

# Toward a New Goal on the Care of the Environment

From a talk by Tim Jackins<sup>1</sup> at the Re-evaluation Counseling  
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All the indications are that the way the world is developing demands changes in humans' treatment of the environment. At the same time, information about the environment is increasing and being more thoroughly distributed. It's becoming possible for everyone to have an accurate sense of where we are and what is happening.

As Co-Counselors we can help lessen the effects of distress on discussions about the environment and show that it's possible to understand the situation and develop good, rational policies for improving it. We can illuminate the situation, and the background of it, and contradict enough of people's common distresses that we can help people think and move toward solutions.

It seems to me that a full, clear goal on the care of the environment would be useful to us and to most people. We have moved in that direction, but not very far yet. We have looked in that direction with an earlier goal. It's been having a good effect, good work is being done, and it would be useful to accelerate the work.

How do we figure this out? What is the issue really? What is our situation and how did we get here? How do we understand it completely enough to begin to take action and head in directions that will be the best we can figure out?

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Humans can take action with or without thought, and we're in this environmental position because as humans we haven't thought enough in this particular area. We've taken lots of actions that have affected the environment, and we haven't been able to think about all the unintended consequences and ramifications of those actions.

## THE BEGINNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF LIFE

Life developed here on earth in the special conditions that existed at the time, including perhaps the planet being hit by a lot of meteorites. It's simply part of the structure of the universe that particular configurations of molecules are likely to develop, and that given certain conditions, they're more likely to develop. Conditions were good enough here that molecules started forming more complex

relationships, and at some point, because of the conditions and the material around it, some set of molecules developed the interesting property of producing copies of itself. It replicated itself. That was life.

In the beginning, life-forms replicated using the raw materials in their environment, and the form that existed was the only show in town.<sup>2</sup> There was only one type, and everything alive was that type. Who knows how fast that type spread, how efficient it was at replicating, but it didn't have to contend with other life-forms and it didn't use anything except raw materials.

Things had to change for this beginning to occur, and things didn't stop changing after it happened. It

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<sup>2</sup> The only show in town means the only thing happening.

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appears likely that a change in the first life-form was what created the next life-form. The next one could have been another fresh start (there could have been two independent starts, or a number of them), but odds are that once a life-form worked well, a change in that life-form was what caused a different one to occur. Then there were two life-forms. They were consuming similar things but were somewhat different from one another. We might want to say that they were competing, but our use of that word has a cultural twist to it. It's hard to use it without getting odd images in our heads. They were using the same resources.

Over time, more and more life-forms developed. Then another interesting thing happened: some organism developed whose existence depended on another organism. This doesn't necessarily mean that it ate the other organism (it may have consumed a byproduct of it), but it used conditions created in part by the other one. It probably could have functioned on its own, but it functioned better in conjunction with the other organism.

When there is a benefit like that, change tends to occur to take advantage of it. So that organism's descendants, over many generations, came to use the other organism more and more efficiently. They came to depend on it more heavily and were less able to survive without it. An interconnected web of life-forms began and became larger and larger as more life-forms came into existence and became more complex.

(Most life-forms can't live off of raw material at all. We humans can't eat dirt and get very far. We can't absorb solar energy and get much energy out of it. To have enough surface area to absorb enough solar energy to power ourselves independent of eating other organisms, we'd probably each have to be spread out over something like half an acre.)

A complex web of life developed, and it's changing all the time. New things, small changes, are always happening. We see species change, but there are many, many small changes too.

We humans can't survive without other life-forms. We have more cells of other life-forms living in and on our body than we have cells of our own. We may feel isolated, but we're crawling with life. It's all over us, all through us. Life is that interconnected.

In general the environment changes slowly—but it doesn't always. Sometimes there are big eruptions; the whole atmosphere is clouded and very little solar energy comes through for a year or more.

Sometimes a meteor hits and there's a similar effect. When researchers dig down and find a layer of the same chemical at the same depth in many places, they know that years ago a meteor hit or a volcano erupted. Life-forms that develop slowly and are interconnected can't compensate quickly, so when sudden, big changes occur, a lot of them don't survive. Evolution appears able to move faster than we once thought it did, but it can't move fast enough to handle sudden disasters.

Not so many thousands of years ago, there were apparently about five thousand people alive. One can tell by looking at DNA. Because DNA changes at a predictable rate, it's possible to calculate backward to where everyone had very similar DNA, indicating a small population. It looks as if after some disaster, perhaps an ice age, about five thousand people were left. We humans have changed just fast enough to handle the catastrophes in our environment.

But most species haven't. Many more species have existed than exist now. Many couldn't change fast



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enough to keep their species going. There have always been extinctions. The 9,993 species of birds in the world today are a small fraction of what has existed. Though it's sad to lose that complexity, extinction has always gone on.<sup>3</sup>

All species also have an impact on the environment. The larger the life-form, and the greater its numbers, the bigger its impact is. Species have spread out and enlarged their sphere of existence. They've been hampered by large bodies of water (if they've been flightless and unable to swim), mountain ranges, and other things, but when the world has changed, life-forms have spread, especially since we humans started moving and taking things with us—on the bottoms of our shoes, in our suitcases, on the hulls of our ships, and so on. Organisms now travel to places where they couldn't go to before. With our help they can traverse the places in between, where they couldn't survive.

When we humans started out we were a small collection of individuals, and in a global sense it didn't matter what we did. The rest of the world's species and the world itself could compensate for our actions. But if a species gets too numerous, it starts affecting the others. For example, the populations of a predator species and its related prey species swing back and forth. If the predators eat almost all the prey, then almost all the predators die, because they no longer have enough to eat. Then the prey come back, and then the predators come back. If it swings too far, it can run

over the edge: too few prey are left to be able to come back. For a long time, our effect as humans wasn't large. We were too few and the messes we made weren't very big. We accidentally burned down forests, we did different things, but on a large scale what we did could be compensated for. In some sense we got used to that, and we didn't pay attention to the possible large-scale effects of our actions.

### **A MARVELOUS AND FRIGHTENED SPECIES**

We're a marvelous, ingenious, inventive species that gets frozen in certain ways by distresses and then can't consistently think. Where distresses get stuck on us, our behavior changes from aware to frozen and, for example, becomes driven by feelings of scarcity and the danger of annihilation. We each have our own fears about existence, because our individual starts weren't that good, but we also carry the undischarged fears of earlier generations. If our family or our people had a history of famine, and we didn't get to discharge on it, we see the world in a certain way. We mostly didn't get to discharge, so we've been left with feelings of scarcity and competition—feelings that we need more, need more, need more.

As a species we could figure out ways of getting more. We could figure out how to exist in parts of the world that humans didn't start out in, places our ancestors didn't know how to live in. We spread across the world, and we spread more quickly than other organisms because we were able to travel across places we couldn't survive in.



HELEN PARKIN

We could adapt how we functioned, not just find another place where we could function in the same way that we had before. We learned new things in order to fit in, but our fears of scarcity also kept us from being able to rationally consider certain things, as they could seem secondary to survival or not related to it. For example, the welfare of other people could seem secondary to making sure we got more.

We spread out and became successful, and as we figured out more things, we became more numerous and did more things that had a more drastic effect on the environment. Salvation always seemed to mean more—more of us and having more command of the environment, so that we could produce more of what was reassuring to us: more food, bigger castles, bigger ships. We tried to more thoroughly dominate the things that used to dominate us.

### **DESTRUCTIVE SOCIETIES**

We're still fighting back from a population of five thousand. We're 6.4 billion at this point, but

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<sup>3</sup> Gone on means happened.

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we're still unsure because of the old distresses. Given this number of us, the rest of the world cannot compensate for our mistakes. It can't compensate anymore for what we haven't been able to think about. There are simply too many of us, and too many of us locked into distressed behavior and irrational systems that we call societies.

It isn't just our individual mistakes; it isn't just that we leave our old wrecked car, pick-up truck, and tractor behind the shed and let them rust. There are too many of us with old cars and pick-up trucks and tractors. We're far past the point where systems can compensate for us and what we leave behind. Our modes of production give off massive amounts of smoke, ash, CO<sub>2</sub>, and other things—far more than the rest of the world can handle. Driven by our patterns of always needing more and not considering the full effects of our behavior, our modes of production are locked into our societies, as they were locked into the societies before ours.

Patterns of destructive wastefulness have been part of human societies. Societies have always destroyed people and other forms of life. But in the past there weren't as many of us, so the destruction didn't have a big effect. We have now reached the point where the patterned functioning locked into our societies has massive effects.

It seems to me that we've been against oppressive societies mainly because they were bad for people. They were bad for everything else, too, but this hadn't reached the point where it couldn't be



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compensated for by the rest of the environment. We've clearly reached that point now.

Organized societies have always been mired in distress patterns. They operate by organizing people into groups and classes that support the functioning of the society, and some groups are given much less resource than others. Those that receive the largest share and have the most control of the resources have patterns installed on them that push them to make decisions about the resources that give them the most immediate material benefit, with little or no regard for the effect this has on other groups of people, other life-forms, the environment, or even their own long-term existence.

For example, there continues to be a drive to find more fossil fuel deposits, and new ways to exploit them, no matter what pollution and damage that causes. As long as short-range profit can be made, many people can't face that producing and

burning more fossil fuels is what's causing climate change and massive environmental damage.

Our societies are consistently destructive and short-sighted, and their most damaging effects are inflicted on the people who are already the most exploited, for example, those doing the actual work of production, those targeted by racism, those living in countries that have not yet developed economically to where they can protect themselves against the large economies of the world.

### **WE MUST CHANGE SOCIETY, IN THE INTEREST OF ALL LIFE-FORMS**

Societies built on patterns, as ours is built on greed from distresses connected with insecurity and isolation, cannot function rationally enough to keep from damaging people and the world. We can usefully oppose and stop particular aspects of this destructive patterned

functioning, and need to. We can also stop tolerating the existence of societies based on distress.

Past efforts to change oppressive societies have involved the majority of people opposing the class that controls the resources of the society, the owning class. However, the individuals in that class are simply the agents of oppression, driven by the distress patterns installed on them by the society. And they are not the only ones with those distress patterns; everyone in the society gets hurt by those distresses being acted out and ends up with a version of the same distress.

We have known that the work to change society is not really a struggle against people of a certain class—that it is a struggle to end the effect of distresses on all of us. We are not struggling for one group of people against another. We are trying to end the grip of patterns on all people, including those who direct the society, for the benefit of all people. Portraying the way forward as a struggle against any group of people is always misleading and restimulating and is incorrect in a fundamental way.

To protect the environment from the ongoing destructive, irrational functioning of society, we need to change society—not in the interests of one group of people as opposed to another but in the interest of all life-forms. We need to change it in order to preserve an uncountable number of life-forms from the environmental effects of society's distressed functioning. This is in everyone's interest, including those whose distresses have not yet allowed them to realize it.

## WE CAN MOVE

This change in society should not be delayed, since large environmental changes are happening rapidly and their consequences are difficult to predict. Some of our patterns want “proof” before they let us face the need to change, but there is little absolute proof in something as complex as our world. Human minds often decide things based on far from complete data. We may feel so insecure that we are afraid to move—even when we see clear, strong reasons to—but we can go against the pull of our patterns and make decisions to change in the best possible direction we can imagine.

We can move against our patterns of feeling inadequate, small, and passive. We can discharge the distresses installed in our childhoods that have left us with those feelings and confusions. And we can become important parts of

the ongoing efforts to interrupt the patterned mistakes that are damaging the environment.

We can move out of passivity, learn what we do not yet know, and discharge any distresses that keep us from playing the roles we want to play—as participants, communicators, supporters of existing leadership, and developers of policy and perspective.

We can do this in significant numbers, and it will bring benefits in many ways: we will move forward the work to save the environment, we will function more outside of our distress, and we will expand our communication of what we know about humans.

RCers have moved in similar, significant ways before. Two of the clearer examples are how we moved against nuclear war several decades ago and how we started United to End Racism about a decade ago. Let's do it again.



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## Choosing One's Attitude

Just remember that you can always determine what your attitude will be in an upcoming event, and often that decision can make the difference.

*Harvey Jackins\**

From a letter written in 1995

\* Harvey Jackins was the founder and first International Reference Person for the Re-evaluation Counseling Communities.