

The Next Civilization, with Jeremy Lent – Kosmos Journal

By Jeremy Lent

Jeremy I Yes. I think that is crucial. Yet, I do think there was a lot in that nomadic hunter-gatherer way of living that was very conducive to a sense of well-being, because that is how we evolved as humans. At the same time, as you point out, there was a lot going on from our perspective now that we would look at and be horrified: the rate of infanticide, for example, was quite high. And similarly, if somebody was injured—the whole lifestyle was always about moving on—they might be left to die. There were a lot of things in that life that we would not want to go back to. That's absolutely the case.

And, I think that it's worth understanding that when we had that shift from that nomadic lifestyle to what's called sedentism, which really correlates with the rise of agriculture, a lot of the values (and vices) that we now take for granted as being part of human norms, actually became part of the human experience for the first time. That was only about 10,000 years ago, and it includes patriarchy, as well as chattel slavery.

I think it's important because it shows that those things are not actually intrinsic to human nature. Oftentimes, people who don't have this perspective will get that conflated, and they'll say, "Well, it's human nature to do this and that." Actually, it's not. It's only human nature as a particular response to a particular way of living.

Kosmos I Fascinating, because when you look at the challenges of our time, it is helpful to look back and ask: where, precisely, did we go wrong? Where did our thinking get sidetracked? Take economic disparity—it became part of the dominant culture somewhere along the way. When exactly did that become OK?

Jeremy I Well, again, it's really correlated with the rise of agriculture. And the reason for that is that if you're a nomadic hunter-gatherer band, there's no value in possessing a whole lot of stuff. In fact, it becomes a negative because you've got to carry it around with you. But as soon as you begin to settle, these differences, these inequalities, emerge. If a farmer gets lucky or works a bit harder and manages to make more produce, all of a sudden he'll put fences up around his property, and then he might employ somebody else who wasn't so lucky in the field next to him, so these inequalities arise.

The very notion of *wealth* itself becomes something to value, and that's what leads to a ratchet effect, because the more powerful certain groups become, the more they're able to go and conquer or steal the possessions of another group close by them. And so chieftains begin to emerge, and slowly these hierarchies begin to arise. Along with that, came a new worldview. If the hunter-gatherers viewed nature as 'giving parents,' the new worldview with agrarian civilization was really about a 'hierarchy of the gods.'

People saw hierarchies around them—when the Big Chief came to visit, you'd prostrate yourself and tell him how wonderful he was, hoping that he wouldn't take your possessions away. They viewed the gods in the same way. You'd have priests who could mediate your

relationship with them, and you'd start to sacrifice to the gods and pray to them and tell them how wonderful they were, too.

They were taking the patterns of behavior they saw in their lives around them and applying it to these divine hierarchies. And then this ratcheting effect kept going, so these chieftainships became bigger and bigger, and then they became empires. And so this incredible inequality—this wealth inequality—started thousands and thousands of years ago. But it did reach a certain stable equilibrium, because the people at the top could only have so much wealth. They might want to build pyramids or other massive undertakings so they could feel that sense of status—almost divine. Yet, there was still a certain limit in how much more wealth they could enjoy than the other people around them. That changed once again with another ratcheting effect—the scientific revolution and the rise in European power around the 17th century.

That led to a whole different layer of exploitation where the European way of thinking and institutionalized racism—the sense of white supremacy—in just a few hundred years took over the world and became the dominant worldview that we've inherited today.

Kosmos I You devote a lot in the book to that period. So, we dragged all our baggage with us into the idea of nature as something to exploit and tame, and you contrast that with what was going on in the East—ways of thinking about the universe. Two very different models. Can you just lay that out for us a little bit?

Jeremy I Yes, sure. And that's one of the things I try to focus on in *The Patterning Instinct*, because usually in the West, we're given world histories and they really are just histories of European thought. They don't incorporate what else has been going on in the world.

Before I say anything more about it, just like you were saying about the tendency to idealize hunter-gatherer and tribal cultures at times, I also want to make sure that we don't idealize the East Asian way of thinking.

It was also very patriarchal and hierarchical, and based a lot on empire. So, once again, I don't want to give the sense that, "oh, we should go back or we should transmute our way of thinking to that way of thinking." But there was a way of thinking in East Asia that was fundamentally different from how we think in the West. We can learn much from it now, I believe, and that's what's so exciting. What arose in East Asia was a further development of that sense of connectedness that the hunter-gatherers had. There was never a clean split in East Asian thinking from hunter-gatherer ways of thinking. Instead, it developed into a very sophisticated cosmology of interconnectedness, which I describe in the book as using this new core metaphor of nature as being a harmonic 'web of life.'

In traditional Chinese thought, when people looked at the ways in which everything was interconnected, they sensed everything was always changing. And the goal of humans was not to try to conquer nature, but rather to be part of nature, to harmonize with nature. Think about how you might be in the forest and see a spider's web connected to a branch or something like that, and you know that just a little leaf falling on it or a drop of water will cause that web to reverberate. All the different parts of it resonate through one small action. The Chinese understood human activity in the same way—that everything you did had reverberations through Heaven and Earth—which led them to a sense of reverence.

The Tao Te Ching talks about how humans should act like reverent guests of nature. And that's

a sense that was lost in the Western way of thinking, which saw humans as being fundamentally separate from nature and conquering nature and seeing nature as a machine, which was unthinkable from an East Asian perspective.



Taoist painting—integration with nature

Kosmos I The separation between self and nature obviously has played out in the Western worldview in all the ways we have colonized, extracted, and tried to bring nature under our control, and commoditized everything, right up to where we are today. But look at what’s happening in Hong Kong right now and the rise of populism all around the world. What does this say about our worldview today?

Jeremy I Yes, I do think there is now a globalized, dominant worldview. One of the things that I explore a bit in this book is the ways in which worldviews change. They can be incredibly stable and last for millennia, from one generation to the next. But when there is a major transformational shift in power, the old worldview can change dramatically and quickly.

As a result of the European conquest of the rest of the world, there is now this dominant global worldview, a reductionist worldview that’s based on seeing nature as a machine, and not questioning the idea that the whole world is there for humans to dominate. And that’s where, I think, it’s so important for us to realize there are other ways of making sense of things.

It’s a mistake to think that the current way in which we hold values, and how we assume the world works, is the universal way of human nature. It’s actually just one particular form of making sense of things that simply became dominant because it led to the development of powerful technologies.

We’re looking at this incredibly precarious place where we seem to be heading at an accelerated pace—toward the potential collapse of our global civilization—because of these imbalances that we’ve created, and ultimately because of the dominant worldview. But we also have, for the first time in human history, an opportunity to learn from other cultures and to incorporate—not go back to being hunter-gatherers or go back to some sort of idealized Chinese golden age—but to incorporate some of the insights that those different cultural complexes had about the universe. And actually make that part of a transformed worldview that could potentially lead us to steer away from the collapse that we seem to be headed toward right now.

Kosmos I Transcend and include. I think you can say that about all of modernity, right? That

you can't just throw it out with the bathwater. It's given us many breakthroughs in science and in medicine, and understanding the universe and the body, and human rights. There's a lot of good that has come out of scientific rationalism, let's say, but now we know that we've run up against its boundaries in terms of resources and how we cooperate with nature and each other. It's time for another great shift, as you say, to an ecological civilization. Do you feel such a shift is inevitable? Or, left to our own devices, will humans rush headlong off the cliff?

Jeremy I I tell you, these are the big questions that I think anyone looking at the world today is asking or should be asking. Well, the first thing I really want to emphasize is that there's nothing inevitable about the direction we're going to take. There are some people who put patterns on history, and there's no question that if you just look at life in general over billions of years, there is a seemingly inexorable move toward increased complexity. Even that is not absolutely inevitable, but it does seem to be a pattern. I think the one thing we can really be sure about in terms of where we are this century is that we are undergoing one of the great transformations in human history.

It's the same way that the transformation from hunter-gatherers to agrarian civilization occurred, and the same way we saw this transformation with the scientific revolution. It's a transformation that affects virtually all humans on Earth, and almost every aspect of life, and all the ways in which we make sense of things. So, the big question, and I think what none of us can actually know is: *which direction is this great transformation going to take?*

In my book, in the last chapter, I look at these potential trajectories to our future—summarizing some of the really deep thinkers who have looked at this—and there seem to be three different trajectories that could take place:

One of those is clearly **collapse**, and that's something that increasingly alarms a lot of people who are awake to what's going on. All we need to do to see that we could be headed toward that collapse is to look at climate breakdown and the fact that right now we're heading toward a world which, according to thousands of scientists, is simply not commensurate with continued civilization. And even if you were to somehow magically fix the climate issue without changing some of the underlying fundamentals, we'd still be headed toward that kind of collapse because of the massive destruction of the life support system of Earth itself—whether deforestation, species loss, or the vast destruction of marine life. By mid-century, there'll actually be more plastic than fish in the ocean.

Incredible statistics that just make the mind boggle. In each place we look, that's going on. It's very easy and straightforward to draw these lines a little bit further forward and see collapse as a trajectory.

There's another trajectory, which people don't talk about enough, but I think, honestly, is one of the reasons why those who are in power right now aren't doing the things that we all feel they should be doing to respond to this crisis. It's one that I call that the **techno-split trajectory**. Look at these incredible inequalities, these economic inequities that we see right now in the world. And imagine them deepening even further over the next few decades, along with technologies of genetic enhancement, access to clean water and food, and access to the internet and AI, then you see where we could end up.

Right now, if you look at certain pockets of society like Silicon Valley—close to where I live—there are people who don't think about collapse at all, they just get so excited by these

possibilities of what technology can offer. This can lead to the *techno-split* scenario, where the vast majority of humans do suffer the absolute devastation of collapse and climate breakdown and their societies falling apart, but a small minority, maybe as many as a billion people—I'm not talking about just the one percent, I'm talking about people who are living affluent lives right now—get increasingly separated into fortress communities, and live lives where they are not as profoundly affected by the devastation. One observer compared it to people having a gilded lifeboat and kicking everyone else off the lifeboat so they could just enjoy their life of luxury.



Photo | Johnny Miller, Wealth Gap, Mumbai, India

If this scenario occurred, it would be the greatest moral crime that humanity has ever committed. But I think people conveniently don't think about that. In the affluent world, we go along with our lives, we look at these breakdowns taking place elsewhere, and there's this kind of quiet sense of satisfaction: "Well, we'll be okay. We need to look after ourselves. We need to develop our local resilience." But we are an interconnected human race, and we must recognize that all other humans—according to the Declaration of Human Rights of the UN—all humans have the right to a life of dignity, to enough food to live, to education, to enjoy a full human life. We are absolutely at risk of destroying that fundamental moral precept the way we're going. So that's a second scenario that I think we need to be more aware of.

But then there is this third scenario, which is what would it look like if we could actually transform the values that our modern society is based on and create **a world that is regenerative**—one which does allow for human flourishing on an Earth where life itself can be allowed to flourish. Some people, looking at the way things are going right now, might view that as just pie in the sky. The thing that's amazing about it, is that it's what most of us as human beings want. So we have to ask ourselves: what is it that's stopping us, as humans, from living the life we actually want? A life with community, a life filled with our own sense of quality, a life filled with connection with nature. I think that there are enough people waking up and recognizing that something is going very, very wrong in the world right now.

If we can tell the story of this flourishing life with more clarity, and look at what deeply needs to be rethought in order to get to that life, there's a possibility of seeing a transformation in culture and economics that could allow us to get there.

Kosmos I Thank you for laying out those three visions of possible futures for us, Jeremy. The second one is more frightening than the first.

Jeremy I In many ways, yes.

Kosmos I Looking at the first one, when we talk about collapse, I think even that word really has to be unpacked. What do we mean by 'collapse'? Evolutionarily speaking, that's been the

story of human history—the rise and fall of civilizations. Nothing lasts forever, right?

Jeremy I It's completely true. That's right.

Kosmos I But the second scenario is more nightmarish because it's almost like, "this was the test and we failed," utterly. Humans have this opportunity to create heaven here on Earth, and instead we create a hell for all of us.

The third one, of course, is a *Kosmos* perspective we've been talking about for more than two decades—the rising global transformation. That everywhere you look, you see consciousness on the rise. People waking up from separation, from I to We, to All. The irony is, for that to happen on a global scale, it almost seems like the entire Earth community needs to face the dark night of the soul, like the one you faced before writing this book—and then it may be too late!

Jeremy I Yes. It's very easy to fall into despair. If we had plenty of time for a deep cultural transformation to happen, like a few centuries, we could all say, "Okay, we're moving in that way." And so we could feel hope about that. But then when we look at the urgency of what needs to be done, we know that we need to be making these profound shifts, basically, right now. We have maybe a decade or two at most to make these things happen, and then it feels hopeless, which leads many to get to a place of deep despair and talk about the inevitability of some kind of collapse.

I draw a sense of ... I don't want to say the word "hope," because I think that word becomes so controversial and gets misused. I draw a sense more like feeling into the mystery of where we're headed as human beings and where the Earth is headed, and a recognition of the nonlinear aspects of change. In human society right now, it's not only things like the economy, the material stuff, that nobody can predict. There's also a whole cognitive shift taking place that no one can predict.

When we start to look at that, one thing we do know is pretty much any complex system, whether it's a single cell or an ecosystem or human society, goes through four phases that ecologists have recognized. One of them is a conservation mode where things stay relatively continuous until they enter a release phase, when things start to unravel. That's really where change starts happening at a much more rapid pace. Some of these shifts in cultural thinking that, as you say, *Kosmos* has been leading the way in thinking about.

But as things unravel, with each new catastrophe that takes place, more and more people of younger generations grow up saying, "We're not going to accept this anymore." A great place to look, of course, is the incredible impact that Greta Thunberg has had and the school children's climate strikes across the world, where in a very short time you see millions of school kids around the world saying, "We don't accept this." Each wave of younger folk grow up becoming more aware of what's going on; they look at the unraveling and they reject the mainstream worldview that they see is not working anymore. And that's where I feel that those of us who've spent years exploring different ways of thinking have an amazing opportunity and responsibility to offer to younger generations a coherent way of making sense of the world—one that rejects what is wrong about the old reductionist way, and yet offers something that can truly be life affirming, rather than life destroying—which is what our civilization is currently doing.

Kosmos I I think that's the fourth scenario—a combination of the three before it.

There's going to be severe disruption. There's going to be a split in terms of those with economic means to survive the disruption and those without the means to survive it. And that's going to lead to increasingly vivid moral choices. There's going to be so many challenges on so many levels, and yet, at the same time, there will *also* be the great awakening and blossoming of new ideas. We have the opportunity to prototype the kinds of future that may still be possible.

There have been times in human history, as you well know, where the human species has been radically diminished, and maybe just 10,000 individuals survived who carried the flame forward. We may face such catastrophe again, and whether I survive or my loved ones is not the point at all. Rather, if we believe in Life and if we can affirm Life, then we don't need to be fixated on a particular outcome. We can awaken now and we can create heaven on Earth now—in our own being, in our families, and in our communities—and cultivate a legacy of wakefulness for those who come later. That's helpful.

Jeremy I Yeah, I just couldn't agree more. The words that come to my mind, I think it was Otto Scharmer who said we have an opportunity to live into the emerging future. We're not spectators looking from outer space and saying, "Oh, I think it's going to collapse." Or, "I think it's going to do this or that." We are a part of whatever takes place. And so the choices each of us makes, and the values that we live according to, become part of that future.

We each have a responsibility to carefully assess our own values. If there is a kind of a future that we want to see, we can live that future now. To exactly your point, it's not just what we're doing for ourselves and our community, but we're sowing the seeds for what may come after us.

There's a wonderful quote by William Gibson, the comedian: "The future is already here, it's just not very well distributed." And that's consistent with your sense of the fourth scenario. Really, all three of those future scenarios *are* already taking place. We're already seeing an incredible divide between the haves and have nots. We're already seeing collapse in different parts of the world, such as the Central African Republic or Syria. We're seeing pockets of people choosing to live life according to the concept of an ecological civilization—where we're actually living by the principles of how Life itself evolved and developed with resilience and strong ecologies.

We have those options, and I think that one of the most important things for people to remember is that each of us is part of that emerging future. We're not separate spectators. We're all part of this interconnected web of life and meaning.

Kosmos I Well, if what you say in the book, quoting George Lakoff, is true, that "*new metaphors have the power to create a new reality*," then I think that is exactly the metaphor, as you just stated—the interconnected Web of Life—that we need to live into. I thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us today. Just wonderful and really helpful insights. I hope that your next book comes out soon, because I'll be the first one in line for it. Did you want to say anything about that, Jeremy?

Jeremy I Thanks Rhonda. Essentially, the book I'm working on looks at the underlying foundation for the new worldview that could replace the current destructive one. In a way, it's a sequel to *The Patterning Instinct*. If *The Patterning Instinct* looked at the history of worldviews up to the present, this next book looks at the potential worldview that could lead to sustainable flourishing. The book is called, *The Web of Meaning: Integrating Science and Traditional*

Wisdom to Find Our Place in the Universe.

Modern science in the last few decades, whether it's cognitive science, evolutionary biology, or systems thinking has shown how the old reductionist science of separation is wrong in many ways, and looks at the world based on the ways in which things connect. This new book shows how the modern scientific way of thinking is fully consistent with the great insights we've received from traditional wisdom—from indigenous wisdom, Buddhist wisdom, and from Taoist and other East Asian ideas.

All of these different insights are really lenses into the same underlying reality of our true interconnectedness. It offers, really, a foundation for the new story that we're all looking for, that we know we need if we're going to move into a flourishing future.

Kosmos I A truly integral worldview for a new era of interbeing. Jeremy, thank you for your clarity and your bodhicitta and your hopefulness as we all prepare for the profound changes to come.

Jeremy I Thank you, Rhonda. It was great talking with you. I so appreciate it.