

Upshifters: Pioneers of an Awakening Culture - An interview with Duane Elgin

by Sarah Van Gelder and Richard A Slaughter

Sarah: How did we get to the point where buying and possessing things has become so important to us? What need is it fulfilling in our lives?

Duane: Since World War II, we've seen the most massive experiment that's ever been undertaken in programming the psyche of a civilisation. And it has worked. The advertising culture has succeeded in creating identity consumption - a sense that our meaning in life depends upon the significance of what we consume. A retail analyst, Victor Lebow, who promoted consumption as necessary to our economy in the post-war period, was very clear about this. He said "Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate."

I think people are having a very tough time separating their sense of spiritual identity from their consumer identity. And, there's a conscious blending of the two by advertisers to make it seem as though our spiritual or soulful significance is manifest in our consumption.

Sarah: Could you say more about the effects that this reprogramming of our psyche is having on us as individuals and on our culture?

Duane: The effects are so pervasive that we don't see them. They are just accepted - like the air we breathe. Advertising is creating a lethal addiction. Over consumption is not a matter of taste, it's a matter of survival. We're promoting a mass psychology that will result in our own ruin. This is not good mental health! Jung defines schizophrenia as mistaking the dream for reality. We have been so inundated with the televised-generated version of the American Dream (each person watching roughly 25,000 commercials a year) that we have mistaken it for reality. We're literally going crazy - on the one hand knowing we need to learn to live with less, and on the other hand being continuously encouraged to consume ever more. We are being divided against ourselves. Something has to give.

Sarah: Besides your work in voluntary simplicity, you've also been very involved in media activism. What is the connection between the two?

Duane: I feel that the future of the species will depend to a large degree on the future of communications. If the mass media presents a shallow, secular, and consumerist view of the world, then we will be more inclined to allow the destruction of the global environment. Then, a majority may not see, until it is too late, that we live within a sacred universe. In my view, our collective use of the mass media will need to be infused by a sacred sense of reality if we are to reconcile ourselves to living sustainably on the Earth. We need communication that comes from a place of compassion if we are ever going to collectively envision and then reach agreement around a common pathway into the

future. George Gerbner (professor of communications and founder of the Cultural Environment Movement) says that to control a nation, you don't have to control its laws or its military, all you have to do is control who tells the nation its stories. Television tells most of the nation most of its stories most of the time.

If television is our social brain, then American television currently has the highest level of intelligence that beer and car commercials can buy. And this 'dumbing down' of the U.S. public is happening at the very time when we face unprecedented social upheaval and change. As people have really tried to live out the television dream, and seen how hollow it all is, they are becoming deeply cynical about it and saying, "I don't care how many more ads you show me, I don't believe them any more. I don't know what to believe, but I just don't believe it any more."

Sarah: But it does still seem to be working. There are still millions spent on advertising and people still seem preoccupied with getting the latest high-tech gadget or car or clothes.

Duane: We're literally becoming schizophrenic - divided against ourselves. On one hand, we believe the advertiser fiction; on the other hand, we don't believe it. Here's how I'd summarise the polls: about 75 percent to 80 percent of the public say, "We're going to need to make major changes if we're going to live sustainably on Earth." I find it very significant that such a large fraction of the overall public recognises that, like it or not, there are great changes ahead. Next, about 60 percent of U.S. adults say, "Not only do we need to change, we want to change." Still, this is largely rhetoric as most are sympathetic but disengaged - still waiting for the starting gun to go off. Then, about 25 percent are actually doing something by changing the way they live - perhaps by not taking the job promotion that would require them to move somewhere; maybe one of the partners in the relationship will stop working or take a lower-paying job that's closer to home. These are the so-called "downshifters" that are disengaging from the rat race of our consumer society.

Finally, about 10 percent of U.S. adults are "upshifters" that have gone even further and are pioneering a new way of life that is more sustainable, satisfying and soulful. They're making a whole-pattern shift in their lives that grows out of an ecological awareness and the sense that "I'm here as more than just a consumer to be entertained; I'm here as a soulful being who wants to grow. I want to have meaningful work, a meaningful life with my family, a meaningful connection with my community, and a meaningful sense of spiritual development." That 10 percent is about 20 million people, and it's almost two-to-one women to men.

So, women are disproportionately represented among the pioneers for this new culture and consciousness. My sense is that men are more locked into associating their self-esteem with their consumption. I also think men are more likely to measure their sense of power and significance by a car, a house, or clothes. Their natural interest in seeking status and dominance has been successfully transferred into the material realm by advertisers like Victor Lebow. Whereas women see more of life connected with relationships - family, community, and so on. As we move into an era of ecology, which is an era of inter-relationships, women are more pre-adapted psychologically, I think, to

find meaning in that world. So, it's an easier transition for the feminine kind of archetype in consciousness than it is for the traditional masculine.

Sarah: It's interesting that you say that. When we were researching this issue, we held a focus group in Seattle of people involved in the voluntary simplicity effort - mostly women as it turned out. Several people said they thought that women's attractiveness to men is far less dependent on their financial status than men's attractiveness to women. So perhaps at least some women have greater freedom to move into a different value system. And perhaps women also unknowingly put pressures on the men in their lives, expecting that they will be the breadwinners.

Duane: Yes. There is the implicit expectation; it's often assumed that if you're a man, you're going to be a good breadwinner.

Sarah: What's the connection between the small incremental choices people are making to change their way of living and the possibilities for a new civilisation to emerge?

Duane: About two-thirds of the economic activity in this country is based upon consumer purchases and, even a small shift in consumer activity creates tidal-wave reverberations throughout the economy. Seemingly small lifestyle changes can accumulate into big impacts when multiplied by millions of consumers or citizens. Small changes are beautiful. Little changes can accumulate into a tidal wave of change!

Arnold Toynbee looked at the rise and fall of over 20 civilisations and summarised civilisational growth with his Law of Progressive Simplification. In accord with this law, Toynbee said that the essence of civilisational growth is not power over land, or power over people (and I think now he would also say it's not how much we consume.) The essence of a civilisation's growth is its ability to transfer increasing increments of energy and attention from the material side of life to the psychological, spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic.

Sarah: One of the things I was struck by in your book, *Voluntary Simplicity*, was the irony that the material abundance of the modern age could provide all of us with an opportunity to live a more reflective life and a life that's free of the threat of poverty. But this possibility can only be realised if we can become less emotionally and spiritually attached to that material abundance.

Duane: Yes ... all these delicious paradoxes. That's right. We have to see that we're being consumed by our consumerism instead of being supported by it. We're in a watershed with the American dream, which, in its hyper form is a relatively recent phenomenon that has been around only since World War II. We're seeing the end of that dream and, as it crumbles, a new vision for humanity is in the process of invention and formation. What is emerging is not a "new American dream" but a more conscious and purposeful "central project" for the entire human family. The central project of the human family is to somehow come into harmony with three core "ecologies" - physical, social, and spiritual. I think of these as three "S's."

One "S" stands for a more sustainable way of life - a way of life that's in harmony with the Earth's physical ecology. The second "S" is for a more satisfying way of life - one that's in

harmony with our social ecology - with other people, our work, our community, the rest of the world, members of the opposite gender, and so on. The third "S" stands for a more soulful way of life - one that is in harmony with the spiritual ecology, however described.

The human family is fast approaching one of the most pivotal points in the entirety of human evolution - the point at which we consciously recognise, for the very first time, that we are inextricably a single "species-civilisation," a single planetary family whose destiny is intimately intertwined. Knowing this, we then have the choice of moving toward a new central project for the human family--that of discovering and building a sustainable, satisfying, soulful way of living upon the Earth.

Richard: How would you describe the essence of the new paradigm or new mindset?

Duane: In its simplest terms, when we get underneath it all, I think we are shifting from thinking that we inhabit a dead universe, to perceiving that we inhabit a living universe. This shift of perception from a secular to a sacred cosmos transforms the human agenda--from high-consumption lifestyles that protect us from a lifeless universe, to sustainable and meaningful ways of living that connect us with a living universe:

If the universe is unconscious and dead at its foundations, then we are the product of blind chance among materialistic forces, so it is only fitting that we the living exploit that which is dead on our own behalf. Because the universe is lifeless, it does not have a larger purpose or meaning, nor does human existence; therefore, it is only natural that we focus on consuming material things to minimise life's pains and to maximise its comforts. Because we are ultimately separate beings in a lifeless universe, there are no deeper ethical or moral consequences to our actions beyond their immediate, physical impacts.

If the universe is conscious and alive at the foundations, then we are the product of a deep-design intelligence that infuses the entire cosmos. Therefore, it is only fitting that we treat everything that exists as, in some meaningful way, "alive" and worthy of great respect. We shift from feelings of existential isolation to intimate communion within a living universe. In seeking to engage with a living universe, it is only natural that we would choose simpler ways of living that afford greater time and opportunity for meaningful relationships, creative expression, and rewarding experiences. This new perspective brings a new sense of purpose: to engage the inner world of humanity's psyche and spirit with the outer world of action in the common work of building a sustainable, sociable, and soulful species-civilisation. Every action in a living universe has ethical consequences as it reverberates throughout the deep ecology of the cosmos and beyond.

Importantly, a new paradigm is not just a different set of thoughts or concepts. James George, former Canadian ambassador with a long-standing commitment to the environment, described the feeling qualities and visceral nature of paradigm change in his book, *Asking for the Earth*: He says that a paradigm shift "is not just an idea, it is an experience; and experiences take place in the moment, in bodies with feelings. So do paradigm shifts. They first infiltrate your mind, then they grab you in the gut; only then do you 'get it' and act." My sense is that the living systems paradigm is already infiltrating the culture and consciousness of many people, and that a growing percentage of the population does 'get it' and is willing to act on their insights.

Richard: What evidence is there to indicate whether this "living systems" perspective is actually emerging in the world?

Duane: During this century, the Western, scientific view of the nature of the universe has already changed dramatically. Less than a hundred years ago, Einstein thought that the universe was a static, unchanging system no larger than our galaxy. Today, we know that the universe is expanding rapidly and contains at least 50 billion galaxies, each with a 100 billion or more stars. In recent decades, scientists have made many stunning discoveries that have added to the scope and depth of the awesome mystery that is our universe. The pioneering physicist Neils Bohr stated that "anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it."

Whereas we once viewed space as empty, the new physics asserts that, even in a complete physical vacuum, there remain immense levels of background energy (called zero-point energy). Another dramatic departure from the traditional view is that the cosmos is now seen as an integrated system that, in some mysterious way, is profoundly unified. Indeed, one of the most stunning insights from modern science has been the discovery of "nonlocality" - objects that are seemingly separate are really connected in fundamental ways that transcend the limitations of ordinary space and time. Still another astounding discovery is that immense levels of energy flow through the universe and continuously regenerate it.

As physicist Brian Swimme explains, "The universe emerges out of an all-nourishing abyss not only 15 billion years ago but in every moment." Everything in the cosmos is a flowing movement that arises with everything else, moment-by-moment, in a process of continuous regeneration. Some scientists now suggest that, not only is our universe alive, it has also evolved through natural selection. Turning from science to society, various sources indicate there is a shift in perception under way that is congruent with this living systems view. Here are several examples:

* The business literature is filled with articles and books viewing organisations as living and learning systems. For example, Joseph Jaworski's popular book *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* describes the fundamental shift of mind under way in business. In it, Jaworski states "Our mental model of the way the world works must shift from images of a clockwork, machine-like universe that is fixed and determined, to the model of a universe that is open, dynamic, interconnected, and full of living qualities." Takashi Kiuchi, past chairman and CEO of Mitsubishi Electric America, has explored the workings of rainforests for insights on how to run a successful business. Writing in *The Futurist*, he states "If we ran our companies like the rain forest, imagine how creative, how productive, how ecologically benign we could be. We can begin by operating less like a machine and more like a living system."

* A 1975 U.S. survey of adults found that 25 percent had the "sense that all the universe is alive." A 1994 U.S. survey found that 55 percent of Americans considered nature to be sacred and/or spiritual. One third of the U.S. population reports having had a "mystical experience" including a sense that "love underlies all thing" and other qualities congruent with participation in a living universe. The percentage of the US population who believe in telepathy (communicating through means other than the five senses) grew from 37

percent in 1949 to 56 percent in 1996. This trend is also consistent with the emergence of a "living systems" view of the cosmos in which consciousness is regarded as a life-force that can extend beyond the body.

* There is also a growing interest in first-hand experience or an "experiential spirituality." An ABC News/Washington Post poll in 1996 found that 19 percent of Americans said they have practiced meditation, and 12 percent say they practiced within the past year. Other national polls show an upsurge of interest in spirituality. A 1994 poll of U.S. adults found that more than half (58%) reported being more interested in spirituality than they were five years ago.

The shift from a "dead" to a "living" universe transforms the human story. We become participants in an unceasing miracle of creation and this perception brings with it a new appreciation for life, and a recognition that our potentials are as exalted and magnificent as the living universe that surrounds and sustains us. As we explore our connection with a living universe, our previous interest in material consumption shifts into the background of our lives and an interest in the invisible, spiritual nature of people and life shifts into the foreground. From this new mindset or paradigm comes a new human agenda: instead of mobilising to fight one another as enemies, we mobilise to support one another as friends and to begin our common work of building a sustainable and soulful species-civilisation.

Richard: How is this new mindset translating into people's lives and behaviour?

A new set of priorities and behaviours are emerging in the world, as shown by random surveys:

* Evidence of a global shift to "post materialist" values emerges from the massive *World Values Survey*, conducted in 1990-1991 in 43 nations, representing nearly 70 percent of the world's population and covering the full-range of economic and political variation. Ronald Inglehart, global coordinator for the survey, concluded that, over the last 25 years, a major shift in values has been occurring in a cluster of a dozen or so nations—a change that he calls the "postmodern shift." This shift in values has been growing primarily in the United States, Canada, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Britain. In these societies, the earlier emphasis on economic achievement is shifting to post materialist values that emphasise individual self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality of life concerns. At the same time, people are placing less emphasis on organised religion, and more emphasis on discovering their inner sense of meaning and purpose in life.

* The Health of the Planet survey, conducted in 24 nations by the Gallup organisation in 1993, is perhaps the most important global survey of attitudes toward the environment. In writing about the survey, its director Dr. Riley E. Dunlap concluded that there is "virtually world-wide citizen awareness that our planet is indeed in poor health, and great concern for its future well-being." The survey found that residents of poorer and wealthier nations express nearly equal concern about the health of the planet. Majorities in most of the nations surveyed gave environmental protection a higher priority than economic growth, and said that they were willing to pay higher prices for that protection. When asked who is "more responsible for today's environmental problems in the world,"

people from rich and poor nations were not as polarised as they are widely assumed to be. The most frequent response was that industrialised and developing countries are "both equally responsible." There was little evidence of the poor blaming the rich for environmental problems, or vice versa. Instead, there seems to be a mature and widespread acceptance of mutual responsibility.

* In 1995, the Merck Family Fund commissioned a study of U.S. citizens' views on the issue of consumption. Their report, *Yearning for Balance*, suggests that a deep change is occurring in the culture and consciousness of the United States. The survey found that respondents' deepest aspirations are non-material. For example, when asked what would make them much more satisfied with their lives, 66 percent said "if I were able to spend more time with my family and friends;" only 19 percent said "if I had a bigger house or apartment." Twenty-eight percent of the survey respondents said that, in the last five years, they had voluntarily made changes in their lives that resulted in making less money, such as reducing work hours, changing to a lower-paying job, or even quitting work. The most frequent reasons given for voluntary downshifting were:

- Wanting a more balanced life (68 percent)
- Wanting more time (66 percent)
- Wanting a less stressful life (63 percent).

Has it been worth it? Eighty-seven percent of the downshifter described themselves as happy with the change. In summing up the survey's findings, the report states that, "People express a strong desire for a greater sense of balance in their lives--not to repudiate material gain, but to bring it more into proportion with the non-material rewards of life."

* Another survey that reveals a deep shift in values and priorities was conducted by Paul Ray in 1995. His random national survey found there is a core group of roughly 10 percent of the U.S. population (20 million adults) who are choosing to live in a way that integrates a strong focus on their inner or spiritual life with their strong concern about the global ecology. As a group, these people are living more simply, working for ecological sustainability, and are willing to pay the costs for cleaning up the environment. They also are largely unaware of one another and feel relatively isolated.

The implications of these values-changes are immense. They suggest that a growing number of people around the world do not view consumerism as a compelling vision for a meaningful future. This, in turn, presents business with both an identity crisis and an opportunity.

Richard: How can businesses adapt to the new global reality of sustainability?

It is increasingly understood that economic health and environmental health are two sides of the same coin. In the past, businesses have been able to optimise their behaviour without worrying much whether their actions were degrading the Earth Now, with climate change, resource depletion, and other forms of global stress apparent, businesses are challenged to shift to a new way of viewing their role in the world. Triple bottom line accounting will reinforce this shift as companies adopt a more balanced concern for social responsibility, ecological integrity, and economic viability. Still, there is another

compelling reason for business to adapt themselves to a sustainable economy-opportunity. In writing about "Strategies for a Sustainable World" in *The Harvard Business Review*, Professor Stuart Hart states: "Over the next decade or so, sustainable development will constitute one of the biggest opportunities in the history of commerce."

From a new paradigm perspective, the opportunities for business in a sustainable future are huge. Because a sustainable economy would seek to serve, not simply the wealthiest 10 to 20 percent of the world's population, but the entire population of the world, it will generate the most immense expansion of business opportunity in history. The opportunities include trillions of dollars in infrastructure in developing countries as well as entirely new forms of businesses-such as renewable energy systems, organic agriculture, tele-education, tele-medicine, and tele-business.

Through the Internet, people around the world could acquire the tools, knowledge, and skills needed to recreate their lives at the local level with innovations such as solar technology for heating, photovoltaic technology for electricity generation, and intensive urban gardening for supplemental sources of food. New urban forms could emerge: eco-villages or micro-communities, the scale of a single block, could be nested within larger neighbourhoods with a local school and grocery store; these larger neighbourhoods could, in turn, be nested within the larger city and region. Small businesses that are well adapted to local conditions and needs could flourish. Economic life could become much more decentralised. This could create a local net of security and sustainability during a time of sweeping global change. Consumption patterns would tend to shift in favour of products that are functional, durable, energy efficient, non-polluting, easily repairable, and produced by ethical firms. Voluntary changes in consumption patterns could be reinforced by changes in the tax laws that, for example, tax the wasteful consumption of resources (such as minerals, water, and timber) and pollution of the environment. Instead of mass industrialisation (with huge factories, freeways, and skyscrapers), simpler, more decentralised approaches to sustainability could be given priority throughout the world. The economic potential - and ecological healing - that could come from this broad reconfiguration is enormous.

Richard: Will current institutions and social forms need to break down before change can happen? Or can we consciously respond to the challenge of sustainability?

We are experiencing a period of change at least as great as the shift from the agrarian to the industrial era, so there will be an inevitable reconfiguration of life and activity as we move into this new era. Still, there is no necessity of a catastrophic evolutionary crash that destroys current social institutions. To the contrary if we allow an evolutionary crash that devastates both the biosphere and social institutions, then it could be infinitely more difficult to reach our early maturity as a species in the future. What is required is more awareness, not more suffering. There is already sufficient suffering in the world to motivate change-what is needed is the wakefulness to see it and then respond appropriately. The evolutionary intelligence and compassion of the human species is now being tested. Will we move through this time of testing and challenge to reconcile ourselves around a sustainable future that restores the Earth's biosphere to its former integrity? Or will humanity be torn apart by chronic conflict as our abundant resources are squandered and the environment is mutilated? A positive future will not arrive on its

own. I have every confidence that the human family has all the communication tools and talents needed to consciously respond to our global challenge.

Richard: Duane, thank you very much.

Duane Elgin is the author of *Voluntary Simplicity* (New York, Morrow, 1981) and *Awakening Earth* (New York, Morrow, 1993) as well as of many other papers and reports on the issues covered here.

Note: the first part of this interview was carried out by Sarah van Gelder, Editor, in *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, Summer/Spring 1996, Seattle, WA. The later section was the result of an email exchange between Duane Elgin and Richard Slaughter during 1998.

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