




More Beautiful World,  
Our Hearts Know  
is Possible

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# Separation

Sometimes I feel nostalgic for the cultural mythology of my youth, a world in which there was nothing wrong with soda pop, in which the Super Bowl was important, in which America was bringing democracy to the world, in which the doctor could fix you, in which science was going to make life better and better, and they just put a man on the moon.

Life made sense. If you worked hard you could get good grades, get into a good college, go to grad school or follow some other professional path, and you would be happy. With a few unfortunate exceptions, you would be successful if you obeyed the rules of our society: if you followed the latest medical advice, kept informed by reading the *New York Times*, got a good education, obeyed the law, made prudent investments, and stayed away from Bad Things like drugs. Sure there were problems, but the scientists and experts were working hard to fix them. Soon a new medical advance, a new law, a new educational technique would propel the onward improvement of life. My childhood perceptions were part of a narrative I call the Story of the People, in which humanity was destined to create a perfect world through science,

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reason, and technology: to conquer nature, transcend our animal origins, and engineer a rational society.

From my vantage point, the basic premises of this story seemed unquestionable. My education, the media, and most of all the normality of the routines around me conspired to say, "Everything is fine." Today it is increasingly obvious that this was a bubble world built atop massive human suffering and environmental degradation, but at the time one could live within that bubble without need of much self-deception. The story that surrounded us was robust. It easily kept anomalous data points on the margins.

Nonetheless, I (like many others) felt a wrongness in the world, a wrongness that seeped through the cracks of my privileged, insulated childhood. I never fully accepted what I had been offered as normal. Life, I knew, was supposed to be more joyful than this, more real, more meaningful, and the world was supposed to be more beautiful. We were not supposed to hate Mondays and live for the weekends and holidays. We were not supposed to have to raise our hands to be allowed to pee. We were not supposed to be kept indoors on a beautiful day, day after day.

And as my horizons broadened, I knew that millions were not supposed to be starving, that nuclear weapons were not supposed to be hanging over our heads, that the rainforests were not supposed to be shrinking, or the fish dying, or the condors and eagles disappearing. I could not accept the way the dominant narrative of my culture handled these things: as fragmentary problems to be solved, as unfortunate facts of life to be regretted, or as unmentionable taboo subjects to be simply ignored.

On some level, we all know better. This knowledge seldom finds clear articulation, so instead we express it indirectly through covert and overt rebellion. Addiction, self-sabotage, procrastination, laziness, rage, chronic fatigue, and depression are all ways that we withhold our full participation in the program of life we are offered. When the conscious mind cannot find a reason to say no, the unconscious says no in its own way. More and more of us cannot bear to stay in the "old normal" any longer.

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This narrative of normal is crumbling on a systemic level too. We live today at a moment of transition between worlds. The institutions that have borne us through the centuries have lost their vitality; only with increasing self-delusion can we pretend they are sustainable. Our systems of money, politics, energy, medicine, education, and more are no longer delivering the benefits they once did (or seemed to). Their Utopian promise, so inspiring a century ago, recedes further every year. Millions of us know this; more and more, we hardly bother to pretend otherwise. Yet we seem helpless to change, helpless even to stop participating in industrial civilization's rush over the cliff.

I have in my earlier work offered a reframing of this process, seeing human cultural evolution as a story of growth, followed by crisis, followed by breakdown, followed by a renaissance: the emergence of a new kind of civilization, an Age of Reunion to follow the Age of Separation. Perhaps profound change happens only through collapse. Certainly that is true for many on a personal level. You may know, intellectually, that your lifestyle isn't sustainable and you have to change your ways. "Yeah, yeah. I know I should stop smoking. Start exercising. Stop buying on credit."

But how often does anyone change without a wake-up call, or more often, a series of wake-up calls? After all, our habits are embedded in a way of being that includes all aspects of life. Hence the saying, "You cannot change one thing without changing everything."

On the collective level the same is true. As we awaken to the interconnectedness of all our systems, we see that we cannot change, for example, our energy technologies without changing the economic system that supports them. We learn as well that all of our external institutions reflect our basic perceptions of the world, our invisible ideologies and belief systems. In that sense, we can say that the ecological crisis—like all our crises—is a spiritual crisis. By that I mean it goes all the way to the bottom, encompassing all aspects of our humanity.

And what, exactly, is at the bottom? What do I mean by a "transition between worlds"? At the bottom of our civilization lies a story, a

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mythology. I call it the Story of the World or the Story of the People—a matrix of narratives, agreements, and symbolic systems that comprises the answers our culture offers to life's most basic questions:

- Who am I?
- Why do things happen?
- What is the purpose of life?
- What is human nature?
- What is sacred?
- Who are we as a people?
- Where did we come from and where are we going?

Our culture answers them more or less as follows. I will present a pure articulation of these answers, this Story of the World, though in fact it has never dominated completely even as it reached its zenith in the last century. You might recognize some of these answers to be scientifically obsolete, but this obsolete nineteenth- and twentieth-century science still generates our view of what is real, possible, and practical. The new physics, the new biology, the new psychology have only barely begun to infiltrate our operating beliefs. So here are the old answers:

Who are you? You are a separate individual among other separate individuals in a universe that is separate from you as well. You are a Cartesian mote of consciousness looking out through the eyes of a flesh robot, programmed by its genes to maximize reproductive self-interest. You are a bubble of psychology, a mind (whether brain-based or not) separate from other minds and separate from matter. Or you are a soul encased in flesh, separate from the world and separate from other souls. Or you are a mass, a conglomeration of particles operating according to the impersonal forces of physics.

Why do things happen? Again, the impersonal forces of physics act upon a generic material substrate of fundamental particles. All phenomena are the result of these mathematically determined interactions. Intelligence, order, purpose, and design are illusions; underneath it all is merely a purposeless jumble of forces and masses. Any phenomenon,

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all of movement, all of life, is the result of the sum total of forces acting upon objects.

What is the purpose of life? There is no purpose, only cause. The universe is at bottom blind and dead. Thought is but an electrochemical impulse; love but a hormonal cascade that rewires our brains. The only purpose of life (other than what we manufacture ourselves) is simply to live, to survive and reproduce, to maximize rational self-interest. Since we are fundamentally separate from each other, my self-interest is very likely at the expense of your self-interest. Everything that is not-self is at best indifferent to our well-being, at worst hostile.

What is human nature? To protect ourselves against this hostile universe of competing individuals and impersonal forces, we must exercise as much control as possible. We seek out anything that furthers that aim; for example, money, status, security, information, and power—all those things we call “worldly.” At the very foundation of our nature, our motivations, and our desires, is what can only be called evil. That is what a ruthless maximizer of self-interest is.

What, therefore, is sacred? Since the blind, ruthless pursuit of self-interest is antisocial, it is important to overcome our biological programming and pursue “higher things.” A holy person doesn’t succumb to the desires of the flesh. He or she takes the path of self-denial, of discipline, ascending into the realm of spirit or, in the secular version of this quest, into the realm of reason and the mind, principles and ethics. For the religious, to be sacred is to be otherworldly; the soul is separate from the body, and God lives high above the earth. Despite their superficial opposition, science and religion have agreed: the sacred is not of this world.

Who are we as a people? We are a special kind of animal, the apex of evolution, possessing brains that allow the cultural as well as the genetic transfer of information. We are unique in having (in the religious view) a soul or (in the scientific view) a rational mind. In our mechanical universe we alone possess consciousness and the wherewithal to mold the world according to our design. The only limit to our ability to do so is that amount of force we can harness and the precision with which we

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can apply it. The more we are able to do so, the better off we are in this indifferent or hostile universe, the more comfortable and secure.

Where have we come from and where are we going? We started out as naked, ignorant animals, barely hanging on to survival, living lives that were nasty, brutish, and short. Fortunately, thanks to our big brains, science replaced superstition and technology replaced ritual. We ascended to become the lords and possessors of nature, domesticating plants and animals, harnessing natural forces, conquering diseases, laying bare the deepest secrets of the universe. Our destiny is to complete that conquest: to free ourselves from labor, from disease, from death itself, to ascend to the stars and leave nature behind altogether.

Throughout this book I will refer to this worldview as the Story of Separation, the old story, or sometimes outgrowths from it: the Story of Ascent, the program of control, and so forth.

The answers to these questions are culturally dependent, yet they immerse us so completely that we have seen them as reality itself. These answers are changing today, along with everything built atop them—which basically means our entire civilization. That is why we sometimes get the vertiginous feeling that the whole world is falling apart. Seeing the emptiness of what once seemed so real, practical, and enduring, we stand as if at an abyss. What's next? Who am I? What's important? What is the purpose of my life? How can I be an effective agent of healing? The old answers are fading as the Story of the People that once answered them crumbles around us.

This book is a guide from the old story, through the empty space between stories, and into a new story. It addresses the reader as a subject of this transition personally, and as an agent of transition—for other people, for our society, and for our planet.

Like the crisis, the transition we face goes all the way to the bottom. Internally, it is nothing less than a transformation in the experience of being alive. Externally, it is nothing less than a transformation of humanity's role on planet Earth.

I do not offer this book as someone who has completed this transition himself. Far from it. I have no more authority to write this book

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than any other man or woman. I am not an avatar or a saint, I am not channeling ascended masters or ETs, I have no unusual psychic powers or intellectual genius, I have not passed through any remarkable hardship or ordeal, I have no especially deep spiritual practice or shamanic training. I am an ordinary man. You will, therefore, have to take my words on their own merits.

And if my words fulfill their intention, which is to catalyze a next step, big or small, into the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible, my very ordinariness becomes highly significant. It shows how close we all are, all of us ordinary humans, to a profound transformation of consciousness and being. If I, an ordinary man, can see it, we must be almost there.





# Breakdown

*The kingdom of God is for the broken hearted.*

—FRED ROGERS

**I**t is frightening, this transition between worlds, but it is also alluring. Have you ever gotten addicted to doom-and-gloom websites, logging on every day to read the latest evidence that collapse is coming soon, feeling almost let down when Peak Oil didn't start in 2005, or the financial system didn't collapse in 2008? (I'm still worried about Y2K myself.) Do you look toward the future with a mixture of dread, yes, but also a kind of positive anticipation? When a big crisis looms, a superstorm or financial crisis, is there a part of you that says, "Bring it on!" hoping it might free us from our collective entrapment in a system that serves no one (not even its elites)?

It is quite normal to fear what one most desires. We desire to transcend the Story of the World that has come to enslave us, that indeed is killing the planet. We fear what the end of that story will bring: the demise of much that is familiar.

Fear it or not, it is happening already. Since my childhood in the 1970s, our Story of the People has eroded at an accelerating rate. More and more people in the West no longer believe that civilization is fundamentally on the right track. Even those who don't yet question its basic

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premises in any explicit way seem to have grown weary of it. A layer of cynicism, a hipster self-awareness has muted our earnestness. What was once so real, say a plank in a party platform, today is seen through several levels of “meta” filters that parse it in terms of image and message. We are like children who have grown out of a story that once enthralled us, aware now that it is only a story.

At the same time, a series of new data points has disrupted the story from the outside. The harnessing of fossil fuels, the miracle of chemicals to transform agriculture, the methods of social engineering and political science to create a more rational and just society—each has fallen far short of its promise, and brought unanticipated consequences that, together, threaten civilization. We just cannot believe anymore that the scientists have everything well in hand. Nor can we believe that the onward march of reason will bring on social Utopia.

Today we cannot ignore the intensifying degradation of the biosphere, the malaise of the economic system, the decline in human health, or the persistence and indeed growth of global poverty and inequality. We once thought economists would fix poverty, political scientists would fix social injustice, chemists and biologists would fix environmental problems, the power of reason would prevail and we would adopt sane policies. I remember looking at maps of rainforest decline in *National Geographic* in the early 1980s and feeling both alarm and relief—relief because at least the scientists and everyone who reads *National Geographic* are aware of the problem now, so something surely will be done.

Nothing was done. Rainforest decline accelerated, along with nearly every other environmental threat that we knew about in 1980. Our Story of the People trundled forward under the momentum of centuries, but with each passing decade the hollowing-out of its core, which started perhaps with the industrial-scale slaughter of World War I, extended further. When I was a child, our ideological systems and mass media still protected that story, but in the last thirty years the incursions of reality have punctured its protective shell and eroded its essential infrastructure. We no longer believe our storytellers, our elites.

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We have lost the vision of the future we once had; most people have no vision of the future at all. This is new for our society. Fifty or a hundred years ago, most people agreed on the general outlines of the future. We thought we knew where society was going. Even the Marxists and the capitalists agreed on its basic outlines: a paradise of mechanized leisure and scientifically engineered social harmony, with spirituality either abolished entirely or relegated to a materially inconsequential corner of life that happened mostly on Sundays. Of course there were dissenters from this vision, but this was the general consensus.

Like an animal, when a story nears its end it goes through death throes, an exaggerated semblance of life. So today we see domination, conquest, violence, and separation take on absurd extremes that hold a mirror up to what was once hidden and diffuse. Here are a few examples:

- Villages in Bangladesh where half the people have just one kidney, having sold the other in the black-market organ trade. Usually this is done to pay off debts. Here we see, literalized, the conversion of life into money that drives our economic system.
- Prisons in China where prisoners must spend fourteen hours a day playing online video games to build up character experience points. The prison officials then sell these characters to teenagers in the West. Here we see, in extreme form, the disconnect between the physical and virtual worlds, the suffering and exploitation upon which our fantasies are built.
- Old people in Japan whose relatives have no time to see them, so instead they receive visits from professional “relatives” who pretend to be family members. Here is a mirror to the dissolution of the bonds of community and family, to be replaced by money.

Of course, all of these pale in comparison to the litany of horrors that punctuates history and continues, endemic, to this day. The wars,

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the genocide, the mass rapes, the sweatshops, the mines, the slavery. On close examination, these are no less absurd. It is the height of absurdity that we are still manufacturing hydrogen bombs and depleted uranium munitions at a time when the planet is in such peril that we all must pull together, and soon, for civilization to have any hope of standing. The absurdity of war has never escaped the most perceptive among us, but in general we have had narratives that obscure or normalize that absurdity, and thus protect the Story of the World from disruption.

Occasionally, something happens that is so absurd, so awful, or so manifestly unjust that it penetrates these defenses and causes people to question much of what they'd taken for granted. Such events present a cultural crisis. Typically, though, the dominant mythology soon recovers, incorporating the event back into its own narratives. The Ethiopian famine became about helping those poor black children unfortunate enough to live in a country that still hasn't "developed" as we have. The Rwandan genocide became about African savagery and the need for humanitarian intervention. The Nazi Holocaust became about evil taking over, and the necessity to stop it. All of these interpretations contribute, in various ways, to the old Story of the People: we are developing, civilization is on the right track, goodness comes through control. None hold up to scrutiny; they obscure, in the former two examples, the colonial and economic causes of the famine and genocide, which are still ongoing. In the case of the Holocaust, the explanation of evil obscures the mass participation of ordinary people—people like you and me. Underneath the narratives a disquiet persists, the feeling that something is terribly wrong with the world.

The year 2012 ended with a small but potent story-piercing event: the Sandy Hook massacre. By the numbers, it was a small tragedy: far more, and equally innocent, children died in U.S. drone strikes that year, or by hunger that week, than died at Sandy Hook. But Sandy Hook penetrated the defense mechanisms we use to maintain the fiction that the world is basically okay. No narrative could contain its utter senselessness and quell the realization of a deep and awful wrongness.

We couldn't help but map those murdered innocents onto the young

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faces we know, and the anguish of their parents onto ourselves. For a moment, I imagine, we all felt the exact same thing. We were in touch with the simplicity of love and grief, a truth outside of story.

Following that moment, people hurried to make sense of the event, subsuming it within a narrative about gun control, mental health, or the security of school buildings. No one believes deep down that these responses touch the heart of the matter. Sandy Hook is an anomalous data point that unravels the entire narrative—the world no longer makes sense. We struggle to explain what it means, but no explanation suffices. We may go on pretending that normal is still normal, but this is one of a series of “end time” events that is dismantling our culture’s mythology.

Who could have foreseen, two generations ago when the story of progress was strong, that the twenty-first century would be a time of school massacres, of rampant obesity, of growing indebtedness, of pervasive insecurity, of intensifying concentration of wealth, of unabated world hunger, and of environmental degradation that threatens civilization? The world was supposed to be getting better. We were supposed to be becoming wealthier, more enlightened. Society was supposed to be advancing. Is heightened security the best we can aspire to? What happened to visions of a society without locks, without poverty, without war? Are these things beyond our technological capacities? Why are the visions of a more beautiful world that seemed so close in the middle twentieth century now seem so unreachable that all we can hope for is to survive in an ever more competitive, ever more degraded world? Truly, our stories have failed us. Is it too much to ask, to live in a world where our human gifts go toward the benefit of all? Where our daily activities contribute to the healing of the biosphere and the well-being of other people? We need a Story of the People—a real one, that doesn’t feel like a fantasy—in which a more beautiful world is once again possible.

Various visionary thinkers have offered versions of such a story, but none has yet become a true Story of the People, a widely accepted set of agreements and narratives that gives meaning to the world and coordinates human activity toward its fulfillment. We are not quite

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ready for such a story yet, because the old one, though in tatters, still has large swaths of its fabric intact. And even when these unravel, we still must traverse, naked, the space between stories. In the turbulent times ahead our familiar ways of acting, thinking, and being will no longer make sense. We won't know what is happening, what it all means, and, sometimes, even what is real. Some people have entered that time already.

I wish I could tell you that I am ready for a new Story of the People, but even though I am among its many weavers, I cannot yet fully inhabit the new vestments. As I describe the world that could be, something inside me doubts and rejects, and underneath the doubt is a hurting thing. The breakdown of the old story is kind of a healing process that uncovers the old wounds hidden under its fabric and exposes them to the healing light of awareness. I am sure many people reading this have gone through such a time, when the cloaking illusions fell away: all the old justifications and rationalizations, all the old stories. Events like Sandy Hook help to initiate the very same process on a collective level. So also the superstorms, the economic crisis, political meltdowns . . . in one way or another, the obsolescence of our old mythology is laid bare.

What is that hurting thing, that takes the form of cynicism, despair, or hate? Left unhealed, can we hope that any future we create won't reflect that wound back at us? How many revolutionaries have recreated, in their own organizations and countries, the very institutions of oppression they sought to overthrow? Only in the Story of Separation can we insulate outside from inside. As that story breaks down, we see that each necessarily reflects the other. We see the necessity of reuniting the long-sundered threads of spirituality and activism.

Bear in mind, as I describe the elements of a new Story of the People in the next chapter, that we have a rugged territory to traverse to get to it from where we are today. If my description of a Story of Interbeing, a reunion of humanity and nature, self and other, work and play, discipline and desire, matter and spirit, man and woman, money and gift, justice and compassion, and so many other polarities seems idealistic or naive, if it arouses cynicism, impatience, or despair, then please

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do not push these feelings aside. They are not obstacles to be overcome (that is part of the old Story of Control). They are gateways to our fully inhabiting a new story, and the vastly expanded power to serve change that it brings.

We do not have a new story yet. Each of us is aware of some of its threads, for example in most of the things we call alternative, holistic, or ecological today. Here and there we see patterns, designs, emerging parts of the fabric. But the new mythos has not yet formed. We will abide for a time in the “space between stories.” It is a very precious—some might say sacred—time. Then we are in touch with the real. Each disaster lays bare the reality underneath our stories. The terror of a child, the grief of a mother, the honesty of not knowing why. In such moments our dormant humanity awakens as we come to each other’s aid, human to human, and learn who we are. That’s what keeps happening every time there is a calamity, before the old beliefs, ideologies, and politics take over again. Now the calamities and contradictions are coming so fast that the story has not enough time to recover. Such is the birth process into a new story.

# Interbeing

*I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers that I have read,  
all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved,  
all the cities I have visited.*

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

A recognition of alliance is growing among people in diverse arenas of activism, whether political, social, or spiritual. The holistic acupuncturist and the sea turtle rescuer may not be able to explain the feeling, “We are serving the same thing,” but they are. Both are in service to an emerging Story of the People that is the defining mythology of a new kind of civilization.

I will call it the Story of Interbeing, the Age of Reunion, the ecological age, the world of the gift. It offers an entirely different set of answers to the defining questions of life. Here are some of the principles of the new story.

- That my being partakes of your being and that of all beings. This goes beyond interdependency—our very existence is relational.
- That, therefore, what we do to another, we do to ourselves.
- That each of us has a unique and necessary gift to give the world.
- That the purpose of life is to express our gifts.



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- That every act is significant and has an effect on the cosmos.
- That we are fundamentally unseparate from each other, from all beings, and from the universe.
- That every person we encounter and every experience we have mirrors something in ourselves.
- That humanity is meant to join fully the tribe of all life on Earth, offering our uniquely human gifts toward the well-being and development of the whole.
- That purpose, consciousness, and intelligence are innate properties of matter and the universe.

Much of this book will flesh out the Story of Interbeing. The more we share with each other this kind of knowledge, the stronger we are in it, the less alone. It needn't depend on the denial of science, because science is undergoing parallel paradigm shifts. It needn't endure the denial of livelihood, because from a trust in gift we find unexpected sources of sustenance. It needn't withstand rejection by everyone around us, because more and more people are living from the new story, each in his or her own way, inducing a growing feeling of camaraderie. Nor is it a turning away from the world that is still mired in Separation, because from the new story we access new and powerful ways to effect change.

The fundamental precept of the new story is that we are inseparate from the universe, and our being partakes in the being of everyone and everything else. Why should we believe this? Let's start with the obvious: This interbeing is something we can feel. Why does it hurt when we hear of another person coming to harm? Why, when we read of mass die-offs of the coral reefs and see their bleached skeletons, do we feel like we've sustained a blow? It is because it is literally happening to our selves, our extended selves. The separate self wonders, "How could this affect me?" The pain is irrational, to be explained away, perhaps, as the misfiring of some genetically coded empathy circuit meant to protect those who share our DNA. But why does it extend so easily to strangers, even to other species? Why do we desire so strongly to

serve the good of all? Why, when we achieve a maximum of personal security and comfort, are we still dissatisfied? Certainly, as a little introspection will reveal, our desire to help is not coming from a rational calculation that this injustice or that ecological disaster will somehow, someday, threaten our personal well-being. The pain is more direct, more visceral than that. The reason it hurts is it is literally happening to ourselves.

The science of Separation offers another explanation of what it calls “altruistic behavior.” Maybe it is a kind of mating display, which demonstrates one’s “phenotypic quality” to prospective mates (i.e., it shows that one is so “fit” that he can afford to squander resources on others). But this explanation takes as an unexamined premise another assumption of the worldview of Separation: a scarcity of mating opportunities and a competition for mates. As anthropology, reviewed in books like *Sex at Dawn*, has discovered though, this view of primitive life is more a projection of our own social experience onto the past than it is an accurate description of hunter-gatherer life, which was communal.<sup>1</sup> A more sophisticated explanation draws on game theoretic calculations of the relative advantages of being a strong reciprocator, weak reciprocator, etc., in situations of mutual dependency.<sup>2</sup> Such theories are actually a step closer to an evolutionary biology of interbeing, as they break down the idea that “self-interest” can ever exist independently of the interest of others.

The desire to serve something transcending the separate self and the pain we feel from the suffering of others are two sides of the same coin. Both bespeak our interbeingness. The emerging science that seeks to explain them, whether it invokes mirror neurons, horizontal gene transfer, group evolution, morphic fields, or something further out, doesn’t explain them *away*, but merely illustrates a general principle

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1. Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

2. For a good example of this kind of reasoning, see Ernst Fehr and Urs Fischbacher, “The Nature of Human Altruism,” *Nature* 425 (October 23, 2003): 785–791.

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of connection or, dare I say it, oneness. The science is beginning to confirm what we have intuitively known all along: we are greater than what we have been told. We are not just a skin-encapsulated ego, a soul encased in flesh. We are each other and we are the world.

Our society runs in large part on the denial of that truth. Only by interposing ideological and systemic blinders between ourselves and the victims of industrial civilization can we bear to carry on. Few of us would personally rob a hungry three-year-old of his last crust or abduct his mother at gunpoint to work in a textile factory, but simply through our consumption habits and our participation in the economy, we do the equivalent every day. And everything that is happening to the world is happening to ourselves. Distanced from the dying forests, the destitute workers, the hungry children, we do not know the source of our pain, but make no mistake—just because we don't know the source doesn't mean we don't feel the pain. One who commits a direct act of violence will, if and when she realizes what she has done, feel remorse, a word that literally means "biting back." Even to witness such an act is painful. But most of us cannot feel remorse for, say, the ecological harm that the mining of rare earth minerals for our cell phones does in Brazil. The pain from that, and from all the invisible violence of the Machine of industrial civilization, is more diffuse. It pervades our lives so completely that we barely know what it is like to feel good. Occasionally, we get a brief respite from it, maybe by grace, or through drugs, or being in love, and we believe in those moments that this is what it is supposed to feel like to be alive. Rarely, though, do we stay there for very long, immersed as we are in a sea of pain.

Our situation is much like that of a little girl who was taken by her mother to visit a chiropractor friend of mine. Her mother said, "I think something is wrong with my daughter. She is a very quiet little girl and always well behaved, but never once have I heard her laugh. In fact, she rarely even smiles."

My friend examined her and discovered a spinal misalignment that, she judged, would give the girl a terrific headache all the time. Fortunately, it was one of those misalignments that a chiropractor can correct

easily and permanently. She made the adjustment—and the girl broke into a big laugh, the first her mother had ever heard. The omnipresent pain in her head, which she had come to accept as normal, was miraculously gone.

Many of you might doubt that we live in a “sea of pain.” I feel pretty good right now myself. But I also carry a memory of a far more profound state of well-being, connectedness, and intensity of awareness that felt, at the time, like my birthright. Which state is normal? Could it be that we are bravely making the best of things?

How much of our dysfunctional, consumptive behavior is simply a futile attempt to run away from a pain that is in fact everywhere? Running from one purchase to another, one addictive fix to the next, a new car, a new cause, a new spiritual idea, a new self-help book, a bigger number in the bank account, the next news story, we gain each time a brief respite from feeling pain. The wound at its source never vanishes though. In the absence of distraction—those moments of what we call “boredom”—we can feel its discomfort.

Of course, any behavior that alleviates pain without healing its source can become addictive. We should therefore hesitate to cast judgment on anyone exhibiting addictive behavior (a category that probably includes nearly all of us). What we see as greed or weakness might merely be fumbling attempts to meet a need, when the true object of that need is unavailable. In that case the usual prescriptions for more discipline, self-control, or responsibility are counterproductive.

Notice whether, when I described people “running from one purchase to another,” you felt any contempt or smugness. That too is a kind of separation. The transition we are entering is a transition to a story in which contempt and smugness no longer have a home. It is a story in which we cannot see ourselves as better than any other human being. It is a story in which we no longer use fear of self-contempt to drive our ethics. And we will inhabit this story not in aspiration to an ideal of virtuous nonjudgment, forgiveness, etc., but in sober recognition of the truth of nonseparation.

In *Sacred Economics* I made the point that what we perceive as greed

might be an attempt to expand the separate self in compensation for the lost connections that compose the self of interbeing; that the objects of our selfish desires are but substitutes for what we really want. Advertisers play on this all the time, selling sports cars as a substitute for freedom, junk food and soda as a substitute for excitement, "brands" as a substitute for social identity, and pretty much everything as a substitute for sex, itself a proxy for the intimacy that is so lacking in modern life. We might also see sports hero worship as a substitute for the expression of one's own greatness, amusement parks as a substitute for the transcending of boundaries, pornography as a substitute for self-love, and overeating as a substitute for connection or the feeling of being present. What we really need is nearly unavailable in the lives that society offers us. You see, even the behaviors that seem to exemplify selfishness may also be interpreted as our striving to regain our interbeingness.

Another nonscientific indication of our true nature is visible in yet another apparent manifestation of greed: the endless pursuit of wealth and power. What are we to make of the fact that for many of the very rich, no amount of money is enough? Nor can any amount of power satisfy the ambitious. Perhaps what is happening is that the desire to serve the common good is being channeled toward a substitute, and of course, no amount of the substitute can equal the authentic article.

Upon each of us, the wound of Separation, the pain of the world, lands in a different way. We seek our medicine according to the configuration of that wound. To judge someone for doing that would be like to condemn a baby for crying. To condemn what we see as selfish, greedy, egoic, or evil behavior and to seek to suppress it by force without addressing the underlying wound is futile: the pain will always find another expression. Herein lies a key realization of interbeing. It says, "I would do as you do, if I were you." We are one.

The new Story of the People, then, is a Story of Interbeing, of reunion. In its personal expression, it proclaims our deep interdependency on other beings, not only for the sake of surviving but also even to exist. It knows that my being is more for your being. In its collective

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expression, the new story says the same thing about humanity's role on Earth and relationship to the rest of nature. It is this story that unites us across so many areas of activism and healing. The more we act from it, the better able we are to create a world that reflects it. The more we act from Separation, the more we helplessly create more of that, too.