

# Some Thoughts on the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Rise of Globalism\*

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## **Abstract**

*Globalism has replaced the Cold War as the dominant ideology. Along with the shift from East–West tension to ecological concerns has come a change from national to global worries. This article begins by presenting the argument that global thinking is replacing traditional nationalist ideologies. The article discusses the changes necessary for a shift to an ecologically centered ideology and the merits of the Bahá'í Faith's teachings are examined in light of a transformation to a world-centered mindset. Finally, the article concludes by questioning whether the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh fully recognize material prosperity as restricted by the earth's limited resources.*

## **Résumé**

*Le globalisme a remplacé la guerre froide comme idéologie dominante. Accompagnant l'abandon des tensions Est–Ouest en faveur de préoccupations écologiques est venu un changement d'inquiétudes nationales à mondiales. Le présent article débute en présentant l'argument que la pensée globale tend à remplacer les idéologies nationalistes traditionnelles. L'article discute ensuite les changements requis pour permettre la transition vers une idéologie écologique, ainsi que les mérites des enseignements bahá'ís dans le contexte d'une transformation globale vers une pensée mondiale. Finalement, l'article termine en soulevant la question à savoir si les enseignements de Bahá'u'lláh reconnaissent pleinement la prospérité matérielle telle que limitée par les ressources terrestres.*

## **Resumen**

*El Globalismo ha reemplazado a la Guerra Fría como ideología dominante. Acompañando al cambio de tensiones oriente–occidente por preocupaciones ecológicas está el cambio de preocupaciones nacionales por las de tipo global. Esta disertación comienza por plantear el concepto de que la ideología tradicionalmente nacionalista está siendo reemplazada por el pensamiento global. Pasa después a comentar los cambios necesarios para lograr una ideología centralizada en la ecología, y los méritos de las enseñanzas bahá'ís.*

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*la luz de la transformación global hacia una mentalidad mundocéntrica. Finalmente el artículo concluye preguntando si las enseñanzas de Bahá'u'lláh reconocen plenamente que la prosperidad material se restringe por los recursos limitados de la tierra.*

As we near the year 2000, political scientists speak of a “New World Order.” Many dramatic changes have happened internationally: Who would ever have dreamed that the Iron Curtain would come down so quickly! The end of the Cold War and the relaxation of East–West tensions are unsettling national stabilities in several countries. Even the United Nations is finally gaining prominence in world events. And with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1992, the world moved toward a stronger acknowledgement of its global finitude.

In fact, I would argue, globalism currently co-exists with nationalism. While global thinking is certainly not new, it is gaining recognition and acceptance. And while nationalism has traditionally been a dominant force in social identity, it is losing strength. Just as environmentalists encourage people to think globally and act locally, countries are beginning to juggle global concerns with national issues.

The Bahá'í Faith is one of several systems of spiritual exploration that has consciously and precisely promoted global thinking. Bahá'u'lláh, even as early as the late 1800s, held that “the establishment of world peace within the framework of a unified, spiritually enlightened new world order” was a fundamental objective of the Bahá'í Faith (“To the Peoples of the World” ix). This recommendation is clearly outlined in the monograph “To the Peoples of the World,” which was written by the Universal House of Justice. Citing earlier sources, this tract proclaimed that there is an

imperative need for a world order based on justice, the eradication of all forms of prejudice, the equality of the sexes, and recognition of the essential harmony between science and religion. Other principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh included the creation of universal institutions designed to foster the unity of mankind, and the search for a solution to world economic problems through consideration of the spiritual dimensions of human life. (ix)

By defining the need for unity, equality, justice, and harmony on a world scale, Bahá'ís succinctly frame the social transformations necessary for a political and economic globalism.

Before exploring the basic tenets of Bahá'í beliefs about globalism, I begin by arguing that the rise of “the Big Blue Marble” as a dominant icon demonstrates the growing acceptance of a global mindset. While the term *icon* is literally defined as “a sign which is determined by the nature of its object,” I use the word in a wider sense (O'Sullivan, *Key Concepts in Communication* 106).

In common colloquial practice, the word *icon* has come to represent a sign or symbol that not only *denotes* a set of ideas but also *connotes*, at one precise stroke, such emotions as reverence, conviction, and inspiration.

Icons provide a mythical shorthand; they abbreviate sets of ideas (such as myths) within a single symbol. In turn, dominant myths have been called ideologies (O'Sullivan, *Key Concepts in Communication* 106). And so, by reviewing iconic representations of more popular myths, this article argues that specific ideologies are identified and subsequently compared (Chambers *Popular Culture* 79). In other words, popular icons, from the crucifix to the globe, are used as indicators that global concerns have gained prominence.

After arguing that global thinking is gaining wide acceptance, I examine the necessary changes required when shifting from a capitalist ideology of growth and expansion to a mindset that includes the recognition of earth's finitude. The main objective of this article is to examine the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh on the topic of a global orientation to life. Bahá'í teachings are reviewed with reference to the necessary economic, political, and social changes required by a transition to global thinking. Then I close by questioning whether Bahá'í teachings about material prosperity fully concede the reality of the earth's limited resources.

### **A History of Dominant Mindsets**

In Canada, until the Second World War, the tallest buildings in any city or town provided stark witness to the leading belief systems. For many years, churches were probably the tallest buildings in any town. Only in the last few decades have banks and office buildings come to dominate the urban landscape. In a similar manner, we can identify the most prevalent symbols that demonstrate how the Western world has moved through a variety of religious, emotional and social mindsets.

In the Western world, Christianity has long been the dominant mindset (Sorokin, *Crisis of Our Age* 17–18). A pervasive use of crosses on churches, as jewelry, and in art work attests to the prominence of Christian beliefs. Medieval paintings, for example, made repetitive use of this symbol. Even today, people of all ages continue to wear crosses.

Since the 1950s, the frightening image of an atomic mushroom has consistently, if not always consciously, ruled international relations and stimulated personal fears (Halliday, *Second Cold War*). The mushroom-shaped cloud of the atom bomb was a fatalistic image. This powerful symbol terrorized us with a fear of military escalation and the possible use of an A-bomb, even through accidental nuclear deployment.

Perhaps as a result of the terror—or in an effort to countermand that deep fear—we have just completed an era when the Coca-Cola sign was identified as the most widely recognized trademark (*Marketing Magazine* 4). This image of consumerism, with its swirls and bubbled letters, has been surveyed as the most readily recognized symbol throughout the world.

More recently, Mickey Mouse has become the most popular image, according to marketing surveys (*Marketing Magazine* 4). While the Disney corporation jealously guards its symbolic representations, the Mickey Mouse ears have recently been surveyed as the most well-recognized icon to date. The popularity of this symbol represents the prominence of American popular culture.

But for the last decade a new symbol has entered our collective consciousness. This graphic portrait of Earth could only be imagined until the 1960s. A satellite photo of Earth first gained prominence at Expo '67.

In his book *The Culture of Nature*, Alexander Wilson encapsulates the social impact of this portrait of the world. Wilson writes:

For the first time, our visual environment allowed us to imagine the planet as a single organism. Environmentalists quickly picked up the image and used it on bumper stickers, decals, logos, flags, and magazine covers. The image was commemorated on Earth Day in 1970, and it eventually penetrated advertising. It became significant in ecological theory with the publication of James Lovelock's *Gaia* in 1979. (167)<sup>1</sup>

Wilson was certainly correct in asserting that this image of Earth has penetrated every aspect of culture and the media, further demonstrating the iconic nature of the image. Replication of the "Big Blue Marble" icon is now pervasive. As with the crucifix symbol, the satellite picture of Earth is used as a motif on clothing and accessories, posters, and in advertisements.

In 1991, for example, this motif was used in an interesting manner by the Norwegian government. That year, Norway sponsored a massive publicity effort to draw attention to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to be held the following year. Three replicas of Viking ships were built to sail the Atlantic from Newfoundland to South America. When a replica of a Viking ship, the *Gaia*, entered any harbor, it carried a message of global concern with the colored portrait of "the Big Blue Marble" prominently displayed on its large white sail. This picture of Earth has certainly provided us with a compelling sense of ontological isolation. Not only is life on Earth unusual and special, it is also finite.

In describing the ascendancy of the global symbol, Wilson overlooked the scientific community's past reluctance to shift to global thinking. Global awareness has waxed and waned in popularity. In his book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, James Lovelock notes early resistance to globalism. In the preface, Lovelock reports reluctance on the part of fellow scientists to recognize his work. He writes:

. . . *Gaia* was condemned as teleological by my peers and the journals, *Nature* and *Science*, would not publish papers on the subject. No satisfactory reasons for

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1. *Gaia* is the name of the Greek goddess of Earth, also known as Ge, hence geography and geology.

rejection were given; it was as if the establishment, like the theological establishment of Galileo's time, could no longer tolerate radical or eccentric notions. (vii–viii)

Lovelock, as indicated, assumed that his work was condemned for being teleological or overly concerned with such unscientific notions as transcendent design or ultimate purpose.

Yet a closer reading of his book demonstrates the absurdity of any such condemnation. In brief, Lovelock reviews the biological history of the planet and encourages scientists always to consider features of the globe's populations, oceans, lands, and atmosphere from a holistic perspective. Lovelock calls for a review of economic and developmental policies in light of the finitude of the planet. As Lovelock himself declares, there was “no novelty” in his claims, “it had all been said before” (*Gaia* ii).

In contrast to this earlier resistance, the visual image of the earth and its waters and lands now provides a convincing image of Earth's solitude. The stark reality of Earth's finitude may have played a significant role in fostering a rapidly growing concern with global housekeeping.

### **Global Consciousness and Spirituality**

In spite of early resistance to his book, Lovelock played an important role in popularizing global consciousness in the West. His work became a classic for researchers in the field of environmental studies.

Lovelock recommended a greater appreciation of the beauty of Earth and a restrained use of its resources. But he did not forecast the types of social, political, and economic changes global thinking would demand. Contemporary environmental studies have examined the wider implications of globalism. Surprisingly (in light of tendencies for the scientific world to favor rationalism), environmentalists often present the development of spiritual values within the context of scientific solutions. For example, Table 1 was printed in *Alternatives*, a magazine that describes itself with the subtitle “Perspectives on Society, Technology and Environment.”

This table proposes the important economic, political, and social concerns that must be addressed as the world shifts from the dominant paradigm of capitalist economies to a global (named, in this case, “environment”) mindset. The table clearly identifies the areas of transformation necessary for a mindset that supersedes global limits in relation to conventional capitalist guidelines for economic development. Areas of change are identified as core values, economic arrangements, social structures, attitudes toward nature, and assumptions about the nature of knowledge.

The table begins with the claim that many societies, in the past, have valued material growth and therefore chose to dominate and even exploit nature. In contrast, the global approach of an environmentally aware paradigm requires such values as harmony with nature.

**Table 1. Features of Shifting Paradigms<sup>2</sup>**

<b>Features</b>	<b>Dominant Paradigm</b>	<b>Environment Paradigm</b>
Core Values	Material (economic growth) Natural environment valued as resource Domination over nature	Non-material (self-actualization) Natural environment intrinsically valued Harmony with nature
Economy	Market forces Risk and reward Differentials Individual self-help	Public interest Safety Incomes related to need/egalitarian Collective/social provision
Society	Centralized Large-scale Associational Ordered	Decentralized Small-scale Communal Flexible
Nature	Ample reserves Nature hostile/neutral Environment controllable	Earth's resources are limited Nature benign Nature delicately balanced
Knowledge	Confidence in science Rationality of means Separation of fact/value, thought/feeling	Limits to science and technology Rationality of ends Integration of fact/value, thought/feeling

The economic arrangements of capitalism have allowed the risks and rewards of capital activities to determine market forces, leaving each individual to fend for herself or himself. While we can readily acknowledge that liberal capitalism made some modifications in the individualism of capitalism through the welfare state (as in Sweden, for example), an emphasis on public interest, safety, equality (called egalitarianism in the table), and collectivity within the proposed environment paradigm clearly states the need for these more socially oriented values to shape the economy.

In order for these shifts in core values and economic relations to come about within a global context, the model predicts the need for a shift from centralized, large-scale political control to decentralized, small-scale power relations. In addition to these stark political transformations, basic attitudes toward nature, according to the table, must be changed as well. The old exploitative orientation must be replaced with a new respect for nature. Even past reliance on science and technology must be adjusted to include a recognition of the limits of scientific knowledge and a renewed celebration of the merits of values and feelings.

2. *Alternatives* 18.3 (January/February 1992): 26–33. Reprinted courtesy of *Alternatives Journal: Environmental Thought, Policy and Action*. Annual subscriptions \$24.00Cdn (plus GST) from *Alternatives Journal*, Faculty of Environmental Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3G1.

This overly simplistic description of the dominant capitalist paradigm is certainly open to criticism. The optimistic predictions of the environmental paradigm may be problematic. Nevertheless, the model does provide us with a well-organized portrait of the great changes we are facing in the next century.

Furthermore, this table can be criticized for its either/or approach: it conceptualizes a world with either capitalism or globalism, either market forces or public interest, either centralized or decentralized power relations. As we shall see below, the tenets of the Bahá'í Faith facilitate an integration of various approaches.

Conceptualizing nature as “benign” and “delicately balanced” underestimates and certainly undervalues the important impact of nature on humanity. As well, while recognition of the “thought/feeling” dichotomy demonstrates a marked improvement in patiently valuing individualism, this approach neglects to define a larger, spiritual component for human existence.

These criticisms of the model have been explored within, among other religions, the Bahá'í Faith, which, for example, ameliorates the limited valuation of subjective knowledge by strongly advocating such self-actualizing recommendations as personal review of all knowledge (the independent investigation of truth)—even a questioning of the religion itself:

If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imaginations; for the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition. Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation. (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 181)

The next section provides a summary of the basic tenets of Bahá'í beliefs concerning a nationally integrated worldview.

## **Globalism and the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith**

When considering the rise of globalism, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith are compelling for a number of distinct reasons. First, the Bahá'í Faith unabashedly *centers* itself on this transformation to world-centered thinking. As well, it consciously addresses two areas often isolated from each other—economics and spirituality. Then too, this belief system not only advocates the complex political arrangements of a decentralized government but also models that approach within its own structures. At a time when science is in strong ascendancy, the Bahá'í Faith advocates that scientific knowledge be balanced by spiritual beliefs.

To begin, the shift from nationalism to globalism is conceptualized as “the planetization of mankind” within the Bahá'í writings (Teilhard, cited in “To the Peoples” 1). Foundations of the Bahá'í teachings repeat and emphasize a belief

in the unity of humanity as expressed by a favored slogan: "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens." (*Gleanings* 250).

The primary change identified in the table presented above is a shift from material to non-material core values. This transformation in core or basic values presents the most complex point at which change will be required. These ideas were foreshadowed in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá when he wrote in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, "The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit" (238).

Even the self-centered value of the "natural environment as a valued and legitimately exploited resource" to an "intrinsically valued" natural environment suggests a move from material to deeper, affective responses. Bahá'ís link that "intrinsic valuation" of the natural to creation and a "Creator." Their basic teachings say:

The Bahá'í belief in one God means that the universe and all creatures and forces within it have been created by one single superhuman and supernatural Being. This Being, whom we call God, has absolute control over his creation (omnipotence) as well as perfect and complete knowledge of it (omniscience). (Hatcher and Martin, *Bahá'í Faith* 74)

Bahá'ís then add a concept I found most inspiring when I first heard it. They explain that although language or culture may lead one to define God using different names, "we are speaking about the same unique Being" (Hatcher and Martin, *Bahá'í Faith* 74). (Now, as a feminist, I must add that I find this conception of a masculine [he], powerful, omniscient Being, separate from nature and singular, highly problematic. I prefer a conception of the divine and the mentality that stresses "God-within" and emphasizes spiritual immanence. I, nonetheless, believe that Bahá'í recognition of a unity for all spirituality certainly presents a prime necessity for global thinking.)

A clear definition of "God" is important to globalism. Certainly the shift from "market force" to "public interest" indicates a transformation from the *laissez-faire* greed assumed within liberal ideology to the altruism that can only be fostered through the principles inherent in most religions. Another merit of the Bahá'í Faith is precisely its "faith." The Bahá'í writings exude a confidence that this transition from material to spiritual is possible, claiming that "uncritical assent" has been incorrectly given to the notion that "human beings are inordinably selfish and aggressive. . ." ("To the Peoples" 3).

The complexities of shifting from the dominant social paradigm in which society is idealized as, according to Table 1, "centralized, large-scale, associational, and ordered" to "decentralized, small-scale, communal, and flexible" can only be achieved through a magnanimity that is able to do both.



The nationalism characterized by the former set of descriptives cannot totally be replaced by the latter; elements of both would be necessary.

The deep appreciation of nature, which is required to make the shift from seeing nature, again according to Table 1, as “ample, hostile (or at best neutral), and controllable,” to “limited, benign, and delicately balanced” will require the abdication of greed with its accompanying acquisitiveness. The transformations in the nature of knowledge predicted in this table need not be clarified for anyone with even the simplest awareness of the Bahá'í Faith. Within that belief system, science and technology, unless in harmony with true religion, were predicted to become inadequate:

Religion and Science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 143)

When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world. . . . ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 146)

In their writing, Hatcher and Martin begin with the premise of unity between science and religion:

Bahá'u'lláh affirmed that man's intelligence and reasoning powers are a gift from God. Science results from our systematic use of these God-given powers. The truths of science are thus *discovered* truths. (*Bahá'í Faith* 88)

By acknowledging the unity of the Divine, intelligence, and science, the Bahá'í Faith emphasizes the linkage between science and religion. This discourse of “God-given powers” still intimates the existence of a lapse between the spiritual and the intellectual. Again, I believe there is too much emphasis here on an external God providing powers. I would prefer that spiritual *empowering* be defined as an internal process. Nonetheless, the Bahá'í Faith makes a valuable point by arguing that any separation between thought and beliefs is a fallacy.

To review, here are the most important contributions by the Bahá'í Faith to global thinking. The following concepts most succinctly demonstrate that contribution:

1. Belief that humanity evolves, progresses, or matures. The Bahá'í Faith asserts: “The aggression, self-centredness, competition and war characterizing the annals of human history are reflections of the behaviour of humanity during its stages of childhood and adolescence” (“To the Peoples” xi). Hence, the responsible calculations of limited resources, environmental

risks (such as ozone depletion), and concern with the impact of global warming represents a more mature approach to resource management.

2. Belief that “the time has come when those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west . . . must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise” (“To the Peoples” 8). And the notion that “world order can be founded only on an unshakeable consciousness of the oneness of mankind, a spiritual truth which all the human sciences confirm” (“To the Peoples” 16). The Bahá'í Faith hereby openly questions materialist values.

3. The Bahá'í Faith addresses the contradictions within the social organizations of the paradigm shifts from centralization to decentralization. It

insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity. . . . (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá' u' lláh* 42)

Creation of world institutions and support for the United Nations. In *The World Order of Bahá' u' lláh*, Shoghi Effendi details the bridge between nationalism and globalism. He encourages the establishment of a world commonwealth uniting all nations, races, creeds, and classes while at the same time guarding the autonomy of state members and individuals. Shoghi Effendi, in fact, proposes parallel global structures for all the institutions found within most nations: armies, courts, media, commerce, and others.

4. The Bahá'í Faith's blueprint for the altruism required by developed countries. In the pamphlet *Bahá' í Focus on Development*, Moojan Momen outlines the main projects carried out in the fields of education, health and social services, communications, resource economies, and community development. Each of the projects builds on Bahá'í beliefs in the importance of education, democratic participation, economic independence, equality of sexes, and benefits of community. These values are identified elsewhere as “dignity, self-reliance, cooperation and interdependence. . . ” (Dahl, “Bahá'í Perspective” 168).

### **The Bahá'í Faith and the Question of Materialism**

Early Bahá'í advocacy for a peaceful world order was voiced as a call to end war. Today, the world is “battling” environmental deterioration. And although the Bahá'í Faith contains the basic tenets for global thinking, does it take into account earth's resource limits?

In “The Spiritual Framework of Development,” Holly E. Hanson has written that “Bahá'ís believe economic prosperity comes from spiritual actions” (12).

She quotes Bahá'u'lláh's encouragement to humankind to "forsake the things that profit thee and cleave unto that which will profit mankind" (*Tablets* 64). But the important question is still true—do these teachings take into consideration Earth's limits? Does the struggle to "attain a better standard of living" and the establishment of a "new society," as Hanson puts it (16), take into account the globe's vulnerability and finitude? Does the Bahá'í Faith's belief that "wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God" and if it is "expended for philanthropic purposes" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 24) take into account our contemporary global reality?

Similar warnings against materialism were included in an anthology titled *Circle of Unity*. In his contribution to that volume, Gregory Dahl writes, "Material development is seen as a useful tool in the process of spiritualization, but not an end in itself" ("Bahá'í Perspective" 156). Dahl explained that the world is strongly materialistic, both in the capitalist and communist systems. It should be added that Dahl clarifies development as necessary at other levels, claiming that "attitudes, abilities, spiritual and moral qualities, intellect, and higher aspirations all must parallel material attainments" ("Bahá'í Perspective" 156–57). To reiterate, while the Bahá'í Faith acknowledges the risks of overproduction in military goods, for example, possible limits to the globe's resources are not considered. The Bahá'í Faith only concedes the accumulation of "excessive wealth" as immoral, without directly identifying that value with the earth's resource capabilities.

More recently, Bahá'í literature does incorporate some recognition of the earth's resource limits. In *The Prosperity of Humankind*, the authors have written: "The fallacies in theories based on the belief that there is no limit to nature's capacity to fulfill any demand made on it by human beings have now been coldly exposed" (14). Yet even with that recognition of resource restraints, the importance or primacy of Earth's finitude is not fully recognized. The concept of "justice," for example, is not fully defined in this document. In my opinion, justice should be addressed primarily as "economic justice." Simply identifying injustice between the "haves" and the "have nots," as the *Turning Point for All Nations* does (14–15), ignores a crucial point. Economic injustice creates a more vital distinction—between those who "live" and those who "live not"!

## Conclusions

In this article, the popularity of the "Big Blue Marble" symbol has been used as an indicator of society's growing commitment to globalism. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, while made over a hundred years ago, blossom within the contemporary context of global thinking. They convincingly espouse an ideology of holism, globalism, and unity.

Transforming the world's economic, political, and social practices and values toward a global orientation will mean a dramatic change in ideas about nature and knowledge. As stated so aptly in *The Prosperity of Humankind*, globalism "requires a radical rethinking of most of the concepts and assumptions currently governing social and economic life" (18).

At the 1992 Colloquium at the University of New Brunswick, it was highly fitting to cherish the wisdom of Bahá'u'lláh's advice when he said, "Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self" (*Gleanings* 94). Recognition of resource limits must become a primary consideration.

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