ‘cloud.’ Distributed processing technology allows for data storage, software and computing technology to reside out on the network in large interconnected data centers far removed from the local user. Using these networks and remote data centers, extremely large-scale computing projects can now be shared across millions of independent loosely-coupled smaller processors worldwide, each ‘donating’ its spare computing cycles to the functioning of the whole. Cloud-based shared computing networks are already tackling the modeling of new cancer-fighting drugs, the mapping of the universe, and the tracking of the smallest quantum interactions.

The cloud is now the ‘place’ where we store more and more of our cumulative human intelligence. In addition to shared processing cycles and web applications, eventually every book written, every recording, every webpage, every film and television program—the entire works of humankind—will find its way to the cloud, while we rely on ever more powerful search engines, ‘data mining’ algorithms and crowd-sourcing to make sense of this overflowing abundance: the meshes, mixes and remixes of our evolving culture.

The explosive expansion of the information cloud has given more and more objects and places a digital voice: many office machines call in service technicians before their owners are aware of any problems, tiny sensors monitor soil and water conditions, alerting farmers when to irrigate and harvest. Similar devices in bridges are now sending wind, wave and traffic data to the highway department, while soon vending machines will adjust their prices depending on supply and the current weather and traffic conditions, texting when they need restocking. Cellphone-guided neighborhood tours and local living histories are being developed

in many communities: one New York artist has recruited his neighbors to record stories about the love life in their building, while another has poets tell the stories of individual trees in a Bronx park.

But beyond ‘talking trees’ is the emergence of real-time connectivity to the earth’s life web itself. The Internet has allowed us to vicariously participate in the naturalist’s work of monitoring and tracking wild animals: from nesting baby bald eagles on city skyscraper ledges, to grey wolves in Yellowstone, to deep-diving seals, to tiny insects in the canopy of the rain forest. Earth-based monitoring—from interactive underwater observatories, to atmospheric carbon and ozone monitoring stations on the tops of mountains and deep in the forest; from stress sensors embedded deep in the earth, to the emergence of the ‘smart electrical grid’—is creating a proto-nervous system for the planet, making it possible to ‘listen’ to Gaia herself.

We must learn to synthesize and integrate the messages from these extended neurons without becoming overwhelmed or overly thick-skinned. The technology of ‘ambient devices’ provides one such tool. These devices track myriads of complex data inputs, synthesize their impact and display them in easy-to-understand interfaces such as a cellphone app or a ‘cyber-pet’ whose tail changes color as electrical consumption increases and whose purr is replaced with a sad grumble as more carbon-based power is added to the mix.

As we learn to monitor our physical environment through such digital intermediaries, we will be challenged to pick inputs that represent our highest selves. What if we insisted that we use this planetary ambient awareness to electronically track and share the encroachment of the deserts, the thinning of the ozone layer, the decline of the ocean’s diversity? Not just the condition of our investment portfolio, but the number of malnourished children in the world? Not just status updates from ‘friends’ we hardly know, but reports from our ‘adopted’ whales, sea turtles, giant redwoods or tiny mushrooms living in the Amazon?

I believe that as we become more comfortable with our real-time connection to the planet’s multiple voices, we will begin to see ourselves less as individual beings competing for resources, power or status, and more as one node in a joyously, noisily communicating system. And with that system awareness comes the chance to see in the cloud beginnings of a paradigm shift in human consciousness: the modeling of a world where we connect not only with every other being, but through awareness of that interconnection, with the larger network itself—what the mystics have understood as ‘unity consciousness,’ the simultaneous experience of individual identity and cosmic oneness.

Steven Vedro, author of “Digital Dharma: A User’s Guide to Expanding Consciousness in the Age of the Infosphere,” uses the technologies of the Infosphere as metaphors on the path of evolving ‘teleconsciousness.’ www.srvedro.com