

# The Evolutionary Activist

A Series

Booklet 1:

## Making Sense of Today

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## **About the Series**

The opportunity for conscious participation in the evolution of our culture and society is still fairly new to humanity. Beginning about a century and a half ago, there has become visible a growing wave of people thinking in new ways, people challenging status quos, and progressive movements of many kinds. However, few people have recognized the deeper wave: a new stage of evolution on our planet. Even fewer have considered how we can learn to get ahead of the wave, to ride it, and even to help steer it in a direction more supportive of human development and a sustainable relationship with the environment.

*The Evolutionary Activist* is a series of booklets intended to help open a bit wider the door to this opportunity for conscious evolution. Each booklet in the series focuses on something our communities and societies need to know, or be able to do, in order for people to actively and constructively participate in this process.

We don't know whether it is inevitable that we will make the shift from unconscious to conscious evolution, or whether it is something that will depend on a combination of effort and "luck." In either case, we do appear to have a choice.



## **Introduction**

If you're paying attention (or even if you're not), you might have a sense that the world is changing. It's not your imagination. About 150 years ago, a big shift started to occur in the world, and that shift has been accelerating ever since. The pace of this wave of change hasn't always been steady, and it hasn't always shown up in positive ways, but the wave has clearly been rising and it has yet to crest.

Your grandparents witnessed big changes over the course of their lifetimes, including some of the most painful episodes of modern history. But the change they saw was relatively slow compared with what you have been seeing, and what you will witness going forward. The memories and experience of change of different generations—Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, Millennials, and whoever comes next—are co-existing and crashing together like too many trains coming into the station at the same time.

You might feel excited about the change, but you are probably more often feeling concerned. There is room for both feelings. For some, solutions to issues like racism, environmental threats, and the treatment of mental illness seem too slow in coming. If that is true for you, consider how much has changed just in your own lifetime, or the lifetime of your parents, compared with the pace of change just a few generations ago. For others, change has been too fast, threatening their values and their sense of relevance. Some of them have tried to push back.

This is not just another time in history. It is a turning point between stages of evolution on a global, perhaps even universal, scale. By taking a step back and looking at what some have called “the epic of evolution,” what is happening today can make a lot more sense.

## **Evolution: The Back Story**

The word *evolution* might bring to mind tree squirrels and apes and Darwin's theory of how species change. That's biological evolution. But evolution is not limited to just biology. Evolution is a pattern that spans the entire history of the universe. What's more, that evolutionary story is turning a new chapter right now.

## **Evolution: What is it?**

Evolution has a lot to do with energy and order, so we'll start there. Energy

likes to spread out and get random, which is why things fall apart. A scientific word for this is *entropy*. Energy has done this ever since the Big Bang—that explosion of all matter out of a tiny point marking the beginning of the universe. But from that same initial event, the tendency for things to fall apart has been accompanied by the *opposite* tendency. Here and there in the big pool of energy spreading out randomly, little concentrated pools of order emerge. In these little pools of order, structures form, and those structures create differences in the concentration of energy. These differences are put to work. How?

- At the level of atoms and molecules, differences in energy and mass (at really tiny levels) are what keep the protons, neutrons, and electrons together. These differences are also what get atoms to join up and make molecules, and what make molecules join up to make bigger molecules. This is how “stuff” exists.
- Cells and bigger living things build upon the order at the smaller level, and organisms use energy from their environments to build and maintain their internal structures. They also maintain a semi-open boundary between their insides and the outside environment (another way that things move away from entropy). This level of order is far more complex and rare than that of atoms and molecules. So far, we’ve found it on just one planet: our own.
- At an even greater level of complexity, you have entire systems of different living things and their environments, all inter-connected in one way or another, exchanging flows of energy. All are dependent on stable patterns like climates.

All of these higher levels of order are *extremely* unlikely...yet here they are.

So far, we’ve been talking about energy and order, and we’ve covered two levels of complex order in the universe. You could call these the Physical/Chemical level and the Biological level. Before we move on to other levels, we should get into the question of how, against a backdrop of randomness and entropy, these levels emerge.

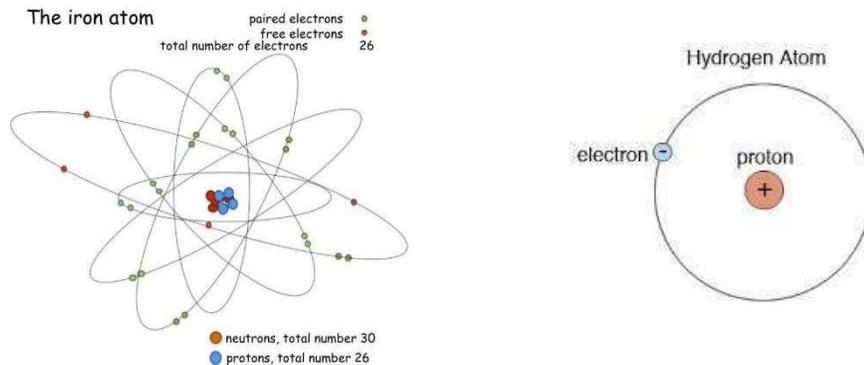
Evolution, in the universal and general sense, **is the process of shifting from a less complex kind of order to a more complex kind of order**. How does it happen? A stable structure (which is really a stable system of flows of energy) tends to remain stable so long as it can draw energy from outside of

itself and put that energy to work. But if that flow gets interrupted, the structure will either:

- (a) collapse to a lower order of complexity (some call that *devolution*), or
- (b) re-organize to a form of similar or higher complexity that can work with less energy, or at least better handle the changing conditions.

That *re-organizing with complexity to return to stability* is the simplest example of evolution.

Now, the difference between the evolutionary level of atoms and molecules and the evolutionary level of *life* is about more than just degrees of complexity. You could say that an iron atom is way more complex than a hydrogen atom:



But they are still both atoms, and an iron atom can't really *do* anything more than a hydrogen atom can. Bonding with other atoms is about all either one can do.

The thing that really distinguishes a more advanced evolutionary stage of the universe from a less advanced stage is that a fundamentally different kind of behavior has become possible. In the case of shifting from the Physical/Chemical stage to the Biological stage, the new behavior is basically *the ability of things to be self-organizing and self-maintaining*. An atom or molecule can't do that, but a cell (and every living thing made of cells) *must* do that.

So, what specifically happened to allow that dramatic difference to appear? Right before life first appeared about 4 billion years ago, long chains of molecules were already making copies of themselves (a physical and chemical activity). That wasn't yet what we call "life" (biological activity). The blurry line is somewhere between that chemical activity and where this self-copying activity became *internalized* within a protective boundary that the entity itself

maintained. This was such an important shift that we might think of it as the “Second Big Bang.”

The variety of molecules and chemicals on earth changed pretty slowly, and geological forces—while powerful—also worked pretty slowly. The exciting new thing was the emergence of life on earth and the change and increasing diversity in life forms and living ecological systems, which began to actually shape the physical conditions of the planet. Based on how much was going on once this started, we can say that biological evolution became “center-stage” in the evolutionary epic for most of the next 4 billion years.

### **The Third Big Bang: From the Biological to the Cultural**

Let’s look for the next major shift, where a whole new kind of behavior seems to appear in the world—something beyond what any plant or animal to this point could do. By a few million years ago, lots of animal species had evolved (within the biological range of evolution) to have decent-sized brains. Like what we can see today in species like chimpanzees and whales and elephants, many animals would have communicated and coordinated and had rich social interactions. Some would even use objects as tools—pretty intelligent behavior. But around a million years ago (give or take a few hundred thousand years), a form of early human species developed a brain size and structure that, under the right social conditions and survival requirements, allowed some very new things to begin happening:

- some form of abstract thinking and being able to plan, to anticipate, and to invent, and
- the ability to share (through language and symbols, and ever-more complex social relationships) the learning and idea-making that took place within individual brains.

This sharing of ideas would include teaching one’s children, who now would inherit not only genes (biological history), but a *growing body of cultural knowledge* as well.

What may have allowed this to happen was that the complex communication systems that these early humans used, including use of symbols, became *internalized* within individual members. In other words, an internal mental environment emerged, allowing for those individual members to play with ideas. Put still another way, our ancestors learned how to build things with language and then *live in and through* those things.

With these new developments taking root among more and more members of these early human communities, groups would have an increased ability to use resources and energy, to compete and/or cooperate with other groups.

By around 200,000 years ago, your basically modern human—*Homo sapiens*—was here. Humans would eventually spread from Africa to Asia, Europe, Australia and the Pacific, and the Americas. We have little knowledge of what human culture was like hundreds of thousands of years ago, but we have archaeological evidence on which to base guesses. The mastery of fire was followed over the next 150,000 years by the emergence of more complex use of symbols, beliefs in the supernatural, and new kinds of social organization and relationships. Prehistoric art, jewelry, and practices like burial and marriage are evident from this time. It is not known exactly when spoken language began, but it is speculated that it emerged between 50,000 and 150,000 years ago.

### **The Cultural Stage of Universal Evolution Firmly Established**

By around 15,000-10,000 BCE (“Before Current Era,” an alternative to the term “BC” or Before Christ), the most dynamic stage of evolution on earth was that of the newcomer: human culture. Biological evolution hadn’t stopped or become any less relevant—we were, and are, still entirely rooted in it. But ever since *Homo sapiens* had appeared, genetic evolution has *by comparison* been very slow compared to what was happening on the culture stage.

Within what we’ll call the Cultural era of universal evolution (at least as experienced on earth)—from about 10,000 BCE to the mid-1800’s—there were many stages of development. Most kids learn about these in World History class. These stages of development can be defined along different dimensions, *all of which are connected*:

- The economic base shifted from hunting and gathering to small-scale cultivation to large-scale agriculture. Agriculture—taking root in major river valleys by about 4,000 BCE—allowed for populations to greatly increase and allowed for concentrations of wealth and power to form. Money was invented, and trade in goods spread across wider regions, eventually leading to worldwide journeys of exploration and conquest.
- Political and social structures expanded from family/clan/tribe scales to chiefdoms to city-states to nation-states to empires. Social structures shifted from being very horizontal to very vertical, with different classes

of people having different levels of wealth and power.

- Belief systems shifted from “magical” thinking (involving rituals that we believe directly cause other things to happen, like rain, or healing, or victory) to “mythical” thinking (complex stories explaining our origins and natural phenomena, and justifying the order of society), to the large organized religions of today.

Technology was the biggest driver of change. Improving the way food was grown; new kinds of metal alloys that were more durable; better weapons; new forms of transportation; all of these and more dramatically affected society and culture. Non-technological ideas were sometimes revolutionary as well, but they usually took many decades, if not centuries, to gain acceptance and to spread.

Cultural evolution was pretty slow in terms of the experience of individual people. Virtually no one would have witnessed much change to their cultural and social patterns. When they did, such change would have been caused by momentary interruptions at the personal and community level due to survival threats like catastrophic natural disasters—floods, droughts, famine, or disease—or by devastating attacks by competing or invading groups.

A very privileged few would have even conceived of the idea of *culture* as a pattern of values and beliefs that could be defined or observed, let alone changed. Most people were occupied with simple survival. Most did not have an opportunity to think outside of the dominant belief system. And while some people did encounter different cultures (e.g., through trading or empire-expansion), those encounters would have been along the edges, and spread out over time, not really affording opportunities for a lot of people to reflect on culture as something amenable to conscious change. To what end would they want it to change, anyway?

For all the reasons given above, we can describe almost the entire period of the existence of human culture on earth as a period of *unconscious cultural evolution*. In fact, that “unconsciousness” of the role of culture (and of how or why it might be consciously changed) remains widespread even today. However, a seismic shift began to occur in the mid-1800’s, setting off the tsunami that is carrying us today.

## **The Fourth Big Bang: From Unconscious to Conscious Evolution**

### *The Spark*

In the 1600's and 1700's, a number of thinkers were breaking out of the medieval thought process and church doctrine. The earlier Renaissance had laid the original groundwork: an opening to creativity, of questioning and observation (e.g., Copernicus and Galileo, and their observation that the earth orbits the sun, not the other way around). Then the "Enlightenment" reintroduced the ancient practice of philosophy in the West, and evoked new ideas about human liberty. The first modern democracies emerged in Italy, England, France, and the new United States. The Scientific Revolution demonstrated the power of science as a disciplined process, open-ended, based on questions, observation, and experimentation and laid the groundwork for the Industrial Revolution of the 1800's.

Europe was not the only place where innovative thinking was happening, of course. In fact, for most of history, Europe was something of a backwater among civilizations on earth. But it was where the future global Industrial Revolution would originate, so our thread continues from there.

### *The Explosion*

In the mid- to late 1800's, many new developments were taking place that would be catalysts for a true evolutionary transformation. These included: global travel by steamship, and the interaction between cultures and societies that this accelerated;

- a shift from agricultural and small-scale industry to large-scale industry, along with movements to call out and address the impacts of industrialization on human beings (e.g., disruption of small-town life and child labor in factories);
- the colonization of non-European nations by European powers (among others), leading to the most exploitative form of globalization;
- the abolition of slavery and the birth of civil rights and peace movements;
- growing acceptance of recent theories of the evolution of species, which inspired thoughts about the evolution of the entire universe and of what we can do to improve the human condition going forward;
- movements to extend the right to vote to all men, initially, and to

women not long afterwards;

- new communication systems (from telegraph to telephone to radio and television) allowed for instantaneous delivery of ever-richer information around the world;
- the beginnings of public education systems;
- new sciences that focused on the mind (psychology), the differences between cultures (anthropology), the dynamics of society (sociology), and even the very nature of matter (quantum physics);
- political movements that would spread to the global scale, such as the (ultimately ill-fated) Russian Revolution and related socialist revolutions;
- the beginnings of concern about protecting natural spaces (e.g., the creation of the first national park in the US in 1872).

In the early 1900s, the “Progressive Era” would symbolize a whole range of mostly positive change movements, even while the world powers used their new industrial know-how to build more effective killing machines (warships, tanks, aircraft, machine guns, and poison gas were all employed in the First World War) and continued to vie for regional power. Ideologies and modern myths competing for world domination would drive violence on a scale never seen, leading to as many as 20 million deaths from the Russian Revolution and the loss of 80 million people during World War II.

The invention of the nuclear bomb ended the bloodiest war in history but opened up, for the first time, the possibility of the destruction of all life on earth at the hands of humans. The only good news there is the use of atomic weapons in war never went beyond Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century presents a stark contrast between dramatic good and dramatic bad:

- World literacy climbed from an estimated 20% in the year 1900 to 56% in 1950, to 82% by the year 2000, opening up a whole new world of ideas and opportunity to billions of people...but at different rates across the world, with female literacy lagging behind male, and with illiteracy persisting in the world today.
- Worldwide alliances like the United Nations were formed to work for peace and mutual benefit...but have remained weak due to nation-states asserting their own importance and sovereignty above all.

- In the 1950s and 1960s, European nations gave up their worldwide colonial empires and countries all over Africa, and Asia gained independence...but many of those countries were left to struggle with poverty and conflict for decades to come.
- The “Cold War” kept a constant threat of destruction by nuclear war over our heads...but the spread of nuclear weapons was fairly well contained, none were used in war, agreements were made to reduce the number of warheads, and the worldwide conflict between western nations and communism ended.
- Child mortality would fall and lifespans would increase through better nutrition and medical care; rates of infectious disease would fall worldwide through the establishment of better sanitation, adoption of simple protective measures, and the creation of new medicines and vaccination programs...but diseases based on sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy diets would rise, as would rates of cancer.
- World population would explode throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with related increasing consumption of resources and expansion of cities leading to massive loss of natural habitat and a dramatic rise in the extinction of species...but environmental movements emerged in the 1960’s (the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970), laws and policies were passed and treaties were signed, and whole government departments were created around environmental protection (e.g., the EPA in 1970); some threats were addressed by conscious action (e.g., the banning of the pesticide DDT and the banning of CFC’s that threatened the ozone layer); and today practices like recycling are mainstream.
- The racist and sexist discriminatory legacies of earlier days were fought by civil rights and feminist movements, leading to new laws and policies protecting equality, and women and people of color would occupy more roles previously reserved for men (e.g., in political and corporate leadership); more groups and identities would gain social acceptance (e.g., gay marriage legitimized)...but old attitudes persist, and prejudice, discrimination, and institutional violence continue to pervade institutions and societies around the world.
- Wars have continued to be waged...but dangers of escalation have been low, and since the Korean War, losses of both military and civilians declined to lower rates than ever before.

- Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we had a rising “middle class” around the globe, with rates of absolute poverty falling...but concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few are higher than ever.
- Computers, the Internet, and the cell phone gave more people access to more information than ever before...but also dumped us into a sea of data, information, and misinformation, with little cultural knowledge to help us turn information into wisdom.

As a backdrop to all of this rapid change, we have to mention that on the horizon—and in some ways already here—is the greatest environmental threat ever faced: human-accelerated climate change, which threatens widespread disruption of ecosystems, species, and human settlements before the end of this century.

#### *The Story of the Past 150 Years*

The overall theme of the past 150 years of cultural and social change can be summarized as a wave of **progressive liberation and progressive integration**: individuals and societies getting freed up to begin to fulfill their potentials, while the world shrinks and the inter-dependence among all people grows. Both liberation and integration are needed for evolution. One without the other is not enough. Using the terms of energy flow described earlier, liberation allows for energy to flow freely—but downhill, in the direction of entropy. It is essential, but without integration it leads to breakdown. Integration creates the relationships, order, and complexity that allow for energy to “flow uphill”—in the direction of creativity and evolution.

To recap, around the mid-1800’s we began to transition from a 15,000-year period of unconscious cultural evolution to a period of conscious evolution, and the pace of transition has been accelerating ever since. We can now recognize that this has been happening—in other words, we have the beginnings of *evolutionary awareness*. Going hand in hand with that awareness, we can now perceive the extreme need and the wide-open opportunity to do something with it. In other words, while evolutionary awareness continues to grow, we also need to advance from evolutionary awareness into conscious evolution.

To what end would we want to engage in conscious evolution? The two greatest areas of need and opportunity are **human development** and **ecological sustainability** (or, as a friend of mine suggested, ecological

*thrivability*). An appropriate word for what we need is **co-evolution**. This word usually refers to species of plants and animals influencing each other's evolutionary paths. I use the term co-evolution in a slightly different context: **the conscious evolution of culture and society toward forms more supportive of human development and a sustainable relationship with the natural environment on which we all depend.**

## **Human Development and Ecological Sustainability**

When I talk about conscious cultural and social evolution in support of human development, I'm not talking about people living in bliss or being genetically improved or living forever or merging with artificial intelligence. I'm simply talking about the room for improvement that all cultures have for supporting the various aspects of human development and fulfillment. Different people and different cultures may define fulfillment in different ways, but there are some universals. In fact, various psychologists over the past century have identified some markers of, or things associated with, human fulfillment, which include:

- developing a sense of self-determination and effectiveness;
- being motivated more *intrinsically* rather than by external controls and internalized social expectations;
- developing and maintaining rich and positive social relationships from birth through death;
- having a sense of connection and purpose;
- having the opportunity to work at levels of complexity and challenge that keep us growing;
- having abundant opportunities to connect with nature; and
- developing the qualities associated with wisdom (including open-mindedness, flexibility, reflection, a tolerance for ambiguity, and integrating emotion, intuition, and rational thought).

I would suggest that all of the above are aspects of the evolution of individuals within their own lives. This happens not in isolation but in a context of family, community, society, and culture, and it seems that to the extent we have a choice, we should be working to make sure that our cultures and societies *co-evolve* with the individual through mutually supportive relationship. It would make sense that this is part of what's been driving the tide of progressive liberation that I mentioned earlier.

With regard to ecological sustainability, at a very minimum we depend for survival on a healthy planet, from the air and water and land right around us to the entire planetary system. Thinking beyond narrow human needs, many people will appreciate the wider moral, ethical, and spiritual reasons for making sure that our culture supports patterns of thinking and living that protect all other species and the habitats on which they depend, for today and for all future generations. We've allowed our technological power to wreak havoc on the world, and we are usually behind the curve on taking action once we realize the damage we've been causing.

### **The Baggage of Unconscious Cultural Evolution that We've Carried into the Third Millennium**

We are living in a time of great tension between the previous stage of evolution and the emerging one. The characteristics of both stages are evident all around us. More and more people have become aware that most of the problems persisting in the world are a matter of choice—certainly of collective choice and sometimes less obviously a matter of personal choice. Yet we are seemingly paralyzed in doing anything “collectively” in an intentional way. Many of our cultural and social patterns are archaic, the baggage of the era of unconscious evolution that we are growing out of. These include, but are not limited to:

- an economy based on fear and consumption, rather than on fulfilling human needs and allowing natural systems to thrive;
- politics based on ideology, on parties jockeying for control, on simplistic “majority rule” and on a passive role for citizens, rather than on problem-solving, vision, consensus, and active participation;
- education systems still designed around an Industrial Era premise of lock-step, formulaic schooling, and the maintenance of what *is*, rather than around human uniqueness, community, creativity, and active participation in moving society toward what *could be* or *should be*;
- the persistent threat of violence, whether from war, terrorism, authoritarian governments, crime, prejudice and hate, domestic violence, or simply bullying; and
- short-term thinking and un-systemic, fragmented ways of seeing and acting rather than long-term, deep-rooted, and holistic approaches.

As for the role of the individual, most of us wait until there is a “critical mass” before we adopt new ways of doing things. Most people feel like they are but small actors in a giant play beyond their comprehension and influence. The most common form of individual engagement in the world is in serving as consumers and producers. The vast majority of people are *pattern-maintainers* rather than *pattern-changers*.

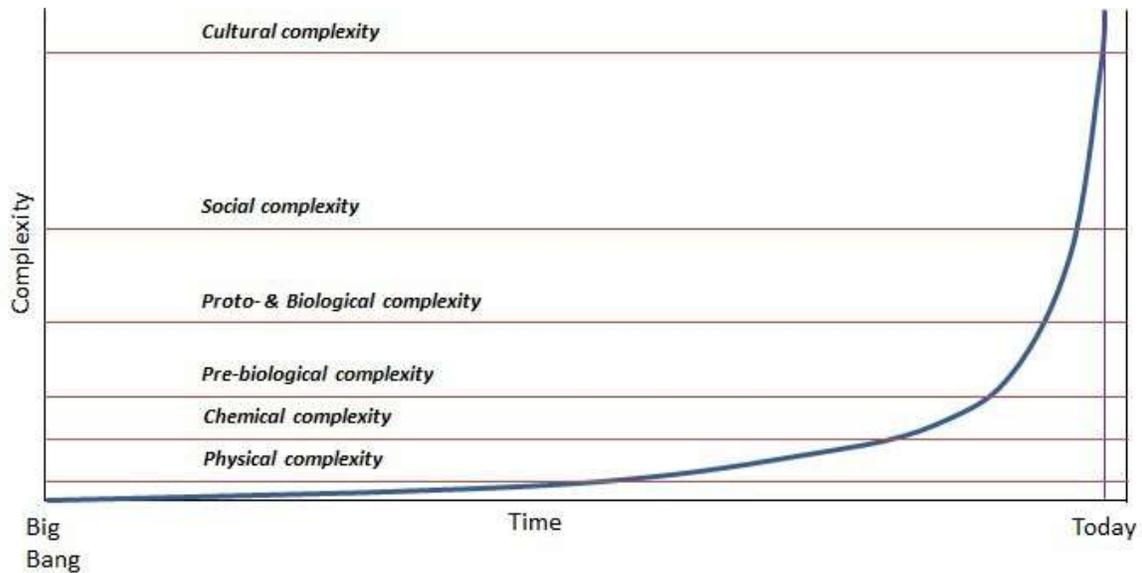
A growing number of people are trying to make conscious choices about things like what they eat, buy, and drive. They consider the impacts of these choices. A few people even go beyond being more conscious about their individual choices and actually become public advocates and activists. Activists continue to work for causes, but these often address single issues and seek to effect change through legislation, policy changes, or shifts in political power. This kind of activism, which began in the late 19th century and persists into the 21st century, is important work that all of us have benefited from. However, it leaves unaddressed the deeper patterns of our culture that give rise to problems in the first place.

### **Time Scales: Shorter Stages, Steeper Curve**

Having reviewed four stages of evolution from the beginning of the universe through today, and hopefully getting a sense of where we are in that context, it's worth taking a look at the time scale of evolutionary shifts. This helps to explain the feeling of momentum, and the opportunity, that we have today.

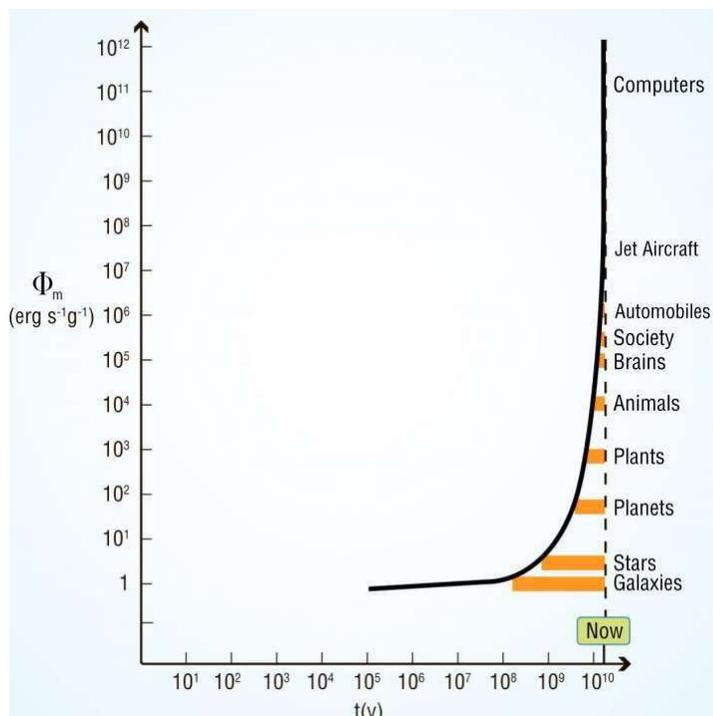
1. Between the beginning of the universe and the first evidence of life on earth was a span of about 10 billion years.
2. Between the beginning of life on earth and the emergence of human consciousness and culture on earth was a span of about 4 billion years.
3. Between the beginning of human consciousness and culture on earth and the beginning of the transition to conscious cultural & social evolution was a span of about 15,000 years.

There has been a shortening of the spans of time between eras. If we then consider the rate of change just in the last 150 years, and then just the last 50 years, we really get a sense of the acceleration of transformational change over time. The diagram below, created by George Mobus, offers another picture of the acceleration of major shifts, in terms of the increase of complexity over shorter amounts of time:



This second diagram, from astrophysicist Eric Chaisson, shows it from another angle. It indicates larger amounts of energy flowing through smaller amounts of stuff at a faster rate as we move up through the stages of universal evolution.

The implication is that it may not be long until we are fully immersed in the next stage of universal evolution, which the pattern (and need) suggests will be



centered around the participatory, conscious evolution of culture and society toward forms more supportive of human development and a sustainable relationship with the natural environment, on a global scale.

This new era would not be some kind of utopia without challenges and struggles. It would, in fact, open new frontiers of challenge and struggle that require new kinds of courage and wisdom.

You and I may not live long enough to see that era for ourselves. This is a possibility that we need to accept. But it is very possible that our children, or our grandchildren, will see it. We can help make it happen by holding that vision and by committing ourselves to bringing that future into the present.

### **Hastening the Shift Toward Conscious Evolution of Culture & Society**

Many people are recognizing the story described in this booklet. Some have been talking about it, in different ways, for decades. Some are scientists, some are scholars, some are artists and poets. Some could be described as “evolutionary prophets.” Few, however, address the question of what we can *do* with this awareness, other than try to live more consciously (which is obviously critical) and/or put our energies into social, political, and environmental causes. **Many of these movements are part of the tide of progressive liberation and integration, and they have helped countless millions of people. They are signs of a shift away from unconscious evolution. However, they are still mainly *reactive* and don’t address the core aspects of our culture that continue to create crises. In other words, conventional advocacy and activism doesn’t build the capacities needed for the conscious co-evolution of culture & society, individuals, and nature.**

This booklet sets the stage for the remainder of a series. The series is called *The Evolutionary Activist* because its focus is on actively building the capacity—our individual and collective ability—for conscious co-evolution. What does building that capacity involve? The image below focuses on ten areas of work that evolutionary activism and advocacy might well focus on.



Each of these priority areas is summarized below, and each of the other booklets in *The Evolutionary Activist* series focuses on one of these areas:

**1. Fostering evolutionary awareness:** Evolutionary awareness is what this first booklet in *The Evolutionary Activist* series is intended to help foster.

Evolutionary awareness means being aware of the evolutionary story, of our place in that story today, and being aware that the kind of change we've been experiencing is not "normal" but part of a transformation. This lays the groundwork for recognizing that we can play a part in what happens next.

**2. Building the capacity for dialogue:** By "dialogue" I mean meaningful conversation about important things. If we can't do this, then we can't make much progress. Dialogue is key because it can open the door to understanding, finding and creating common ground, and solving problems. It is also key to some of the other priorities for evolutionary advocacy and activism, such as opening the door to the examination of assumptions, to fostering shared vision, and to being able to bring democracy to life. Dialogue in large groups can be particularly powerful. At present, many people are not comfortable with, or feel competent in, this kind of conversation. One reason is that people confuse dialogue with debate. Another is that they perceive it as "talk, not action." Another reason is simply the lack of experience: like anything we learn in a culture, it takes practice.

**3. Helping people surface and examine assumptions:** Assumptions are the generally unexamined basic ideas we hold about things. Our social systems (things like education, justice, and political and economic systems) are built upon them. If they remain unexamined, they can't be questioned, and the relevance of the institutions they are built upon can weaken without our recognizing it, and without our knowing why. This becomes catastrophic in a time of rapid change and diversification. Making it a regular practice to surface assumptions, reflect upon them, and building a permanent "reflex" or consciousness and transparency about our assumptions, becomes essential.

**4. Fostering a systems perspective:** Everything is connected, directly or indirectly, to everything else, and everything exists in a context. Recognizing this reality and working with it is the heart of the *systems perspective*. Another aspect of the systems perspective is a recognition that things can't be reduced to, or explained by, their parts. Put another way, relationships produce new and often unexpected things. This has important implications for humans'

relationships with the world and with each other. Seeing and acting systemically and holistically, rather than addressing only pieces in isolation, is a perspective that will be critical to shifting into conscious evolution. With relationships comes complexity. Learning how to work with complexity is important for developing a systems perspective that is empowering rather than frustrating.

**5. Strengthening “feedback loops” between the individual and the collective:** The larger and more vertically-structured that societies have become, the harder it has become for individuals to recognize their very active role in maintaining existing patterns and systems through their everyday choices. In a large and seemingly fragmented society, it becomes harder for individuals to see how they can make a difference. If conscious evolution is to gain momentum, it will be essential to help people see the big in the small, the long-term in the short-term. In that way, all people can gain the knowledge and the encouragement needed to become co-pilots of their society and culture, not merely passengers or, at worst, perpetrators or victims.

**6. Fostering awareness of the influence of technology:** Technology—which includes any kind of tool from the pencil to the light bulb, from the automobile to the smartphone to social media—has been a major driver of change in human culture, and in behavior down to the individual level. Becoming conscious of the power of existing and emerging technologies on our behavior and on our society is essential to making the choices associated with conscious evolution.

**7. Building the capacity for visioning and idealization:** *Vision*—a rich, evocative picture of a desired condition—creates a magnet for change because it affects expectations, intentions and actions. *Idealization*—thinking, feeling, and talking about what we really want in life and for our world—frees up aspirations, core values and core ideas about *what should be*. Without vision and idealization, outdated and unhealthy patterns persist and a group, community, or society drifts in a reactive mode, in danger of becoming less viable. We can see this all around us today. Vision and idealization alone, however, are insufficient if they don’t form the basis for action—for design. Vision also needs to be *shared* vision; otherwise, it will not serve all people, and designs inspired by it will be weakly supported.

**8. Fostering readiness for the inclusive (re)design of our social and societal systems:** “Design” is a disciplined, creative process. When it comes to the design of our social and societal systems—such as education, government, justice, health care, and our economy—we need to shed the old practice of expecting experts to design *for* everyone, and instead embrace a culture and process that involves everyone who serves, is served by, and is affected by the system. This will help to ensure that the system we have fits the needs and the aspirations of those it serves.

Design translates vision into organization and action. This is not something that any society in the world is used to doing. It goes hand-in-hand with the best of what democracy means: inclusivity and creativity. Learning how to do inclusive, vision-based (re)design of our systems is essential at a time when so many of our institutions are based on archaic principles and assumptions that do not fit the needs of today.

**9. Fostering readiness for democracy:** Democracy is commonly thought of as “majority rule” and as a political principle rather than a way of life. This does little to connect individuals with their community and their society, nor does it release the creative potential of our communities and societies to address interests in common, both of which are crucial for inclusive conscious evolution. Democracy will be defined here as *the capacity for people to create and act upon a will in common*. Creating a will in common require dispositions, skills, and opportunities that our society generally does not yet cultivate, in spite of the fact that modern “democracies” have existed for hundreds of years.

**10. Encouraging transformational leadership:** Individuals are sometimes in situations and in positions where they can influence the direction of things in a sustained and strategic way. This might be thought of as a generic definition of leadership. Leadership that fits with the needs of our world today will include the elements of (a) vision, (b) an insistence on empowering others, and (c) a readiness to lead for transformation rather than on just keeping things well-maintained as they are. The need for these qualities will hold true even if the leaders themselves are not thinking in such terms. It is important to identify, support, and expand this kind of leadership, because our society continues to rely on outdated ideas of leadership based on personality traits and on images of leaders as “saviors,” “servants,” “commanders-in-chief,” or as mere managers.

## **Getting Organized: Evolutionary “Cells”**

There are people all around the world doing good things. An even larger number of people are aware, at some level, of the transformational nature of the times we live in. But evolutionary advocacy and activism—of the kind I’ve described—is still very rare. What can we do to make it more common? Here is one path forward:

- Find the like-minded around you who are ready for this kind of work;
- Start doing evolutionary advocacy and activism in our own local communities, through initiatives and projects that address the priority areas outlined above, or other priorities that you define as being essential to shifting into conscious evolution; and
- Share what you’ve learned with people in other communities and societies, and learn from others doing the same kind of work.

Starting and maintaining locally-based evolutionary cells is the focus of the another booklet in *The Evolutionary Activist* series.

## **Summary**

- The science and the story behind universal evolution can help us make sense of what’s going on around us today, so that we can be better prepared to make the choices that are being handed to us.
- We are living in a time of transition between a 15,000-year period of unconscious cultural evolution and an era of conscious evolution.
- This transition between unconscious and conscious cultural evolution began around the mid-1800’s and has been accelerating through today.
- The era we’ve been transitioning into can be viewed as a fourth stage of evolution on a planetary, even universal, scale, the first three being the physical/chemical, the biological, and the (unconscious)cultural.
- Each stage has been significantly shorter in duration than the previous one.
- The overall trend of the past 150 years can be described as one of progressive liberation and integration, with a rising tension between terrible threats and opportunities for positive change.
- Based on the recent trend, and on where our greatest need and opportunity is, the main focus of the unfolding era will be the conscious evolution of culture toward forms more supportive of human development and a

sustainable relationship with the natural environment on which we all depend. Conscious evolution can thus be thought of more precisely as conscious *co*-evolution.

- Conscious co-evolution would allow us to steer a course away from ecological destruction and the needless waste of human potential, and allow us to focus our energies on all rising together. It wouldn't mean the end of challenges and struggles. Rather, it would open up new frontiers of challenge and struggle that require new kinds of courage and wisdom.
- One conscious step toward fostering conscious evolution will be to create locally-based evolutionary “cells” — groups who focus on building in their communities the capacities associated with conscious evolution. These capacities would include:
  - Being comfortable with and competent in dialogue.
  - Being conscious of the assumptions underlying our society and its institutions.
  - Seeing and living democracy as a way of life in which we create and act upon a will in common.
  - Focusing more on relationships and context than on addressing just parts of issues and systems.
  - Creating feedback loops between the individual and collective, so that we can see the big in the small, and the small in the big.
  - Freeing ourselves to express and imagine what we really value, need, and want, individually and collectively.
  - Learning how to design and re-design our shared systems in a way that is participatory, vision-based, systemic, and continuously evolving.
  - Being aware of the effect of technology on our behavior and our culture.
  - Expecting a kind of leadership that builds the capacity for participation, shared vision, and transformation.
  - Being aware of the story of universal evolution that is playing itself out through our lives individually and collectively.