Why having less is more

'I often compare the situation of living in the United States, to being in the eye of the storm', writes architect Sergio Palleroni, noted for his work to provide shelter to the poorest of people in impoverished nations. 'When you are standing in the eye of the storm, everything seems calm. But as you step away... you realize the storm you're creating is changing the rest of the world dramatically'[1]. Many who read this book probably live, like me, in the eye of the storm Palleroni talks about. We read of the political, economic and environmental storms engulfing billions of people and other species across

the planet, but it is easy to lull ourselves into thinking that we can forever remain in the eye and that we will never be buffeted by the human-generated winds and waves that have left so many people barely surviving. But storms move and their eyes break apart, and we will all eventually be affected in various ways by the economic hurricanes and typhoons swirling around us.

How can ethics and design provide humans the life jackets we'll need as these storms grow in intensity? Ethics can help us in two primary ways, reflected in the division in Western thought between the ancients and the moderns. Generally speaking, ethics involves questions about what constitutes being good and doing right. The first of these – being good – played a dominant role in the thinking of the ancient world, in the virtue ethics of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Epictetus, as well as of religious leaders such as the Buddha, Jesus, Augustine, and Aquinas. These thinkers all focused on the importance of developing a good character as the basis for our acting in good ways and for surviving the hardships that inevitably come our way in life. Virtue ethics went out of favour for much of the modern era, although it has witnessed a revival in the latter half of the twentieth century in the work of philosophers and writers such as Philippa Foote, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Iris Murdoch[2].

The second approach to ethics – the concern about doing right – has dominated the modern era, ranging from the social contract ethics of Thomas Hobbes to the duty ethics of Immanuel Kant to the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham. They focused not on our character, but on our actions, looking at the obligations societies and individuals have toward each other, whether thought of in contractual terms or judged according to the intentions or the results of our actions. This view of ethics has remained a primary concern of philosophers in our own era, such as John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, and Peter Singer[3].

The built environment has reflected this shifting interest within ethics. While we may think of virtue ethics in terms of the rhetorical inscriptions that the Greeks and Romans applied to their temples and public buildings to remind people of what it means to be a good citizen, such ethics had a much deeper effect on design in the ancient world. The classical virtues of courage, justice, prudence, and temperance led people to lead mostly very modest private lives, while valuing, as Hannah Arendt has argued, the public life as the place in which we, the most social of animals as Aristotle observed, could be most human[4]. That sense of the virtues guiding us to be courageous in the face of

setbacks, to be just when we encounter inequities, to be prudent in our use of
resources, and to be temperate in our expectations of life – all of which will be
of great value as we encounter, like many societies before us, much greater
physical and material limits than many of us, living in the eye of the storm,
have seen before.

The attention paid to doing the right thing in modern ethics has, in turn, found
its reflection in modern architecture, whether it be the utilitarian emphasis
on function and efficiency in many commercial and industrial buildings, or the
focus on our duty to others in the creation of public parks or public housing,
or the embrace of a social contract in our adherence to building and zoning
codes and in our respect for the property rights of others. While modern
architecture, like modern ethics, has encountered its share of criticism for
its unintended consequences or insensitivity to place, these approaches
remain influential in shaping our actions and the built environment that
contains them. Likewise, such action-oriented ethics should also prove quite
useful in years to come, when we attend to our duty with fewer resources at
our disposal, when asking what is the greatest good when great numbers of
people have so little, and when re-imagining a social contract for a society
much more mobile and mutable than those in our immediate past.

The large-scale division of ethics into being good and doing right, like the
broad-brush division of design into the ancients and moderns, barely begins
to get at the many ways in which they can help us survive and thrive in the
future. Within each of these categories, there exist multiple interpretations
and matters of emphasis that reveal different approaches depending on the
situations we face. As with design, it is hard to talk about ethics in the abstract.
Both fields, in the end, remain wedded to particular situations, and have
different ways of addressing specific questions, which may vary from one place
and time to another. So, let's begin at the point where most people encounter
ethics, which is also where many people have traditionally experienced a major
work of design – in a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque.

Most people do not study ethics formally, any more than they do design, even
though we all confront ethical dilemmas as constantly as we do designed
objects and environments. In many cases, the ethics people know come
largely from religion, which they might have learned by attending religious
services and classes or by simply being a part of a culture, almost all of
which have a grounding in a set of ethical ideas that often arose originally

out of religion. All religions have embedded within them the tools to survive setbacks, disappointments, and hardships, which is why many people turn to religion in times of trouble. The irony is that most established religions have also evolved into large, wealthy, powerful institutions that sometimes fall prey to the very hubris that leads people to the crises that religion seeks to address. But, whatever the limitations of organized religions, the ethical ideas in religions can be very helpful, especially when the excesses of modern civilization have brought us, collectively, to a crisis of global proportions.

Take one of the oldest religious texts in existence, the Bhagavad Gita[5]. It begins with the warrior, Arjuna, in a crisis, standing in his chariot and about to go into a battle that would pit allies and friends against each other, a situation not unlike what could happen in a future of diminishing resources and growing population, in which not only enemies might go to war with each other, but also families and neighbours. The god Krishna responses to Arjuna's despair with the seemingly paradoxical idea that Arjuna should do his duty and go into war without worry about dying or causing others to die, since the body and the material world in general are ephemeral and that nothing can kill the eternal soul in us.

To modern ears, such advice seems quite odd, since we have largely become accustomed to see the material world as permanent, seeing death as something to fear, and viewing the killing of others as an evil. How could a god, in this case Krishna, advise doing just the opposite? Krishna offers Arjuna, however, a profound ethical insight of great use to us all as we face difficulties as metaphorical charioteers on life's battlefields. We often think, as Arjuna did, that material reality really matters, that we can't live without it and that its loss would leave us bereft, but in fact very little of it matters and we can live without all but the essentials needed to sustain life. Moreover, we can find happiness without it if, as Krishna urges Arjuna, we focus on doing our duty and serving others. As we enter a period in which many people will be needing help, valuing the duty of helping others will become key to our making it through our collective hardships.

The argument in the Gita also may sound odd to designers who make things in the physical environment all the time. Reading Krishna words to Arjuna might tempt a designer to do what Samuel Johnson did when hearing of David Hume's scepticism about cause and effect and reality in general: Johnson went over and kicked a rock to demonstrate that things do exist and that

kicking a rock has the effect of causing pain[6]. But Krishna isn't saying that the material world doesn't exist, only that it is ephemeral, constantly changing, and ultimately beyond our control, and that the only thing that lasts is the soul, which exists in all living things. Every designer knows that what we do in the material world will not last, that things deteriorate, break, or fall apart. And while we rarely talk about it this way, designers also know that the best work has a spirit or soul that we find compelling and that causes us to care.

What the Gita suggests for the design community is that what matters is the spirit in what we do: how much the work helps people feel whole and how much it speaks to the spirit in every living being affected by it. How does our work enhance the humanity not only of those who commission, use, or inhabit it, but also the humanity of those who fabricate, assemble, or build it, and those who will have the responsibility to care for, dispose, or reuse it after we have gone? And how does our work enhance the quality of life of other species – the habitat of plants and animals in the locations where what we use is harvested, where what we create is fabricated, or where what we design gets built?

Such an expansion of care may sound impossible. How can any designer attend to such dispersed impacts in so many different places, many of which may be far away or out of our control? We can never do so completely, but we can become conscious of it in everything we do and thus raise the consciousness of everyone else we deal with. Designers, like all who create the physical world in which we live, have incredible power simply by asking the right questions, and the single most important question we can ask of everything we do is: how does this best serve all? The paradoxical result of such a question is, because everything is connected and the soul pervades every living being, serving all is the best way to serve our clients and the users of what we design. The fundamental ethical responsibility of every professional is to do the right thing, and to do our duty to the best of our ability without regard to the fruits of our actions. The Gita simply asks that we not put limits on that: that we do, to the best of our ability, the most we can do for as many as possible. It may be the only way that we, like Arjuna, will survive the battles that lie ahead.

The Buddha offers another take on this ethical idea, putting less emphasis on serving others and more on being happy and avoiding suffering. Coming from a wealthy family, Buddha knew how much time and attention people paid to

earning money and acquiring goods as the way to happiness, but he also saw how much unhappiness – ranging from envy and jealousy to fear and anger – resulted from this very process of gaining possessions. After a period in which he tried to rid himself of all possessions to the point of almost starving himself, he realized that the problem lay not with things, but in our thinking about them. The suffering he saw around him came from our attachment to things, and in our inability to find peace of mind, the lack of which leads us to seek it in the external world. Controlling the mind, eliminating desire, needing nothing, resenting nothing, relinquishing all attachments, focusing on the present moment, having compassion for others, being generous and kind to others – such is some of the wise counsel that the Buddha offers as the way to happiness.

Underlying this is the ethical idea of 'the middle way', the notion that we should seek a path of moderation between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. That idea also occurs in the ethics of Aristotle and it represents a position quite contrary to the extremism of the modern world, in which extraordinary levels of wealth and poverty, over-consumption and deprivation, exist simultaneously. Nor is it the way in which most of the design world has gone over the last century. Most designers depend upon wealthy individuals, organizations, and governments for many of their commissions, resulting in designers directly serving a very small fraction of the total population. At the same time, the design community has tended to recognize and award work that stakes out an extreme position of one kind or another. Moderation in a project rarely gets covered in the media, rarely draws people's attention, or rarely attracts the kind of clients that designers sometimes assume is necessary to do good work.

On top of that, the Buddha's urging that we not be attached to things or not desire possessions also seems contrary to what designers do, which is to make things that other people need and want. Is Buddhism antithetical to design? The answer depends upon whether we are talking about current forms of design practice or about design generally. As E.F. Schumacher observed about economics in his development of 'Buddhist economics', design practice has come to reflect the world in which we work, a world in which, as the Buddha observed, many people continue to look at material possessions as the way to happiness, rather than to their own state of mind[7]. But there has always been design, and we need to discover a design equivalent to Schumacher's economics, a 'Buddhist design' that isn't about the design of

Buddhist temples or decorative arts, but is instead about imagining a form of design that leads to happiness through an embrace of humility, moderation, openness, and acceptance of limits.

Schumacher urged his fellow economists to re-establish their field on some basis other than greed and envy, which he saw as the unhealthy and unhappy motivators for so much economic activity. Designers need to do the same. While greed may lead people to want a larger house, a bigger office, or a flashier car, and while envy may lead people to commission work that exceeds in some way that of a competitor, such frames of mind arise out of unhappiness and, as the Buddha understood, can only result in unhappiness, which is hardly in the best interest of anyone, be it the designer or those who commission or use what we do. If the purpose of design is to relieve suffering, to improve the world and people's lot in it in some way, than continuing the cycle of suffering, as the Buddha describes it, renders what we do rather pointless, and possibly leads to the ironic result of design being less valued even as the desire for it increases. Like addicts, our culture has become hooked on the quantity of things, wanting more and more of what, in psychological terms, means less and less. 'Buddhist design' would refocus people away from quantities of things to the quality of each thing, showing us how we actually need much less than we think we do, so that we can enjoy each thing more.

In a sense, Buddhist design might be more like the natural world we see all around us. It might be made, like a forest, almost entirely of biodegradable materials that serve their purpose and then disappear without a trace. It might consist of materials, like rock, that can be endlessly reused by whoever needs it at the time. It might generate wastes, like a plant or animal, that serves as the food for others or fertilizer that enhances the richness of the whole. And it might use the least amount of material possible, like a bird, to achieve the greatest efficiency and beauty. The Buddha achieved enlightenment while meditating under a Bodhi tree and we, in the design community, might find similar insight contemplating nature in this way, seeing how we might help others, and ourselves, actually achieve the happiness that people turn to our work for. This will become especially important in the future, when the only real abundance most of us will have will lie inside ourselves.

A third ethics to arise out religion that can serve us as a useful tool is that of Jesus. It has become difficult to talk about Jesus' ethics because of the

current wave of fundamentalism and fanaticism that has emerged from all three of the major Western religions – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. At a time when, as the writer and former nun, Karen Armstrong has argued, some people see religious texts like scientific facts, as having to be literally true in order to be believed, even talking about Jesus as a ethicist will offend some[8]. But so be it. As Thomas Jefferson did with his Bible, cutting out the metaphysics to get to the ethics of what Jesus said in the New Testament, let's look at what the ethical core of what Jesus said has to offer us as we look ahead to a world that may increasingly look like the world that Jesus knew some 2000 years ago[9].

What is most striking about Jesus' ethical pronouncements is how much they address the needs of the poor. Just as Krishna would urge us to serve others and the Buddha to relinquish attachments, Jesus would have us give up our wealth and share it with the most impoverished people. This radical realignment of wealth, of people voluntarily giving up most of what they own so that everyone could have enough, does seem to get lost in the conflation of Christianity with capitalism that has become common, at least among many conservatives in countries like the USA. It is hard not to read Jesus' pronouncement that the 'meek shall inherit the earth', and wonder about all the competition, aggression, and bloodshed that has characterized the behaviour of some Christians towards other religions or other denominations in their own religion[10]. As Karen Armstrong observed in an interview, 'religion... is about losing your ego... We need to rediscover what is in our religions, which have gotten overlaid with generations of egotistical and lazy theology. The current thinking – my God is better than your God – is highly irreligious'[11].

Many designers might be very sympathetic to Jesus' compassion for the poor and maybe even his urging that we give to the poor everything that we don't absolutely need in order to live, but design remains a field for the relatively well off and out of reach for most people who do not have the money to pay our fees. What the ethics of Jesus forces us to confront is the question of how design practice can serve the poor, the very people who need, even more than the wealthy, what designers have to offer: that capacity to do more with less, to satisfy the greatest number of needs with the least amount of effort or resources. One way to achieve this would be to see design as a form of public health, which is similar to the way in which Jesus saw his role as ministering to the people that the government and established religion of his day had forgotten.

A public health version of design would entail dealing with the problems that the greatest number of people, especially the greatest number of poor people, face in their daily lives. Cameron Sinclair, whose organization, Architecture for Humanity, has come perhaps the closest to achieving such a goal, once said that the one thing most people around the world seem to need most is a way of fastening different kinds of materials together[12]. Poor people often can get access to cast-off or low-cost building supplies, but connecting materials together in ways that keep out the elements or withstand the wind or possible earthquakes poses a real and largely unaddressed problem. The same is true of people's need for basic services – water and electrical supply, sanitary and storm sewage, security and safety elements. The poorest people lack such essentials, access to which should be a fundamental human right. That billions of people lack one or more of those basic services – access to clean water, to sanitation, to electricity, to security – is something that the design community should take on as both our responsibility and an opportunity. Public health designers, able to address the simplest and most generic challenges in extremely low-cost and low-skill ways, would have billions of people around the globe as users, with governments and non-profit agencies of all types as clients. If designers do not literally give, as Jesus suggests, their second coat to the poor, we can at least give the poor our best thinking and most creative ideas.

As Jesus knew well, giving of our time and talent to those most in need will have a transformative effect on us as well as them. That transformation might lead at least some designers to take on, not just the objects and environments people need, but also the processes by which materials get made, products get produced, and supplies get shipped – all with the goal of maximizing local economies, developing local skills, and minimizing environmental impacts. We could help end poverty simply by requiring that everything we use be made locally and sustainably. At the same time, the transformation might prompt us to design into our work the process by which it will be deconstructed, recycled, or repurposed, all of which can empower ordinary people and leverage their inherent creativity. The design community must find a way to serve the poor in more than token ways. It is not just our professional and ethical responsibility to do so, but it is the great-untapped opportunity of our disciplines. For what Jesus said was prophetic: the long-term stewards of the planet, those who will inherit the earth, are the very people who are most ignored and least served by us today. And if the rest of us continue in our excessive levels of consumption, we will all be like them soon enough.

A fourth ethics, not specifically religious, but with a strongly metaphysical character, is that of the seventeenth century Jewish philosopher, Spinoza. He argued in his *Ethics* that everything – every being, every particle, the cosmos itself – is one substance, which he called God/Nature, with physical and mental attributes, and existing in an almost infinite number of modes[13]. Spinoza's ethics sounds odd at first, and so abstract that only a philosopher might appreciate it, but the more you think about his ideas, the more they open up connections for us. For example, the notion of reality as a single substance brings to mind the work of modern-day physicists who see matter and energy as different modes of the same thing, existing at different speeds. Spinoza's ethics also anticipated those who search for the so-called theory of everything, in the belief that all reality must follow the same physical laws. In calling this single substance God/Nature, Spinoza elides past the divide that exists in our own time between religion and science by claiming that God and Nature are really the same thing and that God is not some transcendent intelligent designer outside of the natural world but is immanent in and inseparable from nature. No wonder Spinoza got in trouble with Jewish authorities in his own day, for his theistic views were much closer to the pantheism of the ancient Greeks than to anything in the Old Testament.

The ethical implications of Spinoza's one substance also conflict with the dichotomous world view so prevalent today and around which we have designed our built environment. Spinoza argued that unethical behaviour begins with the assumption that individuals or groups are separate from each other and that there is some advantage to be had over others. By denying the validity of that very assumption, Spinoza's ethics make it impossible or at least completely self-destructive to cause harm to others, for in so doing we only harm ourselves, since they are us, all part of a single, inseparable substance. Complexity theory has made a similar argument about the physical world – that everything, at least on earth, is interconnected so that the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings can contribute to causing a hurricane halfway around the world. Spinoza's ethics applies a related concept to human actions: everything that we do comes back to affect us. We may not see it or know how or when it happens. It may not happen immediately or in the same way in which we acted toward others, but our being of one substance makes it impossible for us not to be negatively affected by our negative actions – or positively affected by our positive ones.

Spinoza's one-substance idea also applies to the natural world, so that the damage we cause to nature, we cause to ourselves as well as to God,

which he saw as identical with nature. If we accept Spinoza's premise, the only conclusion we can draw from it is that we need to act in ways that help, improve, or enhance others – other people, other species, future generations – for there is no other way to help ourselves. That conception of service, of finding our happiness by fostering happiness in others, lies at the heart of all helping professions and offers a model for a very different way of thinking about economics. Instead of an economy based on self-interest – which in Spinoza's terms might mean self-harm – we might imagine an economy based on other-interest, on giving as much as possible to as many others as we can. This notion of a 'gift' economy, in which value and incentives involve how much we give rather than how much we get, may work best at relatively small scales, among families, tribes, or communities, but that may be the scale in which many of us live in the future, once we run out of the inexpensive fossil fuels that have so expanded the scale of modern life. The gift economy also seems well suited to the internet age, in which people give information or advice with no quid pro quo, and where millions of people have access to and benefit from what others have to offer. Indeed, we might see the world wide web as a Spinozan infrastructure, one of many ways in which we come to see ourselves and act as a single interconnected mutually reinforcing entity.

Infrastructure like that may also require a new mythology, a new story about our relationship as human beings to each other, to nature, and to being itself. As the critic Northrop Frye put it, 'there have been two primary mythological constructions in Western culture... In the older mythology... Man was a subject confronting a nature set over against him. Both man and nature were creatures of God, and were united by that fact'[14]. That older mythology was eventually replaced by a newer one based on 'the conviction that man had created his own civilization'. Frye continues with a discussion of design. 'A major principle of the older mythology was the correspondence of human reason with the design and purpose in nature it perceives'. In the new mythology, 'design in nature has been increasingly interpreted by science as a product of a self-serving nature... The rational design that nature reflects is in the human mind only'.

Those two mythologies of the West have had major implications for the way in which we live. The first mythology culminated in eighteenth-century Europe, in cities characterized by elaborate social rituals, religious celebrations, and public displays, underpinned by technology that had changed little in thousands of years, powered mainly by natural means such as water or

wind or by renewable resources such as wood. This contrast between social and spiritual elaboration and technological simplicity expressed the first mythology's simultaneous sense of celebration and humility that arises from a belief that humans and nature come from God, who transcends both. And yet, as the historian Marcel Gauchet has argued, the distancing of humans from God, which came with monotheistic religions, also led to the sense that people are free to believe – and to live – as they choose, which prepared the way for Frye's second mythology[15].

The second mythology – that we live in a human-created world – may have reached it peak in twentieth-century North America. It reversed many of the features of life under the first mythology, with most social life now occurring in the private realm along with widespread abandonment of and disinvestment in the public realm[16]. At the same, technology became a focus of invention and investment, fuelled largely by non-renewable and highly polluting fossil fuels[17]. With this second mythology, and the 'disenchantment' of nature, Western culture acted as if it had free reign to exploit nature as a resource for our use, to employ all means possible to increase our comfort and power, and to defy what the earlier mythology saw as natural limits on how fast humans can travel, how far our reach should extend, and how much information we can absorb at one time.

Northrop Frye argues that the second mythology has largely replaced the first. As he put it, 'contemporary science, which is professionally concerned with nature, does not see in the ancient mother-goddess the Wisdom which was the bride of a superhuman creator. What it sees rather is a confused old beldame who has got where she has through a remarkable obstinacy in adhering to trial and error – mostly error-procedures'. While Frye isn't disputing evolution, he does capture the simultaneous concern with and exploitation of nature that we see in modern science and technology, treating nature not as our mother deserving our respect and reverence, but as an 'old beldame' we can dismiss or exploit at will. Frye argued that one mythology replaced the other, but it may be more the case that the first mythology and then the second have simply become more or less dominant, with the recessive myth becoming the basis for resistance, a place from which to protest as the opposition.

When viewed in this way, both of the mythologies that Frye describes represent not a polarity, but two different versions of the same idea, an idea that looks increasingly unsustainable at the beginning of the twenty-first

century. In both of the mythologies of the West, humans occupy a place separate from nature. In the first mythology, humans and nature come from God but remain separate creations, while in the second mythology, humans and the rest of the natural world stand apart, the result of their own evolutionary development. It may be that, as we begin this new century, we also need a new mythology, one that challenges the separation of humans from nature, regardless of whether one is a creationist or a Darwinist.

This sense of separation from nature, either because we see ourselves standing humbly 'over against it' or because we have assumed an almost divine control over it, has had dire consequences for humans as well as many other species. Rather than see our ability to alter nature as a reason to become protectors of it, good stewards of all that we depend on in this world, humans have caused the so-called 'sixth extinction' on the earth, with species disappearing at an increasingly rapid rate because of the affect we have had on habitats and ecologies. We can fool ourselves into thinking that because we are separate from nature, we won't be affected much by the likelihood that half of all the species of the planet will be gone in 100 years, but we are fools if we do[18]. Nor should we kid ourselves that this is just a natural cycle. Humans now use almost half of all the energy available for sustaining life on the planet. Indeed, as the biologists James Brown and Brian Enquist, and the physicist Geoffrey West, have shown, the average human now consumes energy at the rate of a blue whale, which, if we imagine a world overrun by over 6 billion blue whales, helps explain why humans are pushing so many other species to extinction[19]. According to their theory of biological scaling, individual humans should be consuming energy a bit more than a goat and somewhat less than a horse or cow, so our energy appetite is killing us, along with many other organisms with us[20].

How might we make this transformation to a third mythology, to one that refuses to separate humans from nature? In a study done by the Center for the Study of Social Policy entitled *Changing Images of Man*, its several authors define this transition moving from a 'technological extrapolationist' future to an 'evolutionary transformational' one[21]. The first of these amounts to a continuation of our current trajectory, characterized by concentration of economic and political power, rapid accumulation of scientific and technological knowledge, increasing dependence on 'knowledge elites', increasingly secular habits of mind, a dominance of utilitarian ethics, and the growth of cities into 'megapolitan' areas. Recognizing the unsustainability

of that future and the rise of a 'post-industrial' society, an ecological sensibility, and an ethic of self-realization, the authors posit an 'evolutionary transformational' alternative. Such a future would involve a de-concentration of economic and political power, moral constraints on technological progress, more participatory decision-making, a stabilized population, a more balanced view of ethics, and decentralized and more diverse ways of living.

But, as Frye noted, mythologies involve a transformation in belief as well as political, economic, and social change. A belief system that might have the greatest chance of leading us towards an 'evolutionary transformational' future was best summarized in Aldous Huxley in his anthology *The Perennial Philosophy*, a book that finds a common thread through all of the major religious traditions[22]. That common thread is based on the idea that God is not just transcendent, but immanent, not just up there, but in here, in all things and in all of us, regardless of our racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious differences. According to this 'perennial philosophy', we are inseparable from each other or from the natural world, the spark of divinity exists in each of us as well as in all living beings, and we are all part of 'one divine Reality [underlying]… the manifold world of things, and lives and minds', as Huxley puts it. Behind this lies a heightened conscious of our connections to all things in the cosmos, to the effect we have on others, to the consequences of our actions, and to our nature as beings that transcends our particular circumstances.

Huxley called it 'perennial' because this view of the world is ancient, first formulated in the Vedic era in India around 1500 BC. It has also continued to thrive as a belief system, especially in many non-Western cultures, even though it has often been obscured by the more recent Western mythologies Frye describes. What might the world be like under such a belief system? Non-Western vernacular settlements suggest what life might be like under this very old and yet possibly very new 'third' mythology. Useful objects would mostly come from locally available materials and be made with local labour. Housing would consist mostly of low-scale structures, again using local materials, with natural cooling and heating determining much of the form. And settlements would remain fairly condensed in scale and dimension, with ready access to agricultural land and open space, with key natural resources carefully stewarded.

Rather than see this third mythology as separate from the two Western mythologies or as a complete substitute for them, we need to see the new

mythology as embracing all that has come before. There is a practical reason for this, since a mythology only exists if it can move large numbers of people to act in new ways. The rise of a new mythology takes centuries, as Frye observes with the second of the mythologies he describes. For people across many different types of cultures to embrace a new mythology, it must remain familiar enough to be credible and yet different enough to lead to meaningful change. This also stems from the new mythology itself. As Huxley quotes the Roman philosopher, Plotinus[23], we should 'see all things, not in process of becoming, but in Being, and see themselves in the other. Each being contains in itself the whole intelligible world'. If the ultimate reality behind all difference is this oneness, then that must be true of our mythologies: behind their diversity lies unity. It is that which the 'third' mythology seeks to find.

The West has had a long tradition of thinking in this way. That tradition not only includes Plotinus, but medieval thinkers such as Saint Francis, early modern philosophers such as Spinoza, Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau, and deep ecologists such as Arne Naess and environmental theologians such as Thomas Berry. In each case, these Western thinkers saw the world itself and all that occupies it as sacred, interrelated, and inseparable from ourselves. When we harm others, we only harm ourselves. Damage something else, and we damage ourselves. They all faced the criticism of those who see a kind of muddle in this idea of oneness, and if we take the idea too literally, the critics have a point. But underlying this perennial philosophy exists the acceptance of paradox: that everything in nature can be the same and different at the same time, transcendent and immanent all at once, and mortal and eternal simultaneously.

Among other things, this perennial philosophy offers a way of resolving one of the conflicts between the two older mythologies: the debate between the advocates of intelligent design and of evolution. The believers in the first mythology tend to argue in favour of intelligent design, seeing design as the result of a cosmic creator and the intricate and interdependent qualities of the natural world as proof that an intelligent being 'designed' it. The believers in the second mythology, those who marshal ample evidence to prove evolution, see nature as the result of a more-or-less blind process of selection over very long periods of time. Since they too see a designer as an intelligent being controlling a process, they argue that the evolutionary process proves that no such cosmic designer exists. In other words, while the two mythologies are

diametrically opposed on the question of nature's origin, they agree on the definition of a designer as a being in control of creating things.

The third mythology, the 'evolutionary transformational' alternative embedded in Huxley's perennial philosophy, seems to arise from a very different conception of design, one that is not just something done by an intelligent being, but also by all living beings at all scales in response to changing circumstances. From that perspective, design of a sort occurs in evolutionary processes as well as intentional ones, in the adaptation of species as well as in the imagination of individual humans. This accords more closely to how design actually occurs. It involves both people and process, intentions and accidents, intelligence and blind luck. It occurs not just at the hands of designers, but as part of the input of everyone involved in a process, with myriad decisions being made by many participants in response to new information or changing conditions. It is evolutionary and transformational at the same time.

If design can help us understand this third mythology, what effect might this perspective, in turn, have on design? What kind of physical world would this third mythology lead to and what difference would that make? This question underlies the very reason why we need to find a way past the two dominant mythologies of the West, for they have created a world that is environmentally unsustainable, as humans collectively use resources at a much greater rate than they can be replenished or stewarded for the use of future generations. At the same time, we have created a world in which we view other cultures as separate from or as a danger to ourselves, and other species as either a means or an obstacle to our convenience or comfort. Design has facilitated this view of the world by giving us the technologies and built environments that keep us apart from the natural world and from the consequences of our actions on other species or future generations. At the same time, design serves to convince us of the rightness of this, normalizing behaviour that even people just a few generations ago would recognize as irresponsible and unsustainable.

But, if design is part of the problem, it can also serve as part of the solution to the dilemmas we face. The third mythology rests on a few principles key to the design enterprise: seeing ourselves as an integral part of the natural world, valuing all beings and all things as sacred, helping others as the only way to personal happiness, and embracing external constraints for inner freedom. Some may see those principles as impossible to achieve. We always affect

the material world when we act, needing to consume food and resources in order to live or have energy sources in order to work. Others may see these principles as harmful to what many see as essential to human's thriving, thinking that the health of our economy, our communities, and our families demands that we sacrifice other species, use resources as we see fit, and protect ourselves from others who want what we have. But this is precisely why we need a new mythology, since such negative reactions stem from one of the other mythologies that have dominated Western culture for centuries. Once we shift our mindset and see the world and ourselves in terms of a new myth, we can achieve all that we currently value, but in ways that we can sustain without exhausting essential resources, exploiting other cultures, and leading to the extinction of other species.

The role that design can play here is not to reinforce our prior beliefs, the old mythologies, but help us see a possible future with the new mythology, demonstrating that the latter, rather than being a step backward to some primitive past, constitutes a higher evolution. In that sense, this third mythology of the West doesn't entail a radical departure for Western culture, but rather a more honest and humble interpretation of it. The harm caused by our hubris, the perils of overweening power, the short-sightedness of acting only out of self-interest – these ideas have long been a centrepiece of Western art and literature, which we have appreciated and applauded, but then proceeded to act as if we are immune to them in our daily lives. The third mythology simply holds the West accountable, envisioning a world in which humans are both a part of and stewards of nature.

And the ethics of service we find in the Gita, the ethics of detachment we hear from the Buddha, the ethics of giving we receive from Jesus, and the ethics of oneness we read in Spinoza are among the ways we can begin to bring this third mythology into being, one that will enable us to sustain ourselves more effectively on this planet in the face of dramatic changes in our world. And while we need to continue to respect the previous two mythologies, we also need to see that our continuing to think in their terms will make it very hard for us to survive what lies ahead. This is as true for science as it is for religion, for both hold part of the solution to the problems we face, but both also are part of the reason why we face them in the first place.

As the writer Curtis White argued in a recent essay in *Harper's* magazine, by continuing to use the language of science and instrumental rationality

in understanding and describing the natural world, ecologists end up, unintentionally, reinforcing the very forces of global capitalism destroying the environment. Instead, White argues:

> Environmentalism should stop depending on its alliance with science for its sense of itself. It should look to create a common language of care (a reverence for and a commitment to the astonishing fact of Being) through which it could begin to create alternative principles by which we might live... [which] would begin with three questions. First, what does it mean to be a human being? Second, what is my relation to other human beings? And third, what is my relation to Being as such, the ongoing miracle that there is something rather than nothing?... [If] we answer that there should be a greater sense of self-worth in being a human, more justice in our relation to others, and more reverence for Being, then we must either live in bad faith with capitalism or begin describing a future whose fundamental values and whose daily activities are radically different from what we currently endure. The risk I propose is simply a return to our nobility... We should insist on a recognition of the mystery, the miracle, and the dignity of things, from frogs to forests, simply because they are. Such a 'religion' would entail a refusal to play through to the bloody end the social and economic roles into which we happen to have been born. What lies beyond the environmental movement is not only the overcoming of capitalism, but self-overcoming[24].

This new 'religion' will need to draw from the ethical ideas buried in older ones and from the scientific understanding of sciences like ecology, but it will have to be different from both, and radically different from the values that now drive humans to do so much damage to the very planet we depend on for our survival. We have designed the dysfunctional systems and places we now occupy, and we desperately need to design new ones, based on a new understanding not only of design, but of ourselves, our relations to others, and of Being itself.