

# **That Which May Be Gained: A Return to Scale, Community, and Morality**

**by Dan Allen (selected excerpts edited by C. Papadopoulos)**

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It was, of course, all foreseen long ago. We were warned. (See, for example, the interview with David Orr at <http://www.energybulletin.net/node/52016>)

But we chose the easy path – the childish, impulsive, arrogant, blithely-limitless, material-worshipping path. We followed our worst instincts as a species and have ended up facing the worst of all predicaments.

It was, of course, our easy access to rivers of concentrated ancient sunlight (i.e. fossil fuels) that enabled industrial civilization to expand its scale far beyond anything imaginable to other human civilizations. These great rivers of energy made it possible to (temporarily) beat back the universal tide of entropy and construct physical and bureaucratic entities of dizzying organizational and technological complexity. And these entities were then assembled to access and unleash even more of this fossil energy; doing work of astonishing magnitudes on the lithosphere, oceans, atmosphere, and biosphere of our planet – and altering it to a huge, sometimes-almost-unrecognizable degree in the process.

But this exponential expansion of the scale at which we have operated has had profound negative impacts on the Earth's biosphere, our human communities, and our very thought patterns.

Maybe the industrial economy will just recede away from us like water draining from a tub – leaving us dripping cold and naked; on our own. Maybe then we'll lock the missile silos and reactors; open the prisons; empty the shopping malls, supermarkets, and office buildings; abandon our cars in the driveways; take a walk around the neighborhood; knock on our neighbor's door; and get down to work.

And maybe we – or some of us, at least – will find it possible to follow the righteous path; the path of reorienting our species with biophysical reality; the path of hard, honest work and reverent spirituality. And we can then perhaps – even a little bit (maybe?) – taste the sweet fruits of peace and community.

A student came to me the other day and asked me, in light of all that was wrong, how she could maintain her cheerfulness and positive outlook. She didn't want to lose it and was confused. And she had trouble reconciling the things I was saying and writing with my

generally-cheery and positive personality. She didn't ask this next question, but I asked it of myself, "Why am I not depressed about all this?"

I think perhaps the explanation for my curious lack of dread comes down to this: a sort of mental weighing-out of the things that may and will be lost in the coming times versus things that may and will be gained. And I think I have already, to some degree at least, reconciled some of the losses and envisioned the possible gains. In my mind, I have already gone through some degree of mourning for our past, present, and future losses and emerged into some partial form of acceptance.

I have let go of the notion that my Industrial Civilization membership card entitles me to live essentially forever outside of biological reality – to replace my malfunctioning organs with synthetic or borrowed ones as needed; to vanquish, at a moment's notice and with potent synthetic chemicals, the countless microorganisms who desire to eat my flesh. I accept that I really have no right to live past the functioning life of my body – whatever that turns out to be. I have no right to immortality.

As such, I suggest the following as a worthy set of 'prizes' and goals for the coming post-carbon future: a return to life at a proper 'human' scale, the reclamation of functional coherent communities, and the widespread internalization and application of a true morality.

In a thermodynamic sense, we obviously have no choice but contraction of scale in the coming post-carbon era. As fossil fuels begin their imminent nose-dive, the net-energy needed to maintain the absurdly-huge current industrial scale simply won't BE there. And despite the likely-violent convulsions that will almost certainly accompany such a monumental contraction, the smaller 'human' scale towards which we are returning may be beneficial in many ways.

Firstly, we simply won't have the massive power to damage the biosphere as extensively and rapidly as we have. While our ecological depredations will almost certainly continue at some level, smaller scales of human activity will limit these depredations to a similarly-smaller scale. Secondly, there is more of a chance that even local occurrences of ecological degradation can be vastly minimized at smaller scales of societal organization. I know from my own farming/gardening experience, that I simply am able to treat the soil much better when I operate on a smaller scale; I can pay much closer attention to closing the cycles of the matter and energy changes I'm orchestrating. The noble discipline of Permaculture speaks eloquently to the practical skills and thought patterns required here.

A smaller scale will also perhaps encourage a return towards greater personal responsibility for our actions – and thus a higher quality of work. The impetus for this greater

responsibility would be a more intimate connection with the results of our work at a smaller scale. No longer will we be able to destroy distant landscapes or communities from afar by remote control. Any destructive activities will be felt close to home.

Just as we face the compulsory return of our lives to a smaller scale in the post-carbon era, I think we are destined also to return to tight local communities. And I think that's an overwhelmingly good thing – something to really look forward to; something to make us atomized industrial consumers smile as we gaze into the otherwise uncertain future.

And by 'communities' here, I mean REAL communities – collections of inter-dependent, cooperating neighbors working together to fashion meaningful lives. These won't be the superficially-connected, nebular entities we call 'communities' today. We won't be able to afford those shallow luxuries anymore -- video-gaming 'communities'; internet 'friends' lists; corporate 'families'; 'communities' of fellow teachers and administrators in a school district; geographic neighborhood 'communities' composed of rank strangers, etc.

The post-carbon communities will be REAL communities working together on real, fundamental problems -- like building functioning local economies with resilient local food, water, transportation, and manufacturing systems; like building rich networks of deep face-to-face social interactions; like ensuring that our lives are consistent with the demands and limitations of finite local material and energetic resources.

## 3 Moonshot Ideas from Peter Diamandis

The X Prize and Singularity University founder is known for his optimism. These are three areas where he thinks the future is especially bright.

BY TESS TOWNSEND, *Staff reporter, Inc.com*

<http://www.inc.com/tess-townsend/3-moonshot-ideas-diamandis.html>

Serial entrepreneur [Peter Diamandis](#) is optimistic and ambitious, even by the standards of tech-can-fix-everything [Silicon Valley](#). He thinks believing the world is headed anywhere other than an era of [abundance](#) where all have access to first world-grade resources is foolish. Technological advances--artificial intelligence, developments in diagnostic

technology, access to previously inaccessible resources--all this means people can accomplish more than ever before, with less than ever was needed.

These views are extreme, but for Diamandis, that's kind of the point. He thinks he knows better than what [cable news or other media](#) would have you think. "I look at the data and I try not to watch the news," Diamandis, who founded the X Prize foundation, told an audience of about 50 business people at his organization Singularity University earlier this week.

He shared with the audience his three [moonshot ideas](#) in areas where he thinks great advances can be made if only people adopt hyper-ambitious--some would say magical--thinking.

### **Extending the healthy human lifespan**

Diamandis has a personal goal of living a multi-hundred-year lifespan, but his goal for longevity extends beyond his own physiology. He believes a combination of large amounts of health data and machine learning technology to aid in analysis of that data can lead to longer lives for humans in general. To that end, Diamandis co-founded tech company Human Longevity Inc., aimed at compiling a comprehensive database of genetic and clinical information. The idea is to link DNA information about patients to health data with goals including predicting health risks. "What we're doing is we're building the capability to digitize you," said Diamandis.

### **Expanding humanity's access to resources**

Space drones mining asteroids for minerals and other resources. Drones and satellites mapping the Earth's agricultural systems to predict yields, and providing insight into energy production through keeping an eye on facilities like oil refineries. Devices that map the ocean's floor. Diamandis thinks there's a lot out there we're not taking advantage of, and technology can help us find it.

### **Addressing the world's grand challenges**

Diamandis is of the belief that the current era stands out from periods in the past. One key reason, he said, is that [entrepreneurs](#) have more power than ever to take on the world's problems. Through the X Prize foundation, initially launched to promote private space travel, he hopes to fund ambitious projects of all kinds, from diagnostic devices to innovations in education. "I don't know how to build a spaceship, but I can crowdsource that," he said--and other feats can similarly be accomplished through teamwork enabled by technology.