

The Ascent of Humanity

Charles Eisenstein explains his approach to human crisis and potential today

Interview by Christian Salvesen in March 2012

Dear Charles Eisenstein, I'm very impressed by your passionate and extensive work – all the different ways of sharing your insights on internet (videos etc.) and by your books! How do you manage all that? "The Ascent of Humanity" has been published in Germany just recently. It covers a huge and all encompassing subject. Is there a way to say in a few sentences what it is all about? What is it that you want to bring across?

When someone really understands how bad the crisis of the planet is, it is hard not to fall into despair: not only because the problems seem unsolvable, but because it seems humanity as a whole isn't even trying to solve them. It seems that WE are the problem. The Ascent of Humanity tries to come to terms with this despair. The book traces all of the crises today to a common root that I call "Separation." Separation from nature, from each other, from community, even from our own bodies. It describes how our social institutions -- such as money, medicine, education, politics, technology, etc. -- are all expressions of Separation, which is why they are all coming to a crisis point together. The key idea of the book is that this multiple crisis isn't the end, it is the beginning. It is a birth crisis propelling us into an age of "reunion." We can see already that such ideas as the conquest of nature, and the primacy of the individual, are becoming obsolete. So basically, humanity's journey over the past thousands of years, in which every horror imaginable has happened, is part of a larger process.

You say that there is a spiritual dimension in the global crisis – can you elaborate on that?

By "spiritual" I am NOT talking about some realm separate from matter. What I mean is that the crisis goes "all the way to the bottom," that it is bringing change on a most fundamental level. What is in crisis isn't just our institutions and systems. What is in crisis is our very way of being, our sense of self. The answers to the questions, "Who am I?" "What is the purpose of life?" "What is it to be human?" are changing.

Separation is probably the general crisis of humanity that you point to in your book. Has that changed since Adam & Eve? Would you say the illusion of the I or separate individual (as addressed by spiritual teachers such as Buddha) is the source of this crisis?

Yes, that is one way to put it. The illusion of separateness didn't happen all of a sudden though, it evolved over thousands of years. From it, we created systems and technologies that in turn accelerated separation. For example, agriculture might be an outgrowth of symbolic culture (language) which makes nature ours conceptually; with agriculture we apply that concept to the actual domestication of plants and animals. And once we have done that, we are in a human, domestic realm that is all the more separate from nature.

You speak of a new concept of self from which the solution may come. What is this new concept?

It is more than a new concept of self, although that is part of it. It is also a new sense of self. It is a concept embedded within an entire mythology that is largely invisible to us, but that creates our customary state of being. The new self is the connected self, the self of interbeing.

No longer will we experience ourselves as these separate bubbles of psychology interacting with other separate selves in a universe that is "out there." For the connected self, the principle of ecology is obviously true: that the welfare of other beings is part of my welfare too. What would an economy look like that were based on that understanding?

In your book you state an interdependence between the individual and the collective. As far as I understand the mystical approach (or awakening) once the I drops away the collective doesn't matter, there is no separation any more. What do you say?

I really don't linger too much over metaphysics. I can say, however, that when I talk about Reunion I'm not referring to a state of undifferentiated oneness. It is not that the separate ego self is wrong and should be abandoned. It has its place. The problem today is that we are stuck in that self most of the time. The transition I am seeing is a transition toward a more fluid self that has many concentric layers. There is the ego self, the self of family, of community, of humanity, of the land, of the planet, of the cosmos. Reunion is the process of recovering the felt connections to these larger aspects of self that we currently experience as other (except in special moments of connection.) Those moments of connection are a glimpse of where we are headed. When you experience those moments, you know that they are real -- realer than ordinary life.

How do we get out of this controlling self?

Mostly not through our own efforts. We are born out of it, and have about as much agency in that process as a fetus does during childbirth. If we resist, the birth lasts longer, but in the end we are still born. More specifically, we get out of the controlling self when the strategies of control stop working. That is happening on a collective level as we speak. Addiction gives us a good picture of the controlling self. Drugs are a way to maintain control over life, over pain. They work for a while, but eventually the addiction becomes impossible to maintain.

What would you say is the meaning of life?

I think the meaning of life changes as we proceed through it. It is very personal. You might say that because it is not absolute, it is something we create, but that is not accurate. Rather, it is something given to us. I think a more pertinent question might be, "What is the purpose of life?" That, I think, is fairly universal. It is to learn, to play, to explore, to love, to experience life, and to give of ones gifts.

Can you say something about your involvement in the Occupy Money Movement? What is the situation right now in the US and world wide?

I wasn't directly involved in Occupy in the sense of camping on the streets. I just wrote a few influential articles and was the subject of a viral video: Occupy Wall Street: The Revolution is Love. I think the movement was a huge success, despite the fact that it achieved nothing tangible in the way of public policy. No laws changed, but public perceptions shifted. Debt entered the public's radar screen. Also, it showed the ordinary citizens have power. The time wasn't quite ripe yet for people power to come into its own. People are still too comfortable here -- it is still possible for most people here to pretend that the system is still working, or at least to pretend that normalcy will return. That pretense is wearing thin, but it will probably take a major crisis to puncture it. When that happens (and there is no telling when it might happen) people will be out on the streets again, and events will take on a life of their own, and

unimaginable changes will happen overnight. In times of collapse, the hopelessly radical becomes commonsense.

In one of your videos you say "money is a story". Can you please elaborate on that?

Money is a system of agreements about the meaning of symbols. On the physical level, Bill Gates' bank account is essentially the same as my bank account: it is merely a string of bits in a computer somewhere. But the interpretation of those bits makes a huge difference. If the social agreement that gives value to these symbols falls apart, then money becomes nothing more than a data file, nothing more than pieces of paper with ink on them. In Germany, you have seen the collapse of the story of money before, in the Weimar days.

Anyway, the question I investigate in my new book, *Sacred Economics*, is, "Why have we chosen a story of money that puts money at odds with the welfare of the planet and the survival of civilization?" Why have we agreed to value activities that aren't serving anyone except in a very narrow, short-term way? This is a pertinent question because, like our other institutions, the story of money is falling apart. It is still here, but it is wearing thin. In my youth there was nothing more permanent, reliable, and practical than triple-A bonds, blue chip stocks, and your pension, but now we no longer trust in these things. Soon, as the collapse of the money system accelerates, we will have the chance to build a new money system built on a different set of agreements.

Here are two concepts that I heard you talking about in a video: Time Bank and Gift Culture. Can you explain the context?

Time banking is simply a way to connect local gifts and needs without using money. Typically, there is an electronic bulletin board of services that people are offering, and another one of needs that people have. When you help someone out, your account is credited with, say, two hours, and their account is debited. Then you can "spend" those two hour-credits when someone renders you a service. It is a way to re-form community in places where it has disappeared. Instead of hiring a babysitter, or a lawn care service, or a taxi, people can do it for each other. Eventually, when they get to know and trust one another, maybe they stop keeping track of the hours. In a mature gift economy, you don't need to keep track because everyone knows who has been generous and who has not. Ancient tribal cultures were gift economies -- they almost never used barter as the economists imagine. Today, gift relationships have been replaced by money relationships. For example, when I was little, neighbours watched each other's kids after school, so you never paid for day care. We played outside and never paid to play as children do today stuck indoors with their video games. A few centuries ago people rarely paid for music -- instead, they sang together. They rarely paid for medicine -- every village had a grandmother or two who could heal with herbs, and knowledge of folk remedies was widespread. People also built their own houses (with lots of help from the neighbors). Today, all of these functions have entered the realm of paid services. People don't rely on the gifts of people they know; therefore, there is no community. Community is woven from gifts. If I don't need you and you don't need me, our relationship is probably going to be quite superficial.

In July you will come to Munich, Germany for a talk. What will be the focus? What would you like to say to our readers?

I haven't decided what to speak on yet. I am a very spontaneous speaker -- every talk is different. Sometimes I talk about economics and the money system, sometimes I talk about

the crisis of civilization, sometimes I talk about the personal dimensions of how to align ourselves with the new world, or how to navigate this time of transition.

To the readers, I would say that we are transitioning into an age that we might call, "the age of the Gift." We are here to give. You may have noticed that if you are in a job that doesn't engage your gifts, you'll feel like you're not even living your own life. You'll think, "I wasn't put here on earth to do this!" That feeling is true. In uncertain times, when everything that was once secure is now in doubt, we can no longer trust our old plans and strategies. Instead we can trust our desire to give, and begin making choices based on, "What am I called on to give?" Many people find that new possibilities open up for them when they inhabit this question.

For further information see: www.charleseisenstein.net/