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COMPLEXITY CHAOS COLLAPSE COMMUNITY CREATIVITY COMPASSION

Why We Need New Ways of Thinking

BY BARRY BOYCE

IN 1988, Kurt Schmoke, the young firebrand mayor of Baltimore, shocked the U.S. Conference of Mayors by proposing the decriminalization of drugs. Advocating an approach he would come to call “medicalization,” Schmoke argued that drugs ought to be a matter of public health, not law enforcement. Schmoke’s radical—and compassionate—attempt to demilitarize the war on drugs earned him the label “the most dangerous man in America” and ruined his political career. In a fictional treatment

of the controversy, former *Baltimore Sun* reporter David Simon, in the HBO series *The Wire*, cast Schmoke himself as a public health official and depicted a police commander as the spearhead of the medicalization approach.

Simon wanted to show how entrenched thinking—reinforced within the organizations created by that thinking—makes creative approaches almost impossible, because they are literally unthinkable. At a critical moment in the show, the police commander meets with his top officers. They tell him that his approach, while noble, just won't work. Harsh, violent enforcement—war—will be the best policy. "You mean the same old thing?" he asks. His most loyal sergeant replies, "Yeah, boss, the same old thing—but better."

The same...old...thing...but better. This is so often the approach we take—in our own lives and in our communities—when we face what leadership consultant and facilitator Adam Kahane calls, understatedly, "tough problems."

The same old thing doesn't work, Kahane says, because when it comes to complex, tough problems—global warming, food crises, civil war, terror, drugs, urban decay, persistent poverty—we have to go beyond the approaches that got us there in the first place. Kahane, who was a key participant in the Mont Fleur process that helped bring about the peaceful transition from apartheid to democratic rule in South Africa, is one of a loose but growing collection of thinkers, activists, academics, and social entrepreneurs who are searching for the "unthinkable"—the new ways that we can't see because of our old ways of looking.

These thinkers and advocates have not formed any formal association or movement (the very looseness of their association is seen as a virtue, in fact), but they all firmly believe that the good old world we've come

to know and love is coming apart at the seams. Systems of all kinds are breaking down and will continue to do so. In response, they champion ways of seeing and acting that acknowledge that the world is a chaotic, deeply interdependent place, a place that won't yield to attempts to overpower it. We must come to understand, they argue, the nature of complexity, chaos, and interconnectedness—and to train ourselves in ways of acting that embrace this unmistakable reality.

Adam Kahane says our approach to the future must meet three

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criteria. It must simultaneously be *systematic* (not piecemeal and divided into silos), *participative* (involving many people's ideas, energy, talent, and expertise), and *emergent* (able to move and adapt nimbly in a minefield of uncertainty). The hope is that we will act with courage and creativity; the fear is that if we don't, the world will face debilitating collapse on many fronts.

Over the past several months, I have been poring over the books and papers of four thinkers looking for new ways to solve global problems: Kahane, who wrote *Solving Tough Problems*; Thomas Homer-Dixon, author of *The Upside of Down*; Paul Hawken, who wrote *Blessed Unrest*; and Meg Wheatley, author most recently of *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. I interviewed each of them about the very difficult chal-

lenges the world faces today and what we can do that doesn't simply amount to "the same old thing—but better."

ADAM KAHANE was working as an analyst in the strategic planning department of Royal Dutch/Shell in 1991 when his career took an unexpected turn. Kahane was doing "scenario planning," a sophisticated tool for navigating a complex future that was pioneered in the 1970s by Pierre Wack, head of Shell's economic forecasting group in France. Because of Shell's expertise in scenario planning and its long involvement in South Africa, the company was asked to send a planner to facilitate an exercise in charting the future of a post-apartheid South Africa.

The exercise brought together twenty-two influential South Africans, leaders from both the anti-apartheid opposition and their adversaries within the white community. Over the course of a year, they held four intensive meetings at the Mont Fleur Conference Center on

a wine estate in the mountains just outside Cape Town. "They saw this as an opportunity," Kahane says, "to participate in giving birth to the 'New South Africa.'" The hallmark of Mont Fleur was that people with very different perspectives and power bases were able to envision the future together. This helped immeasurably during the radical transformation the country underwent.

Inspired by this success, Kahane has continued to travel the world at the behest of parties groping their way through intractable problems and crises. He has worked on post-war rebuilding in Guatemala, contested elections in the Philippines, civic rejuvenation in the United States, judicial reform in Argentina, and child malnutrition in India, to name a few. Kahane knows that none of these initiatives in solving problems through dialogue has been an



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ADAM KAHANE

PHOTO BY JOE MCCARRON



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unqualified success—and some have been utter failures—but he believes his thinking, and that of the many people he's been working with, has evolved in helpful ways. Now he has taken on one of his most difficult projects to date: climate change.

Climate change, Kahane says, is the paramount example of a tough problem, and before offering any prescriptions, he insists on a diagnosis. The problem with climate change, like the many other tough problems we face, is our response to complexity.

"There's a way to deal with simple problems on a small scale," Kahane says. This for the most part involves directing and controlling: if you want to fix a broken table, you roll up your sleeves, take

charge, and repair it, brush-slapping your hands together in accomplishment at the end. But it's different when a problem is complex. "If you try to do the same thing," Kahane says, "you will get disastrous results. You end up either getting stuck or resorting to some form of violence." It becomes "the war on..." fill in the blank.

A problem like climate change, Kahane says, is complex in three different ways. It's *dynamically* complex: the causes and effects are far apart in space and time (carbon generated fifty years ago is affecting the climate today). It's *socially* complex: different groups have widely divergent aims and interests (the developed world implores the developing world to join in sustainability initiatives



Scotia Square Spatial Continuum

at the expense of their economic growth). And finally, it exhibits *generative* complexity: it's new to us (there are no analogous situations and off-the-shelf solutions for massive climate change; we have never been here before).

Kahane has spent most of his consultancy since Mont Fleur focusing on dialogue, what he calls "opening," or even "love." But he has come to see that power is just as important. He's been inspired in this view by something Martin Luther King, Jr. said in a speech he delivered just six months before his assassination: "...power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic."

Kahane says an approach based on "opening up" and creating connection is half-right, "but dangerously so." Power is integral to life, he says. We start with "power-to," such as the power to have a house and a car and all the appurtenances of the modern lifestyle that enable us to get on with our lives, but insidiously this becomes

"power-over," because something (and often somebody) has to be exploited to make it possible. That leads us to a complex problem.

The kind of power we need, says Kahane, is "power-with." This kind of power, which King said is nothing more than "the ability to achieve purpose," applies force and influence but with a vigilant awareness of its effect on others and how their power will manifest. We need to "act *with* connection," Kahane says. "We don't have a choice between power and love. We have to do both."

Doing that is not straightforward, though; it involves feeling and listening as much as thinking and talking. Kahane feels that something the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping said captures this spirit perfectly: "We need to cross the stream by feeling for stones." He also likes to quote Trevor Manuel, the first black minister of finance in South Africa, who said about the country's great transition, "There was no paradigm, no precedent, nothing. We had to *carve* it, and so perhaps we were more willing to listen."

THOMAS HOMER-DIXON is a political scientist who is not content to remain within the confines of his chosen discipline. His books, while intricately detailed, do not read like abstract recitations of pre-digested ideas. They're travelogues of inquiry. He visits people and places, listens and observes, and carves out a new way of seeing, one that's tentative but driven by a strong belief that "we can do better."

For several decades, he's made it his business to research humanity's capacity to deal with the complexity it has wrought. Long-time director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Toronto, he was a frequent visitor to the Clinton White House and an adviser to Al Gore. In his 2002 book, *The Ingenuity Gap: Can We Solve the Problems of the Future?*, he presented evidence that the demand for ingenuity arising from the ever-increasing complexity of our world is far outstripping our capacity to supply it.

Heretofore we've been able to come up with technological fixes—and in Homer-Dixon's words, "throw huge amounts of energy at our problems"—to keep our ever-expanding Rube Goldberg contraption together. But now we will almost certainly find it necessary to accept some large breakdowns in human and natural systems and to develop radical new ways of running things as a result. Homer-Dixon's appetite for innovation has led him to take a position as the CIGI chair of global systems at the newly formed Balsillie School of International Affairs in Ontario. (CIGI stands for The Centre for International Governance Innovation, a think tank recently formed by Jim Balsillie, whose company invented the wildly popular Blackberry.)

"There are a couple of areas where I sometimes despair about our capacity to deal with what lies ahead," Homer-Dixon told me. "One is our cognitive characteristics and the other is the self-reinforcing nature of our economic system."

When Homer-Dixon speaks of our "cognitive characteristics," he refers to the fact that we adapt easily to small-scale, incremental change. It's what makes it possible to get up in the morning and not feel we're in a strange new world. It's part of our survival apparatus. And yet, Homer-Dixon says, this very capacity is "a real handicap when it comes to dealing with slow-creep problems. We just don't see the change, and the thing about slow-creep problems is they may be slow-creep for a while, but then all of a sudden there's a non-linear shift and we find ourselves in a crisis."

Our economic habits link up with every other problem we face, since at bottom economics is about how we choose to use the resources of the planet—in what ways, in what proportion, and at what rates. "We simply don't have a vision of an alternative economic system that isn't oriented toward unending material growth," Homer-Dixon says. "Until we have an alternative vision, or theory, we won't give up the one we have." Rather than a mere study of stock markets and gross national products, real economics is the interface between human beings and the world all around. And we are evermore out of touch with that world.

"Seduced by our extraordinary technological prowess," Homer-

Dixon writes in *The Ingenuity Gap*, "many of us come to believe that ... the reality outside our constructed world ... needs little attention because, if we ever have to, we can manage any problem that might arise there." But we are numb to the messages from our surroundings. "On a day-to-day basis, most of us in rich countries are increasingly sealed within the hermetic and sometimes illusory world of the human-made, the human-scaled, and the human-imagined," he says. This narcissism weakens our sense of awe and "our receptivity to critical signals ... that might awaken us to our deep ignorance of the potential consequences of our actions, and warn us against hubris."

In *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*, Homer-Dixon explores new ways of thinking about the world that might lead to new ways of acting. "There is a temporal order in dealing with our big problems," he told me. "First we have to change how we view the world, and that will cause us to change how we act."

Like Adam Kahane, Thomas Homer-Dixon asks us to take the time to appreciate complexity. He points out that with each passing decade we build more complexity into the conduct of everyday life, which requires ever more energy

and maintenance. While "connectivity" is generally thought of as a virtue, in complexity theory, systems with many close connections are said to be "tightly coupled." Tightly coupled systems can act like the proverbial chain of dominoes: a breakdown in one location sends rapidly cascading effects throughout the world. For example, if the few large food-growing areas we rely on suddenly experience breakdown at the same time that transportation costs spiral upward, a food crisis can develop within days.

Breakdown is one problem, Homer-Dixon says; debilitating

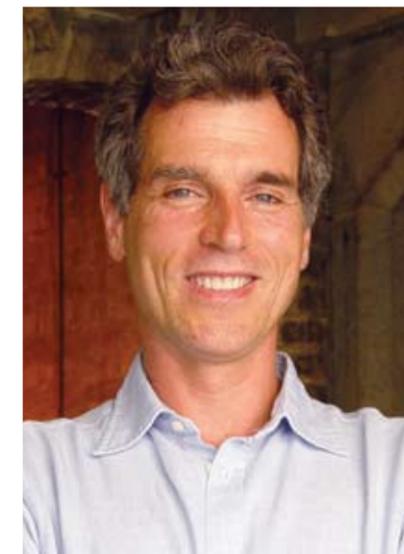


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One thing we all agree on is that we care about our kids. We want the best possible future for them and we have a pretty clear conception of what that good future means.

THOMAS HOMER-DIXON

collapse is another, and it's much worse. Breakdown is someone close to us getting a bad disease; collapse is when we become so distraught about it that we wreck our car and kill five people. Drawing on something called panarchy theory, he talks about learning to build more resilience into our systems through decoupling (striking a better balance between self-sufficiency and interdependence, you might say). Another form of resilience is the collaboration of diverse interests, and Homer-Dixon sees promise in open-source activities, like Wikipedia, in which we "suddenly have a worldwide-network technology, where we can basically all have a conversation together."

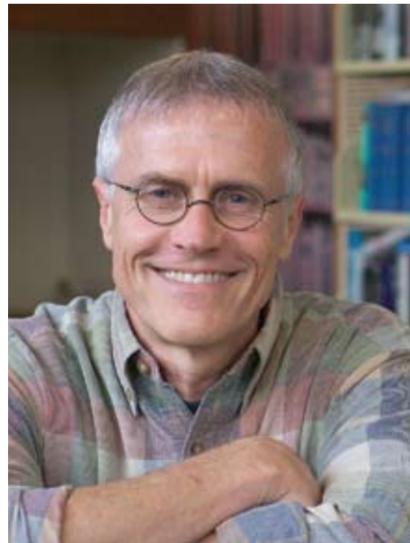
Above all, we must accept breakdowns as inevitable parts of cycles large and small. After a breakdown, rebirth and renewal can occur, in a process he calls *catagenesis*: the adaptive, creative, reformative period that follows the breakdown of a system. Although this proves the resilience of the larger system, we haven't done well in embracing a larger cyclical view. Since we cherish our systems and we want them to be permanent, he says, "we haven't really understood that our challenge isn't to preserve the status quo but rather to adapt to, thrive in, and shape for the better a world of constant change."

The answer, Homer-Dixon writes, is to develop a "prospective mind," a mind not fixed on the status quo, one that instead is "comfortable with constant change, radical surprise, even breakdown ... and must constantly anticipate a wide variety of futures. With a prospective mind, we're better able to turn surprise and breakdown, when they happen, to our advantage." We will, in short, be better able to achieve *catagenesis*, which he defines as "the creative renewal of our technologies, institutions, and societies in the aftermath of a breakdown."

While Homer-Dixon is not certain about the exact nature of "prospective mind" and how precisely to cultivate it, both individually and communally, he is clear that we need to know in our bones that we ride on the razor's edge between order and chaos. To truly know that we inhabit such a world makes us more resilient. But, I point out to him, we really, really like things to be ordered and predictable.

"Well, you know what?" he responds. "Get over it."

PAUL HAWKEN is the patron saint of the participative. Almost forty percent of his new book, *Blessed Unrest*, is devoted to an appendix listing non-profit groups that work to address the environment, indigenous rights, and social justice. Hawken is



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PAUL HAWKEN

He can speak in a quiet, ruminative voice about our body being "a backstory of the Earth four billion years ago, the molecular chains, elemental compounds, simple bacteria, and salty fluids that wash our eyes and surround our cells, forming a compendium of life that preceded us." He's a storyteller who recalls his boyhood days on his grandparents' farm, a waste-free world from a time before "recycling" was a movement, where "the barn was full of used washers, bolts, wire, and doodads," where "paper lunch bags were brought back from school and neatly folded for use the next day," where a "toy was a bald tire swinging from a sycamore."

But Hawken also has a forthright, declamatory voice that exhorts people to change. He writes that we're moving "from a world created by privilege to a world created by community," and that global themes "are emerging in response to cascading ecological crises and human suffering." Among these themes are "radical social change, the reinvention of market-based economies, the empowerment of women, activism on all levels, and the need for localized economic control." To Hawken, this is not a list of separate efforts; it's an interconnected, self-organizing web, the response of humanity's immune system to an assault on its life force.

Hawken is very busy meeting with as many members of this web as he can, so our interview had to take place by e-mail, some of his answers written from an airplane seat. I asked him about

the consummate "social entrepreneur," someone who colors outside boundary markers of change like "charity" and "protest," and applies the ingenuity of entrepreneurship to social development. He has written six books; founded a variety of companies, including Groxis, a portal and search engine interface software provider, and several natural food companies relying solely on sustainable agriculture; and is now heading the Natural Capital Institute, a research organization in Sausalito, California.

In the spirit of open-source, wisdom-of-the-crowd collaboration, the institute has created a "hub for global civil society" on the web. The World Index for Social and Environmental Responsibility (www.WiserEarth.org) provides a database of over 100,000 organizations in some 250 jurisdictions. It's collaboratively written, in wiki style, but organized using a very sophisticated classification scheme to "map the social landscape." It's a well-ordered free-for-all, evincing the blessed unrest, the balancing on the cusp of chaos and order, that is the centerpiece of a new worldview.

Hawken, like the others I spoke with for this story, is nothing if not reflective.

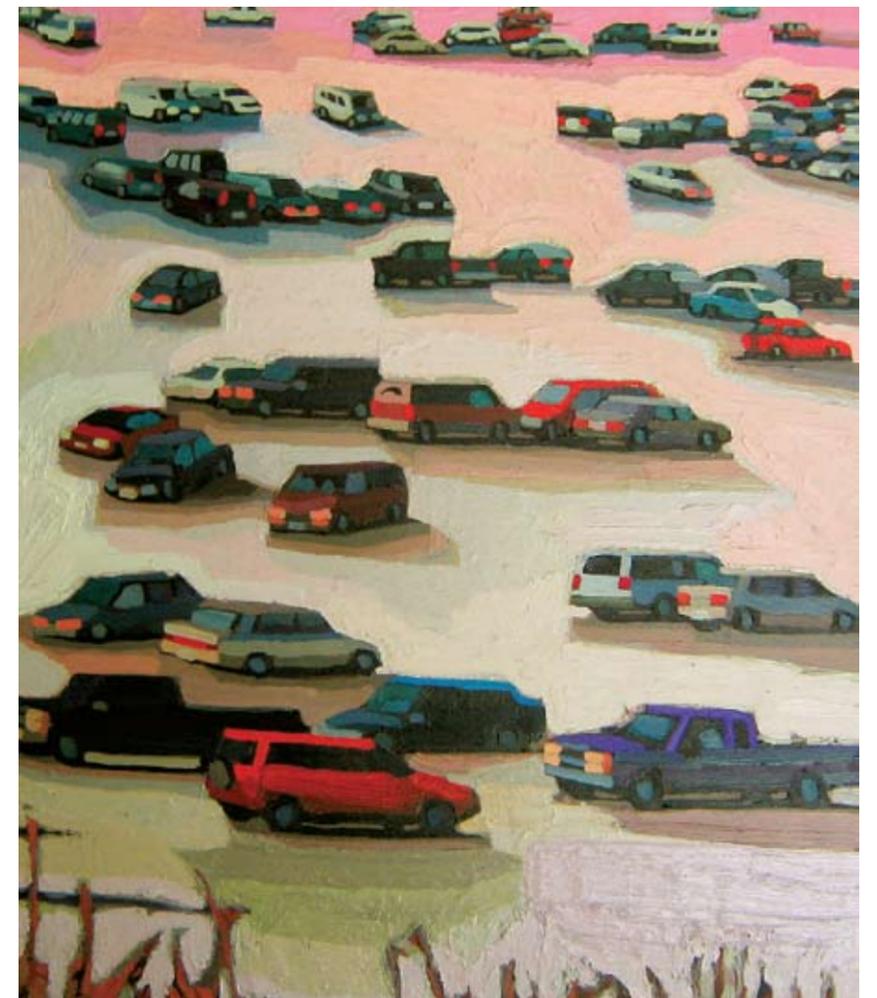
PHOTO BY TERENCE MCCARTHY

the paralysis that many people feel when they consider all these very tough problems, and that on top of it all they must struggle to meet the daily needs of their family. He replied that paralysis "is a sign of unexpressed grief," and he quoted the poet Czeslaw Milosz, who said "we should all feel sick in some way, experience some sense of despair, because that is normal." When we experience this, it is a sign we are sensitized to the world around us. "The sense of loss," Hawken wrote me, "makes us human and brings us more deeply in touch with our heart. The enormity of what is passing away is almost unspeakable. It's not just species and ecosystems, but entire cultures, the seasons, civilization itself." Such a prospect can "freeze us in our tracks."

One of our central sticking points, in Hawken's view, is ideology—rallying around a fixed view of things, which sounds the death knell for diversity. In *Blessed Unrest*, he quotes historian Arnold Toynbee, who "cautioned that civilization is a movement, not a condition, and the rise of uniformity consistently marks its decline." He also notes that theologian Karen Armstrong "strongly emphasizes that the early expressions of religiosity that arose during the Axial Age were not theocratic systems requiring belief, but instructional practices requiring action." Just so, Hawken says, the movement that he sees emerging "coheres into a values system but not a belief system."

"The most important step to take is to feel," Hawken told me. "Our courage and reverence and will are locked up in paralysis, released when we feel what we see and allow it in."

If we are able to get beyond centralizing so much on ourselves, we can find solutions in nature itself, Hawken says. "We are turning to nature, not merely as balm but as designer, mentor, guide, and muse. Kenny Ausubel of Bioneers puts it aptly when he says, 'The solutions in nature surpass our conception of what is possible.' Moreover, this is equally true about our human nature. What to do? Engage one's community, become more generous, cooperative, and enthusiastic. Creativity abounds, and our imaginations are limited only by what our mind believes."



Gasoline Rainbow

Community is the unit of change. The only way we get through difficult times is together.

MARGARET WHEATLEY



MARGARET WHEATLEY began her professional life as a high school teacher and then administered educational programs for disadvantaged youth. The challenges she encountered there led her on an educational quest of her own, into systems thinking and organizational behavior and change. Having seen so many attempts by well-meaning people to effect change through organizations—schools, health care institutions, governmental bodies, and non-governmental organizations—Wheatley felt there must be "a simpler way to lead organizations, one that requires less effort and produces less stress than our current practices."

A breakthrough for her came when she noticed that the view of the world emerging from the so-called "new science" did not square with how we actually run the world. New science—embodied especially in quantum physics, chaos theory, and the theory of self-organizing systems—showed her that even the idea of "running the world," as if it

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were a machine, was ill-suited to the way the world really works. *Leadership and the New Science*, her book that came out of this line of thought, was first published in 1992 and has been published in two revised editions since. She is also the co-founder of the Berkana Institute, which is dedicated to “serving life-affirming leaders.”

Like Paul Hawken, Wheatley takes nature as her “designer, mentor, guide, and muse.” We’ve acted like we want to be God, she tells me. “We need to play by the rules of the planet, and you don’t need any religion to tell you what they are. They are clear principles that you find in science, but also in spiritual traditions in the form of understandings such as interconnectedness and impermanence.” We’ve constructed “unnatural mega-systems that don’t work. They are crumbling and collapsing around us, and we are the casualties—stressed-out, disconnected from each other, moving too fast without a moment for reflection or a really good conversation.”

When Wheatley looks to nature as her guide, she sees “emergence” as the salient property. “In nature,” she writes in a Berkana paper written with Deborah Frieze, “change never happens as a result of top-down, preconceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. Change begins as local actions spring up simultaneously in many different areas.” That’s how all larger-scale systems come about. If you could sit on a mountainside for many decades, you would see a tree here or there sprout up in the valley below, and then more and more, until you would see something you might call a forest. But you’d be hard-pressed to find the blueprint.

What can we learn from this? According to Wheatley, we learn that the world “doesn’t change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what’s possible.” They realize all of sudden that they make up a forest, an ecosystem—a community.

“Community is the answer,” says Wheatley. “Community is the unit of change. The only way we get through difficult times is together. Yes, you work at the level

of the individual, but particularly today, people are so caught up in small personal and interpersonal dynamics, a downward spiral of narcissism and egotism, that they just can’t get over themselves.” As a consequence, Wheatley thinks the small group, not the large group or the individual, is the most potent focus. The best place to begin is in having a good conversation and cultivating relationships. According to emergence theory, these are the bonds that lead to change, growth, and influence. For Wheatley, all of the truly marvelous changes wrought by humans can be traced back to “some friends and I started talking and....”

I asked her whether there wasn’t important work to do at the individual level. She said one of the most important things we need to do is find time for reflection. “This kind of time has disappeared from our lives, and we need to reclaim it,” she says. “We must have time where we start to feel centered, peaceful, focused.” Out of that space, we can cultivate a real relationship and start a conversation.

Like the others I spoke with, Wheatley sees all kinds of breakdown as inevitable, and there will be casualties. There already have been. But the cataclysms we face in the future, Wheatley says, may lead us to more local focus, to self-sufficiency, to coming out of our isolated shells. Adam Kahane likes to repeat a distinction Wheatley taught him. She sees a difference between *giving up*, throwing your hands up in exasperation and frustration, and *surrender*, embracing the power of that which has overtaken you. Wheatley is not certain how many people are ready to surrender. “The kind of breakdowns we’re experiencing may force more collaboration and community on us, but I have to say, I haven’t seen it yet. As things break down, it’s either going to force us into community, or we will kill each other more.”

IT’S DAUNTING to talk to knowledgeable, insightful people who are so sure things are going to fall apart, and also sure that a little better version of the same old thing won’t be enough. Yet each of them sees promise. Not a dewy-eyed, mushy kind of promise, not love without power, or a grand ideology to rally round, but a realistic promise that in crisis we will find resilience, that we will be thrown back on ourselves and our communities and what counts. That’s the way of nature, including human nature.

What I find striking is how close their view is to the core Buddhist principle of interdependence, the teaching that there are no self-sustaining, permanent, inherently existing entities; that everything emerges as part of a great web of interlocking relationships. Suzuki Roshi referred to it as the interplay of “dependency and independency.” Environmentalist Stephanie Kaza wrote in the March, 2007, issue of this magazine that “the experience of a systems thinker, who brings awareness to all their relationships with specific human and non-human beings” is equivalent to what a Buddhist might call the “penetrating experience of interdependence.”

In Buddhism, however, the philosophical understanding of interdependence is coupled with the practical understanding that we need a mind discipline to break the habit of treating entities as permanent and independent. To get us out of our mess requires more than an intellectual understanding of what’s

wrong and what’s right with civilization.

Mindfulness-awareness meditation allows us to quell the anxious roiling of our mind and to see the world and ourselves in all of their slow-creep splendor. It is precisely the tool to cultivate Homer-Dixon’s “prospective mind,” to help us act “emergently,” and to attune ourselves to the rhythms of our surroundings and our fellow community members. Frankly, it’s hard to conceive of how we can genuinely change our view and way of acting without such a discipline. Without it, how, in the face of chaos, uncertainty, and fear, will we not fall back into fighting for dominion over what we imagine to be “our world”?

Working with the mind through such practices reveals connectedness and unlocks caring and compassion, which these thinkers say is the very driving force of positive change. When I asked Thomas Homer-Dixon where he finds hope, in spite of his despair about how deeply ingrained our self-defeating habits are, he talked about our children’s children’s children. “We don’t need complete agreement on a way forward,” he told me, “but human beings know what they want at bottom. It may sound trite, but across all the divisions of race and ethnicity, religion and civilization, class, caste, and rule, one thing we all agree on is that we care about our kids. We want the best possible future for them and we have a pretty clear conception of what that good future means. It’s not a future full of material stuff, but a future in which our children are secure and safe and can develop their potential and flourish as human beings.” ♦