

# Towards a Poetics of Possibility:

## Critical Spirituality as a Resource for Framing Sustainable Futures

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There is an anticipatory dimension to futures thinking which lies at the heart of any engagement with social and personal possibilities. Anticipation covers both our preferences and our fears. The word evokes a sense of promise, and this is important to any futures practice, as to see the future as only a place of dark foreboding diminishes our ability to respond proactively and with the necessary mixture of courage and imagination. Yet we also need to have the real fear of collapse and decline to goad us into both personal and collective action. Thus anticipatory futures offers us both the carrot and the stick. Both are woven into the fabric of the possible and both invite us to consider how best to engage with the question of sustainable futures as a praxis grounded in local realities yet striving for a beyond that will remain forever unattainable; offering a universalisable possibility of sustainability that is always just out of reach, yet always calling us forth to action. In this way sustainability acts as both a utopia and a utopic<sup>1</sup> as it is both an unrealisable goal and a set of processes grounded in the aspirations, imaginations and needs of people.

### **Yearning**

This paper will offer an overview of sustainable futures that incorporates this element of the 'beyond', a critical and spiritual dimension, in order to expand our thinking about sustainability and human adaptive capacity. This sense of the beyond presupposes an essential yearning for wholeness at the heart of the human condition. This yearning is what has challenged humanity to develop culture and the array of technologies that support it. This yearning has led humanity to also develop the great spiritual traditions (indigenous and historical) and weave wondrous tales of becoming that are the jewels in the crown of human spiritual expression (Smith, 2000). Such a vision does not separate the spiritual from the material but understands both evolving co-creatively in a dialogue of mutual respect. In this way we need to also understand sustainability and sustainable futures as essentially processes that involve consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> To explore this distinction turn to the work of Louis Marin (1984) and Kevin Hetherington (Hetherington, 1997).

Now this yearning occurs in different ways according to context. At the brutally harsh end of the human experience it is simply the yearning for a bowl of rice and physical security. Life is more sustainable when you have a full belly and feel safe from physical danger. Thus the minimum necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter, medical, educational – need to be guaranteed. But beyond this there is a limitless scope for yearning. But what do we yearn for? Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar argues that we yearn for expansion because the human spirit, being a Cosmic entity, does not understand limits and although we as humans in a relative world must acknowledge them there exists an unseen level of Being with which we are still connected (1988). Thus we seek to rise above limitations, to emancipate ourselves physically, intellectually and spiritually from the human condition.

This vision rests upon the concept of the Brahma Chakra cycle which describes creation as the outflow of consciousness into matter and then consciousness' return to its source through the evolution of life (Sarkar, 1988; Skolimowski, 2010). In this process each unit being, over lifetimes, finds their way back slowly but surely to the supreme hub of existence. The dynamism for this movement is this yearning – a longing to return 'home' to the cosmic source of our being. Now this may sound very theoretical but when we look at culture, cultural dynamics, the inequalities in this world, the pressure on human consciousness from the environment, we can see all as goads to the evolution of consciousness. Good and evil are no longer absolutes as they are in the Judeo-Christian traditions but a moving towards or away from consciousness. Furthermore, it is in this movement towards and away that consciousness develops.

Ultimately how our civilisation, I use the singular as we are now for all intents and purposes a global civilisation with local variations, responds to the threat of climate change will depend on our cultural creativity (M. Bussey, 2010b; Ray, 2000). There are limits to this creativity. These lie in the historical, axiological, epistemological and ontological roots of modernity which has spawned a materialist culture of superficiality, instrumentalism, and egotism. The historical limits are established by our relationship with energy. This relationship has shaped our politics, economics and technology and can be seen driving us towards the precipice of no return. The axiological limits are linked to the value systems that frame meaningful action and deeply inform the choices we make both collectively and individually. The limits of dominant value systems are being approached in regards to our relationship with energy and being expressed in current debate on climate justice and sustainability. Epistemologically, history and values act as lenses that frame knowing, knowledge creation and the questioning (seeking) that drives both. In a world dominated by a culture of materialism solutions are often framed in engineering and technological terms. Even the social changes required to foster resilience are treated as structural issues that require social engineering through policy, educational and legislative interventions. Finally, ontological limits rest on the shallow sense of purpose and identity fostered by the secular and materialist orientation of our globalizing culture. The hyper individualism that is a bench mark for identity and expression forecloses on relationship and connection. Creativity becomes product oriented and imagination is corralled into the field of technology which generates wondrous and novel gadgets but overlooks key elements of the human condition (see Bussey et al 2012).

### **Towards a Poetics of Possibility**

To reframe this context is an invitation to birth new civilisational narratives. Narratives in which progress is framed not in linear and material terms but in human and spiritual terms. A new planetary civilisation, and I believe that we are part of this new world already, where

consciousness, community and connection become the hallmarks of human endeavor is within reach. Like all such chimeras its immanence obscures its possibilities. As with all civilisational projects the vision is core and it is expressed aesthetically in a poetics of possibility in which what Ananta Giri calls “the art of integration” evokes the sense of endless yearning to become part of something bigger than oneself. The human urge for wholeness is a powerful ordering force which expresses itself equally at the level of the psyche’s quest for integration in which the mind yearns, as Aurobindo (Dalal, 2002) describes, for Sachindananda as well as at the level of the collective where social ordering moves from complexity to complexity as clan becomes village, becomes city, becomes state and finally empire. These ever expanding circles of social order reflect the inner drive for integration. Of course this has in its patriarchal form frequently been violent and hegemonic in nature (Eisler, 1995). Yet it need not be so as integration need not demand a unitary singularity but can find expression in partial, local even fractal possibilities<sup>2</sup>. Such a soft wholeness joyfully embraces difference and multiplicity as expressions of the possibilities of wholeness where the uni-versal allows in the multi-versality of the kaleidoscopic dance of consciousness in both form and function (Nehls & Bussey 2012 Forthcoming).

When thinking about a poetics of possibility we can see that multidimensional thinking is a central element of this human becoming whole. This multidimensionality must take into account the physical world, the social and institutional world, the cultural world and the subjective inner world of each individual. Thus a poetics of possibility invokes a *politics of possibility* in which relationship is measured and promoted through a distributive justice that leaves no being outside of the community. Seen in this light trees and animals, in fact the entire biosphere of the planet, is part of this greater belonging (Bussey 2010a, 2011). We are all working towards this work as ‘earth worms’ churning and enriching our collective civilisational soil<sup>3</sup>. Advocacy for inclusion in our co-creative cosmos seeks to maximize the possibilities of each being while retaining a balance between inner and outer, one being and another, one voice and another. This balancing is dynamic and an expression of *prama* (Sanskrit for balance) in action. It is clearly expressed in the principles of Prout<sup>4</sup> as articulated by P R Sarkar in the 1950s (1992).

## Spirituality as a form of critical inquiry

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<sup>2</sup> See Ananta Kumar Giri’s (2012 - forthcoming) beautiful poster “Rethinking Integration” for the Sociological Bulletin which is the journal of Indian Sociological Society

<sup>3</sup> This analogy is taken with gratitude from Giri’s paper “Rethinking Integration”

<sup>4</sup> Sarkar spelt out five Fundamental Principles of Prout they are:

- (1) No individual should be allowed to accumulate any physical wealth without the clear permission or approval of the collective body.
- (2) There should be maximum utilization and rational distribution of all mundane, supramundane and spiritual potentialities of the universe.
- (3) There should be maximum utilization of the physical, metaphysical and spiritual potentialities of the unit and collective bodies of the human society.
- (4) There should be a proper adjustment amongst these physical, metaphysical, mundane, supramundane and spiritual utilisations.
- (5) The method of utilization should vary in accordance with the changes in time, space and person, and the utilization should be of a progressive nature.

The main focus of these principles, and of all thinking that starts with spiritual and meditative activity in this world, is distributive justice. Thus spirituality demands a critical inquiry into the workings of this world. This calls forth a spiritual critique into realms often quarantined from the spiritual such as economics and politics. From a spiritual perspective the separation between sacred and secular collapses under the weight of injustice and human and planetary suffering. This critical spirituality is a corner stone for any engagement with sustainable futures as it forces all to look beyond dominant categories as we co-nurture a future worth having (Bussey 2000, 2006).

It is interesting that Sarkar balances the mundane, the psychic (supramandane) and the spiritual in his five principles of Prout. He sees them as mutually reinforcing co-creative domains of Being. Now Deleuze and Guattari (1994), coming from the tradition of Western philosophy, talk about planes of consistency in which meaning evolves and is expressed. These planes function in a similar way to the three domains described by Sarkar yet are endless in their variety and ordering. For Deleuze the world is folded in on itself as subjectivity constantly recreates/reinforces its meaning making (1993). For him a belief is simply an idea we keep repeating to ourselves. This repetition is a form of *japa*<sup>5</sup> in which the mantra of our being is reified through repetition and our consciousnesses evolve according to the dictates of the mantra on which we focus. Thus repeating that 'the world is corrupt' creates this reality for us. Of course the reverse – 'the world is an expression of divine consciousness' – generates other possibilities (Hicks, 2006; Tolle, 2005). It is in the possibilities of reframing that we can rethink the issue of climate justice and sustainable futures.

### **Critical Spirituality**

The question of climate justice is an example of our current economic system's failure to generate optimal futures for all. Critical spirituality offers a set of resources for rethinking and working on such failures in order to generate conditions in which the vulnerable will not bear the brunt of the modern world's addiction to a compromised energy system. Immanent to the present are a set of resources grounded in civilisational categories denied or diminished by dominant modernist culture. Hegemony or no, the civilisational currents beneath the veneer of modernity are in constant dialogue. A myriad civilisational conversations are in progress and all those seeking sustainable futures are part of this ferment. The anticipatory is built into these conversations which all have a futures dimension. There is something qualitatively new emerging that is growing out of the creative milieu in which traditions are meeting and cross fertilizing generating hybrid forms. Such processes point towards what Derrida (2005) called the 'enlightenment to come' where reason and the rules and categories that define current 'logics' are over turned. This is a time when it is important to believe in impossible things<sup>6</sup>. In this context we can begin thinking about a poetics of possibility as a critically spiritual poetics in which we pay attention, careful and loving attention, to the world of form as well as to the world

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<sup>5</sup> This is a Sanskrit work meaning 'repetition' and is usually linked to the repeated use of a mantra to elevate the mind. Deleuze uses the metaphor of stuttering to capture this sense of the power of repetition - (Albrecht-Crane, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> A colleague of mine, Tom Abeles, pointed out to me this wonderful quote from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* which is the inspiration for this remark:

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one *can't* believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

(*Through the Looking Glass*, [Chapter 5](#))

if ideas, categories and languages while bringing in both ancient and emergent spiritual categories.

Critical spirituality begins by inviting us to explore the world through the quality of relationship. It offers an assessment of our relationality by firstly expanding the sense of our human identity. In an anthropocentric universe 'man' stood at the top of a vertical arrangement of relationships in which relating was transactional and utilitarian. A new (neo) humanity is on the horizon as we explore horizontal relationality in which it is dialogic process rather than domination that defines our interconnection. Such a critical spirituality invites us to enter into what Giri (2012 forthcoming) calls processes of 'meditative co-realisation'. This offers us a critical poetics based on a neohumanist vision of possibility beyond limits yet embedded in local realities in which the work of co-realisation is always at the heart of human activity (Bussey 2006)<sup>7</sup>. In this the body receives and experiences, the mind analyses and synthesises, the spirit reflects and critiques. This requires that we ourselves become laboratories of reflection in which body, heart, mind and spirit bear witness to Being. This reflective process is then amplified relationally through encounter and the co-realisation these foster. This reflective milieu forms the basis for a new form of empiricism in which understanding is reached by observing the *effects* of the object of study. Studying effects may take the form of empirical science but it might just as easily call forth a meditative empiricism. Such relational work also effects how we understand reason. Now we can assess the rational relationally as an extension of benevolence. Again this can be assessed by its effects in the world. Thus we are exploring an emergent realm of consciousness in which a neohumanity is premised on a neo-empiricism and a neo-rationality.

There is no road map to help us in this process. We are on a journey of co-realisation together. And this journey involves the entire planetary community not just the human cohort. Yet the wisdom traditions offer a rich basis for considering the way forward as we strive for sustainable futures. It is in the encounters between these traditions and their secular variants, such as Western philosophy and science, that the ingredients of a poetics of possibility lie. What is important is that the ethical compass be set based on relationality, conviviality and benevolence. In a world torn by dichotomies we now strive to find a bridge between dual principles in order to heal the world from the heart. A critical spirituality offers one such bridge as it integrates the physical world with a spiritual appreciation for relatedness. It is this appreciation that a poetics of possibility as it is open ended, multidimensional and committed to maximizing the possibilities inherent to context.

To activate context we need to engage a politics of possibility as a critical tool that explores the nature of relationship, identifying both possibilities and obstacles for co-realisation. This is where critical spirituality expands our sense of agency as it liberates our limited identities from the ego-consciousness that excludes us from the potentiality of co-realisation. Spiritual critique will call us individually and as a culture to account relationally for our values, beliefs, and aspirations as well as for actions and the technologies that enable our civilisational project. Thus climate justice becomes linked to a relational logic which critiques not just the expression of the injustice but also the root. This critique is pragmatic in nature as it focuses on the process – the space between cause and effect where we humans 'work things out'. This is the place between

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I recently ran an in service for teachers at the Ananda Marga River School where they were invited to meditate and explore the nature of neohumanist possibility. The workshop brief can be found at the following link:  
<http://www.futuresevocative.com/education.html>

the microcosmic and the macrocosmic bookends of Being where our identity is both expanded and diminished by our knowledge/awareness of our relational individuality embedded within the layers of consciousness and action. The result is an urge, born of a sense of co-vulnerability, to serve others<sup>8</sup>. This awareness spawns both the ecstasy of connection that defines the *bhakti* (devotee), the righteous ire that fires the *ksatriya* (warrior), the expanded consciousness that motivates the *vipra*(intellectual), the entrepreneurial wizardry of the *vaeshyan* (business mind) and the drive to shape the world with their hands that typifies the *shudra* (worker).

Thus a poetics of possibility draws on a critically spiritual sensibility. Such an awareness acts as an ethical imperative to serve<sup>9</sup> as we find in the Other our own pain and vulnerability. This imperative is fostering conversations across borders to establish the basis for new categories for acting, thinking and being. Critical spiritual consciousness is part of this process as it invites us to explore our own emergent neohumanity as an opening up to possibility that nurtures our co-realisation. From a practical point of view there are three distinctive features within this process.

- Meditative empiricism is part of research. Here meditation and a meditative approach to life form the basis for knowledge and identity creation (these are intimately linked)
- Re-mystification of experience allows for new categories, such as the neologisms we have explored in this paper and which are the hallmark of much speculative and intuitive research on planetary futures
- Critical spirituality realigns scientific method with an ethic of benevolence, offering a neo-ethical relational rationality

### **Towards Mapping a Poetics of Possibility**

Derrida (2005) towards the end of his life wrote about the enlightenment to come. In feeling his way towards this other space he took recourse to the ‘unconditionality of the incalculable’ (p. 148) as a way to short circuit the illusion of stability that hegemony fosters. All epistemic realities are rooted in this sense of ‘reality’ yet all are only ever partial representations of a whole beyond representation. In his thinking, the enlightenment to come and the unconditionality it presupposes offers a pedagogy. All attempts to reach any goal (didactic, pedagogical, moral or utopian) will be limited by the constraints language and perception impose on consciousness. Yet it is only in language and the sense of agency it vivifies that we will ever find a way beyond present categories and the actions they underwrite. The quest for a poetics of possibility is necessarily a critical engagement with this linguistic consciousness-work as it offers the possibilities of categories beyond the present default laden lexicon.

In **Table 1** below I attempt to place some elements that might concretise this poetics. This is a speculative task that draws out the *logic of relational becoming* that I have been exploring in this paper. Critical spirituality is grounded in action premised on relationality. Its goal is to liberate unit consciousness from the often unjust and compromised constraints that limit human potential. It understands and seeks to mobilize an integrated consciousness that draws in body-mind-spirit

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Here I am reminded of Judith Butler’s (2004) beautiful plea for social process based on co-vulnerability “Precarious Life”

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Here I find the principles of *yama* and *niyama* (<http://www.discoveryyoga.com/Yama.htm>) are wonderful touch stones for integral thinking on how to serve beyond attachment while fostering critical spiritual consciousness

as a basis for authentic being. It offers meditation as a platform to engage in this integrative work. It is passionate about relationship and justice thus it works to develop skills (*techne*) that can proactively engage the world. Again this work is integrative and nurturing. It offers a pragmatic process that is open ended and non-definitional (unconditional) while recognising that real world problems require real world solutions that need to be reframed via a critical spirituality that problematises categories while empowering the down trodden, marginalized and silenced.

This critical work moves across scales integrating local with global action through a layered consciousness which perceives/intuits connection and relational dynamics. This in turn recognises the eternal dance of consciousness in which we are forever becoming whole without ever realizing the goal (moksha and mukti will forever tantalise us). The yearning that propels consciousness forward also animates our sense of relational being. This forms the basis – the logic and energy – for a neohumanist engagement with the world and its struggles. This is ever so human, yet always striving for the beyond. This implies rich anticipatory futures thinking and the critical spiritual orientation that gives it ‘teeth’ in a world so easily psychologised and relativised. Finally, beyond all action lies the sublime state of eternal Cosmic Consciousness that is the source of our yearning. This state invokes a rich immanent-emptiness always ready, pregnant and over flowing yet empty!

Poetics of Possibility		
Poetic	Process	Expression
Relational	Co-creative becoming	Yearning
Libratory Praxis	Combine Theory and Practice	Subjective approach with Objective adjustment
Embodied	Consciousness working in body, mind and spirit	Shamanic futures consciousness (M. Bussey, 2009)
Meditative	Meditative co-realisation fosters relationality	Sadhana of Relational-Becoming
Passionate	Head, heart and body	Thinking is feeling
Craft ( <i>techne</i> )	Develop tools (social, ethical, intellectual, conceptual, spiritual) to engage the world	Can be cultivated and taught
Pragmatic	Reality is co-created	Focused on practical issues
Local-Global	Consciousness is a continuum of relational awareness	Act Local think Global; Systems theory as relational praxis
Becoming	Align relational consciousness with actions; no final goal/terminus; open ended, eternal	Working across borders; co-creativity; dialogue
Neohumanism	Relational being and anticipatory futures thinking	Critical spirituality that engages with context to maximize human and non-human potential
Emptiness	Stillness; presence	Pause – ne expression as paradox of Being

**Table 1: A Poetics of Possibility**

### Conclusion

This paper opened with reference to anticipation and the yearning this evokes. At the heart of this yearning lies a new aesthetic which I have been thinking about as a poetics of possibility. The analytic and logic at the root of this approach is Neohumanist in nature and grounded in a critical spiritual relational rationality that challenges current categories and posits an

enlightenment to come based on the unconditionality that Derrida was wrestling with in the years before his death. This process of exploration is decidedly dialogical, even conversational, in nature. It works across civilisational categories in order to find emergent possibilities. In Table 1 above I summarise the 'conversation' so far. At the heart of it all lies a sense that sustainable futures and the question of climate justice hinge on an emergent relational consciousness which anticipates a critical spirituality grounded in a poetics of possibility. Such a poetics invites transformations in how our civilisation negotiates the physical, social, cultural and subjective domains which frame identity and action.

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