

# Ways to Deal With The Current Social Transformation

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I WANT TO TALK about a few of the possible strategies that we can use in the coming few years to enhance our ability to deal with the fact that we know something is happening.

Now I don't think we have any idea how peculiar that is. You know, we say, "This transformation is comparable to the Copernican Revolution," but at the time we were having the Copernican Revolution, nobody knew it. And when the Industrial Revolution was occurring, nobody knew it either. As for the Old Stone Age, I think there's very little chance people knew they were in the Old Stone Age. But about two weeks after Hiroshima, people were talking about the Atomic Age, and there was even on the streets of New York about that time, something renamed "The Atomic Laundry." So this is the first time in history that man has been able to label what was happening to him while it was happening, and this is profoundly important, and I think, very worth considering.

At any rate, here we are—we've named ourselves. We know that we are in a transformation period, and we know that this is as important as the Copernican Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, or the period when man stopped being nomadic and became sedentary.

## *The Need for Extra-somatic Memory*

I think one of the outstanding things that we've got to do is to develop, in George Land's phrase, an extra-somatic memory so that our tendencies to blur and forget our uncomfortable lessons from the past can be overcome. (See *Grow or Die: A Unifying Principle of Transformation*, by George Land, New York: Random House, 1973). If we look at man as a

creature, one of the things that we find is that he has a tendency to forget pain. Probably that is very important, because if we could remember the most painful moments in our lives and continue to remember them, we probably couldn't survive.

Now when we try to generalize this ordinary human capacity to forget—this human amnesia—to communities, and look at communities in the past, we find the same thing. They were unable to remember what had happened to them: they went back and built on the slope of the volcano or the fault in San Francisco. This capacity was in the past probably very useful. Lots of people lived on islands and there wasn't any place to go but a volcano. If they were going to survive at all, they had to go back and build there and risk being overcome by lava. Those who were left would have to go back and build there again.

But this human capacity to forget has ceased to be a valuable characteristic. And we have no reason to believe that we can alter the kind of human physiology that may be half a million years old. Individual human beings are going to continue to sort out and blur and forget the things that are too painful to remember. Therefore, we've got to build something else; we've got to build an extra-somatic memory of some sort. And I suggest that one of the principal pieces of research that we might be doing at present is to figure out what will give us that kind of continual warning system. We've done a little thinking about it and our present feeling is that we can define it in two ways:

1. It's got to be something that changes, because any continual signal like "Drive slowly" has no effect on people if they see it day after day without any alteration.

2. Human beings have to do something in response to it: if you merely take in a set of warnings, even though the set of warnings change, they will in time have no effect.

So we need to set up some system or sets of systems that will command our attention and demand some responsive activity. One of the things we have now in New York City is a daily report on the air—whether we can breathe or not. And that has some effect. You listen each day and you don't get totally accustomed to being suffocated, because the report changes, and some days they say you won't be as suffocated.

There are more and more reports on the state of those things in the society that are unsatisfactory, and undoubtedly this will make us more alert to the

things that need to be done. It's very useful to know the pollen count, the components of the air, the toxic substances that are now going around the earth, the new radioactivity that is pouring into the atmosphere—the series of things that we're going to have to be alert to if we are going to make necessary changes.

But it isn't much use just to be told that the air is unbreathable if there is nothing for you to do about it. Possibly if you have to stop, as they say you do in Japan, to get a little oxygen, that may have some effect. Somehow we've got to keep ourselves alert to whether an emergency situation is rising or falling and what kind of activity it demands from us.

### *Reducing National Barriers*

In the next quarter century, we may have an opportunity which we may not have again. Within this period, we are not yet going to conquer pollution, because we are not going to have the necessary technology to prevent our contaminating the atmosphere, and we may contaminate it so badly, we won't be here.

But if we exercise our ingenuity we probably can, in the next 25 years, work out ways of handling our technology so it doesn't endanger the atmosphere any longer. We haven't done it yet and we don't know whether we're going to do it, and in that period when we're not sure how bad the contamination of the atmosphere is, the whole world shares the same dangers.

The whole world has never shared the same dangers before, and it may not continue to share them. It's quite conceivable that in 25 years, we may discover ways of boxing off parts of the world. Our interdependence at present depends on trade, on certain kinds of technology, on communication, and on a few beliefs, such as the belief in the brotherhood of man, and we might get over that. (We haven't believed in the brotherhood of man very long and we could stop quite rapidly.)

But at present we have a climate of opinion that recognizes that we're all one species, that the world is highly interdependent, and that the air is endangered. That endangered air gives us something to share. Human beings have never been able to share very well: we have always put up fences; we've always guarded frontiers against other people; and we've always tried to protect what we have against others—and, a good deal of the time, made inroads on what others have. But you can't do any of those things with the air. The air is the one substance that we can't fence off and of which we can't obtain exclusive possession. We can't protect ourselves against other people's contamination: if a toxic substance were introduced into the air in the room, we'd all go down together, and there would be no way in which one person could get an extra bit of air.

So this is an ideal moment in history—a moment that we can possibly seize to build interdependent social institutions that we haven't had before. I don't

think we can assume that this opportunity will continue. Many people do: they say, "The world has become interdependent, and it will stay that way." Maybe it won't, but maybe we have a moment in history now where we do share a common danger that we can't fence off, we can't arm against, can't put barriers up to, and therefore, a moment when we may learn to protect ourselves from disaster.

It gives us a chance to deal with a problem that has beset us for a long while, the assumed contrast between what is called patriotism—loving our own country—and internationalism—a sense of the necessity of living in one world and relating to one world. We have a tendency to think of those things as opposed, but when the air is endangered, they are not opposed. The only way that we will have any hope of saving our own loved country is to cut down on the kinds of poison that are going to poison our own people and go right around the world and poison other people, and come back and poison one's own people again. So we may shift from our emphasis on frontiers to an emphasis on the center of the country. People in each country may care as deeply as they can about the center of that country.

There is also the possibility that we may be able to diminish some of the other existing barriers—too much of a barrier around the nuclear family and too much of a barrier around the nation state, and not enough commitment to the community and to the wider region. We may be able to arrange it so that the more you love your family, the more you love your community, and the more you love the world. That is a possible sequence, whereas we now build a sequence that says: the more you love your family, the more you hate the neighbors, and want to beat them; and the more you care about your nation, the more you denigrate other nations. These sequences are not inevitable, but they have developed rather directly from the condition of territorial expansion and territorial protectiveness. During the next 25 years, we may have a period in which that will not be the case.

### *Biological Foresightedness*

I'd like to mention what looks to me like the best way of getting people to take a longer look into the future than they're willing to take at present, and that is for every person to know small children that he or she cares about. The one way that you cannot avoid thinking about the future is if you have a two-year-old child in front of you who is growing. When you think about ten years from now, that child will be twelve; when you think of twenty, that child will be twenty-two and you begin to wonder: what will that child's children be like? This biological guarantee of foresightedness has carried human beings forward as they forgot the troubles of their past and present in concern for the future. Today we'll first have to get the old people out of the golden ghettos and get them back into the community and give each of them a child to think about.