

## **Enough: A Worldview for Positive Futures**

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### **Introduction**

It seems that nowhere in recent history have people had as many questions as they do today. Here are just a few:

How can we live in harmony with nature? How do we stop global warming, associated climate change and the destruction of ecosystems?

How can we eliminate poverty, provide security and create sufficiency for all?

How do we restore an ethic of care for people and for the earth?

In short, how can we put human and planetary well-being at the heart of all our decision-making?

In this paper I propose a philosophy and practice with the potential to answer these questions. It is in essence a worldview, and I call it Enough. This worldview applies insights from flourishing ecosystems and from moral thinking to the big philosophical questions about how we should live. Given the crises of ecology and social justice now facing us, the need for a new worldview is as crucial as new technology. We're all born with the capacity for *enough*; everybody has a part to play in the creation of a culture of *enough*, as a way to understand the world and live in it. It is not a new idea, but I believe it has new resonance and value in today's world and that it should be revisited and revived as a way to deal with life and the challenges it will bring.

In the modern world, we tend to equate happiness with success, and in turn we define success as material possessions and external achievement. We emphasise constant activity and visible, measurable wealth over experience and reflection. Even our notions of what is beautiful are limited: we're not sensitive to the inherent elegance of restraint and limits. However, many languages have proverbs or sayings that reflect the insight that enough is as good as a feast. In Irish, for example, the same phrase—*go leor*—means both 'enough' and 'plenty'. *Enough* is about optimum, having exactly the right amount and using it gracefully. It is about being economical with what we have, without waste of resources or effort, but without being stingy either.

Ideas concerning the beauty and value of *enough* are not alien or distasteful, although embracing them fully is not a well-developed option either, because they are so countercultural.<sup>1</sup> Many of us recognise the value of *enough* at the same time as we receive strong messages to keep growing. In the contradiction between two different messages there lies the potential for wisdom. Striving for *enough* in the midst of a world of *more* is a way to cope with the demands of the modern world. It can help us to balance the different roles we occupy and the worlds we inhabit, and to make sound decisions and choices.

Modernist culture currently values untrammelled economic growth above all other types of growth. At this time, as many countries experience recession, most people are fixated on getting growth started again. Such growth ‘works’ in the sense that it brings short-term material wealth to small groups in countries where it’s practiced. But we know that many of its activities create the greenhouse gases that cause global warming. We also know that the industrialized agriculture favoured by a growth culture creates food insecurity, puts small farmers out of business and uses cruel practices in ‘growing’ animals. The emphasis on economic growth at all costs has encouraged us to deny the consequences of always using resources from communities and eco-systems, but never giving to those same communities and systems.

This culture also affects our understanding of the term ‘development’. Development comes to mean increasing levels of consumption. It implies that the ideal state for all is to live some version of a suburban lifestyle, commuting to work, with salaries, pensions, cars, and various other possessions seen as essential to a modern lifestyle, along with speedy foreign travel. This ideal state is available to anybody who complies with the work-earn-spend system and is willing to be productive and to compete with others. We are required to use our creativity and imagination in the service of profit and ‘growing’ our economies in this narrow sense. But our imaginations have been constrained by this worldview, so that we have largely lost any understanding that progress and advancement for the human race can take many other forms. Throughout the minority world, there is a reluctance to ask hard questions about the nature of progress; as a collective, we’re unwilling to question the very system that is causing our problems.

Within a worldview of *enough*, it would be more appropriate to say that *all* societies (the so-called underdeveloped as well as the ‘developed’) require transformation. In other words, all societies on earth today need a fundamental shift in values and worldview: they need to converge around the idea of deep security. And this security has to be based on equity and justice: sufficiency for all, without excess for some and misery for others. It is not simply ‘security of the fittest’ while the weak die off.

In the past, we did not need to make a big deal of *enough*; it was built into our lives in many ways. Our language recognised it in phrases like ‘enough is as good as a feast’, and ‘waste not, want not’. But in modern life the sense of *enough* is badly underdeveloped; in affluent societies we have largely forgotten the wisdom captured

in the old sayings. *Enough* is radically different from our current affluent Western obsession with expansion and accumulation. We would benefit from exploring its value for us in the future. It is knowledge recognized by earlier generations; its value has become obscured in the world of more, but it has the potential to be very useful to us at this time. Knowledge takes many forms, including practical skills, interpersonal skills and critical thinking. All forms are essential and of equal importance.

### **Thinking about progress**

This is a time in history when we need to make collective plans in ways we didn't have to in the past. Some very serious planning for us as a global, connected species is required, because developments have for the most part gone beyond the optimum. We need to make choices that will ensure all aspects of human security, including climate, food, water and peace.

One of the most important choices we have to make is to stop denying or ignoring the consequences of economic growth. Never has so much information been available to us about the effects of our actions. We know that we need to reduce demand and slow consumption, in order to stop global warming and climate change, and to nurture forms of economic activity that would be more life-enhancing than relentless growth. A second choice is even more important: to apply wisdom and passion in acting on the information we have. We need to examine our situation honestly, profoundly and self-reflectively. This is not about inducing a guilt-trip or causing a paralysis of blame, but about acting responsibly.

Part of acting responsibly is to look within and ask how we can promote other ways of knowing the world and acting in it. The philosophy of 'more' has channelled human development through a very narrow gate, where the focus is always on outer action and material accumulation. In this channel, the stream gets very fast and turbulent. Survival is difficult and this has resulted in the development of our worst human capacities: indifference, cruelty, denial, a narrow materialism and short-term thinking in an effort to compete with others. In this channel, the claims of ecology, morality, aesthetics and spirituality get lost. We need to reclaim the inner life, where we can reflect on other possibilities for human development, other ways of being in the world, including living according to a philosophy of *enough*.

It would be easy to dismiss *enough* as a form of stopping progress or even as a naïve attempt to reclaim the past. But it's really about creating many different kinds of human growth and expansion. A culture of *enough* would judge human progress in diverse ways and not just in the quantitative, measurable sense of increasing GDP. Such a culture would always attempt to balance our considerable scientific and scientific achievements with an increase in our moral, ecological, spiritual and emotional development. Humane and ecologically sound cultures would be a mark of progress and human advancement.

### ***Enough and ecology***

The words ‘ecology’ and ‘economics’ have the same root; ‘eco’ means ‘home’ or ‘household’. *Enough* returns economics to the scale of the household, makes it focus on the needs of the systems that sustain us and insists that economics recognise how everything is connected in ‘the wider household of being’.<sup>ii</sup> *Enough* treats markets, money, trade, science, technology, competition and profit—all the elements of modern growth economies—as good, creative activities that can be harnessed for the good of people and the planet if they are kept within moral and ecological boundaries. It distinguishes vibrant economic activity from unregulated economic growth.

Ecology differs from environmentalism, which is a modern way of trying to manage and limit the destructive effects of growth-related activities on the natural world. Ecology is a way of looking at the big picture, including the whole person and the place of humans in the systems of the earth. We need to know more about our planet in order to overcome the ways the modern world can cut us off from eco-systems and from diversity. An ecological outlook encourages a sense of belonging, which helps us to create meaning. And for many,<sup>iii</sup> meaning is lacking in the cultures that grow up in tandem with growth economies.

Scientific insights into the natural world have made the marvels of healthy ecological systems available to us. They do not waste; they are economical in the original sense of the word; they elegantly and spontaneously<sup>iv</sup> observe limits. They are, in other words, truly sustainable. We could take our cues from these organic systems and encourage human, social and economic systems modelled on them.

We should not idealise nature, however, as it can just as easily be co-opted for fascist ends as for justice. Everyone wants their ideas to be seen as ‘natural’; it is a very powerful concept, because it suggests that what is natural is right and unstoppable—it provides a moral justification of sorts. For instance, nature can be employed to suggest that there is a natural hierarchical order of relationships in human society, among different races or ethnic groups, or between the sexes. Proponents of unrestrained global markets and growth economies say that such systems are a natural progression for humans and that there is no alternative to them, even if they sometimes have considerable downsides.

We *can* use insights from the study of nature as a way to examine the kinds of systems that support life. We know that healthy ecosystems are rich in diversity and that they can provide more for their ‘inhabitants’ (human, plant or animal) than impoverished systems, even if both kinds of system have the same nutrient resources to start with. For example, an ecologically run garden has a closed nutrient cycle; nothing leaves it in the form of waste, and it uses everything it produces to provide nourishment for the soil and the plants. We also know that healthy systems accommodate growth, but of a cyclical rather than an unlimited kind. Nature favours cycles because they come to an organic end after a suitable period of growth.<sup>v</sup> They do not go on growing because in nature, that is a cancer.

Humans today need to consciously self-regulate. Other species and systems, those which have not developed cultures that devalue limits, know spontaneously when enough is enough, but humans have to choose it. For economic development to be beneficial, it has to conform to very strict ecological and moral limits. Of course, we will never reach perfect agreement on the question of what the limits should be. But rather than try to set absolute rules for them, the important thing is that we start and strive to maintain a wide-ranging conversation about limits. The full potential of *enough* cannot be seen from where we currently stand in affluent countries. It becomes clear only as we travel along its path and put it into practice.

### ***Enough and aesthetics***

To appreciate *enough*, we need an aesthetic sense that recognises the elegance of sufficiency. *Enough* has a beauty that is completely appropriate for our time. What if the cutting edge came to mean, rather than the never-ending expansion of boundaries, the art of walking that edge between less and more, sometimes balancing, sometimes slipping? It would be beautiful and challenging at the same time.<sup>vi</sup> Wealth could come from achieving balance and wholeness, including humour, fun, laughter and creativity.

However, if we consider them to be about mediocrity or deprivation, it will be difficult to embrace *enough* and its recognition of limits. The notion of limits has come to assume certain negative connotations. *Enough* can put us back in touch with the parts of ourselves that respond positively to the beauty of scale and sufficiency, the parts that empathise with the rest of creation. The arts—the record in music, painting, writing or dancing of what we have found beautiful or meaningful<sup>vii</sup>—also work with a notion of limits. The artist has to prevent the work from exceeding itself, from becoming unwieldy or going on for too long. Otherwise the finished product becomes meaningless.

### ***Enough and Morality***

Cultural and personal appreciations of the beauty of *enough* also constitute the beginnings of a moral practice. A conversation about morality—the principles and values that underpin our actions—is essential for a different kind of long-term public culture, one that does not rest on the idea that we are fundamentally economic beings. Morality, like ecology, examines how all things can flourish in relation to each other. Both are concerned with connection and the effect that different parts of a system have on each other.

A moral quest asks us to consider things we would often rather ignore. It asks us to reflect on our place in this world, the extent of the damage that humans have done in the world and the responsibility each of us has for creating a just world: what, in short, are our obligations to other people and to the earth itself? We often don't do enough of this, so *enough* requires that we do more of what we neglect to do right now. And it requires more than asking what is wrong; it involves going on to ask, 'how can we behave in ways that are right?' Morality and ethics require that we

examine the consequences of our beliefs and actions in areas beyond ourselves and our immediate environment, and in the long term.

A lack of moral development is distinct from a breakdown in organised religion. Institutional religions have traditionally held a monopoly on moral pronouncements, and indeed have tended to emphasise the guilt and shame aspects of our private lives. Progressive religious leaders are thankfully now recognising the need to broaden moral understanding, and that is to be welcomed. But we must not leave morality to religions; it is something we all need to concern ourselves with, whether we take a religious view of the world or not. Morality can be thought of as another way of naming politics, since politics too is concerned with human and planetary well-being.<sup>viii</sup>

World economics needs to be subjected to moral and ecological scrutiny. There is a moral dilemma involved in the way that economics, narrowly understood, has taken away our capacity to live good lives. We produce and consume to ‘keep the economy going’ but in the process, we also destroy many of the less tangible features of life that support and sustain us. ‘Maximum individual choice’ is the big mantra within growth economics: we are promised enormous numbers of choices, which are supposed to make us happy. We often talk about equality as if it means having the right to shop on an equal footing with other people. But many of the choices available are meaningless and cause unwanted and unnecessary complexity in our lives; they are not actually available to all and they often come at a price: ecological destruction and social injustice.

*Enough* recasts choice as moral decisions that strive for the common good. That means taking into account all other humans, community systems, the earth, and ourselves as individuals or small family groups. This may mean setting limits on certain kinds of expansion and accumulation, because of the ways they close off decent choices for others. Taking a moral stance forces us to inquire into what is really going on in the world around us, not just in our own private or family sphere. So the moral dimension of *enough* is also concerned with justice and fairness.

### ***Enough and Spirituality***

Spirituality involves full and constant attention to and awareness of what is happening, even if this is painful. Full attention is spiritual in a sense that has nothing to do with institutional religion. If we truly pay attention to the present, then we cannot ignore what is going on around us, the social and environmental realities that we are part of. And if we stop denying and ignoring, then we will no longer be prepared to live with some of the things we see.<sup>ix</sup>

Securing peace of mind is one part of spirituality, and to this end, many contemporary interpretations of spirituality would have us simply acknowledge and accept what we see. But merely to acknowledge the world’s wrongs is more likely to bring despair, when we realise the extent of the wrongs. The only way to find peace

is to resist what is wrong<sup>x</sup> and attempt to do right. The public side of the spiritual path—attention to social and economic systems—cannot be ignored in favour of the personal. Spiritual searching today must be infused with a political flavour if it is to be relevant to the contemporary scene.

Many people are already searching for peace of mind in the private realm with activities like yoga, tai chi, reiki, meditation, psychotherapy and poetry. Unfortunately, many spiritual activities, as taught or practiced in the West, emphasise the pleasant and the personal and do not refer to a broader social or cultural search, or offer a sense of the bigger picture. It is not enough to embrace spirituality, if it is only to escape one's own pain. For example, a spiritual celebration of nature, uplifting and healing as it is, is not complete if it ignores the ways that nature is being violated by economic growth, or if the spirituality fails to defend nature. In any case, ecology teaches us that one part of a system cannot be truly healthy if other parts are in trouble. Spirituality can all too easily become the pursuit of the pleasant, a sort of tranquilliser. It can be used as an excuse for ignoring or denying what is going on in the world.<sup>xi</sup>

Morality and spirituality appropriate to our times bridge the gap between public and private. They are political matters, because both are relevant to the world around us and to our inner lives. An ecological outlook enables us to look at context, that is, the bigger picture or web, in which our private lives are lived. The search for *enough* enables us to broaden our horizons and critique the systems that set the scene for our lives. It brings together resistance to what is wrong in the public domain as well as in the personal; it helps us to see the need for life-giving systems and gives us a desire to work towards them. Spirituality, like morality and ecology, is a recognition of deeper levels within ourselves and between ourselves and the world.<sup>xii</sup> All three are concerned with being conscious of how everything in the world functions in relation to everything else.

We cannot know all the aspects of *enough* without actually doing it. It is a way of being in the world, not a simple set of rules for living. It is like a path whose end point we cannot see before we start out. This is part of its spiritual dimension: although we can understand it cognitively in minutes, it can take a lifetime of practice to come to truly know it. But the beauty of it is that, the more we walk on the road, or practice the philosophy, the more we become aware of the nuances and value of the practice. So *enough* can be a slow realization along the way, and in the process bring with it dramatic insights or transformations. It can also take the form of new knowledge that nobody has yet envisaged. There are difficult sides to any spiritual way, such as doubt, fear, failure, uncertainty and struggle. These are to be accepted for what we can learn from them; pushing them aside is another form of denial.

*Enough* has a good history; it is rooted in past generations and has been valued and practised by several great wisdom traditions, including religions, especially those traditions that have an ecological outlook and view humans as part of the great

natural systems. Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Hinduism, Christianity, and the Ancient Greeks have for thousands of years promoted the virtues of moderation. Although *enough* does not rely on religious doctrine, neither is it rigidly secular; its spiritual and ecological dimensions take it beyond any view of life and the world that values only the strictly rational, observable and material. Spirituality is about who we are when all inessential trappings are stripped away; it also concerns the most important connections we have in the world.

*Enough* has an immediate value for individuals in our current culture; it can help us cope with the personal and social effects of what can sometimes seem like a runaway world. Working out what is *enough* in one's life is a way to get some peace of mind and capacity to deal with hectic daily activities. It is a way to be content, not in the sense of tolerating poor quality, but in the sense of knowing what is valuable and what is not, and relishing the good things we have already. It provides security in times of boom and recession.

### **Public policies based on the concept of *enough***

*Enough* is at the heart of many concrete proposals and frameworks for making the changes we need in order to live well in the future. Such proposals include Contraction and Convergence and Cap and Share,<sup>xiii</sup> both based on the idea of a fair distribution of carbon-emissions quotas to all citizens of the globe. Another framework concerns basic financial security for everybody, which can in turn contribute to general security and a global retreat from growth, while also encouraging local development. This has developed into the idea of a universal basic income, which provides sufficient cash for every citizen to have the basics for a decent life.<sup>xiv</sup> *Enough* also underpins a growing worldwide food movement, based on intelligent local agricultural practices and the renewal of a food culture in places where it has died out. The basic premise of intelligent agriculture is that food production and food consumption should take place as close together as possible.<sup>xv</sup>

In an ideal world, governments make laws based on such frameworks, creating structures for sustainability. With key structures in place, citizens would see an improvement in the quality of life. In turn, this would give a new culture of *enough* a chance to flourish; its full potential could emerge, co-created by government and citizens. It is important, therefore, that activists continue to push for such frameworks to be formally introduced. In the meantime, though, we live in a gap between what is and what might be, and in the absence of formal public policies based on *enough*, citizens need to take up the role of leaders and promote a culture of *enough*.

### **Citizen-leadership for *enough***

We cannot all be official, designated leaders, but if leadership is about taking risks and bringing other people along in a new vision, then we can all do it. We need to rid ourselves of the idea that only experts can lead us. A leader is anyone who wants to



help<sup>xvi</sup> and leadership is an everyday thing, not something apart from day-to-day living. It's not confined to those who have decision-making power in institutions or states. We can all, irrespective of age, occupation or role, regularly ask questions about how we should live, what is good, how we can achieve well-being for everybody, how we can respect the earth and how we can take the long-term view and try to see the whole picture. We can engage in conversation with others about these issues. A society that does not cultivate the art of asking questions cannot count on finding answers to its most pressing issues.<sup>xvii</sup>

As citizen-leaders, we have to find ways to amplify the attractive identity of *enough* and related concepts. We have to get them into public awareness and get people talking about them and seeking others who are interested.<sup>xviii</sup> This includes providing information, but crucially, it is also about building *influence* for those ideas. We need the world to pick up on the message of *enough* in a thousand different ways, in all its different expressions, whether in personal or public life. We can draw on key attitudes such as stability, creativity, equity and participation. We can lead a movement *for* quality, wholeness, sufficiency, well-being, morality, ecology and full human potential. At the same time this movement resists injustice, quantification, monetarism, denial, isolation, cruelty and the deskilling of human beings.

The choice to live by a key attitude like *enough* is political in the broadest sense of the word. Politics is about public, collective choices and is closely connected to morality. Political and moral concerns include the values, culture and mindset that underpin the overt laws or rules that govern society. Party politics and parliamentary democracy are only a tiny part of politics.

## Conclusion

*Enough* is a concept that is intrinsically moral, intrinsically ecological and intrinsically healthy. Practising it allows us to get what is needed from the world to sustain human flourishing, but without taking too much from individuals or from social and natural systems. It is also about how to give adequately to the world around us. So it is about the relationship between humans and the world, how we get and how we give. In our modern worldview, we have limited our understanding of how everything is connected to everything else.

The problems are all connected with each other. But just as importantly, the solutions are also interconnected. A sense of *enough* creates the conditions that will allow a critique of growth. It can also nourish a culture of adapted human behaviour which will give at least some of the earth's ecosystems a chance to renew themselves and at the same time allow social justice to emerge.

*Enough* is neither cynical nor utopian, but hopeful. It is based on our potential for good. Simple but not simplistic<sup>xix</sup>, it is a principled way of understanding and being that requires us to get the balance right between the inner world of contemplation and the outer world of observable action. We can think about the future in a hopeful way,

grounded in the belief that humans can live up to their potential for good and for moral action. The problems facing us are very serious, but if we look only at the extremely hard realities and avoid the language of possibility, then the realities seem just too much, and we risk slipping into cynicism, denial or despair. We need to lay claim to the notion that human beings have the capacity to intervene in, influence and shape the forces that structure our lives.

There is no perfect worldview; anything taken to an extreme will show its shadow side or become dogma. But a reflexive attitude can prevent the way of *enough* from becoming rigid. This means sticking with the questions and not flinching from the challenges inherent in them. *Enough* is a key concept for the future. Living, adaptive and dynamic, it encourages creativity and diversity for groups and individuals around the world. It can help us to forge connections and discover common ground. **And right now, as a positive first step towards an increasingly precarious future, it might just be enough to bring us real hope.**

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> McKibben, Bill (2004) *Enough: Genetic Engineering and Human Nature*. London: Bloomsbury, page 227

<sup>ii</sup> Le Guin, Ursula K (2003) 'Life in the Wider Household of Being', an interview with Ursula K le Guin by Erika Milo for *North by Northwest*, Nov. [www.northbynorthwest.org](http://www.northbynorthwest.org)

<sup>iii</sup> O'Sullivan, Edmund V (1999) *Transformative learning: Educational vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, page 231

<sup>iv</sup> McKibben, Bill (2004) *Enough: Genetic Engineering and Human Nature*. London: Bloomsbury, page 214.

<sup>v</sup> Brandt, Barbara (1995) *Whole Life Economics: Revaluating Daily Life*. Philadelphia, PA and Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

<sup>vi</sup> McKibben, Bill (2004) *Enough: Genetic Engineering and Human Nature*. London: Bloomsbury, page 217

<sup>vii</sup> McKibben, Bill (2004) *Enough: Genetic Engineering and Human Nature*. London: Bloomsbury, page 218

<sup>viii</sup> Eagleton, Terry (2003) *After Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Basic Chapters

<sup>ix</sup> Gottlieb, Roger S. (2003) *A Spirituality of Resistance: Finding a Peaceful Heart and Protecting the Earth*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, page 32

<sup>x</sup> Gottlieb, Roger S. (2003) *A Spirituality of Resistance: Finding a Peaceful Heart and Protecting the Earth*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>xi</sup> Gottlieb, Roger S. (2003) *A Spirituality of Resistance: Finding a Peaceful Heart and Protecting the Earth*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, pages 13-18.

<sup>xii</sup> Selby, David (2002) 'The signature of the Whole: Radical Interconnectedness and its Implications for Global and Environmental Education, pages 87, 88 in O'Sullivan, Edmund V., Amish Morell and Mary Ann O'Connor (eds), *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pages 77 – 93.

<sup>xiii</sup> Meyer, Aubrey (2005) *Contraction and Convergence: The Global Solution to Climate Change*. Schumacher Briefing no 5. Totnes, Devon: Green Books.  
Also see [www.capandshare.org](http://www.capandshare.org)

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<sup>xiv</sup> Lord, Clive (2003) *A Citizens' Income: a foundation for a sustainable world*. Charlbury: Jon Carpenter

Also see [www.citizensincome.org](http://www.citizensincome.org)

<sup>xv</sup> Tudge, Colin (2004) *So Shall We Reap: What's gone wrong with the world's food – and how to fix it*. London: Penguin.

Tudge, Colin (2007) *Feeding People is Easy*. Paris: Paripublishing.

<sup>xvi</sup> Wheatley, Margaret (2006) *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications.

<sup>xvii</sup> cf Cornelius Castoriadis, cited in Giroux, Henry A (2001) *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, page 81.

<sup>xviii</sup> Meg Wheatley calls this getting the idea into the relational or communication networks, in her chapter (2006) *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications, page 87.

<sup>xix</sup> Distinctions made in Goodman, Anne (2003) *Now What? Developing our Future: Understanding our Place in the Unfolding Universe*. New York: Peter Lang, pages 303-4.