

The Evolutionary Activist

A Series

Human Development: Making Evolution Personal

Matthew Shapiro

Copr. November 2020

About the Series

The opportunity for inclusive, conscious participation in the evolution of our culture and society is still fairly new to humanity. Beginning about a century and a half ago, a growing wave has been visible, taking the form of individuals 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. Still 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 more widely the door to this opportunity for conscious evolution at the personal and community level. Each booklet in the series focuses on something we need to know, or be able to do, in order 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 depends entirely on some combination of effort and "luck". In either case, we do appear to have a choice.

Introduction

We've been transitioning into a new stage of evolution in the world that is based on conscious participation in the evolution of culture and society. But evolution toward what? For what purpose? To what end? One purpose seems to be to allow for the greatest opportunity for human development and fulfillment for the greatest number of people.

What it means to be a "fulfilled" person sweeps in multitude of things that are touched on in psychology and self-help books, what our cultures tell us, and our own experiences and feelings. The related question of "what is the purpose of life?" has been explored by philosophers for thousands of years. Suffice it to say that there is no one answer, no one theory, that answers these questions. Even so, these are valid questions that every person, and every society, should feel good about asking.

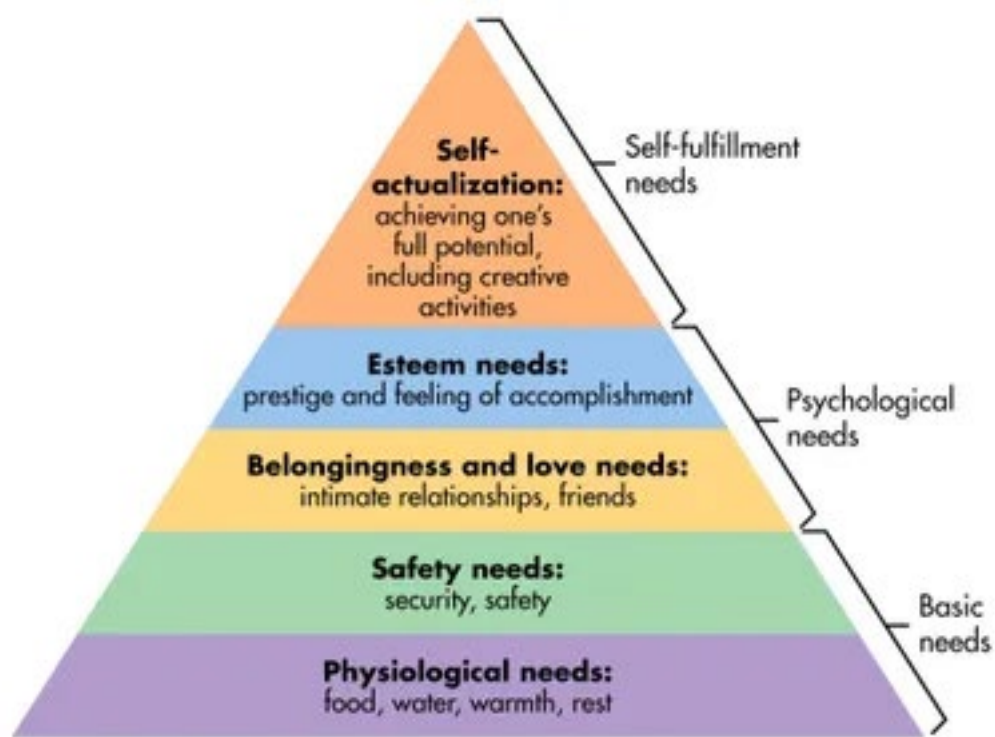
More people than ever before (although still far too few) have more freedom to *be* and to *become* what they aspire to be and become. The question of human development is increasingly at very heart of the society's very reason for existence. It seems no longer sufficient for a society to just survive for its own sake, to perpetuate a culture. Opportunity for education, health care, freedom, equality, and the reduction of poverty are increasingly the standard for what define a "good society". All of these things support human development and fulfillment, which I suggest is about evolution at the personal level. That is what this booklet is about.

We are not going to review every theory of what it means to be a "healthy, happy, well-adjusted person" (and I'm certainly not going to recite what it means to be "normal"). But we will cover the ground sufficiently to see the underlying patterns and to see how evolution at the individual level connects to the need and opportunity for the conscious evolution of society and culture.

Aspects of Human Development and Fulfillment

“Basic Needs” and Upwards

Most psychologists focus on illness and dysfunction. Abraham Maslow was one of the first psychologists who focused on what the fully developed, or what he called “self-actualized” person, is or could be like. According to Maslow, all people have a drive toward full realization of their potential. Furthermore, all people could pursue this, provided that their culture supports it and provided that their “basic” needs are met. You may have heard of *Maslow’s hierarchy of needs*. It looks like this:



Source: simplypsychology.org

The foundation layers are undeniable: we can't really develop ourselves fully if we don't have air, water, shelter, sleep, and basic safety from immediate physical harm. If we're in a constant state of stress trying to meet basic needs, or the majority of our attention is dedicated to that, then it's hard to pursue opportunities for personal growth and longer-term goals. This is why poverty is such a threat to human development.

At the upper end of Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization, which is a somewhat loose standard for true psychological health. The self-actualized person, according to Maslow and others in his tradition, has the following traits:

- high self-esteem;
- inner directedness (rather than being driven by outside forces);
- lives in the present;
- accepts their own weaknesses;
- is sensitive to their own feelings;
- is spontaneous;
- sees people as inherently good;
- has the capacity for intimate contact;
- goes beyond dichotomies (i.e., doesn't see things as just black or white); and
- is actively engaged in their community and society.

Contrary to some interpretations of Maslow's theory, *the self-actualized person is not supposed to be the ordinary person with something special added, but rather the ordinary person with nothing taken away.*

While the whole theory of self-actualization has had its critics, Maslow's hierarchy is still popular because it speaks to the challenge of higher aspirations when the struggle for meeting basic needs continues. There is some limitation to even this part of the model, of course, since it may be possible to seek and even meet some psychological needs while at the same time not fully having more basic physical needs met.

Nurturance, Fear, and Love

I'm using *nurturance* as a broad term that includes physical, psychological and emotional needs and experiences. These are the kinds of things associated with the bottom 2 or 3 levels of Maslow's hierarchy. Most of these are fairly obvious, but they need to be mentioned so as not to be taken for granted. Many people grow up in contexts where these things are not available in the abundance that they should or could be.

Physical Nurturance

Most people are familiar with the importance of good nutrition to human development and health across our entire lives. It is especially crucial when we are still in the womb and for infants and young children. Other things in the category of basic biological conditions for optimal development are clean air and clean water, free from toxins.

Touch is also recognized as essential to human development. Studies have shown the positive effects of touch on everything from the brain activity and weight-gain of newborns and young children to the development of a sense of safety and trust that in turn is a key to cooperative relationships later in life.

Physical activity is obviously important for developing muscles, bones, heart and lungs, for maintaining health, and for increasing fitness, which helps us handle illness better and deal with emergency situations requiring greater exertion (e.g., running away from danger or lifting something to help someone). Physical fitness helps us live longer and feel better (even *die* better), and is linked directly to mental health and dealing with stress.

Less Fear, More Love

Fear is an important instinctive reaction that can help to protect us, whether it is the fear of getting hurt that causes us to run from danger or the fear of a future potential situation that makes us take steps to prevent it. But when fear is present too much, and too often, it stifles our development. In fact, studies have shown that fear has a negative effect on brain development. For young children, the effect can be very long term.

In contrast to fear, *love* supports human development. It's worth touching on love and fear in the same section because in a broad sense, they are opposites.

Psychologists Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler expressed a simple and, I think, useful case that almost every kind of behavior and response to situations can be traced to either fear or love:

“It's true that there are only two primary emotions, love and fear. But it's more accurate to say that there is only love or fear, for we cannot feel these two emotions

together, at exactly the same time. They're opposites." (From the book *Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us About the Mysteries of Life and Living*, 2000)

Love is one of those things that has no specific definition but which we all know and seek. Modern western culture recognizes different kinds of love: family love; the love we associate with romance and sometimes associate with sexuality ("making love"); spiritual love; the general love of fellow human beings; self-love (which has good and bad forms).

All of these involve feelings, but probably more powerful than feeling when it comes to love is the quality of the *relation* between and among people (or beyond the realm of people, in the case of a spiritual sense of love). It does seem to be something we need in order to thrive, and it has to do both with nurturance and with what is touched on next: belonging and significance.

Belonging and Significance

The psychologist Alfred Adler developed a very different approach to psychology than his better-known contemporary Sigmund Freud. Adler saw that a sense of *belonging and significance* was essential to human health and happiness. We meet this need primarily through our social relationships, which could involve anything from family and friends to neighbors and co-workers, professional organizations, even less socially-sanctioned groups like gangs. The role we play in our culture and world, as reflected in our shared *myths* can afford us a sense of belonging and significance, too. A sense of belonging and significance could be found through spiritual pursuits as well.

Adler also saw that if our needs for belonging and significance are not met by positive and constructive means, people can seek them out in less "positive" ways. This includes anything from simple misbehavior in a classroom to vandalism to pathological violence. Trolling in social media would be another example. Any kind of attention-seeking behavior is an attempt to meet the need for belonging and significance.

Our Relationship with Death

A discussion about belonging and significance is a fair place to mention our relationship with death. We're all mortal, and to some extent our life is defined by that fact. If human development and fulfillment is a process going on from birth through death, what is its expression at the end? Is there a fulfilling death? It seems that the answer is yes. People want to die knowing that their life had meaning; that they made a difference; that they didn't leave things unsaid and unresolved. People also want to die with dignity, and to know that they are loved. Different societies and their cultures obviously vary in terms of helping make sure that people have a "fulfilling" death. We should ask, does our society help us die with fulfillment, and without fear of death? Does it leave the living feel whole as well?

Self-Determination, Sense of Effectiveness, Optimal Challenge and Optimal Complexity

People of different times and different cultures have had different ideas about where decisions come from, what (or who) drives our thoughts and decisions and actions. One common denominator appears to be that as we grow, we have a growing need for a sense of self-determination. Whether we believe that freedom is real or an illusion, we need to have some sense that we are free to choose. No one likes to be a prisoner or a slave (at least, not consciously), and people tend to rebel when they don't feel sufficiently empowered and able to make at least some choices (consider the typical teenager).

Psychologists Edwin Deci and Richard Ryan studied this aspect of human psychology and observed that circumstances are only part of what determines the level of sense of self-determination that we feel. Different people react to the same circumstances in different ways. Some people learn to take any kind of information, even restrictions and demands and commands coming from others or circumstances, and use that information to maintain or even extend their self-determination. They called this an "autonomy orientation". Other people in the

same circumstances might feel completely oppressed, either losing motivation or rebelling (often in ways that don't work out well).

Related to a sense of self-determination is a sense of effectiveness in what we do. People need to feel that what they do works or makes a difference, at least some of the time. If they don't, they lose confidence and will be less willing to take the emotional and intellectual risks that are needed for growth.

Related to a sense of self-determination and a sense of effectiveness are *optimal challenge* and *optimal complexity*. If something is too easy or too simple for us, we lose interest in it. If something is too difficult or too complex for us, we lose motivation to pursue it. Finding and staying at the balancing point is where the word *optimal* comes into play. We need to be able to "up the ante" and stay challenged in order to thrive. This can easily be seen in the realm of play, and in sports. The ability to increase the level of challenge as one gains experience and skill is one reason why computer gaming is so popular. Carrying this over into other aspects of life is not always easy, however.

Natural Environments and Solitude

Some scientists have observed that our access to truly natural environments can have an effect on this aspect of human development and fulfillment. Built environments (like cities and towns) channel us into narrow and predictable behaviors that don't present us with the kind of opportunities to grow that wild places do (career ladders aside).

A natural environment, by contrast—particularly an immersive one like a wilderness or open ocean—challenges us and tells us pretty quickly how effective our strategies and decisions are. Opportunities to experience that kind of environment are obviously more limited today for more people than they were thousands of years ago. In fact, experience with nature may be so important that writer Richard Louv coined the term "nature deficit disorder" to describe problems rooted in a lack of contact with the natural world.

Solitude—the experience of being alone for an extended period of time, usually by choice—can make the experience of nature even more powerful. But even in a

built environment, opportunities for solitude can free us up from the demands of everyday life and from social expectations and judgment.

The Development of Wisdom

Wisdom is more of a “folk” concept than a scientifically-identified trait. We know it when we hear it, and it is something that most cultures traditionally appear to value. However, wisdom has been the subject of some reflection by psychologists, and what they observed rings true and deserves a place in any discussion of human development and fulfillment. In a compilation edited by Yale psychologist Robert Sternberg, the various contributing psychologists associated the following attributes with wisdom:

- reasoning that goes beyond just logic, bringing together thought, emotion, and intuition;
- an ability to balance certainty and doubt, objective and subjective, to tolerate ambiguity (things being unclear), and to resolve contradictions;
- a recognition of *context* and the inter-relatedness of things; and
- communication skills and the ability to advise others.

While we tend to associate wisdom with age, the relationship isn’t that simple, and may not even be true. What appears to be true is that we are born with a certain kind of wisdom, and that it evolves (ideally) from a simple form to a profound form through life experience. The catch is that this only happens if we are able to *reflect* (and thus learn) from our experience as we age.

Other Frameworks Giving Clues to Human Development & Fulfillment

It is worth mentioning how some popular psychological theories and related ideas speak to the subject of human development and fulfillment.

Freud

Sigmund Freud, possibly the most famous psychologist, invented the treatment called “psychoanalysis”. Freud’s theory is all about resolving conflicts between three main different levels of a person’s mind. For Freud, those levels include the deep primal instincts, the regular mind (ego) that tries to manage those primal

drives, and the moral/social dimension that defines what is acceptable. Freud also focused on uncovering repressed traumas and desires because they could cause and explain mental, emotional, and behavioral problems that someone may be experiencing.

Freud's ideas, while debated, are found everywhere in our society. The most relevant take-away for our look at human development is that it's all about harmonizing different levels of the mind, reducing internal conflict, and fostering introspection and reconciliation. Those are general themes that can be found in many aspects of development.

Jung and "Individuation"

The psychiatrist Carl Jung was about a generation younger than Freud. Like Freud, Jung focused on the unconscious, but in a different way. Briefly put, Jung said that every person is on a journey of *individuation*—becoming unique. This process, according to Jung, occurs through integrating the personal unconscious, the "collective unconscious," and the conscious mind. The collective unconscious includes deep elements of culture, including myths, universal structures or patterns called "archetypes", and symbols.

According to Jung, the individual naturally evolves out the collective unconscious toward becoming unique, and this requires stripping off the identity that we accept earlier in life through conformity. That, Jung says, is a natural process but can also be consciously supported and advanced. The process of individuation occurs mainly in the second half of life, but is never fully completed.

Individuation has parallels to Maslow's idea of self-actualization.

Mindfulness

We hear the word *mindful* and *mindfulness* a lot these days. Mindfulness is about relating fully and consciously. This is related to being able to focus our attention long enough to have a positive experience, and to being aware of what our self (including body and mind) is doing. The popularity of the term may be a reaction again the way that our attention is pulled in so many different directions today.

We know that when we can't focus our attention and be "in the moment," we diminish the quality of our experiences and our relationships.

Our ability to focus and to be fully aware of our experience is particularly challenged in the age of the Internet, where we get inundated with things clamoring for our attention—from news items to ads to the posts and "likes" of the hundreds of "friends" we may have in social networks. Living with stress due to constant worry about paying the bills, taking care of others, etc. also makes it more challenging to be "mindful."

The growing popularity of meditation and yoga is a positive thing, and it is related to the pursuit of mindfulness. It is worth noting, however, that when ideas like mindfulness become rapidly popular, they can lose their meaning and impact because people seek shortcuts and the experience itself becomes an object. There are no shortcuts to happiness. Nevertheless, we should be asking how our society and culture either support, or work against, mindfulness, and what we can do about it.

The Common Themes Underlying Human Development & Fulfillment

We've reviewed here many of the conditions needed to support the continuing and full development of human beings from the time they are born onwards, as well as some traits that seem to be associated with that development. Some common themes emerge. What human fulfillment *generally* seems to come down to, across any and all cultures, is **the opportunity to learn, to grow, to become more complex, yet more "integrated", with and through rich relationships.**

Some aspects of fulfilled human development can be thought of as "internal", and some as "external" (even though the difference between these can be blurred):

- The "internal" aspect includes a coherent (unfragmented), stable-yet-maturing picture of our self and our world, and harmony among our thoughts, feelings, drives, and unconscious concerns.
- The "external" aspect includes our inter-personal, family, community, and society-scale relationships. (The kind of relationships that we call "spiritual" could be thought of as either internal or external, or both).

Conditions necessary for the full expression of human development include meeting certain basic physiological needs, the emotional needs that are often connected to those physiological needs, and the social/cultural needs in turn connected to both. Things that must be in *abundance* include:

- love;
- trust;
- play;
- opportunity to try, to fail, and to learn;
- challenge (but not so much that it overwhelms);
- diversity of experience;
- experiences with nature; and
- stability without stagnation.

Things that *inhibit* human development, when in over-abundance, include:

- chronic poverty;
- fear; and
- violence.

Human Development and Fulfillment as Evolution at the Personal Level

If you read the first booklet in this series--“Making Sense of Today” —you may recall that the basic pattern that defines evolution in all complex systems—from the physical and chemical to the biological to the cultural and social—is a cycle, really an upward spiral, with two phases:

- (a) differences weaving together to create new wholes, followed by
- (b) fresh differences emerging, ready to be integrated into new wholes...

...and so on.

Put more compactly, evolution is a matter of differentiation and integration, locked in an upward spiral of increasing complexity.

Internally, the more complex, newly-evolved systems use more energy. In order for this to happen, there has to be an availability of free energy (or information) to put to work. Also, any increase in entropy (randomness) caused by this greater flow of energy should ideally be matched by an increase in efficiency so that

progressively less entropy is pushed into the environment. That matters because entropy can become a kind of pollution (physically, psychologically, or socially).

Human Development and Fulfillment as Evolution at the Personal Level

Earlier I made the statement, and hopefully the case, that human fulfillment is very much a process of learning and growing in a context of rich relationships, both “internal” and “external”. In that process, we can clearly see the central pattern of differentiation and integration:

- We experience *differentiation* whenever we encounter, discover, or realize. This happens when we interact deeply with people, when we look inwards, when we encounter new kinds of situations and objects, and when we struggle with challenges.
- We experience *integration* whenever we create, when we learn, when we put things into context, and when we reconcile.

This cycle of differentiation and integration within our own lives parallels the basic pattern of universal evolution so closely that we can go out on a limb and conclude that **the process of human development and fulfillment is evolution at the personal level.**

The Influence of Society & Culture on Human Development & Fulfillment

Society is basically the arrangements between and among us, at every level up to the global. It is the system of relationships that define most of our identity and helps us survive together. At its best, it serves to provide us with opportunities for development; at its worst, it serves only a purpose of self-perpetuation without regard to the fulfillment of its members. *Culture* can be thought of as the values, ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that inhabit, support, and are transmitted through society. It is like our collective mind.

Society and culture affect our chances for a fulfilling life well before we’ve even born. They affect the feelings and expectations and diets and habits of our parents, including the mother who carries us in the womb. They affect the stimulation we receive as babies, toddlers, and on up.

As we grow older, society and culture affect the presence or absence of opportunity for learning, exploration, and optimal challenge. They affect the presence or absence of equity, or of racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice that can deny different people pathways to fulfillment, which ultimately harms all of us. They affect our opportunity to experience nature and solitude.

Society and culture affect the nature of our economy, our role in it, and whether we're treated as mere objects or as unique beings of great potential. They affect our educational culture, which may be all about human development or merely about indoctrination and the training of workers. They affect our systems of health care (prevention vs. cure? Just body or mind-and-body? For some, or for all?) They affect our notions and systems of justice (is justice merely about public safety and punishment or is it about growth and wholeness?)

Society and culture affect our formal systems of governance (collective decision-making) and our informal capacity to solve problems together. They affect our sense of belonging and significance and how we fulfill that need (either in constructive ways or in destructive ways, closing down our opportunities rather than opening them up). And society and culture affect our cultivation of, recognition of, and valuing of wisdom.

Subjective Well-Being and its Relation to Society: The "World Happiness Report"

Subjective well-being, or simply "how people feel about life" is an undeniable indicator of fulfillment. This is the subject of the annual World Happiness Report, which has been published almost every year since 2012. Written by an international group of scholars, and affiliated with the United Nations, this report draws from a large international survey of "life evaluations" and then looks at how various factors affect the country scores. It also ranks the world's countries by their inhabitants' overall "happiness". (Happiness isn't necessarily the same as well-being, but that appears to be a matter of semantics in this case).

The world's top spot in the report has been occupied by Finland for the past three years. The nearby countries of Scandinavia have the highest rankings overall. The figures below are from the 2020 report. *I've only included the top 20 and bottom 20.*

1. Finland (7.809)
2. Denmark (7.646)
3. Switzerland (7.560)
4. Iceland (7.504)
5. Norway (7.488)
6. Netherlands (7.449)
7. Sweden (7.353)
8. New Zealand (7.300)
9. Austria (7.294)
10. Luxembourg (7.238)
11. Canada (7.232)
12. Australia (7.223)
13. United Kingdom (7.165)
14. Israel (7.129)
15. Costa Rica (7.121)
16. Ireland (7.094)
17. Germany (7.076)
18. United States (6.940)
19. Czech Republic (6.911)
20. Belgium (6.864)

134. Comoros (4.289)
135. Togo (4.187)
136. Ethiopia (4.186)
137. Madagascar (4.166)
138. Egypt (4.151)
139. Sierra Leone (3.926)
140. Burundi (3.775)
141. Zambia (3.759)
142. Haiti (3.721)
143. Lesotho (3.653)
144. India (3.573)
145. Malawi (3.538)
146. Yemen (3.527)
147. Botswana (3.479)
148. Tanzania (3.476)
149. Central African Republic (3.476)
150. Rwanda (3.312)
151. Zimbabwe (3.299)
152. South Sudan (2.817)
153. Afghanistan (2.567)

The authors of this report found that major factors connected to the level of sense of well-being include:

- income (which they measured in terms of gross domestic product per capita);
- healthy life expectancy (how long people live);
- social support (if you were in trouble, could you count on people to help you?);
- freedom to make life choices;
- generosity (as indicated by charitable giving);
- perceptions of corruption; and
- people reporting recent happiness, laughter, and enjoyment versus worry, sadness, and anger.

In the conclusion to the 2020 report, it is reported that “The top countries tend to have high values for most of the key variables that have been found to support well-being, including income, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom, trust, and generosity.”

Among these variables, *income* was the most powerful factor. Inequality in well-being within countries is another factor: “Countries with a broader spread of well-being outcomes have lower average life evaluations.” The World Happiness Report writers also found that *trust* plays a big role as well: “(A)nything that can increase social and institutional trust produces especially large benefits for those subject to various forms of hardship...” The authors found a lot of interaction between various factors, resulting in “virtuous cycles” (for example, improvement in trust heightens other positive factors, which in turn boost other factors, etc.), as well as “vicious cycles” in the opposite direction.

Conclusion

Society and culture clearly have a tremendous influence on human development and fulfillment—or, as re-framed here, on the evolution of individual human beings through their lifetimes. Genetics and individuals’ unique experiences play an important role, of course, but society and culture are major if not dominant influences.

No one society in history can be pointed to as the “ideal” society in terms of support for human development and fulfillment. We draw inspiration from many, and we can learn from history as well, but what lay ahead of us will be increasingly of our own co-design.

Conscious Evolution of Society & Culture as the *Co*-Evolution of Society & Culture with the Individual

In the first booklet in this series, “Making Sense of Today”, we reviewed evidence that the emerging stage of evolution on a global scale (and, for all we know, on a universal scale) is marked by the opportunity for more of us to consciously participate in the evolution of our societies and cultures. But to what end would we want to do this? Based on the trend toward liberation (freeing up) and integration (a more inter-related, inter-dependent, mutually supportive world), the “end” (purpose) would seem to include human fulfillment, or evolution at the personal level. Thus, when we speak of “conscious evolution,” we really are speaking of the conscious *co*-evolution of society/culture and the individual—both evolving together. Indeed, that is the only way each can continue to evolve.

It is important to note that the “end” is not literally an end, but a process of becoming. “Being-in-becoming” is a good way to think of it. We’re not talking about some kind of utopia (which translates as “no place”), or an absence of pain, struggle, or conflict. All of those, it seems, are actually part of the journey, and we might ultimately regret it if we gave them up. No, I think we’re talking about *eutopia* (which translates as “good place”)—taking as many different forms as there are cultures in the world, and maybe even as many forms as there are individuals. This isn’t a matter of *prediction* (such as what “futurists” focus on) but rather one of *projection*: what we can aspire to and bring forth.

The Other “End” for Conscious Evolution: A Healthy Relationship with the Planet

While this booklet focuses on human development and fulfillment, the other “end” for conscious evolution needs mention as well. This other end is a sustainable—or even better, “thrivable”—relationship between individuals, their society and culture, and the natural living systems and environment on which we all depend. Rather than assume we will someday just abandon our crowded and endangered planet and seek fulfilling lives on space stations or other planets engineered for human life, we should embrace the uniqueness of the planet we evolved on. The earth remains our only and greatest home, garden, playground, and classroom. We each have a great deal of nurturing to receive from this planet, and in turn it needs our help.

Summary

- People are born to become. Human development and fulfillment is a process that begins before birth and continues through death.
- If we review insights from psychology and from human history, and just look at our lives and those around us, it appears that the essence of human development and fulfillment is the opportunity to learn, to grow, to become more complex, yet more “integrated”, with and through rich relationships. This integration is both internal (in our own conscious and unconscious mind) and external (relationships with the other people, with society, and beyond). The foundations for this are established at a very early age.

- The process of human development and fulfillment mirrors the universal pattern of differentiation and integration, so we can say that it represents evolution at the personal level.
- Society and culture play a dominant role in supporting, or failing to support, evolution at the personal level.
- Fostering a mutually supportive, “co-evolutionary” relationship between society & culture, the individual, and our natural environment is the “why” for conscious evolution.