

The American Idea, Resilience, and Thrivancy Education

Dexter Chapin

Series in Education



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Foreword

Dr. Barry Clemson

President, Earth Viability Center

Listen!

You will hear a huge babel of voices, each proclaiming one or another aspect of the great transition humankind is undergoing ... and many of them are insisting that we face utter ruin unless we make that transition very quickly indeed. I make no pretense of fully understanding this great transition, but I can point to some key aspects. Dexter Chapin's book provides a penetrating analysis of the education we need to make this transition relatively painlessly.

Humankind has undergone several great transitions. First, from hunter-gather tribes to the age of agriculture and nation states. Second, from agriculture to the age of industry and multi-national corporations. Today, we are in the throes of another great transition whose outlines are still emerging. The previous transitions were primarily shifts in the means of securing our food, shelter, and the other necessities of life.

Most of humankind's history has been dominated by scarcity ... getting enough to eat and the material "stuff" for a good life required a lifetime of hard work. Quite suddenly, we are faced with abundance ... our industrial civilization easily produces more than we can use, and the advertising experts are busy creating "needs" to get us to buy all the stuff being manufactured. Even with food there is abundance. For example, the United States throws away 40% of the food it produces ... while millions starve in Africa. We have not yet figured out how to live equitably and sustainably with an industrial civilization committed to always producing more.

The first two great transitions (into agriculture, then into corporate industrialization) certainly changed humankind's image and identity, e.g., from a hunter to a farmer to a laborer. However, industrialization and Newtonian physics enthroned humankind as special and superior and separate from nature. The current transition is more about our psyche ... how we think, what we feel, what stories and foundational myths guide our individual and collective behavior ... in short, our level of consciousness/spirituality is shifting

under our feet ... and this means we are no longer sure about who/what we are ... We must create a new identity for ourselves. Quite obviously, the education we provide for ourselves is a crucial aspect of this transition ... which of course explains the frantic efforts of our right wing to ban books and eliminate any aspect of our education that might enlarge student's imaginations or to help them think critically or grow morally.

An early aspect of the current transition involved cybernetics in the 1940s and continued with systems theory, Chaos theory, complexity theory ... and we discovered that our common sense and intuitions were often completely wrong. Then, along came quantum physics to upend everything.

Our fundamental ways of thinking and understanding the world have been based on dualism: white or black, my tribe or "others," good or bad, hot or cold, A or not A. In this world, you can't have both A and not A at the same time, you have either one or the other but not both. And here comes quantum physics blithely telling us the world is not like that. We currently have two contradictory theories about how quantum physics works. These theories contradict each other ... A and not A. And yet, the engineers are building useful, real-world machines based on both contradictory theories.

Quantum physics is presenting another, possibly even more troubling, idea. It seems that everything might have some level of consciousness. Paired electrons communicate instantaneously across multiple light years of distance. Mycelium networks link the entirety of vast forests and somehow communicate quickly across those distances. Forests are now known to function as one giant organism. The Gaia hypothesis posits that all life on earth collaborates to create the conditions for life to sustain itself. And the biologists are now ensuring us that we humans are utterly dependent on nature ... without the multitude of services that nature provides we can't survive.

The Great Transition

Our old certainties, stories, identities are seen as inadequate or just plain wrong. We are in the midst of a great psychic struggle ... everything is in turmoil and Chaos as the old age ends and a new age struggles to be born. Probably the best we can do in defining where we are headed in this great transition is to point to certain key aspects.

Thomas Berry (priest, cultural historian, ecologist) "believed that humanity, after generations spent in despoiling the planet, is poised to embrace a new role as a vital part of a larger, interdependent Earth community, consisting of a

‘communion of subjects not a collection of objects’”¹ Berry thought of humankind, nature, and the universe itself as engaged in a cosmic dance of evolution toward more complexity and higher consciousness. Berry’s, *The Great Work*,² argued that facilitating this evolutionary dance was the critical task for our age.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the current great transition is that humankind seems to be moving to a new level of consciousness/spirituality. Ken Wilber studied almost 200 different developmental schemas. For example, Piaget developed the cognitive developmental schema. Kohlberg devised a moral development schema. A common feature of these schemas is that an individual at one level is unable to understand the thinking/feeling/behavior of someone at the next higher level. A simple example of this is that young children do not have the concept of “conservation of volume.” When a toddler is shown water being poured back and forth between a tall thin glass and a short fat glass, they will insist that the volume changes as the water is poured into the taller glass. Similarly, a person at the level of “my family or tribe vs all the others” can’t fully grasp the implications of “my tribe is all of humanity.” Wilber argues that humankind as-a-whole is in the midst of transitioning to a new (higher) level of consciousness/spirituality. This emerging level of consciousness is a movement toward justice, equality, diversity, and inclusiveness. The rise of right-wing populism, e.g., Donald Trump and his cult, is in large part a backlash against this emerging consciousness in all of its manifestations.

Aspects of the Great Transition

The combination of a new consciousness and a civilization of massive complexity is driving us to rethink almost everything. This section briefly touches on the law, government, and the economy, all of which depend upon the sort of education Dexter Chapin’s book advocates.

- Commons. Elinor Ostrom’s *Governing the Commons*³ showcases the ancient practices that were rapidly being lost but are now more necessary than ever. Economists “proved” that the commons could not work (Garret Harding’s famous “Tragedy of the Commons”) but in fact they do work and have been working for centuries. Ostrom’s Nobel prize winning work documents how they work and what is required to keep them healthy. As our world shrinks (more people and easier transportation) the commons of land, water, wilderness, air become ever more critical for the well-being of all life and are an increasingly important aspect of the emerging future.

- Legal. Fritjov Capra and Ugo Mattei argue for a new sort of legal system in *The Ecology of Law*⁴. The bedrock concepts for our current legal system are private ownership and state sovereignty. This legal system essentially ignores two arenas that are now critical for our future, i.e., the common good and the critical role of the services nature provides. This legal framework developed during the transition to the industrial age a time when the commons were abundant, and the capital needed for industrialization was scarce. This situation is now reversed. Capital is abundant (some would say too abundant in that the very rich are dominating our governments) and the commons are already scarce, and the remaining ones are rapidly being lost to privatization. An ecological legal system rests upon three bedrock principles:
 - Disconnecting law from power and violence and vesting the law in community norms, much like the cultural norms for a viable commons as described by Ostrom.
 - Making community sovereign (instead of the nation state).
 - Making property generative (instead of a source of rent). This shifts property from a source of unearned wealth to serving the common good.

A legal system along these lines empowers communities, the common good, and the rights of nature.

- Economic. The currently dominant economic system, whether described as capitalist or communist, is based on continual growth, unlimited resource extraction, and massive collateral damage, i.e. pollution of land, water, and air and destruction of the Earth's life support system. In short, this economic system is rapidly driving civilization towards suicide ... it is now very clear that civilization can't long survive "business as usual." The New Economics Foundation, David Schweickart, and Charles Eisenstein are a few of the voices suggesting new sorts of economies that will be more viable. Solidarity Economy is a loose coalition of folks experimenting with new economic arrangements. Similarly, there is a major movement toward coops of all sorts. Frederic Laloux's, *Reinventing Organizations*,⁵ provides case studies of companies that have gotten rid of "bosses" and the hierarchy of authority and power. These companies rely upon empowered workers and work units. Unlike traditional companies bound by the need to maximize profits, these companies consider profit only one among many critical variables, including

benefits to their community, workers, and customers. These companies are adaptive, creative, and very profitable. People love working there.

- Government. The cybernetician, Stafford Beer, in *Platform for Change*,⁶ argued that many of our institutions were “structurally incompetent.” A “Structurally Incompetent” institution has a formal structure that renders it unable to deal with the complexity it is supposedly managing. For example, a general-purpose legislative body such the US congress is expected to create policies and laws. The bills that these officials vote on are often hundreds or thousands of pages long and are the result of much horse-trading among diverse interests, especially the perverse influence of the major corporations and the ultra-rich. These legislators have neither the time nor the expertise to gain a real understanding of the multitude of problem-situations they are expected to legislate about. The inevitable results of this process include:
 - The legislators vote on “sound bites” rather than the actual provisions in the bill.
 - The bills often contain contradictory provisions.
 - In most cases, the bills provide perks to special interests at the expense of the general public.
 - More often than not the bills create more problems than they solve because the dynamic behavior of complex systems is usually counter-intuitive. Thus, here in the USA, we see highly touted governmental initiatives such as the war on terror, war on drugs, or no child left behind ... and in all these cases it seems likely that we are worse off than we were before.

Beer argued that we needed to completely rethink our governmental and economic institutions such that they were equipped to deal with massive complexity.

Democracy R&D and the New Democracy Foundation are developing and putting into practice “structurally competent” institutions, i.e., institutional arrangements that do manage extreme complexity and that demonstrate “deliberative democracy” passing laws that effectively promote the common good.

Another key aspect of “structural incompetence” is arbitrary political boundaries. For instance, a medium sized river watershed typically includes hundreds of towns, counties, cities, states and, in many cases, two or more

nation states. A river watershed is one of nature's key systems. And a major lesson from all of the various systems sciences is that systems must be dealt with wholistically. Planet Earth's rivers and bioregions are sick and rapidly getting sicker. If we are to avoid destroying the Earth's life support system (and ourselves!), then we have no choice but to manage our river watersheds as systems. This requires major changes in our governmental units.

An Informed Public

The US founding fathers were keenly aware of the need for an informed public. Unfortunately, here in the USA we may have the least informed (and most misled) public in our history. Our mass media spent decades presenting "both sides" of every issue as if right-wing disinformation should be given the same consideration as the consensus of the scientists. In recent years even this "both sides" gloss has all but disappeared with the extreme consolidation of both newspapers and television stations into the hands of ultra-rich right-wing owners. Social media has seriously exacerbated this flood of disinformation. Too many of our citizens seem to have lost all ability to think critically about the stories they are being fed and that they endlessly repeat. A robust education is critical if we are ever to have serious discussions about the state of our world and what sort of future we want to work toward.

We in the USA are currently battling over every aspect of education from pre-schools through university. On the surface, there are a great many different issues that are being fought over. The real issue, however, has to do with the great transition: will our education system resist or facilitate the great transition? Dexter Chapin's book describes the educational system required to facilitate humankind's transition to a new level of consciousness and a viable planetary civilization.

The Planetary Emergency

Thousands of scientists are warning that we are on the very brink of utter catastrophe from global warming, pollution and too many people for a finite planet. There is substantial literature under the general heading of "Collapsology." I will briefly mention three of the threads in this literature.

- Peak Energy. Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down*,⁷ argues that energy shortages have been central in the downfall of every previous civilization. Our current situation is that the return on investment (ROI) for oil has gone from 100 to very near 1 in 153 years. For the first oil wells, using one gallon of oil gained a hundred gallons. We are now getting just slightly

more than one gallon for every gallon expended. Clearly, if the ROI goes to one, i.e., it requires a gallon to get a gallon, then there is no point to it. Homer-Dixon argues the age of oil is about over; we are squandering the remaining oil to, e.g. make plastics that we could do without, and that the transition to alternate fuels is unlikely to be possible in time to avoid a collapse.

- Elites. Margaret Wheatley's *Who do We Choose to be*⁸, reviews the literature on the collapse of civilizations and concludes that our global civilization is in serious trouble because our elites are corrupt. Throughout history, the elites in new civilizations start out with a strong commitment to public service and the common good. Over a period of roughly ten generations, the elites gradually lose their commitment to service and become self-serving, greedy, and corrupt. We have no example of a civilization recovering after its elites become corrupt. Our current situation is unique in that there are no barbarians next door to replace our civilization ... the current civilization is world-wide, and it is all we have. Wheatley argues that our elites are very corrupt, that civilization will collapse and that we need to create islands of sanity that could persist even in the midst of this collapse.
- Convergence of Crises. Pablo Servigne and Raphael Stevens, *How Everything Can Collapse*,⁹ discuss the multiple crises converging on us all at once. While our institutions may be able to handle major crises, none of them are able to handle multiple simultaneous crises. "Failed states" are nations in which the central government is unable to exert control over and provide basic service to the major regions of the country. There are currently 26 failed or nearly failed states. In the USA, the polarization among the general population and the failure of Congress to develop any meaningful legislation during 2023 do not inspire confidence.

In conclusion, we have very strong scientific evidence that 1) we are in a dire planetary emergency and 2) there is very little time to avoid the collapse of civilization, wide-spread famines and deaths, and a reversion to much degraded technological base for the survivors.

Culture, Stories and Education

Every human culture has always been shaped and directed by its stories and foundational myths. Two of the key stories of our current age are:

- The story of "More"... the good life depends on more money, more stuff, more fame, etc.

- The myth of continual growth ... the economy must grow; production and consumption must grow without end.

The story that “more” leads to happiness and fulfillment directs much of our behavior ... even though most of us know this doesn’t work.

The myth of continual growth ignores the very inconvenient fact that it is clearly impossible. To quote the eminent economist and polymath, Kenneth Boulding “Anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist.”

The Birth of New Stories

Cybernetics and the more recent systems sciences have demonstrated that our world is more a creation of our own minds than previously understood. Heinz von Foerster put it this way “The opposite of objectivity is responsibility.” These new sciences also demonstrated that systems abound ... everywhere, at all scales from the sub-atomic to the universe itself, we find systems which behave as entities. Further, within systems the relationships among the parts are more important than the parts themselves.

Buckminster Fuller jogged our collective imaginations with his “Spaceship Earth” image. Suddenly we are confronted with the idea of earth as a finite system (a ship) traveling through space. This implies that we had best learn to be good stewards of our ship. Pictures of earth taken from space further enlarged our imaginations.

Lovelock and Margulis took this a step further with the Gaian paradigm shift¹⁰ which argues that the entirety of the Earth’s biosphere constituted a system that created and maintained the conditions that it needs to thrive. An obvious corollary is that if we disturb Gaia too much, it will eventually cause this planetary system to shift into some entirely new state ... and this new state may or may not be hospitable for humans.

Physics is often considered the queen of the sciences and, as such, has always been important in shaping our conceptions of ourselves and the universe. As mentioned above, quantum physics is upending both our image of ourselves and of the universe. *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*,¹¹ a book on quantum physics based on conversations between physicists and Buddhist monks, says “no one understands quantum physics.” Perhaps meditation and Zen are as useful in understanding quantum physics as are experiments and data.

David Korten wrote about this in *Change the Story, Change the Future*.¹² Charles Eisenstein hosts a web forum aptly called “The new and Ancient Story”

with more than 4 thousand participants¹³. Joe Brewer, also with more than four thousand participants, is working on how we might manage the evolution of our cultures and the regeneration of our bioregions.¹⁴

To paraphrase Martin Luther King, the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. This can mean nothing else except that all the great battles for justice and equality are truly one battle. The age of old white European patriarchy is over. We are seeing the birth pangs of a new age of justice, equality, diversity, and inclusiveness.

I don't know what the new stories will be. However, I am certain the new stories undergirding the Great Transition will emphasize love for all life, including reverence for nature.

It is very hard to see how we can possibly manage this Great Transition without Thrivancy Education.

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Preface

I did not plan to become a teacher, but through happenstance fell into the only job I might be good at. I loved teaching and am proud to have been a teacher, but that is not the point. Schools give teachers the opportunity, if they choose, to sit in one of the best possible grandstand seats to observe what is happening in their community and beyond. They have a raft of reporters arriving every day, ready to tell their story as they come through the door. Not always in words, not always in actions, sometimes in silence, and sometimes in tragedies.

Students have the capacity to point out the blind spots, the unseen, unheard, and ignored. I spent over half a century in K-12 education being educated by kids. It's not always students. Parents, administrators, occasionally police or a judge, and often other teachers, coaches and staff deliver the news. You watch, you listen, you ask a question every now and then, and you see, you learn, and sometimes you understand, and sometimes you respond.

This book is a response. I treasured my place in the grandstand, made possible by my teachers, my mentors, and my coaches. This book is a precis of all that I learned from my kids, the adults, and my experience.

This is not intended as an academic treatise. The references are almost all readily available, popular sources if the reader wishes to explore farther. The older, referenced books are generally available in digital formats. I have taken what is commonly known and woven it into a new pattern that generates hope that we can regain the ability to thrive.

I expect my readers to be those people who look out the window and wonder why America seems to be moving backwards? How did we elect the people we elected? Why are we banning books? Why are we losing ground financially, socially, and spiritually? It is too easy to call something fascist, and I never do, but the expression used to be, "The clouds of Fascism are always on the horizon in America, but it rains in Europe." These days, the rain squalls are coming closer. They are just one town, or one state, over. How is this happening in America and what can we do about it? This book provides an answer to those questions.

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The writing has taken years. Every time I say I am done, the reporters say, “No, you’re not.” I must thank the teachers, mentors, and coaches with whom I shared schools. Equally, there were the shipmates, mechanics, best friends, and those I just brushed up against in life. Some are gone, but I still listen to them. The members of The Freedom Road Global Writers Group will all see their work here. Of the students, some have stuck around for decades. They never stop teaching.

Every one of them worked at helping me see the beauty hidden from me because I did not try enough to understand. The major credit goes to Karen. Without her beside me, through thick and thin, here and there, with and without, this book would not exist, and neither would I. I Love you.

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