

A New Superpower in the Making: Awareness-Based Collective Action



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Visual by Kelvy Bird

Three weeks ago, I posted some reflections on what we are learning from corona and climate action. Given that post's wide circulation (150K+ views), I wanted to share a quick update. The concluding idea of the post — to launch an impromptu, global

infrastructure for leaning into our current moment of disruption and letting this moment move us toward civilizational renewal — has quickly taken shape.

GAIA — Global Activation of Intention and Action — was implemented only twelve days after a small core team first came up with the idea. Within twelve days, 10,000+ had signed up for this free, four-month, online journey, and a global team of 100+ volunteers had begun co-creating, in five different languages, a suite of deep learning events for participants around the world. On March 27, we launched GAIA with a day-long series of events, including framing inputs, deep listening practices, small breakout groups, intentional stillness, reflective journaling, live music performance, and “social image resonance.”

All of this happened without much planning and on a dime — even without any real budget. Events that usually take a year to plan suddenly became doable within hours and days...

The remarkable response to GAIA is evidence, perhaps, of something much bigger. It signals the further awakening of a movement taking shape across the planet. It's the activation of a deep and widely held longing for profound societal and civilizational renewal. Wherever I go on this planet, whomever I talk to, I hear people express the equivalent of these three simple realizations:

- We know that our current civilization is not sustainable. It's about to hit the wall. In fact, it's already hitting the wall. And that process of collapse will deepen dramatically if we don't change direction.*
- We want to be part of a different story of the future. We want to contribute to redirecting where we are heading as a society.*
- I don't know how...*

Whether you talk to CEOs and executives in small or big companies, grassroots movement makers, government officials (privately), or the heads of departments in large international institutions, everyone knows what we are doing now is not sustainable. Individually, almost everyone wants something different. Yet collectively, we keep

producing the same results, manifested in the deepening of the three major divides of our time: the ecological divide (the disconnect between self and nature), the social divide (the disconnect between self and other), and the spiritual divide (the disconnect between self and self).

This is our current moment. The ten points below sharpen and further develop observations I started to describe in my March blog post.

1. Everything We Knew Wasn't Sustainable is Collapsing Now

“Everything we knew wasn't sustainable is collapsing now.” When I heard my colleague and co-creator of GAIA, Antoinette Klatzky, summarize what she sees going on, it seemed like an almost universal observation, applicable to so many systems and sectors.

In the past few weeks, we've seen blue skies over Beijing (at least for a little while) and blue skies as well cleaner rivers across many other hotbeds of industrial production. It's almost as if, as several observers have suggested, Mother Nature has sent us to our rooms to think about what we are doing to her, to each other, and to ourselves. We've been given a time-out as a species! What key learnings can we take from this collective moment?

2. Rise: As Systems Collapse, People Rise

As systems collapse, people rise. People rise to the occasion in an absolutely remarkable manner. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of volunteers have shown up in their own countries and communities to help their neighbors and to support the selfless work of frontline healthcare professionals who, often without access to healthcare insurance for themselves, are putting their own lives on the line for the flood of Covid-19 patients needing care. Everyone does what they can, from the opera singer in Milan singing from his window to the retired healthcare professionals returning to work in Madrid, New York City, and other places. The resilience of the human spirit, the activation of immense profound love and altruistic action, and the deep connections humans feel to each other in such a moment of crisis are moving and awe-inspiring.

3. Connection: We Are One System

Covid-19 has become one of the most effective and impactful teachers of our time. It's providing an advanced lesson on systems thinking with the planet's 7.8 billion citizens as students. Yes, some of us have already learned these lessons intellectually. But now

our bodies have too. We are acutely aware of our global interconnectedness. We are many, and we are one. We breathe the same air. We drink the same water. We walk the same earth. We enact the same global web of social, economic, and cultural connections. You thought it didn't matter to us what happens on the other side the globe? You thought it didn't matter to you if vulnerable people in your community didn't have health insurance that would cover a Covid-19 test? Well, now we know better. Now we know that ignoring our fundamental condition of interconnectedness leads us to design institutions that utterly fail in moments like this. In other words: it's time to "rip off the veil of unreality," as Peter Lipman, co-chair of the Transition Network, suggested the other day.

4. A New Superpower: Awareness-Based Collective Action (ABC)

Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we have been debating who is the world's current, or next, superpower. Who will shape the 21st century? The United States? China? Both? Some other entity? If you want to see the next superpower in the making, you may have to widen your view *and* look more deeply.

Over the past three weeks, we have almost miraculously transformed our collective behavior on a planetary scale. The amount of disinfecting, hand washing, and social distancing at home and in public spaces is mind boggling. Over the span of three weeks, almost all of the world's population was able to focus on one single issue. That collective focus of attention has started to dissolve many of the obstacles that usually stand in the way of profound change. Within days and weeks, we, as a species, effectively changed our collective behavior. We mobilized massive resources to fight the spread of the virus. And we are forming unprecedented new patterns of collaboration across institutions and communities. In short: *energy follows attention*. First, we apply our collective attention onto the challenge at hand, then we develop interventions that successfully transform our collective behavior, which in turn bends the curve. In a nutshell, the moment we focus our global attention on one single issue, there is nothing we can't do.

We can flatten the curve because we are able to bend the beam of collective attention back onto our own behavior and how it affects the well-being of the rest of humanity.

“To bend the curve” means to transform the rules that usually govern our collective behavior — which is the difference between natural science and the social sciences: in natural science, the laws of physics remain the same. If you focus your attention on bending a spoon, the spoon remains the same. In the social sciences, however, we have the power to bend the curve; we can change the “invariances” that govern our behavior by focusing our attention and awareness on them. In that case, metaphorically speaking, we can bend the spoon. That’s precisely what we are currently doing collectively in fighting the virus.

We are bending the curve. How? By bending the beam of collective attention back onto ourselves, through the realization that our own behavior (e.g., social distancing) contributes to the flattening of the curve, to the well-being of all. That, in my view, is the new superpower in the making — the rise of a new pattern of collective action that operates from an awareness of the whole: Awareness-Based Collective action (ABC).

It’s a pattern of action that is familiar to most of us — for example, when we face disruptive challenges in our families or communities. What do we do? We come together. We hold each other. We jointly pay attention to what is happening. And then, once we *see together*, everyone simply does what needs to be done. Often without central coordination. Without formal governance. Spontaneously. Coordinated by seeing together — by a shared awareness of the whole. That’s the magic.

We often see this kind of response in local communities. We see it less often on a national level and scale. And we rarely ever see it on a global level. But occasionally we do, such as in the case of the Paris Climate Accord. The “spoon” starts to bend when we shift our mode of action from one way of operating to another — from *ego*-system to *eco*-system awareness.

Symptoms: 1.3M Cases, 75K Deaths

Reacting: ICU, Lockdown

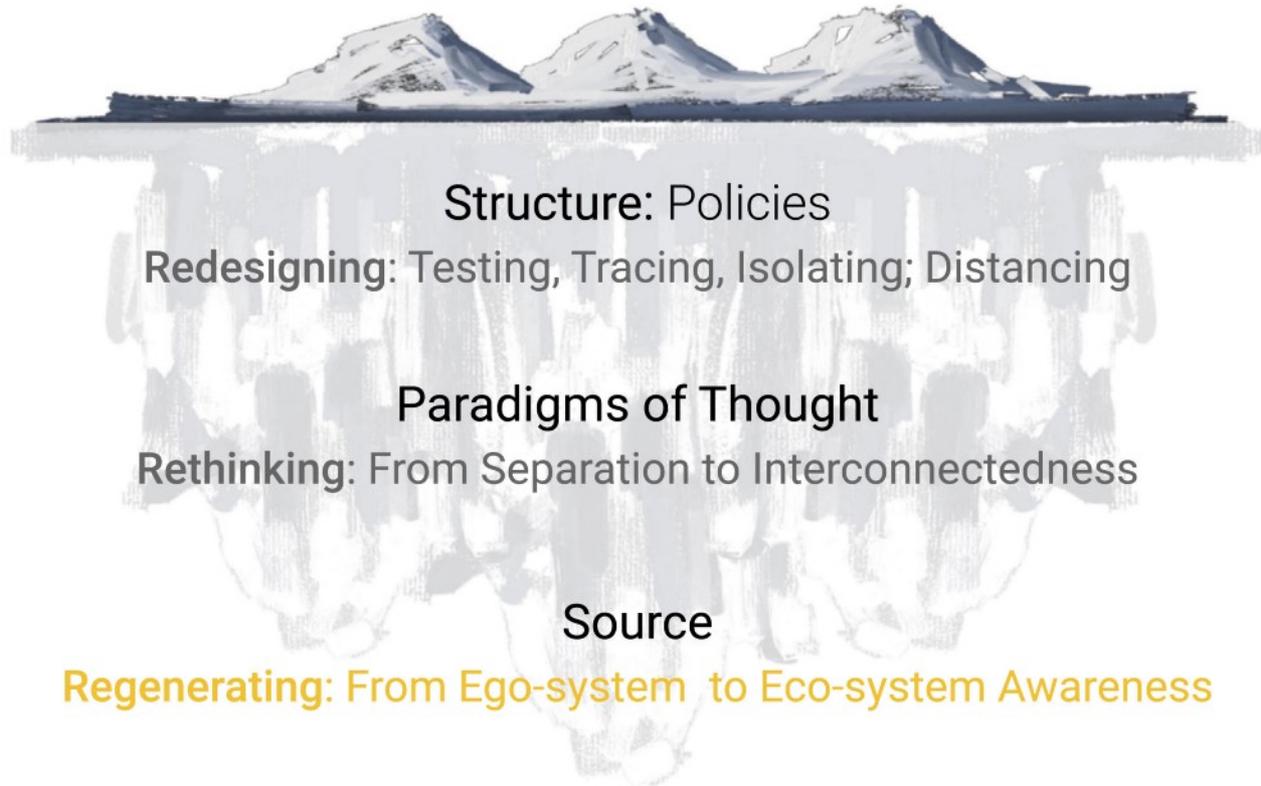


Figure 1: Bending the Curve by Bending the Beam of Attention: Integrating all four levels of change — visual by Kelvy Bird

Figure 1 summarizes these ideas from a systems thinking point of view. Flattening the curve requires us to address the Covid-19 situation not only by *reacting* at level 1 (by building ICUs, locking down social and economic activity), but also on the deeper levels: by *redesigning* (broken) policies and programs for testing, tracing, isolating, and social distancing (level 2); by *reframing* the underlying way of seeing the world from separation to interconnection (level 3); and by *regenerating* the deeper sources from which we operate, by moving from an ego-system focus or awareness that revolves around our own well-being to an eco-system awareness that revolves around the well-being of all — all beings (level 4).

So, what is the emerging next superpower? It is our capacity to *bend the beam of our attention back onto ourselves* — *both individually and collectively*; to become aware of the rules that govern our collective behavior; and to bend and transform these rules as the circumstances demand. No other species on earth can do this. It's what makes us human.

5. Systemic Failures: Big Government, Big Market, Big Data

The systems map in Figure 1 can also help us to better understand the types of systemic failure that the corona crisis has highlighted for us. What happens when your response to a situation as an individual is purely reactive (level 1)? You panic-buy in order to stockpile your personal reserves, thereby disrupting the supply chain and depriving your neighbors of necessities.

But what is happening on an institutional level?

Two things. We see a massive amount of unnecessary suffering that disproportionately affects those who are the most vulnerable.

And we see a massive institutional failure connected to these issues, particularly the failure of the three institutions that are usually celebrated for their successes: Big Government, Big Business, and Big Data/Big Tech.

Big Government: Even though many pundits are claiming that the corona crisis proves that big, centralized government is the key to success, I at least in part disagree. Cases in point: look at Russia, at India, or at China during the first two months, and at the US federal government over the past three months. You see a landscape of massive institutional failure. A picture of politicians at the center of centralized government structures who are by and large out of touch. But what about South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Germany, and what about US state governors whose response has been honest, timely, and proactive? Yes, these are excellent examples of competent governance. But none of those countries or states has a super-centralized government. They have either an agile, proactive national government in a smaller country or a decentralized, devolved government in the case of the individual German and US states. So, a centralized government structure can be of critical help in a pandemic IF — and only if — there is competent leadership at the core. But if you have a Trump-style administration, a centralized government becomes your major weakness. Conversely, the German case demonstrates that if you build coherent alliances of semi-

public research institutes, states, hospitals, and citizens, these interdependent ecosystems of regional health players can work together surprisingly well. So, yes, agile and effective government is crucial. But that does not mean that more centralization is always better.

Big Business: When you double click on why a powerful country like the United States can't respond effectively to a pandemic like this one, one root issue quickly becomes obvious: competition. The basic idea of competition is to fight it out in the marketplace. States compete with each other for protective gear and ventilators. Add to that the complicated bureaucracy of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) which prevented states from developing their own tests. The national stockpile of ventilators falls short because the medium-sized provider that was contracted to mass-produce simple and inexpensive ventilators many years back was acquired by a giant medical equipment company not interested in producing these devices because doing so would eat into the company's other revenue streams. The root issue here is that health and healthcare are not commodities; they are not just another market. This begs the question: "Should health and healthcare — or core parts of it — be organized by a different type of enterprise, one that is driven by a social mission instead of profit?"

Big Data: For years Silicon Valley titans like Mark Zuckerberg have presented themselves as saviors, superheroes who could solve global problems more effectively than any government or other institution. OK, now that we have a real problem on our hands, where is the Silicon Valley response? The silence and lack of imagination from Silicon Valley since the world was locked down is growing louder every day. Yes, we do use some of their technologies — such as the wonderful services of Zoom — to organize and connect. But it's people — people in education, people in business, people in government, people in civil society — that make those technologies work. Yet we also know from East Asia that Big Data can be a big part of the solution. That knowledge leads to an obvious question: "How can we make Big Data serve all of us, the well-being of every community, local and global?" *That would mean democratizing the ownership and use of data.*

The failure of Big Government, Big Business, and Big Tech is connected to the same underlying issue: when they are operated with a mindset of disconnect and ego-system awareness (competition and empire-building) rather than a mindset of interconnectivity and eco-system awareness, then you end up with a government that takes six weeks to respond to a pandemic, rather than three days; you end up with a medical equipment provider that puts profits ahead of public health; you end up with

Big Data companies that put profits and the power to manipulate collective behavior ahead of empowering societies and citizens to democratize the use of their own data. Three forms of institutional failure. One root issue.

6. Stopping: When you face disruption, you need to wake up

When you face disruption, you need to stop “downloading” the patterns of the past and wake up. According to the *Guardian* and the *South China Morning Post*, the first Covid-19 case on record in China was identified on November 17, 2019. Even though 266 people were infected in 2019, it took the Chinese government until January 21, 2020, to acknowledge the human-to-human transmission of the virus. Precious time was lost. Roughly three days after that January announcement, the governments of Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea responded with their own task-force-guided plan of action, including screening, testing, tracing, and isolating. In the United States, even though it had the same information and the same quality of experts on board, it took the government six additional weeks to even begin responding. Again, precious time wasted. The impact of that delay? Look at the death toll in the US: 15,000 and rising. This is already five times the death toll of 9–11, arguably the most devastating event on US soil in recent memory.

How can we learn to be fully awake in the face of something unprecedented?

How can we shorten the wake-up phase from six weeks to three days, from three days to the very moment of seeing, to now?

The key to shortening the response time is to stop downloading — that is, to stop reacting with habitual patterns of thought. That’s the first part of waking up.

7. Choice: When Waking Up, We Have a Choice

The second part of waking up deals with what’s next. When you stop downloading, you realize that you actually have a choice — a choice in how you respond to any situation. You can respond by turning *away*, or by turning *toward*. Turning away means closing your mind, heart, and will — in other words, acting from *ignorance*, *hate*, and *fear*.

Turning toward means opening your mind, heart, and will — acting from *curiosity*, *compassion*, and *courage*. These are the choices we face in any moment: Do we turn away and close down, or do we turn toward and open up, activating the deeper levels of our humanity?

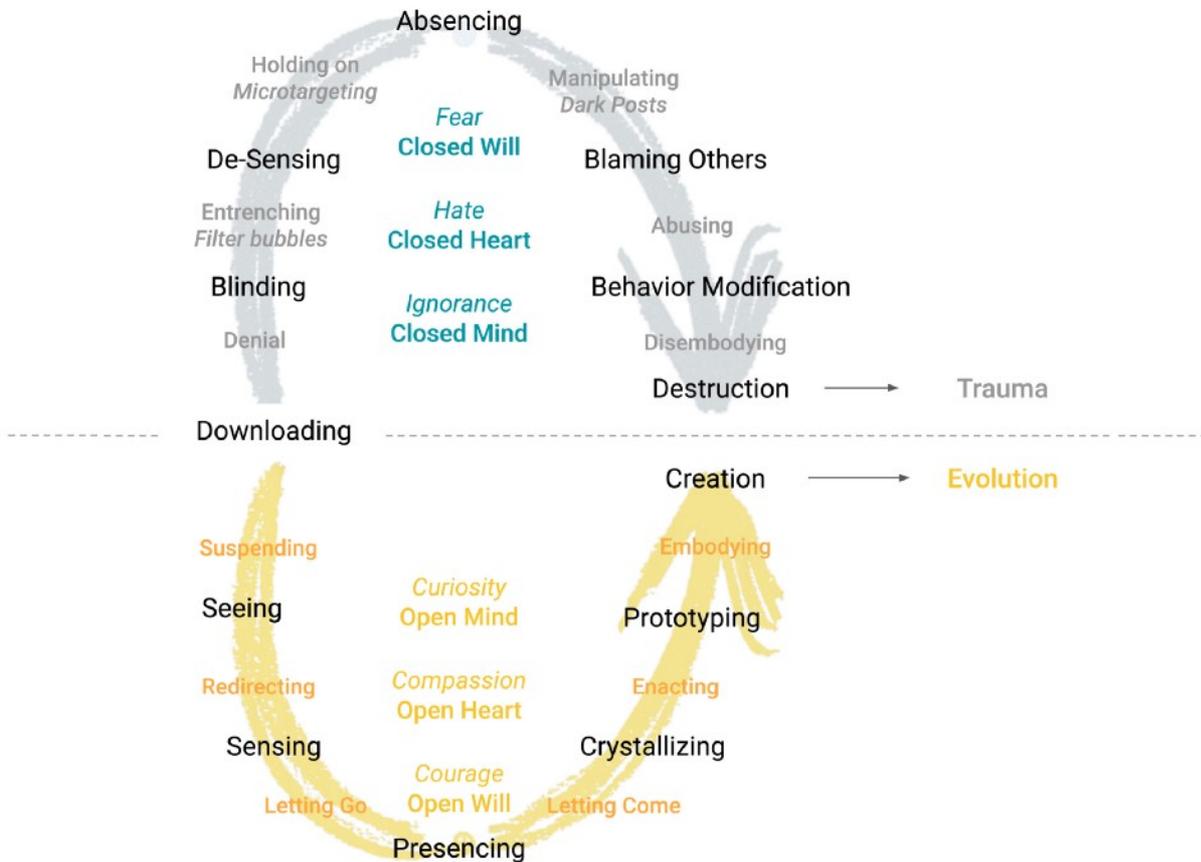


Figure 2: Two Cycles, Two Social Fields: Presencing and Absencing — visual by Kelvy Bird

Figure 2 maps out the dynamics of each response. Being human means operating between these two social fields: the field of *absencing* in which we enact a cycle of disconnect, disembodied presence, and self-destruction; and the field of *presencing* in which we enact a cycle of deepened connection, embodied presence, and co-creation — which enables something new to come into being through us.

The human experience in this century is shaped by these two contradictory forces that we experience in all our communities: On the one hand we see walls going up, and borders closing down, and on the other hand we see what my colleague Becky Buell calls the “dissolving of boundaries” such as in the solidarity economy (blending what’s mine/yours), in cross-organizational collaboration (sharing staff), or in the case of cross-sector collaboration (government, private sector, military, civil society all on same page). Says Becky: “I think this is an interesting hint of what is to come.”

8. Reimagining Our Civilization: New Innovation Infrastructures

Summing up: The first step in confronting any disruption is to stop downloading and wake up. The second step is to realize that we have a choice: we can close down, or we can open up. And the third is to embody and activate such a choice both individually and collectively.

Figure 2 maps out the individual dimension of the two social fields: *presencing* and *absencing*. There is a lot of evidence of both of these fields in societies today. And we can see many examples of both of these cycles in the response to the pandemic. But which one dominates the headlines and public conversation? Which one dominates our social media feeds? It tends to be the cycle of absencing, the cycle of self-destruction. Particularly over the past few years, we have seen an enormous uptick in these dynamics globally. Why is that so?

I believe two factors play into this: (1) the influence of “dark money” in politics, money from special-interest groups such as Big Banking, Big Tech, Big Oil, Big Pharma, and Big Agriculture; and (2) the toxic influence of social media like Facebook. Although it’s an important means of connection for many of us, Facebook and other social media operate according to a business model that maximizes advertising revenues, which in turn requires maximizing user engagement, which is best accomplished through algorithms that activate the emotions of hate, anger, and fear on the part of its users. While these companies have created fortunes for owners like Mr. Zuckerberg, they have also caused pain in many people and undermine the foundations of our democracies.

Which leads us to the obvious question: How can we nourish and strengthen the manifold seed initiatives that are part of the cycle of presencing? To nourish these seeds, I believe we need to create three new types of societal innovation infrastructures (see figure 3):

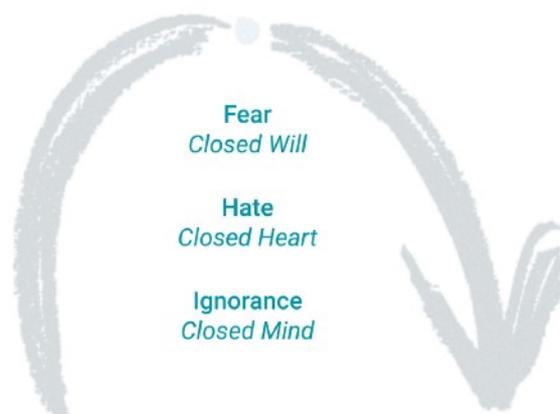




Figure 3: Three Innovation Infrastructures: Learning, Democracy, Economy — visual by Kelvy Bird

- **New Learning Infrastructures** that link head, heart, and hand (whole-person learning). Examples include action learning and whole-person learning initiatives both in institutions of education and outside of them such as u.lab or the School For Transformation that we seek to prototype with the GAIA journey.
- **New Democratic Infrastructures** that make our governance processes more direct, more distributed, more diverse, and more dialogic. Examples here include citizens' assemblies on climate action (in some cases combined with a referendum on the proposed results) as it is already beginning to happen in an increasing number of countries, including France, Scotland, England, Spain, and Germany.
- **New Economic Infrastructures** that shift the main focus of economic activity from ego-system awareness to eco-system awareness — from me to we. Examples here include the various “acupuncture points” for transforming capitalism in ways that relink the coordination and governance of economic activity back with human awareness and human intention at all levels of scale (see the evolution of governance depicted in figure 4 below).

What's so interesting about the current situation is that many of these things, which seemed impossible just weeks ago, seem reasonable today and are starting to be implemented in one way or another. In the United States, the only developed country without universal health insurance, recognition is building that universal healthcare is a systemic necessity. The same applies to the economy. While the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) just a couple of years ago was viewed as far-fetched and obscure, two weeks ago the entire US Senate voted in favor of giving a check to almost every citizen, at least once. Quite an astonishing reversal. Likewise, the suggestion of hyper-localizing our food cycles a decade ago sounded like a far-out idea. Today, particularly

over the past few weeks, we have seen a massive wave of hyper-localizing our food cycles already underway. Another major shift we see going on is in terms of rethinking the framework of public health in terms of the planet: putting planetary health and well-being first in our framing of what a good healthcare system is trying to do.

As our economy has come to a standstill, many of us have started wondering about a few more things: Why are the people we are now calling “systemically relevant” or “essential workers” often the least well-paid — nurses, farm workers, truck drivers, grocery store checkers — while those with jobs that either add no value or subtract value from the whole — e.g., those who run the destabilizing mechanisms of financialized casino capitalism — go home with obscene levels of compensation? Again, how did that happen? How could we hold a public conversation on rethinking and reshaping the fundamentals of our economy?

What if we applied our superpowers not only to bending the C19 curve, but also to reconceiving our *economic* systems as entities designed to bridge the ecological and social divides? That serve the well-being of all beings? What if we applied our superpowers to reconceiving our *democratic* systems as entities that bridge the political divide, by making the democratic conversation in our communities more direct, more diverse, and more dialogic? What if we applied our superpowers to reconceiving *learning* as an activity that bridges the spiritual divide that separates us from our sources of creativity and best future potential?

9. Co-creative Ecosystems: Upgrading Our Operating Systems

One way of illustrating systems change is with the analogy of a smartphone. Every smartphone user knows that, in order for the device to function well, once in a while, you need to *upgrade* your *operating system*. Figure 4 shows how the “operating systems” of society have evolved over time. Each sector has followed the same trajectory: from input-centric to output-centric, from there to user-centric, and from there to eco-system centric. The last column depicts the evolution of governance — that is, the evolution of the coordination mechanism that we use to steer the system.

Four Stages of Systems Evolution, Four Operating Systems

	Learning	Health	Farm & Food	Corporate Sustainability	Finance	Governance
1.0 Input and authority-centric	Traditional teacher-centric	Traditional doctor-centric medicine	Traditional farmer-centric	PR Alleviating projects	Traditional banker-centric	1.0 Visible hand: <i>Hierarchy</i>

2.0 Output and efficiency-centric	Testing: bulimia learning: fast in, fast out	Evidence based medicine	Industrial agriculture: monoculture	Corporate practices Efficiency	Extractive Capital: externality blind	2.0 Invisible hand: <i>Market</i>
3.0 Outcome- and user-centric	Learner- centric	Patient-centric medicine	Organic Ag: reduce negative footprint	Business Innovation	Impact investing: externality- aware	3.0 Organized interest groups: <i>Lobbying</i>
4.0 Co-creative and eco- system- centric	Activate deep learning cycle: head, heart & hand	Strengthening sources of health and well-being for people & planet	Regenerative Ag: Food as medium for healing planet & people	Purpose or Mission-driven Enterprise	Regenerative blended finance: systems transforming	4.0 ABC: <i>Awareness- Based Collective action</i>

Figure 4: Four Stages of Systems Evolution, Four Operating Systems — visual by Kelvy Bird

Figure 4 highlights three main issues. One, you cannot solve “4.0 challenges” with response mechanisms that are rooted in operating systems 2.0 and 3.0. But that of course is precisely what happens in most systems most of the time. Two, if you try to move your organization into the 4.0 realm of operating, you realize that no one can do it alone. You need an entire eco-system of partners. And three, the C19 situation has greatly accelerated the urgency of the 4.0 agenda:

- **Learning:** The spaces for deep learning have never been more in demand.
- **Health:** Strengthening the sources of health for people and planet is precisely what the current situation calls for.
- **Food and Agriculture:** food as the medium for healing the planet and its people. That’s the idea of regenerative agriculture, which has been boosted by local community-supported agriculture (CSA) related farms.
- **Corporate Sustainability:** Mission-driven enterprises are what everyone is looking for — but they are still a small and ‘endangered’ species.
- **Finance:** Regenerative, blended finance that provides resources for evolving and transforming the system. The entire financial sector seems to be at a profound inflection point, moving from impact-blind to impact-aware modes of operating.
- **Awareness-based collective action** is the seed for a new, awareness-based form of coordination and governance that is already taking root in many places.

The key to transforming our civilization, I believe, lies in our capacity to plant and cultivate these fields for co-creative action that arises from shared awareness. It's these seeds that will activate the dormant superpowers of an emerging movement.

Once these generative social fields begin to grow, they will develop organically on their own, and if luck is on our side they will function as a "landing strip" for additional concrete possibilities that are seeking to emerge.

The birth and rapid enactment of the GAIA idea is a good demonstration of the power of these principles. These are the *fields of the future* that we need to cultivate.

10. What We Can Do Now: Seeding the "Superpower in the Making"

What can we do now? The most important leverage point for profound change lies in seeding and cultivating these fields of deepened connection with each other, with nature, and with ourselves. The emerging superpower of this century is linked to our capacity to *bend the beam of observation back onto ourselves*. This shift of our attention allows us to see ourselves through each other's eyes, to keep our gaze focused on our behavior as a collective, and to become aware of our own blind spots — in order to bend the curve, to reimagine and reshape civilization to bridge the ecological, social, and spiritual divides.

That, in a nutshell, is the intention of the GAIA journey: to help cultivate the soil; to seed, support, and further activate this movement of awakening, now.

You are invited to join at gaiajourney.org.

Visit the March blog post.

Visit Antoinette's blog

Download free chapter: Essentials of Theory U

I want to thank my colleagues Antoinette Klatzky, Sarina Bouwhuis, Marian Goodman, Zoë Ackerman, Katrin Kaufer and Rachel Hentsch for commenting on an earlier draft of

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