

## **Cartography of the Present: The Meaning Crisis and Maps for the Future**

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The first half of this paper provides a cartography of the present through an exploration of various thinkers who go beyond the *what* of the various ecological, political, economic, and technological crises we face to uncover the *why* of these interlocking phenomena. What ties these thinkers together is their recognition of the near total breakdown of the worldviews, ideologies, systems of belief, and cultural narratives that had provided frameworks for meaning and sense-making for much of humanity over the past 2,000 years. Recognizing the role of schooling/education as a central institution responsible for the intergenerational transmission of meaning, virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for the continuation of social life and the species itself, the second half of the paper will identify needed changes to guiding educational philosophies and frameworks, and viable practices for fostering connection and meaning. To meet this challenge, a set of philosophical frameworks and embodied practices should aim to reconnect and reintegrate body, mind, and spirit and re-embed the human within the broader living earth and cosmos. Drawing upon Ken Wilber's (2014) integral bio-psycho-socio-cultural model of social reality, I weave together values, principles, and systems from Buddhist psychology and meditation, embodied practices like martial arts, deep ecology/Earth democracy, and bioregionalism/anarchism as a comprehensive map for meaning-making in the present and beyond. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2023 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine philosophies of subjectivity and socio-cultural frameworks for education in light of thinking and scholarship that describe the present moment as characterized by multiple human-made catastrophic and existential risks largely rooted in a crisis in meaning and sense-making (The Consilience Project, 2021; Stein, 2019; Vervaeke, Mastropietro, & Miscevic, 2017). The first portion of the paper will provide a cartography of the present through an exploration of various thinkers who go beyond the *what* of the various ecological, political, economic, and technological crises we face to uncover the *why* of these interlocking phenomena. What ties these thinkers together is their recognition of the near total breakdown of the worldviews, ideologies, systems of belief, and cultural narratives that had provided frameworks for meaning and sense-making for much of humanity over the past 2,000 years. Exponential change in human understanding, technology, and influence on the biosphere have rendered many of these historical narratives obsolete and has far outpaced our ability to replace them with more fitting and sustainable ones. The vacuum in sense-making or what Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Miscevic, (2017) call “The Meaning Crisis” has significant implications for the project of modern education and calls into question the very foundations of what goes on in schools and beyond.

Recognizing the role of schooling/education as a central institution responsible for the intergenerational transmission of meaning, virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for the continuation of social life and the species itself, the second half of the paper will identify needed changes to guiding educational philosophies and frameworks, and viable practices for fostering connection and meaning. To meet this challenge, the underlying philosophical frameworks and embodied practices should aim to reconnect and reintegrate the body, mind, and spirit and re-embed the human within the broader living earth and cosmos. Drawing upon Ken Wilber’s (2014) integral bio-psycho-socio-cultural model of social reality and Stein’s (2022b) notion of a collective *paideia* or intergenerational transmission, I weave together values, principles, and systems of understanding from Buddhist psychology and meditation, embodied practices like martial arts, deep ecology/Earth democracy, and bioregionalism/anarchism as a comprehensive map for meaning-making in the present and beyond.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE MEANING CRISIS**

With an unprecedented level of disruption to the educational status quo resulting from the global pandemic, some see an opportunity for a thoroughgoing re-examination of the purposes of education (see for example, Arnove, 2020; Hughes, 2020; Fullan, 2020; Popa, 2020). As the economy shifts, attitudes towards work evolve, and more people question the necessity of college, education as primarily an avenue into the world of professions and careers no longer carries the same weight. Similarly, as democratic ideals are openly challenged and common civic identity and connections fracture, the notion of education as preparation for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship is becoming a distant memory (Hutt Scott, 2022; Zimmerman, 2016). Also looming is the ecological crisis, eliciting existential anxiety around the future of humanity and one's role in the anthropogenic disruption of the biosphere. These conditions have scrambled our psychic coordinates and made it increasingly difficult to situate ourselves meaningfully within the world around us.

Thinkers from a variety of different disciplines - from cognitive science to theology to psychology to educational philosophy – are bringing together the knowledge from their respective fields to articulate a meta-theoretic perspective on the human and more-than-human predicament in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. While approaches and perspectives differ, there seems to be some general agreement in their respective conclusions. Externally, we are living in the midst of a profound unraveling and loss of legitimacy of many of the institutions that have structured social life and provided a framework for organizing our individual and collective selves. The disruptions in the external institutions as well as the cultural/ideological coordinates that undergird them are having significant repercussions on our internal constitutions. As Zak Stein (2022b) describes it, we are living in a time between worlds:

Our civilization is starting to mishandle the basic task of equipping the next generation with the requisite skills, personality structures, and cultural resources needed to maintain essential social systems. This is what might be called “social autopoiesis” —the self-(re)creation of the social body—and it can only be accomplished through intentional practices of education. Drastic educational crises that remain unresolved result in failures of social autopoiesis and eventually civilizational collapse. (8)

Stein (2022a) claims the meta-crisis – or what he describes as “a generalized educational crisis in which, despite all the concrete problems faced by society, the most pressing problems are actually ‘in our heads’ (i.e. in our minds and souls, we are in a crisis of the psyche)(8)” - as being constituted by four interrelated aspects. He calls these the sense-making crisis, the capability crisis, the legitimacy crisis, and the meaning crisis

Regarding the sense-making crisis, Stein (2022a) explains the exponentially increasing complexity of the world has outpaced our ability to understand how the near-infinite variables fit together. We may have an intuitive sense that there are connections between, say, mass shootings, global pandemics, and the decimation of the Amazon rainforest, but we lack the capacity to rationally comprehend how these pieces fit together. This increasing complexity renders us incapable of engaging in meaningful “problem solving to the degree needed for continued social integration” (9). In many cases, we know what needs to be done, but the inability to act contributes to a crisis of capability. Perhaps the most concretely obvious of the four, the legitimacy crisis speaks to the inability of political and bureaucratic forms, including the institution of schooling, “to provide sufficiently convincing rationale and justification for trust in their continued authority” (Stein, 2022a). Finally, linked to and in many ways ungirding the others, the meaning crisis gives a name to the lack of a coherent narrative that makes evident the purpose of individual existence, the goodness of the world, and “the value of ethics, beauty, and truth” (Stein, 2022a, 9). If left unattended, the meaning crisis fosters alienation, nihilism, and psychological unraveling and leaves individuals and collectives impotent in attempting to address the other areas.

In a similar vein, John Vervaeke’s work has been mapping the contours of the ‘Meaning Crisis’ and what might be necessary to ‘awaken’ from this crisis. Broadly speaking, Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Mescevic (2017) claim the meaning crisis is characterized by “domicide”, or the killing of our shared home in the broadest possible sense. Whereas we once felt at home in the world and there was a harmony between our minds or inner lives and the external environment, modern life is characterized by a sense of homelessness, an unbridgeable chasm between the interior lifeworld and exterior reality. This has happened before, according to Vervaeke et al. (2017), for example in the shift from nomadic hunting and gathering to the rise of agriculture, cities and civilization itself. Corresponding to the advent of modernity, the current meaning crisis has been precipitated by the scientific revolution’s undermining of animism and religious dogma, the overshadowing of public philosophy by a focus on individualistic self-development and self-improvement, the commodification and

commercialization of shared values, and the anxiety and alienation fueled by social media, the 24-hour news cycle, and the entertainment industry.

Similarly, Vervaeke and Mastropietro (2020) define the ‘meaning crisis’ in the following way:

The “meaning crisis” describes a felt state of meaninglessness. Victor Frankl (2006) expressed it as an “existential vacuum,” an aimlessness or disintegration that distends our experience of life in its personal, social, and cultural dimensions and leaves us spiritless, disconnected from a world whose presence seems increasingly insensible and impassive to our touch (Mastropietro and Vervaeke, 2020, What is the meaning crisis?, para. 1).

More specifically, they claim the present age is bereft of a “spiritual ecology of practices mediated by institutions of wisdom and religious participation, that allowed us to ameliorate perennial problems of self-deception, self-destruction, nihilism, and despair” (n.p). This crisis plays out on different levels and scales, some intimately personal, others social and collective, through bodies, minds, behaviors, and relations, often crossing over and back imperceptibly between the internal and the external. Vervaeke and Mastropietro (2020) offer a continuum of symptom types that help shed light upon the coordinates of the crisis ranging from reactions to responses to reflective responses. *Reactions* are those symptoms that can be described as the largely instinctive and unconscious manifestations of personal suffering elicited by a sense of meaninglessness. Anxiety, depression, and suicide are examples. *Responses*, on the other hand, the authors define as the “purposeful attempt to relieve the suffering of meaninglessness” (Vervaeke and Mastropietro, 2020, Why a Continuum?, para. 2). Along the continuum between reaction and response are deaths of despair, the loss of *communitas*, the rise of addiction, ‘the virtual exodus’ whereby immersion in or addiction to virtual worlds such as social media or video games begin to “exacerbate other symptoms of meaninglessness, deepening loneliness, atomization, addiction, and erotic and existential frustrations” (Vervaeke and Mastropietro, 2020, The Virtual Exodus, para. 4).

On the side of the response-reflective response portion of the continuum, we find ‘idolatries of the sacred’ or attempts at filling the void in (meta)-meaning left by the death of god that could “provide a view of what the world is, who we are within it, and how we must act and interact, a system replete with marks of realness, morality, and a manner for being-in-the-world” (Vervaeke and Mastropietro, 2020, Idolatries of the Sacred,

para. 1). These encompass neo-gnosticism (for example conspiracy theories and romantic notions of more idyllic, bygone eras), pseudo-religious ideologies, ersatz mythologies (such as superheroes and other fictional creations that have been ascribed religious significance), and fundamentalism.

Not all responses to the meaning crisis are negative or pathological. According to the authors in the section ‘Renewing Gnosis’, people are finding more substantive avenues to address the meaning crisis – through resuscitation of wisdom traditions such as stoicism, a renewed interest in the practice of mindfulness, exploration of altered states of consciousness through psychedelics – what they call ecologies of practice “committed to renewing gnosis...a participatory form of knowing that reconnects our being to disclosing experiences of sacredness...to what is most real, significant, and inexhaustible” (Vervaeke and Mastropietro, 2020, *Renewing Gnosis*, para. 2). These responses aside, the meaning crisis and meta-crisis largely overwhelm and exhaust on both the individual level as well as on the social level. Due to the exponential rate of change (primarily technological and scientific), our tools for making sense of the world are failing us. Our seemingly infinite capacity for adaptation is predicated upon our ability to *learn* when confronted with new environments, physical and psychological demands, and threats to well-being.

As we are confronted by these drivers of adaptation at an ever-quickenening rate and depth of complexity, our ability to learn how to situate them into our existing mental frameworks and to develop the skills necessary to navigate them successfully are overwhelmed and rendered insufficient. This situation can lead in a couple of different directions, both of which are problematic. On the one hand, the tsunami of change, information, and threats by which we are confronted can result in *epistemic nihilism*, what The Consilience Project (2021) describes as “a diffuse and usually subconscious feeling that it is impossible to really know anything, because, for example, ‘the science is too complex’ or ‘there is fake news everywhere’” (para. 3). On the other hand, people are just as prone to *epistemic hubris*, “the belief that some form of knowledge can in fact clearly and definitely explain and predict those things that are most important in the world” (The Consilience Project, 2021, para. 4). The resulting situation is one in which “individuals and cultural groups oscillate between the hopeless mood of ‘post-truth’ culture and the peaks of polarizing certainties that emerge around politically significant scientific and geopolitical issues” (The Consilience Project, 2021, para. 4). As an antidote, these authors offer a position of *epistemic humility and*

*commitment* as a framework for public sense-making and civic engagement.

Much like Stein and Vervaeke, The Consilience Project (2021) arrives at the conclusion that the sheer complexity of the realities faced by modern humans far outstrip any individual's or group's ability to fully understand, manage, and mitigate them. *Hyperobjects* – a term coined by ecological philosopher Timothy Morton (2013) – are those objects or realities that we have come to live with as part of everyday life but that are so vast and complex so as to be beyond comprehension and prediction. Climate change and the internet are two prime examples. Additionally, the very tools and practices that once allowed for what The Consilience Project (2021) calls “public sensemaking” – journalism and communications technologies - are themselves incapable of providing sufficient explanations for highly complex and indeterminate phenomenon. While a simple and comprehensible expert explanation is produced and provided for the general public for something like the short- and long-term impacts of a nuclear disaster, a ‘counter-expert discourse’ emerges and “public sensemaking becomes reduced to warring and politicized discourses around very real risks when...these risks are too complex to claim determinate knowledge” (The Consilience Project, 2021, What is to be Done?, para. 4).

Compounding this situation are the mediums utilized for public sense-making: the smartphone, digital media technologies like social media and the digital media landscape of the internet, each themselves hyperobjects eluding complete understanding. As The Consilience Project (2021) explains, “Living in a risk society, the very thing that should be making us aware of risks (the media) is putting us at greater risk, specifically by allowing public discussions of risk to become polluted with advertisements, entertainment, and misinformation” (The Epistemological Weapon in Our Pockets, para. 2) and engendering distraction, misperception, addiction, and other psychological distress. The Consilience Project (2021) offers an explanation as dizzying as it is succinct:

There is a hyperobject that can be labeled as “postmodern psychological warfare,” which is widespread, and works against public sensemaking. The “hyper-battlefield” is in your pocket, if not already in the palm of your hand. Note that this means there is a hyperobject (the hyper-battlefield) within the hyperobject (your smart phone) that you are using to gain visibility to hyperobjects in the

world (such as pandemics and climate change) (The Epistemological Weapon in Our Pockets, para. 6).

The solution, according to Schmachtenberger and The Consilience Project (2021), are upgraded educational and informational infrastructures and a stance of epistemic humility by which is implied “curiosity, commitment, and a motivation to pursue further learning” (para. 5). This humility walks the line between epistemic hubris and epistemic nihilism. It accepts that truths can be known but also always accepts that a degree of indeterminacy. The central question coming out of this position is: “has our society improved its own capacities to continue learning?”

As mentioned earlier, Stein (2022a) views the meta-crisis as synonymous with a “generalized educational crisis” in that the philosophical and material educational edifice that has been constructed over the past 200 years is no longer up to the task of providing the next generation with suitable instructions for effectively managing the present nor for guiding and sustaining civilization into the future. With that in mind, a primary set of questions to be addressed are around the nature of what Stein (2022b) calls the ‘collective paideia’ or cultural instructions that will prepare young learners for the world they are inheriting. More specifically, what knowledge, skills, ethics, virtues, and systems of morality are appropriate to pass on and cultivate in the context of the meta-crisis? As he explains, “humans make history when they make intentional changes to the dynamics of intergenerational transmission.... things like socialization, enculturation, contexts of human development, dynamics of teaching and learning...This is all “education”—as I broadly construe it.” (Stein, 2022b, 7).

In other words, knowing the instructions that were left to us are insufficient for guiding today’s youth toward individual health and shared sense-making, what intentional changes do we make to the dynamics of intergenerational transmission? When we examine the conditions under which previous civilizations have collapsed, we cannot help but recognize a number of common themes. Conflict, war, abrupt climate-change driven famine (Kaniewski, et. al, 2013) and, most importantly for this paper, a breakdown in the shared meaning-making system that acted as a social cohesive and provided individuals with a sense of purpose albeit constrained by hierarchical and rigid forms of social organization. As we think through the instructions future generations will need to navigate the present, it seems necessary we also consider the trauma that has been passed down through bodies and psyches through our unsatiable



exploitation of those deemed Other – human and more-than-human alike. In doing so, we will need a framework.

## **NEW SOURCES OF MEANING AND CONNECTEDNESS: FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRAL EDUCATION AND AN ECOLOGY OF PRACTICES FOR MEANING-MAKING**

Each of these thinkers present different, yet related, approaches to addressing the meaning crisis, the meta-crisis, and/or the crisis in public sensemaking. Also, each of these approaches seem to have important implications for how we can think anew about education. Throughout his work, Stein (2019) draws a number of different conclusions regarding the structure, function, and goals of education “in a time between worlds”. Importantly, Stein highlights the inadequacy of human capital theory as a foundation for educational endeavors. He predicts the “end of schools” as we know them and proposes the creation of educational hub networks (Stein, 2019). Vervaeke, on the other hand, focuses his attention on what he calls the “wisdom famine” in the West. This can be best described as the need for the renewal of wisdom traditions free from dogma/doctrine and married to robust scientific investigation supporting the individual and relational benefits of these traditions. The primary developmental needs and work of adolescence are taken up with meaning-making and identity formation. In light of this, the root of the mental health crisis affecting millions of young people becomes obvious. Unless wiser and more experienced elders work to fill this void, profiteering corporations and power-hungry politicians will gladly do so in our stead.

So what is the role of education in “awakening from the meaning crisis”? What narratives might guide education and individual development, and collective meaning-making that move beyond human capital theory, materialism, individualism, limitless economic growth, and other discourses of modernity (Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci, 2015)? What is the nature of the intergenerational code or paideia that should be passed on to younger generations who are inheriting a rapidly changing world fraught with conflict, uncertainty, and defined by liminality? In light of the metacrisis, what knowledge, skills, and dispositions might be necessary for individual self-actualization and social autopoiesis? Following Vervaeke, is it possible to re-unite toward common cause knowledge institutions and wisdom institutions? In order to enact more wholistic and systemic change in the way that we think about education during this unique period of history, I draw upon Ken Wilber’s (2014) integral bio-psycho-socio-cultural model of social reality. In other

words, we must articulate frameworks for thinking about education or intergenerational transmission of knowledge in and through four distinct yet interrelated quadrants.



(Wilber, K. (2014, October 28) *What are the four quadrants?* Integral Life. <https://integrallife.com/four-quadrants/>)

Additionally, each must be addressed at developmentally appropriate levels and so will look and be delivered differently depending on the age and maturation of the individuals being addressed. That said, the overarching framework and areas of investigation within each quadrant will be roughly the same across grade levels/ages/developmental stages but scaffolded toward increasing complexity and integration. What will also be noticed is that areas of investigation and teaching/learning within each quadrant will be connected to corresponding practices – some intellectual, some spiritual, and some physical – that are drawn from Vervaeke and Ferraro’s (2013) notion of an “ecology of practices” necessary for “awakening from the meaning crisis”. As Stein (2019) explains:

An integral meta-theory of education contrasts with reductive human capital theory. Education is conceived as not only or primarily about the limited technical challenge or arranging for the ‘functional fit’ of individuals into the economy and social system. Education is also and primarily an ethical and cultural challenge concerning the meaning-making of individuals and groups (31).

This is not a proposal for what should be happening in schools. Schools themselves have been described as hyperobjects and are directly implicated in the meaning crisis and each of the sub-crises that constitute it (Peim and Stock, 2021).

Rather, we must begin to imagine what other configurations are possible and sufficient for cultivating altered and higher states of consciousness, deep experience of interconnection, alignment of internal and external realities, a sense of belonging, and congruence between agent and arena (Vervaeke and Mastropietro). In doing so, we will be compelled to utilize psychotechnologies and embodied practices that precipitate self-transcendence, ego annihilation, psychic reconstitution, and reintegration. These processes, in turn, challenge and upend the tenets of Empire including hyperindividualism, splitting off of mind from body, commodification of desire, objectification, private property, ownership, exploitation, and control (Thornson, 2019). Ultimately, these practices and the knowledge and dispositions they engender become a roadmap for reinventing one’s sense of self and of being-in-the-world and therefore of the world itself.

If, as Vervaeke et al. (2020) argue, ‘domicide’ or the deliberate destruction of home is the term best suited to characterize the meaning crisis” (35), then it follows that the crisis can most wholistically be addressed through unified efforts at *homemaking*. Just as in their use of domicile, Vervaeke et al. (2020) “extend the definition of home into a metaphor for the canopy of worldview, the cultural and cosmic domiciles that coordinate our beliefs and behavior” (35), we, too, must define home rather broadly. Drawing again from the integral bio-psycho-socio-cultural model of social reality referenced above, we can think about the different aspects of home as represented in the four quadrants. This, in turn, entails considering not only the making or re-ordering of the exterior and collective (place, culture) but also the interior and individual (body, psyche).

Literature on place, place-making, bioregionalism, and place-based education have gone a long way in providing concepts, tools, and practices for helping people recognize their connection with and responsibility to

the human and more-than-human inhabitants of particular places and will be explored below. These connections and responsibilities can go a long way in providing one with a sense of belonging, purpose, and meaning in life. What is given less attention in the aforementioned literature is one's relationship to oneself and the conditions or qualities necessary for mental, physical and spiritual well-being and full self-actualization. What I will argue, along with Gary Snyder (1990; 1995), is that we need to distance ourselves from the "Judeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West" as our organizing framework or mythology and embrace something more akin to a Buddhist-anarchist-embodied-deep ecology or earth democracy. Laurence Coupe (2011) sums it up this way:

The 'quest for place', for a part of the earth on which one may feel at home, is for Snyder synonymous with the search for a living myth: after all, *oikos* and *mythos* go together. The cure for the ills of the West is to find out who we really are by understanding where we really are: 'People are challenged to become "reinhabitory" – that is, to become people who are learning to live and think "as if" they were totally engaged with their place for the long future.' In the USA, he hopefully notes, a significant minority of like-minded individuals are 'in the process of becoming something deeper than "American (or Mexican or Canadian) citizens" – they are becoming natives of Turtle Island'. In other words, they are recovering a lost mythology and a new ecology simultaneously (Coupe, 2011, 12 citing Snyder, 1995, *A place in space: Ethics, aesthetics, and watersheds*, 246-247)

As will be explored below, a new mythology that gives sense and meaning to our lives cannot be conceived of independently from the places we inhabit – our mind/body, local ecosystems, and the great Earth itself.

## **INTERIOR/INDIVIDUAL: I/SUBJECTIVE – BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY/MEDITATION/MINDFULNESS**

When thinking about the meaning crisis and the frameworks and practices that would be up to the task of addressing it, this portion of the quadrant is central. Some of the primary signs and symptoms of the meaning crisis take the form of deteriorating mental health across wide swaths of young people, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Mojtabi and Olson, 2020). It is not possible to identify a single source for this epidemic but one need not look hard to recognize the factors that are contributing such as increased dependence upon social media for

information and connection, increasing socio-political divisiveness, cascading ecological degradation and *the absence of intergenerational wisdom/roadmaps for meaningfully navigating the terrain of contemporary society*. When it comes to the I-Subjective quadrant, the practice of meditation and mindfulness can help young people cultivate greater self-awareness, emotional regulation, decreased impulsiveness, and an enhanced sense of connection to the world around them (Waters, Barsky, Ridd, and Allen, 2015; Wisener, Jones, & Gwinn, 2010; Saphthiang, VanGordon, & Shonin, 2019). Additionally, these practices can engender the individual thoughts, emotions, states of mind, and perceptions that are conducive to creating cooperative, life-enhancing, and regenerative systems and structures.

Seated meditation in the Buddhist tradition is a psycho-physical practice through which one can relax the body and quell discursive thought and ultimately see through the illusion of a separate, autonomous, and independent self exempt from the law of impermanence. From the Buddhist perspective, one does not meditate in order to gain something. Rather, meditation itself is a recognition of or awakening to the originally unfixated and expansive Mind that manifests in “the 10,000 things” of objective reality (Lin, 2006). Meditation helps one cultivate an understanding of the Middle Way taught by the historical Buddha. The Middle Way points to the non-dichotomous and mutually interdependent nature of cause and effect, mind and matter, self and other, existence and non-existence (Chodron, 2020). Through practice, one nurtures the ability to be present in the here-and-now, present to one’s life as it unfolds rather than ruminating on the past or looking ahead to an uncertain and unpredictable future.

Whereas the struggle for control and influence was once centered upon hearts and minds, the contemporary era is characterized by a no-holds-barred fight for our attention (Wu, 2016). Streams, tweets, memes, likes, posts, pics, products, faces, filters, 24-hour news – all of these compete with one another to enter awareness just long enough to trigger the amygdala or a shot of dopamine so that we come back for more. Considering this, letting the devices go quiet, sitting on the floor upright and in a state of relaxed awareness, lowering the gaze, and focusing on one’s breath — meditation can be viewed as an act of resistance in our age of frenzied activity, diversions, and information overload (Holohan, 2022). Ultimately, meditation fosters non-dual awareness, a clearer perception of reality unencumbered by the ego, and a perception of others – both human and more-than-human – as none other than oneself.

A sustained meditation practice seems an essential tool in the defense of our inner lives. As described in Peter Doran's (2017) book, *A Political Economy of Attention, Mindfulness, and Consumerism*:

The 'attention economy' can be understood as a new arena of struggle in our age of neoliberal governmentality; as the forces of enclosure—having colonized forests, land and the bodies of workers—are now extended to the realm of our minds and subjectivity. This poses questions about the recovery of the 'mindful commons': the practices we must cultivate to reclaim our attention, time and lives from the forces of capitalization (cover copy).

The Buddhist teaching of interdependence and its emphasis on meditation and mindfulness might be just such practices that could help us reclaim autonomy and meaning in this sphere of social reality. Mindfulness and non-judgmental awareness of one's inner life enable the individual to more thoughtfully navigate the contemporary terrain characterized by materialism, hyper-individualism, and disconnection. This, in turn, opens up space to more clearly recognize the roots of social and ecological crises and to more meaningfully respond to the existential challenges confronting the species and all of life in the Anthropocene.

## **EXTERIOR/INDIVIDUAL: IT/OBJECTIVE – EMBODIED PRACTICES**

In much of western philosophy, the role of the body has been devalued and often completely ignored (Chouraqui, 2021). Descartes' Cogito Ergo Sum set up a mind-body dualism that would persist for centuries. Vervaeke has recognized this blindspot and given attention to practices like primal movement and the Evolve Move Play framework developed by Rafe Kelley (<https://www.evolveplay.com/>). Embodiment philosophy aligns closely with Buddhist psychology and practice insofar as it does not view the mind/body dualistically. Rather, it is based upon the idea that the human mind is integrated into the body's sensorimotor system, and cognitive processes are intertwined with the systems of the body (Barsalou, 2008). Thinkers like David Abram (1996) remind us that our sensory and cognitive perceptions are not closed systems but rather involve "an active interplay or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives" (43). Viewed this way, the body can be understood as "a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth" (Abram, 1996, 46).

Cultivation of positive and healthy states of mind and immediate sensations cannot be separated from attention to the material body. Bridging the gap between the interiority of the individual and one's physical manifestation in the material world are movement practices and martial arts such as yoga, tai chi, judo, and jiu jitsu. Each of these practices fosters a connection between mind and body, body and spirit, and self and other. Much like meditation, ancient physical practices foster attention, awareness, and mental calming (Abadi, Madgoankar, Venkatesan, 2008; Burke, 2010; Gloeckner and Stuck, 2005). If the meaning crisis is characterized by increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, reconnecting to one's body and bringing the body into contact with others and the earth itself can help bridge the gap between thought and feeling, inside and outside, self and other.

The field of ecopsychology has highlighted the deep and ancient interconnection between mind, body, and nature. Those thinking through the intersections between modern human mental and physical disease and environmental degradation and decline resulting from human activity compellingly demonstrate the ways in which our divorce from the natural world has in many respects cut us off from the source of our own health and flourishing. The void left in the wake of this separation is then filled with materialism, technology, and various forms of addiction, all of which pale in comparison to the fecundity of nature and kinship with the non-human (Glendinning, 1995; Kanner and Gomes, 1995; Shepard, 1982/1995). Compounding the trauma of separation is the grief, residing in the body, surrounding what is being lost and our culpability for the destruction. This pain and loss of connection can only be fully ameliorated through specific practices aimed at re-aligning and re-integrating body/mind/environment.

For example, while introducing young people to the practice of yoga in schools has become more widely accepted, grappling arts like wrestling and jiu jitsu – as old or potentially predating the practice of yoga – are less commonly taught and practiced across age and grade levels. Brazilian jiu jitsu in particular has enjoyed increasing interest and attention for the many benefits it offers. These include self-defense, physical exercise, calm under duress, and kinesthetic awareness, amongst others (see Blomqvist, 2019; Blomqvist-Mickelsson, 2019; Chinkov and Holt, 2015). Physicality, rough play, 'horsing around', even simple free play, recess, and time outdoors – these sorts of activities are central to development and early learning but their benefits extend far beyond childhood. Arguably, these types of activities are coded deep in our DNA and have the potential not

only to bring us into greater awareness of our own bodies and create a sense of connection with others but also to generate fun and joy.

## **INTERIOR/COLLECTIVE: WE/INTERSUBJECTIVE – DEEP ECOLOGY/EARTH DEMOCRACY**

Deep ecology and Earth Democracy would act as the foundation for rethinking the nature of our shared values, meaning, language, and relationships. Currently, this quadrant is largely shaped and dictated by massive corporations, technology, social media, and the advertising and entertainment industries and is undergirded by racism, patriarchy, hyper-individualism, consumption/commodification, comparison/competition, and, significantly, human-centeredness or anthropocentrism. It is no wonder many people in the modern, industrialized world feel lonely, depressed, alienated, and a sense of meaninglessness. As Viktor Frankl (1992) explains, the success of his book *Man's Search for Meaning* was not the result of the story he tells in it “but rather an expression of the misery of our time: if hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under their fingernails” (xiii). What might provide an antidote to this desolation of meaning and connection? In addition to familiarizing oneself with the inner landscape through meditation, I would argue that a framework which posits the deep interconnection between and inherent worth of all sentient beings – deep ecology – and that provides all those affected by a decision with a voice in making that decision – earth democracy – would go a long way in connecting to the outer landscape of nature and culture.

The foundational principles of deep ecology were articulated in the early 1980's by George Sessions and Arne Naess. Later, Devall and Sessions (1999) summarized these principles and placed them in stark contrast with the “dominant worldview of technocratic-industrial societies which regards humans as isolated and fundamentally separate from the rest of Nature, as superior to, and in charge of, the rest of creation” (200). More specifically, deep ecology holds that all life – human and more-than-human alike – has intrinsic value independent of its usefulness for strictly human ends. Diversity contributes to the well-being of life and is a values in itself. As a consequence, humans have a responsibility to avoid limiting this richness and diversity beyond satisfying vital needs and should therefore work to limit or even decrease human population. Policies need to be enacted to slow and ultimately halt human interference with the non-human world. Ideological changes should emphasize quality of life rather



than quantity, growth, and change. Finally, those who espouse the aforementioned principles have an obligation to help precipitate the changes necessary for their realization (Devall and Sessions, 1999, p.203).

Coined by Vandana Shiva (2005), the concept of Earth Democracy advances a framework similar to that of deep ecology insofar as it begins with the premise that all species, peoples, and cultures have intrinsic worth. We are all members of an interconnected web of life and therefore no species has the right to take more than the share necessary for meeting its basic needs. Shiva (2005) argues that nature and culture must be defended against those who do not recognize the previous two principles and/or who deprive any being from its right to sustenance. As Shiva (2005) states, Earth Democracy is “based on living economies and economic democracy” whereby economic systems are designed to protect ecosystems and people’s livelihoods and to provide all with their basic needs (9). Local economies are central in that they support life and do not take unnecessarily from the local ecosystem. Similarly, Earth Democracy is a living democracy as it provides all life impacted by a decision with a voice in making said decisions. Shiva (2005) adds, “self-rule and self-governance is (sic) the foundation of Earth Democracy” (9). Earth Democracy is based upon living cultures which support the dignity of and respect for all life, both within human groups and between humans and non-human species. Finally, Earth Democracy globalizes peace, care, and compassion.

Some of the more prominent implications of both deep ecology and Earth Democracy for addressing the meaning crisis should be obvious. However, what might these principles look like in practice? As one’s education extends out from the exterior of one’s own body (individual/exterior/it/objective) to the broader shared context in which one is embedded, academic study and observation can be conducted around one’s natural environment including an understanding of the local flora and fauna, social/political/economic/cultural systems, and history that make up one’s place. The principles and practices of critical place-based education offer a robust framework for these investigations and help young people develop a sense of agency, belonging, and shared responsibility (Gruenewald, 2003a; Gruenewald, 2003b; Gruenewald & Smith, 2007).

Deep ecology as a philosophical framework and Earth Democracy as a decision-making framework can foster an ethic of interconnection with the vast web of life and a sense of meaning beyond the human-centric. However, it is still vitally important that people have the tools to understand and dissect the meaning-making structures that currently

dominate contemporary social life. This necessarily would involve deep and sustained attention to the media/social media landscape through the cultivation of critical media literacy. Share, Gambino, and Marineo (n.d.) define critical media literacy in the following way:

The goal of critical media literacy is to engage with media through critically examining representations, systems, structures, ideologies, and power dynamics that shape and reproduce culture and society. It is an inquiry-based process for analyzing and creating media by interrogating the relationships between power and knowledge (n.p.).

As social media and the internet occupy the role of central cultural storytellers, young people deserve to understand how they function, who controls them, how they exert influence, and how they might be further democratized and made more accessible. A thorough understanding of these tools would enhance the ability of individuals and communities to use them to shape meaning rather than being used and shaped by them.

#### **EXTERIOR/COLLECTIVE: ITS/INTEROBJECTIVE – BIOREGIONALISM/ANARCHISM**

In considering the interobjective quadrant of the diagram, two questions should be addressed. First, what systems, structures, and institutions currently shape and structure shared values, meaning, language, relationships, and cultures? By and large, these systems, structures, and institutions within the western world can be characterized by institutional gigantism beyond the reach of individuals and communities, bureaucratic organization, profit-driven, top-down, commercialized, and blind to natural ecological limits. What is needed instead is a framework that is human-scaled, democratic, sustainability-driven, egalitarian, and suited to the unique features and inhabitants of particular ecosystems. With significant implications for social, political, economic, and cultural values and organization, bioregional anarchism may be one such framework.

What does it mean to 'live in place' (Synder, 1990)? How can we learn to live well in place? How does the concept of living well differ geographically, culturally, and historically? What is the process through which one becomes place-based or inhabitory? How does this process differ in different places? How is this process shaped by culture and particular social arrangements? Assuming people have been place-based for the majority of human history, what are the implications of the increasing placelessness engendered by technology, gentrification, global

migrations, neoliberal economics, standardized education, bureaucratic institutions, faceless governments, multinational corporations, and the denuding of natural landscapes? What are the spiritual, physical, psychological, and social impacts of disconnection from place and reconnecting to or re-embedding oneself in place? How can familiarity and intimacy with the more-than-human world (animals, plants, trees, rivers, mountains, lakes) sharing a particular place enhance one's connection to place and feelings of responsibility? How do the cultural habits (both contemporary and historical) of the inhabitants (particularly indigenous and marginalized) of particular places shape those particular places? What does teaching about place achieve for students beyond providing more relevance for traditional academic content? There are a number of concepts that are well-developed in the literature that can be drawn from to begin to answer some of these questions.

In *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder (1990) proposes as an antidote for the destructive values of Western civilization – progress, rationality, individualism, control – a reintroduction of primal values “that will help us regain the ‘etiquette of freedom’” (154). These values are rooted in what Snyder (1990) describes as ‘grandmother wisdom’, namely “values that center in a place and emphasize interconnection with the tribe and the environment, values that recognize and conjoin the interests of people with the wide interests of ongoing inhabitation, that prize ecological relations” (Johnson, 1998, 154). Based upon the work of Snyder and other bioregional thinkers, the first priority should be re-centering in place and re-establishing the fundamental importance of full ecological knowledge and value for the place one occupies. As Johnson (1998) explains, “Place here is understood as biological place, part of a bioregion with distinct biological and ecological features and is connected with the concept of the commons as an area shared, respected, and cared for locally by all people, established through mutual agreement as open land as opposed to private property, and available to all species” (154). Decolonization, re-inhabitation, freedom from hierarchy, mutual aid, shared decision-making, living within ecological limits, prefigurative politics, recognition of the inherent values of all members of the community – all of these important qualities of deep ecology, earth democracy, and bioregionalism point toward a form of social organization best encapsulated by the philosophy and practice of anarchism.

Anarchism, as a political philosophy, perfectly complements bioregionalism in its emphasis on mutual aid, localized economics, and elimination of institutionalized bureaucracy. Similarly, there is a long-standing affinity between the tenets of anarchism and Buddhist practice.

In examining the connections between Buddhism and anarchism, John Clark (2005) explains that Buddhism “rejected the idea that any authority, whether person or written document, could lead one to truth, and that it must instead be reached by direct personal experience” (51). He goes on to say that “[Buddhism’s] goal of non-attachment can be seen as an attack on the foundation of political, economic, and patriarchal domination in the desire to aggrandize an illusory ego-self” (p. 52). This has significant implications for a philosophy (anarchism) aimed at undermining unequal power relations, enhancing individual autonomy, and promoting mutual aid. Finally, anarchism advances the ideals of both deep ecology and earth democracy with its aim toward non-hierarchical relationships free of domination, challenges to unjustified authority, and embrace of direct democracy.

One final area for consideration in the realm of the interobjective are the root metaphors that shape culture and society. As C.A. Bowers (2016) explains:

the root metaphors of a culture provide the interpretative frameworks that survive over many generations and influence values, approaches to problem solving and activities in a wide range of daily life; the root metaphors, as meta-cognitive schemata, also influences the silences as well as what will be marginalized; the dominant root metaphors in the West...have contributed to an ecologically destructive culture (n.p.).

Some of these root metaphors include mechanism, progress, Cartesian individualism, and anthropocentrism. With guidance and instruction, young people can begin identifying, naming, and unpacking these root metaphors and looking for examples of where and how they manifest in day-to-day life. Additionally, youth can be involved in the process of identifying more life-giving and sustainable metaphors and in drawing out the implications of using such metaphors to organize collective thinking and behavior.

## **CONCLUSION: LOCALIZING KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM, AND MEANING**

This paper began with the premise that we are living in a time of unprecedented and compounding crises – externally in institutions, cultural meaning-making practices, systems, and the body and internally in values, thoughts, emotions, and states of mind. The work of prominent

contemporary thinkers wrestling with the overarching crisis in meaning have been drawn upon to substantiate this primary claim and to consider possible starting points for collectively addressing the liminal time and space in which we live. We are, indeed, living in a time between worlds (Stein, 2019). Many of the institutions, mythologies, belief systems, and discourses that have bound humans together in common cause are either under extreme duress or failing completely. This is not to say there was ever a time in which one framework for meaning-making or a single set of meaning-making practices predominated or were sufficient to provide most individuals with a sense of purpose in their lives and a sense of belonging in the world. However, the cotemporary era could be characterized by a splintering and fracturing of frameworks and a profound multiplicity of meaning-making practices such that one feels completely overwhelmed and alienated from the systems, structures, and institutions that shape contemporary life. Alternatively, in having found a framework for creating meaning, one achieves some degree of individual solace and contentment yet finds their life and way of being in the world at odds with the dominant set of values, mores, and worldviews of the majority and the shared institutions that shape them leading to sense of loneliness and isolation.

With this context as the starting point, the question driving the study has been centered upon what philosophical frameworks, value systems, decision-making structures, and psycho-physical practices might satisfy the deep human need for meaning *while at the same time honoring and preserving our kin in the more-than-human world*. The honoring and preservation of our kin is not only necessary for our own survival and flourishing but also, and more importantly, because it is good and true and beautiful. I hope to have made clear why and how attending to the internal world of the psyche as well as shared thoughts, emotions, states of mind, values, language and relationships cannot be accomplished without equal attention to the external world of the body, systems, networks, language, decision-making, and shared embeddedness within the living earth. As the crisis is material/psychological/spiritual/ecological so too must be the approaches to addressing them. In other words, how can we revitalize the multiple planes on which we find sustenance while at the same time supporting, revering, and mutually sustaining the diversity of existence with which we are inextricably interdependent? More importantly, how can we pass on this knowledge, these values and commitments, these structures and practices to younger generations so that they too might find meaning and wholeness in living without sacrificing the same potentiality for those that come after them? Schooling nor our notions of what

education is for will ever change sufficiently to help address the crises of our times until the broader culture, systems, and subsequent ways of being in the world adapt and adjust to the contours of the present. In all of this, I have shared nothing new or of my own making here. Nor has it been possible to consider all of the areas that require attention in addressing the crisis in and of meaning in the contemporary world – for example, child-rearing, intimate relations, and livelihoods, to name a few. The effort was to draw from and bring together the wisdom of past and present thinkers, cultures, and traditions as a way of imagining how we might meet the challenges that face us and to provide a map for traversing the future to those who come after us.

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