

Chapter 21 Communicating to accelerate the Great Transition

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Andrew Gaines

The Inspiring Transition initiative

My Aikido teacher used to ask, “What’s needed now?” What does this group of students need at this point in their development? He would then improvise a training session based on that perception.

When I look at the global situation, like many others I see two trends.

On the one hand, both environmental deterioration and corporate control of the state and its citizens is increasing.

On the other hand, underneath the radar, millions of civil society groups have formed in response to these trends, and environmental and socially responsible businesses are forming as well.

I think that what is most needed now is a concerted effort to inspire urgent thoughtful mainstream commitment to doing everything required to transition to a life-sustaining society. Who should do this? Those of us who care!

This is a call to a new kind of action.

The Great Transition to a life-sustaining society

There is a huge movement for positive change underway. It comprises millions of groups and their members. Paul Hawken describes it in [*Blessed Unrest*](#).

If this movement fulfils its potential, historians in the future may describe our time as ‘*the Great Transition to a life-sustaining society*’.

A number of thought leaders and groups are using the phrase Great Transition spontaneously. For example:

Paul Raskin and his colleagues at Tellus Institute wrote a seminal paper, *Great Transition: the promise and lure of the times ahead*. In it they outline possible scenarios for the future. Two are quite dark: Fortress World and Breakdown. They call the two positive ones (Eco-Communalism and New Paradigm) *the Great Transition*.

In *This Changes Everything* Naomi Klein uses ‘the Great Transition’ as a label for what our movement is about. Other independent thinkers, including the New Economics Foundation and Lester Brown have adopted the phrase as well.

I suggest that we might all adopt ‘*We are in a Great Transition to a life-sustaining society*’ as a guiding meme for our time.

Brand recognition and social change

The meme *We are in a Great Transition, and we need to accelerate it* (and variations of this) can act as a counter to the mantra ‘economic growth, economic growth’. In time (as soon as possible) we want *the Great Transition* to supplant ‘economic growth’ as the primary definition of what our times are about.

Marketers know the value of having a brand appear ‘everywhere’. That’s why we see brand names featured prominently in sports arenas, clothing labels, billboards and glossy magazines.

We don’t exactly have a brand; each of the groups Paul Hawken mentions has their own brand. But we have a unifying meme.

Applying the meme is simple. We can bring it up in conversations. We might use it as a tagline in our email signature:

We are in a Great Transition to a life-sustaining society!

We can refer to the Great Transition in blogs, articles and lectures. The idea, as marketers know well, is to have the phrase appear everywhere, often.

Does the prospect of mentioning that we are in a Great Transition make you feel foolish awkward? I encourage you to do it anyway, because affecting public consciousness in this direction is the single most important thing many of us can do.

Or so I assert. There anything more important than affecting mainstream consciousness?

Projects are necessary—but not enough

Whole system change shows up as on the ground projects such as renewable energy, building soil carbon, cultivating local economies, improved childrearing and the like.

However, the large-scale systemic drivers of environmental deterioration are not dealt with in approaches that focus on specific projects. For example, even when companies such as Interface commit to becoming ecologically sustainable, their sphere of concern is limited to their company gates and supply chains. Likewise the good hearted folks in Conscious Capitalism do not (yet) assume responsibility for changing the overall direction of a society that is ecologically self-destructing.

This is not to criticise them; it is just to call attention to the fact that now all of us need to raise our sights and take responsibility for the well-being of society as a whole. Just ‘doing our thing’ with specific projects will not suffice.

Actually, some people hold that a multitude of us ‘just doing our thing’ *will* suffice. This is one theory of change. Does it stand up to criticism? On current trends the operation of society as a whole, directed by powerful elites with the general compliance of a consumerist society, is taking us all over the ecological edge.



It is as though we are all on a boat. Even as we achieve local successes we are headed for the falls. We need to change the direction of the boat itself, and this requires us to inspire massive commitment from the general public and from influential decision-makers.

The most important problem to be solved is *How to gain mainstream commitment to a life-sustaining society?*

With such commitment the multitude of positive initiatives that are now underway will gain much more traction. Without it, the current operation of mainstream society will take us all over the ecological edge.

So how can we gain mainstream commitment? By thousands/millions of us acting as 'citizen educators' who help people connect-the-dots and think for themselves. We could call ourselves 'Transition Leaders', but the label doesn't matter.

I suggest that in addition to our specific projects, each of us devotes a portion of our efforts to enabling people in our networks to grasp why transformative change is necessary, and how they can contribute within their sphere of influence.

Developing a mental framework for grasping whole system change equips people mentally and emotionally to support leadership for large-scale transformative change when it emerges, and to exert leadership themselves within their sphere of influence.

Inspiring Transition

[Inspiring Transition](#) is a platform to support us in communicating with our networks.

Inspiring Transition has a well-developed communication strategy, interesting communication tactics and a model for engaging thousands—even millions—of groups. We have intentionally set it up so that playing a role in Inspiring Transition need not take an inordinate amount of any one group or individual's time. We know that everyone is busy.

Everyone who participates acts as an autonomous agent. Our vision is to inspire organisations and their members to act as citizen educators (thinking catalysts) seeding transformative ideas into mainstream culture.

I would like to think that you too will want to play a role in Inspiring Transition.

For people new to Inspiring Transition two key articles to start with are:

- [Accelerating the Great Transition - Engaging mainstream commitment to a life-sustaining society](#)
- [Understanding Whole System Change](#)

Administrative support is provided by Be The Change Australia, but we do not direct what people do.

In the movie *Invictus* Nelson Mandela asked, “*How can we inspire ourselves to greatness when nothing less will do?*” I think it is time for each of us to lift our game to a new level of leadership. In my view masses of us communicating with our networks about whole system change is the key to success.

Transformative social change through thinking, not slogans

Donella Meadows observed that the most influential leverage point in any human system is in people's paradigms or worldviews. Affecting people's worldviews in a healthy way is also the most challenging thing we can undertake.

I have spent most of my professional life helping people think better, in ways they find beneficial. I sometimes say that I help good brains work better. I use techniques from Feldenkrais, creativity training and experiential psychotherapy. I know that all skilled behaviour—and therefore all purposeful activity—is mediated by patterns of coordination in the central nervous system.

My theory of social change is to improve the way people think. I suggest that there are two aspects that we especially want to improve. One is that we want to improve people's map of the world—their framework for making sense of things.

[Tabletop Presentations](#), one of the Inspiring Transition communication tools, has a series of modules that enable people to shift from ‘silo thinking’ to grasping the big picture drivers of ecological deterioration. It is actually not hard.

We also want to improve people's way of acting in the world. As Riane Eisler has suggested, there are two fundamental ways of operating: good willed *partnership-respect* in contrast with self aggrandising *domination-control* (some people quibble and say ‘Oh, there must be more’, but for our purposes Eisler's distinction is useful).

The Spanish Inquisition and the Western powers' invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq are terrible examples of domination-control, and the movie *Avatar* illustrates how powerful commercial interests willingly destroy creativity and the environment.

In contrast, Pope Francis' recent encyclical is a beautiful example of partnership-respect thinking.

It is not the institutional label that should be the basis of our assessment (e.g. 'Christianity' or 'democracy'), but the actual behaviour.

There are modes of personal training, such as Aikido and Non-Violent Communication, and also of organisational development, that increase our capacity for partnership respect relating.

In addition, leaders in schools and businesses can affect their institutional culture. This is what I mean when I talk about 'taking responsibility for the Great Transition within our sphere of influence'.

And of course we can all do our own inner work, if we are so moved, to sort out the emotional drivers that lead to our own tendency to dominator behaviour. The reward is an increased capacity for caring relationships...

Slogans and messages that appeal to people's values can be helpful for certain purposes. But to actually inspire whole system change we must help people's thinking become far more comprehensive.

The aspect of improving thinking that each of us can most readily affect is people's map of the world, because we can do this through conversations as well as through writing. The communication tools on the Inspiring Transition website enable us to conduct focused conversations that affect people's worldview.

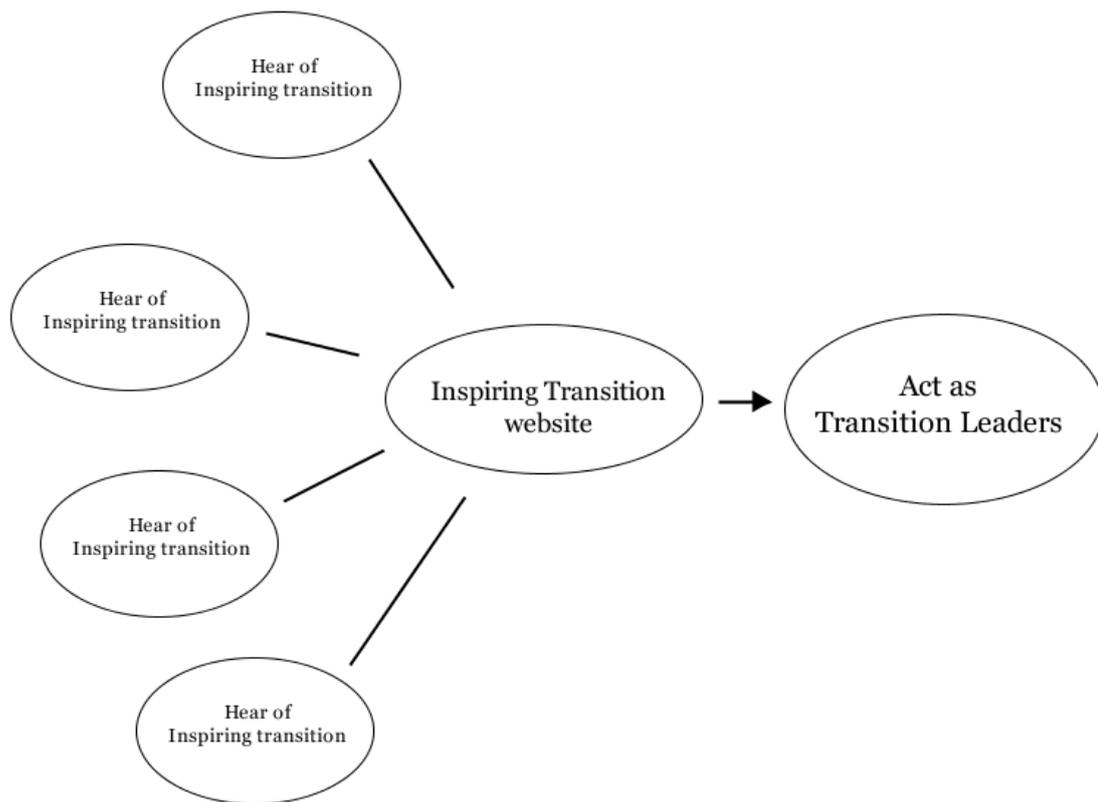
Inviting the audience to become leaders

You are familiar with the idea of preaching to the converted. It is time for the 'converted' become leaders.

Every year there are millions of talks, meetings, webinars, festivals, and conferences focused on environmental and social issues. People attend because they are interested in the topic—which means that they care about a positive future. Each of these people is a potential thought catalyst in the Inspiring Transition initiative.

Each of these meetings can be used as an opportunity to encourage members of the audience to step up and act as thought catalysts for the Great Transition. I suggest that:

1. Whenever you give a talk or lecture, participate in a panel discussion, run a webinar or workshop, or organise a conference, mention that we are in a Great Transition and we need to accelerate it, and *encourage members of your audience to become active communicators.*
2. Follow through by referring people to the Inspiring Transition website to get up to speed about whole system change, and to gain access to our open source communication tools.



There is nothing people need to join. We are encouraging self-initiated independent action.

It is not enough for those of us who care to just inform ourselves. It is time for all of us to step up and proactively seed transformative ideas into mainstream culture in whatever way we can.

The Inspiring Transition Launch will be during September, with a great flowering throughout 2016. During the lead up we are engaging as many individuals and organisations as we can to communicate with their networks about the Great Transition.

We have about twenty interesting communication [tactics](#), some of which are quite simple.

I request that each of you who read this choose to play a role in communicating about the Great Transition to a life-sustaining society. Together we can accomplish something magnificent that the we couldn't dream of achieving separately.

Andrew Gaines

+61 2 8005-8382

Skype: andrewgoodhumour

andrew.gaines@inspiringtransition.net

www.inspiringtransition.net

We are in a Great Transition to a life-sustaining society!