

# Sustainability is Dead— Long Live Sustainability

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*A Manifesto:  
Written to Mark the End of  
Millennium Two,  
and the Beginning of  
Millennium Three*

Alan AtKisson

## *Preface*

*This Manifesto was first drafted in the waning days of 1999 as an exercise in personal clarification. While the Western world celebrated the turning of the millennium, I asked myself, What do I believe? What do I stand for? To what do I dedicate the second half of my life?*

*Answering these questions seemed pressing. My first book, Believing Cassandra, had generated strong responses from its readers; some of them claimed to be redirecting their lives, based on their reading experience, to become more active change agents for sustainability. While such impact had been my hope, to have achieved it in any measure was more sobering than gratifying. I felt challenged to go deeper, to become clearer about what sustainability requires, to write about that, to live it.*

*In the relative calm between the day Millennium Two ended in fire-works, and the day Millennium Three was scarred by the opening disasters of war, that feeling intensified. My mother and stepfather—great examples of lives committed to service—succumbed to cancer. An important teacher and friend, Donella (“Dana”) Meadows, died suddenly of a brain infection. The generation of my parents and mentors had begun to disappear, at a time when the world clearly needed more people like them.*

*The sense of loss was acute, and it gave new urgency to Dana’s strong encouragements to spread this document more widely. I resisted the inclination to rewrite it based on the dramatic events of September 11, 2001, precisely because we must not lose sight of humanity’s more fundamental and long-term challenge: the sustainable redesign and redevelopment of our world.*

*Central to my motivation is this hope: that the number of people committed to sustainability will grow, and grow dramatically. Thoughtful, creative, and committed people, quietly rebuilding those parts of our world that do not work, can usher in an era of accelerating transformation, a decade when—despite all odds—we truly begin to “turn things around.”*

*Transformation is generally turbulent; but as the old Shaker hymn says, “To turn and to turn will be our delight / till by turning and turning we come down right.”*

*Alan AtKisson  
18 October 2001*

AT THE DAWN of the Third Millennium, human civilization finds itself in a seeming paradox of gargantuan proportions. On the one hand, industrial and technological growth is destroying much of Nature, endangering ourselves, and threatening our descendants. On the other hand, we must accelerate our industrial and technological development, or the forces we have already unleashed will wreak even greater havoc on the world for generations to come.

We cannot go on, and we cannot stop. We must transform.

### *Facing a Great Paradox*

At precisely the moment when humanity's science, technology, and economy has grown to the point that we can monitor and evaluate all the major systems that support life, all over the Earth, we have discovered that most of these systems are being systematically degraded and destroyed . . . by our science, technology, and economy.

The evidence that we are beyond the limits to growth is by now overwhelming: the alarms include climatic change, disappearing biodiversity, falling human sperm counts, troubling slow-downs in food production after decades of rapid expansion, the beginning of serious international tensions over basic needs like water. Wild storms and floods and eerie changes in weather patterns are but a first visible harbinger of more serious trouble to come, trouble for which we are not adequately prepared.

Indeed, change of all kinds—in the Biosphere (nature as a whole), the Technosphere (the entirety of human manipulation of nature), and the Noosphere (the collective field of human consciousness)—is happening so rapidly that it exceeds our capacity to understand it, control it, or respond to it adequately in corrective ways. Humanity is simultaneously entranced by its own power, overwhelmed by the problems created by progress, and continuing to steer itself over a cliff.

Our economies and technologies are changing certain basic structures of planetary life, such as the balance of carbon in the atmosphere, genetic codes, the amount of forest cover, species variety and distribution, and the foundations of cultural identity.

Unless we make technological advances of the highest order, many of the destructive changes we are causing to nature are irreversible. Extinct species cannot (yet) be brought back to life. No credible strategy for controlling or reducing carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere has been put forward. We do not know how to fix what we're breaking.

At the same time, some of the very products of our technology—

plutonium, for instance—require of us that we maintain a very high degree of cultural continuity, economic and political stability, and technological capacity and sophistication, far into the future. To ensure our safety and the safety of all forms of life, we must always be able to store, clean up, and contain poisons like plutonium and persistent organic toxins. Eventually we must be able to eliminate them safely. At all times, we must be able to contain the actions of evil or unethical elements in our societies who do not care about the consequences to life of unleashing our most dangerous creations. In the case of certain creations, like nuclear materials and some artificially constructed or genetically modified organisms, our secure custodianship must be maintained for thousands of years.

We are, in effect, committed to a high-technology future. Any slip in our mastery over the forces now under our command could doom our descendants—including not just human descendants, but also those wild species still remaining in the oceans and wilderness areas—to unspeakable suffering. We must continue down an intensely scientific and technological path, and we can never stop.

Sustaining such high levels of complex civilization and continuous development has never before happened in the history of humanity, so far as we know. From the evidence in hand, ancient civilizations have generally done no better than a few hundred years of highly variable progress and regress, at comparatively low levels of technology, with relatively minor risks to the greater whole associated with their inevitable collapse.

The only institutions that have demonstrated continuity over millennia are religions and spiritual traditions and institutions. So, while we must be intensely scientific, our future is also in need of a renewed sense of spirituality and the sacred. Given our diversity and historic circumstances, no one religion is likely to be able, now or in the future, to sustain us or unite us. We need a new sense of spirituality that is inclusive of believers, nonbelievers, and those for whom belief itself is not the core of spiritual experience. We need a sense of the sacred that is inclusive of the scientific quest and the technological imperative. We need a common sense of high purpose that connects, bridges, and uplifts all of our religious traditions to their highest levels of wisdom and compassion, while sustaining and honoring their unique historical gifts. We need, especially, all the inspiration and solace they can offer, because the task ahead of us is enormous beyond compare.

Our generation is charged with an unprecedented responsibility: to lay secure foundations for a global civilization that can last for thousands

of years. To accomplish this task, we must, in the coming decades, maintain and greatly enhance our technical capacities and cultural stability, while simultaneously changing almost every technological system on which we now depend so that it causes no harm to people or the natural world, now or in the future.

Our situation is not only without precedent; it is virtually impossible to comprehend. Those who, in the waning decades of the Second Millennium, have been able to comprehend this Great Paradox to some degree often feel themselves emotionally overwhelmed and powerless to effect change—the situation I have elsewhere called “Cassandra’s Dilemma,” after the mythical Trojan prophet whose accurate foresight went unheeded. Those in power, on the other hand, face stiff barriers to comprehension and action, including financial, political, and psychological disincentives. Denial and avoidance have been civilization’s predominant responses to the warnings coming from science and the signals coming from nature during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

But the feedback from nature, as well as the growing global distress signals from those left behind in either relative or absolute poverty, are both becoming so strong that they can no longer be denied, even by those with the greatest vested interest in denial. These early decades of the Third Millennium—and especially this first decade, which philosopher Michael Zimmerman has said should be declared “the Oughts” to signify the urgency for addressing what ought to be done—are the decades of reckoning, the time for decisively changing course.

### *Modest Changes are Not Enough*

Change is clearly possible. Modest changes in the direction of greater sustainability are now underway, and modest, incremental changes in both technology and habitual practice can ameliorate—indeed, have ameliorated—some dangerous trends in the short run.

But overall, incremental change of this sort has proven exceedingly slow and difficult to effect, and most incremental change efforts fall far short of what is needed. Carbon emissions, which are now causing visible climate change, provide a good example: current global agreements for modest reductions are hard to reach, impossible to enforce, and virtually without effect; and even if they were successful, they would have a negligible impact on the critical trend. Far more dramatic changes are required.

Dramatic, rapid change, in the form of extremely accelerated innovation in the Noosphere (conscious awareness and understanding) and

the Technosphere (physical practice) is necessary both to prevent continuing and ever more catastrophic damage to the Biosphere, and to adapt to those irreversible changes to which the planet is already committed, such as some amount of climatic instability. The rapid evolution of many social, economic, and political institutions, which mediate between the Noösphere and the Technosphere, is obviously necessary as well.

Without extraordinary and dramatic change, the most probable outcome of industrial civilization's current trajectory is convulsion and collapse. "Collapse" refers not to a sudden or apocalyptic ending, but to a process of accelerating social, economic, and ecological decay over the course of a generation or two, punctuated by ever-worsening episodes of crisis. The results would likely be devastating, in both human and ecological terms. The onset of collapse is probably not ahead of us in time, but behind us: in some places, such as storm-ravaged Orissa, Honduras, Bangladesh, Venezuela, even England and France, collapse-related entropy may already be apparent.

Trend, of course, is probability, not destiny. It is still theoretically possible, albeit very unlikely, that civilization could continue straight ahead, without any conscious effort to direct technological development and the actions of markets in more environmentally benign and culturally constructive ways, and escape collapse through an unexpected (though currently unimaginable) technological breakthrough or improbable set of events. Some have called this the "Miracle Scenario."

But hoping for a miracle is by far the riskiest choice. The future may be fundamentally unknowable, but certain physical processes are predictable, given adequate knowledge about current trends, causal linkages, and systemic effects. Prediction based on extrapolation is not just the province of physics: much of our economy is focused on efforts to accurately predict the future based on past trends. The Internet economy, for example, relies upon Moore's Law (that the speed and capacity of semiconductor chips doubles roughly every 18 months). Insurance companies base their entire portfolio of investments and fees on statistical assessments of past disasters and projected trends into the future.

When it comes to the prospects for sustaining our civilization, we have to trust our species' best judgment, which comes from the interpretations and extrapolations of our best experts. These experts—such as the respected Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—are reporting a disturbingly high degree of consensus about the level of threat to our future well-being. We are in trouble.

We must transform our civilization.

## *Transformation is Possible*

Dramatic civilizational change—transformation, in a word—is not so difficult to imagine. History is full of examples. Global history since the Renaissance, with all our remarkable transformations in technology, economics, and culture, is largely a product of humanity learning to take seriously the evidence of its senses, to reflect on that evidence carefully, and to make provisional conclusions that can be tested. This is the cornerstone of science.

If we are to take seriously the evidence of our senses and our science, we must provisionally conclude that we are now largely responsible for living conditions on this planet. We have the power to fundamentally shape climate, manage ecosystems, design life-forms, and much more. The fact that we are currently *doing* these things very badly obscures the fact that we are doing them, and can therefore learn to do them better. Designing and managing the world is now our responsibility. That is the hypothesis that must now be tested by humanity as a whole, if we are to prevent collapse and succeed in restoration.

To succeed, we must take our responsibility as world-shapers far more seriously than we currently do. History demonstrates that we, as a species, have the power to create the future we envision. If, therefore, we give in to despair, collapse will follow. If we cultivate a vision of ourselves as powerful and wise stewards of our planetary home, transformation becomes possible.

Examples of cultural transformation occurring in a generation or less abound. The Meiji Restoration transformed Japan from a closed, agricultural society to an industrial one in just a few decades. The wholesale redirection of the North American and European economies during World War II took just a few years. The Apollo Program's success in putting humans on the moon transpired, on schedule, within a decade. The fall of the Berlin Wall . . . the end of Apartheid . . . the change in China from a state-planned to a market economy . . . much of recent history suggests that transformation is not only possible, but a frequent occurrence in civilizational evolution.

None of these events, however, remotely approaches the scale of global transformation we must now effect in technology, energy, transportation, agriculture, infrastructure, and economics, based on a new cultural understanding of our role as nature's managers, the world's architects, the planet's artists and engineers. But this testimony from history illustrates something profoundly important about transformation, in addition to its raw and indisputable possibility: no transformative

change truly happens suddenly. Nor does transformation involve the magical or instantaneous creation of a new culture. “Transformation” is the name we give to *the extremely accelerated adoption of existing innovations, together with the acceleration of innovation itself.*

Understanding transformation in these terms gives, to those who seek to create one, a reason for hope. An enormous amount of design work, preliminary to a transformation of the kind envisioned here, has already been done. Inventions, policies, models, scenarios, alternatives . . . innovations of all kinds have been developed by thoughtful and committed people over a generation, and the speed of innovation is increasing. Intense and focused commitment by a critical mass of talented, dedicated, and influential people—in business, government, religion, the arts, the civil sector, every walk of life—could accelerate the process by which innovation enters the mainstream of technical and social practice, and thereby turns humanity on a more hopeful course.

By framing ambitious and visionary goals, and by highlighting the dangers and risks of inaction, this corps of skilled and forward-looking individuals in groups, organizations, corporations and governments could inspire others. The numbers involved could grow exponentially, and as institutions became thoroughly oriented toward achieving transformation, enormous resources could be mobilized, accelerating the transformation process still further.

One generation of intensely focused investment, research, and redevelopment—redesigning our energy systems, overhauling our chemical industries, rebuilding our cities, finding substitutes for wood and replanting lost forests, and so much more—could transform the world as we know it into something far more beautiful, satisfying, and sustainable.

*This I believe:* Sustainability is possible. Sustainability is desirable. Sustainability is a goal worthy of one’s life’s work. Sustainability is the great task of the next century. Sustainability is the next challenge on the road to our destiny.

### *Sustainability is Dead—Long Live Sustainability*

The concept of “sustainability” sprouted and spread like grass during the last few decades of the 20th Century. In scientific terms, it means a system state that can endure indefinitely. Consider a forest: by not losing trees any faster than they grow back, the forest “system” survives despite (and sometimes because of) fires and other natural disturbances. The forest is sustainable. In more popular terms, “sustainability” has come to mean long-term survival and well-being in general, both for human civi-

lization and the rest of nature.

As a guide to the future, the word “sustainability” is currently both our best hope and our biggest obstacle. Many have found the concept a great inspiration, and it has given rise to hundreds of initiatives around the world. But as a word, “sustainability” bores some people and frustrates others. Many have questioned the clarity of “sustainability,” and others have doubted its utility in practice. Indeed, the word is beset by problems; but the problems run deeper than most criticism would suggest.

As the new Millennium begins, sustainability, as a word, is dying. It is not, as some would claim, that there is too much vagueness in its definition. A process can either continue (sustainable), or it cannot (unsustainable). A society’s use of resources, its social patterns, and its pollution emissions are such that they will either go on indefinitely (sustainability), or they will not (collapse). Societies have collapsed before, and they will do so again. History is a databank of case studies in unsustainability.

Volumes have been written on the natural laws governing sustainability, and on the physical, economic, and social conditions for making sustainability real. Indicators of progress toward sustainability have been derived for cities, companies, and nations. What is sustainable, and what is not, is relatively well understood.

But it must be repeated: the word “sustainability” is dying. “Sustainability” is dying because few concerted attempts have been made to enshrine a deeper understanding of the word in intellectual and political discourse, to defend the word from misappropriation, or to bring the word to public attention in a positive and exciting light. “Sustainability” is dying of misuse, and dryness, and reduction to buzzword. It is dying because it is attached to too many initiatives that are failing to achieve their stated goals—or even, in many cases, to make any significant progress in that direction. It is dying because other initiatives, more cynically, pretend to be “sustainable” when they are demonstrably not.

The misuses and abuses come from all sides. Sustainability is not a substitute word for environmentalism, though it is used as such by proponents and opponents alike. Sustainability is not a substitute word for economic growth, though it gets stretched in that direction far too often (as in “sustainable growth”). Sustainable development—a term so misapplied as to be nearly beyond rescue—is not development-as-usual with a few green-looking additions or nods to social equity; but that is what it has often been reduced to in practice.

Sustainability is a far more ennobling concept than most current

application reflects. Sustainability is a dream. Sustainability is an overarching ideal toward which any human society collectively strives. Sustainability is not “the goal of all our striving,” but it is the fundamental and primordial benchmark of our maturation as a species.

It is not an elegant word. It is, as words go, awkward, long, and technical in sound. But it is the best word we have for what we need: A vision. A direction. A set of criteria by which to measure our success.

Let us collectively abandon our use of the words sustainability and sustainable development, as they were used in the 20th Century. “Sustainable development,” in particular, has been abused almost beyond repair. Development—the change we make to the world—can either be good or bad. Good development contributes to sustainability; bad development makes sustainability more and more impossible, and collapse more and more certain. And most current development, including much of what is being done in the name of “sustainable development,” is quite bad, causing long-term damages far greater in scope than the benefits it purports to bring.

Let us therefore declare sustainability dead—and immediately proceed to revive it.

To be brought back to life, sustainability, as a word, must be reinvented. It must be imbued with all the qualities that our societies need to embrace to make sustainability itself possible. The word “sustainability” should shine with promise and vibrate with creativity. Sustainability should fascinate the hungry mind, satisfy the heart in search of a meaningful life, draw people to it the way athletes are drawn to compete, the way artists are drawn to create, the way lovers are drawn to each other.

For our descendants, sustainability may someday be about maintaining a hard-won balance between the needs of people, nature’s other species, and future generations of both. But we are far from balance today. For this generation, sustainability is about *global transformation*. Nothing could be more exciting to consider as the project of a generation, except perhaps making the first journey to the stars. We have before us the opportunity and the responsibility to begin *remaking our world*. We can, and we must, make it more beautiful in every respect, more delightful, more effective and efficient at securing our needs and encouraging our aspirations.

In the 21st Century, let us abandon diminished applications of this potentially enlightening word, and use “sustainability” only when it carries the full radiance of a dream—the dream of civilization’s transformation to a more uplifting, beautiful, ecological, equitable, and genuinely prosperous pattern of development.

## *The Transformation of Globalization*

Transformation of many kinds is already happening all around us, mostly in the name of globalization. “Globalization” has become the signifier for a family of transformations in communications, finance, trade, travel, ecological and cultural interaction that are drawing the world’s people and natural systems into ever closer relationship with each other, regardless of national boundaries. Many of these transformations contribute more to the likelihood of global collapse than to global sustainability, because they are fueled by destructive technologies, they result in ever greater levels of environmental damage, they undermine national democracies, and they have so far widened dramatically the gap between rich and poor.

Yet there is nothing inherently unsustainable about globalization *per se*, if we understand that word to mean the growing integration of global human society. Indeed, globalization of many kinds—from the spread of better technologies to the universal adoption of human rights—is essential to attaining global sustainability. But the engines of globalization need to be harnessed to a more noble set of goals and aspirations.

At the heart of most descriptions of globalization is the market economy. It has often been fashionable to blame the market for the environmental crisis, and in particular to blame the market’s tendency to concentrate power within the large, independent capital structures we call “corporations.”

But we need corporations, and the market, to accomplish the change we seek. To develop and spread innovations for sustainability at transformation speed, we need corporate-scale concentrations of research, production, and distribution capacity. We need the market’s speed, freedom, and incentive structures. Clearly, we also need governors on the spread of destructive development, and the enormous fleet of old and dangerous innovations—from the internal combustion engine to the idea that cynical nihilism is “cool”—that are increasing our distance from the dream of sustainability at an accelerating rate. But if we can alter globalization so that it turns the enormous power of the market and the corporation in a truly sustainable direction, we will watch in awe as our world changes for the better with unimaginable speed.

Envisioning the transformation of globalization will strike many as the ultimate in wishful thinking. Yet transformation begins precisely in wish and thought; and there are currently two powerful wishes adding considerable weight to global efforts to bring down the Berlin Wall between today’s damaging “capitalism-at-all-costs” and tomorrow’s prac-

tice of a more mindful “capitalism conscious of all costs.” One “wish” is the United Nations’ new “Global Compact” with the corporate sector. It calls on corporations to adopt greater levels of social and environmental responsibility—a call that many are pledging to heed. The other “wish” is the non-governmental Global Reporting Initiative, which sets new criteria for measuring sustainable corporate performance and is fast becoming adopted as the international standard, by corporations and activists alike.

These promising developments, still in their relative infancy, did not appear suddenly out of nowhere. There are but the latest and most successful demonstration of the power of “wishful thinking,” indulged in by hundreds of thousands of people, from the Seattle protesters of 1999 to the world government theorists of the 1930s. And these agreements are, themselves, “wishful thinking” of a kind, comprised as they are of agreements on principle and criteria for measurements. But if this is what wishful thinking can do, consider what inspired action, multiplied throughout the global system, will accomplish when seriously embraced at the same scale.

Indeed, the transformation of globalization will, in many ways, signal the onset of transformation in general. When we witness the redirection of investment flows, the adoption of new rules and ethics governing the production process, the true raising of global standards of environmental, social, and economic performance, sustainability will then be written directly into the cultural genes, also known as “memes,” steering global development. These new “sustainability memes” will then be replicated in every walk of industrial life. The dream of sustainability will become business as usual.

### *The Quest for Sustainability*

We are still, however, quite a distance from that happy day. Moving decisively in the direction of sustainability will require transformative change in virtually every area of human endeavor. We must, at a minimum:

- ***Completely redesign and rebuild our energy systems*** so that they drastically reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse emissions. The implications of this imperative are staggering: every internal combustion engine, every coal-fired power plant, every methane-emitting landfill must be transformed or replaced with an alternative that is climate-neutral and environmentally benign. We must speed up the innovation cycle and the depreciation cycle of capital investment. We need breakthroughs

in the spread of solar, wind, hydrogen, and other forms of energy, together with new policies and financial instruments to accelerate the transformation process.

- Ideally, we should simultaneously ***develop a globally coordinated system for managing the global carbon balance*** at a scientifically determined acceptable level, since current best-case scenarios for emission reduction still leave us with an unacceptably warmer world.

- ***Completely eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons and materials*** from escaping into the biosphere. Highly radioactive and long-lasting materials like plutonium, especially, must be contained in perpetuity or transformed into more benign materials; and new technologies, both in science and in social patterns, must be discovered for achieving either goal.

- ***Completely overhaul our production and use of chemicals*** and materials so that no toxins of any kind are allowed to accumulate in the biosphere. There must be a concerted effort to identify existing alternatives, innovate new ones, and diffuse both throughout the global economy.

- ***Eliminate global poverty and the threat of war.*** “Poverty reduction” is neither a noble nor an adequate goal, as poverty creates ecological destruction, increases social instability, and diminishes our humanity. War is too dangerous in an era of globally destructive weaponry. Nothing less than the full elimination of these two scourges is sufficient to attain sustainability and establish the full proof of our maturity as a species.

- ***Protect absolutely the integrity of the Earth’s natural and agricultural systems.*** Hard boundaries should be drawn around biodiversity preserves, critical ecosystems, and places of awe and wonder. Farmlands and food production should be protected from displacement by urban sprawl and colonization by overzealous profiteers. Human habitations should be completely self-sufficient, no longer drawing down resources at unsustainable rates or destroying places of living mystery with thoughtless extraction, pollution, or overuse.

To achieve these and other lofty goals, *change agents*—people dedicated to promoting sustainability ideas and innovations—are needed in

every field, in ever increasing numbers. We need, especially:

- The **artists**, to help us feel the gravity of our predicament, to facilitate our envisioning a more beautiful way of life, and to inspire us to strive for better things.

- The **scientists and engineers**, to find solutions, new inventions, breakthrough ideas that can rapidly transform our way of life.

- The **designers**, to redesign virtually everything, and to fuse beauty and functionality in a transformed world.

- The **business people**, to reimagine and redirect the flows of money and investment and talent in ways that can recreate the world while enhancing global prosperity.

- The **activists**, to call attention to those issues about which societies at large are in denial or unable to act because of systemic or hegemonic forces.

- The **professionals**, so-called, such as those in health care or the law or international development, to change the standards of practice in their profession and to lend their considerable weight to a general movement for change.

- The **average citizens**, so-called, to reimagine themselves as global citizens, to enthusiastically support change efforts, and to dare to reach for their own aspirations for a better world.

- The **politicians**, to motivate us with inspiring rhetoric, to frame new policies that encourage transformation, and to tear down obstacles to innovation and transformation.

- The **educators**, to prepare current and future generations for a great responsibility: directing human development toward sustainability, and beyond.

If a critical mass of people in all walks of life take seriously the charge to make transformation happen, and if they are supported with widespread communication networks and resources and incentives, then *transformation will happen*, and sustainability will become an attainable dream.

And *transformation will enrich us*, not impoverish us. It will enrich us spiritually, socially, and economically. We will know our purpose more profoundly, live together more compassionately, develop wealth more equitably. There is so much work to be done that there will be jobs for all who want them. There is so much genuine new value to be added to our economies that our measures of “economic growth” will continue to rise, even as our impact on nature declines dramatically.

In fact, to achieve a genuine transformation, *we must accelerate and redirect our economies*, not slow them down. The demand for innovation, redesign, and redevelopment is too great to be achieved by anything less. Our responsibility for the dangers we have already created requires us to continue growing in our technical capacity, scientific understanding, and economic integration.

We can climb the mountain of sustainability, but not by pulling back. We must charge forward, and reach up, with all the strength, intelligence, wisdom, compassion, and determination of which our species is capable. And when we attain the summit, we will see the world from an entirely different perspective.

### *Life After Sustainability*

We do not know, ultimately, what the purpose of life is, or even whether the concept of “purpose” is a meaningful one. Our philosophical traditions provide a legacy of questions, but no ultimate answers. Our scientists can increasingly describe what the universe is and how it works, but they cannot approach the ultimate question of why. Our religious traditions, in all their diversity, do approach this question, and they provide hints and guidance and, for some, the solace and foundation of faith—but the ultimate unanswerability of life’s greatest questions is precisely the reason for religion’s existence.

Attaining sustainability does not release humanity from wrestling with such questions as, Where do we come from? Why do we suffer and die? How shall we live?

But the closer we get to sustainability, the more we can address these questions in full freedom—and the more our descendants will be free to consider them, unburdened by poverty, or ecological instability, or insecurity about the future of civilization. We do not know what a sustainable world will look like, but we can be assured that it will far more beautiful, creative, prosperous, fascinating, and engaging of our full humanity than the world in which we now live.

The challenges are enormous, and the indications of success, if we

achieve it, are largely visible only over the course of years or decades. But the rewards, even for making the attempt, are great—for all of us now, and with luck, for all the generations of life to come after us.

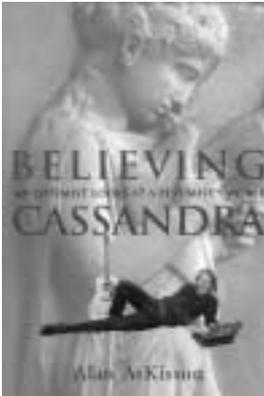
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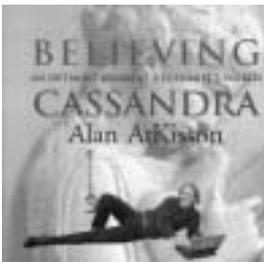
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*"Alan AtKisson is the freshest and wisest voice to emerge from the sustainability movement in many years. Believing Cassandra manages to be incisive, but also humorous and hopeful, while examining unblinkingly the environmental holocaust enveloping the earth. This book renews our sense of the possible and expands the dimensions of our collective intelligence, transforming our sense of the future from a curse to a blessing."*

—Paul Hawken, author of  
*Natural Capitalism*

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