



# Growing in the sustainability paradigm

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# 1 Introduction

These are complicated times. I often feel two forces inside me, one is pulling me forward, and one is pulling me backward. One wants to change, and one wants to resist change, and in the middle, there is me. It is not easy to make these two forces talk to each other. Finding peace in these times is essential.

We all drink from the same fountain so the things that I write here may sound familiar to you. This, after all, is not an attempt to present a new theory to explain how the world works or how to solve its problems. It is just a tentative to put into words something that I have been feeling in the last couple of years. It is a collection of reflections, originally written in chronological order, whose only aim was, at their own time, to express what I was feeling about the events that were happening around me and bring clarity in my mind. I share it with you, slightly rearranged in a more logical order, first of all out of curiosity. I see that many of us are feeling similar things and working in our own ways to put such sensations, such streams of consciousness, into practical actions to orient us in everyday life. We are all on a path. The Path of life, of evolution, of becoming, which I see as being one path, with one final destination, one mountain to climb, common for all of us. But, to continue with the trekking metaphor, we are not necessarily following the same tracks. Each one of us follows a different track to the top of the mountain. So that pretending

to recommend directions based only upon one's individual experience, and doing that with absolute certainty, is useless and can even be confusing. Nevertheless, maybe, in the track that you are following, you may recognize some of the challenges or passages that I have encountered, since after all the path is one, with one destination (through different tracks). I think, by talking, and, especially, by listening more to each other we can smooth our walk in this uncharted path, and make it also somewhat more fun! (A bit like a real trekking, which is always more pleasant when shared). So, if sharing this collection of thoughts has any attempt, it would be to see if some of this thinking resonates with anyone else, and to start a conversation. The hope is that this sharing exercise can contribute to a more honest, up-to-date, and holistic discussion on the sustainability challenge (as well, why not, on other tough challenges), which we are altogether facing in our common path, right now.

## 2 Sinking boats, hot engines, and broken backs

We are on the brink of an environmental catastrophe. International scientific bodies have underlined for many years the danger humanity is facing due to the degradation of the environment. The Earth system is gravitating on unsustainable ground, breaching multiple planetary boundaries, and this is expected to bring instability for the decades and centuries to come. Climate change in particular, is recognized as a major threat to society. This crisis is touching all humans and living beings on Earth, regardless of who they are and where they live.

Whoever is not seeing this or claims that there is not such a problem is either not informed, or in denial (often out of convenience). On the other hand, we can discuss, whether solving the environmental crisis should be our priority. After all, we have many problems, and we are a big and diverse world. But this doesn't mean that the ecological collapse is not happening, and that it has no consequences on the human society.

What is also indisputable at this point is the role that humans have in causing this huge change in the environment. This change is so obvious that scientists have even started using a name to define the current epoch. We are not any longer in the Holocene. We are in the Anthropocene, the age of man. Humans are shaping the world – accept it or not, this is very much what is happening. Our insatiable hunger for consuming things is making us take, day-by-day (literally), more and more resources from the environment.

This is not much different than what bacteria do. Whoever is at least a little bit familiar with chemistry knows the graph that bacteria cultures in a closed environment follow. This has a bell-shape and can be divided into four phases. First of all, there is the lag phase, when the bacteria are not so many and struggling to reproduce. At some point, the growth picks up and you have the second phase, the exponential phase. At this point you can determine the tangent and the speed of growth that the culture is having. If this wasn't a closed culture the bacteria would keep growing at that speed. However, resources at some point become too little for the hungry bunch, so the stabilization phase kicks in. Since this is a closed culture and no more resources are inputted into the system, at some point resources become too scarce to sustain the population and the culture begins to die: the decay phase.

This experiment always made me reflect on life on Earth, and humans in particular. After all, Earth looks somewhat like a closed system, with one culture feeding on the other, who feeds on the other, etc. In periods of stability, Earth can regenerate cultures and resources if we let it. How magic! This, until we take more than we are allowed to. Then, the equilibrium changes, it gets destabilized, and suddenly this regenerative system of Earth starts looking a little bit more like the closed system of the bacteria culture.

In comparison to the bacteria, we have one difference though. We are conscious (and becoming increasingly more conscious by the day) of our impacts. We organize conferences to discuss how to reduce our impact on the environment (something that probably the bacteria society doesn't

do), and try to develop actions to reduce it. So, together with the hunger and increasing consumption, comes the knowledge that what we are doing is creating some problems that can harm us. We look at the society that we have built, and we see all its flaws – and it certainly has many.

At some point I have questioned: are we trying to fix a boat that is too broken? We could picture society as a cruise boat. A giant cruise boat. With some problems. Many holes where water flows in and slowly makes the ship sink. Some of these holes could be called climate change, poverty, racism, other types of inequalities, biodiversity loss, wars, pollution, etc. Some people work desperately to fix those holes, while a bunch of other people just sit comfortably on the deck enjoying mojitos and chocolate fountains. “What the heck?! Go down and help, people! The ship is sinking!”. I was firm on the idea that the problem could not be solved. The ship’s design was just flawed, and no patching work could save the ship from sinking. It would be better to build another boat altogether – and start soon! So that when the big one would collapse, at least people would have some other ship to jump to and continue sailing to the neverland destination (maybe leaving the chocolate fountain lovers on the other boat... nah, just kidding!). For a long time, I thought about that other ship. What could it be? What kind of system could be developed in parallel to this system?

I love metaphors, as my friends know (and this chapter is about metaphors, it is not the title of a mechanic’s nightmare). In this one, I see the human race like an engine, a constantly, relentlessly, working engine. This engine is accelerating (as you can obviously see from any graph



about energy consumption, population, GDP). It is accelerating, and, as a result of that, it is overheating. There are many signs of this overheating, even at personal, individual level: people feeling tired, people stressed, people burned-out, and people who can't find anything better than killing themselves (isn't this a problem of the first magnitude?). Many screws are jumping off from this crazy engine, as people can't keep up with its speed anymore, but nevertheless the engine continues, dangerously, to accelerate. Why does it do it? Who is driving this engine? Together with all this (or maybe, exactly because of this, in a sense) global warming is making things even hotter, and an explosion, or a more silent (yet dangerous) halt, seems near. This engine should be slowed or cooled down. But how? Some crises do the job (at least temporarily). The covid pandemic was one, but other crises have partially done that in the past, and more are promised to do that in the future.

I have definitely felt the overheating of the engine on my own skin. It was the beginning of 2020, before the covid pandemic would strike and lockdowns would be announced. I was an ambitious young associate at a research centre of the UN Environment Programme. I was taking on several projects and focused on climbing the career ladder. I was overworking, and quite prone to get stressed, although in my mind, I was always able to manage it. Coming back from a trip to my home country, I started feeling some pain in my leg. This got worse by the day, until, a month later, I was basically in a vegetative state. I could neither stand nor sit anymore, my leg and my back constantly affected by a terrible pain pushing on the sciatic nerve. I was diagnosed with a slipped disc, a hernia. For the ones that don't know about it, a hernia is a condition in which a

rubbery tissue (the disc) in between two bones of your spine, stacks out, and in many cases, but not always, pushes on some nerves and produces a hell of a lot of pain. It is a condition that cannot be reversed – once it's out, it's out (unless you have an operation of course). This put me to bed and working from home already before the pandemic would start. Even after a few weeks, I could barely walk. If I was walking, the pain would force me to take full attention to every step and every movement. If I wanted to sit, I had to sit properly (just to have a chance of being able to sit for around 10 minutes). I had to change completely my whole life. Not because I wanted to. But because I was forced to.

This will certainly sound familiar to whoever suffered a similar chronic injury. For me, at 26 years old, it was an unexpected but incredible experience. It brought me to listen. I was connected by necessity to the now moment. There was no escape from it. Pain forced me to be grounded in the now. Being present was the only way to listen to myself and act to have a chance of feeling less pain right there, and, hopefully, the day after. Recovery was a long process.

### 3 Cause, effect, and effect

Some people think that we should just chill out, live in the moment, because whatever obstacle will come in our way, we will deal with it and solve it. Such thinkers also argue that happiness and wealth are rising, so why worry? I fully agree with this on one level, but I also think that this kind of approaches have the risk of being misunderstood. They risk being perceived only in one specific fashion, one that does not take responsibility for a lot of things that are happening in the world and things that we are feeling, right here right now, in the moment in fact. Being mindful means seeing, hearing, feeling, what is happening around you. If we translate this from an individual scale to a global scale, let's say looking at Earth, being mindful means listening to what Earth is telling you. What the world is telling you. Some would say what God is telling you. Listen to this, and (not to be underestimated) act on it.

When I was diagnosed with a hernia, it took me a lot of time to realize what that meant and what it required for me. Whoever has suffered and overcome a chronic injury learns three things. The first one, is that you need to listen to yourself (where do you feel the pain, when do you feel it, and why do you feel it). The second one is that you need to accept what you hear (whatever the pain is telling you). And the third one, is that you need to do something about it.

Now, this is easier said than done, and there are definitely several ways of dealing with a chronic injury. Some persons would succumb to the need

to suppress the pain. This involves taking (often a shitload of) medication to alleviate the pain, and waiting (often with not-so-good results) for it to go away. However, probably most of the ones who actually overcome a chronic injury know that even though this medication strategy may be beneficial (if not necessary, in parallel), the only way out is much more radical. It involves a systematic, constant mindfulness and taking care of the illness, every second of your life. How? By listening to yourself (something that medicines by definition don't help you to do). Furthermore, and ultimately, it involves a transformation. The way you walk, the way you train, stand, sleep, drink, think, everything is part of it. Some of the measures that you have to take are very difficult to adopt and they may involve changing things that you like or that you have been used to do for a very long time. But ultimately, that is the only way out, and the only way to survive and be happy. Sure, an operation is also a possible option. In some cases, it cannot be avoided. But there is always a risk involved. The risk, first of all, that something will go wrong. And, the much more likely chance, that even that intervention will not solve the problem, because it will fail to address its deeper, root cause, and the problem, in due time, will return, in one form or another.

Healing is a process that cannot be rushed. It is often a long process that can entail seat-back and disappointments. However, in my experience, more than any other change it ultimately brings positive change. The necessary, evolutionary, change. The “problem”, the symptom, is there for a reason. To give you the possibility to heal something much deeper. If you don't heal properly, meaning if you don't tackle the cause of the problem but just something on the surface (maybe by using medication

or an intervention), the problem will just pop up in the same or another form – of that you can be sure. And so, healing takes you to places that you would have never believed you could go, to do things you would have never thought you would do, and that ultimately make you who you become – who you really are. It is a path rooted in the moment, without worrying too much about the future because whatever will happen you will deal with it (yes, indeed).

Our planet (or better our society, or “us”) is also suffering from a chronic injury. We can see many different symptoms of it. Climate change being one of them, but in fact there are a lot of other symptoms attesting to this illness may those be of an environmental or social nature. Like taking care of a hernia, taking care of our planet and its chronic illness also needs to be rooted in the moment. And some of the lessons that are valid for a personal chronic injury are also valid for the bigger, global, chronic problem. After all, the part feels what the Whole is feeling, because the Whole (including its illness) is reflected in the part.

However, when translating this metaphor from the individual’s sickness to the sickness of the planet, a couple of things should be kept in mind. First of all, when scaling up from personal mindfulness to planetary mindfulness we really should keep in mind that a life of a person moves much faster than the one of planet Earth. That is to say, our chronic injuries are a few years long. Planet Earth’s chronic injuries are at least centuries of years long. And so is the healing process. Everything is happening in a much longer period, a span of time that we are unfamiliar with, because it is much longer than our individual lifetime, and that

therefore is of less immediate comprehension to us. Second, there is a reference challenge, which relates to our ability to listen at a global, holistic level, and interpret correctly those sensations and thoughts. Earth in the last decades is telling us something and it's telling it in every possible way. We monitor every single heartbeat of Earth. We have all possible data, but is that being mindful? Are we really listening? Are we really looking in the eyes of the person next to us and listening to what s/he says? Are we feeling what the animals around the world are going through? Do we care enough as if it was our own illness? We get too easily distracted by the shiny but fake jewels that we are producing to keep us happy (or let's say "fed") and forget what really matters. We forget what we've heard. So, we go back to the doctor and say, "please one more exam!", and the doctor huffing turns to the machine, checks again, and then reverts "yes, you are still screwed".

To tackle effectively the climate crisis, we must listen deeply. Not just at the surface. And be honest about what the root cause is. Because that is where we need to act to have a higher chance to cure the illness. We cannot just medicate the surface while deep down the problem lies unchanged. Something I have learned is that everything has a cause, and every cause has a cause. The beginning of the chain lies where we are able to see... until we can see a little bit further, to a yet-deeper cause. For my herniated disc problem, I did have to reflect quite deeply on what the cause was. I had to (and I had the time, thanks to the pandemic). Otherwise, I was constantly relapsing. That illness did not pop up randomly. It popped up because of precisely the way I was, and I am, and

it wouldn't go away until I would realize that, and do something about it.

We have, for a long time already, pointed to the burning of fossil fuels as the cause of climate change. That's a proven fact, burning fossil fuels is causing an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, which is causing global warming and the resulting climate change. But why were fossil fuels burned in the first place? Then we point to the industrial revolution. But why did the industrial revolution happen? Everything has a cause, and that has one too. Where does our need for producing and consuming more things come from? How far back does it go? We are, in a sense, a bit like those bacteria, eating, consuming, in order to grow. We need to consume energy. In the end, put simplistically, it is all about energy. The more some beings are energetic, the more powerful they are. That's why we are obsessed with producing and consuming energy. But for some reason, we ended up producing bad energy. Energy produced and consumed not for the right cause – for a wrong “power”. This bad energy is infecting nature as it infects humans, inseparably. Are we sure that just by producing “cleaner” energy, we will solve the problem enough deep, so that the illness would not relapse creating new symptoms?

There is an article I like, where the authors argue that if we are to reach the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement, the current “technology will do it all” approach will not be enough. The authors instead make use of a framework, called the three spheres of transformation, to depict how transformations happen thanks to changes in three spheres: the practical sphere (of technology and practical behaviours), the political-economic

sphere (with the political and economic systems in place), and the inner sphere (of the mindsets, beliefs, values that we hold). I like to represent this structure using gears, instead of spheres. Three wheels, or gears, connected with each other, rotating to produce change. A transformation through different spheres, always working simultaneously as one, and creating change at different levels: in the practical realm of things, in the realm of structures, and in the realm of thoughts and feelings. However, those wheels do not necessarily work all at the same speed, nor do they necessarily have the same size. In fact, one could argue that the practical sphere of technology is much more easily changed, and can rotate much faster. Of course, that gear is smaller, and so able to rotate faster. But being smaller, it also exercises less momentum on the other spheres. Of the three, the one which I think moves slower is the inner sphere, of mindsets and values. Those can stay more or less unchanged, on average, at the global level (not necessarily at the individual level) for centuries. It is much more difficult to rotate this wheel, and if this doesn't rotate or goes very slow, well the others don't move much. Or if it is not oriented towards the "right" kind of change, the three wheels will not produce that kind of change. But once this is put in motion, and oriented towards the right direction, the other wheels can't resist rotating, the momentum is just too strong. Of the three gears also, this is by far the one which we put less attention on. In conclusion, the wheel with the highest potential to create transformation is also the most challenging to move, and the one that can keep things stuck.

The inner sphere is, by definition, also the deeper sphere, where change can originate in the first place. And it is important to look deeper.



Looking deeper means getting at the root of the problem, understanding why we have an illness, and increase the chances of curing it. That's why putting the current climate crisis in a deeper perspective and discuss about it is important. What we are seeing now around the world is not only a climate crisis. It's not only an environmental crisis. These are just symptoms of a much deeper, crisis. A spiritual crisis. The climate crisis is, in fact, just the additional manifestation of a deep spiritual "crisis" that goes back millions of years (or even more). From that "apple" that we "ate in the garden of Eden". From our separation from the Whole, and our ability to see good and evil. And that crisis is something that we are mostly overlooking. In fact, we, as society, prefer to medicate our way out of it (e.g., by only acting at the surface of the climate crisis), because it is just too uncomfortable, too destabilising, to look deeper and heal it.

The outside is just a reflection, a different dimension, of what is going on inside. And the deeper we go, the higher chances we have to create a change that is there to last, so we can't refrain to consider the inside when tackling the climate crisis. We must understand deeply why we are causing it. Why this illness has arisen. What is the role of each of us in it. We all have a role in it, as we all have a role in the world.

The hernia forced me to slow down (and the pandemic did its fair bit too). Together, they showed me the importance of looking inside, of listening, of being present, and of healing. I could look at the climate crisis with a different pair of glasses. It was not really about the climate crisis itself. It was about a much deeper crisis, of which climate change was but one symptom. And I thought, if we are to heal this crisis, if we

are serious about it, we need to start with our own selves...no, first of all, I need to start with my own self. So, I reflected deeply on my own self, saw what I thought had to be changed, and concluded that pretty much half of the job was done. All I had to do was to change myself, and then try to spread the change to the people next to me. (Spoiler alert: it wasn't that easy).

## 4 Slowing down (and then what?)

As a result of these reflections, in the following year, I went through some big changes in my life. I decided that I had to slow down. I owed it to my back, to my mind, and to my heart. And most of all, I had a purpose. I really thought that slowing down was the thing that was needed for society to avert the climate crisis, and that by doing my part, I would contribute to the transformation towards a healthier, sustainable planet. I started by changing my job (well, in fact, I kept the same work, the same content and collaborators, but moved self-employed and part-time). I needed more time to reflect and understand what was needed from me; the freedom to spend more energy to do the change my “back” required me to do. That Earth, or spirit was asking me to do. Something was in motion, and I could not stop myself from following it.

I did manage to find a new equilibrium. Less working hours, more meaningful work, freedom to use my time on learning, reflecting, meditating, connecting with my family and others, growing my food, writing...healing. It was working. I was much more at peace. My thinking was evolving. My whole perception of reality was evolving in a much smoother and faster way. Religion and spirituality were my main interests. Getting in touch with the ultimate truth, transcending the ego, etc., the goals – the ultimate, and constantly moving, point down the infinite rope.

All good on one side. Yet, something wasn't right.

Too often, I still would find myself questioning the meaning of the work that I was doing, the place where I was living, or the relationships I was holding, the life I was having. Every time, I would smash myself against reality. I was living, feeling, a very real paradise, inside, but Earth was not looking quite the same. It was always too imperfect.

I didn't seem to appreciate the way I was, what I could do, anything of it, unless it was cleaned from the material world and its things. Otherwise it looked fake, far from what I recognized as "true" or "noble" or "right", and I was not able to accept it. It didn't seem Truth. It didn't seem to be that far-away star I was pursuing... what I was feeling inside... It didn't seem to be what I wanted.

But what did I want? What do I want? It's often a question not easy to answer. I want to feel joy, to be happy, to love. But how can I love or feel joy, if I don't love what I am right now? If I don't love how the world is right now? If the world always has to change? If I always have to change? There is always hope, or doubt, somewhere in the head that maybe I am something different than this, and that thing is what I should be doing instead! I think I am someone, but then I smash against a reality that shows me that I am something different, something more imperfect. And fixing that imperfect reality is tough! Fixing all the "problems" to make it perfect is complex.

Reality is complex. And complexity is tiring. But why is it? Complexity per se is not tiring. It is the fact that I want to control it to pull it in a specific direction, to make it fit my scheme, that makes it tiring.

When you try to change reality towards a specific direction, part of the challenge comes from the fact that there are others, which may or may not think exactly as you do (most, at least to some extent, don't). So, the first thought that is coming is "they must be changed"! Or wait, am I the one who should just shut up and forget about this whole idea of changing the world like this? That conflict can be confusing. Once force is telling you that things should change, and one is giving up and labelling that idea as dumb.

It is a fine line between being a dictator and repressing yourself. Between wanting everything to be like you desire, and bowing your head to everyone and everything and always renouncing your ideas. That fine line is achieved when you include yourself in the right amount. That amount that allows you to be a creator without pretending to be the sole creator. That allows you to see the other creators, and you with them. To accept that this is not a one-person show (yet at the same time it is. Just who exactly is that "person"?).

There are two extremes, either you always want to step in and change things the way you want, or you always accept the way others want to do things. If you are always "my way or no-way", maybe you should wonder whom you are really fighting against (is there anything "out there", that is rather "in here" that you are escaping from or trying to suppress?). On the other hand, if you are constantly bowing your head to someone else's will, you are maybe underestimating, repressing yourself, and then why are you even here? Die to your ego, yes, but also include that! Be who you are meant to be, without getting attached to that. Listen

to what you feel, trust yourself a little bit more, while also respecting others. This is a co-creation. A mix of many different ideas (including yours), all evolving together towards a direction, but in a complex way. More complex than we would wish!

So, the temptation is to avoid the complexity altogether by creating a more simple, smaller, reality where we can shelter from confronting others and be a dictator without opponents. To build another boat that leaves all the rotten out, and only takes the good in. But do we have another boat? Does each one of us actually want to build their own little boat to save him/herself and possibly their dear ones? A boat to feel comfortable in, and avoid confronting some ugly sides of us?

I think that we only have one boat, and it is called Earth, society, or the universe, or You/Me/Us. You can try to escape from it, but then you know you are separating yourself from a big chunk of reality. Which is rotten, yes, but maybe you are too. The temptation of creating something new and perfect elsewhere is strong. That's why we fantasize about inhabiting other planets. But how can you pretend to create something better elsewhere when you cannot make your own garden flourish? You are that garden! We are our society, in the good and the bad. We cannot really separate ourselves from the rest just because we don't like it. Doing that would mean that we are separate from the rest, while we are not. We can only create for ourselves the illusion of being separate from what we refuse to accept, but that undesired item remains there, lurking and growing in the unconscious.

So, if we want to make things better we must start with what we have. With all that we have. Because that is what we are. It is challenging yes, but it is a challenge worth engaging in, because it is Our challenge.

## 5 A sustainable compromise

If we want to have a just transition and still have a society when we are done with this, we need to have everyone on board. This is a tough process. So many voices are speaking, and some speak louder and louder by the day. And, as you know, it is not necessarily a pleasant listening! Keeping democracy intact is not easy in this situation. Avoiding confronting our differences sounds like a much safer option, for our peace of mind.

We see division amongst people, while we need common ground to advance. Yes, we want to get there (e.g., to a more sustainable world) and that is important, but we also want this and that (e.g., money), and for some, that is important too. That can feel very chaotic, and chaos can be stressful. So, we need to let go a little bit of all that chaos, of that complexity, of the many voices. But not by plugging our ears when some of them speak. No. By first of all accepting that those voices are there, and ultimately by finding a compromise between them. With them. By not being a tyrant. By not wanting to control all of it.

Finding, and equally important, accepting, a compromise means, from one side or the other, also accepting that we may go through some sufferings at individual level, because of our attachments to things, or ideas. Suffering is also what is often preventing us from doing what it takes in order to pollute less. We want to avoid some sort of suffering right now, so we buy that dress that makes us feel better about ourselves,



eat that delicious food, take the fastest and most comfortable means of transportation, heat and cool our houses to feel just a bit more comfortable, etc. On the other end, seeking that comfort makes Earth suffer. Not only at an environmental level, but at a human level too. It is an interesting exercise to think about who exactly are the main ones responsible for the climate crisis and, on the other hand, who is suffering the most from it. How the benefit of a certain part of the population is coming out of the suffering of the another. One part of the world goes faster than Earth (the body) allows, and the rest has to deal with the damage. Does that really work? How long before that comes back like a boomerang? Earth is suffering, other humans are suffering, and we are suffering for it too, because we are all part of the same Whole. Earth is our body. And we feel what our body feels, sooner or later.

It is sad to see a lake dried, to see people suffering, to see yourself suffering too. Suffering is sad. “No, suffering is an illusion!”. Certainly, at a certain level (but so is happiness and seeking it). At another level, suffering is quite a real thing, and that level is part of existence as well. If you could choose between two places, one subjectively beautiful and one ugly, which one would you choose?

It could be that this suffering is just because we are resisting the accelerating current of our mind and its ideas. Because we are attached to Earth. But thinking that (or adopting that philosophy just because someone who seems smart said that once) means ignoring that we have a body. It means escaping it. It means transcending our body and the material world, but not including it. And included it must be, because

whether we want it or not, we will still have a body, and we will smash against that now and then. Should we really follow our mind down to the path that it is taking us without asking (rather, opening our eyes) to where it leads us? To where it already led us? The environment is the body of our society, and at some point, you also have to say to the mind to hold the horses, because the body can't make it. "We will anyways survive, evolution will continue" you hear. Certainly. But what about our body? That's also part of us.

Otherwise, sure let's just let the body die. Let's go fully with the stream of a yet-to-imperfect mind, create the extinction of thousands of species, so many illnesses, and countless deaths. The choice is truly ours, and to what seems right to us. But then let's not talk about sustainability. Let's not fill our mouths with compromises we cannot keep up with. If sustainability is just a compromise to keep growing in the material sphere, then let's be clear about it. Do we want to have a society where we can do all sorts of things, where anything is reachable whenever our mind wants? OK. But then "anything reachable" has no limit, as our mind has no limit. If we go for that, what we are after is infinitely using the resources that we have around.

Why instead don't we focus on discovering and living more in line with a new us? An us that is not identified only with our ego, but with a bigger whole. It may be uncharted territory, but we can start in the present. By doing the best that we can to heal, instead of digging the hole even deeper. Why don't we focus more energy, for example, on improving our ability to love, besides accepting that we are able to like and dislike?

Our ability to accept. And at the same time try to make our garden flourish, instead of ruining it because we want to play more.

The problem is that doing this shift requires time. Time taken away from, for example, pursuing a career that would lead to more fame and more money. That's a compromise lying there in front of us. And in a world where everything (for some) seems reachable, we have forgotten what it means to compromise. We don't like compromises. The political world is the perfect reflection of this. It is very rare (to say the least) to witness political leaders having constructive debates and being examples of how to find collective solutions. And this is dramatic. Because we need honest debates and collective solutions, now more than ever (and tomorrow more than now). We are parts (or parties, in politics) of a whole, and if we want to move that Whole forward in a peaceful way, we need to become better at democracy. We need to start accepting compromises. We need to start admitting our weaknesses, become aware of them at least. Not shield them with some giant ego and defensive debates.

Yes, we need a stable economy, yes, we need jobs, but for what? Isn't this whole society about us? Can we repurpose our economy towards something more noble? Something better? Something truly evolutionary? Something that is at the service of a more real Us. Not that harms Us. Can we do it while still including who we are right now, as imperfect as it is, and work with that, instead of against that? And at the same time truly, honestly, and relentlessly, work towards the greater goal, knowing that this is a big change, but a change that must be done. We are at the forefront, of evolution, and we are right here right now forming

the new thoughts that are shaping the future of the world. What is the future we want? And how much can we do right now to get a little bit closer to that?

Changes are scary. Big changes are very scary. But sometimes they are the inevitable way to move forward. They are scary as death is scary. We are afraid that if we don't grow we will die, but do we? Or our system and a part of us dies? Us and our system have to evolve. And evolve it must, and it does, in any case, but we can steer it towards a direction that brings us a little bit closer to paradise, and less close to hell. Because hell can be very real. Suffering is quite real, here on Earth. We have to keep growing, yes, but there are different modes of growth. Not everyone is ready for what you are ready? Fine, not everyone shares your ideas. But this doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to live your truth, and experiment. At the same time, we must also keep talking to each other, in order to exercise acceptance, to exercise democracy, and move forward together, in a coherent and honest way. That's important because we must avoid creating silos, where parts of society end up developing very different ideas about how the world works. This is already creating deep separations (well reflected in politics) which must be taken care of. To avoid that increasing division, dialogue is important, but not any kind of dialogue. Compassion is an essential component in these dialogues. However, that's almost all the time lacking and substituted by impatience. The issue is, it is very difficult to listen and be compassionate, while you are in a hurry. And society is always in a hurry. We need to find the calm, the peace, the space, to train compassion, and apply it.

## 6 The good, the bad, and the “I don’t want to hear about it”

You look at nature, at birds, ants, animals and plants... it gives you a feeling of peace, everything seems calm, happy to be as it is. It makes you think: “that’s how I want to live! Why am I even working? I should just be chilling and be free as a butterfly”. But look closer, everything is in fact in constant motion! Have you ever seen an ant sunbathing or chilling at the ant-bar, or having a lunch break at the ant-cafeteria? Animals are constantly seeking something too. All nature is constantly moving, driven by Eros, to reproduce and evolve. And we with it! So, it is no wonder that we are also constantly seeking. The difference, if there is, is that nature out there seems to act as One. Most living beings eat and are eaten, born and die, without making any apparent fuss about it. They act as if they are part of a bigger organism. They are not puzzled by the doubt. We, on the other hand, are self-conscious. We can tell the difference between “good” and “bad”. And we can do that without necessarily being aware that we are part of a higher, constantly evolving, constantly moving, organism, so that the good and bad becomes my individual good, and my individual bad. And we try to choose one or the other according to the situation. We think that, ultimately, we have a choice. And a choice in fact we can have. Otherwise, if there is no choice, all this thing of “sustainability” makes no sense at all. How otherwise would we be able to act to “ensure that future generations have what they need”?

We want to change the future, and so we act in the present, we make choices, thinking that this will make a difference.

If we would be really serious about sustainability, we would do what it takes to get there. The problem is that doing what it takes entails a (sometimes tough) choice. It entails choosing one behaviour instead of another, which means labelling one behaviour as “good” and another one as “bad”. Some behaviours to be pursued, some to be avoided. And the issue? They both are within us! We can manifest, in fact we are right now manifesting, both behaviours because they are within us, within our society, within our nature, within spirit and the universe.

This creates a problem: what if I or someone I know manifests a bad behaviour? What if I am not able to act “good” at all? What if I can’t resist the instinct to go on some e-commerce website and order this or that little thingy every day?

If we or someone fails to do what it takes, shaming is not a good solution, hate is certainly not a good solution; love, true acceptance, true embrace, is the solution. That’s when we need compassion and forgiveness (and training them). First of all, starting from ourselves. Loving and accepting how we are; forgiving how we cannot be.

Yet, we have to move, because we know what is coming if we don’t. And there are different ideas about how we should move forward, as there are different ideas within oneself. That’s why listening is important. We need to understand and agree on why we are doing something, why we are accepting compromises, and who we are doing it for. Are we fine with the compromise? Even if it is not ideal? Do we like too much to do

this or that, that we don't want to give up on it? Then we must bear in mind the consequences, not pretend that we don't see them, because they are there, and they are coming. Should we just follow our mind anywhere, accepting that it can create good and bad? Are the lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not enough? All those deaths came because of our need for evolution. Our ideas. We were certainly not meaning to create atomic bombs in the original place. We were just experimenting. "Good" and "bad" are both part of us and they are in our nature, yes, but they have consequences. Divine providence, to use a biblical term, karma, or however you want to call it, is quite real. It feels real, in any case. "Bad" creates more "bad". If we don't want more of that "bad", we should try to stop creating it right here right now. Certainly, we should not act as if we don't care or don't know what is coming. That is an insult to our own selves.

What is more evolved? What is more "enlightened"? Saying that "there is no good and bad", or accepting that, according to the context, there is both good and bad, there is right and wrong, and by accepting both and rising above them, we can freely choose to create more of one and less of the other? We can choose, if we want to create good or bad, to the largest possible extent that we can. To the largest extent that I, or You, can, according to our own possibilities. That doesn't make you any less of a person if you can do less "good" in a specific situation. We always must accept that we can create both. It's totally fine, those behaviours are rooted within us. But we can strive a little bit more for the good, and a little bit less for the bad. At least we can try.

Tackling and overcoming the climate crisis, requires reflecting deeply on where the climate crisis comes from. Listening requires mindfulness (i.e., the mind at its full, without getting attached to one idea or the other), with acceptance of the outcome. It doesn't mean that we need to do exactly what we hear. We can always disobey. We constantly disobey because of something our mind says. But at least we need to hear.



## 7 The role of the individual

Just to repeat it, I think that we can take the wrong decisions, we can disobey, we can take a plane or eat a steak, drop waste in rivers, or keep running our small business in an unsustainable way, etc. We can be bad. We are bad! It is in our nature! But we also know that when we are bad, we get bad in return. That's the law of the universe, no escape from that. So we must be conscious of the bad that we do. We can't avoid being conscious of it (or if we pretend not to see the bad that we do, then we will end up hating the entire world, because the smell will still be there, and we will curse our neighbour not seeing that the smell comes from our garden). So be conscious about it. Then make your choice. You still want to travel? You still want to buy this or that? Do it, but know what you are doing. Forgive yourself, accept that you are flawed. Don't hate yourself. Accept your good and bad. And in the same way, accept it in the other people instead of pointing the finger. We must move as one, if we are to solve this, but the only person you have full control on (if you want) is yourself. Don't pretend to control the others. Look in your garden first, and set that in order. It seems small and worthless in the grand scheme of things, but is it really?

Yes, the challenge is huge, and the system is complex, so that you become almost hopeless in front of the problem. The solution seems to require too many things to move, and the lack of trust in the others undermines the faith in the realization of the solution (sure, I am setting my little yard in order, but what about that giant dumpsite?!). It is easier to complain

that things are not good, compared to act and take our responsibility to make them a little (and it seems even too little) bit better.

Imagine that you are driving on a road and stumble in front of a pile of rocks slide down from the mountain, which is blocking your way. You can't reach your destination and you are certainly annoyed, so you start complaining "damned who made it fall, damned who is not moving it, nothing works in this country etc. etc." Cars start cueing up after you and suddenly there are a bunch of people complaining with each other against someone else that is not moving that pile of rocks. The thing goes on and on for hours, more people complaining, perfectly knowing that the pile of rocks is too big for one person alone to move.

But what if one would start moving a little rock? How long would it take before another one takes the next rock, and two others together move a bigger one, and so on? Alone we are weak, but together we are strong.

But it's much easier to complain, because by complaining you maintain your current belief, which is that you are strong and right, the other ones are dicks and wrong, and the reason for your suffering is the fault of someone else not doing their job correctly. That's a nice comfort story there! You can keep believing your little great story of you alone being the saviour in this world, alone facing all difficulties and having to resolve them all by yourself and yourself alone...the hero with a sword in the hand! But some challenges are too big for this little great hero as well, so that the hero becomes the victim, and the fault becomes the fault of the system: "it's the system, it's the politicians, it's the patriarchy, or the old ones, or the young ones, etc.". This is the made-up story of a fake all-

mighty, all-powerful guy, created to mask the secret knowledge of his impotence. We prefer to be a king in hell than a peasant in paradise. What if we would accept that alone we can't move the pile, but that if we do our bit maybe someone else would do their bit too? We somehow become even annoyed that other people could do something that good, that altruistic, that amazing... because that would show me that maybe I am not even that saint I want to believe I am! I am not the victim... But then the whole story that I have in my head collapses... and we don't want that comforting tale to die. Because we think that with that tale, we would die too. What if our politicians would just start acting good? What if that friend that I thought was a dick would start acting good? Then what was I complaining about all these years? Was it all for nothing? Am I not needed anymore to save the world? Then there is no role for me anymore here!

No. Your role is exactly there where you are. Nothing less, nothing more. And you must do it the best that you can. We are all in our special position in the picture of all that there is, and we are all doing "our bit" and "all of it" at the same time.

One thing is in between each of us taking the right action: our belief that we are alone. Our understanding that our ego matters more than the Whole of It. Our need to prove ourselves better than some made-up, idealistic, character in our head. To prove that we are actually worth something. To fill some void inside, to have more power. But power is never enough. That hole is a hole without an end. It doesn't have an end, the same way the universe doesn't have an end. It cannot be filled with

all the material stuff of this world. It can only be accepted, transcended, and included.

We need to start by accepting who we are and where we are. Because nobody else can do it instead of us, nobody else can take our place. Nobody else can do “your bit”. This also means that with regard to the bigger problem, take climate change, you don’t have to do it all. You don’t have to solve the whole thing alone. You just have to do your bit. No need to lift the entire physical world on your shoulder, just lift what you have around, because that, yes, is *your* entire world. Do the maximum effort that You can do... not that somebody else can do... but that you in Your position, can do. But do your maximum today, and with a fresh mind do your maximum tomorrow, because that can be even more than today!

It’s us, doing what we can, right here, right now. Acknowledging that. Surrendering to it. And doing the best that we can. Looking at how the Big Us moves, because that counts more. This is not a one-man show, it is more about moving in synchrony towards the same finish line, but all through different, special, tracks. “Do not desire that of another”... meaning also, do not desire the track of another. You have yours. And it is special. Accept it.

There are many things to do. Too many if you think you only have a pair of hands. But if everybody does their bit, we are suddenly many hands. All we need is to trust each other a little bit more, and realize that our neighbour is sometimes an asshole, yes, but he is also a good guy. And that sometimes I can also be an idiot, but that it is ok, I am the best that I

can be, and that is fine, I will anyways try to do a little bit better tomorrow.

To do this we have to have faith in the others. In Us. We have to believe in it. Believe that this is possible and that the other parts of us will do the same. That we will move in synchrony. We have to be ready to accept differences, because we are different. We have to react to those differences not with guns, but with forgiveness, with acceptance, and with dialogue, with understanding, with listening.

## 8 Conclusion

Crises, like the covid pandemic, or the climate crisis, make us more aware. They awaken people to reality. But that realization can always take two roads, one of more separation, of more suffering, and one of more unity, and liberation. And, if taken, the second one can very much be like the cooling of the crazy hot engine that we need. Because all these crises ultimately happen because of who we are. And they make us reflect on who we are. They are deeply rooted in our spiritual crisis. Our disidentification with Whole. And they are therefore an opportunity to get better, and heal. Like you do whenever you feel any symptom, which is just the surface effect of a deeper illness that is just waiting for You to heal it. Let's not close our eyes. Let's not miss this opportunity. Let's not shy away from our destiny just because it is uncomfortable.

So that's why these reflections took a very philosophical turn, a very spiritual tone. Because if we look deeper, and we try to change our world to be more sustainable, these are some of the questions, some of the challenges that we find. We find Us. In our good and our bad, in our eagerness and resistance to change, in our division and our interconnectedness.

The climate crisis, and the sustainability challenges are not arising randomly right now in history. They are happening exactly because of who we are. So that a challenge that at first seems technological, and certainly has some technological aspects, is in fact very spiritual, it is

personal, it is about the mindsets that we have, and then, as a consequence, or rather, as a reflection, of those mindsets, it is about what political-economic structures we have chosen, and what technology we have chosen.

If we are to take the opportunity of the climate crisis and heal deep, we must confront the primary cause of it, which is ourselves. And this does not mean condemning who we are, whipping ourselves and saying that we deserved it. We are who we are, and we constantly try to get better. This crisis is yet another symptom showing us who we are, the same way an illness shows you something about you. It is also for this reason, due to the fact that the climate crisis is not only about technology but rather about us, that it is not easy to be solved. It creates conflict inside us because it is not easy to make peace with who we are and at the same time try to change it.

On the one hand, we see the disaster coming, we see the suffering of the other beings and us with them, but on the other hand, we are faced with the difficulty to change ourselves. One force asking to change, the other one resisting change. They must talk to each other, because if they don't, the conflict will sooner or later hit the one in the middle - you. Democracy starts within us, by having honest conversations with us, and negotiating a good enough compromise first with one own self, and then with the whole.

How to make the best of the world, today? If the sustainability crisis is also a spiritual crisis, what is the solution? First of all, I should listen to what the world is truly telling me. I should not lose time. Listen to your

mind, listen to your heart. Learn to listen, meaning also talking with yourself and understanding where things come from, why you are saying something. Not to criticize yourself, not to deceive yourself, but to accept yourself, to be a fuller version of yourself. Being yourself is the first thing to try to do. Accepting others for what they are is the second. Treat them as if they are you. Be present. Heal your wounds. Do not fight. Do not continue wars, even your small wars with parents, or neighbours, or some friends (how else can we pretend that the bigger wars would stop?). Accept the others, stop fighting them. Forgive them every moment. Respect the independence of the others. Don't try to control. At the same time, work to improve the world. Make an effort to improve the outside, but never lose sight of the inside – that is the priority. But what should I work on the inside? What is that is really ruining the world and driving us apart from nature? Look at our need to do something. Look at our unease with the present moment. Our desire for stuff. Our need to fill emptiness with stuff.

That is why we need to learn patience. And that's why we need acceptance of the present. At the same time, we should never lose sight of the final, and constantly moving, destination, and relentlessly work to get a little bit closer to that. After all, we are creative beings. There is nothing as fulfilling for us as creating something. So sitting somewhere doing nothing and simply "being at ease" is probably not a great solution, and not the point here. Our creativity is our gift, and it should be re-oriented towards creating that vision that we have inside. That can give us purpose, and purpose is an essential partner in life. But equilibrium is needed.



It is like walking on a rope: there is a long-term goal, and there is the equilibrium right here right now. And all of it *is* rope. All of it *is* present. Both are important. We must not be fooled, that the goal is the equilibrium in one point, but that is also a precondition. Because if your equilibrium here is not good, you keep falling down, you get hurt, and you never advance on the rope. So, first of all you must accept your equilibrium here. If there is no equilibrium here, then start by creating it. Lose the weights that are threatening your equilibrium. Or accept them if you can't let them go. The fewer things we carry with us, the easier we can focus on the moving, because we don't have to control the equilibrium of a thousand things. So travel as light as you can, keep your equilibrium in check so that you don't constantly fall, and move towards the direction you set, move along your path, because you are here for that.

Society cannot be changed in one day. Us, inside, may not be changed in one day either. But we can, no, we must, try to change every single day towards the best. As much as possible every day. Our society is not perfect, it is flawed. But it is better than what we had yesterday. By definition. Because it is its evolution, and by being that, it contains what was there yesterday and a little bit more. It superseded yesterday. It doesn't mean that the step that we took was perfect, but what other step could we take? Only that one happened. It is not possible to judge the choices of yesterday with the mind of today, because the mind of today is the result of the success and failures of yesterday. So, the yesterday and the today it created must be accepted.

At the same time, the today can and must be improved. What we feel inside, what we know of our society, is true, and trying to fix its problems is an honourable cause. At the same time, we need to be careful not to get overly caught up in trying to make the moment as perfect as the bright future that we see. Because the impatience of seeing that long-term goal materializing here and now can make you go faster and faster. You are suddenly running on the rope! And that is not a problem, if you can do it. If you can maintain your equilibrium. But maybe you can't. So find your speed. You also need your time, no? The time to be, to feel grounded. Because you need the equilibrium in the now, you need to be present in order to balance. There is a lot to do, and you want to run to reach the end of the rope. But healing takes time. You think you don't have time, and indeed your time is limited, but *Our* time is abundant. And slowing down, not hurrying, is an essential part of the healing process. It gives you the chance to dedicate time to listen. To cool down the engine. To dedicate energy to what is needed, which means that other parts of us, other parts of the system may receive less energy. And those must be let go of. A healing process is a transformation process. Something will change, and that should be accepted.

We must put our mind at the service of our body. From our ability to listen to Earth and put our mind at its service, depends our ability to heal *its* illness, and ourselves. Because we are *it*. And the part must be at the service of the Whole, because from the health of the Whole depends the health of the part, and vice-versa.

For me, looking inside wasn't and it is not easy. Changing wasn't and it is not easy. Maybe it is the same for you. But I think we both know that it must be done. It is not easy, but my experience showed me that it is certainly possible. We just have to do it. The question is how. My answer would be: in our own ways; in our own time. But with honesty. With acceptance. And with forgiveness.

This was a good share of my inner journey and reflections over the last two and a half years. These are the things I saw while walking my track, and that I wanted to share with you. This was my little story, and I hope it was an interesting first part of the exchange. I am looking forward to hearing from you for the second part!

Mirko

*Let's keep climbing the mountain, with respect for each other's path,  
together, as One.*