

A Movement Towards the Emergence of a Planetary Consciousness:
The Case of the San Francisco Bay Area

by

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Susana Gubkin

To Avi

(Avikam Reuben Hoffman, 1975-1994) and to our youth.

May they live in a peaceful world.

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INTRODUCTION

These days, practically at the dawn of the Twenty First century, we are facing collectively, as a species and as a planet, opportunities and challenges perhaps unprecedented in any other generation. Never before have we humans encountered such enormous potential--both creative and destructive-- as our developing Western scientific/technological enterprises now cause us to face. The contemporary human adventure is steered by a new science, technology, and consciousness paradigm that at this historical juncture is emerging as a double edged sword.

On the one hand, we can foresee the dawn of a world that has the ability to foster a dignified and creative life for all. We have the technological and scientific tools to feed, house, educate and allow for the creative self expression of masses of people. On the other hand, we ourselves are provoking massive human starvation, poverty and dislocation, creating a growing threat of nuclear and ecological accidents and holocausts, and allowing the depletion of Earth's natural resources and the progressive destruction of Earth's environment and life-support systems. These developments render questionable, for the first time in history, the survival of our species and of the planet itself.

We seem indeed to be at a major crossroads--a choice between evolving towards a conscious, mature species, with concern for an ongoing and lasting legacy and a responsibility for the future¹ or an irrational, self-destructive species concerned only with spontaneous, arbitrary creativity and indiscriminate indulgence.

People all over the world are forced to face these issues. Some of them-- particularly in the Third World, in poorer countries and poor population groups--

already feel their full impact. But now among the richest Western capitalist countries there is a growing economic, social and environmental crisis of truly global dimensions, accompanied by great change and uncertainty. And many succumb to fear and a sense of helplessness. We see signs of psychic numbing, alienation, and political apathy. We see psychosomatic illness, addictions of various sorts, adolescent nihilism, family disintegration, urban crime, and the dislocation of vast masses of people. We see greed and rampant consumption that refutes any sense of future. Yet, others appear to confront these issues in a more resolute and mindful way, searching for a new consciousness and conscientiousness to guide science, technology and resource distribution on a more meaningful path toward a more hopeful future.

What is obvious at this historical juncture is the global nature of our contemporary challenges and their possible solutions. That is, the personal, social, and natural worlds are increasingly appearing as deeply interconnected. This is apparent in practically all areas--in world politics and economics, mass media and communication, cross cultural exchanges, weather patterns, individual and group health, consciousness changes, and in many other areas. At the same time, insights from contemporary feminists and ecologically minded people, converging with ancient spiritual and traditional wisdom, are highlighting the fact that nature itself is part of this global interconnectedness--a co-creator, with us humans, of life on planet earth. The emerging Gaia consciousness, for example, affirms that "we exist *in* this planet rather than *on* it", "the earth is *us*, not *ours*"². Survival of the human species and survival of the earth and all of nature becomes, then, a joint enterprise. This has powerful implications for virtually every realm of scientific, socio-political, and philosophical endeavor because it calls for a new way of perceiving the world, one that transcends the contemporary anthropocentricity, linear positivism, and materialism.

This global interdependence is becoming obvious to people from all walks of life, and not exclusively, or essentially, to experts as in the past. And this new awareness is

evident not only in the sociological phenomena discussed above, but also in the deep personal experiences of many people. All over the world, people are increasingly expressing a direct intuition of this interconnectedness of all of life. These insights may come about by way of various media, such as intense emotional communion with human and non-human others, political consciousness and activism, deep aesthetic experiences, creative self expression, spiritual practices and experiences, and even psychedelic experiences. They may manifest in an enormous diversity of demonstration and behavior; but what is common to all is this deep personal sense of the interrelatedness beyond the apparent compartmentalization and objectification of nature that the mainstream Western paradigm fosters.

People who report this awareness, in both global and personally meaningful ways, seem to be involved in a profound transformation process. Their lives change with their emerging new insights and so do their values and their dealings with the world and, in many cases, their very life styles. This is an emergence of a new planetary consciousness, based on reason, intuition, and experience, that all life on the planet is deeply interconnected, and that every "separate" action affects the whole. In truth, it is more than a transformation of consciousness because institutions and values are also changing with the growing manifestation of the global interdependence.

Of course, all this is taking place concurrent with a global process of increased polarization--cleavages among people of various strata, social groups, ethnicities and nations in which rising nationalism and fundamentalism within the world's major religions are playing a crucial and potentially self destructive role--destructive not only of integral identities, cultural diversities and life opportunities for all peoples but also of all life on Earth, and of Earth itself.

In this work I focus on the emergence of this planetary consciousness and the characteristic social responsibility and action that accompanies it. Such an emergence represents a quite unprecedented choice in human experience of collectivity at a

planetary level. It assumes conscious responsibility for and intentional stewardship of our planet home and the life upon it--a conscious intent to best serve the cause of all of life in its fundamental interconnectedness and belonging. It represents a choice towards love and compassion for all beings, based upon the understanding that our fate is deeply collective. As such, it requires a fundamental transformation of society's guiding values and social institutions as well as the individual psychological and behavioral patterns of each person who participates in it.

Such transformation is, of course, no menial task, and will require generations, if not centuries, to unfold and mature. Yet, this time in history is crucial as we are at a crossroads which may actually determine whether life on Earth--our children, our animals, our plants, or our planet--has any future at all. Fundamental to this work is the assumption that only by conscious recognition of the magnitude and complexity of our contemporary challenges and by the accompanying conscious choice of an appropriate course of action will we manage to manifest the fundamental interconnectedness of all life as a social planetary reality.

We humans have created a science and technology which has achieved unprecedented wonders of manipulation and conquest of nature, and we humans have a choice as to what direction we collectively take in shaping our relationship with the natural environment and with each other.

As a sociological phenomenon, the emergence of a planetary consciousness is truly international, and the San Francisco Bay area is one of its major centers (or, perhaps, even sources), as it was in many aspects of social consciousness during the last three decades. The most striking characteristic of this transformation (at least as I have witnessed it in this geographical area) is its strong experiential nature based on a deep sense of inner knowing. This, within our current socio-cultural context, is itself revolutionary, and has proven to be an inspiration for purposeful social action in practically every aspect of life.

Methodologically, this work has been conducted by way of participant observation in the truest sense. Through a quite extraordinary and unusual set of circumstances, I discovered this interconnectedness, this "Oneness of all" myself, in 1981, during a brief vacation in a small town in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. In a way that defies rational explanation, but that nevertheless felt to me as real or true as any of the knowledge I had gained through the years as a sociologist, I experienced a sense of connection and communion with nature and the traditional people in a direct, intuitive way which was totally new to me. The deep sense of comfort and the long sought--even if unconsciously--existential sense of belonging I experienced resonated with my whole being (as did my deep care and concern for the collective well being of what felt like my newly found "extended family:" all life on Earth.) Coupled with that was my bewilderment at realizing how my many years of studying in the areas of philosophy, consciousness, sociology and psychology in different countries and academic institutions had left me totally unaware of this whole realm of life.

My own experience occurred around 1981 in a rural area in Mexico. It began one night on the beach but it lasted, in a sense, or continued to unfold over a period of months and years. I had left California for a rather spur-of-the-moment flight to Mexico. I went to visit a friend of mine with whom I was very close at the time, and eventually found myself sitting on the beach, simply "hanging out" with her and a number of local people. That afternoon, I had what I believe would most accurately be called a "vision." It was not only totally unexpected but also totally out of context with my life views and perspectives. I was not certain exactly what invoked it: perhaps it was the company of the local people in our group, the sudden, total change of setting, or the emotions I had carried with me at the time. I "tuned in," as it has been described, to an intuitive mode of perception (though I had no words to call it at the time).

It started gradually, but with a compelling force that was calling my attention to a dimension of meaning beyond my conception or ability to articulate. I found myself drawn closer to the water, and I left the group of people--or perhaps they were all beginning to disperse (I don't recall that I noticed)--and began to approach the ocean. As I stopped to look out over the water, I intuitively sensed a cross hanging on the horizon in the distance. I was not clear what it meant--I simply knew that it had meaning. It was not a cross with any particular religious connotation but rather indicated, unexplicably, four dimensions of meaning and perspective. Each point of the cross suggested a different perceptual vantage point: the ocean before me, the land at my back, the meeting of shore and sea to my right. The fourth point, or perspective, to my left was the flowing of a river into the ocean. I grasped that if, metaphorically, I should live my life and die facing the ocean-- one point of the cross--all my perceptions would be perfectly clear and simple. Behind me there was the land--something made be turn to look over the land--and I told myself that if I should live my life and die just facing this "point" everything would be clear as well. This was earth and I understood the Earth. Then I turned slightly and looked to the right side, to where the ocean met the beach, and I felt that I understood this sight. This was where the ocean met the land, where the demarkation and the joining of earth and water were clearly visible and clear. I felt safe and comfortable with this sense of understanding and completion. This was the whole arrangement, and now I understood completely: there is the land and the water they both exist in their own right and they come together--and it is clear how and where this happens. But then, something pulled me to turn to the other side, and something in me resisted. I knew if I looked to the left side I would be frightened, though I did not know why. I struggled with this for perhaps hours. I cupped my hand over my eye and tried to force myself to at least peak in that direction. I caught a glimpse of a river. On this side, where the water met the land, there was a river flowing into the ocean, and on the other side of the river was where very poor fishermen and their families lived.

My sense of understanding, my basic perception of reality, was now threatened. Things were not as I had thought. My entire structure of understanding, built with logic and reason abandoned me, and I was left with the feeling that there was nothing but uncertainty. Here was a river, more water, and somehow I felt I had no way to understand whether the water I saw was sweet or salty, or in which direction it flowed and, therefore, no way to understand even water. I struggled with this feeling, literally for hours. My friend was sitting on the sand nearby, just behind me, as though to accompany me or to wait for me, and I tried to explain to her what I was seeing and feeling; but she only nodded or chuckled, and I realized I could not communicate this experience and that she did not understand.

I thought about the cross. The image of that cross was still vivid in my mind, impelling me to decipher it well into the evening. I realized I had been looking in the four directions--and that these, in a sense, were the four points of the cross. A local dark-skinned man came along the beach and walked right up to me. He reached out to me, holding something in his hand, saying that it was for me. He told me it had been given to him by the ocean--given to him for someone--and he did not know, until he saw me, who that someone was. I took it from him and looked at it. It was a cross. This man had not been part of our group and I had never seen him before but, when I saw the cross, I blurted out as though I had just met a friend. I told him I had just been "seeing" that cross, was not sure what it was, and that I knew not how to explain it... He stopped me, saying, "no need to explain, woman. We speak your language here. Welcome." At that moment, I felt something undefinable. It was something like an "opening" into a totally unknown realm of being which over following weeks and months (and even years) were like a force within me driving me in search for meaning.

Over the following two weeks I learned much from this man. I walked with him, talked with him, even prayed with him. He took me to homes of ill people, to places where my services were needed--to cook, to help with the children, even to clean. With

him I learned about "odd" phenomena--at that time totally new to me--such as intuition, non-verbal communication, belonging with Earth, and a more direct sense of connection with others. Most significantly, I learned from this man (whom I came to know as "Mai" and with whom I eventually became friends and spent much valuable and meaningful time), a very profound and direct sense of the meaning of interconnectedness in terms of caring for others--the concept and experience of service.

This was something new to me: I had longed, over the years, to be effectively involved in relevant and effective social action and had attempted it in various conventional modes of "peace" and "solidarity" work. Intuition, unitive consciousness, and so-called mystical experience (for lack of any other term) were not part of my understanding of the world or of the work. Yet, this experience, and the subsequent learning that followed, appeared to offer such fundamental insights about human nature and potentials and therefore such a valuable contribution to social change that I felt compelled to pursue it into what became this research.

What started then as a serious personal search for new, or wider, understandings of human and social predicaments led me to discover along the way large numbers of people, in various countries, who were involved in a similar process of discovery of planetary Oneness--people who were feeling the need to reassess personal and collective values and directions. Returning to the San Francisco Bay area, I discovered an abundance of this new consciousness, and I eventually became aware that this phenomenon was beginning to show the characteristic signs of a social movement. If this was not a movement in the conventional sense of an intentional and organized political force, it was indeed a moving, through conscious and collective intent, in the direction of some new, mutually chosen option. The recognition of the social significance of this movement--as relevant to our contemporary dilemmas, and not simply as an addition to a body of knowledge of sociological phenomena--prompted the present research.

I believe my own experience is at least somewhat similar to that of the individuals I present in this paper--individuals who have embarked upon a consciousness shift, a resulting transformation of values, lifestyle, and priorities and, in many cases, a relevant activist commitment. It is for this reason that I have found it pertinent to investigate and discuss the events or experiences that provided the initial catalyst or invocation for personal transformation. I believe that part of what makes these incidents of personal transformation an emerging social transformation, or movement, is that there is some common denominator in the nature of these personal experiences--whether they are induced by the moonshots, direct encounter with other cultures or individuals (such as Eastern philosophy or traditional native peoples), mind-expanding substances, ritual, hypnosis or whatever.

Since the late 1980s I have been involved in an extensive research of the literature and ideas in this field. But, beyond that, I directly engaged myself in various activities and organizations that were involved in and appeared pertinent to this movement. These I located by intensive search and by an informal and organic network of word-of-mouth recommendations and referrals. I thus participated in hundreds of events, conferences, workshops and symposia that took place in this geographical location. During these years, I managed to sharpen my criteria (and my experience) of what were, in my view, truly planetary organizations, philosophies and social activists--a challenging task in such new and novel territory. Many of my original subjects, of course, did not meet my ultimate criteria. But, fortunately, many did--too many to describe in total depth within the present limitations of time and space.

Altogether I observed and spoke with literally hundreds of individuals over a span of eight to ten years. Out of this number, I interviewed in-depth fifty two individuals. Among these, I spent two or three hours in the actual interview with ten interviewees and five to six hours in interviewing about twenty five of them. With about fifteen remaining (of these fifty two individuals), the actual interview time ranged anywhere

from six to twenty, and even thirty hours, including two or three followup interviews and frequent update phone calls. With some of the latter, I kept in close contact over the years, communicating frequently by way of phone contacts and follow-ups, not only regarding their own stories and circumstances but also regarding general interpretation of the phenomenon under study. In these cases the total number of interview hours added to possibly several hundreds.

The emerging planetary consciousness that is the focus of this study rests heavily on intuition and highly subjective personal experiences--aspects of human experience deemed beyond those defined as relevant, and legitimate, by conventional sociological parameters. Thus it truly transcends common-group affiliation and behavior and, in fact, any readily observable activities. To add to that, it is a truly contemporary phenomenon, still in its early formative periods, and it manifests a high degree of change and flow.

Therefore, when I wanted to identify and be able to describe what types of experiences seem to be conducive to *planetary activism*, and *what* planetary activism is, I was faced with considerable methodological difficulty. There was not even a readily available terminology- let alone one with legitimized sociological and social implications. The conventional quantitative and quantifiable sociological methods of observation required a compartmentalization of holistic experiences that was not compatible with the nature of this phenomenon. Other methods, more sensitive to the subjective realm of human experience, were bound to observable group belonging and affiliation. In fact, a central observation of this research is that the contemporary movement towards a planetary consciousness reflects a general attitude and a perceptual shift that is almost independent of any particular group activity. The people I identified and studied indeed showed a great diversity in their group affiliations--some of them closely linked to one or several for various periods of time, others considerably shifted groups and

observable activities during the period of observation and, while still others had no recognizable group affiliation at all.³

A central argument in this work is that a profound personal exploration and discovery of subjectivity, such as exemplified by the people I here describe, is --at its root- truly *collective*. Namely, that "...personal exploration, knowing the individual self allows a door to be opened to experiencing the Universal Self, and to effecting change in the wider world. By learning to know the one, we become closer to directing energy to the One."⁴

The methods of participation-observation and reports of oral histories, coupled with relevant literature and background material, seemed the most powerful way to describe such a world of experience and its collective aspect.⁵ The main areas of inquiry pivoted around the personal "paths" of these people that led them to their current views, values, and activities. These included oral histories of various levels of involvement and complexity, requiring varying amounts of interview time, depended upon the individuals.

Finally, the spontaneous motivation towards a universal caring that is central to this emerging consciousness, and which translates socially into a committed activism, is suggested here by the social involvement and activities of the people selected for this work. I therefore became acquainted with about 50 organizations, 10 of which I studied closely (and wrote full reports about) in terms of their history, structure, principles and social change activities. This included interviews with spokespersons, and members (and some participation in their activities), and study of the literature provided by the organizations.

In all these cases, the interviews were conducted in the homes or offices of the people, audio-recorded and later transcribed. The subsequent interpretation evolved out of repeated readings of transcripts and an occasional repeated listening to taped interviews.

As a result of all my in-depth acquaintance with these individuals, at least fifteen of them, as well as nearly all the organizations and projects I investigated more closely, stood out in my mind as truly impressive as well as clearly prototypical of the emerging planetary consciousness and activism. I have been impressed with the degree of collective communication and cooperation that has existed among the individuals whom I have observed and/or interviewed from the time that I first knew them. The term "network"--another popular term from, perhaps, the 1960s has been widely used and often loosely used; but this concept, however it may be called, is important for the converging and the mutual endeavor I have discussed above. In any case, I have observed a connectedness within this consistent minority that is even more than a network, in the usual sense, and that seems to have almost naturally, or even coincidentally, developed. Whether they are high-profile individuals or represent organizations with very apparent impact, or are simply committed and effective individuals, they are all particularly influential and important and on the leading edge of the movement. Yet, in one way or another, all these individuals are acquainted or connected. The individuals I have selected to include in the present work were selected because they appeared to me to be particularly articulate regarding their personal experiences and activities, or effective in the projects in which they were involved. In various and varying ways they were *models* of planetary citizenship.

This work is an attempt to present a very small sample, a taste, of the people and organizations that illustrate this important contemporary phenomenon--this movement --and to suggest that within this very movement there may well be the seeds of a truly radical--and badly needed--social and planetary change.

¹ Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*, 1975. (Bantam Books, 1976)

2 Geochemist James Lovelock formulated the Gaia hypothesis, in which the earth is seen as a coherent, living entity. "The hypothesis suggests that the actual stability of the atmosphere, given a chemical composition very far from equilibrium, can best be understood by assuming that the atmosphere is actively and sensitively maintained by the oceans, the soils, the plants, and the creatures- indeed by the whole biosphere." David Abram, "The Perceptual Implications of Gaia", *Revision*.(Winter/Spring, 1987), p.7.

3 Rather than focusing on organized group behavior, more appropriate attempts to circumscribe the boundaries and characteristics of this population sector are such as those formulated by Ferguson (1980) and Roszak (1975).

4 Clare Cooper Marcus, "Findhorn, Phenomenology and the New Paradigm", ed., David Olamon *Dwelling, Thinking and Designing*, 1989.

5 See William McKinley Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). Chapters 8 and 9.

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