

“THE TRANSMISSION OF EVOLUTIONARY EPIPHANIES”
by John Stewart

Reflections on the May 2005 “Evolutionary Salon”

CONTEXT:

The discussion in the group had reached the view that the central evolutionary challenge for humanity was to move from societies of disconnected, atomistic, self-concerned individuals to a society in which individuals see themselves primarily as part of a larger whole, and act accordingly.

ISSUE:

The challenge was to identify how movies or other presentations could assist in actualising this transition.

COMMENTS:

Key ingredients

Key ingredients for experiences that are capable of assisting this transition include:

- The experience needs to produce a shift in consciousness in which individuals suddenly step outside of themselves and see themselves and their actions as a necessary part of a larger whole; and
- The context provided by the larger whole needs to be capable of making at least some individual actions meaningful, and therefore capable of answering the central existential question facing all individuals: what should I do with my life?

The capacity of the great evolutionary story to provide these ingredients

The great evolutionary story has as a unique capacity to provide evolutionary epiphanies founded on these ingredients. It has an intrinsic ability to spark a shift in consciousness in which individuals come to see themselves self-reflexively as part of a larger meaningful process.

This is because it is not just a story about events external to the individual. Instead it is about the processes and history that have produced everything on the planet and that will continue to produce whatever exists in the future. The shift in consciousness can be sparked when the individual suddenly comes to the realisation that:

- she is a product of this larger evolutionary whole:
- she exists only because of the larger whole:

- her life and actions are an essential part of the larger evolutionary process;

And, critically,

- her actions can have meaning and purpose insofar as they are relevant to the wider evolutionary process. To the extent that her actions can contribute positively to the evolutionary process, they are meaningful to a larger process outside herself that has been unfolding long before she was born and that will continue long after she dies

This works because it produces a shift in consciousness that changes the object of self-reflection – the object of self-reflection is no longer just the isolated self and its particular concerns, it is the self-as-part-of-the-planetary evolutionary process. The shift occurs when the individual sees and experiences herself and her actions as an integral part of a new and wider whole - the great evolutionary process. The individual now identifies with the wider whole rather than the narrow self.

One effective way of triggering this shift in consciousness through a film or other presentation is to eventually lead the audience's attention to the fact that their attendance at the presentation is itself part of a significant evolutionary event on this planet – it is part of a process in which humanity is becoming conscious of the evolutionary process and is beginning to use knowledge of its trajectory to guide humanity's own evolution – an event of enormous evolutionary importance on earth.

- In the same way, your reading and engagement with this document is also part of that significant evolutionary unfolding, and is therefore inextricably connected with other evolutionary processes arising on this planet that are contributing to the emergence of a cooperative global society.

The epiphany is strongest when the individual's attention is progressively widened to see and embrace more and more of the human actions and processes that are instantiations of the unfolding of the evolutionary process across the planet (including her actions). This expanded, all-embracing attention becomes to be experienced as love for all that is involved in the wider evolutionary process.

The nature of the new whole

The evolutionary epiphany is more profound and lasting if the individual is also led to experience the fact that her actions are meaningful in evolutionary terms insofar as they contribute to the great evolutionary process. But this needs to be founded on a fairly clear understanding of the nature of the new whole that evolution is progressing towards. This knowledge is essential if the individual is to see what forms of action and social creativity on her part will contribute positively to the next great step in evolution, and to see how she should live her life.

For these reasons, any effective presentation of the grand evolutionary story must include a concrete identification of the next great step in evolution on this planet, and of the concrete measures needed to actualise it.

- A proper understanding of the evolutionary story demonstrates that the next step will be centred on the formation of a unified, sustainable, cooperative planetary society. This is the new whole to which evolution is progressing. It is a continuation of the trajectory of evolution on this planet that has progressively produced cooperative organizations of greater scale and evolvability – beginning with the formation of cooperative organizations of molecular processes to produce the first simple cells, followed by the formation of organizations of these simple cells to produce complex cells, followed by the formation of organizations of these complex cells to produce multicellular organisms, followed by the formation of organizations of organisms to produce societies, followed by the formation of organizations of societies to form a planetary society.
- The great story also suggests that this step will require new forms of governance (including world governance) and other social innovations. The global society will need to be highly organised just like the complex cell and multicellular organism before it;
- Another important component of the next great step will be the development in individuals of the capacity to increase their adaptability by transcending their biological and social past. Spiritual practices are important means to this end.
- We need a clear understanding of the nature of the next great step in evolution because it will not actualise otherwise. In this stage of the evolution of life on this planet the mechanism that will produce the next step is our intelligence, plans and intentions. We need to use these tools to identify where we are going, and to design strategies to get there. If we leave it to chance, it will not happen – in the past chance took millions of years and many failures and false starts to produce cooperative organizations such as complex cells.

Transmitting the epiphany to all levels of society

To accelerate actualisation of the next great evolutionary step, it would also be desirable to produce evolutionary epiphanies at all levels of society. Just as it is important for individuals to see themselves as part of the evolutionary process, and to use the evolutionary trajectory to guide their actions, so too is it important for groups. Political organizations, governments and groups involved in socially creative activities (including environmental activists) would no longer see themselves as just pursuing specific social or environmental goals. In addition to pursuing their specific goals, they would see themselves as part of an inclusive evolutionary process that was working towards the actualisation of the unified planetary society. They would use the trajectory of the evolutionary process to design, guide, energise, and inspire their activities.

- For example, if the production of evolutionary epiphanies were included in David's work in building social resilience from the bottom up, participants could be energised by the realisation that their activities are not just about building better communities - they are also part of the evolutionary trajectory to a unified planetary society, and are linked to all other activities across the face of the earth that are consciously supporting this trajectory.
- It is worth noting here that not all cultural creativity is a positive contribution to the next great steps in evolution on the planet – evolution, if successful, has a particular trajectory, and it is only cultural creativity that contributes to the actualisation of this trajectory that is positive and relevant in evolutionary terms.

In this way, the great evolutionary story could energise, unite and guide the activities of individuals, of all kinds of social and political activist groups, and of societies, including governments. At all levels, the evolutionary perspective would provide a meaningful answer to the question: What should I do with my life?

A short case study of a political organization that has been energised and guided by an evolutionary epiphany

The International Simultaneous Policy Organization (ISPO) is an example of a group that has undergone the shift in consciousness referred to earlier.

ISPO promotes a pathway to achieving forms of global governance and international cooperation that do not require any nation state to act against its narrow self interest.

- For example, at present if a nation state introduced special measures to penalise international corporations that damage the environment, the corporations will take their factories elsewhere where they are not regulated, and the nation will lose the jobs etc that would otherwise be provided. The ISPO approach overcomes this by having nations sign a commitment to introduce these environmental controls, but not until its competitor nations have given a similar undertaking. When all have given such a pledge, the regulations are introduced simultaneously, and the corporations cannot avoid them.

Sometime after he developed this idea, the founder of ISPO John Bunzl came across my book. The ideas in Evolution's Arrow appear to have produced an evolutionary epiphany in which he saw that his founding of ISPO was part of the evolutionary process that is actualising the formation of a cooperative global society. He refers to this realisation in his January 2003 ISPO newsletter which can be accessed by putting the phrase "where does sp fit in to evolution" into Google. Subsequently he wrote and had published an article that develops in greater detail and sophistication the evolutionary significance of ISPO. It draws upon my work, the work of Elisabet Sahtouris and the writings of Ken Wilber. The full article is at: http://www.simpol.org/dossiers/dossier-UK/pdf_UK/EvolutionaryBiology_SP.html . He has also since linked up with Barbara

MH and her Foundation for Conscious Evolution. And even though he might not know it yet, he is also linked with all of us and with our diverse activities.