

# “Self-Will Run Riot”: The Earth as an Alcoholic

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*This paper proposes that the major national/cultural states of consciousness in the world today are characterized by an addictive epistemology—the corruption of will into willfulness. The essence of addiction is seen to reside in the issue of control. While World War II had a singularly “intoxicating” effect on the world’s consciousness, the war in Vietnam was an occasion when this consciousness “hit bottom.” The hitting bottom event is not a function of objective circumstances, but of consciousness; of the subjective interpretation and experience of phenomena. To resolve this addictive consciousness we need to learn, as individuals and en masse, to surrender control and accept responsibility. Because addiction, and its resolution, hinge on transformations of the experience of self, we find that questions regarding the nature of selfhood and identity once considered philosophical recreations have become urgently pragmatic.*

## *Foreword*

The unconventional structure of this paper deserves a bit of explanation. In 1985 I was asked to present some of my thoughts on addiction in society to a discussion group organized by the renowned family therapist Lynn Hoffman. This group was exploring the application of psychotherapeutic perspectives to larger social and political concerns. Following this dialogue I was invited to join the group in a presentation they were making at a remarkable public symposium at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, sponsored by the Audubon Society Expedition Institute, examining the question, “Is the Earth a Living Organism?” Dividing the available time among the group members, we were each left with twelve minutes to make our various contributions. I usually speak from rough notes, but in this case I wrote the entire presentation, to be sure of fitting within the allotted time. The resulting text became the first of a series of sections making up what I came to call a “cumulative paper.” Revisions and new sections were added periodically between 1985 and 1993. The result is a document reminiscent of those segmented farmhouses where additions have been strung out along the rear of the home over the course of several generations. The section contributed in 1993 includes some lighthearted acknowledgment of this serial quality.

Jon Diamond and I have concluded that there is an advantage to leaving this structure intact. My underlying argument assigns a central role to addiction in contemporary society. As the sections of the paper appear in sequence, we see how addictive process figures prominently in the political, cultural and social developments over the last two decades.

An Afterword will bring us into the 21st Century, identify the overarching conceptual frame which informs my current writing, and disclose an intriguing historical circularity embodied in this paper. But now let us return to 1985, and to a fascinating gathering taking place at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

*Introduction—Amherst, 1985*

This symposium explores the possibility that the earth is a living organism. Since there is no definition of what a living organism *is* which fully satisfies Those Who Should Know, namely biologists, even when there is full consensus that the entity under consideration certainly is a living organism—a tree, perhaps, or an amoeba—I don't expect that the present enquiry will be in any sense conclusively resolved. The following observations don't attempt such a resolution, but rather flow from the premise that in some respects it is useful and pertinent to act "as if"—as if the earth *is* alive. By "alive" I mean having a developmental trajectory of "being" as an integral whole, some form of consciousness, and a quality of purposefulness. In other words, I mean that there is indeed a "whole earth" in a vital sense; that it is possible for things to "go wrong" or "go right" for this entity; and, that it possesses some kind of awareness and responsiveness. I believe it is useful to think in this way, even if we presume that it is entirely metaphorical and, scientifically speaking, nonsensical. For the record, I will report that I suspect it *is* true; that in some meaningful sense the earth is in fact alive, as characterized above. However, neither this opinion nor my grounds for holding the opinion are what I have to offer today. My reasons for thinking this way are idiosyncratic, but hardly unique, and not particularly credentialed. What I can offer that will perhaps be unique here and, hopefully, productively provocative is the notion that the earth organism is suffering from alcoholism. Observations which contribute to this point of view are drawn from the span of my more or less adult life, which includes a period of full-time work within the peace movement in the 1960's, a period of

professional involvement with the environmental movement in the 1970's, a fourteen-year career of active alcoholism followed by over twenty years of recovery, and my experience as a therapist working with alcoholics and clients with other addictions-related issues.

*Premises*

Two sets of premises need to be introduced to establish a context for the remarks which follow: 1) concerning the “living earth,” and 2) concerning alcoholism. Regarding the living earth, my sense of things is that humans, proliferate and recursively interwoven with each other, constitute an aspect of earth's evolving consciousness; in particular, that aspect which explores the potentialities and pitfalls of conscious *choice*—or in other words, *will*.

Regarding alcoholism, it is asserted in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous that an alcoholic can be essentially understood as an “extreme example of self-will run riot.”<sup>1</sup>

At first glance this can seem startlingly simplistic, with perhaps a moralistic tinge to it. However, since AA has proven conspicuously successful as an approach to dealing with a problem otherwise conspicuous for its resistance to resolution, the claims of this fellowship deserve thoughtful scrutiny. I want to describe a sequence—essentially an epistemological shift—whereby alcoholism can be seen to emerge in a person's life. This sequence is relatively straightforward. However, to convey the essential dilemma of alcoholism, I need to clarify how I am using the word “epistemology.”<sup>2</sup>

The term as I am using it here implicates the answers to four broad questions:

- 1) What is *possible*? Reality.  
(Possible, of course, includes *actual*—that which *is*, as well as that which *could be*.)
- 2) What is *important*? Values.
- 3) How are things *connected*? Systems of Relationship  
And, bearing on the process of answering the first three questions, and most faithful to the narrow, classical meaning of the term:
- 4) How do you *know*? What are the processes by which you arrive at answers to these questions? Systems of Knowledge.

In sum, the term epistemology as I use it here refers not only to the reality we come to know, but also to the processes by which our “knowing” is itself assembled.

Now let us consider the person *en route* to alcoholism at the beginning of their learning process:

❖ Consuming alcohol provides an extraordinary affective experience (characteristically, feelings of power, freedom, connectedness, and safety, in varying combinations and degrees of emphasis for different individuals). This experience is so potent and consistent that the individual prioritizes the act of drinking and increasingly depends on drinking to provide these feelings. In effect, what has happened is the discovery of an *instrument* for the manipulation of feeling states—the discovery of a *technology of feelings management*.

❖ Because this technology initially works so well, the individual neglects the development of alternative strategies to acquire equivalent affective “payoffs.” This neglect accumulates incrementally to constitute a substantial developmental deficit over time. Simply put, the individual fails to grow up, emotionally. Over the course of a subtle progression, the use of alcohol becomes increasingly compensatory rather than contributory; its use is more and more valued for its escapist, anesthetic functions, as its liberating and empowering functions diminish.

❖ Concomitantly, for those whose relationship with alcohol will eventually manifest as addictive, the use of alcohol is proving to answer a question even more fundamental than “how can I manage my feeling states?” and that is, “*who am I?*” For these individuals drinking alcohol brings about an experience of existential transformation; a conspicuously enhanced experience of self. Over time a dependency relationship develops such that the experience of an adequate and viable identity becomes increasingly hostage to the use of alcohol. For some drinkers, this sense of existential transformation happens almost instantaneously; for others it accumulates gradually. Eventually, however, the experience of existential adequacy is absolutely contingent on the drinking of alcohol. It is this development that gives the behaviour its remarkable authority to over-

rule common sense. If the very experience of selfhood seems at stake, then virtually all other considerations become subordinate.

✿ During this time a linear, causal view of life's processes and possibilities evolves, wherein the appropriate response to internal longings, appetites, discontent or distress is seen to be the utilization of a technology—in this case, ingesting or “importing” an external substance in order to manage feeling states, and maintain a viable identity experience. The epistemological landscape which evolves from this orientation tends to organize itself along two axes: *control* and *sensation*.<sup>3</sup>

✿ The situation progressively worsens as the problematic features of the epistemology and of the drinking compound each other in a classical Catch-22 downward spiral. That is, the epistemology is troublesome in that the commitment to control provokes states of frustration and discontent, whenever actual results deviate from desired results—which, to one degree or another, is *always*. The discrepancy between goals and outcome becomes more extreme as the continued use of alcohol increasingly undermines competence at control, in all the ways with which we are familiar. This, of course, intensifies the feeling that more effective control is needed—and the circle of frustration and willfulness rounds upon itself.

✿ There is, meanwhile, an equivalent spiraling deterioration of the affect and identity management functions of the drinking. The original affective rewards are turned on their heads: power yields to helplessness; freedom to entrapment; connectedness to estrangement and alienation; and safety to an unrelenting sense of being at risk. And the experience of self devolves, over the course of progression, from an optimally enhanced sense of self to an experience of self that is loathsome and abominable. Tragically, in that state the only imaginable source of relief is—to drink.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, regarding alcoholism in the individual, I want to note that it is a commonplace in alcoholism treatment that there is a distinct difference between mere abstinence and sobriety. *Abstinence*, with no change in the control-oriented epistemology, manifests in a very rigid, frequently moralistic and judgmental presentation, and is based on *self-*

*deprivation.* Such a person is often described as a “dry drunk.” It is beyond the scope of my presentation today to fully characterize *sobriety*, except to note that it involves an abandonment of the instrumental, control-based epistemology through a psychological/emotional process which is no less than revolutionary; and that it offers rewards in both the affective and the identity domains that are *at least* as satisfactory as those provided by the drinking *when it was at its best!*

### *Discussion*

You may begin to see where I am headed. I am suggesting that the major national/cultural states of consciousness in the world today are committed to and invested in the alcoholic epistemology, which, in essence, is the corruption of *will* into *willfulness*. This distinction is fundamental: *will* refers to the ability to choose among alternatives, whereas *willfulness* describes an insistence on controlling the consequences—the end results—of choice. It is one thing for me to decide that I will seek to persuade you to my point of view; it is quite another for me to insist—to require of myself, you, and/or the universe—that you will agree with me.

Now let's consider the sequence outlined earlier regarding alcoholism, substitute military technology for mind-altering technology, and observe the parallel evolution which emerges.

❖ It is, I think, self-evident that the use of military technology provides the user with feeling-states comparable to those available through drinking. (In this discussion I consider the user of military technology to be the body politic; not just the person whose hand is on the trigger.) Those feelings, remember, are: power and freedom; connectedness and safety. Granted that these are often distorted to frenzy and license, and nationalistic and/or ethnic chauvinism; much the same can be seen as a consequence of alcohol use.

❖ Further, it is equally evident that the exercise of military power has deeply informed and reformed the state of our national/cultural identity and has served or been employed as a radical balm when that identity has felt compromised.

✿ When military technology “succeeds” in these ways, a shortcut mentality develops. Why bother with reasoning, negotiation, reflection, compromise, etc., if one can simply assert one’s interests in a bullying or self-righteous manner and send in the Marines? As with the individual alcoholic, as reliance on the technology becomes more and more exclusive, there is a concomitant failure to develop a mature emotional repertoire. If “growing up” is catalyzed by rude encounters with reality, then these technologies can be seen as buffers, protecting the consciousness from such encounters.

✿ Again, there is a recursive pattern whereby the addiction to technology married to willfulness engenders a series of problems and frustrations, the response to which tends to be “more of the same”—more of the same short cut solution—since alternative coping strategies have been largely undeveloped.

✿ And, again, as the negative consequences of willful behaviour compound each other in a sort of geometric progression, the single-minded dedication to the addictive technology increasingly subverts any possibilities for authentic fulfillment, or integrity of character for the user, as the perceived need to keep disaster at bay becomes the paramount mandate.

At this point I want to note that I consider these parallels to be not merely analogic, but symptomatic of the same essential dilemma. I label the epistemological ground which underlies this disorder “alcoholism” in part because that’s where I first made its acquaintance, in part because alcoholism is both exquisitely archetypal and widely pervasive, but also because the most salutary alternative to this epistemological dilemma has evolved out of the struggle with alcoholism, in the form of Alcoholics Anonymous. Framing the problem within the constructs of alcoholism and addiction invites the application, within the “living earth,” of the approach which has been ameliorative for individual alcoholics.

### *Conclusion*

I want to conclude by mentioning three examples to illustrate the general thesis. Concerning the distinction between the “wet” and “dry”

(drinking and non-drinking) alcoholic states, I would suggest that the U.S., the U.S.S.R., Ireland, *et al.* are prime examples of the wet; and that Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya *et al.* are excellent examples of the dry—societies where the control epistemology is firmly in place, but alcohol itself is prohibited, and an intense moralistic self-righteousness prevails. Again, I characterize the disorder as alcoholism for the reasons noted in the paragraph above, but also because it is an epistemological terrain—a social/cultural ecology—which cannot accommodate the presence of alcohol in the system without suffering severe adverse consequences. (I am sorry to report that I can nominate no modern nation as adequately representative of a “sober” culture. However, a comparison of the cultural features of Italy and France is suggestive, both nations having very high per-capita consumptions of alcohol, with France, however, having the highest incidence of alcoholism in Europe, while Italy has among the lowest.<sup>5</sup> I am struck, for example, by the fact that France has been a major center of existentialist thought, with its focus on the presumably inescapable isolation and absurdity of individual experience; whereas in Italy even the underworld is known as “family.”<sup>6</sup>)

Secondly, I suggest that World War II had a singularly “intoxicating” effect on the world’s consciousness, in particular that element of consciousness dominated by identification with the United States and its extensive realm of cultural influence. Each of the affective interests described above—power, freedom, connectedness and safety—seemed exquisitely well served by this war, which rescued the U.S. from the divisive malaise of the great depression and united the nation in opposing formidable and wholly plausible adversaries. This great constellation of “successes” is comparable to those drinking experiences which work wonderfully for the alcoholic in the early stages of progression.

Lastly, I would propose that the war in Vietnam can be seen as an occasion when this consciousness “hit bottom”—came up against the cumulative consequences of technological willfulness. We tried the “more of the same wrong solution” approach repeatedly, in an escalation as grotesque as the tortured and brutal lashing-out characteristic of individual alcoholics late in their progression—and finally made a grudging and partial admission of defeat. As with alcoholics, this “hitting bottom” can serve either as a nadir point which initiates yet another cycle of willful self-assertion—resulting quite possibly in eventual self-destruction—or as a point of departure: specifically, an abandonment of the



commitment to control, and the embrace instead of an outlook which is integral rather than isolative and which takes responsibility for *intent* and *effort*, but does not presume to dictate *outcome*.

I believe that Vietnam veterans may play a crucial role in such a transformative process, since they have born the major brunt of this national “bottoming-out”—*not only historically, during combat, but still today*. Over the years the Vietnam vet has been left in isolation to grapple with the implications of this massive failure of the control strategy, while the larger culture has invested itself heavily in processes of denial fundamentally equivalent to the contortions of rationalization, distortion and avoidance which manifest in alcoholic family (and other) systems. A conspicuous instance of this denial process is the current movement to translate the neglected Vietnam vet into an “overlooked hero”—focusing single-mindedly on their sacrifice in service to their country so as to avoid any glimpse of the profound self-doubt which plagued the nation during the war and which remains unresolved—in large part because it is essentially unaddressed. We are like the alcoholic who has become so dependent on their “technology” that they dare not examine any evidence suggesting that they are headed up a blind alley, so we blithely label our alley “Victory Boulevard,” and hope nobody notices that the emperor is not merely naked, but is on a collision course with destiny—and that this emperor, grandiose and commanding, is nothing more nor less than that fearful core of willfulness brooding within ourselves.

The unwillingness/unreadiness of the larger society to confront these critical lessons regarding the limits of control has left the Vietnam veterans largely alone with a burden which is properly ours as well, but alone also with their unique source of wisdom—that wisdom which can emerge out of a stark encounter with the contradictions and limitations inherent in the control epistemology. We are all victims of our inheritance—of this epistemological *cul-de-sac*. Vietnam veterans and alcoholics are distinguished particularly in that they have occasion to look into the mirror, only to find their mortal limitations staring unsparingly back at them. Many succumb at this point, and retreat, to suicide, insanity—or to lives of determinedly narrow vision. Those who endure the initial onslaught of fear and disorientation can find the experience profoundly clarifying and instructive, on those deep levels where our epistemologies are formed and transformed.

Just as sober alcoholics find that the moment which seemed to

signal their greatest defeat can become the kernel for a process of redemptive self-transformation, so might the Vietnam veterans provide a germinal focus for such a regenerative process within the evolving consciousness of our living earth.

### *Epilogue*

The above text is somewhat expanded from the initial presentation given at the symposium, in particular the last section discussing the Vietnam experience. I have elaborated on that segment in part because the subject is timely, but also because I wished to assure that the paper not be interpreted as somehow “blaming” the Vietnam vet. In fact I envision soldiers and alcoholics as finding themselves, by historical and circumstantial coincidence, at critical points of nexus where the contradictions of our addictive epistemology converge most poignantly. This is, intrinsically, neither noble nor ignoble—it just is. Similarly, the “facts” of power and technology just “are.” I do not take issue with either: power is just another word for energy—the ability to effect change. Technology simply refers to the complex of instruments and procedures through which energy is channeled.

I am not even addressing the thrust of purpose in this discussion. Certainly I have my own opinions about which purposes are more worthy and which less, but what I am discussing is the nature of the *will* which is attached to purpose; this is more fundamental. A succinct formulation of this consideration is: *surrender control; accept responsibility*. It is my sense of things that a soldier who realizes these principles will be in essential harmony with the earth, and conversely, that a Peace Corps worker who is entrapped in the control epistemology will be a toxic presence within the earth’s consciousness.

During the Vietnam era we tended to portray ourselves as either Doves or Hawks; these characterizations suggest that we considered the intentions of one bird to be more “correct” than those of the other. What we have to learn from doves and hawks is not, however, whether one should hunt mice or carry olive branches, but how one can be in the world in such a way that every effort affirms our intimate association with the larger life in which we are participants. Animals do this with absolute grace because it is unconscious; it is our challenge and our opportunity to learn how to *choose* this way of being in the world.

I want to close with the following quote from the last pages of *Tales of Power* by Carlos Castaneda. The speaker is Don Juan, the Yaqui medicine man.

Don Juan squatted in front of us. He caressed the ground gently.

“Only if one loves this earth with unbending passion can one release one’s sadness. A Warrior is always joyful because his love is unalterable and his beloved, the earth, embraces him and bestows upon him inconceivable gifts. The sadness belongs only to those who hate the very thing that gives shelter to their beings.”

Don Juan again caressed the ground with tenderness.

“This lovely being, which is alive to its last recesses and understands every feeling, soothed me, it cured me of my pains, and finally, when I had fully understood my love for it, it taught me freedom.”

*Postscript—October, 1990*

Very briefly, I would like to log and remark on the following changes which have occurred in the five years since this paper was first drafted:

✿ Because totalitarian Communism—the most comprehensive endeavor in social control in world history—has encountered its own hitting-bottom crisis, the cold war has essentially dissolved, leaving great uncertainty and amorphousness in its wake.

✿ As of this writing, the Persian Gulf, subsequent to Iraq’s invasion and engulfment of Kuwait, is the focal point of military and political attentions of a magnitude which could very plausibly culminate in a conflict with catastrophic ramifications worldwide.

✿ Just prior to this crisis in the Mideast, the Pentagon had begun refocusing its attention from cold war goals and objectives toward a quantum escalation of the “war on drugs,” proposing to militarize and internationalize this control effort on a scale greatly exagger-

ated from any heretofore contemplated. This perspective has been postponed, but by no means abandoned.

- ✿ The AIDS epidemic, which represents a quintessential social and cultural laboratory for issues of control and sensation, powerlessness and denial, has continued its deadly crescendo unabated.
- ✿ Domestically, the United States is in an economic and political crisis resulting from a decades-long orgy of buy-now-pay-later economic policies.

These developments can be appreciated as crises resulting from addictive consciousness and behaviour, manifesting over extended periods in social, political and economic domains. It is, I believe, easy to recognize that widespread, deeply rooted patterns of willfulness and denial are embedded in the histories of each of the situations noted above.

Meanwhile: The last five years have also witnessed a phenomenal expansion of awareness of and healing response to addiction in peoples' lives—on individual, family, and larger-system levels. This awareness is rapidly developing a sophistication which recognizes and addresses the addictive dynamic in a wide array of behaviours and experiences, not only those associated with substance abuse.

Central to the healing momentum in this movement is the Twelve-Step community and paradigm, of which AA is the progenitor.

*Escape Hatch—August, 1993*

This is about where we left things in 1990—poised on the brink of the invasion of Iraq, which turned out to be the headiest, most intoxicating American military binge since WWII. Shall we add another chapter here, remarking on the outcome of the Iraqi conflict to date; the “elephant in the living room” that is manifesting as the corpse of Yugoslavia, hideously dismembering itself into its constituent ethnic body parts; and so forth and so on? Oh, I think not.

Over the last eight years this paper, which is at risk of collapse under the cumulative burden of its successive finales (Conclusion, Epilogue, Postscript, and now this), has, in various incarnations, represented a perspective on certain affairs of the world informed by a model of

addictive process and phenomena. It is time to lay this project to rest. For one thing, even the kindest and most rapt reader must feel giddy, at the least, after lurching out of one more seeming final harbour into yet another sea of text. But, as well, I am presently working on a book on addiction, which will address these matters much more adequately than is possible here.

We've had two changes of Presidency in the United States since then, and, on the day of this writing, most of the cloistered and classified documents regarding the assassination of President Kennedy have been released, thirty years after the event. In my youth I sat in the basement of Kennedy's White House in the company of several other representatives of the student peace movement of that time, listening to McGeorge Bundy, Theodore Sorenson and Jerome Weisner patiently explain to us why our alarms about the "advisory" operation in Vietnam getting out of hand were unfounded. The irony of that encounter mounted in my mind and heart with a ponderous and implacable crescendo over the ensuing decade, finding relief finally not in the abortive, long-overdue cessation of military involvement in Vietnam, but rather in the epistemological reconstruction which accompanied my personal adventure into recovery, roughly coincident with our stumbling departure from Vietnam.

There is for me, then, a kind of looking back from this moment's rolling wave of history to other waves behind me, which seem part of the same wake, somehow—resulting from the passage through time, and lives, and cultures and societies, of some great striving which is all wrapped up in control and addiction, defeat and despair—and the alternative possibilities of surrender and transformation. And, to return to our starting point, I suspect that this striving is a part of the life process or evolution, if you will, of our host being which we call earth. So it turns out that, eight years later, I am still inclined toward that notion of the earth as a living organism which launched this enterprise in the first place. Now, as then, I make no claim of certainty in this regard, nor seek to impress it on others. I will say this much, however: I have a conviction based on personal experience that there are aspects of wholeness and relatedness to the universe, and to human experience, which are neither accessible by nor explicable through our empirical, analytical sciences. This is in no sense an indictment of science, simply an appreciation that science, and its legitimate realm of purview, isn't the whole

enchilada. While I am not a religious person, I find that, even though they are littered with political and philosophical detritus, *spiritual* constructs seem to best characterize these domains of relatedness not amenable to scientific explanation or description.

As we wend toward our final exit from this protracted opus, I want to acknowledge two features of the discussion which could unnecessarily limit its range of application. I am referring to the emphasis in this paper on *alcohol* and on *military* technologies. Should readers perceive this paper as a summons to stamp out drinking and militarism, it will have failed in its purpose. These are conspicuous and rampant instances of addiction on the individual and societal levels, respectively,<sup>8</sup> but they are only the tip of the iceberg. In my understanding the essence of addiction resides in the issue of *control* and the various particular behaviours which make up the growing list of recognized addictions are simply instances of control being exercised through different technologies, whether these be technologies of substance ingestion, behaviour (work, exercise, etc.), relationship, ideology, or whatever. Although each technology has an accompanying retinue of issues associated with it—cirrhosis of the liver with alcoholism; spousal abuse with codependency; etc.—the resolution of any addiction always requires that the central issue of control be recognized, and appropriately addressed. And the appropriate address? As we saw earlier: *surrender control; accept responsibility*.

It is perhaps fitting to bring this final concluding section to its *denouement* with a brief look at the event called “hitting bottom,” since this event itself is, typically, a kind of period at the end of an interminably protracted behavioural sentence. The following formulations describe the experiential perspective of an individual addict. As you read, bear in mind that the hitting bottom event is not a function of objective circumstances, but of consciousness; of the subjective *interpretation and experience* of circumstances and events. These characterizations are complementary; they are different angles on the hologram.

Hitting bottom is:

❖ *An occasion where pain intersects with understanding.*

It is important to recognize that the understanding may be in fact be *misunderstanding*. People often hit bottom resoundingly and take

action informed by understandings which are plausible and persuasive—but quite mistaken. If the understanding is *fundamentally* incorrect (e.g., flawed *vis-a-vis* the control issue), recovery cannot follow from this particular hitting bottom event.

❖ *The ownership of powerlessness.*

Powerlessness manifests in different ways at different stages of recovery. Allowing for this, and appreciating the vast array of technologies which are potential seed-crystals for addiction, perhaps the most adequate generic definition of powerlessness in this context might read: “*I am powerless to achieve fulfillment through the exercise of control.*”

❖ *An occasion where one is no longer willing to live with the person they have become.*

This is, for me, the most viscerally satisfactory characterization of hitting bottom, because it alludes to the existential emergency at the heart of the event, and thus indicates the arena where transformation must take place if the problem is to be not merely managed but *resolved*.

How might such events of consciousness manifest within groups—small groups such as families and large groups such as nations? This is only one of a constellation of questions that present themselves when we try to contemplate the processes by which our “alcoholic earth” might heal into sobriety. Formulating and engaging with these questions is perhaps the most urgent—and the most hopeful—task confronting us as participants in global evolution.

*August, 2003*

Ten years later, to the month: As I write, the conduct of my government in both foreign and domestic affairs so exactly and transparently corresponds to late-stage progression in addiction that it would insult the reader to enumerate the details. I will leave you with three points for your consideration, then close by describing the historical circularity I

mentioned in the Foreword, which has led to a significant shift in the conceptualization of my work.

✱ Precisely because the policies and pronouncements of the Bush administration are so unblushingly willful, it would be easy to dwell on the repugnance of this conduct and thereby lose track of the larger trajectory of addictive process, of which today's current events are logical extensions.

✱ In the last definition of hitting bottom given above, we find someone who is "no longer willing to live with the person they have become." Clearly, we have (at least) two unreconciled versions of the experience of selfhood operating here. A hitting bottom crisis is gathering in our nation, our culture, our world, in which parts of our larger "selves" are becoming unwilling to live with the "self" we have become. Because addiction and its resolution hinge on transformations of the experience of self, we find now that questions regarding the nature of selfhood and identity once considered philosophical recreations have become urgently pragmatic. Our challenge is not to answer these questions definitively, but to engage them with sufficient courage, imagination, integrity, and humility.

✱ Technology *per se* is not the problem. Indeed, certain technological developments, conspicuously the internet, but also cell and satellite phones, digital movie cameras, etc., are enabling new forms of relationship which may well enhance the prospects for a sober evolutionary state of being for our transforming species. The worldwide movement which sprang up in protest against the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq resembled AA in many respects, not the least in that it did not owe its coherence to charismatic leaders, nor exist to serve particular chauvinistic interests. It did, however, owe a great deal to the remarkable web of communication which derives from and depends on the technologies mentioned above.

With the last point I foreshadow the thrust of my current work, and the historical circularity mentioned previously. The original symposium question, "Is the earth a living organism," grew explicitly out of the then recently proposed Gaia hypothesis. James Lovelock, one of the



formulators of this stunningly useful and adventurous idea, was a main presenter at the symposium. Lynn Margulis, the brilliant evolutionary biologist who worked closely with Lovelock in developing the Gaia theory, was invited but unable to attend. A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to show Lynn Margulis the 1993 version of this paper. Our subsequent conversation made it clear to me that I was essentially identifying addiction as an evolutionary hurdle, or turning point, in the development not only of our species, but also of the larger biosphere of earth itself. The book proposal was put on hold, and with Lynn's guidance, I went back to the library, and back to the drafting board, to incorporate this conceptual frame into my writing. I will leave you with this quote by the esteemed primatologist Allison Jolly, from the end of her book, *Lucy's Legacy: Sex and Intelligence in Human Evolution*:

It remains to be seen what role our evolved conscious purpose will play in using our new global power. We may choose despotism, ecological blight, death for other species, destruction for our own. Or we may successfully improve our lot, stabilize our demands, preserve and enrich the biosphere. Biology has nothing to predict about which course we take. It only says that we are something new under the sun. We are bringing changes to the biosphere as important as the first true cell that survived to leave progeny to inhabit the earth, almost as drastic as the first green mote that made energy from sunlight. Just perhaps, we may become even more important, not as individuals but as a global organism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> p. 62, *Alcoholics Anonymous, Third Edition*, New York: AA World Services, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> The term "epistemology" was first used to characterize the predicament of alcoholism in an insightful and germinal essay, "The Cybernetics of 'Self': A Theory of Alcoholism" by Gregory Bateson. In addition to the word itself, I am borrowing as well Bateson's usage, which includes ontological significance within the meaning-domain of the term "epistemology."

<sup>3</sup> Along these axes are extremes of being in *and out* of control; of heightened sensation, and *lack* of sensation, or *numbness*, as well.

<sup>4</sup> *The Little Prince* (Harcourt Brace Janovitch, 1943, pp. 42-43) offers an elegant and poignant rendering of this predicament in the dialogue where the little prince asks a man “settled down in silence before a collection of empty bottles and also a collection of full bottles”:

“Why are you drinking?”

“So that I may forget,” replied the tippler.

“Forget what?” inquired the little prince.

“Forget that I am ashamed,” the tippler confessed.

“Ashamed of what?” insisted the little prince, who wanted to help him.

“Ashamed of drinking!”

And, the story tells us, the little prince went away, puzzled.

<sup>5</sup> Research methodologies and findings are so diverse, and have shifted so substantially since this section was written, that these representations may now be questionable. The merits of the point in question are not dependent on these particular examples.

<sup>6</sup> This comparison illustrates another critical feature of addiction: that addiction inheres in the *relationship with*, rather than the actual use of, the technology.

<sup>7</sup> The image of the elephant in the living room refers to the idea that growing up in an alcoholic family is often like growing up in a household where there is an elephant in the living room—and at the same time a family rule against acknowledging that there is, indeed, an elephant in the living room.

<sup>8</sup> Although very few forms of addiction could be consigned solely to the individual or social domains, and certainly not these two.

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