

## PART II: MAKING CHANGE

### Shifting Our Cultural Stories

In video 10 we talked about Donella Meadows’s essay “Places to Intervene in a System,” in which she says that the “**goals** of the system,” and “the **mindset** or **paradigm** out of which the system arises” constitute the most effective leverage points for making change in a system.

Well, society’s goals and mindsets could be thought of as the **stories** we tell ourselves. Some cultural stories are deeply ingrained in us as a species—maybe part of our evolution—while some are the predominant narratives of the particular society we have been born into. If our society happens to be barreling toward ruin, it’s likely that some of its subconsciously reinforced belief systems and behaviors, some of its stories, are preventing most of us from clearly seeing the perils ahead, and changing our behavior accordingly. So, understanding and altering cultural stories can be an important part of the process of collectively waking up and stepping on the brakes before we plunge into the abyss.

So, here are some of the most powerful cultural stories we may need to change:

**For example, we may need to shift from the consumer economy to a conserver economy.** You know, we’re constantly rehearsing a story that says life is better when we consume more: the economy improves, jobs are created, and consumption makes us happy. Well, where did this story come from? To a large extent, the consumer economy is an artifact of the twentieth century, when overproduction was a significant economic problem. The solution to overproduction was to stoke demand with advertising and consumer credit. Governments began to refer to citizens as *consumers*, and the health of the economy came to be measured by rates of consumption. But in a future of

scarcer energy and materials, that story no longer makes sense. We need to foster a **conservator economy**, in which consumption is minimized. The consumer economy is buttressed by constant flows of messaging in the forms of advertising and growth-obsessed business news, and by government subsidies and regulations. So the shift to a conserving economy will require a reversal in orientation of those messages and institutional supports.

Here's something related to that: **From things to relationships and experiences**. The story of consumerism appealed to people's love of novelty, and it fed on our deeply ingrained urge to display symbols of status. Advertising contains millions of images and messages, but all tell essentially the same story: human satisfaction derives from the ownership of certain objects. To get away from consumerism we will need to replace those satisfactions and symbols not just with vague promises, but with real experiences, and with stories that appeal to our deepest human aspirations. Consumerism replaced satisfying experiences of making, growing, repairing, and sharing with the momentary buzz of buying a new manufactured product. We need to reverse that bargain.

Then there's the shift **from perpetual economic growth to a steady-state economy**. The logic behind the consumer economy was that it would produce long-lasting economic growth. As societies industrialized, agricultural labor was replaced with fuel-fed machinery, resulting in urbanization and the growth of wage labor. Economic growth came to be seen as the necessary source of more jobs and higher incomes for workers, higher tax revenues for governments, and profits for investors. We were riding on the crest of a wave of growth, so the story that this was a good thing and that it could and would continue indefinitely seemed to make sense. But perpetual growth implies a world full of endless resources, in which demand can continue to grow forever. We've very quickly emptied the world of resources and filled it with consumers.

Economic growth based on ever-increasing rates of consumption is simply not possible.

The relatively new field of **ecological economics** has taken this fact as a starting point, and outlined the principles by which a conserver or “steady-state” economy could function. The steady-state economy will be the basis of a new story about an ongoing, mutually supportive relationship between humanity and nature.

Then the shift **from corporate hegemony to distributed ownership and increased equity**. Our society’s current story says that corporations are effective tools for deploying capital to provide products and jobs, benefiting society as a whole. In fact, the corporation *has been* an effective institution for growing the economy: it encouraged the concentration of investment capital, it shielded investors from liability, and it produced profits that could be reinvested in further expansion of production. But by concentrating capital it also concentrated control over the lives of workers and consumers, as well as influence over the political system. In a world where inequality has become a serious problem and overall growth in consumption is no longer achievable, the for-profit corporation may no longer make sense, at least in its current form. Cooperatives, in which worker-owners share risk and rewards, may provide a better institutional means for organizing the economy.

Non-profit organizations, currently the fastest growing sector of the entire economy, also offer a useful model for the future of enterprise and work. Already, millions of Americans are living a new story in which equity, cooperation, and sustainability count more than profit and market share.

Then a shift **from population expansion to stabilization and decline**. In video 3 we saw that population cannot grow perpetually, and that we have already surpassed sensible limits to a sustainable global population size. Well, then why does population keep growing? In many cases, the desire for more children is rooted in cultural stories from previous eras in which resources were

abundant and childhood mortality rates were very high. In many societies a higher number of children still confers higher social status, particularly on men. Stabilizing population largely depends on raising the social and economic status of women, and on overcoming certain religious and cultural notions that no longer reflect the world we all inhabit.

How about a shift **from the politics of mass persuasion to a politics of local engagement**. The elites of every society have always aimed to sculpt and influence the opinions of ordinary people. Today this is often done by media professionals using scientifically honed methods that are non-coercive yet reliably effective. Rather than becoming empowered, citizens are increasingly “dumbed down” to the level where they are most readily categorized and manipulated. The result is political polarization, lack of government accountability, and institutional gridlock. Our political narratives are to a large degree written for us by whoever can pay for airtime, advertising space, and media expertise. In a world increasingly battered by complex, systemic issues requiring intelligence and understanding, and cooperation, this is a formula for societal failure. What’s needed is an informed electorate, locally engaged, and skilled in critical thinking. We need to begin to write our own collective story.

Finally, **from nature as resource to nature as source**. In a consumer society, nature is seen primarily as a pile of resources to be plundered. We need to flip this view and see nature as the necessary ground of our existence, whose welfare is our responsibility. That means raising our collective level of “ecoliteracy”—appreciation of nature’s beauty and understanding of how it works. This more mature relationship with nature can then serve as one of the foremost motivators for transforming other cultural stories.

Well, as we’ve seen, the cultural transformations we need are immense. Are they even possible? Well, it’s helpful to keep in mind that the construction of the consumer economy and the mass communications culture, and the growth of world population from less than two billion to nearly seven billion, all

this occurred during the course of a single century. Stories are powerful and change can occur quickly under the right circumstances.

But how do we get there from here? Next, we'll look at human neuroscience to see what it can tell us about cultural change.