

Transformative Learning & the Tao of History: Spirituality in the Postindustrial Revolution | Part 3

By Brian Milani,

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Beyond Religion: Mysticism as the *Inner Core* of Postindustrial Politics

Today, new productive forces based in human creative development have changed longstanding relationships between individual and collective, as well as between politics, economics and culture. This has particular implications for the nature of religion and politics.

First of all, human development (a “cultural” project) has become the nexus of **economic** development. The primary *means of production* to be seized by the new working class are *within* us. Human development happens everywhere, and it is not necessary to have prior control of the state to begin establishing appropriate alternatives—which I tried to demonstrate in my book. I also tried to demonstrate there that real postindustrial politics takes place in the realm of everyday life. The prioritization of human development almost completely eliminates the distinctions between politics, economics and culture.

A key thesis of the book was that it will be impossible to tap postindustrial human and ecological potentials as side-effects, spin-offs, by-products or trickle-downs of material and monetary accumulation. Unlike the material accumulation of early industrialism, *quantitative* criteria and goals cannot drive *qualitative* wealth production. Social and environmental need must be **directly** targeted. While in the transition, it is certainly true that the profit-motive can in many situations be reengineered to spin-off more qualitative wealth. But for the long haul, for the economy as a whole, means and ends must be integrated. Producing for quality and regeneration depend upon returning both matter and money to a status of *means-to-an-end*.

This also suggests a basic change in the nature of politics: away from being a means of contesting the distribution of social power, and towards the direct creation of regenerative activities. Politics is, after all, is the way of making collective change and regulating social affairs. Today it must become participatory and developmental. If it is to do so, it must utilize images and symbols that resonate strongly with potentials deep in the human psyche. That is, it must fulfill almost precisely the function once served by religion.

Politics and religion are both collective modes of consciousness and change. The difference between them has been that, until now, politics has been concerned with social change, and religion has (ostensibly) been concerned with individual values. With [postindustrialism](#), politics must become concerned with human development, and so it must become more like religion, using deeper symbols and rituals. Religion, for its part, must become more political, since social change is the appropriate concern for a collective mode of consciousness.

Religion’s other roles are—or must become—obsolete. Its social function of justifying oppression and exploitation clearly jeopardizes the survival of our species—and many other species to boot. Religion’s spiritual role of acting as a form of collective attunement is also affected by the imperative that individual self-actualization be generalized to all human beings. It is no longer sufficient for individuals to be satisfied with indirect spiritual experience, and related forms of ego-dependence. Certainly we still need symbols and rituals that support self-actualization and ecological regeneration, but this is precisely the role of politics today. Therefore, if religion is to survive in its only remaining progressive role—as a mode of collective



attunement to our evolutionary potentials—then it must become virtually indistinguishable from postindustrial politics.

The imperatives of planetary individuation suggest that, in the same way that mystical [self-actualization](#) served as the “inner core” of civilized religion, it has now become the inner core of postindustrial politics. Or alternatively, it has now become the inner core of a postindustrial religion that now takes revolutionary social change as its principal goal.

The Evolutionary Synthesis: The Ecozoic and Postindustrial Return to Gaia

Two main strains of thought seem to exist on progressive spirituality and human evolution. One tends to be more mystical, emphasizing individuation, the attainment of levels of superconsciousness and transpersonal awareness. The other is more social, ecological or “[Gaian](#)”, emphasizing the necessity of going beyond all forms of domination and exploitation, to reintegrate with natural process, and to establish egalitarian ecological societies.

From my perspective, both are equally important and must be combined, because one will not be possible without the other. For this reason, Rudhyar’s insight into the dialectic of development is crucial: civilization’s very progress, and its most important evolutionary contributions, depended upon the domination of nature, and upon alienated suppression of related human capacities—capacities that are now central to postindustrial development. These are the “yin” capacities of intuition, integration and collectivity associated with nature and the feminine.



Am I saying that brutalities of class exploitation, patriarchy and environmental destruction have been necessary for humanity to now achieve a new level of consciousness and society? Not exactly, but close. Who knows if humanity might have managed to find a different, more harmonious, way to develop rational capacities, historical awareness, greater technological power, and individual/planetary consciousness? Who knows if it was really possible to achieve, in Wilber’s words, evolutionary “differentiation *without dissociation*”? The point is that if didn’t happen that way, and we have reached our current situation by way of violence—against nature, against women, against ourselves in all sorts of way.

However we got here, our responsibility is now to return to nature—not as a regression to a past state—but consciously, with more freedom, and with more responsibility. This is why people like Thomas Berry call real postindustrialism the [Ecozoic Era](#).

We shouldn’t fool ourselves, however, about our current level of development, because it is mostly potential, latent within us. The evolutionary space we have attempted to create between us and our biological/collective past is somewhat illusory. We can perhaps do something with this space today, but in itself it is disabling, prompting in us a deep sense of insecurity. Despite our suppression of nature and “the natural” within us, we are perhaps ever more at the mercy of seemingly irresistible and additive compulsive “biological instincts”—as the size of the pornography industry shows. Despite our achievement of an almost psychotic individualism, we have also not managed to free ourselves from the ego’s distortion of primitive *collectivity*: the [herd mentality](#) expressed in fascism, racism, and ethnic cleansing.

In short, ego-consciousness cannot deliver on its promises of individuation, differentiation and freedom. Civilized ego-development has contributed some tools we can use; but we need to make a break from the ego to properly use them in a constructive way. We must allow a return of the repressed *yin-capacities* as expressed in Gaia consciousness and green economics, in the wisdom traditions, in [radical feminism](#), and in grassroots movements for [direct democracy](#).

As I argue in my book, we have the tools and conditions to gradually achieve such a transformation, but real postindustrialism can never come on the crest of an inexorable external Megatrend. The changes must be fully conscious and intentional. If not, then they will be the wrong changes, simply aggravating our problems. That said, current conditions are forcing big changes on us—but they still leave us with big choices.

For example, it seems clear that the very development of productive forces is forcing us to reintegrate with nature—in *some way or another*. Our rational-scientific knowledge of nature is penetrating so deeply into nature that we are gaining the power to manipulate genes and deliberately change DNA codes—a dangerous and potentially very destructive game. On the other side of the coin, we have developed incredible ecological knowledge—through [permaculture](#), living machine water treatment, industrial ecology, etc.—to help restore natural systems while living abundantly and learning exciting new skills. As I emphasized in my book, a green economy works by reinserting human activities benignly within nature, like sailboats in the winds of natural processes. Green alternatives are already being developed in every sector of the economy.

Therefore the choice is ours as to which form of integration with nature we will explore: the imperialist or the ecological variety. My point is that our current level of knowledge about nature, puny as it still is, has taken us to this crossroads. The new productive forces are forcing some kind of integration with nature on us.

All this, of course, raises what our more holistic development means *for nature* if we are successful in realizing our potential. Nature is evolving, and we are part of that process. We may be in “[coevolution](#)” with other species on the planet, but we do have a very specific role to play. Various writers have suggested that our increasingly self-conscious culture and technology constitutes a new kind of “planetary nervous system” for [Gaia](#)—if human consciousness can tune in to Gaia’s already existing self-regulating modes.

These metaphors can be helpful to raise important questions, and to fuel discussion and debate. But coming up with definitive answers right now is less important than simply acknowledging that our conscious evolution does mean something for the rest of creation, and we have responsibilities to live up to. Although I argued that our individual self-actualization is something of an “end-in-itself” when compared, for example, to earlier forms of Shamanism, we must recognize that, ultimately, our development serves a purpose far beyond human consciousness, be that individual or social.

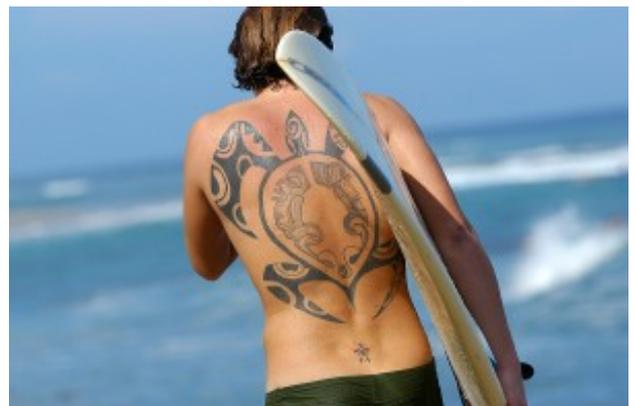
This is not evolutionary egoism, since every species is special in some way. That we are expressions of a new mode of self-consciousness in evolution does not make us superior. From the point of view of *cosmogensis* or the evolution back to the Absolute, we are only half way there, at best. And compared to other species, we have not even begun to fulfill our potentials. Given this fact, spiritual or historical egoism would be our biggest sin, the biggest block to our development. Ultimately, we are here to be of service. As Nikos Kazantzakis (1960) wrote, we are “improvised bridges”, thrown down over a cosmic chasm, over which ever more powerful forces must surge. Articulating a responsibility to Gaia is one way of being aware of our responsibilities to all of creation and not simply humanity. It also helps offset the individualistic preoccupations that can sometimes come even from a commitment to the mystical traditions.

Neoprimitivism in the Global Village

Industrial capitalism has been in a dilemma for the past century. Its survival depends on extending the *yang* qualities of civilization, but it needs to selectively employ the new productive forces in its competitive struggle. Even in our destructive global economy, we see hints and suggestions of *yin-energies* trying to squeeze through. I reviewed many of the political-economic expressions in my book: the trends toward decentralization, the importance of human creativity and life-long learning, the potentials for internal self-regulation in complex systems, the growing ineffectiveness of external bureaucratic organization, and so on. Perhaps most importantly we see them in the rise of new social movements with more qualitative concerns: feminism, ecology, aboriginal rights, human potential, etc.

Contemporary interest in things “primitive” is pervasive—in World Music, in folk art, in aboriginal cultures and spirituality, in studies about and metaphors of “village” culture, in mythology, etc. Decades ago, [Marshall McLuhan](#) (1962, 1964) pointed out what he called “mythic” (or all-sense) forms of perception encouraged by our emerging electronic environment and the rapid pace of change in contemporary culture. The speed of change often forces us to forsake rational-analytic thought—which takes too much time—for more **whole-body** intuitive perception of larger patterns.

As I described in my book, the industrialization of culture—although somewhat distorted by capitalism—has brought a new dynamic to the technological extension of



our senses and functions. Up until the appearance of the NPFs, this extension had been mainly that of our muscles and bodily controls (like heating/cooling), and was fairly external, unbalancing our perceptions. Increasingly over the last century we have begun to extend our ***minds and nervous systems***, through an electronic infrastructure. If we can, for a moment, leave aside some of the distorted applications of this technology by capitalism, we can see that this infrastructure has the potential to integrate rather than fragment our sensual balance. As McLuhan (1964:64) wrote,

“By putting our physical bodies inside our extended nervous systems, by means of electric media, we set up a dynamic by which all previous technologies that are mere extensions of hands and feet and teeth and bodily heat-controls—all such extensions of our bodies, including cities—will be translated into information systems. Electromagnetic technology requires utter human docility and quiescence of meditation such as befits an organism that now wears its brain outside its skull and its nerves outside its hide.”

The new milieu can and should encourage a greater [*field-consciousness*](#), like that of a hunter/gatherer, a Zen monk, or Tai Chi master. It encourages identity to be more connected with the mind, rather than the contents of the mind—with the movie *screen* rather than from the *images* projected on it. Without sacrificing our powers of analysis and abstraction, we would nevertheless employ them more selectively, and try to stay more in touch with the *patterns* of flow of knowledge and reality. The focus would, as in primitive society, be more on ***context***. Whereas our rational consciousness places such a great emphasis on the visual (a very separative sense), a postindustrial neoprimitive culture would feature a much greater balance of the senses, with a particular emphasis on hearing and touch, which are more integrating and inclusive forms of perception. Being more anchored in sensing than simply thinking, consciousness and identity would reside in a better balance between mind and body. Or rather, the mind would be centered in the whole organism, not simply our heads.

This more integral consciousness is obviously not emerging spontaneously from the megatrends of capitalist development, contrary to what some pop postindustrialists would have us believe. Despite the emergence of very interesting and progressive subcultures, particularly among the young, in music, visual art, electronic technology, etc., the mainstream expressions of these potentials in the mass consumer culture are typically quite alienated, or even decadent. We are fortunate, however, to have among the wisdom traditions those of aboriginal peoples. They have been able to preserve much of the sense of communion with nature typical of hunting/gathering and neolithic societies while also pioneering holistic individual development.

The spirituality of First Peoples can be particularly helpful in the creation of the new developmental myths and “universe stories”, which writers like [Thomas Berry](#), [Brian Swimme](#), [Edmund O’Sullivan](#) and [Charlene Spretnak](#) have stressed as being so important to creating a new world. Not only does native culture place particular emphasis on sensitivity and respect for nature, it also combines concerns for individual and collective development. In contrast to some of the more isolating strategies of the Eastern traditions, most First Peoples have nurtured “in the world” spiritual consciousness. Many of the myths, symbols, insights and practices of native peoples can, under their guidance, be employed in developing deeper and more transformative political and environmental relationships. Perhaps most importantly, however, it is essential that non-aboriginal cultures recognize the importance of supporting native peoples in their quest to maintain and develop their own traditions. This includes support for land claims and self-determination, as well as for all other necessary material, economic and educational resources that can allow their cultures to flourish.

Individuation and the New Mind

There are definite parallels between society integrating with nature, and the individual mind reintegrating with the body. As Rudhyar and Wilber argue—and something I think not fully appreciated by many [Deep Ecologists](#)—our return to nature cannot be simply a return to instinct, to collectivity, or even the [mimetic](#) consciousness of primitive humanity. We have new kinds of responsibilities that come from our new freedom from scarcity and tribal exclusivism. There is a new kind of perception and consciousness that must emerge. Reinserting our economies benignly within natural processes is much like the meditator or Tai Chi player centering their minds within the body. Disciplined observation within this sensual balance can allow something transcendent to emerge. The realm of the “vertical” is not found outside the horizontal-material world. One is most likely to find the spiritual when fully being “inside” one’s body.

It is not likely that the social and ecological changes possible and necessary today can take place without thoroughgoing individual change. This will only be possible with *new disciplines of practice*. Real individual change involves much more adopting new values, or ethics or even lifestyles—it involves deep-seated ***perceptual*** change and new powers of mind. Today our identity tends to be based on the most recent thought or emotion to drift over the mind. In this state, talk about “the sacred” can amount to no more than the substitution of one concept for another; and even archetypal symbols and sounds can be romanticized if

the mind is not prepared to receive them properly. We need both to cultivate both deeper forms of perception and identity, and to find ways of maintaining this awareness in everyday life.

The wisdom traditions tend to see the ordinary mind as something of a filter. Reducing the amount of information we receive through the brain and nervous system allows us to process it more easily. It allows us to function in everyday tasks. But it also limits our view of reality. Disciplined work on the mind, becoming sensitive to subtle perceptions, is the key to developing a deeper sense of identity. For most people, this requires some kind of meditative practice. But there are many kinds of meditative practice, including forms of art and movement that can satisfy the inclinations of different kinds of people. Even when certain states can be experienced, there is still the challenge of bringing them into everyday activity. Various kinds of disciplines of self-observation are necessary for most people to accomplish this.

The wisdom traditions are crucial in helping us “[cleanse the doors of perception](#)”, to begin to see and sense more deeply, and to create the disciplines that can help us bring deeper consciousness into everyday life. But this ultimately requires something of a transformation in these traditions, because many of them grew up in patriarchal cultures and incorporate various kinds of repressive cultural baggage. Sexist relationships must go, but also certain kinds of hierarchical or authoritarian relationships. How one separates the authentic authority of knowledge from more culture-bound patriarchal authority is a very difficult question. We don’t want to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water. If we are to value and incorporate the inherited wisdom of traditions like Zen, Sufism and Tibetan Buddhism, these solutions will have to be improvised on the fly.

Going beyond sexism is, however, crucial in all areas of life if we are to achieve new levels of individuation. Gender roles are perhaps the single most important psycho-social pattern of conditioning that must be broken to allow a more holistic balance of energies within people. This means not just formal equality between genders and the end of heterosexual domination, but moving to unleash *yin* energies in all realms of human activity. For men, this implies a substantial internal transformation to overcome repression of life energy into the genitals, to go beyond habitual objectification of other people, and to develop a consistent mentality of service and cooperation.

Because gender roles are simultaneously individual and social, women are in a strategic position. Women’s “work” has always been closely connected with their “lives”, and for this reason radical feminist perspectives on change have tended to be more holistic and integrative. Feminist perspectives on the economy, on development, on architecture and planning, on citizenship and politics, on the environment, and on spirituality have many insights to offer on the nature of the relationship between postindustrial individuation and social change.

New Age Transformative Learning

In [Designing the Green Economy](#), I argued that critics and commentators, both inside the social movements and out, have tended to drastically underestimate the qualitative nature of the changes that need to take place simply for us to survive as a species. We are at an evolutionary threshold where “[sustainability](#)” and partial reforms will only slow down the process of social and environmental decay. Our task is more accurately seen as social and ecological **regeneration**, which is based in the new productive forces of “people production” and human creativity. Tapping these potentials, as I have argued here, necessitates a new level of human consciousness: a holistic individuation through which we really begin to explore realms of superconsciousness.

For this reason, the agenda for truly transformative learning is a disconcertingly ambitious one. We can, however, be comforted by two facts. One, the changes that must take place can only emerge organically and incrementally. If they take place from the top down, all at once, they are the wrong changes. So while time is short, the initial goals can and must be manageable.

Two, the work of transformative learning is already fairly advanced. In the last forty years, social movements have emerged to oppose, and provide alternatives to, virtually every form of domination, and increasingly the various forms of “social movement learning” are finding common ground. Here, I include the human potential movement as a social movement, although its focus is more internal,



because it is an expression of our current potentials, the same as most of the social movements.

As people self-consciously concerned with transformative learning, I believe our primary responsibility is to acknowledge what is already taking place, to help call attention to it, and also assist in the cross-fertilization of individual, social and environmental change. Much, if not most, of the most important education is being done outside the mainstream educational system, and it is chronically short of resources.



In the second half of *Designing the Green Economy*, for example, I sketched the outlines of regenerative wealth production in key sectors of the economy, and transitional strategies to accomplish this. At this moment the established school system provides almost no education and training for these crucial areas in permaculture, industrial ecology, green building, appropriate technology, community financial systems, etc. Even university environmental studies faculties are almost exclusively focused on nature appreciation or environmental protection, rather than on more transformative ecological alternatives.

This situation is even more extreme when we consider holistic individual development. Lower levels of consciousness are acknowledged, but not higher levels; subconsciousness, but not superconsciousness. And, not surprisingly, the mind is divorced from the body. Mind/body education should rightly begin very early, and continue for a lifetime. The meaning of holistic physical education has been virtually lost in mainstream education. There have been progressive developments outside, which are hopefully rippling back into the school system today, but there is virtually nothing that supports the exploration of deeper levels of consciousness.

Hopefully this essay, however schematic, has been successful in bringing into the open some fairly large perspectives on historical and spiritual change. As with social and ecological change, I fear that scholarly discussion tends to underestimate the possibility and scope of human consciousness change. My particular concern is that we recognize that not only are our problems and crises large, but that our *potentials* are perhaps even larger. With this in mind, I feel we need more social analysis from a spiritual perspective and more spiritual analysis with a social perspective. The very notion of “transformative learning” invites such cross-analysis, and perhaps eventually the emerging *field* of transformative learning can positively contribute to the social and spiritual movements that are now simply the subjects of discussion.

Brian Milani teaches and writes on green economics, personal, and social change in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He is the author of “*Designing the Green Economy: the Postindustrial Alternative to Corporate Globalization*” (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). His doctoral thesis was entitled “*Building Materials in a Green Economy: Community-based Strategies for Dematerialization.*” Brian has practiced Tai Chi for over 30 years and Baguazhang for 12 years. Many of his essays, courses, Ph.D. thesis, and internal martial arts webpage are accessible at www.GreenEconomics.net.

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