Learning To Be Evolution

by Tom Atlee

If we wish to consciously evolve as a civilization
evolution has some lessons
we need to start learning, taking seriously, and applying.

First of all, I want to be clear that this is not about Darwin or genetic engineering. It is bigger than that, much bigger. Those pursuing this inquiry see Darwin as a genius who opened new realms of understanding, while at the same time provoking profoundly deeper questions about what's really happening in evolutionary processes. Furthermore, we are exploring not only the evolution of living species, but the evolution of the cosmos, the planet, society — everything from natural laws to the shape of our everyday lives.

Evolution is the process of change — ongoing transformational change. It is the cumulative development of life, unfolding slowly and incrementally, with occasional sudden bursts of creativity, with evolutionary opportunities sprouting in climates of crisis. We are living through one of these disorienting bursts of creativity and crisis right now.

Through evolution new forms appear — new organisms, new partnerships, new conditions, new systems. Some of them last and some don't. Evolution tests things out. Evolutionary testing goes on at every level, all the time. The universe does it. Life does it. Human societies do it. You and I are doing it every day — sometimes in our lives, sometimes in our minds, sometimes in our conversations. New patterns rise and fall.

Billions of years of creative trial and error have added up to the world we live in. Some of that world is profoundly exciting and enjoyable. Some of it is increasingly scary. Things are getting better and better and worse and worse, faster and faster. Much of it is changing faster than we can follow, its novelty and complexity racing ahead of our individual capacity to understand and respond.

We face daunting choices about how to respond to changes that seem forced on us. We also face compelling choices about creating a better world from the depths of our hearts and our dreams.

How did we end up in this place? Individually and collectively, we are products of evolution. Evolution produced us through trial and error and a few thousand years of more or less conscious choices by thousands of people we call our parents, leaders, elders, ancestors. Little did they know what would happen.

And now WE are the ones making choices that are shaping the evolution of the future — not only future generations of humanity but future generations of all life on earth.

How conscious are we about who we are, what we are doing, where our motivations come from, and the consequences of the choices we make? Do we realize that our awareness, our intelligence, our desires and dreams, our creativity and efforts — seasoned by wisdom, or not — have become evolution, right here on earth, at least for now?

Nothing on earth can compete with the impact of 21st century humanity. Collectively we have become a semi-conscious branch of evolution. We are the shapers of the ongoing processes of transformational change — half blind, half awake, less than half wise.

It is slowly dawning on us that our species will flourish or fade away, thanks to the evolutionary choices we make now, whether or not we know what we are doing.

We are at a critical stage in our remarkable human journey on this planet: We are coming to a place where the road ends. From here on out, we will be making the road as we walk it, in ways we've never had to do before. We now have the job of forging our own evolutionary destiny, and being prime agents of the process of evolution here on earth.

It behoves us to learn something about the job description, starting with the story of who we are.

Our remarkable evolutionary story

It is not mysticism but hard science that now tells us we are made of stardust and light, waves and coalescences of stardust and light reconfiguring into cars and trees, oceans and civilizations. We — humanity and the living earth we are part of — are the soul and substance of cosmic evolution, happening right here and now. We are the living face of evolution, the eyes and hands and wings and minds of the universe weaving itself into its next manifestations, day after day after day. And humans are a growing edge of the universe becoming conscious, watching itself through microscopes and telescopes, mountaintops and meditations, awed, nudging its pieces into greater awareness and love.

We humans are also the universe broken apart in the illusion of separateness, the arrogance of our small but growing power, the pursuit of our small but growing desires. And we are the universe waking up from this dream of separateness and smallness into the discovery of ourselves as conscious, loving Evolution, finding ever more remarkable and inclusive forms of cooperation. We are both the universe's sleep and the universe's awakening.

Here on earth, we are stardust-as-human-civilization dawning into an evolutionary imperative: the creation of a collectively wise culture that is capable of its own conscious evolution. This unprecedented challenge is more than an enticing possibility. It is a collective necessity, a matter of survival. It IS our next evolutionary leap and we ARE that leap.

This is where the work of co-intelligence was born — the work of preparing for wise, conscious collective evolution.

Learning from evolution how to be evolution

Lessons from our long evolutionary journey offer rich sources of guidance about how to consciously participate in the evolutionary process. Taking this guidance seriously can help us transform ourselves, our consciousness, our social systems and cultures, and our technologies in ways that serve our long-term collective flourishing as part of a flourishing Earth.

Here are just a few of the evolutionary dynamics and opportunities we can explore and use, which are described further at the end of this article. A major project of the Co-Intelligence Institute now is researching more of them, and how to best apply them all, and spreading that new old knowledge.

1. LOVE AT THE CORE. Our common past makes us kin, and deep inside we know it. We are wholeness en route to new wholeness. This deep truth can be called forth to help us resonate with each other. Much of what we need to do next taps into this powerful fact of life.

2. A NEW DANCE OF COOPERATION AND COMPETITION. Evolution has evolved with cooperation enhancing competitiveness. As we become a global society, competition will necessarily evolve to support cooperation.

3. SYNERGY BETWEEN SELF AND WHOLE. Life on earth finds novel ways for self-interest and the whole to serve each other. We are called to create new ways to design this dynamic into complex 21st century societies.

4. HIGHER LEARNING. Evolution is, itself, a vast learning enterprise — and emergence is its learning edge. That edge involves new forms of ongoing collective intelligence and wisdom, and reframing education to meet the challenges of conscious collective evolution. By its nature, learning on the edge requires a growing capacity to embrace the unknown.

5. SELF-ORGANIZATION AND EMERGENCE. Evolution starts simple and brings forth increasing complexity. At the same time, it creates remarkable ways for life to self-organize without top-down direction. Our social and technological complexity is now calling forth new forms of creative, conscious human self-organization.

6. EVOLVING CONSCIOUSNESS. Consciousness shapes social systems and culture — and social systems and culture shape consciousness. This insight, combined with new and ancient methods of expanding consciousness, offer tremendous leverage for humanity's conscious evolution.

7. THE JUICE OF OUR DIFFERENCES. A major driver of evolution is the creative use of diversity, conflict, crisis and dissonance. And our uniqueness — our individual specialness — is a vast nascent resource for the world. These insights challenge us, in times of collective trauma, to move beyond peacemaking and crisis management to catalyzing inclusive evolutionary breakthroughs.

8. IT'S ABOUT PROCESS. The essence of evolution is the emergence of outcomes from powerful interactive processes. But it isn't about being attached to particular outcomes, since they, too, will change and evolve. If we want to become evolution, we would be wise to learn how to let go and focus on manifesting powerfully interactive, life-serving processes.

These eight evolutionary dynamics and their corresponding transformational projects are but a taste of the rich guidance available from the serious study of evolution's relevance for today. There are dozens of other dynamics and patterns revealed by evolutionary science and related studies which could also guide us — and new ones are being discovered every year.

We are just beginning to learn how to apply these emerging understandings to our lives, our societies, and our efforts to make a better world. This is a new field of study and practice. Its insights will help us see where our energy, attention and resources can be most usefully focused to build a more sustainable, just, and life-serving civilization.

Perhaps most remarkably, in doing this work — to the extent we learn to consciously apply the dynamics which are already at work in the evolution of life — we are actually becoming a manifestation of evolution in a totally new realm — conscious evolution.

Just as evolution shifted into major new realms of creativity when it discovered cells... then sexual reproduction... then multi-cellular organisms... then language... it is now shifting into a remarkable new game as it becomes conscious of itself, through us, and begins to consciously perform its transformational magic — even consciously evolving its own consciousness into more profound states.

To make crystal clear what we're dealing with here: "conscious evolution" is not primarily about the genetic engineering of individual animals, plants, and humans. It is about far greater, more productive and vital challenges — the conscious evolution of our societies, our lives, and our individual and collective consciousness — and the conscious evolution of the knowledge, arts and tools that will make those developments possible. Therein lie tremendous hope for our civilization and an inspiring new view of who we are and what we are doing in this universe.

For we are not just organisms trying to survive, accidents of mutating materiality, or isolated individuals consuming one more wave of well-advertised products. In a very profound sense, we are the universe, itself, beginning another chapter in its truly remarkable, wildly creative, and keenly experimental Great Story-of-all-stories.

What we do next will be profoundly important. No matter what.

More about the above eight examples of evolutionary guidance

1. LOVE AT THE CORE. The fact of evolution means we are all related. Not just we humans, but all entities in the universe — all are expressions of one universe. We have been kin since the infinitely

intense birth of this universe, when we were obviously One but not separate enough to notice the fact. We all arose from the Source of that — whatever that may have been — and we are all made of stardust, literally. Two hundred million generations ago, our ancestors swam in the sea; today the chemistry of the sea flows through our veins. Our bodies contain great civilizations of highly specialized and synchronized single-celled beings, cousins of the trillions of microbes that populate the world around us. All humanity is one family, rich with diversity yet sharing one root. Deep inside we know this, we resonate with one another, we are drawn into relationship, support, and celebration. Love is not something that needs to be added or built, only freed and nurtured, for it is our natural state. On the other hand, evolution is about moving from old states of wholeness into new states of wholeness. So love can and must find new forms and ways to be and do.

2. A NEW DANCE OF COOPERATION AND COMPETITION. Those who today detect directionality in the history of life note that evolution through time has produced ever more inclusive and intricate systems of cooperation, from molecular synergies to the global financial web of Visa. Cooperative achievements have been retained by the body of life not at the expense of competition but in service to it: Quite simply, cooperating entities are usually more robust in handling the challenges offered up by the world around them and beat their competition. However, this dynamic is now undergoing a radical shift. As human activities expand to embrace the global commons we all share, the win/lose games that drove human interactions in the past are being supplanted by cooperative games that recognize we are now all in it together. Our exploding power has made it clear that, in the final analysis, we will either win together or lose together. More inclusive, sophisticated forms of cooperation are no longer simply admirable; they are essential. In the next evolutionary surge, competition will be honed for its best gifts — driving creativity and excellence — but contained and constrained within globally cooperative contexts.

3. SYNERGY BETWEEN SELF AND WHOLE. Because individual organisms play their role in biological evolution by passing on genes, self-interest is foundational in biological evolution. And yet it is evident that the evolutionary benefits of cooperation throughout the journey of life have been achieved by creatively tying self-interest to the welfare of the whole. Sustainable cooperative systems thus contain feedback loops that help individuals experience the positive and negative effects of their own acts. On that loom, individual gifts can then be woven into patterns that serve the whole even as the whole enhances the lives of its individual members. Under the right social conditions, individuals "taking responsibility for what they love" generate greater life for their whole group or society. Our job is to bring about those "right social conditions." This is evolutionary science. This is evolutionary economics. This is evolutionary sociology. This is evolutionary politics and governance.

4. HIGHER LEARNING. Evolution is a vast learning enterprise. In biological evolution, learning happens when organisms pass information from one generation to the next, using the genetic language of DNA. New genetic approaches (mutations, sexual recombinations, etc.) get tested in new environments, and workable ones spread. This change-and-test evolutionary intelligence changed radically — accelerating and freeing life from many harsh consequences — when it became embodied in minds that could test ideas and options in virtual safety before trying them out in the physical and social worlds. Then, as symbolic language emerged in the human realm, this intelligence became augmented by increasingly sophisticated methods for developing and transmitting knowledge over time and space — writing, education, printing, science,

telecommunications, the internet. And with those developments, collective intelligence — which began with multicellular organisms and social insects — rapidly evolved into totally new realms. Today, increasingly inclusive forms of collective intelligence and wisdom are embracing and creatively engaging with complexity, uncertainty, and mystery at the emerging edge of evolution. And quite naturally, this rapidly evolving higher learning is beginning to explore the subject of evolution, itself.

5. SELF-ORGANIZATION AND EMERGENCE. Evolution has steadily enriched the capacity of life to organize itself into ever-more creative, remarkable, complex, and workable forms. The wonder of the universe is not that it was designed from outside, but that it is designing itself from the inside, and getting better and better at doing so. (Some say God manifests in this intimate, imminent, infinite, ever-expanding creativity.) As complexity increases, linear forms of understanding and management become less and less workable — both in the realm of human societies and ecologically in the world at large. The complexity sciences have vividly demonstrated that life operates primarily with distributed, evocative, loopy, self-generating, whole-system organic forms of organization and leadership, rather than through straight lines, boxes, command hierarchies, conformity, and unchanging rules (except for the deepest laws of nature). Using whole-system forms of intelligence, life generates its own newness at the evolutionary edge, which we humans experience as emergence, as a creative upwelling within us, among us and around us. The growing body of knowledge about healthy self-organization and emergence can help us transform problems and crises into evolutionary leaps.

6. EVOLVING CONSCIOUSNESS. Most native peoples experience the world as alive and aware: stones, mountains, forests, plants, animals are all alive and conscious, each in their own ways. Drawing upon mainstream science, as well as these indigenous roots, many other people are beginning to recover similar forms of depth communion with the more-than-human world. The resulting deep sense of interconnectedness engenders a more sensitive relationship with nature. In addition, for thousands of years, pioneers committed to exploring the interior dimension of reality have explored and mapped diverse, extensive, evolving realms of awareness, which are now becoming available to more people, deepening them into Spirit and ameliorating the destructive tendencies of materialism. More recently, social, psychological, and cognitive sciences have begun to clarify how civilization — with its languages, tools, stories, and constructed environments and institutions — shapes consciousness — AND how individual and collective states of consciousness — and the interactions and conversations among conscious beings — influence and create culture and social systems. The more we explore these two, the more we discover that social systems and consciousness co-create each other and co-evolve. We suspect tremendous evolutionary opportunities will be found in the dynamics where these two powerful realities shape each other. As we engage those opportunities, we will become conscious agents of evolution, midwifing increasingly conscious and self-evolving people and social systems — which will constitute new forms of consciousness, itself, evolving.

7. THE JUICE OF OUR DIFFERENCES. Diversity — dynamic, interacting diversity — is one of the deepest and most widespread realities in the universe. It could be called the most important engine of evolution, being the source of so much creativity — AND transformational crises. Just as we all arise from stardust, we are each profoundly unique. Society can gloss over our uniqueness with conformity, prejudice, and politeness — trying to restrain our mind-boggling diversity — but it

refuses to disappear, and constantly struggles to show up, to be recognized, to make a difference. When our differences come vividly into view, they often disturb our simple certainties and comfortable order. Those disturbances almost always mark something new and important trying to surface in our midst, so today we need to hear the call to acknowledge our differences while remaining connected with each other. Welcoming diversity and disturbance, and engaging them creatively, are powerful conscious acts that catalyse emergence at the growing edge of evolution. Efforts to simply resolve, solve, ameliorate, and calm troubled waters can short-circuit important opportunities for transformation. Our capacitance — our individual and collective capacity to welcome, hold in dynamic tension, and creatively engage with diversity, dissonance, uncertainty, and complexity — is a hallmark of co-intelligence and a source of evolutionary energy and guidance.

8. IT'S ABOUT PROCESS. Evolution IS process — or perhaps we should say a vast family of processes that together add up to creative development, unfolding complexity, and ever-emergent wholeness. How can we be conscious agents of such processes? How can we catalyse them, live into them, embody them? These are guiding questions for those of us wishing to become conscious manifestations of intentional evolution-in-action. Most leading-edge processes used in groups, organizations and communities involve many of the seven dynamics listed above. They blend intentionality with a responsive "letting go of particular outcomes". They embody a trust in the capacity of living systems — under the right conditions — to call forth inspired, workable next steps. Creating those conditions is the task of the process worker, who holds a space for life's diversity to show up, interact, and learn in ways that welcome and empower breakthroughs. Reflecting on the creativity of the universe, we can imagine evolution pursuing and pushing the limits of an unspoken question: "What is actually possible here?" Evolutionary process workers use variations of that question to call forth the transformational energies of the people and systems they are working with. In the resulting conversations and interactive spaces, people explore their individual and collective dreams, passions, and circumstances and discover totally new possibilities they can work on or BE together. As those possibilities get tested in the real world, evolution continues, making space and energy for still newer possibilities...

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