

## *Short Paper for Ecocity World Summit*

*Richard Register, conference co-convener, has written short essays to augment his talks at the Seventh International Ecocity Conference. These do not follow the particular words of the talks as the talks are from notes, not scripts. The short essays are designed to encapsulate some of the more important thoughts. This one goes along with my "Tribute to Paolo Soleri" at the closing session of the conference, Saturday, April 26, 2008.*

## *Einstein, Gandhi and Paolo Soleri*

*Said a friend recently, "We hear about Paolo Soleri so infrequently these days, why do you keep mentioning him as a key person in your career, anyway?" "My career? Should be everybody's survival, not just one individual's career."*

Paolo Soleri is one of the three most important people of the 20th century, and leading into the 21st century now. Time Magazine got it backward deliberating on their two nominees when its editors and publishers chose Einstein over Gandhi as Man of the 20th Century. Of course they missed Paolo entirely, for reasons I'll contemplate below.

In "outward looking," mechanistic Western tradition they chose Einstein over Gandhi because Einstein told us a great deal about the universe we are part of, the universe outside of ourselves, and how it works in terms of physics and mathematics. Very important for sure, even beautiful in its way. Gandhi, however told us about ourselves and how to survive deep into the future by way of non-violence and self-discipline, by the love and spiritual/psychological path that many equate with the "inward looking" Eastern tradition. Of course! Time Magazine is a western publication.

Gandhi, like Einstein, worked in the physical world but in a very different field of action, destroying the most far-flung empire the world ever saw and replacing it in his neighborhood with the still-largest democracy on the planet – all with non-violence, with appeal to the compassionate and spiritual and promotion of law in the service of fairness to all. It is amazing, and to our discredit and gathering danger, that he is talked about so infrequently these days. On behalf of us Westerners avoiding self-confrontation, Time Magazine correctly represented the strong tendency of economics and science to embrace Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of economics and supposed objectivity of science leading the way, with little guidance from whatever it is humanity really is. We float into the future following what is physically possible. We blindly follow the pathetically under-examined and under-evaluated trends of economy. (Should we really follow something that's invisible?!)

Soleri figures in as providing the General Field Theory that Einstein sought unsuccessfully, because he, Einstein, didn't identify one of those key items in the evolutionary process, namely us people with our ability to shape evolution itself, to provide another dimension of creativity to the full swath of evolution's course through the universe – and destructivity. What we add to evolution are love and hate, passion and robotic numbness, greed and generosity, good and evil and other elements of a wide range of "drivers" way off the radar screen of physics and math. Soleri, though developing the theory in a language that most people couldn't read – or didn't want to think about – said it most succinctly in the title of one of his books: "The Bridge Between Matter and Spirit is Matter Becoming Spirit." This sounds puzzling to most people but simply means that evolution delivers changes in a particular pattern in which people now play a crucial role giving rise to higher levels of integration, physically and thereby spiritually, if spirit means higher levels of consciousness and conscience in us humans and heading toward whatever may come in moving in that direction into the unknown reaches of future evolution.

Presently, human impact on evolution is massively evident and has been understood almost solely in destructive terms, us two-

legged, brain-bright exterminating angles sweeping across the planet with spears, atel-atels, bows and arrows and guns destroying most of the larger fauna of the biosphere, with axes and chainsaws, destroying most of the forests, with plows and bulldozers cutting through the soils... and so on. Now massive amounts of CO2 from our sprawling cities designed on the measure of cars, not people, destroy the stability of the climate system of a whole planet. That the Earth is experiencing an "extinction spasm" and collapsing biodiversity for all of the planet and evolution here into the many millions of years in the future is well known and accepted by anyone who studies ecology, biodiversity, paleontology, evolution or just plain biology. Most people don't want to think too much about that, or if they do, just wallow in their vulnerability and lack of courage to fight back by doing something uncomfortably new, difficult, strenuous, systematic, disciplined and rewarding. They fantasize instead about moving to a country farm, putting a solar "collector" on their roof, growing a vegetable garden while actually doing little to put even that dreamy effort in gear. Some, lacking the energy, insights or resolve to try to reverse the disastrous trends at the level of their causes are promoting adaptation - by building dikes on coastlines or proposing moving closer to the poles. Not a health response.

But if we took up the challenge of rescuing evolution from the division between physics and us creative agents, who are people potentially in sync with Einstein's universe and Gandhi's notion of who we can be, we'd realize there is a very positive side to all this interference in evolution, which is our ability to build ourselves and our cities, towns and villages in a way to get evolution back on a healthy track. We can, as Gandhi demonstrated, mold ourselves into agents of peaceful evolution. We can, as Soleri proposes in his ideas for reshaping the built environment, help reshape ourselves at the same time we are supporting, not attacking, biodiversity in the way we build our cities, towns and villages. Einstein was hooked into physics and math that were too limited, broad though they be, to give efficacy to the world we humans operate in, the world Gandhi was exploring, the world Soleri described pretty well and not only that but demonstrated in his attempts to build

something capable of radical energy, land, time and other resources conservation, that is, lean and efficient "matter" organized for biodiversity and attaining higher human creative and compassionate potential.

People have not caught on to Paolo's enormous and crucial contribution for many reason, no doubt many reasons I don't understand myself. But I see a large part of the problem of ignoring his powerful contribution as having to do with everyone following each other around in circles like a heard of sheep, everyone wanting to be accepted and everyone afraid of genuine change. People wanting to thrive right now in material terms, cling possessively to every shred of "success," people trying to be accepted into academic propriety, look smart and attractive, become an embodiment of business success, provide for the funding sources what the foundations and governments want, send the kids to the right schools, follow the "invisible hand" of the market place instead of the creative mind of... ourselves. We follow the supposedly objective directives of science in the service of blind economics and go where it is leading us rather than saying, "WE decide where to go." Our stinginess in giving to the future, paying taxes and using them for the future, the fear of investing something in the future when we might be able to enjoy something else in comfort today is involved too. I have nothing against some comforts and pleasant habits, and we can have some of those. But we need to face up to some real discomfort, embrace some serious even painful exercise, summons real effort and courage to grow into something "spiritual" from the material world we are part of, as Soleri suggests in that title of his book. We need to do this to facilitate a healthy direction for evolution here on this planet and in our corner of the universe.

Einstein was amazing but he didn't get it totally right if a mere layman dare say. There's simply more to evolution and the universe than math and physics and there's far more to life than that. The attempt for a unified field theory based on such reduction was just too narrowly drawn.

Soleri alerted us to the direction evolution takes - moving toward more complexity and miniaturization in ever more harmonious whole systems - and suggested a

methodology that would help enormously in that direction: the reshaping of cities in a healthy direction and at the same time, therefore, a reshaping of ourselves.

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