

The Greatest Adventure on Earth

An Essay by Carlos Alvarez Pereira

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Life is a pure contradiction. It should not even exist. Actually, as far as we know, it did not exist for most of the time of the Universe and it does not exist elsewhere than on Earth. This makes it so much valuable.

The contradiction is manifold: it is between the expansionist drive of life, its propensity to grow and expand by default, and the finiteness of exploitable resources; it is also about the need for animals to feed themselves by destroying other living beings; ultimately, it is about the mystery of improbable birth and inevitable death, certainly as an individual, possibly as a species.

That makes life in itself a source of permanent conflict between creation and destruction. But any particular form of life, even the simplest, is also a singular opportunity to transcend that contradiction by creating more life than it destroys.

For all our intelligence, humankind faces that same and endless contradiction, but with a big difference. The history of life on Earth is punctuated by the emergence of new adaptive forms, enabling new dynamic equilibria between emerging species and the environment, and also by the extinction of species unable to adapt any longer. Likewise, but on a much shorter time scale, the history of human life is punctuated by the emergence of intelligence and culture and the production of social and technical inventions which change our relationships, between us and with the environment. That way, we are able to (re)create ourselves.

We used to think that all those human inventions meant progress, but this is not always true for earthly life as a whole or even for human life. Certainly, we have been inventing rituals, institutions, ways of exploring the world and technical artifacts in such quantities and richness that we have accumulated an impressive amount of cultural, social and material achievements. By doing that we have also brought the expansionist drive of life to a much higher level, able to fill the planet and alter dramatically the environmental conditions of all species, including our own, and to put them and us at risk.

In a deeper way, emotional, conscious and imaginative beings as we are, we constantly look for meaning and transcendence. For all our inventions, we know we are still not able to deal with the basic contradiction of life without entering into conflict with others, whether they be other humans, other living species, the natural environment in which we live, or even our own future. Actually, much of what we have done and still do is based on ever increased exploitation — of the many weak by the few strong, of helpless natural resources, of future time as the least renewable resource of all.

And afraid as we are of our permanent conflict with the world, we also invent self-delusions to alleviate our fears. For instance, we observe social status and practice

individual accumulation to protect ourselves not from need but mainly from the feeling of personal irrelevance and the anxieties we face everyday in our eternal quest for meaning. Is that the right response to our fears?

Moreover, we artificially transmit to our inventions our own values of perpetual growth and expansion. Useful as it is as a mediation tool, we give money an undeserved centrality in our life, forgetting there is no natural law entitling money to reproduce by itself unless it is backed by human labor creating authentic value. And we also forget that real life is much richer than money because its diversity and complexity cannot be reduced to the one-dimensional nature of any currency. This is one of many examples of how we inadvertently or interestingly substitute human purposes, complex as they are, with all too simple goals, like the truly utopian one of boundless financial accumulation.

But our consciousness also tells that, tomorrow, unless we change dramatically the course of things, there will be no way to fulfil human aspirations, at least as we conceive them in our consumerist culture. We feel that we are not reducing but increasing the contradictions between our human drive and the future of life as a whole, on a planet whose biophysical limits have been reached, whose climatic stability has been endangered by human activity, whose living and mineral resources are being exhausted at an ever increasing pace, and all of this without eliminating human poverty and need.

At a time when 6 out of 7 billion humans strive to reach, much deservedly, the same comfort enjoyed by many of those living in rich countries, the welfare fabric of these is being attacked for the sake of financial mirages and the agenda of sustainability is being postponed, and so we continue weaving everyday the entanglement of multiple dilemmas which, in spite of the dance of change in which we live, inhibits the transformations we need.

First among the dilemmas we face is the metabolic one, the most determining on the long term: we know that our consumerist society of uneconomic growth and waste, driven by the well publicized and materialistic lifestyles of the leisure class, is totally incompatible with the pace of renewal of natural resources brought to us by the magic alliance of Earth and Sun. Without solving that contradiction, sooner or later the collapse of human civilizations is inevitable, as it was for the people of Easter Island, a small-scale but significant precedent.

Second is the dilemma of will, especially that of western elites which, in rebellion from the societies they should serve, are living on short-term and narrow-minded purposes and not leading the construction of a sustainable and inclusive future for the planet.

Third and most important is the cultural dilemma, more difficult to apprehend but not less critical. Consciously or not, the dominant behavior we practice today when facing the contradictions and conflicts of life is based on the powerful but false idea that progress is a result of the selfish pursuit of individual interests. Powerful because it connects with many people adopting selfishness as an artificial relief for their fears, but false because it actually produces concentration of power and richness in the hands of a few, and therefore inhibits the potential of most.

On the contrary, if we propose as a definition of progress that it should create more life than it destroys, we should recognize that our individualistic interpretation of the expansionist drive of life is able to destroy much more life than it creates.

Time has come for a quantum leap in our strategy of adaptation. The only way to get out of the Gordian knot in which we live is to collectively transcend those dilemmas by creating a new paradigm of civilization, one that actually can be built with pieces we already have.

Of course, we humans cannot live without feeding ourselves, and we cannot aspire to a decent life without extracting many resources from our environment. But we can decide in which ways we frame and deal with the conflicts our existence creates.

For instance, if not preserving each animal or vegetable, we can apply permaculture practices to preserve the existence of living species at the same time we ensure the appropriate feeding of all humans. We can decide to deter mutual destruction of humans through war and violence. Instead of fighting others, we can decide to fight ignorance and prejudice. Instead of accumulating useless artifacts, we can fight our inner limitations and develop our talents. Instead of practicing depredation, exploitation and exclusion, we can require ourselves to behave better for the profit of all. We can choose creation (and self-creation) instead of destruction. We can choose life instead of death.

How to achieve that? When we calculate the balance of creation and destruction produced by our actions, the result depends on the boundary we choose: caring about other humans or living species is not the same as not worrying at all about their survival. Fixing that boundary is required to perform rigorous ecological balances, but it is the result of truly political will, since it depends on including or not into our concerns the victims (human or not) of any kind of exploitation. Ultimately, creating more life than we destroy will depend on extending that boundary so far that we only leave outside the Sun, as the unlimited source of energy to which we owe our existence (for now and until the remote future of its own death).

There, at the junction of thermodynamics and humanism, lies the real opportunity we have to reconcile beauty and truth, the beauty of our aspirations and the truth of our limitations, and to ensure that life is able to continue its adventure on Earth under a new and transcendent form, that we could wishfully call "sustainable happiness".

Let us try to imagine further how that could be, through different but intertwined dimensions of desirable futures.

Unleashing human potential. Actually there is one unlimited game to which we can direct our human drive in harmony with the environment. It is that of learning and experiencing together in the infinite variety of disciplines of knowledge, of sports and crafts, of art and science, of beauty and truth.

The world would look very differently if we recognized at last that every human being has talents of own which must be developed, that emotions and human relationships are among our most valuable assets and that they can be educated to produce a multitude of individual passions for the profit of all, not for the sake of individual accumulation. Which in turn would require education to be no longer centered on reproducing social hierarchies and selecting narrow elites, but on the assumption that everybody has the same right and obligation to achieve personal fulfilment.

Extending the circle of generosity and trust. While it is obvious in the most universal and intimate experience of any mother with her children, it is taking a very long time to understand that the progress of civilization is all about extending the frontier inside which we practice generosity and trust by default.

Self-indulgent as we are, we prefer to ignore that the rule of generosity and care, rather than that of selfishness and exploitation, applies not only to our family but also to the weak and suffering, to the persons who share our land and language, whatever their origins or income, to those who are like us but live elsewhere or talk differently, to those who are different from us in beliefs, skin or habits, to all children of all nations, to all forms of animal and vegetable life, and in the end to the whole planet we share.

By applying the rule in clever ways, protecting the institutions of collective welfare from abuses, extending their reach and being self-demanding in our personal generosity, we could receive much more than we give and create more life than we destroy.

Sharing feminine and masculine values. For too long, the game of human power has been an exclusive battlefield for alpha males, whose natural drive is expansion and conflict, even at unreasonable costs. We need to transcend zero-sum deals and change the nature of power to transform it into a practice of shared potentialities and care of the common nature from which we all live.

Of course, we speak here of a deep cultural revolution to recognize at last that women are equal to men in rights and opportunities, but also to change our vision of what is quality of life, to state that quantity (in particular, of children) is not necessarily good and that collaboration is not always but so many times better than competition.

In the end, we will understand that the deep unity and richness of humanity and life is only possible through the respect of diversity and the sacred principle of dignity for all, and that overcoming segregations, whether social, cultural or racial, is both a moral and a practical imperative.

Changing the purpose of organizations. Based on such universal values, human organizations of the future will no longer be obsessed with monetized growth for the sake of it, but devoted to better problem-solving. As the many parts of a societal ecosystem, they will address different facets of a global purpose, that of producing an equitable and universal human welfare while preserving for now and the future the essential equilibria of the natural ecosystem from which we live.

Of course, this will need fundamental changes: a combination of societal innovations and technical progress to ensure both a very high productivity in the use of natural resources and a very low unemployment, so as to maximize the use of our abundant human talents and minimize that of the scarce factors.

This will also mean abandoning the self-delusions of financial accumulation and consumerism and combining different types of property for different purposes in competitive collaboration. Also, we will have to reclaim the legitimacy of good governance and regulation to produce public goods and limit public bads, and to reinstate politics, not as a pure game of power but as the common space where collective problem-solving is debated and addressed.

Empowering citizens of all ages. At a time when, even in rich countries, the promise for most is made of exhausting full-life workdays just to ensure some material comfort and avoid the threat of unemployment, we cannot help saying that life should be something completely different from a mad race towards status and hyper-consumption, where so many lose and some seem to win (while losing their own time).

Societal arrangements are feasible to produce what is needed with much shorter workdays and a variety of professional engagements over personalized curricula, so that ordinary people would no longer be just workers and consumers, threatened by

the exclusion of unemployment or the (so frequent) emptiness of retirement, but empowered citizens who can enjoy substantial time in lifelong learning, exchanging across generations, practicing passions and participating in collective decisions at all levels, from local to global.

Taking the holistic view. Life is more complex than ever before, and the chance is it will continue to be so, because complexity is the result of our dreams coming true. We, all humans, aspire to personal autonomy and dignity, to express our multiple identities in local or global communities, to practice our passions, to receive social recognition, to enjoy life with our loved ones but also with the unknown who share our feelings, whether near us or on the other side of Earth.

This two-sided nature of autonomy and connection is what makes society a complex system that is much more than the sum of its parts. It is more and more so, in a small world in which the distant flap of a butterfly can produce a tornado next door. This requires us to analyze and understand reality with a holistic mindset, in which details and macro-behaviors are connected and the center of the world is everywhere.

Fortunately, this also brings the opportunity of unexpected emergent behaviors, of new capabilities of self-organization for the sake of life. And it creates as well the feeling that we are all together, of any origin, language or color of skin, in the same adventure, and that the best ideas may come, why not, from a remote village of Africa, where the whole story began.

Of course, some will say that we speak about Utopia, a land of wishful ideas which will not materialize, at least in our lifetime. But being only realistic is today a recipe for disaster. And the practicality of painting sketches of desirable futures is that they can inspire not only those who already dream but also those many more who still do not dare to dream.

So, let us get back from the future of our common dreams, and start making them real. Let us continue this adventure, the greatest on Earth, that of a paradigm shift of unprecedented scale in human history. Let us abandon the pervasive disenchantment of the early 21st century, obsessed with money and the exhibition of material privileges.

Let us assemble the energy of young, the wisdom of elders, the claim of women and the excluded, the voices of all nations, for the greatest of all revolutions, one without enemies except our fears. This will be to build a human world at peace with itself and the planet, an inclusive, sustainable and more feminine world where we could practice the obligation and pleasure of making life a meaningful and enjoyable journey for all of us and our children of generations to come.

Our life is a pure contradiction. We know we will be here just for a while, and yet we try not only to survive everyday, but also to give a meaning to what we do, for ourselves but mainly for others, of course our loved ones, but also so many people we do not know. We will never suppress the eternal dilemma between beauty and truth, but by extending our innate generosity and practicing intelligence, we can make life joyful instead of miserable.

To do that, we will certainly have to overcome our fears and bet on love and trust. But, what could be the meaning of our presence here if we do not dare to love?