

Harmony with Nature and Harmony among Humans in the Anthropocene

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address you as part of this fifth Dialogue on Harmony with Nature, and to express my gratitude to the Plurinational State of Bolivia and its friends and supporters. You have brought the topic of Harmony with Nature into the forefront, in a world where much of our thoughts and interactions are focused on mankind and machines. But perhaps that typical anthropocentric focus should not be surprising – after all, we are living in the Anthropocene.

THE ANTHROPOCENE

Humans have an influence on the environment that is global in scale, and which will be evident on geological timescales. Although there is an ongoing scientific debate over whether to really, formally call our current Epoch the Anthropocene, and when to put the starting date, we can nevertheless think of many examples of our environmental impacts on a global and long-term scale, such as climate change, ocean acidification, continental-scale deforestation, and sediment layers of minerals and plastics. And we know from assessment reports like those by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) about the many hardships that the various forms of global environmental degradation will cause, or are already causing.

We are in the midst of the Great Acceleration, the rapid increase since the 1950s in many indicators of the Anthropocene, such as greenhouse gas concentrations, deforestation and species extinctions, and the world’s population is still growing, approaching or perhaps even exceeding 10 billion in the coming decades. And somewhere around that time, we could end up making a qualitative shift, from the Anthropocene as we know it, to a new form that I’ve started calling the “Anthropocene 2.0”.

What would be so different in an Anthropocene 2.0 compared to the current Anthropocene? Consider that so far, our global impact on the environment has largely been unintended, resulting as a side effect of things we do for other purposes, like generating electricity, or burning fuel for transportation, or growing crops for food. More and more, however, we are *intentionally* modifying the face of the Earth: converting large tracts of land into urban landscapes, building canals and dams and rerouting rivers, and so on. But still, while this is intentional, these are largely *uncoordinated* efforts, serving local, often short-term purposes.

This could take on an entirely different character given the discussions around so-called "climate interventions", also called "climate engineering" or "geoengineering" – ideas that have been put forth for removing gigatons of CO₂ from the atmosphere in various ways, or for increasing the reflection of sunlight back to space, in order to cool the planet in an attempt to compensate some of the effects of global warming. Considering these ideas, the future world's society, or perhaps a coalition of nations, might try to take intentional, coordinated control of the global climate, as well as other parts of the Earth system, such as global vegetation and the hydrological cycle.

What would this mean for our understanding of ourselves, of what it means to be Human, in an Anthropocene 2.0? What would this mean for the concept of Harmony with Nature, when it is hard to even conceive of what Nature would be in the setting of an Anthropocene 2.0?

And, more generally, what kind of Anthropocene – or maybe Anthropocene 2.0 – are we creating for the coming generations? Will it be a *Human* Anthropocene, one in which individually egocentric and collectively anthropocentric desires continue to dominate our behavior, showing our collective willingness to accept the suffering of fellow humans, as well as countless other life forms, in order to feed our insatiable desires for more and more? Or will it be a *Humane* Anthropocene, a compassionate and non-anthropocentric one in which we someday succeed in ascending to our potential to create a truly just and peaceful world in which Harmony with Nature is recognized as a part of our deepest Human Nature?

HARMONY WITH NATURE

Several of the speakers in the previous dialogues have pointed out that it is challenging to really define Harmony with Nature, especially in the context of the Anthropocene. It is already a challenge to define Harmony *within* Nature, *without* the influence of humans, and in the context of the Anthropocene it can sometimes be difficult to even *find* Nature. But while academically *defining* Harmony with Nature is difficult, it's actually not all that hard to *feel* it, for instance when we are sitting quietly in an old growth forest, or next to a pristine mountain lake beneath a clear blue sky. And in the context of the Anthropocene, we can still easily feel a sense of Harmony with Nature in a beautiful garden, or amongst cherry blossoms in an orchard, or in other environments which nevertheless have a strong human fingerprint.

And it's certainly not all that difficult to *feel* when we are in *Disharmony* with Nature – we can easily identify that when we see it, for instance, huge landfills and oil spills and animals packed into small confines on factory-like farms. Examples of Disharmony with Nature are so many, and so vast, and so longstanding, that we sometimes go numb to them, and it is hard to imagine how we could ever turn this back around to someday living in Harmony with Nature.

But those who know me know that I am an undying optimist, and so I’m going to tell you about four reasons that I find encouraging, that do give me hope that we will *someday* turn the tides on this situation.

First – many solutions are available, across the board, and these are not necessarily the kind of solutions having to do with trying to take coordinated control of the global environment and ushering in an Anthropocene 2.0.

Alternate solutions include renewable energy technologies, sustainable building practices, sustainable agricultural practices, low-emissions forms of transport, and so on.

All of these exist, and all could *principally* be scaled up relatively quickly to global-scale implementation. But this is not happening, and will not happen by itself.

So why not? What’s missing? There is no easy answer to this. Much still needs to be learned about what drives and what hinders transformations of societies towards more sustainable patterns of living. But we can pretty clearly say that in order to develop effective solutions for the Anthropocene’s Grand Challenges, we will need to make use of ALL forms of knowledge that are available, and not to assume that “science will provide the answer”. It will not. Science might provide the answer to questions like “what different factors are controlling the year-to-year variability in temperature?”, but it cannot provide an answer alone to challenges like “what can we do about the fact that people persist in doing things that are bad for their health, and perhaps for others around them, even when they are fully aware of this and have good alternatives available?”

Developing truly effective solutions to such challenges relies on accessing a broad range of forms of knowledge, such as indigenous and investigative and political and empirical and emotional and spiritual knowledge. One technique that is being developed to bring these various forms of knowledge together is what we call “transdisciplinary research”. Transdisciplinarity does not *replace* basic science, rather it *adds* to it, with science being a key part of generating knowledge in transdisciplinary work.

And this brings me to the second reason that I am optimistic: there is a substantial movement worldwide to integrate the many forms of knowledge, and not rely on science alone to provide the answers. I have the fortune of being a director at an institute, the IASS, which has made it its mission to be at the forefront of exploring and practicing this kind of inclusive problem-solving. And there are many other research centers and universities that are beginning to explore this form of transdisciplinary knowledge generation. Co-generation of knowledge has also been noted several times in the previous Dialogues, especially in terms of including indigenous knowledge as a part of the deeper understanding of our relationship with Mother Earth.

The third reason that I am optimistic is that there is a slowly growing, broad sense in the world's wealthier societies, not only of the urgency of changing our ways, but also of the empowerment to actually enact those changes, and to even increase one's joy in life through doing so.

The reason for this urgency should be self-evident, given how we are stripping the Earth of its resources and causing climate change and extensive environmental degradation. In a way, isn't this like collectively building up a huge debt by surrounding ourselves with material goods and luxuries of all sorts that we can't really afford, and then letting our children spend their lives enslaved to paying off our debt? Would any of us do that to our children on an individual basis?

Recognizing this urgency, many are actively changing their ways on a personal level. Many cities and nations are also beginning to change their ways, though still far too slowly to expect this to bring about the transformations that would be needed to achieve sustainable development or Harmony with Nature. Of course, it *is* an enormous challenge for a nation to cut its CO2 emissions in half, or to make other sweeping changes on a national scale; however, it is not all that hard for an individual or a family to do this, and even more.

I can say this with firsthand knowledge, since my family has been making efforts in this direction: we now eat mostly vegan, organic and regional food, we generally purchase Fair Trade products whenever possible, we've cut our household plastic waste by over 80%, we switched our electricity provider to one that draws completely from renewable energy, and so on. But please don't think we're "perfect" in reducing our impact, or even hoping to be. We're just trying to see if there are ways that we can find as a family to lead healthier, happier, more enjoyable lives, which at the same time reduce our negative impacts on our fellow humans and on the environment.

And for me personally, as an institute director, my environmental impact through international travel is of course problematic. A few years ago, when looking into CO2 compensations, I realized that flying business class implies that you are responsible for 2-3x as much emissions as when flying economy class, since an airplane full of business class seats would be able to carry less than half as many passengers. So I decided to effectively cut my CO2 emissions by more than half by switching from flying business class to now generally flying economy class. But even though I've done that, and even though I try to reduce my emissions further by combining trips wherever possible, my CO2 budget and other environmental impacts from my work-related travel admittedly still troubles me.

Are my actions and those of my family really contributing directly to "saving the world"? No, not really. Not even if 10 million, or 100 million people in the wealthier nations were to make these kinds of personal efforts to reduce their environmental impact – it still wouldn't be enough to "save the world". And then we're already at the scale of nations, and we know how difficult it is to make such transformations on a national scale.

So, then, why do I, and many others, do these things? There are two main reasons. One is to help me go beyond a dry, intellectual, scientific comprehension of the behavioral changes that we talk and write about, to having direct experiential knowledge and a deeper sense of how it will be for us to make these changes in our collective lifestyles. In doing so, it has quickly become evident to me, in a different way than just reading about it, that a major challenge is finding the discipline to carry through with these changes against the force of habit, and against the forces of societal structures that often do not support these lifestyle changes.

The other reason for making the effort to “practice what we’re preaching” is to provide inspiration to others around us, demonstrating to ourselves and others that although these lifestyle changes may indeed sometimes be quite challenging, when you succeed then they are directly rewarding, leading to a healthier relationship with one’s body and physical and social environment, giving a personal sense of the Joy of Less, and, even amidst our busy world of concrete, cars and computers, giving us an inkling of Harmony with Nature.

HARMONY WITH HUMANS IN NATURE

In thinking about Harmony with Nature, we usually first think about Harmony between Humans and Nature. But considering that Humans are a part of Nature, especially being intertwined with nature in the context of the Anthropocene, shouldn’t we also be thinking about Harmony *among* Humans as a part of Harmony with Nature?

At the second Dialogue in 2012 I presented the idea of a “Cascade of Harmony”: how likely is it that we can achieve Harmony with Nature, when we don’t even live in harmony between societies, within societies, with our neighbors and colleagues, with our families and friends, and, for the most part, we don’t even live in Harmony with ourselves? And doesn’t this cascade work in the other direction as well – can an improved sense of Harmony with Nature be supportive in developing more harmonious relationships among us as humans within Nature?

And this brings me to the fourth reason for optimism: these connections are being recognized in many different ways, for instance, in the increased attention on mindfulness and happiness.

Mindfulness – which is essentially awareness combined with a sense of the here and now – can be of great value in supporting Harmony with ourselves and others. An example of this is the development of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction techniques over the last couple decades, which are becoming more widespread and recognized in mainstream medical practice. There are many ways to enhance mindfulness: through prayer and meditation, martial arts like Aikido, walks in the woods, mountain climbing and even mindful gardening. Studies have shown that mindfulness can help us to train and enhance kindness and compassion, which are of course roots of Harmony amongst Humans. Mindfulness can also help us to avoid inattentively wasting resources on things that we don’t really need or even really want, that we are just consuming due to old habits and social structures. And through mindfulness, one generally develops a state of greater inner peace, which in turn can lead to a deep sense of Joy and Happiness.

Happiness has certainly gotten a lot of attention lately, with innumerable books and seminars on the topic. And here's an interesting connection I've noticed: at the International Day of Happiness Event here last month, all three speakers – the musician Pharrell Williams and the prominent scientists Sylvia Earle and Philippe Cousteau – talked not only about Happiness, but also especially about climate change and global environmental preservation, two important challenges in our quest for Harmony with Nature. This provides a nice example of the growing recognition of the important role that Harmony with Nature can play in supporting the fundamental goal of Happiness and Harmony amongst Humans.

And in turn, Happiness can move us towards greater Harmony among Humans, and also towards greater Harmony with Nature. To be clear, the Happiness I'm talking about here is the deep, spiritual form of Happiness, not the material form of Happiness that is connected with getting and having. And to be clear, I'm not suggesting that just being happy with everything around us will make all our problems go away. But cultivating mindfulness and deep happiness can contribute significantly by supporting us in making the sweeping systemic changes that would be needed to attain sustainable development and Harmony with Nature.

To quote from the book "More Brain, Please", by Gerald Hüther, a German neurobiologist: "If there are many people in a nation who don't feel particularly comfortable [i.e., deeply happy] in their private and work relations, and who only manage to endure this situation by temporarily compensating their frustration through what they can purchase in shopping malls or the internet or wherever else, then a great market forms...and...businesses relocate their manufacturing to nations with cheap labor. And then the residents of the wealthy, developed nations can endure their dysfunctional [i.e., deeply unhappy] relations with family, colleagues and neighbors, through pursuit of their 'replacement satisfactions', at the cost of those in the less wealthy developing countries."

And this is of course also at the cost of the global environment, through vast environmental degradation to extract and process resources and to dispose of their waste – in other words, resulting in Disharmony with Nature.

So, turning this around, if the wealthy few could develop a better capacity to be happy with *being*, rather than mainly with *getting* and *having*, wouldn't we have less pressure on the less wealthy peoples and the environment – in other words, a greater chance for someday achieving Harmony among Humanity, and Harmony with Nature?

PUTTING IT TOGETHER: THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA CONTEXT

So, putting all of this together, there are three main points I'd like to suggest that you take into consideration in your deliberations over the post-2015 Development Agenda:

- 1) Consider whether you want this Agenda to lead us towards a *humane* Anthropocene, or towards an anthropocentric *human* Anthropocene, or perhaps towards an Anthropocene 2.0. I cannot tell you which of these you should prefer. But I can tell you that we are at a crossroads, and the post-2015 Agenda may be quite important in determining which of these paths we follow...and in turn, our perspective on the Anthropocene – how anthropocentrically we approach it – may have a substantial impact on how likely we are to actually achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the Agenda.
- 2) Consider that ALL forms of knowledge are of great value, and how you can effectively integrate these together in developing solutions for the Grand Challenges of the Anthropocene.
- 3) Consider how Mindfulness, Happiness, and Harmony with Nature support each other, and, in the context of the post-2015 Development Agenda, how these can be called upon to support attaining sustainable development.

I would like to close with a quote from an ancient Chinese book of verse called the "Tao Te Ching" (Stephen Mitchell translation):

A good traveller has no fixed plans
and is not intent upon arriving.
A good artist lets his intuition
lead him wherever it wants.
A good scientist has freed himself of concepts
and keeps his mind open to what is.

Let us all be good travellers, good artists, and good scientists in our collective quest for Harmony with Humanity and for Harmony with Nature.