To Create a More Beautiful World

ARNOLD SMITH

The world we live in is in a mess. About that few of us can disagree. Indeed it's easy to argue that the mess—climate change, species extinction, pollution of the oceans, world health, hunger, concentration of wealth and power, war, a political drift towards fascistic modes of governance in many countries—appears to be getting worse quite rapidly. And this state of the world, and the seemingly unstoppable worsening trends, affect us all, whatever kinds of lives we lead.

How can we make sense of this? Is there anything we can do about our bewilderment? Is it still possible to be optimistic without being in denial about what is happening? Like many others, I have been asking myself these questions for quite a while now.

There are innumerable ways of responding to what is happening of course, including political activism, journalism and other kinds of writing, art, donating to or raising money for groups that are ready to act directly—or simply giving up to some kind of cynicism or despair. But underlying any response at all, including giving up, is the way we see and understand the world in the first place.

Below: The Problem We All Live With,
Norman Rockwell, 1963

Very often we assume that the world is 'obviously' the way we see it. This is true even if we know perfectly well that other people, and other groups of people, see it differently. Those people are just as 'obviously' wrong—misinformed, not well-educated, not very bright, subscribers to conspiracy theories, brainwashed by the cult or religious tradition or socio-political grouping they belong to, or simply not paying attention to what *we* believe is important[1]. None of us believes we ourselves are wrong for more than a short time. If we do realize we've been mistaken, we revise our beliefs. So when we see evidence of the world falling apart, it can be very tempting to blame it on some of those 'others' who don't get it, especially because it's likely true that almost no-one *wishes* to see the world fall apart. We can be quite angry with those we think are responsible. But especially if those others, those who are responsible, are a vague group, such as the Republicans, or the liberal elite, or immigrants, or the 'woke' urbanites, or the billionaires, or 'the shadowy cabal who run the world,' our anger is likely to be pretty useless. There is plenty of anger in the world as it is, and on balance it's not clear that angry people are making the world a better place. (I received a spam email this morning, purportedly and possibly from Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida, with the subject line 'I'm FURIOUS,' asking for donations!).

Anger arising from the state of the world is understandable. Anger is said to come from underlying hurt, and we are all hurt to see and feel much that is beautiful being trampled upon or destroyed. But maybe anger doesn't serve the re-enchantment of the world very well. I return to this topic below.

Another rather different factor that we might have thought would redeem the world, make life better for everyone, and generally help to advance the human race and the world, is science and technology. In the period following the Second World War particularly, the idea that new technologies and new machines, their development supported by continuing advances in science, would quickly usher in a world of leisure and comfort and prosperity for all. 'Progress' was an uncomplicated idea and aspiration.

Indeed there have been plenty of technological innovations over the last fifty years. And they have changed and continue to change the lives of all of us. In those early days, I myself got caught up in the excitement of what might soon be possible, went to graduate school to study artificial intelligence, and did research in that area for many years. But by now everyone would agree that all those innovations have not delivered the utopian future we vaguely imagined back then.

This idea of progress linked to technological development has been and continues to be a very powerful myth, and people will point to all kinds of 'proof' of its validity. Look, they will say, at all the conveniences, all the things we can do now that were impossible, even unimaginable, only a few decades ago. Life expectancy (at birth) has roughly doubled in the last 150 years. More and more formerly laborious tasks can be and are now being automated, so that fewer people need to do boring or difficult work. We have new ways of having meetings, interacting with distant friends, and entertaining ourselves, all without leaving home and endangering our safety in the world outdoors—filled as it is with strangers, sexual predators, psychopaths, angry activists, disease-bearing bugs and animals, and teeming with invisible pathogens! Technology is keeping us happy and safe, no?!

Some of these benefits of technology are real. Or at least I don't have clear counterarguments to them all! I take advantage of many kinds of advanced technology every

Left: the 'furious' Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, whose catchphrase during the pandemic was 'How the hell am I going to be able to drink a beer with a mask on?'
Right: Progress?

'Technology is keeping us happy and safe, no?!'

When in 2018, prominent YouTuber Lewis Hilsenteger was testing the new iPhone model, the XS, he noticed his skin was extra smooth in the device's front-facing selfie cam, especially compared with older iPhone models. Hilsenteger compared it to a kind of digital makeup. 'I do not look like that,' he said in a video demonstrating the phenomenon. 'I look like I'm wearing foundation.'

day—including in the writing of this article. But at the same time as technologies have been altering our lives in so many new ways, overall social well-being and happiness have not apparently been increasing. It may be more than time to question whether there might be some connection between the advances and the malaise, and in particular whether the subtler, less obvious effects of technology might be limiting and harming us as much as they're liberating us. Even our elevation of science to the pre-eminent way of knowing may need more consideration. Indeed it's not so much technology itself that's the problem as the ways it tends to shift our perception of the world and each other.

For example, our technologies are often promoted as being improvements over what is available to us naturally. Nowadays we depend on pharmaceutical products to push our bodies towards different responses to environmental influences than they would adopt on their own—believing that our bodies need the help. Our phone cameras now use AI algorithms to transform the photos we take so that they're 'more pleasing' (to humans in focus groups) than the raw images. On social media the same kinds of algorithm can go further, creating images of ourselves with flawless skin and features brought closer to an ideal. There seems to be a growing tendency for people to watch videos from home rather than undertake their own adventures. At first blush these improvements on the natural order can seem like a good thing, or at least harmless. And certainly some of the new technologies have positive benefits, such as being able to keep in touch, interactively, with people who live thousands of miles away.

But at the same time these technologies tend to distance us from the world as it actually is; they subvert and weaken our bodies' natural ways of interacting with the environment. Presenting idealized images of ourselves on social media can easily lead us towards becoming ashamed of what we fear we're really like, so that we retreat further from the 'raw' world. And recently, the societal responses to the pandemic, including lockdowns, masks and social distancing, have exacerbated these same

tendencies. Fear of exposure and contagion encouraged us to keep away from others. The behaviours that we were exhorted to follow were equivalent to distrusting everyone else, and to distrusting even the air we breathe!

In fact of course these modes of distancing and isolating merely continue trends that have been in place for centuries. For millennia we have been living in houses designed to protect and secure us from the environment 'outside,' including weather and wild animals and increasingly from other people. Over the last hundred years or so in the west, housing units have become places for one small nuclear family or fewer, so that by default we live separately from most others. And over the last fifty years more and more of these dwellings have become better and better insulated, heated in cold weather and cooled in warm weather, with the entire interior space kept to within a few degrees all year round. We move around the world in vehicles and do much physical work using not just tools but machines with their own power source. (I've noticed that electric bicycles have been becoming very popular recently in Toronto and Montreal, especially among evidently healthy young people who could presumably easily pedal under their own power.)

So this loss of connection and trust with the world, with our bodies, and with each other is not new. An age-old tendency has simply become much more pronounced and exaggerated in recent years. Of course representatives of traditional and indigenous cultures have been alerting us to the cost of these practices for a long time. But because we're deeply enmeshed in our own cultures, the significance of what's going on can be hard to see.

Maybe however the rapid growth of our practices of isolation and disconnection, and the corresponding

'Isolation and disconnection'

growth of mistrust of the world and of each other, as well as the apparent collapsing of the world around us, can actually help us to become more conscious of what's going on. Crises are opportunities for learning and growth.

Can I Move to Another World?

I've heard more than one person say 'I want to move to a different world!' Although easy to sympathize with in our current context, on its face it sounds like nothing more than wishful thinking. But let me now mention a dream I had almost thirty years ago. In this dream, I was taken by a guide to what I believed was a far-future version of our present world. We soon arrived in some kind of city. We had been flying through the air, and as we got close, many of the people of the city were also flying. And they were all
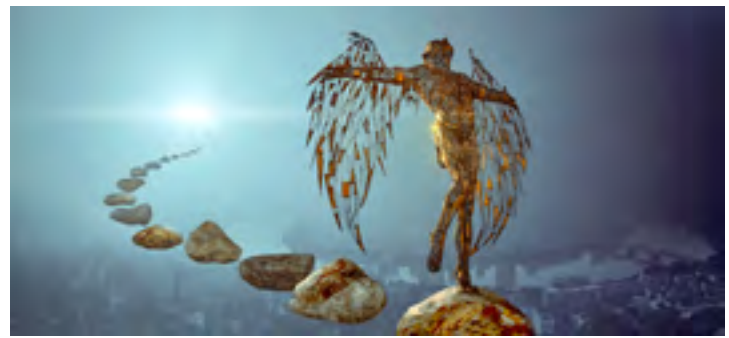
beautiful, absolutely beautiful, wearing iridescent clothes made of a kind of gossamer fabric in exquisite colours, like the wings of butterflies or dragonflies. They were so lovely, these people, that I commented on it to my guide, saying that I was a little surprised that they felt the need to wear clothes at all. Anyway my guide and I landed in a public square or piazza, where people were making their way into an auditorium where a talk was to be held. It seemed to be early evening. So we joined them and entered the auditorium too, to wait until the speaker arrived. As we walked, people greeted us as if we were friends. They laughed and joked and told stories with each other, and I noticed that the jokes were never sarcastic, never at the expense of anyone else. Everyone was so open and warm-hearted and trusting of each other that I was astonished. These people's souls were as beautiful as their bodies. When I woke up from the dream, I wept for the contrast between the world I had just left in the dream and the world I had awakened back into! Ten years passed, and one day I happened to be recalling that dream. It struck me that by that time a world like that of the dream didn't seem quite as distant and impossible as it had when the dream ended. Although world events seemed as appalling as ever, in my personal life it was a different story. I realized that I knew and kept meeting more and more people with whom relationship could be really warm and open and trusting and genuine...where the possibility of love seemed real. While it felt as if globally a beautiful world like that of the dream was as far away as ever, locally there seemed to be a growing number of the kinds of people that such a world would welcome. Even at the time I was asking myself what was going on, if anything. Was it just that I was being drawn to a different cross-section of people than I had earlier been encountering? Was it perhaps simply that I was relating to people differently than earlier in my life? In other words, I was asking, what had shifted? Was it me or was it the world? Since those days I have come to believe that that question is a bit silly. The answer is: it is both—it is me _and_ the world. And that's not simply because everything and everyone changes all the time. It's because I and the world are not separate. It is impossible for the world to change and for me to stay the same. And conversely, and more

radically, when I change, the world that I experience—the world 'out there'—changes as well.

It's not just that the world will change when all of us change our behaviour. That would hardly be controversial. The world that I experience changes when my worldview changes. Consequently, the way to change the world to one that is more harmonious and beautiful is to change the way we see and perceive and understand the raw data of our experience. For this to be effective, the new worldview has to be authentic and grounded, not mere fantasy (I certainly didn't succeed in creating the wonderful world I dreamt of, though I would say it was a glimpse of a possible future—i.e. that there's a real path among the maze of possible paths we can take that gets us to such a world, and that that's what the dream was showing me). Truly envisaging, and thereby creating, a more beautiful world is a creative project, but equally, creating and sustaining the rather dystopian world we already find ourselves in requires constant creativity from us, even if it is mostly unconscious and inherited by default from the surrounding culture. If we are angry about other people's behaviour, we create a world that largely sustains and justifies that anger. If we are disconnected from and mistrustful of our bodies, we find ourselves living in a world in which our bodies are unhealthy and not so reliable. And of course if we are mistrustful of others, we will find that other people don't trust us, and we are more likely to be lonely. If we fall into despair about the state of the world, we will see a world that justifies that despair.

In saying 'when I change, my world changes,' it might appear that each of us could create our own worlds independently. While I believe that may be true at some level, world-making is far more effective when it is a community effort and commitment. In good part that is because we are not intrinsically separate from each other. Even though each of us is unique and individual, consciousness is shared. As many such as Rupert Sheldrake have speculated, consciousness is quite likely analogous to a field in physics—pervasive throughout spacetime with concentrations of intensity corresponding to each of us as individuals. Trying to create and sustain a completely new and different world all by oneself is likely to lead to schizophrenia. On the other hand we don't have to convince the entire world to join us in such a project. In fact in the various politically-polarized groupings that have been emerging in various parts of the world in recent years, we see examples of people living in remarkably different versions of reality simultaneously.

The fact that we can create quite different worlds out of the same raw material that we find ourselves immersed in is closely related to the concept of *maya* in Indian philosophy and Buddhist teachings—that the phenomenal world of our experience is in a sense an illusion[2]. (I'll leave this claim undefended at this point however, as it would require at least a whole other essay to justify it.)

Top: César Sarachu in Intensamente azules (Intensely Blue.) Intensely Blue *is ultimately a work about the possibility of seeing the world differently, a work that moves between imagination, dreams and reality; about daring to look at the world for the first time, about how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive others. Above:* Maya *is a fundamental concept in Hindu philosophy, notably in the Advaita (Nondualist) school of Vedanta.* Maya *originally denoted the magic power with which a god can make human beings believe in what turns out to be an illusion*

Science

One might expect that science would rule out the possibility that we can create alternate worlds, or at least might tell us which of various possible worlds is correct. Science is based on a foundational assumption that the laws (of physics in particular, but more generally the laws of nature) do not change, and are the same throughout time and space. And at least in classical physics, but to a large extent in quantum physics as well, the state of the world

does not depend on who is looking at it. It is fundamental to the scientific endeavour that scientist A experiences 'the same world' as scientist B, and if they each conduct the same experiment they will get the same results.

We must bear in mind though that science is always looking for the regularities underlying all the phenomena that we observe of the world. Our lived experience on the other hand primarily consists of the particularities of what we see and encounter. Generally speaking science has almost nothing to say about which people you are going to meet, what events will happen to you and your friends, what choices and decisions you'll make as your life unfolds. From a scientific perspective these things are contingent facts. Accidents of circumstance. Because science has almost nothing to say about these matters, there's a certain tendency for scientists to regard them as uninteresting, and not worth paying much attention to. One of the primary functions of laboratories in science is to try to eliminate as many as possible of the 'extraneous' influences on the events of particular interest to an experimenter.

Oddly enough, science really has nothing to say even about what 'the present moment' in time refers to. From the point of view of physics and cosmology there's no theoretical way to talk about the present, distinguishing it from the past and the future.

Yet the present, the past and the future, and all of these 'accidental' details constitute the essence of what life is for each one of us. They are what make our lives what they are. They constitute the world or worlds of our experience.

We are strongly drawn to make some sense of our experience of life. And 'making some sense' means identifying some principles that we imagine to be relevant, that we can apply to living our lives. Most of us have an instinctive belief that our lives are not merely a random sequence of lucky and unlucky accidents, fortunes and misfortunes. In a way this impetus to find meaningful patterns in our lives is very similar to the motivations underlying science. Yet so far science has had very little success in this domain (making sense of our life experiences), despite the continuing efforts of neuroscience and consciousness studies.

On the other hand, since time immemorial, spiritual and religious traditions have concerned themselves with exactly these questions[5]. How objectively successful they have been at this task remains a rather open question, but the quest that underlies them certainly remains an active one among many, including me.

It is standard within science to believe that collectively we have reached the point where we understand by now pretty much how the world works. By contrast, I have slowly come to believe that our eyes are just emerging above water level from time to time to get the first glimpses of what our reality is truly like. The laws of nature will apply in all possible worlds—although this is very different from saying that we already know all the important laws of nature!

This may be the place to acknowledge that I worked as a scientist for many years, but then also studied extensively with Zen Buddhists and Tibetan lamas, and to a lesser extent with shamans/shamanic practitioners and Hindu teachers. These days I believe that the same curiosity about the nature of the world motivated all of this for me, including the science. I also have slowly reached the conclusion that none of these sources can fully satisfy that kind of curiosity. All of these traditions have insights from which we can learn, but none has the full story, because no-one has understood everything. Many important questions about life and the universe remain unanswered or inadequately answered, and probably far more haven't even been asked or formulated yet. In some ways that is a liberating conclusion to reach, because it means that the territory is wide open for further exploration and understanding. But at the same time we are all realizing that

Below: the US Department of Defense established the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC) in 2018 to accelerate the 'delivery of AI-enabled capabilities.' Its budget for 2012 was $278.2 million

we and our world are in serious trouble these days, and if none of the traditional structures of science or religion can adequately point to the way through, then are we doomed to experience a collapse of the world we know?

Sadly science itself, especially in those areas of research connected to large amounts of money and profits, has become increasingly corrupted. The large pharmaceutical companies have for a long time now provided most of the financing for medical research and medical journals. I have personally been astonished to slowly realize how much dishonesty has affected the medical research community during the last few years of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how that dishonesty has been misleading the politicians, the media and the public. In another area, towards the end of my own scientific career I had begun to work in the area of complex self-organizing systems, and came to see quite starkly that the main interest in funding such research was the military.

Love

life becomes beautiful when we discover love

Shayan Haqqi[4]

We can't build genuine, sustainable, beautiful worlds from egocentric considerations. It seems likely that the fragmentation and dysfunction we see in the consensus reality of the present time is at least in part a function of the loss of connection discussed above—deep and genuine connections with each other, recognition of our intimate connection to the Earth, trust in and fuller awareness of our bodies. Under such conditions our egos become vulnerable, and feeling vulnerable they become defensive, which can increase disconnection even more, leaving us seriously ungrounded and untethered.

The path to reconnection, and to allaying the fears of the fragile ego, is love. I am not going to try to explain this statement, nor to say what love is. Perhaps we all know in our hearts, and none of us understands with our minds. As my friend and colleague Aqsa Ijaz says: 'Only poetry provides the mode in which love can be addressed.' So I leave it to the poets!

I do want to say however that love is much more than a feeling of bonding with another human being. We can be aware of love, even in mutuality (i.e. of being loved as well), while walking alone through a forest. And love is directly relevant to the healing of disconnection from our bodies, and thereby to their actual healing.

Of course the relevance of love to more genuine reconnection with others is self-evident.

Unlike some others, I don't personally believe that love happens through conscious intention. It arises spontaneously, when we are open enough, are not too strongly trying to hide our vulnerability, and are sufficiently secure in being who we are. We don't have to have completed those journeys, we just have to have embarked on them. This allows trust, even of strangers, to grow. We can allow that trust even though we know that occasionally it will be betrayed. We can usually learn even from such betrayals anyway—either that something we did or assumed was unwise, or just that other people are themselves often wounded, imperfect, perhaps struggling with many things in their own worlds.

The kind of openness and trust between people that I'm referring to can be established and recognized astonishingly quickly. For me it has sometimes begun to happen so quickly, within a few seconds of, say, eye contact with a stranger, that I've been too taken aback to make any comment to the other person. At least in typical western social milieux, there are certain social conventions of reserve that apply. And perhaps the opening up of further

In 1999, Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra as a workshop for Israeli, Palestinian and other Arab musicians to promote coexistence and intercultural dialogue

communication is not important anyway—perhaps a couple of fleeting seconds of something shared is enough. There is a lesson even here about fear (about which I'll have more to say elsewhere).

But often, in my experience, some kind of context provides a safe enough space for more communication to happen. And the initial mistrust that strangers have for each other can turn remarkably quickly into trust…if certain conditions are met. But rather than list the conditions, which I am unable to do anyway, I want to make some observations that come from my personal experience, and try to draw a few conclusions from them.

First this kind of relationship of rather deep and open trust is (for me, a man) much more likely to happen with women than with other men, though that's by no means exclusively the case. Of course, it's undeniable that sexual attraction plays some role, and indeed I suspect that unconscious fears about homosexuality or even atavistic fears about competitive violence among men play a role too (on the whole intimate relationships among females seem to bring up fewer fears for them than they do for males).

But I don't believe that what I'm speaking of has anything directly to do with sex, although perhaps it does have a connection with Eros. What I'm speaking of is a kind of trust that enables us to be undefended with each other, to be able to reveal our vulnerabilities and our fears to each other, and ultimately to be able to engage in shared exploration of places we have never been. That's how we build new worlds!

This kind of trust and openness is all too often not achieved even in long-term relationships. Since I began to grow up a bit more, and become more observant, I've been amazed at how many relationships really consist of two solitudes, where at least one of the partners has quietly long since despaired of achieving what I would call real intimacy, and maybe the other has never quite dared to imagine its possibility.

To be able to reveal vulnerabilities and fears to another is closely tied to being able to reveal them to ourselves. That's what psychotherapy is based on. To speak of such things is to fish them up from the non-language, mostly hidden realm of the unconscious into language, into words, into consciousness, and into the possibility of communication. And this activity—giving voice to what has not before dared to speak or perhaps has never imagined speaking—is a remarkably transformative and powerful process. What has been associated with shame is released, liberated, as it is spoken of. The voice inside us that has been silenced because of fear of ridicule or embarrassment, or fear of not being understood, of fear of ostracism—it is very empowering to let this voice speak.

So the people who are ready to enter into these open-hearted and trusting relationships that I've been talking about are people with enough courage to take a couple of steps towards openness. Despite what I was saying above about the near-instantaneous recognition of the possibility of trust, opening to deep and genuine trust is inevitably, I think, a step-by-step process, an exploration. We are all pretty insecure, when it comes down to it, and we all have, I believe, an incredible amount of power and beauty hidden within us that we don't dare reveal, even to ourselves, because it is so overwhelming. So this whole thing is a process, and a path to be walked.

I've been talking about people who already live open-heartedness as if they were an entirely separate group from those who are governed by fear, who are too self-centred to really see other people, who either run the repressive institutions in society or are complete victims of them. But here as everywhere else, the boundary is ill-defined, and in a certain sense doesn't exist. We all live some of the time on both sides of this boundary. What we can all wish for is the courage to live on the open-hearted side most of the time. It is among these people we will find the communities, the friends and relations, with whom we can imagine new and beautiful worlds, and thereby slowly pull them into existence.

In Closing...

We find ourselves in a dystopian age. Our world seems to be crumbling around us. What can we do about this?

Let us find and join with communities of others, and with them build a new world that can be more wonderful. Such an exhortation can sound saccharine and sentimental. But in fact such a project is not for the faint of heart. Building a new world is not easy or simple or quick, even for a community. And we won't succeed by trying to ignore the world we know and the people we may think we'd like to leave behind. Any new world will coexist with the worlds we currently know, for quite a while. And almost everyone from the old worlds will—initially at least—also appear in any new world we begin to create. But they will be at least slightly changed (as will we ourselves), as if we had chosen a different and unexpected path towards the vast panoply of possible futures. Some of those we had imagined to be enemies, or at least had mistrusted, will appear as bafflingly friendly. Others will gradually fade into the background and disappear. The key to it all is likely to be love, Eros.
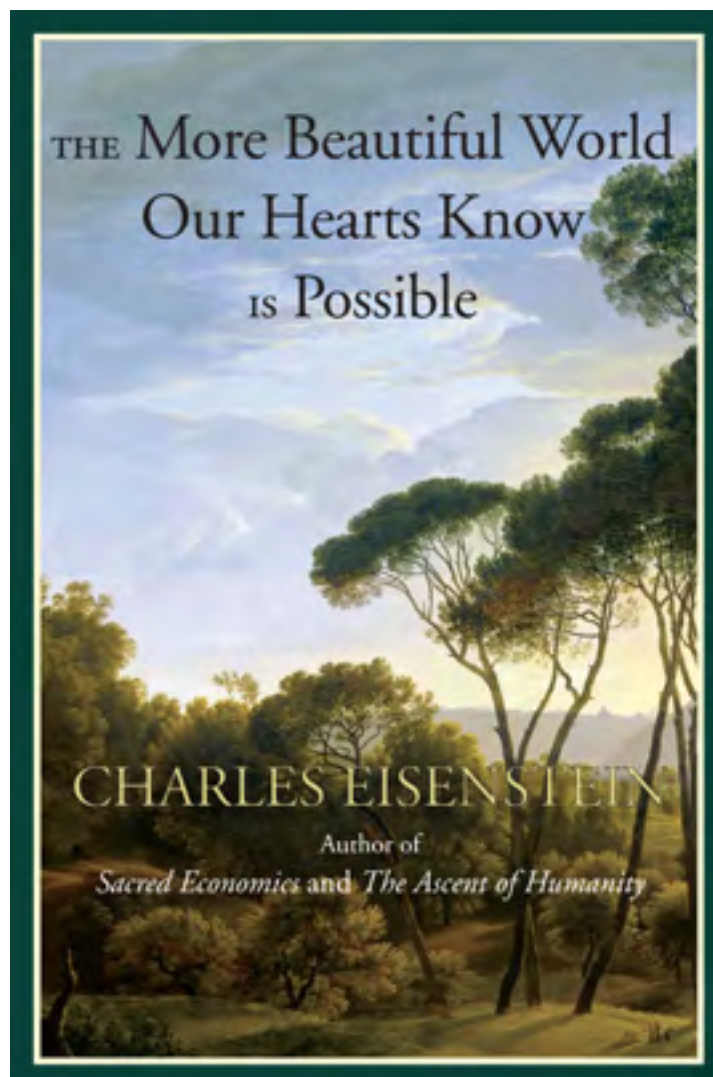
For a superb book on the same general topic as this article, see Charles Eisenstein's *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*. The title itself is wonderful, and I found the entire book to be inspiring.

Finally a quote from Michael Lerner, November 2021: 'the one thing we know is that a complete metamorphosis of what it means to be human on Earth is taking place and we can't stop it[5].'

Endnotes

[1] I am by no means immune to this myself. I use the word 'obviously' quite often in things I say or write, and I'm not sure I always check to see whether what I'm saying is truly self-evident, rather than a view from my current perspective.

[2] Neither Eastern philosophy nor my sense of alternate worlds implies that the phenomenal world that we experience is not serious or important. Reality and our experiences are 'real,' but the nature of underlying reality (*sunyata* in Sanskrit, often

THE More Beautiful World
Our Hearts Know
IS Possible

CHARLES EISENSTEIN
Author of
Sacred Economics and *The Ascent of Humanity*

translated as 'emptiness') is not what we usually imagine. For an independent western account of the primordial reality, and the creativity, that underlie what we perceive, see Smith (1996).

[3] Arguably, psychology and even career advisors and life coaches deal with similar issues, though they are rather less inclined to ask big questions and to look for deep truths about human experience.

[4] Personal communication, 2018

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zopcdFGqFmM (at minute 21:27)

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Educated at Harvard and Sussex universities, **ARNOLD SMITH** spent several decades in computer science and artificial intelligence research, as well as a brief spell working on complex self-organizing systems. He was associate director of SRI International's Cambridge Research Centre in England for six years, a senior scientist at the National Research Council of Canada for ten years, and for a couple of years associate director at the Pari Center for New Learning.

In parallel with his work in computer and cognitive science, he was for many years a student of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, pursued some studies in shamanism, and in addition gained some familiarity with spiritual traditions from other parts of the world. Since 2004 he has been officially retired while continuing to explore the world, both inner and outer. He currently lives in Montreal, close to two of his children and two of his four grandchildren.

> **❝I** *have from my own experience begun to know how intimately related, how nearly synonymous, are the terms 'love' and 'know,' how likely impossible it is to know authentically or well what one does not love, and how certainly impossible it is to love what one does not know"*
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> **Wendell Berry**