

Gaia-Wise : the Science, the Craft and the Art of Living the Gaia Way

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'Through 'transformative change', nature can still be conserved, restored and used sustainably – this is also key to meeting most other global goals. By transformative change, we mean a fundamental, system-wide re-organization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.'

Bob Watson IPBES

...this is not just about 'doing something about climate change'
or 'doing something about plastics in the oceans'
this is about completely changing our working relationship
with the rest of the natural world
and doing it now...

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Gaia-Wise is a Global Co-operation Initiative
which will address the major problems facing humanity
and its relationship with the natural world
by applying the insights of Earth System Science
and the wisdom of the immersive practice of living the Gaia way

*'There can be no prescription, no set of rules, for living within Gaia.
For each of our different actions there are only consequences'
James Lovelock : 'Gaia' p140*

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The historian Yuval Noah Harari explains that humans 'rule the world' because they are the only species that can co-operate flexibly and in large numbers, which, coupled with their use of language and imagination, gives them the ability to create 'fictional realities', like religion, politics, money, economics and nation states.

There is nothing wrong with fictional realities in themselves, they are useful ways of organising societies, but their very existence begs the question: 'Is there a 'real reality' which is beyond the fictional realities, a reality which wasn't created by the imagination of humans?'

It happens that there is just such a 'real reality' which is beyond the fictional realities created by the imagination of humans, namely the 'natural world' systems view of Gaia science, as first described by James Lovelock and then developed in collaboration with Lynn Margulis.

We can engage with the idea of Gaia intellectually, but the Gaia system itself is not a fictional reality created by humans; on the contrary, after 3,600 million years of evolution, starting with the simplest living bacterial cell, it was the Gaia system which created humans:

*'There is no evidence that human beings are the supreme stewards of life on Earth.
But there is evidence to show that we are recombined from
powerful bacterial communities with a multi-billion-year-old history.*

*We are part of an intricate network that comes from the original bacterial takeover of the Earth'
Lynn Margulis : 'Microcosmos' p36*

The existence of this 'real reality' begs two further questions: 'How does the real reality function?', and 'How do the real reality and fictional realities interact?'. James Lovelock distills these questions into a clear message for the future of humanity:

*'In Gaia we are just another species, neither the owners nor the stewards of this planet.
Our future depends much more upon a right relationship with Gaia
than with the never-ending drama of human interest'
James Lovelock : 'The Ages of Gaia' p14*

Lovelock's message clearly implies that there is a discongruity between many of the fictional realities driving the 'never ending drama of human interest' and the way that the 'natural world' system of Gaia actually functions and operates. So how might humanity address this disjunction and secure it's future by finding a 'right relationship with Gaia'?

One example of the discongruity can be seen in current attempts to address the increasingly pressing problem of climate change. A vital feature of the 'natural world' Gaia operating system is 'emergence', the continual, flexible adaptation between organisms and their environment. Global heating and it's effects on the climate are a 'real reality', emergent property of the Gaia operating system, but the heads of state and politicians who come together at meetings such as COP24 to look for a solution are representatives of fictional realities, such as nation states or the UN. For these fictional realities to maintain themselves they have rules and regulations and even dogmas, and so any attempt to come up with a solution has always to be processed through these fictional procedures, and this lack of flexibility to adapt and resistance to change takes inordinate amounts of time. It's important to note that not only are we as a species 'in Gaia', but as organisms, as holobionts, Gaia is also 'in us', so the dilemma for those negotiating is heightened because on one level there is a natural, personal, Gaian response to the urgency of the climate change challenge which then conflicts with the inflexibility of the fictional rules and dogmas of the 'never-ending drama of human interest'.

Another example of a mismatch between the two realities can be seen in the growing concern with the amount of inequality and poverty that exists at a global level. Another vital characteristic of the 'natural world' Gaia operating system is that it operates at all scales, from the microscopic to the global. Lynn Margulis gives us this example:

'An organelle inside an amoeba within the intestinal tract of a mammal in the forest on this planet lives in a world within many worlds. Each provides it's own frame of reference and it's own reality.' 'Microcosmos' p126

There is no suggestion within the Gaia system that any scale, any frame of reference, is any more or less important for the functioning of the whole system than any other. The fictional realities of economics and politics, however, are largely based on hierarchies, where some parts of the system are 'worth more' than other parts of the system and where certain activities are seen as more important for the functioning of the whole, and so inequality is actually built into the system as a principle, and in many systems even a dogma. This means that any attempt to address inequality from within the fictional reality itself may never tackle the wider question of whether the inequality should exist at all.

These two examples highlight the conceptual nature of the differences between the 'fictional realities' that humanity has invented and the real reality of the 'natural world' Gaia operating system. Humanity is facing many problems in its relationship with the natural world and within and between the fictional realities it has created. The paradigm shift which the Gaia operating system view implies challenges a deep rooted concept within the 'never ending drama of human interest', namely the idea that humans are somehow separate from, and superior to, the rest of the natural world.

Lynn Margulis points out that this is not true, and in so doing offers a much more exciting prospect for humanity's future, if it can only make the shift:

'Human beings are not particularly special, apart or alone. A biological extension of the Copernican view that we are not at the centre of the Universe deprives us of our place as the dominant form of life on the planet. It may be a blow to our collective ego, but we are not masters of life perched on the final rung of the evolutionary ladder. Ours is a permutation of the wisdom of the biosphere.'
'Microcosmos' p195

As a product of 3,600 million years of evolution, we have inherited a built-in, intuitive understanding of what makes Earth system sense and this can inform the shift of imagination needed to begin to devise 'Gaia-Wise' solutions to the current problems we are facing by designing human systems which are not disconnected from the Gaia operating system. What's more, as 'permutations of the wisdom of the biosphere', we have a vast, untapped creative potential to 'come of age' and bring about a 'human renaissance' as a truly 'Gaia-wise' species. For, as Lynn Margulis reminds us:

'Gaia, in all her symbiogenetic glory, is inherently expansive, subtle, aesthetic, ancient, and exquisitely resilient.' *'Symbiotic Planet' p160*

...and so, inherently, are we...

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The remit of the Gaia-Wise Global Co-operation Initiative includes:

- creating a network of organisations, groups and individuals at all scales who are already addressing problems through initiatives that make Earth System sense, and publicising and sharing their Gaia-Wise actions e.g. Permaculture; Transition Towns; Lets schemes
- promoting a Gaia-Wise vocabulary which explains the features, processes and dynamics of the Earth Systems view including:
 - the dynamics of emergence, spontaneity and change in evolving systems
 - the role of symbiosis, co-operation and competition in evolution
 - the equal importance of all parts of a system in the functioning of that system
 - the fundamental role of recycling at all scales within the global system
 - the deeply interwoven relationship between an organism and its environment
- examining the incongruity between the 'fictional reality' basis of current political, social, cultural and economic structures and behaviour patterns and the 'real reality' of the Earth Systems view and proposing Gaia-based ways of re-organising the structures and behaviour patterns so they make Earth System sense. Examples include:
 - taking the supply of essential services, such as electricity, out of the competitive market system and installing local community based systems
 - recycling the accumulated global wealth currently in the hands of a minority into a 'common wealth' resource to alleviate the problems caused by the creation of the wealth, such as poverty, environmental degradation and climate change
 - creating local environments where people feel they belong and which are directly connected to natural processes

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