



COVID-19, the Anthropocene, and transformative change

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It is autumn on our farm. The bark has turned crimson on the stems of 'candle-bark' eucalypts, and flame robins have arrived from the mountains for winter. Like windborne waifs, they often flit along fence-lines beside me as I take the sheep dogs for a walk.

Although from remote mountain forests, these birds seem to welcome their seasonal human contact. Once, an enterprising female discovered a cracked window-pane in our shearing shed and, for some years, made her nest in a cut-open biscuit tin that was nailed to the wall as a clock container. In the spring, safe from weather and predator, she defiantly remained on her eggs despite the cacophony of shearing in process around her.

I marvel at such adaptability. But with memories of this summer still new, my thoughts turn to our own species. I ask myself: 'Can WE adapt in time to the increasingly obvious challenges of the on-rushing Anthropocene?'

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The extraordinary bushfire season in Australia, from October 2019 to February 2020, followed years of drought, record temperatures and abnormal, dust-laden winds. Sobering harbingers of our planetary ills undoubtedly, underscored with the signature of over two centuries of 'progressive' but unacknowledged desertification and general degradation of our landscapes: all underpinned by indigenous dispossession.

In the wash-out of the summer, floods accompanied the breaking drought. Anthropocene proponents said 'I told you so!'; sceptics continued to prevaricate. But there was an underlying feeling of discombobulation: a gnawing sense that something fundamental had shifted in our world and in our lives.

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Then, from out of the smoke, ash and floods, emerged a new apocalyptic rider: COVID-19. This, on top of the traumatic antipodean summer, seemed to confirm what Clive Hamilton encapsulated as a 'Defiant' Mother Earth fighting back. But will we join her in this fight, or remain her enemy? (Hamilton 2017).

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Today, our nation, like others, is in 'lockdown'. It is hard to ignore the nightly news bulletins and their repetition of cricket score-like statistics, the feeling of being overwhelmed by some foreign force. This is inevitably underscored by universal attempts to balance human and economic health.

It is in this balancing act—where human health is tallied against economics—that the nub of our Anthropocene dilemma is revealed.

All great civilisations in human history have an overriding story to tell. Ours today is not about a faith-religion, or an emperor, nor about nurturing 'The Earth Mother'. Our 'Great Story' is *Economic Rationalism*: of growth for the sake of growth.

The result is that there is no leadership from the top. Instead, whether with socialist nations, dictatorships, or democratic states of different political persuasions, the overriding philosophy is Economic Rationalism.

Yet signs of hope lie below. This is because that leadership which is appearing is 'bottom-up'. And it represents the emergence of a 'different story'.

For the last 30-plus years I have been researching and working in the field of regenerative agriculture. *Regenerative Agriculture* can best be described as managing landscapes to enable the self-organizational healing of complex-adaptive, natural systems. Nutrient-rich, healthy food-systems can then evolve. For all species, not just humans, these systems produce food that is the very opposite of the nutrient-bereft, chemically-tainted foods of the industrial food system: a system fundamentally complicit in the exponentially rising graphs of modern human diseases.

There are now tens of millions of hectares world-wide returning to a regenerative agriculture. Built on ancient knowledge and modern science and innovation, regenerative agriculture is as varied in its practices as the landscapes of the world. Holistic ruminant grazing, soil-restoring cropping, silvo-pastoral practices, organic food systems, and more.

The effects of regenerative agriculture's collective practices are huge for human health and planetary health. Paul Hawken and team's meticulously researched 'Drawdown' (Hawken 2017) reveals that of the top twenty of eighty best methods for carbon drawdown, ten are forms of regenerative agriculture.

Conversely, the ruling philosophy of modern human society—economic rationalism—underwrites at all levels (politics, policy, research, universities, schools) a destructive industrial agriculture and exploitative approach. This is helping devastate not only planetary health but also that of ourselves, our children's and our grandchildren's.

So, can we turn it around? Can we change our Story? Can recent events be the head-cracking stimuli which provide the genesis for transformative change and the overthrowing of embedded paradigms? I say 'Yes'.

Billions of dollars of philanthropic money is now flowing to this space. The uptake of regenerative agriculture and concomitant re-designing of food systems is accelerating world-wide.

In this last month in Australia in the wake of COVID-19, there are indicators of further change—including a consciousness that our current corrupted food systems are

vulnerable. Sales of laying hens, vegetable seeds, 'how-to-grow' courses, freezers, and home-gardening implements have sky-rocketed. While it is too early to tell if this is the beginning of a fundamental shift, one thing is certain: we don't have long. We must be galvanised now.

I think back to the flame robin. She adapted and found a way to safety and survival through a broken window-pane.

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References

- Hamilton, C. 2017. *Defiant Earth. The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
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