

In nature, nothing exists alone.

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1962

Our fulfilment is not in our isolated human grandeur, but in our intimacy with the larger earth community, for this is also the larger dimension of our being. Our human destiny is integral with the destiny of the earth.

Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 1988

Look into the rear-view mirror of history and you will notice times when the established order begins to crumble. These turbulent times are the turning points when one world gives way to another.

They are the times when new stories arise at the heart of our culture — stories that help us make sense of a world in turmoil, stories that inspire us to face the challenge of an age of transition.

We have often faced transition times on our evolutionary journey. But never before on a planetary scale and thus never with the stakes so high.

To find the courage and creativity this transition will require we must fashion a new human story that restores our role as partners in the community of life. It will be a story through which we rediscover our role in the Earth's sacred love affair with life in all its forms — a story of eco-mutuality.

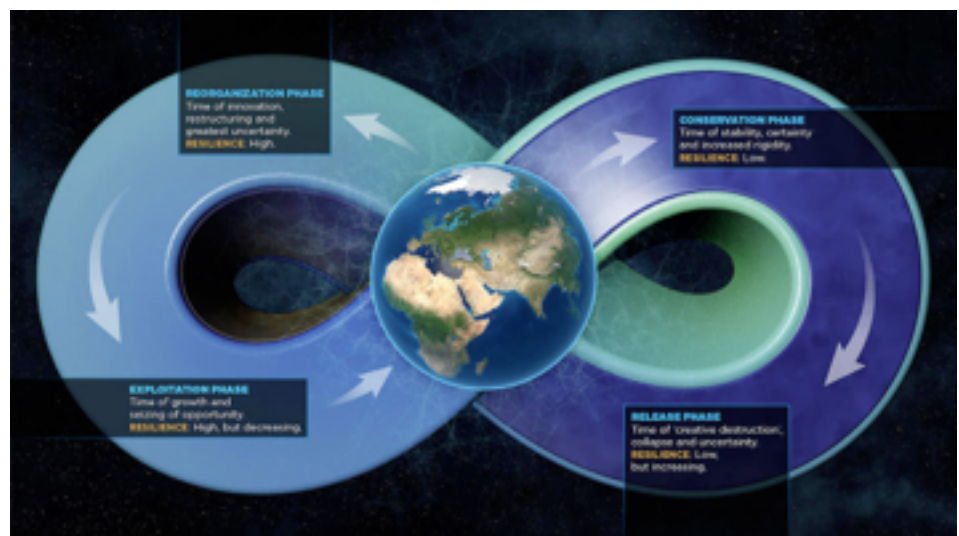
Creative destruction

Nature and history teach us that complex evolving systems — like ecosystems and civilisations — tend to cycle from pioneering growth to relatively stable maturity. In the process they accumulate rigidities that lead over time to a steady decline in the system's ability to adapt to change.

Eventually, internal dysfunction or changes in larger external processes push the system to a tipping point and breakdown occurs. This in turn creates the conditions for renewal.

Ecologists know this as the adaptive cycle and versions of it are emerging in other disciplines. Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon in his 2006 book *The Upside of Down* used the term 'catagenesis' to describe "the creative renewal of our technologies, institutions, and societies in the aftermath of breakdown".

This concept allows us to think about transition in fresh ways. Could the necessary transformation of our culture be the **consequence** of collapse, not a way of avoiding it?



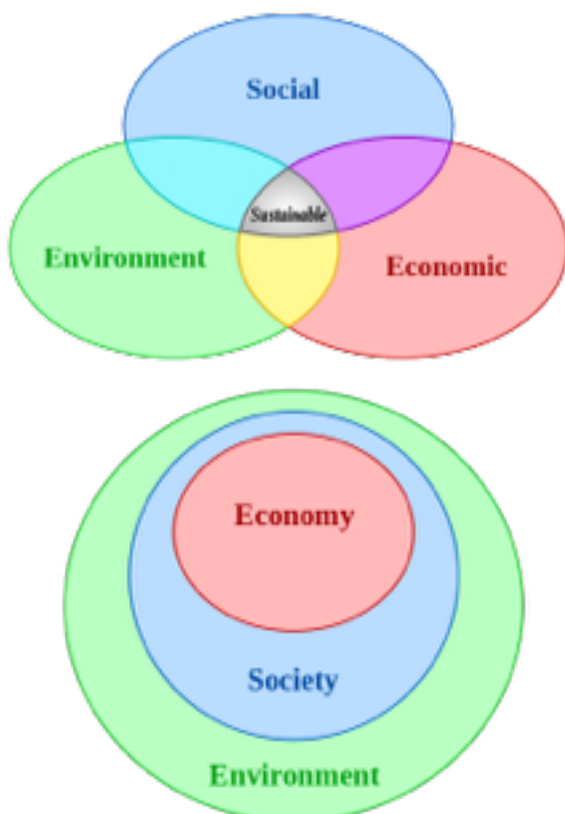
More info: <http://cbobook.org/key-messages-9.php?r=1&width=1920>

How we prepare for renewal through creative destruction would be quite different from the usual managerial models of sustainability.

Sustainability: a flawed story?

Sustainability is a contemporary story that inspires many deeply committed people to worthwhile action. But it is a story being steadily leached of useful meaning. Even fossil fuel corporations and their political camp followers can proclaim their own version of the sustainability narrative, apparently without a skerrick of irony.

Within the sustainability community there is a perennial debate about the relative merits of 'weak' sustainability, which aims to balance the needs of society, the economy, and the environment using tools such as triple bottom line accounting; or 'strong' sustainability which maintains the primacy of environmental imperatives over the demands of both society and economy.



The most widely accepted definition of sustainability is from the Brundtland Report (1987): “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This is fundamentally an anthropocentric or human-centred approach. By making human needs the basis for judgement and action it reproduces the very problem that has brought us to the brink of catastrophe.

Focusing on sustainability within the cultural and political envelope of the status quo, means we maintain the convenient illusion that 'we' (who?) are in control and can manage the transition to a viable planetary future by economic, technical and lifestyle tinkering.

It's not that honest efforts to advance sustainability are pointless. Many significant incremental gains can be achieved. It's just that we're attempting ad hoc workarounds when the problem is with the operating system — the dominant cultural values that define what is possible and desirable and, over time, shape the forms and functions of key social institutions.

How apt is Einstein's oft cited warning about the futility of attempting to solve complex problems using the modes of thinking that created them. This is precisely what we are doing in response to the systemic issues of our times.

Instead of sustainability we need a fresh mode of thinking about our place in the world. The term **eco-mutuality** may offer an opening into such a new worldview. Its meaning is immediately apparent — the goal of, in Thomas Berry's words, “a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and the Earth and all its living creatures”.

Old and new wisdom

"We're only here for a short amount of time to do what we've been put here to do, which is to look after the country. We're only a tool in the cycle of things ... [we] go out into the world and help to keep the balance of nature. It's a big cycle of living with the land, and then eventually going back to it..."

Vilma Webb, Noongar elder.
Elders: Wisdom from Australia's Indigenous Leaders,
2003

Most indigenous cultures share a common grounding in respect for the interdependence of all life. This is the foundation of their relationship with their environments which has served them well for countless generations.

In modern times this world view has been everywhere displaced by a heroic story of human exceptionalism. We alone, this story goes, stand outside of nature. We are destined, it says, to master the Earth and all its lifeforms and landscapes from the tiniest bacteria to the mightiest rivers and forests.

The results of this hubris have been disastrous for many other species as it ultimately will be for our own.

But there are still first peoples who preserve invaluable Earth-centric cultural resources. We need to draw on the cultural DNA of these indigenous ways of knowing and find the way to weave their wisdom into powerful contemporary stories of a mutually enhancing relationship with the Earth and all its living creatures.

The Science of Complexity

The voices of the first peoples have now been joined by scientists augmenting the ancient truths by unfolding a contemporary origin story of breath-taking magnificence.

From the first milliseconds of time as the building blocks of the universe came hurtling into being across the threshold of the knowable, to the flowering of life on our blue-green jewel of a planet, they tell a story of increasing complexity and coherence emerging from simpler origins.

When our mid 20th century leap into space revealed the fragile unity of our home, the seeds of a new planetary consciousness were planted. Then, the emergence of complexity science in the final years of the 20th century offered new ways of thinking about whole system change that transcend the simplistic linear causality of conventional politics and society.

We will find the organising principles of our cultural renewal in ancient respect for the interdependence of Earth's community of life, our growing understanding of the evolution of complex adaptive systems, and a new realisation that the only path is the one we all participate in making together.

Its underpinning values will be those of eco-mutuality.