

## Life Beyond the Bubble

We are at the beginning of a long journey. Still, there is a simple overarching metaphor that has helped us appreciate the revolution we are starting to experience.

To understand this metaphor, you must first appreciate that we are not the first highly successful society to find itself in trouble. History is full of examples of people who've succeeded so thoroughly in expanding their way of living that they found themselves in circumstances for which they were tragically unprepared.

Historian and Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond has chronicled (most recently in his book *Collapse*) how many once-dominant civilizations grew significantly and then expired, often quite suddenly. Few societies of the time, for instance, achieved such sophistication in mathematics, astronomy, and social structure as the Maya of Central America. Yet despite its accomplishments, the Mayan civilization—five hundred years before the Spaniards' arrival in their lands—all but disappeared within a generation, apparently the victim of an environmental collapse brought about by the unsustainable slash-and-burn agriculture the Maya had practiced for generations.

The larger the Mayan population grew, the more their agricultural activity deforested the areas where they lived. Deforestation, in turn, caused soil erosion, which eventually ruined the storage reservoirs that held their drinking water and destroyed their ability to grow crops. Without food and water, the Mayan city-states died and the people moved back to the jungles and forests.

Given the history of the Maya as well as the other examples Diamond shares of sophisticated societies that succeeded in destroying their own resource base, is our situation hopeless?<sup>1</sup> Hardly. In a recent article, Lester Brown, one of the elders of environmental analysis and founder of the Worldwatch Institute, recounts an example of a people who were successfully able to change.

Six centuries ago, Icelanders realized that overgrazing on their grass-covered highlands was leading to extensive loss of the inherently thin soils of the region. Rather than lose the grasslands and face economic decline, farmers joined together to determine how many sheep the highlands could sustain and then allocated quotas among themselves, thus preserving their grasslands.

Just as the Icelanders understood the consequences of overgrazing and reduced their sheep numbers to a level that could be sustained, we now understand the consequences of burning fossil fuels and the resulting CO<sub>2</sub> buildup in the atmosphere. Yet, unlike the Icelanders, who were able to restrict their livestock numbers, we have not yet been able to significantly restrict our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Our success in doing so will depend on more than awareness of the side effects of global industrialization we discussed earlier. The real threats of collapse have more to do with denial than with unawareness, and it is here that we can build upon a metaphor frequently used by historians: the bubble.

We are all familiar with financial bubbles, the metaphor invented by economic historians to make sense of a recurring puzzle: How is it that financial overexpansion and collapse occur time and again, drawing otherwise bright and clever people into ruin?

The answer is that during a period of expansion, in effect, two parallel

realities develop, one inside the bubble and one outside. Both feel equally real to those who live within them. But the more the bubble grows, the more people are drawn into its powerful reinforcing beliefs and perceptions. Eventually, those inside the bubble become so absorbed by their reality that they literally can no longer understand the point of view of those outside.

Recall the exchanges between those inside and outside the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s. Those inside the bubble were living in a "new economy" with new rules, and its success spoke for itself. What mattered was technology, hits to your website, "stickiness" (how long people stayed on your website once they arrived), and frequently a cool, anti-corporate image. Profit—that old-economy word—would come in time, the new-economy zealots argued. And many investors agreed—so much so that profitable old-economy businesses often saw their market value decline in comparison to their dot-com counterparts, despite the fact that the dot-coms had little or no profits.

But there was a larger reality outside the bubble where profits actually did matter. Eventually this larger reality asserted itself and the bubble burst, wiping out a great many paper millionaires and a few billionaires in the process.

As Diamond shows, societal bubbles can last decades or even centuries. In the meantime, the longer the bubble grows, the more people and resources get drawn into it, the more people may benefit from it, and the more its beliefs become deeply entrenched.

After generations, it becomes hard to even imagine an alternative, a way of living outside the bubble. But at some point the tensions and inconsistencies between life inside the bubble and the larger reality outside of it must be resolved. The bubble cannot continue expanding indefinitely.

We believe the Industrial Age constitutes an extended bubble of just this sort. Its expansion has continued for several centuries, so it is easy to assume that it will continue forever. But there is a world outside the bubble, what biologist E. O. Wilson calls "the real real world," and, as we are beginning to witness, signs that the Industrial Age Bubble has run its course are already out in plain sight.<sup>2</sup>

## THE "REAL" REAL WORLD

As the saying goes, "Gravity isn't just a good idea; it's the law." The Industrial Age Bubble violates several aspects of the larger "gravity" of the natural world. Those of us who have been living inside this Bubble must now recognize this in order to see our path forward.

Consider, for example, how within the Industrial Age Bubble we go about meeting the fundamental human needs for energy, food and water, and products and services that ensure our physical security and well-being.

For some 2 billion years, life has flourished on earth based on one source of energy: solar radiation, the same energy that powers a forest, a prairie, a marine ecosystem, or a caterpillar.

By contrast, 90 percent or more of our energy within the Industrial Age Bubble comes from burning fossil fuels.

Similarly, in nature, most food is local (although in some cases seeds may be carried a great distance). Our food is rarely local, traveling instead

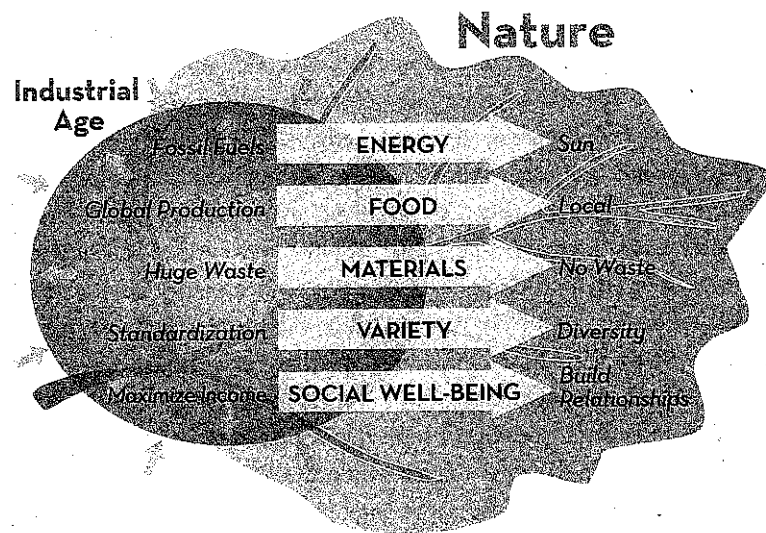


FIGURE 3.1

thousands of miles, and is often genetically modified or otherwise preserved so that it can survive the trip.

In nature there is no waste: every by-product of one natural system is a nutrient for another. Within the Industrial Age Bubble, society generates enormous amounts of waste.

The contradictions of the Industrial Age Bubble also extend to the way society is organized and sets its priorities. For example, the Industrial Age quest for efficiency and standardization has gradually unleashed relentless forces for homogenization, destroying cultural diversity just as it has destroyed biological diversity. Today, people around the world watch the same television shows, buy the same products, and, increasingly, embrace the same consumer ideals of the "good life." In stark contrast to this drive to homogenize, everywhere we see nature's love affair with diversity and uniqueness: No two trees, leaves, dragonflies, polar bears, or people are the same.

For millennia, healthy societies that have endured have fostered a sense of belonging and security, confidence that basic material needs will be met, and the opportunity for each person to grow and express his or her own unique gifts and aspirations. By contrast, within the Bubble, social well-being is often reduced to material growth, specifically GDP growth. Though we are regularly reminded of how important this is, few of us actually *feel* more secure or happier when GDP rises. Indeed, research has shown that after basic needs are met, there is little correlation between increased material comfort and people's sense of well-being.<sup>3</sup>

These contradictions between how nature, including human nature, works and how modern society works cannot continue indefinitely. The question is not if the Industrial Age Bubble will end. The question is when and how—keeping in mind Jared Diamond's point that collapse can occur much more rapidly than those inside a bubble expect.

For a long time, those who have pointed to problems with the Industrial Age have mostly been relegated to the backbench of social critiques, their arguments the stuff of academic debates, not practical policy and organizational strategy. But the urgency of climate change is altering that. The 80-20 Challenge demands immediate shifts in energy use and our modern way of living.

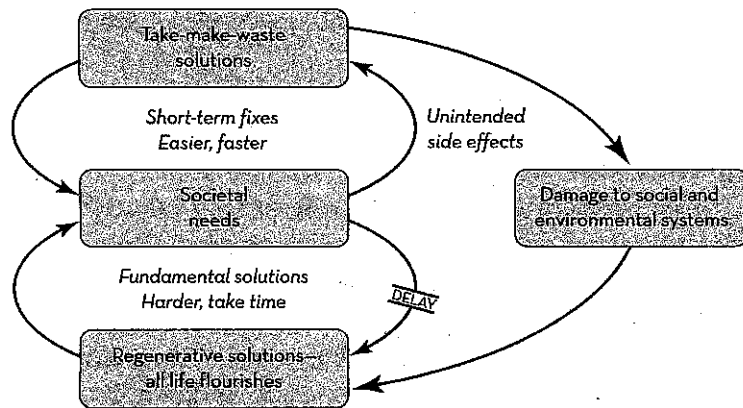


FIGURE 3.2

Which brings us to the question of how, the answer to which is relatively simple—although far from easy. Up until now, we have been shifting the burden to nature to handle the side effects of our fragmented, short-term take-make-waste solutions (see Figure 3.2).<sup>4</sup>

Either we continue on this path, perhaps making the occasional incremental adjustment (the equivalent of choosing between paper and plastic bags), or we invest seriously and immediately in building a regenerative economy and society that mimics nature as fully as possible.

### THE CHOICE BEHIND OUR CHOICES

A core principle of a regenerative society is that life creates conditions for life.

When it comes to deciding how we deal with key issues such as energy, water, and other resources, we can either adopt that principle or resign ourselves to the fact that our time here will be short. Why? Because the more we opt for the old Industrial Age model, the more we compromise the conditions that support and generate life. And the more severe our sustainability problems become, the more difficult it becomes to invest in alternatives, because the increasingly stressed ecosystems will demand immediate, reactive efforts that limit our ability to truly innovate the future.

Obviously, the Industrial Age Bubble is a metaphor, but it is a useful way of looking at the current situation and can help guide our choices going forward. The Bubble is sustained by the choices we make every day—what we buy, what we make and how we make it, how we interact with one another. Choices that reinforce the extractive “take-make-waste” economy are based on a set of assumptions, beliefs, and ways of seeing the world that we have developed over time and that have by now become deeply embedded in modern society. For example:

- Energy is infinite and cheap.
- There will always be enough room to dispose of all our waste.
- Humans can’t possibly alter the global environment. For instance, weather patterns will remain relatively stable no matter how we act.
- Humans are the primary species on earth; others are less important, and many are irrelevant.
- Basic resources such as water and topsoil are unlimited. If limits or problems are encountered, markets and new technologies will re-allocate financial resources so we can continue with our current ways of living and working.
- Productivity and standardization are keys to economic progress.
- Economic growth and rising GDP are the best way to “lift all boats” and reduce social inequities.

By contrast, life beyond the Bubble will be based on choices reflecting very different beliefs, assumptions, and guiding principles, such as:

- **Surf the flux.**<sup>5</sup> Live within our energy income by relying on forms of energy that come from renewable sources such as solar, wind, tidal, and bio-based inputs.
- **Zero to landfill.** *Everything*, from cars and iPods to office buildings and machine tools, is 100 percent recyclable, remanufacturable, or compostable.
- **We are borrowing the future from our children; we have to pay it back.** Our first responsibility is to leave a healthy global biosphere for our children, their children, their children’s children, and so on.

- **We are only one of nature's wonders.** We are just one of the species that matter, and we all depend on each other in ways we cannot even imagine.
- **Value the earth's services; they come free of charge to those who treasure them.** Healthy ecosystems are precious and must be treated as such.
- **Embrace variety; build community.** Harmony amid diversity is a feature of healthy ecosystems and societies.
- **In the global village, there is only one boat, and a hole sinks us all.** Our mutual security and well-being depend on respect and concern for all. If any of us is insecure, then we all are.

Lastly, a regenerative society is a flourishing society. The revolution is not about giving up; it's about rediscovering what we most value. It is about making quality in living central in our communities, businesses, schools, and societies. It is about reconnecting with ourselves, one another, and our fellow non-human inhabitants on earth.

Over twenty years ago, the tiny country of Bhutan embarked on a project of devising a new set of indicators for national progress. What became known as the gross national happiness, or GNH, index included forest cover, child nutrition, education levels, and health of the elderly. Interestingly, in the years since it began using the GNH index, Bhutan has consistently been rated at the top of the performance index maintained by the World Bank for all countries that receive financing from its International Development Assistance arm, an index that takes into account both governance and social and economic indicators.

Life beyond the Bubble will require suspending "either/or" thinking. Assuming that we must choose either a better standard of living or healthy ecosystems and cannot have both is a by-product of the Industrial Age. This is not to assume that a regenerative society will not involve changes that will be difficult, such as adjusting to higher energy prices, having fewer material acquisitions, or taking greater responsibility for our impact on the world. But to assume that this is automatically a step backward in terms of overall quality of living is to assume that our answers from the past are automatically the answers for the future.

## THE WAY IN IS ALSO THE WAY OUT

Just as our way of thinking got us into the situation we are in today, so, too, will our thinking—differently—help us find our way out. We can't attack the problems piecemeal. Solving isolated social and environmental problems will not get us very far; at best it will provide short-term relief. Neither will preserving the status quo while imagining naively that new technologies alone will somehow save the day.

We need to ask, "What would a way of thinking, a way of living, and ultimately an economic system look like that worked based on the principles of the larger natural world? And how do we create such a way of living in our organizations and societies, one step at a time?"