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**'THE BREAST-MILK OF THE INUIT MOTHER; A TALE OF MICRO AND MACROCOSM, SHADOW AND LIGHT.'**

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**Introduction**

*“Until the late twentieth century, every generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow. Each assumed, without questioning, that its children and children’s children would walk the same earth, under the same sky. Hardships, failures, and personal death were encompassed in that vaster assurance of continuity. That certainty is now lost to us, whatever our politics. That loss, unmeasured and immeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time.”*

(Joanna Macy in Roszak et al eds. 1995: 241)

In the mid 1980’s a university scientist from Quebec went north seeking a ‘pristine’ group to compare with women in Southern Quebec who had Poly Chlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) in their breast milk. Instead, he discovered that Inuit mothers had breast milk with PCBs that were five times higher.

PCBs are classified as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), chemicals which are highly toxic, bioaccumulative and capable of undergoing long-range transport. These pollutants migrate to colder climates and precipitate in places like the arctic. The Inuit are hit particularly hard because they eat a diet rich in fat from sea mammals. The fat is loaded with a variety of long-lived toxic chemicals which become more concentrated as they move up the food chain, reaching humans at the top. POPs come from insecticides, electrical insulation, pesticides and industrial waste. They can cause a range of problems such as hormonal imbalance, brain damage and learning difficulties. As a result, Inuit mothers are being advised not to breast feed their babies.

This shocking piece of news illustrates beautifully the interconnectedness of all living systems and the complexity of the social and environmental crisis we face today. Our consumer habits have reached a land that is so far away, a place so white and pure. Our toxins intervene into the most tender of early relationships, into that most vulnerable of places in a woman’s body, so symbolic of mother love. Now we know that there is no pristine place left untouched. Our wild spaces, both inside and out, in matter and psyche, are affected. The land, our bodies, the air, our spirit, the sea, our unconscious and our dreams, our mother’s milk and the groundwater of mother earth – all are affected and seamlessly interwoven.

We write this chapter in the wake of the tsunami disaster amidst a continuing bloody war in Iraq. These events are symptoms of a world in crisis. The fight for the earth’s diminishing natural resources becomes more desperate. As global warming becomes a reality we face increasing ‘natural’ disasters. Yet change seems slow and hard to make. Denial of our situation is rife, inertia hard to shift. How do we make the collective sea-change in the service of life?

The work of psychotherapy is dedicated to deep change. Can we use our skills to help illuminate our collective crisis, and strengthen the sea-change in our attitudes and lifestyles?

### **Microcosm and macrocosm; mapping individual psychological insights onto the collective**

Psychotherapists and environmental activists, ecologists and counsellors and a host of others have been coming together in recent years to try to shed psychological light on our current ecological crisis. Many environmental activists have been coming to the conclusion that our ecologically destructive behaviour is ultimately a question of human consciousness, and are caused to wonder; can anything that has been learned in the proliferation of psychotherapies over the last century help us to understand what we are doing, to wake up, and change, fast? Conversely, there are many psychological workers who are very aware of the significance of climate change, pollution, over-fishing, habitat destruction, the loss of rainforests....and no longer wish to work in an anthropocentric, a human-chauvinist way that partakes in the massive cultural denial of the situation we are in. How to do this? Perhaps we psychological workers also have much to learn from ecologists and others immersed in sustainability issues – about sustainability in the human psyche, about the relief and joy of moving towards ecological balance, inner and outer, about ‘nature’, outer and inner.

The ecopsychology movement that has been emerging around these questions, these impulses, involves much energetic debate, some shafts of insight, and any number of practical initiatives. We shall firstly briefly describe some of the latter, as they are inspiring and informative, before going on to look at some of the knottier issues about changing consciousness. Many involve helping people to ‘reconnect’ directly with the other-than-human natural world, by time and attention spent in gardens, or going into the (relatively) wild, trusting and variously supporting the healing process that then often spontaneously seems to occur. Increasing numbers are now taking part in ‘vision quests’, or in ‘wilderness therapy’ journeys (Adams 1996)(related work has included time in the wild as an alternative to custody for young offenders in South Africa and the U.S.A.). Practitioners are developing horticultural therapy around hospitals and in mental health settings, doing psychotherapy on allotments (Linden and Grut 2002), ‘ecotherapy’ wherever you are, and the burgeoning world of adventure therapy often takes place outdoors. ‘Nature therapy’ with various groups including autistic children and psychiatric patients is taking off in Israel. Research has established significant improvement to recovery times, for patients in hospital with a ‘natural’ view, compared to those without, and gradually more hospital gardens are planned and established.(Cooper Marcus 1998)

Time with ‘nature’ seems to be simply good for us, and where there is space for this, a lot often also takes place at the levels of metaphor and synchronicity, if only we are prepared to be open to this, to look and listen and stay aware. The world around us seems uncannily to mirror what may be going on for us in our inner worlds, and furthermore often seems to have something rather useful to say to us about it. This resonance, these moments of synchronicity can be healing at many levels; the content of the learning involved being added to by the very magic of the thing; we are part of

a world, a universe, that can speak to us in such ways - we are, after all, part of a quite extraordinary web of life, and that web is infused with meaning.

Re-connecting 'psyche' with 'ecos' at any level is surely a valuable part of what Thomas Berry has called the 'Great Work' (Berry 1999) that faces the generations alive today – the shift from an unsustainable and destructive, to a sustainable life-enhancing human presence on the planet, and the change of consciousness that must attend that..

However a great deal of ecopsychological exploration involves the attempt to understand deeply what is occurring in the *collective* psyche, and we thus tend to find ourselves using concepts and tools from individual psychological work, and applying them to the 'big picture'. We shall attempt here to begin to discuss the possibilities, limits and growing edge of such an approach. (For the purposes of exploring how models from individual psychology may be mapped onto collective processes, we shall refer to the 'human species', when in fact we are talking about current human behaviour in the developed western world; the 'industrial growth society' which is in many ways now dominant on the planet, and increasing its dominance and spread constantly. There are of course many within that dominant culture that strive to live differently, and many indigenous societies have lived, and strive still to live, in ecological balance with the living beings that surround them, and in full conscious participation with 'all that is' (Armstrong (1995), Malidoma Some (1998), Norberg Hodge (1991), Abrams (1997), Prechtel (2002).)

It is quickly apparent that understandings and insights from individual and family work do map fairly easily onto the apparent collective psychological aspects of our environmentally destructive society. For example, if psychological work might start with an initial assessment of risk factors – risks of suicide, self-harm, danger to others, substance abuse/active addictions – we find an immediately urgent, risky, situation. The species is not consciously suicidal (although we find it amazing how many ordinary people, once you start talking about environmental issues, express the view that 'we' are rather a bad lot, and if we make ourselves extinct, which is seen as quite possible, then the planet would probably be better off anyway). Yet it is behaving with reckless abandon, as though unaware that it is destroying all that it depends upon for its life; atmosphere, rainforest, clean oceans full of life, weather systems, habitats, biodiversity, soil structure, water tables – and poisoning the food chain throughout the planet, as we have seen. Evidently it is a danger to others (other species) – it is actively ecocidal, and showing a psychopathological lack of empathy or remorse about this. Others are seen as without consciousness or the capacity to suffer, having no intrinsic value, just here to serve us, no loss if harmed or damaged – after all there are plenty more (species) – just expendable objects.

If it is without empathy, presumably its capacity for intimacy, for relationship other than abusive and using, is negligible? Exactly so; the dominant culture has no loving relationship with 'nature', but exploits the imagery of nature (wild places, beautiful sunsets, wild animals) and our repressed longing to be in true communion with these, in order to sell ever more goods – the very goods whose production is destroying ever more of those wild places, wild creatures, peaceful lakes, alighting butterflies, honking geese. And sells it to us directly in packaged holidays, as the lethal air miles build up.

If the apparent lack of remorse is reminiscent of the psychopath, the lack of empathy, and the using of others, is characteristic of narcissism. In narcissism a lacking in the core sense of self leads to a process of using others to bolster appearance, bolster a secretly low self esteem, and there is an obsession with self image, with self in the superficial sense. As though all the 'resources' of the planet become a giant fur coat that we throw around ourselves, and temporarily hope to share the glory of, but unsatisfyingly so, for the animal is dead, and died in vain.

Anyone who has worked in mental health would guess that this being must be an addict, and of course this is so. It is not new to look at the psychological processes of consumerism through the lens of addiction (Kanner and Gomes 1995). Ever more 'stuff' is used, but the brief high does not hold, as what is really being sought for (perhaps confidence, spiritual uplift, the capacity for easy intimacy, a sense of wildness, feelings of true power, true freedom, safety, comfort...) cannot be found in this stuff, and what is being avoided (painful feelings, perhaps also a sense of emptiness, having in some sense profoundly lost the way) cannot forever be avoided by consuming the stuff. Addictions are mean – the longer you pursue them, the more the painful feelings build up and push to be expressed – and the further you get from what you really wanted. When an addict faces up to the situation, s/he finds him/herself more out of control, less free, and with relationships in a worse state than they would ever have thought possible.

We could go on. See for example, Paul Shepherd (Shepherd 1995) for a developmental model of our having collectively de-railed the conditions of the wild tribal childhood in which we developed psychologically over thousands of years, and thus being collectively, chronically immature, full of unresolved early omnipotence, with little sense of limits. Probably our readers could go on also – mapping the psychological models and ways of working with which they have allegiance, onto the broad outlines of our collective situation.

The knotty question that then arises, and that we would here like to acknowledge and at least begin to address, is of course *and then what?* How do we respond to this situation? The question is arguably central to the whole territory where psychotherapy and political process meet. What do we do, for example, with clear insights about the projection of shadow issues onto so-called 'enemies' in international relations, the need to create enemies? With the 'war on terror', the repression and demonisation of the feminine in deeply patriarchal situations, the developing world culture of self-righteousness complacency and guilt, resentment and murderous rage?

On the one hand, to wonder how we might respond to such huge issues risks grandiosity, and the accusation of grandiosity. We psychological workers are not the answer to the problems of humanity; if we have something to offer it will be as 'plain members' of the human as well as of the biotic community, alongside activists and gardeners, indigenous peoples and economists, farmers and spiritual leaders. On the other hand, who are we to avoid responding, perhaps even taking the stance of 'bystanding' (Clarkson (1996) in a situation of holocaust?

It is also, arguably, not an entirely new thing to attempt. Ecophilosopher, anthropologist and magician David Abram (1996) spent time studying with shamans –

magicians and healers – in Indonesia and Nepal, and quickly noticed that these people tended to live

*‘at the spatial periphery of the community, or more often, out beyond the edges of the village – amid the rice fields, or in a forest, or a wild cluster of boulders.....’*

Abram realised this was significant, and symbolic,

*‘For the magicians intelligence is not encompassed within the society; its place is at the edge of the community, mediating between the human community and the larger community of beings upon which the village depends for its nourishment and sustenance. This...includes...diverse plants, myriad animals...winds and weather patterns....and the various landforms, forests, rivers, caves, mountains...’* (p6)

As he goes on to spell this out, it is as though he is describing precisely the territory that modern day ecopsychologists are attempting to explore, or perhaps ‘remember’;

*‘The traditional tribal shaman.....ensures that the relation between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal, and that the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it..’* (p7)

Furthermore, his/her work as a healer of individuals, arises *from* the above work

*‘Only those persons who, by their everyday practice, are involved in monitoring and maintaining the relations between the human village and the animate landscape are able to appropriately diagnose, treat, and ultimately relieve personal ailments and illnesses arising within the village.’* (p7 – 8)

We return to the question; what practices might ecopsychologists adopt that could help mediate the currently terribly disrupted relationship between human community and the wider community of beings, knowing that such was honourable work over thousands of years? On what ground might *we* stand as we attempt to do this, living, as we do, in the ‘belly of the monster’, in every sense part of what is occurring?

Perhaps some elements of the answer to this question are beginning to appear. We may find that our individual work begins to change, as our own consciousness changes. A senior analyst once told one of us that in years of therapy the cutting down of the tree in her childhood garden had *always* been interpreted as being about her father, never about the tree in its own right, and her relationship to it. How different, we wonder, might her therapy and her life have been if her grief – her actual experience - about that beloved being in her young life had been really heard, acknowledged and supported?

We may find that we are drawn to begin to work with our clients outdoors, allowing those processes of metaphor and synchronicity back in. A friend was wondering whether to attend a men’s workshop, following the traditions of ‘rites of passage’, to take place outdoors, in a wild place. He had never done anything remotely like this before, and was understandably very wary. As he sat outside and talked about it with a friend who would be there, a robin landed on the tip of his boot, and perched there, suspended in midair at the end of one of his long, crossed legs. Neither man moved a

muscle, or scarcely dared breathe, as the sense of the sacred, of the magic and mystery of life surrounded them, brought by the most friendly and reassuring of messengers. Needless to say this friend attended the workshop, and much was to follow for him.

Perhaps we trust that the very work of individual therapy in simply supporting personal and spiritual growth, is part of a broad move from outer to inner, from unsustainable to sustainable values and pursuits in life.

Another modality is intentional groupwork, as ‘ecotherapy’ and ‘wilderness work’ and ‘nature therapy’ gatherings add themselves to ‘deep ecology’ workshop practices (Macy and Brown 1998) The power of such collective ‘setting of intention’, together with our allowing ourselves to reconnect with the greater wilder consciousness surrounding us, and the return to working through ritual, music and art that seems spontaneously to arise in such settings, is a potent new/old force.

More contentiously, is it also possible to speak *to* the broader collective psyche? In group therapy the therapist may make an observation, or perhaps an interpretation, from a place of witness that so accurately mirrors what is being experienced, that the whole group process moves on. Such interventions would never usefully have a tone of criticism, blame or accusation, yet how hard it is to talk about our current behaviour at a planetary level without such a tone creeping in! The useful intervention, rather, will be entirely without judgement, and is likely to be highly empathic to the predicament, experience, and process that is being thus witnessed and reflected.

### **Collecting the Shadow: Bulimia and the Collective**

Some forms of writing, speaking, film-making, theatre, art (and more) do mirror the collective process; storytelling and commentary have been likened to a psychotherapeutic process. Would we learn anything new if we tried a more deliberate form of mirroring?

We have tried an experiment here, using bulimia to echo aspects of our collective crisis. Bulimia reflects consumer culture, with its fast food, quick-fix, disposable habits. Although the twists and turns of recovery are different each time, there are patterns to be found over the course of time as individuals change. We wanted to use this example to tease out how our collective destructiveness might be spoken to and transformed.

The individual and collective voices are interwoven, with the collective voice written in italics.

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A bulimic woman is a food addict; she feels out of control around eating, hates her body and resorts to bingeing to avoid certain unbearable feelings and states of mind. Terrified of getting fat, she vomits the binge so that on the surface all appears well. Yet underneath, there is physical deterioration such as hormone imbalance, tooth decay, and damage to internal organs. Meanwhile, all the mess is flushed away.

*We consume fast and beyond our means, damaging our very life support systems, disposing of our undigested waste into vast landfill sites. We abuse our earth body. Are we bingeing in order to avoid the lurking shadows of our collective past? We seem unable to reflect on, let alone repair, the damage we have done. Craving deep soul nourishment, we remain stuck in a vicious circle of indigestion.*

A bulimic woman arrives for therapy when her habit has become more trouble than it is worth. Her therapy journey will be a bumpy ride as she negotiates her way through previously forbidden territory, forever tempted to fall back into the immediate comfort of food.

*Industrial Growth Culture has not yet arrived for therapy and it is possible that we will reach a dangerous level of collapse before deep change can happen. How long do we have to wait until consumer habits become more trouble than they are worth?*

The bulimic woman (often?) has an early experience of abandonment by mother, as well as being used for her mothers' unmet needs. In her childlike way, she concludes her needs are too much and tries to become a 'good girl', splitting off her needy, messy self and flushing it away. Food becomes more of a reliable mate than mother.

*We live in a Hollywood culture of fast food, where slow, dark, needy feelings are unacceptable. We must be efficient, bright, fast and logical to be successful in the West. Our growing alienation from Mother Earth leaves us dangling as if we were separate objects floating in space. In desperation we turn to material comforts, confusing matter, mater and mother love. We have lost our ability to commune with our fellow earth community, believing ourselves to be a lone intelligence in the universe. There is unacknowledged abandonment in the early experience of our species.*

It is sometimes necessary for the therapist to actively 'pull' the secret bulimic symptoms into awareness. The bulimic woman has great difficulty in spitting out the difficult things within the relationship. Instead, she holds onto them, and may vomit her feelings before or after the sessions. If the lurking shadow material is not picked up, the client may leave suddenly, often without paying. There is the need to be on the look-out for what is on the edges, what is not being said.

*Who is able to watch and speak the shadow material in our culture? The shamans were the ones who could communicate with the web of life, speak with nature spirits. In psychotherapy we learn to work with the dark material, to integrate it with the light. How does this weave into our cultural space?*

Destructive symptoms, however ugly, hold meaning. They serve a function. Some bulimic women have prevented themselves from going quite mad in their early life by channelling the pain into their bodies, despite the harm they may have caused. When the symptoms recede, the old madness lurks, and care must be taken not to move too quickly. There is a great deal of stored up and unprocessed material that needs to be listened to carefully. Re-telling the story, often many times, is an attempt to find a truth that fits.

*Western culture tells our collective history in a particular way: that we have made great progress since living in caves, that our scientific and technological achievements give us longer and safer lives. But these achievements have also brought us to the most dangerous point that homo sapiens has ever known in its life: our species is now in danger of becoming extinct. Living with a story that does not fit gives rise to great dissatisfaction, bewilderment and lack of meaning. Re-telling that story takes time.*

Destructiveness can be about a need to repeat something from the past, in order to do it differently this time around. Bulimia can be a way of dealing with past sexual abuse. The abuse has moved from the hand of someone else, to the hand of the victim. Talking about past relationships enables links to be made, and slowly some sense can be made out of madness. Secrets will out, and the abusers can no longer use threats to maintain the status quo to their advantage. At times the client may experience the therapist as the hated parent, the abuser; although uncomfortable, this can enable past feelings to be worked through in the present.

*Abuse at the hands of those in power is, more often than not, covered up. What is wrong in the collective gets converted into an issue of personal ill health. Past abuse at the hands of those in power needs to be publicly exposed so that individuals can see the links, and know the difference, between personal and collective pain. How do we rework this damage? Is it our leaders that need to be strong enough to cope with negative projections, understanding them enough to be able to respond with wisdom, to make sense of our predicaments, rather than trying to spin?*

The bulimic woman has cut off from her body and is trying to rule it with her mind. She will respond to almost any strong emotion with food, and starve herself as a way of punishing her body for being too needy. Her distrust of her intuition and instinct, as vital guides, causes inner chaos. She fears that her body, her senses, will simply lead her astray. Recovering trust in the body is about listening and deep attunement. Using a tender and acute mindfulness she can learn to differentiate between, and respond to, her array of different emotions and bodily sensations. As her emotional literacy develops, she discovers her body to be a useful antenna to let her know what is going on in her environment; if she trusts her body to tell her what she needs, she will settle at a sustainable weight. In part, her self-harm has been a frustration with her strange and unknown nature that she cannot control. The more she attempts to discipline and control her body the more it fights back. Getting to know her nature, with respect, is the turning point.

*Here lies a hotbed of a cultural past, where Christianity and other patriarchal religions have developed a transcendent spirituality, moving up and out of the body in order to control our wild nature - and nature herself. For nature has been turned from feeling subject into inanimate object. Our fears of nature need naming and addressing. Changing direction requires a climbing down from an inflated position of all-knowing humans, recognising the damage we have done. Seeing ourselves as an equal part of the web of life is both terrifying in its loss of control and magnificent in realising its capacity to hold and guide us. Destructive behaviour is likely to cease when we can feel the presence of nature as larger and more powerful than humans, as subject not object; at last we are no longer alone in the universe – we have a*

*container and guide, if we can allow attunement with the body and the body of the earth.*

As the layers peel away, and the war with food and her body ceases, the struggle with intimate relationships begins. For now we are in the territory of the unknown other, of that which is out of our control, with whom we must negotiate, listen to, speak with, learn about, survive loving and hating. Destructiveness only comes when that process becomes so blocked that no other way seems possible. Destructiveness ceases when 'the other' – that alien body, those alien parts of ourselves, become knowable, become our allies instead of threats.

*If we peel away the layers of war on terror, war with nature, we face the nakedness of intimate relationships. We can no longer live as if we were separate beings. Destructiveness ceases when all who inhabit this earth are experienced as interconnected, necessary and fascinating parts of the web of life....transient guests on the earth.*

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One of the most striking things for us in this experiment is that it highlights a process that therapists are familiar with, but may seem paradoxical to the wider world: rather than locking up destructiveness and keeping a tight control over it, it needs to be spoken to, with loving tenderness. It needs to be attuned to, loved, and understood for how it came into being and what it wants. Only then will it grow and change into something else.

Many people are concerned that the move towards sustainability will involve loss of material wealth and power. This feels like an enormous deprivation. Of course, All change involves some loss. But what we arrive at in the end is so much more satisfying. The bulimic realises that food could never satisfy her soul hunger, in the same way that we know deep down that endless material wealth cannot make us happy. Yet we fight like mad in the face of this process, fearing loss of control and hardship. We desperately need a different kind of leadership that can contain our fears and speak to the terror in our hearts – rather than a president who expects that to wage war on terror will somehow destroy it!

### **.....AND LIGHT; Environmental Crisis as Spiritual Teacher**

As well as denial about our destructiveness and the danger we are in, there is also arguably a taboo in our dominant culture about being too hopeful, about really believing that a profound transformation of human behaviour is possible, about having the temerity to see light in the darkness. In speaking or writing about the situation, it is easy to run into either defence, as they stand like huge guardians at the threshold. Too dark, and people recoil from a 'doom and gloom' approach, literally turning off their televisions in millions in the 1980's, leading to a major change in environmental broadcasting.. Too hopeful, and the accusation would be of naïvety, and a lack of compassion for the suffering that wracks our planet.

Nonetheless, as we attempt to listen in to collective process, we keep tuning in to the need for hope, as all of us endeavour to stay sane and functional in the midst of overwhelmingly distressing news, every day, day after day. A 'story' that we find inspiring, is the idea of our current predicament as *teacher*. Such a story can balance meaninglessness with meaning, despair with tender encouragement to become all we can be.

The 'environmental crisis' is certainly a crisis of human consciousness, and as such it challenges us to face up to ourselves, and to grow, very fast. As with any potent story of life-as-teacher, most of the pain arises from our resistance. If we don't resist, the learning is perhaps fairly clear, although each one of us will of course be aware of different aspects of what we are being called to learn, how we are being challenged to grow.

For example; organising our lives and society around getting materially richer is ravaging our planet, dividing us from each other, creating wars, and largely failing to make us any happier (Durning 1995). However if we look for what is deeply important to us, *represented* by what we materially consume, we find sources of value that are much more 'inner' than 'outer' (love, intimacy, freedom, creativity, joy, wisdom, purpose, play, compassion) and are infinitely sustainable, so we have a double reason to transform ourselves and our societies.

As well as a move from an 'outer' to an 'inner' focus, many searching conversations about environmental issues seem to arrive repeatedly at the similar insight that our lives need to become *simpler*, and we need to *slow down*, both of which seem to be very desirable at the point of insight, and also tremendously hard to attain. Speeding up seems to have much to do with avoiding pain, and with the desire to feel in control; again, the insight repeatedly arises that letting go into *trusting* life, trusting ourselves, rather than struggling to control nature, outer and inner, is part of the journey.

In seeing that we destroy ourselves when we are in unbearable pain, it becomes clear that we must focus on our healing.

As we become increasingly aware of the consequences of our actions, we are perhaps challenged to practice mindfulness in our everyday lives. Spending less time 'lost' in the past or future, we arrive in the present, where life is to be found.

In the attempt to live sustainably, we get to reconnect with, to deepen our understanding of our dependence and interdependence, we get to wake up to our place in an infinitely beautiful web of life, to remember mystery.....

Perhaps most crucial of all, we simply *have* to learn to replace destructive competition with cooperation and love, to really learn that we are not separate, that what we do to others we do to ourselves. We will have to learn to grow beyond greed and violence to become compassionate and skilled peacemakers, able to nourish ourselves and each other well and safely. The ecology of our earth tells us that there really is no other choice, and time, for us, is short.

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