

# Human Resilience, Adaptation, Transformation and Development Reflections on the 2011 International Science and Policy Conference

Larry Glover

Will you and I, can humanity adapt fast enough to the great acceleration of change going on all about us so as to be capable of thriving in the new world now being born? This question haunted me as I attended the recent Resilience 2011: Navigating the Complexities of Global Change conference at Arizona State University in Tempe. This was the second such conference; in '08 it was held in Stockholm.

Hanging out with 700 or so of the top resiliency and sustainability scientists, researchers and practitioners from around the globe was an opportunity not to be missed by me. I expected it to be an exciting experience, but given two keynote-type lectures a day and over 150 scientific papers presented daily for four days in a row... it was like kayaking oceanic swells of cognitive, conceptual and analytical energy.

Resilience 2011 opened the day after the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan, and the morning's breaking news was of a nuclear disaster in the making. The epic human disaster was acknowledged and viscerally felt in the room. It lent symbolic urgency and a tangible presence of why we gathered. Roughly half of us had traveled from outside of the U.S., and all of us were seeking to explore the possibilities and potentials of human survival and thrivability in a world where the manmade and the world of nature increasingly appear to be in conflict. The list of such crises and potential tipping points of ecological destabilization have become so common that it is easy to be mentally and emotionally anesthetized to their looming impact.

And indeed, the largely ineffectual ability of these scientists to communicate their findings regarding the extremities of our collective circumstance to the public was cause for frequent self-reflection and examination. Why have we been so ineffective? What will it take to shift public perceptions and our social institutions and for policy makers to move into proactive modes of adaptation?

C.S. (Buzz) Holling, the renown father of Resilience Thinking in ecology (now also increasingly applied in social systems sciences) said, "Since my book *Panarchy* came out, there has been increasing interest in the transformation aspect of the resiliency cycle." Thus he acknowledged the growing recognition of the need for transformation in our personal and collective worldviews if we are to bring them into alignment with the reality of the Earth as a living system. Requisite to this adaptation is the courageous willingness to see what is, what we have and what we are collectively creating. This requires the recognition that "We are not in Kansas anymore," as Dorothy rightly said to Toto. The fact is we are in uncharted territory.

Humanity now lives in a world of our own co-creative but largely unconscious partnership with Planet

Earth. In the newly named geologic age of the Anthropocene, humankind is a biogeophysical force upon the planet along with water, wind, and yes, earthquakes, and historical life-quenching giant meteorites too.

Interestingly, I don't believe I ever heard reference to the phrase, "6th Great Mass Extinction" at the conference. This is the increasingly used reference for the adaptive challenge expected to be too much for perhaps 75% of species on the planet to survive even another 300 years. (Where is Noah when we need him anyway?)

Adaptive Capacity and the Adaptive Cycle were a few of the most frequently used terms throughout the conference; these and references to flexibility, hardiness, robustness and sustainability, perturbation, front loops, back loops and...time. The longer our awakening takes, the less time and resources and the less our resilience capacity will be for adapting and transforming ourselves and institutions for what will come.

Three time periods each day were devoted to multiple panels of presentations in six different conference tracks. I attended panels on everything from the resilience and sustainability of our cities to our agricultural systems, energy systems, businesses, education, forests, lakes, desert riparian areas, grasslands, climatic destabilization, the role of innovation, urgent Biophilia and urban gardening, Topophilia, desperate human migrations, and so much more. The words change and adaptation were heard in every presentation.

I caught the conversational attention of a few folks however when I noted one of the Wild Resiliency Assertions: "Adaptation Works Until It Kills You!" ([wildresiliencyblog.com/wr-assertions/](http://wildresiliencyblog.com/wr-assertions/)) And that is exactly what adaptation does when we continue adapting ourselves to fit into a worldview that is out of sync with reality. This kind of adaptive thinking is the worldview-handicap behind our banking collapse, Enron's fantasy bookkeeping and the systemic assumptions leading to the war in Afghanistan and Japan's current double blow nuclear debacle. This delusional adaptive thinking is why our social systems are collapsing around us. And our forests, waters and fisheries as well.

No blame. We are in this together and our evolutionary spiral could not but have brought us to where we now are: We are living in the end times of the Age of Separation and in the birthing times of the Age of Reunion.

This is articulated eloquently by author Charles Eisenstein in *The Ascent of Humanity: The Age of Separation, the Age of Reunion, and the Convergence of Crises that is Birthing the Transition*. It is a six hundred page book and worth the read for those invested in helping co-create the "more beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible." Therein, Charles places human development both within a historical context and in a visionary worldview of human thriving.

Such a vision of human flourishing and thriving is a vital offering if we are to also effectively communicate the desperation of our current human vulnerability. It is too damn hard to open our eyes to what is, and a sure prescription for despair without this opening to a vision of something beyond sustainability.

This will be a new vision of community and a new vision of what it is to be a human being. This will be an integration of the arts and the sciences, an integration of the body, mind and spirit.

This is a challenge, at its core, of identity. Philosopher, historian and cosmologist Thomas Berry articulated this challenge as The Great Work, and the requisite worldview of such a time as the Ecozoic Era. He described it as the era of humanity consciously playing our role with Earth and life as co-creators of a thriving planet.

Now is the time of this birthing. Now is the time of our birthing into this new story, a worldview of our interconnectedness with all of life. We just had to leave home so to speak, before we could return and so appreciate the long journey of our human transformation into beings of conscious presence. In truth, this is a story of a species and individuals developing from a fetal dependency into childhood and adolescence, and now facing the challenges of consciously and developmentally transforming into co-creators of our future in concert with Planet Earth.

Perhaps it is we who are the Noahs we have been waiting for. And the Ark capable of carrying us into that future is the developmental transformation of our consciousness. This is a birthing process and we are now in the midst of it.

Larry Glover is the director of the Wild Resiliency Institute, whose mission is “to serve beauty and wholeness through inspirations and strategies from nature for thriving in turbulent times.” He is a speaker, resiliency coach and consultant, and blogs at [wildresiliencyblog.com](http://wildresiliencyblog.com). E-mail: [larry@wildresiliency.com](mailto:larry@wildresiliency.com)

#### PULL QUOTES:

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