Foreboding is in the cultural wind these days. Leonardo DiCaprio tells us the ecological crisis has brought humanity to The 11th Hour, esteemed biologist E.O. Wilson issues An Appeal to Save Life on Earth in the subtitle to his book The Creation, while Cormac McCarthy garners a 2007 Pulitzer Prize for his novel The Road, depicting the chilling specter of life after a nuclear war, where a father and his emaciated son fight off cannibals as they make their way across a charred landscape. Meanwhile, Christians by the millions read about coming end times in the Left Behind series. And on “Coast to Coast AM”—the most popular nighttime radio program, carried by 500 stations and the XM Satellite Radio network—an increasing amount of programming is devoted to the signs and wonders (UFO sightings, disappearing honeybees) thought to foreshadow the end of civilization in 2012, prophesied by the ancient Mayan calendar.

Many have lost hope. I had a long talk about this recently with my twenty-nine-year-old nephew, Dimitri, a Ph.D. student in political science. Like others, he holds the deep conviction that damage to the biosphere is irreversible, that there is no chance of turning aside from catastrophe. In his future work, he told me, “I’m going to document the demise of our civilization.” There was no humor in his voice when he said this, as we huddled together over coffee at a gathering for a family wedding, his wife Cody beside him, seven months pregnant.

“When were you born?” I asked him. “1979,” he said.

It struck me that Dimitri had grown up in the era of 1984—the title of George Orwell’s dystopian novel—for he had come to adulthood in a political milieu defined by doublespeak: where politicians talk about clear skies and compassionate conservatism, while increasing pollution of the skies and removing any trace of compassion from government policies. From the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 until now, Dimitri’s world has been shaped by a virtually unbroken conservative hegemony. He has never known any other culture.

It has been an era of deep denial about global warming, the end of the petroleum age, and growing wealth inequalities—an era, not incidentally, when former oil men have occupied the White House. As their time draws to a close, the shield of cultural denial they’ve held in place is beginning to crack, as the reality of our ecological dilemma penetrates.

Something is dying. We sense this: it is in the looming feeling of foreboding. But many do not yet accept the possibility that something is also being born.

Make no mistake about it: trouble lies ahead—likely big trouble, in the form of rising seas, unprecedented species extinction, a painful withdrawal from increasingly scarce and expensive fossil fuels, a greater frequency of droughts and hurricanes, and perhaps a prolonged economic downturn as icing on the calamitous cake. We’re not getting off scot-free here. We’re like a nation of alcoholics, gambling addicts, and compulsive over-eaters, confronting the need to give up excessive consumerism, casino-like financial returns, and gluttonous fossil fuel use. We may have to bottom out before we sober up. Change tends to happen only when things go terribly wrong.

Things do seem to be careening in that direction. Experts predict that oil production will
Imagine the current world economy—already in ecological overshoot—multiplied by four. Now picture the impact on the biosphere. Things are going to get worse before they get better.

The Other Side of Calamity

But our ecological footprint cannot grow indefinitely. At some point we either snuff ourselves out. Or we sober up.

That’s the question I wish to take up here: What lies on the other side of calamity? Is it the complete and utter collapse of civilized life as we know it? Or might it be transformation of the most profound and hopeful kind?

This was the unspoken question that hung over a class I taught in January, at Schumacher College in England, titled “Can the Earth Survive Capitalism?” I began the class by talking about what’s wrong with the current design of capitalism, and planned to move next into solutions. But I found the class wasn’t ready for that next step. Their minds were on “collapse.” That was the word I heard casually bandied about in hallways and over dinner, as I came to realize that many of these students— schooled as they were in deep ecology—were convinced that what lay ahead was ecological collapse, after which, they thought, we would regenerate our civilization at the village level.

A number of students were from Totnes, where Schumacher College is located, which was the first in what is now a movement of “Transition Towns,” where the community is preparing for a carbon-constrained future by creating an Energy Descent Action Plan. Local change excited these students. They seemed to subconsciously imagine that the larger economic system—corporations, the stock market, banks—would somehow implode and be vaporized.

“There are two worldviews in this room,” I said to them, as I set aside my lesson plan and opened up an hour for unplanned discussion. “I think it’s important we put them on the table.” One is the view of total social collapse. The other is a view of transformation—not the advent of utopia, but a kind of muddling through to a new economy that arises out of the one we have. “You don’t want to think about total collapse,” I said. “If it comes, we won’t be tending our community gardens, we’ll be dealing with a new form of fascism.”

It’s transformation I’d like to argue for here, as I did in that classroom—though I want to emphasize I don’t see it as some kind of inevitable destiny. If we delude ourselves that our desired future will waft toward us, as on some favorable breeze, we’ll still be waiting when the rising seas claim the ground beneath our feet. Nor would I argue that transformation is our likely future. It’s highly unlikely, if we let capitalism grind along in its relentless way. I wouldn’t even argue that this transformation has begun, nor would I say its spread is inevitable.

What I am saying is that transformation is possible.

I will add that it would be an achievement against the odds, not unlike the American Revolution, where a tiny band of revolutionaries took on the most powerful empire on the planet, and won.

We can work a profound transformation in our economy. But here’s the trick: winning this one won’t be about defeating some enemy. Would that it were that simple. No, our challenge is to take on ourselves, our own entrenched habits, and our deepest ways of conceptualizing
our place in the world and the nature of the human project.

What is in the offing is a massive cultural turning, global in scale and unprecedented in its swiftness, which will likely begin by tackling climate change and then radiate into every nerve and sinew of industrial society—overturning long-settled economic ideas about the nature of human motivation, the definition of wealth, and the meaning of success. Major economic institutions must also be redesigned at their core.

If it’s hard for Dimitri’s generation to imagine that this kind of cultural turning is possible, it may be because they’ve yet to live through anything like it. But large-scale turnings are something their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents have known something about. When Dimitri’s mom and I were young, a black person in the South could not sit down at a Woolworth’s lunch counter and order a grilled cheese sandwich. High school girls were denied athletic teams, and were not permitted even to wear slacks to school until my senior year. People smoked on airplanes.

Dimitri’s grandparents in World War II saw industry convert overnight to wartime production, with families saving toothpaste tubes and aluminum foil for airplane factories. His great-grandparents saw deeper transformation in World War I, with the collapse of monarchy. In a stunningly short ten years, 1908 to 1918, revolutions swept the Ottoman Empire, China, Russia, and Europe, until by the end of the Great War crowns were rolling in the streets.

From today’s vantage point, it’s tempting to look back and see these changes as inevitable, or easy. But at the time they seemed impossible. Just as impossible as change seems today.

Many Futures Remain Possible

That systems can transform in deep and lasting ways—without destroying themselves—is a lesson we can take from history. To understand why and how this kind of change happens, we can look to systems theory, which offers insights useful to our situation today.

Large-scale systems change is the focus of my colleagues at the Tellus Institute, a Boston think tank founded thirty years ago by physicists and scientists, where the three co-founders—all in their sixties—have taken on a final collective project of charting a plausible course for a “Great Transition” into a culture of sustainability and equity. This focus grew out of scenario planning the institute undertook in the mid-1990s, when it convened an international group of scientists and development professionals to explore alternative global futures. The scenarios and their quantitative models have been used by groups like the United Nations Environment Programme, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The premise of this work is that massive change is inevitably coming in the years ahead, but the outcome is not foreordained. The Tellus framework outlines four broad possible future paths.

In a Market Forcexample, current trends in resource use continue to increase through 2050, as other nations converge toward American lifestyles. With population rising and economic output quadrupling, the strain on ecosystems becomes unbearably severe. By 2050, carbon emissions soar well beyond safe ranges, and the result is runaway climate change and a radically damaged biosphere.

In a Policy Reform example, government emerges as a powerful actor, embracing ambitious policies to reduce energy use, carbon emissions, hunger, and income inequity. Problems
are solved by government fiat. Yet given the likely resistance of corporate lobbyists, it’s hard to imagine this occurring without massive citizen demand, which can only arise from broader cultural awareness. Policy reform in the absence of cultural transformation likely is a fantasy.

A Fortress World scenario envisions that reform fails and problems cascade into self-amplifying crises. Environmental conditions deteriorate, combining with food insecurity and emergent diseases to foster a health crisis. The affluent live in protected enclaves amid oceans of misery. With governmental priorities focused on security, draconian police measures sweep through hot spots of conflict. This is the plausible future of our foreboding.

The future we have yet to focus on is that of a Great Transition. Here we may be prodded initially by higher fuel prices and carbon constraints, but ultimately we embrace traveling less, consuming less, living in smaller houses—not with a sense of deprivation, but because we recognize that quality of life matters more than quantity of stuff. Conspicuous consumption is seen as a vulgar throwback to a coarser time. With the ecological crisis deepening our sense of connection, there is recognition of the need to guarantee a decent minimum for all. This is the source of the massive citizen demand that alone can drive both governments and markets to adequate measures and innovations.

The first two scenarios—business as usual and policy reform—represent the status quo and incremental change from the status quo. Both are transitional states, for neither is plausible as a stable future. In the long run, we face a choice between two worlds: collapse or transformation.

There’s a knife-edge phenomenon at work, where we can be pitched into one of two profoundly different worlds, as the result of tipping points. Today we talk about negative tipping points, like the melting of the Greenland ice sheet. We need to also understand positive tipping points. And that brings us to systems science.

Systems Science and Transformation

Systems thinking looks at a variety of natural systems—from organisms and ecosystems to social systems—and sees them as open systems in a steady state. They are “open” in that they require constant throughput of energies, substances, and information. They maintain a steady state by self-repair of their internal structures. These internal structures are not fixed, like a clockwork mechanism, but are self-organizing. Thus when conditions outside a system change substantially, the system survives through self-transformation. It makes a sudden, creative advance into novelty.

Fundamental transformation is not only possible, it is the routine way natural systems evolve. Radical change is as common as grass in world history, because it is as common as grass in the life of all living systems.

But here’s the critical point: What unlocks social transformation is a shift in values, because values are at the core of a self-organizing human system. To value something is to care about it deeply, making it the True North of our internal guidance system. Values give meaning to human action and legitimacy to institutions, for they define what is good, true, and beautiful. As such they direct human action. We do not simply maximize our individual economic outcomes as the economist’s “rational actor” model would have us believe: we do pursue our interests, but that depends on what we think our interests are, which is a matter of values and social norms.

We can detect the beginning of a values shift in the unnamed spiritual hunger felt by many today. As capitalism threatens the life of the planet, so too does it threaten the life of the human spirit. For many people, the endless cycle of work and consumption leaves them feeling dead inside, unsatisfied, alienated from what really matters. In The Left Hand of God, Michael Lerner writes of the interviews he and his colleagues did at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, finding among middle Americans a pervasive sense that their deepest life energies are being depleted, that life is filled with meaningless activity, that they are going through motions imposed on them by outside forces. The interviews speak of a hunger for something more—for work that contributes to a larger good, for lives of purpose and meaning.

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concerning steroid use. “We ought to re-
view what’s happening if [steroid laws
aren’t] being enforced in baseball.”

Congress has also intervened on the
business side of baseball to exempt it (al-
one of all sports) from anti-trust laws and
on labor, broadcasting and taxation issues.

The Giants’ website promises that “The
Giants’ work in the community translates
into a variety of unique and progressive
programs dedicated to addressing some of
the most pressing needs of Northern Cali-
ifornia children and their families, includ-
ing health, anti-violence, youth fitness and
recreation, education and literacy.” And
what for the youth of Darfur?

Teams such as the San Francisco Giants
provide role models for our youth. “This
is not about Congress checking personal be-
havior,” said Rep. Tom Davis (R) of Vir-
ginia, who conducted the Congressional
steroids hearing. “It’s about people seeing
baseball players as role models for their
kids.” Pete Rose was barred entry into the
Hall of Fame for gambling and Barry
Bonds’ ambitions appear similarly des-
tined.

But if Pete Rose and Barry Bonds are
expected to be role models for the next gen-
eration, why shouldn’t the owners who pay
them be held to the same standard? In light
of the public calumny that many players have
had to endure in the media and in tele-
vised appearances before Congress be-
cause of their alleged ethical shortcomings,
mightn’t the Players Union be justified in
turning the tables and raising the issue of
the morality of owners’ investment prac-
tices in the next round of collective bar-
gaining negotiations?

Emphasizing the centrality of the spiri-
tual and moral dimension of all human re-
lations has been a central theme of Tik-
ku, and the way we can most easily make this
dimension visible is by insisting on its rec-
ognition in all social practices that are or
should be conceived as “public” in nature.
Drawing out the public aspect of these prac-
tices allows us to legitimately assert that
the practice involves all of us and that
those who engage in it have a responsibility
to adhere to community standards of ethi-
cal conduct. The politico-moral dimension
of sport is particularly prominent right now
as we prepare for the Beijing Olympics, and
if we think of the courageous actions of
Jesse Owens standing up to Hitler at the
1936 Olympics in Berlin, or Tommie Smith
and John Carlos holding their fists high on
the 1968 Olympics medal stand in protest
against the mistreatment of blacks in the
United States, we can see how significant
the public aspect of sports can be in helping
to awaken and elevate the world’s moral
consciousness. In this context, Steven Spiel-
berg was right to protest China’s violations
of international human rights in Tibet and
Darfur by divesting his cultural capital
from a sports event proclaiming China’s in-
ternational legitimacy.

But it is always easier to protest an
“other’s” actions, especially when that
“other” is an ascendant rival. Sports fans
of conscience should reflect upon why China’s
support of genocide is more newsworthy
than the support of U.S. based mutual
funds. We might find ourselves morally
called to withdraw our support for the San
Francisco Giants until the team’s owners
dissociate themselves from genocide.
From an economic standpoint, “Your SF
Giants” may need to be reminded who pays
their bills and to face the cost, in the form of
lower attendance, of being associated with
immoral investment practices. But in an-
other sense—a sense most consistent with
Tikkun’s ethic of compassion and speaking
to people’s inherent ethical and moral aspi-
rations—we should encourage Charles
Johnson and Sue Burns to voluntarily em-
brace the moral dimension of their leader-
ship role. By supporting divestment from
companies that support the atrocities in
Darfur, Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Burns would
be demonstrating the very ideals of fair play
and justice that Major League Baseball
once represented and is now working so
hard to reclaim. This is an opportunity for
them to make their fans proud and to serve as
models for owners of franchises
throughout professional sports.

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TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

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If we are to move beyond the current
destructive phase of capitalism, we will do
so because we tap the spiritual energy that
progressives have yet to tap in any coher-
ent way. Values hold the key. The hungry-
of the heart can be the bedrock on which
we build a new social order.

A Shifting Roadmap of Values

Current capitalist values are easy to
tick off, for they pervade the cultural air
we breathe. Self-interest is central: get-
ing the most for ourselves and neglecting
the consequences for others. Free mar-
kets are paramount: letting a boyish fi-
nancial elite run the global economy with
little adult supervision. Growth is the
aim: indulging a fantasy of endlessly ris-
ing gains in Gross Domestic Product, the
stock market, and personal consumption.

This trio of values holds together the
current economic orthodoxy. But this or-
thodoxy is today under pressure to trans-
form, as the world itself changes dra-
matically. In the years before and after
the turn of the millennium, we have wit-
nessed the end of the Cold War, the shred-
ding of the old social contract in the wake
of a globalizing economy, the rise of the
Internet, the mushrooming growth of
global civil society, the emergence of glob-
al terrorism, and the extinction of species
on a scale not seen since the demise of the
dinosaurs. From the European Union and
international trade institutions to new
regimes like carbon trading and the Inter-
national Criminal Court, we are witness-
ing the formation of a global human and
ecological system. The long journey of ex-
anding human connectivity—from city-
state to nation-state—has reached the
scale of the planet. A global civilization is
taking shape, for the first time in history.
Not for hundreds of years have the values
and institutions of society been in such
flux.

The institutions of capitalism seek to
reign supreme over this emergent world
order, profiting from its global connectiv-
ity while evading responsibility for its
health and maintenance. But this is a bar-
gain that won’t long endure. Financiers,
A Transformational Approach to Ecology

We might imagine, for a moment, what a transformed culture could look like, if sustainability were to become a widespread cultural norm, and the foundation for a new suite of public policies. With energy costs rising, a carbon-constrained future will not be easy. Economic hardship will increase. But with a values shift around the meaning of the good life, Americans could more readily embrace the chance to rely on mass transit, to buy local, to turn down the thermostat, to make do with less—seeing such changes less as individual hardships than as the end of gluttony and the beginning of cultural sanity.

Even with a surge of conservation and a shift to renewables, America is not likely to entirely forestall the effects of climate change. Growing seasons around the world will shift, creating regional winners and losers. Some islands and coastal areas may become uninhabitable, and climate refugees could number many millions. If we meet these developments in a spirit of self-interest, we will close our borders and retreat into gated communities. But embracing a sensibility of interdependence, Americans could grasp how our own profligacy contributes to the suffering of others. New windows might open for compassionate immigration policies and strengthened carbon limits. Rather than seeing negative events spin out of control, positive values could allow change to feed back into a rising spiral of transformation.

We might see a massive wave of interest in reducing fossil fuel use, and making transport and the built environment energy-efficient. Carpooling, bicycling, home insulation, green building, and other steps could be encouraged by government incentives, updated codes, and neighbor-to-neighbor outreach. Here is how all citizens could do their part, in a surge of solidarity on a par with World War II.

A Transformational Shift in Economics

Imagine that in economic policy, the neoclassical paradigm evolves as it incorporates the pioneering theories of today’s progressive Nobel Prize–winning economists. Breaking the mold of rational economic man—the isolated individual out to maximize his own utilities—we embrace what George Akerlof, president of the prestigious American Economics Association, calls “The Missing Motivation in Macroeconomics.” That motivation is social norms. It’s the notion that we can encourage citizens to make healthier choices by shaping the cultural milieu to make those choices more likely.

Rather than seeing endlessly consumption as the end of economic life, we could conceptualize success as Nobelist Amartya Sen does, as being about expanding human capabilities. In Development as Freedom, he describes development as “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.” Rather than GDP, the focus is on removing sources of unfreedom, including poverty, tyranny, and repression.

Economic policy might begin—as ecological economics does—with the carrying capacity of the biosphere. Since physical throughput cannot grow forever, allocation becomes central. It’s critical to see that everyone has enough. We might also recognize that markets are not good at distributing certain kinds of resources, like our common wealth, and so we must create new institutions to protect the commons—managing the sky as a commons, auctioning emissions permits, and using the income to serve the public good.

Grounded in these ways of thinking, public policy could focus on helping the too-numerous families who are a step away from financial devastation, recognizing that when any of us are suffering, our national commitment to the pursuit of happiness remains unfulfilled. The challenge of climate change could become a historic opportunity to rebuild our infrastructure for sustainability, creating millions of green-collar jobs. A national index of well-being might take its place alongside GDP as a new measure of policy success.
the bursting of a bubble in financial derivatives, our economic downturn could lengthen. If we help policymakers connect the dots, they will see that the behavior of irresponsible banks and corporations traces its roots to the casino economy. The reckless pursuit of unsustainable, short-term gains—enabled by waves of deregulation—is at the root of many of our financial ills. Seeing this, we might leave behind our addictive fantasies of an infinitely growing pile of financial chips, recommitting to genuine wealth: the health of the biosphere and our own well-being. This awareness could create a cultural framework where, through political battles, we rein in speculation with robust new national and international institutions of capital constraints.

Drawing on the insights of new economics, we could create broad recognition that corporations do not exist to meet the needs of capital alone. Their purpose is to broadly enhance human well-being. Business people might be emboldened to speak out about the burden of meeting unceasing demands for growth in earnings, which some CEOs even today deride as “short-termism.”

Policies could be adopted to redefine fiduciary duties to include social and environmental responsibility. Corporate boards might meet these new duties by adding worker and public interest directors. Alternative, community-friendly company designs—like cooperatives, social enterprises, and employee-owned firms—might flourish, because consumers and employees seek them out. The federal government could make widespread employee ownership a major goal, and steer government contracts toward responsible firms while avoiding irresponsible firms, creating a new Moral Bottom Line.

Inexorably, the culture of capitalism might shift. The short-term focus on maximizing profits could become yesterday’s management theory, replaced by a sensibility of protecting and enhancing our common life, for the benefit of generations to come.

Tangible policies and practices like these could be where transformation plays out—but where it begins is in the human heart. As long as we imagine that our self-worth equals our net worth, that poor people are lazy or inferior, that the size of our house equals our standing in the community, capitalism will retain its hold over us. But when we begin willingly to choose time over money, to pay more for organics because clean soil is worth the cost, or to focus on the BTUs (thermal units) on our heating bills rather than the size of the check we write, we will have begun the shift that can carry us through.

It won’t be quick or easy. Certainly it’s not inevitable. But we can as one whole make that creative advance into novelty this eleventh hour demands.

That’s the message I want to send Dimitri. I want to mail this article in a letter to him, as a way of finishing that conversation we started in the coffee shop months ago. It’s important to remain hopeful, I want to tell him, for the sake of Mariana. That’s his daughter, my family’s first grandchild. She was born July 27, 2007.

Marjorie Kelly (MKelly@Tellus.org) was founding editor of Business Ethics magazine, and author of The Divine Right of Capital. Her Tellus Institute (www.tellus.org) colleagues Paul Raskin and Allen White contributed ideas to this article.

INTEGRAL POLITICS
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Moreover, just as the key to political progress in America starts with raising consciousness at the traditional level by making it more successful, winning the “war on terror” is also a matter of making Islamic traditional consciousness more successful. In the long run, the best way to help the Islamic world to become less stuck in the past will be for America to move its own cultural center of gravity forward in history through the rise of the integral worldview.

It’s important to see how war in the twenty-first century is being fought primarily in the internal universe. The conflicts turn not so much on the actual military engagements, but rather on the results of the battle for hearts and minds. And it’s also important to see how wars are often fought with the tactics and technology of the previous era, resulting in costly losses and bad mistakes. So as we might expect, history is repeating itself in the war on terror—we’re fighting it with the tactics of World War II and the Cold War, wherein torture, secret prisons, and unjustified covert operations by the CIA and others are undermining our moral authority in the eyes of the world. Thus, any gains in the external universe produced by these tactics are more than offset by the losses they create in the battle for hearts and minds taking place in the internal universe.

As consciousness is raised, Americans will come to better appreciate that implementation of a more moral foreign policy is actually a critical part of a comprehensive and effective national defense. And this realization will show us where we need to change our tactics. For example, we can put an immediate end to all forms of rendition and torture, and we can carefully articulate a more transparent and accountable role for our intelligence services. We can announce this change in direction and the reasons for it, and then we can do some things to help heal the history that is continuing to hurt us today. For instance, we can pay for a memorial in downtown Tehran that memorializes our shame for the CIA’s regrettable intervention in Iran in the 1950s. We can symbolically atone for those sins, and help heal the wounds that are keeping us from developing a positive