DENIAL OF REALITY SYNDROME:
Child Abuse, Violence, and the Danger to America

A White Paper
Sponsored by the American Coalition for Abuse Awareness
# Table of Contents

**American Coalition for Abuse Awareness** 4

**Professional Advisory Board** 5

**Statement of Problem** 6

- A Paradigm Shift 8
- Denial of Reality Syndrome 11

**Remembering and Forgetting: The History of Trauma** 13

**Epidemiology: The Extent of the Problem** 14

**Basics of Trauma Theory** 15

- Understanding Human Development 15
  - Attachment Behavior 15
  - Affect Theory 16
  - Disrupted Attachments 17
- When Trauma Hits 19
  - Fight-Flight-Freeze 19
  - Learned Helplessness 19
  - Hyperarousal 20
  - Cognitive Processing During Trauma 20
  - Memory Processing During Trauma 21
  - Learning During Trauma 21
  - Emotional Processing During Trauma 22
  - Traumatic Bonding 24
  - Traumatic Addiction 25
  - Traumatic Reenactment 25

**Individual Healing: Fact Not Myth** 27

- How We Think Healing Occurs 27
- The Role of Others, Including the Therapist 27
- The Issue of “False Memory” 27
STANDARDS OF TREATMENT

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL HEALING: THE CHANGING PARADIGM

ESTABLISHING SAFETY
CONTAINING THE INFECTION OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA
CREATING SANCTUARY IN THE CLASSROOM
CHANGING THE FACE OF AUTHORITY
PRODUCING AN EMOTIONALLY LITERATE POPULATION
LIFE AS ART
GETTING STRAIGHT AND GROWING UP
EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION
BEARING WITNESS, NOT GRUDGES
CHANGING THE PROCESS OF DOING BUSINESS

A BILL OF RESPONSIBILITIES

RESPONSIBILITIES TO CHILDREN
THE “RESPONSIBILITY TO CARE” AND THE BYSTANDER EFFECT
RESPONSIBILITY OF LEADERSHIP AND POWER
RESPONSIBILITY OF JUSTICE: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT
RESPONSIBILITY OF DEMOCRACY
RESPONSIBILITY TO A HIGHER POWER

REFERENCES
AMERICAN COALITION FOR ABUSE AWARENESS

The ACAA, founded in 1992, is an ad hoc coalition of individuals and groups committed to resolving the issue of abuse, including sexual abuse, in children. The President and General Counsel of the ACAA is Sherry A. Quirk, a partner with the law firm of Verner, Lipfert, McPherson and Hand.

The ACAA has been formed with the following goals in mind:

- To promote enactment of federal and state legislation establishing (1) the right of a child to be free from sexual victimization and (2) appropriate protections to ensure that such victimization does not occur.
- To promote enactment of federal and state legislation that extends or eliminates the statutes of limitations relating to civil lawsuits brought by adult survivors of childhood abuse.
- To form a broad-based alliance to support such legislation
- To increase public and media awareness of the issue of the sexual abuse of children
- To establish a comprehensive nationwide network of legal professionals dedicated to advancing the rights of victims of childhood sexual abuse through the justice system.
- To develop educational outreach programs for members of the judicial and legislative branches of government.
- To establish a national body to make policy recommendations on issues related to childhood sexual abuse, the protection of children, and the rights of adult survivors of childhood abuse.
PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY BOARD
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The childhood shows the man,
As morning shows the day.

John Milton (1608-1674)
Paradise Regained

The solutions to the problems of violence in the United States are
to be found only in solving the problems of American children. In 1990,
the U. S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect stated:

Child abuse and neglect in the United States now represents a
national emergency. .. the safety of the nation's
children cannot be assured...the emergency represents a
threat to national survival: such negligence threatens the
integrity of a nation that shares a sense of community, that
regards individuals as worthy of respect, that revere family
life, and that is competent in economic competition. Child
maltreatment tears the social fabric.

In 1991, they continued:

Failure to provide the most basic protection to children is a
grievous collective assault that communicates a lack of
respect for the dignity of children as people. At the same time,
the nature and complexity of child maltreatment are such that
the problem negatively affects every member of American
society. No other problem may equal its power to cause
or exacerbate a range of social ills.

And from the 1992 Board Report of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child
Abuse and Neglect:

Adult violence against children leads to childhood terror,
childhood terror leads to teenage anger, and teenage anger
too often leads to adult rage, both destructive towards others
and self-destructive. Terror, anger, rage - these are not the
ingredients of safe streets, strong families, and caring
communities.

For the past several decades, scientists from around the world
have been studying the effects of overwhelming experience on the minds
and bodies of various survivor groups (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk,
1987; Williams & Sommer, 1994; Wilson & Raphael, 1993). As a result, it
is now well recognized that there is a universal human reaction to overwhelming stress that has profound effects on the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual adjustment of the survivor. Regardless of whether a person is the victim of overwhelming combat experience, an earthquake, a concentration camp, political torture, a criminal assault, or child abuse - the victim’s body and mind will respond in a similar and predictable way to overwhelming terror and threat to life. The long-term response to the traumatic situation will depend on several variables that include the basic constitution of the person, the individual’s history of previous trauma, the age at the time of trauma, and the extent of the social support offered at the time of and subsequent to the traumatic experience.

Although human beings are notably resilient (Higgins, 1994; Rutter, 1990; Wolin & Wolin, 1993), a certain proportion of the population is quite vulnerable to the effects of even minimal stress, and if the stress is great enough, the likelihood of long-term negative consequences of traumatic stress is virtually 100%. The development of resilience is largely determined by childhood experience. Resilient children are those children who are gradually exposed to experiences of stress in circumstances that prevent them from being psychologically or physiologically overwhelmed. Lack of adequate protection from trustworthy adults leaves a child vulnerable to stress, a vulnerability that lasts a lifetime. Child abuse and neglect - physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse - are a significant problem, not only because we care about what happens to children but for the simple reason that childhood events determine adult behavior. As Milton so clearly pointed out, “the childhood shows the man”.

The study of post-traumatic stress has led to revolutionary insights into the exact effects of trauma in childhood on the development and psychophysiological adaptation of the child. These reactions of the child’s mind and body in the early years bear directly on the adult’s mind and body as well. Our concerns about the effects of childhood experience on adult adjustment are no longer speculative, but scientifically and biologically-based. Although there is still much to be studied, there is a sufficient body of well-researched knowledge to inform any major policy decisions.

From a sociological point of view, American society stands on the threshold of some major decisions. The breakdown of the traditional family structure and the value system that supported it is rightly seen as a source of serious concern. Children need the protection, love, and training that healthy families provide if they are to grow into healthy adults. It is tempting to believe in the illusion of the “good old days”, to
look for solutions for present problems in the tried-and-true answers of the past. Certainly, we must draw on lessons learned in the past that have validity today. But we live in a world that presents us with challenges undreamed of by our forefathers. New challenges require new solutions. But finding new solutions is a far more demanding task then reverting to the old.

Everywhere we look - in government, in economics, in education, in the media, in social service systems, in medicine, in business - the old ways of doing things are not working. We keep bouncing off of some invisible wall because the solutions to the tasks appear impossible. The Health Care Reform movement was the most recent example of this dilemma. It appears that the problem-solving method itself has arrived at a dead end. Meanwhile, the problems of socio-economic inequality, violence, family breakdown, the disintegration of the cities, and crime grow unremittingly, apparently beyond anyone’s control. Proposed solutions like more prisons, longer prison terms, school prayer, cutting of welfare, and managed care are stopgaps, not solutions. In some cases they will do some good, in others they will do no harm, in other cases, they will make things worse - but they are not solutions to our far bigger problems. At best, they are band-aids that cannot staunch a hemorrhage.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

But, what is going on? What is this sense of apocalyptic discomfort that manifests in forms as variable as New Age visions to right wing repression, from voter anomie to secession movements? The historian of science, Thomas Kuhn published an anticipatory book in 1962 entitled “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Kuhn proposed a way of understanding how scientific change occurs. As he understood it, a revolution constitutes a shift in the underlying assumptions upon which knowledge is based. According to Kuhn the change begins when certain anomalies are noted, but are used as the exceptions that "prove the rule". Anomalies are not enough to change a paradigm. There must be a growing state of crisis, a period characterized by pronounced professional insecurity. Something happens and the old rules just do not work anymore and many workers in the field begin questioning the old rules and begin searching for new rules that work.

At this point, scientists struggle to fit all the anomalies into the existing paradigm. It is clear, according to Kuhn, that scientists only give up one paradigm when there is an alternative. "The decision to accept one paradigm is always simultaneously the decision to accept another.... to
reject one paradigm without simultaneously substituting another is to reject science itself" (Kuhn, 1970). However, before this switch occurs, scientists will attempt, sometimes going to extreme lengths, to fit the new material into the old paradigm and make it fit, something like Cinderella’s stepsisters trying to jam their big feet into the tiny glass slipper. When an anomaly, or many anomalies, come to seem more than just another puzzle of normal science, the transition to crisis and to extraordinary science has begun. The anomaly itself now comes to be more generally recognized as such by the profession. More and more attention is paid to it by increasingly imminent scholars. For them, the field will no longer look quite the same as it had earlier. More and more anomalies will be noted, the rules of normal science become increasingly blurred, few practitioners agree about what exactly is going on but they know something is. "All crises begin with the blurring of a paradigm and the consequent loosening of the rules for normal research" (Kuhn, 1970).

At this point there are three possible courses. Sometimes normal science proves able to handle the crisis and the established paradigm reasserts itself. On other occasions, the crisis is recognized as unsolvable and set aside for future generations to solve. OR - and this most concerns us - a crisis ends with the emergence of a new paradigm and with the ensuing battle over its acceptance. A new paradigm is not an extension of an old paradigm. "Rather it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field’s most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications" (Kuhn, 1970). No one has explained the experience that so many of us have had so far, as well as Kuhn:

"When the transition is complete the profession will have changed its view of the field, its methods, and its goals... The resulting transition to a new paradigm is scientific revolution.... Confronted with anomaly or with crisis, scientists take a different attitude toward existing paradigms, and the nature of their research changes accordingly. The proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit content, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals, all these are symptoms of a transition from normal to extraordinary research" (Kuhn, 1970).

Kuhn points out the relationship between scientific and political revolution and notes that the choice between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. As is typical of human nature, and maybe of the process of creation itself, competition between two rival paradigms vie for the allegiance of the scientific community. But representatives of the two paradigms essentially live in different worlds; they see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. The switch from one
paradigm to another is often made as a conversion, as a change in a
gestalt, all at once. But it is a switch that cannot be forced and
sometimes will be absolutely refused, particularly by those whose
productive careers have committed them to an older tradition. This "old
guard" in their resistance to a change in paradigm, guarantee that
scientists of the new paradigm will do their homework and do it
thoroughly. "The very fact that a significant scientific novelty so often
emerges simultaneously from several laboratories is an index both to the
strongly traditional nature of normal science and to the completeness with
which that traditional pursuit prepares the way for its own change" (Kuhn,
1970)

Right now, in every aspect of our social and political lives, we are
caught between paradigms. There are strong pulls to try and return to
the assumptions of the previous paradigm which served us well in so
many ways for five centuries. But we must remember, that for all the
problems solved throughout those centuries, significant problems have
been created: the nuclear bomb, the Holocaust, nationalism, malignant
capitalism, and global pollution.

To understand where we are today, author, editor, and activist Jim
Wallis has said:

The truth is that we are in a time of transition, an in-
between period when the old is dying and the new has yet to
be born. The values, assumptions, and structures that have
governed us for so long have come to their logical end, and we
now find ourselves at a dead end. But new values, patterns,
and institutions have not yet emerged. We are caught in the
middle, stranded between paradigms....America today lacks
any coherent or compelling social vision (Wallis, 1994).

To accomplish this monumental task of creating a "compelling
social vision", we must make some fundamental shifts in our thinking,
shifts that are as enormous as the shifts in technology and socio-political
structure with which the late 20th century challenges us. Our growing
knowledge about the effects of traumatic experience provides a bridge, a
cross-over point of understanding between the past and the present. But
because it represents a new paradigm, the implications of the trauma
model are threatening to several long-held and cherished notions about
human nature, social relationships, crime and retribution, illness and
injury, power and authority, good and evil.
DENIAL OF REALITY SYNDROME

At present, the knowledge about the effects of traumatic experience, particularly trauma in childhood, is being resisted. Despite the abundant voluminous amount of scientific data that has been accumulating about the incidence of various forms of child abuse and its long-term effects, there is a move afoot to deny the full extent of the problem of child abuse. The form of this resistance focuses on what is perhaps the most socially noxious form of child abuse - childhood sexual abuse. The resistance has come in the form of the "false memory syndrome", a phenomenon that lacks scientific validation, for which there has been no epidemiological support. Despite the lack of validation and in the face of massive contradictory evidence, the concept of false memory has been seized upon by the media and disinformation has been widely disseminated to the public. Proponents of this "syndrome" have been able to make claims without any peer review or proof and their claims have acquired the same status of truth as the testimony of child abuse experts who have spent years designing and implementing carefully researched studies of the problem.

In part, this has been motivated by the opportunity to provide those accused of sexual abuse with a complicated, controversial, and highly technical defense when they are brought to court. But there are also other factors involved. Psychotherapy, in that it deals with the entire scope of human dysfunction, is an inexact and young science and as such is prone to technical error, trial-and-error methodology, and difficult to measure outcome results. More importantly, the issue of child sexual abuse attacks some fundamental structures of the old paradigm like family privacy; paternal authority; the ignorance, forgetfulness, and general amoralit of children; and insists on the interconnectness of families, a change in the construction of authority within the family, the basic morality of children, and a recognition of the general hostility of adults towards children. All of this is highly threatening to the present social fabric. If we were to truly commit ourselves, as a society, to the well-being of children, many of our prior commitments, opinions, and values would have to change dramatically. We need to make far-reaching changes in our attitudes and behaviors towards children if we want to prevent further violence in the future. We call failure to see the enormity of the problem "Denial of Reality Syndrome". Child abuse is a cultural malignancy that is as deadly to a society as cancer is to the body. The individual patient who denies the reality of the warning symptoms of cancer courts death. So too does a society that refuses to see the symptoms of its own malignancy in its addiction to violence, even towards its young.
In this “White Paper” we will attempt to outline the major issues involved in this controversy and in doing so, provide some of the fundamental building blocks of knowledge to begin thinking in new ways about problem-solving for the future. We will begin with a brief historical review of the study of trauma, summarize present epidemiological information about traumatic experience in the population, summarize the knowledge about what trauma does to the body, mind, and soul of the victim with a special section on what we know thus far about memory processing, explore some of what we are learning about promoting healing from trauma, and the finish with speculations about the implications of trauma theory to the larger social sphere. This work has been prepared by a group of professional advisors who represent excellence in their various areas of interest and influence in the hopes that our work can be rapidly disseminated to those who are in a position to make and implement social policy decisions. Our larger hope is that we can play a role in the construction of a new “compelling social vision” for America.
EPIDEMIOLOGY: THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM
different reality. Their actions provide an alternative way of relating, another example to the perpetrators, and would-be perpetrators, and victims, all of whom become locked into the cycle of violence and abuse. Latane and Darley have outlined a five-stage process by which bystanders turn into helpers (Staub, 1989). First bystanders notice that something is amiss and then they interpret the situation as one in which people need help. In the next critical stage, they assume responsibility to offer that help, then choose a form of help, and finally implement that help. Helpful behavior can be derailed at any of these stages. But what increases the likelihood that helpful bystander behavior will not be derailed?

First of all, there is the intrinsic nature of the bystander. Helpful bystanders have many characteristics in common that tell us a great deal about how we need to raise our children and how we must behave in situations which confront us. Helpers have strong moral concerns that are transmitted by their parents and among those values are a fundamental sense of empathy for others, standards which are applied to people in different social, ethnic, and religious groups. Bystanders who become rescuers often have experience with being marginalized or victimized themselves but have been able to sustain connections with others rather than disconnecting from deeply human bonds. Helpful behavior falls along a very long continuum and evolves gradually over time. Each successful attempt to help leads to more helping behavior that becomes self-reinforcing. This implies that helping behavior can be modeled, learned, taught, reinforced - that it is not a given in any situation but can and must be constantly recreated.

But even willing helpers can be derailed by social propaganda, by coercion, and by the influence of others who want to deny the perpetrator behavior and who offer an alternative out with such explanations like “He deserves what he gets”, “People can always find a job if they look hard enough”, “The problem is not guns its the people who use them”, “People just want to blame their parents”, “Welfare recipients are just lazy and don’t want to work”, “There’s more crime because we’ve gotten too soft on criminals”.

If helpers can get past the propaganda and see the flaws in thinking, they still have to feel that they have some responsibility for solving the problem and that they are able to choose something to do to help and put their plan into action. This sense of mutual responsibility can be taught later in life but is mostly easily modeled within the family systems by what the children see in the behavior of their own parents towards other people. Finding effective ways to help often requires larger
parenting, however, than your parenting will be no better than the
generation before. Given the history of broken attachments, and
particularly the devastating witness of this last century, good parenting
is in short order and is the only other change that could rapidly improve
our cultural situation were parenting education to be taken seriously.

LIFE AS ART

In the haunted house of life, art is the only stair that doesn’t creak.

Tom Robbins
“Skinny Legs and All”

Art has been present in the lives of men and women for as long as
we have any history to report. Every human advance is heralded by a
flowering of artistic achievement, a time in which art, in all its form, is
held in the highest esteem. It is no coincidence that the general
improvement and artistic greatness go together. Knowing what we know
now from our work with individual patients, it is entirely conceivable that
artistic expression determines advancement, that it is vital for human
progress to occur, and that without creative expression, a culture will
involute and self-destruct.

At present, we have more exposure to great works of art, literature,
music, and dance then ever before in the history of mankind. But, partly
out of intimidation in the face of this profusion of excellence, there is
probably less personal performance then ever before in the history of
mankind. Television discourages interaction, even with other people in
the house, people generally have less free time to pursue creative outlets,
and arts programs for the public are poorly funded and often the first to
go whenever there are budget cuts. Creative expression of the artistically
elite is grossly overvalued and creative expression of the general
population is grossly undervalued. This is dangerous. The part of our
beings that has no voice, perhaps our other hemisphere, needs a vehicle
for expression. Without such a vehicle, expression is likely to come
through action, action that is only too often violent and destructive
instead of creative.

GETTING STRAIGHT AND GROWING UP

It is time for us to become serious about our addictive problems.
That means ceasing to see it as a problem of the inner city crack and
scale organization and the participation of others. It is the reverse of the downward spiral of perpetration.

The fundamental question is whether witnesses to the mistreatment of other people have an obligation to act? What is our moral responsibility to each other? Are we, in fact, "our brother’s keeper?" Until quite recently in human history, the family group or the tribe were the only groups to which we felt the kind of loyalty that demands protective action. In the last two centuries, our sense of loyalty has expanded to our national groups. More recently, global ethnicity has been commanding fealty. But we have entered an age of such intense global interdependency that perpetration against one can be seen increasingly to effect the whole in an every escalating cycle of violence and destruction. We may never be able to eliminate the forces that produce violent perpetration but it is not too late to contain the violence. This containment can happen, however, only if bystanders choose to become witnesses and rescuers, instead of silently colluding with the perpetrators.

**RESPONSIBILITY OF LEADERSHIP AND POWER**

Unfortunately, in human history power has more often been associated with a license to abuse than it has with the responsibility to care. In recent history, our political leadership has demonstrated a willingness to bend and even break the law to serve personal and political ends, from the Presidency on down. This abuse of power is so much a part of the traditional rights of authority that we are often able to sustain a dissociative split between immoral and criminal behavior on the part of our highest officials and criminal behavior on the part of the poor and disenfranchised. The result is that our officials often receive little negative consequence for their behavior, or even gain, while the poor are imprisoned. Leadership means stewardship, "the individual’s responsibility to manage his life and property with proper regard to the rights of others" (Webster’s, 1983). Leaders in politics, sports, media, the arts, education, and business are all role models for children. Fulfilling this function is a responsibility that goes along with the rewards of success and those unwilling to fulfill this responsibility should not reap the rewards that accompany it. Every company should define what the corporate responsibility is, not just to the shareholders but to the employees and to the wider community of which they are a part - and in actual behavior, not just in a corporate policy. Some companies are beginning to find ways to develop such a "corporate conscience" by doing things like using a social mission - like painting a homeless shelter - as a corporate retreat (Johnson, 1994).
RESPONSIBILITY OF JUSTICE: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

When people are resident on our psychiatric unit, an increase in privileges is dependent on the achievement of clearly defined and agreed to behavioral goals that indicate an increased ability to manage responsibility. Failure to do so is not evil, a product of their perverse human nature. Such a reification of childish behavior is an incentive to pursue the same behavior - it can create a sense of pride, not shame. Failure to manage responsibility is a sign of immaturity, of insufficient adequate parenting, of inadequate emotional reward for engaging in the difficulties of trying more mature behavior. As such, the response should not be punishment, which encourages emotional responses like rage, vengefulness, projection, and blaming, but a withdrawal of privileges with clear guidelines for the type of behavior that must follow if the privileges are to be returned. Far too often, punishment has no meaningful connection to problem-solving, to actual correction of the problem. Instead, punishment, while disguised as being for the person being punished, is actually a way for the punisher to vent their own unacceptable emotions that have been aroused by the transgressor or by someone else.

People who have demonstrated by their behavior that they cannot safely live freely with other people must be deprived of the right to do so in order to protect others. Such immaturity requires special facilities that are restrictive and ordered enough to prevent the person from inflicting further harm, and which provide sufficient opportunities for maturation if the person is capable of change. This means that the environment must not be traumatogenic. We have created within our prison walls, environments that are far more generative of trauma than most war zones. It is difficult to see what point there is in this other than an unhealthy need for vengeance on the part of the society that creates and maintains these places. If you expect people to behave as animals, they will. If you expect violence you will usually get it. This is not to say that everyone is treatable. It is quite likely that severe early childhood attachment problems may lead to damage in the brain areas associated with bonding and affiliation that can never be repaired. But, at present, we have no idea who is and who is not treatable using modern methods of treatment simply because the treatment of men and women in prison has not been seen as an economic priority. The responsibility to care means we must care for our outcasts as well. Our criminal justice system is not yet a system of justice but more a system of revenge, at best, corruption at worst.
RESPONSIBILITY OF DEMOCRACY

The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt.

John Philpot Curran
Speech on the Right of Election
of Lord Mayor of Dublin
July 10, 1790

We have no right to a free and open democracy unless we are willing to maintain it and assume responsibility for it. Democracy requires a well-educated, involved, responsible and mature populace. As a society, we have a long-way to go before we can fulfill any of those four requirements. The increase of anarchic violence and hate crimes threatens our social stability and our democratic form of government along with it. But so too does corruption from within the government.

In his recent book talking about the betrayal of American democracy, William Greider notes that “the mutual understanding between citizens and government necessary for genuine democracy is now deformed or neglected... the government now responds more often to narrow webs of power - the interests of major economic organizations and concentrated wealth and the influential elites surrounding them... the form and facade of self-government remain elaborately in place and functioning... [but] the self-correcting mechanisms of politics are no longer working (Greider, 1992).

A recent survey reported by the Washington Post weekly confirms what Mr. Greider and others have been warning us about - that something is very wrong with the way our government is working for “we the people”. In a Washington Post-ABC News Poll, 83% of people believed that Congress cares more about keeping power than they do about the best interests of the nation and only 26% of people thought that most members of Congress care deeply about the problems of ordinary citizens. But our attitudes towards Congress really reflect as much about what we think about ourselves as about them - after all, we elect them. The political cartoon that accompanied the article in which the poll was reported made this point with the cartoon Congressman saying, “Why are my constituents so angry with me? How can they say I don’t represent them? I can be selfish and lazy, I look out for my own best interest, I’m prejudiced and swear a little, I never have enough money and I even bounce a few checks, I hate making tough decisions, love being the center of attraction, I’ve even been known to lie and cheat and rink too much.”
How can they be angry? How can they say I don’t represent them?? I think I represent most of them very well!!” (Morin & Broder, 1994).

RESPONSIBILITY TO A HIGHER POWER

Transcendence is the only alternative to extinction.

VACLAV HAVEL
July 4, 1994

This responsibility is perhaps the most difficult to talk about. I am a scientist and therefore not really supposed to talk about God. However, for any meaningful discussion about the further potential evolution of mankind, it is virtually impossible to avoid the topic of a higher meaning. I am not setting any precedent here: “Stranger and more momentous than the strangest of scientific theories is the appearance of God on the intellectual horizon of contemporary science. From Einstein, Planck, and Heisenberg, to Margenau, Hauking, and Eccles, some of the most penetrating modern minds have needed God in order to makes sense of the cosmos” (Margenau & Vargheses, 1992). Bookstores are filled with books some written by New Age eccentrics side-by-side with respected philosophers, quantum physicists, physicians, and biologists. All of them are referring to the ending of an old age and the beginning of a new one. In a speech delivered on July 4, 1994 in Philadelphia where he was receiving the Liberty Medal, Vaclav Havel, the playwright, turned dissident and political prisoner, and now President of the Czech Republic, discussed the emergence of this transitional period and the convergence between science and theology and the inspiration this convergence brings. He said that we are reminded of:

“what we have long suspected, of what we have long projected into our forgotten myths and what perhaps has always lain dormant within us as archetypes. That is, the awareness of our being anchored in the Earth and the universe, the awareness that we are not here alone nor for ourselves alone but that we are an integral part of higher, mysterious entities against whom it is not advisable to blaspheme (Havel, 1994).

Our individualistic, self-preoccupied, and disconnected point of reference has brought us to a personal, social, economic, political, spiritual and evolutionary dead-end. Our long-term survival on this planet is dependent on our species making a dramatic and rapid shift in our social evolution, a shift as dramatic, rapid, and creative as World War II, the Holocaust, and the nuclear bomb were destructive.
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