

## Our Conscious Contribution - The Purpose



Dr. Michael Ben-Eli (right), with Sam Geil, Board Chairman of the International Green Industry Hall of Fame (IGIHOF)

Our friend, Dr. Michael Ben-Eli, Founder of The Sustainability Laboratory, was just presented with the 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award and inducted into the International Green Industry Hall of Fame.

We spoke to him on *what it is that a person can do to make a conscious contribution to the future.*

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*Q. What is the evidence that we are living in a time of change.*

A. The first thing is that you are here and asking these questions and doing what you are doing – speaking with leaders at the UN and in the consciousness community and listening to the collective voices on the planet.

It sounds like a simple question, but it is not; it has many dimensions. The question could be directed to a person, a community or the planet as a whole and it has implications to all these and other dimensions.

There is definitely a sense that something is going on that is unusual and we need to be aware of it, conscious of it, and that it requires a response – a response that has to be commensurate with the challenges we face.

The evidence that we are living in a time of change is manifest by a growing indication from many quarters that something new in history is occurring. It has to do with the magnitude and the impact of human activity on the planet. These have gotten to a point where our actions have become a major force in shaping conditions in the biosphere; this is completely new in human history.

Until recent times, human induced impacts were largely local in nature. It is the first time that, due to two factors – the huge increase in population and the related intensification in the rate of human activity – we have gotten to the point that everything we do is having a critical impact on the planet as a whole.

This is significant if we think of the planet as one system that has many interacting components. We are at a point where our actions are adversely affecting the carrying capacity of the environment on which we depend for our very survival. It is the first time in history that humans have become a major force in shaping the conditions of our total environment.

The direct evidence that is showing up everywhere, relates to phenomena such as climate change, the rise in atmospheric temperature, the collapse of fishing resources, the shrinking of forests, and more. There has never been a time in history when we could threaten the whole fish stock in the oceans. The same holds true for threats to other forms of life and the depletion of other natural resources. The sheer magnitude of all these impacts is a historical first.

These impacts also combine with a growing awareness of the planet as one whole system. We are beginning to realize that our impacts reverberate through the whole system. Because of the potential extent and the fact that emissions “here,” may affect the climate “there,” people need to think about the global impacts of their actions. In other words, our global impacts also carry an awareness of the planet as a whole. Awareness doesn’t exist by itself – it always relates to the dynamics of action.

This is the nature of transition—change in our circumstances calls for change in the understanding of the circumstance and then a response to that change.

This creates entirely new challenges and most of our decision-making and governance mechanisms are not up to these challenges. Many appear Neanderthal in nature. They have risen in the past and evolved to deal largely with local circumstances of an entirely different nature. We do not have the necessary systems in place to deal with planetary circumstances. The UN system, the closest we have to it, is not an effective enough mechanism to deal with these new circumstances.

We cannot continue in this way – our adverse impacts have become too significant. There is almost no component of the biosphere that is not adversely impacted by human activities. There is an altogether different scale involved, but also a different time element. Not only are we able to impact on a planetary scale now, but we are also overriding the time dynamics of ecosystems for recovery, and their regeneration capacities. This brings into question the rate of required response.

We no longer have the luxury for slow adaptation. We need a much more dynamic, timely and truly shift-making response.

*Q. What is the human part in change.*

A. The answer exists in the inherent potentiality of what it means to be human.

In the cosmos there are, apparently, two very different directions of processes – one is the process of diffusion, fragmentation and increase in entropy and the other is the process of

integration, consolidation and order creation. The sun, for example, diffuses its energies, but there are regions in space where energies are concentrated and order is being created. One such place is earth. Here, sun radiation combines with matter to create incredible order of increasing complexity, from simple organic molecules, to all forms of life, to whole ecosystems, and to human consciousness itself.

Human's most precious capacity is in the inherent, potential ability for creating order, for containing entropy – rather than amplifying it, as we currently do. The human mind, it has been suggested, is potentially the most powerful anti-entropic force that we know.

The first challenge is realizing why we are here in the first place – we are potentially “order creators.” The question is, how can we come together to reverse the pathological trends on the planet? How can we mature and develop away from our current adolescent behavior?

Can we come into consciousness fast enough to understand that what we do has great significance, even if it is largely negative at present? Can we live up to our promise and cosmic potential that has taken nearly 14 billion years to evolve?

We don't give ourselves the benefit of recognizing the great creative magic that we can do on the planet. This can only happen if a deeper consciousness can come into manifestation. Realizing the full human potential is the greatest challenge of our times.

Environmental problems are not ‘problems’ but rather, symptoms of a system that is stressed. The stress is not produced only because we are doing the ‘wrong’ thing—relying on a fossil fuel economy, for example—the stress results from the energy of something new that is trying to be born, to become manifest, and the effect of all the mechanisms that are currently in place, blocking it and holding it back.

There is a complex system here, which includes us. The system is trying to reconfigure itself. The reconfiguration, or response, is being arrested by all the mechanisms – institutions and ways of doing things – that were useful yesterday, but are no longer useful today and that, with their inertia, are holding us back. When a system is held back it produces pathology and myriad symptoms of disease.

The planetary ecosystem is trying to come to dynamic equilibrium so that all its essential elements can co-exist. Pathology is created when one element in a complex system starts to dominate at the expense of other essential components. This is what we are doing to the planet: reducing the variety, the diversity, upon which long-term viability of the whole depends.

The human part in this system has become a major force and exerts undue stress on the rest of the system. This creates conditions that require a response, but the response is not happening fast enough. There is a lot of baggage that stands in the way, including our basic models of reality, our values, ways of thinking, and many of the dogmas to which we stubbornly cling. All of this keeps us from seeing what is really happening and stands in the way of real change.

Our institutions and mechanisms are suddenly inadequate, including the lag in time for responding. This makes the stress on the system even more stressful and makes the symptoms, environmental and others, even more severe. As these stresses increase in severity, they impact humans more severely as well. In human social systems, stress manifests itself in violence, which is what we are increasingly witnessing now.

We need to shed our 'old skin' like a snake, throw out our excessive baggage and try to understand what response is required now—how we can participate, creatively and consciously, in shaping our own evolution.

Evolution can be regarded as a particular form of adaptation. Usually, adaptation requires adjustments within a current system as distinct from changing the system itself. The distinction is between change within a given system where the system remains basically unchanged, and change where the system itself is transformed. The current levels of stress in the system, in this case the biosphere, indicate that we need a major evolutionary shift. Merely tinkering at the margins will not do.

Humanity is perched at a critical step in its evolution. This is the biggest question of our times: Are we going to live up to the challenge of shaping the next step in our evolution as a species? The indications are that we are beginning to get the sense of what that change needs to be.

So there are two components of the evidence that we are living in a time of change—firstly, the signs of stress that we are seeing and, secondly, the growing awareness of the significance and meaning of this stress. The younger generation understands this intuitively and does not need to be convinced by argument. There seem to be a growing number of young individuals everywhere who are rejecting conventional expectations and seeking ways to contribute and do something for the planet and the common good.

This, incidentally, may be the reason why nature reproduces the way it does. When we live our lives, we accumulate experience and become increasingly conditioned by that experience. Nature needs to eliminate the old to keep the field open and free for new experiences and new possibilities.

*Q. In what way can we become conscious of our individual part in this.*

A. This is one of the fascinating aspects of this challenge that we face.

Throughout history, there were always individuals who reached higher levels of consciousness. These were unique individuals, so unique that we hold them in great veneration – Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and other great leaders and saints, all icons of expressions of the highest human potential.

The challenge now is to realize that 9 billion people need to become Buddhas! We can no longer rely only on a few leaders ahead of the pack. It has to be a truly collective initiative. The

scale of the collective transformation that is needed is unprecedented. It is a huge challenge. There are large disparities among human groups with regards to literacy, awareness and the freedom to act, and what might seem absurd to some, would be still accepted as commonplace by others.

In this, most educational mechanisms and institutions fail us too—they are simply not up to the task of ushering in the required transformation. More than just how to specialize and get a job, education should be about producing enlightened understanding of our larger role in the world. What is the impact we are having, and what is the way to direct it so that it becomes increasingly more responsible and inclusive—this is what education should be about.

We clearly need to reconfigure a new way of doing things. Not only do we need to develop new technologies and create new awareness and consciousness in individuals, but this consciousness needs to become the spontaneous behavior of the collective. We, humans, are actually the very technology that needs to be activated in a collective new way. We are an important element in the consciousness of the whole system itself.

Technology also needs to be very different. As we move forward, science and technology will play a critical part. Today, though, our priorities in managing both are misplaced. Tremendous resources and some of the best minds are currently focused on creating bigger and better instruments of destruction. We are amplifying entropy instead of creating order.

What we are facing is a “design challenge.” We need to redesign our state of being. Not just the physical element, but our whole experience on the planet. We ourselves are part of the larger design, but we are only conscious of it in a fragmented, separate way.

How we define our individual part has to start with becoming aware of things outside ourselves. We need to become more aware of our whole circumstance. The actual response, the creative response, cannot be arbitrarily dictated, but should be the spontaneous response of the individual, sensitive to others, and anchored to and faithfully reflecting the cumulative history of life itself.

Since the long-term viability of complex systems depends on their internal variety, the creative role of the individual is essential to the process. It is not about becoming a soldier that walks blindly in line, but to remain free, with integrity, understanding what is going on and not producing a pre-packaged response. This is the creative role of discovery – not to repeat the same pattern, but to have the freedom to try something new.

*Some final thoughts...*

It is absurd that we talk about the “consciousness community,” the United Nations, and the “evolutionary community” as separate entities. This is a symptom of our fragmentation. Inclusive and deep consciousness should dominate the United Nations system, which, in itself, should be a primary planetary tool for spurring evolutionary change.

Once things are separate it is very difficult to bring them together and integrate. Each separation becomes an epistemological camp that is usually very protective of itself and often antagonistic to others. We are seeing this in the relations between nations, political parties and other familiar groupings. This is not the way to optimize things. The model of competing forces, each trying to optimize itself, needs to be replaced with a model of collaboration that is able to project an optimized vision for the whole and then asks how best to go about it without too many preconditions.

Humans and human societies have changed before in response to changes in context. This is what evolution is about. Since evolution, by definition, is an open-ended process, we do not yet know exactly what we shall become next, but we do know that the requirements for change are here. These requirements are the consequence of an unprecedented set of adverse conditions and even if we don't have all the answers we have to explore for new ways until we succeed.

The challenge of establishing sustainability as the organizing principle on the planet is huge. No one has had the experience of organizing 9 billion people in an abundant, peaceful, harmonious way. We have to experiment. We cannot continue to rely on dated approaches that often characterize the UN system and national governments – too often they are good at telling us what cannot be done. We have to ask what we, as humans, want to attain, what kind of state do we want to achieve for the planet and then genuinely join forces in a bold effort to make it happen.

When we ask what would be a universally desired, inclusive condition for reorganizing human affairs in a new planetary system, it is bound to threaten every one of the conventional power centers that dominate our current world economy. Resistance to change is, therefore, inevitable and it will continue to create the pressures and stresses that we are witnessing now with our failure to change. The struggle is one we cannot abandon, nor dare to lose.

What can we do as humans? It is not just to strive for realizing our full potential, but also to recognize that we are part of a larger whole. What is the significance of humans as being part of a total ecosystem? The question is how can we enrich the planet instead of impoverish it, which is what we are doing now. If humans were able to rise up to their full potential, the rest would be in harmony.