

## TOM ATLEE

### Interviewed by Michael Dowd in the series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*

Michael: So Tom Atlee, it is a delight to have you in on this conversation series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*. Thanks for being willing to have this call.

Tom: Hi Michael. Glad to be here.

Michael: So, I just want to say this for my listeners and viewers, that Tom and I have known each other for about 15 years now, and I have valued his work in the field of collective intelligence. I think we first actually encountered each other on the whole issue of Y2K in 1998-99, and that sort of thing. And Tom has been just a dear personal friend for the last decade. And I've looked forward to this conversation, because I find Tom to be one of the most insightful thinkers and hearts on topics related to wise democracy, related to collective intelligence, related to how do we facilitate gaining wisdom and then acting on that wisdom in culture. And, so, Tom, I'd like to invite you here at the start, because some of our viewers and listeners may not be familiar with your work, so if you could just sort of start by sharing what your field of expertise is—what are you particularly passionate about and have been engaged in for some time—and we'll just start from there.

Tom: I just realize I can do that by talking about the first time that we met, that I recall, which was out at Lost Valley(?) in Dexter, Oregon, where we were both speakers at a Y2K conference. And we were concerned, on the one hand, that Y2K was going to be a big disruptive factor, and that communities needed to prepare for it because it was going to be, things were going to hit the fan pretty intensely—and, on the other hand, that that disruption created an opportunity for tremendous shift in the business-as-usual rut that our civilization is in, things would get turned upside down and people would be looking for other answers. And we were both speakers at this two-day conference, and after the first day, we were sort the people who, the organizers and the speakers had sort of gathered in this auditorium, and you said to us, “I just have something I just want to check out with you guys, see what you thought, if you'd indulge me for a little bit,” and got up on the stage and you told a holy-roller version of the history of the universe in about an hour, and my jaws just dropped open. I couldn't believe what I'd just seen—I'd never seen anything quite like it. And the next day I had planned this talk, which was entitled, “Y2K is a Door that Looks Like a Wall.” And I started out saying, “We are nature's creativity on speed. And that unless we create ways to monitor our creativity, we will create the means to destroy ourselves.” And that generalization about Y2K has

held, even though Y2K didn't do that, we have so many ways—we, have all these *overwhelming* global problems that we face are overwhelmingly designed by us. They wouldn't exist if we weren't here, you know, nuclear stuff, climate change, you know, technology gone rampant. There's a few things—comets and, you know, super volcanoes—could do us in also, but they're nothing compared to the ones that we have created for ourselves. I mean there's talk of us turning years into a black hole, and destroying the fabric of the Universe with the Hadron Collider experiment. It's like we are extending our powers into realms that we're not evolved to comprehend. And we actually—even though all of our little experiments and formulas tell us we know what we're doing—we actually don't. And, so my inquiry, I sort of started out, growing up, as a peace activist, sort of left-wing peace activist. I had a watershed experience on the cross-country Great Peace March, with hundreds of people, four or five hundred people, walking across the country together. And, because its top-down organization fell apart two weeks into the march, in the middle of the Mohave Desert, walking across the country, we were left to our own devices. We started out with 1200 people and, you know, two thirds of us went home, and the other third had no organized way to organize ourselves. Nobody was in charge. Everybody's, you know, soap boxes all over the place, people standing up saying, “This is what we need to do, gather around me.” And nobody listening to anybody. It was just a total mess. And we holed up for about two weeks in a (*inaudible*) camp in Barstow, and we argued and talked and fought and organized, and whatever, and then started marching across the country with, again, nobody in charge. And that was my introduction to the power of emergent, self-organized behaviour and collective intelligence. We came very close to falling apart a number of times—major, major disagreements. And we had learned from a Native guy on the march, circle process—talking circles, listening circles, sacred circles, whatever you want to call it—passing a talking stick. And we used that over and over again to create breakthrough insights that resolved the things we were struggling with: should we march all together down the road so we make a good solid image for the media, or should we get strung out and talk to whoever we want and enjoy nature, and, “who are you to tell me what to do?” and “if you don't do it my way I'm out of here!” It got really horrible. And this one particular incident that I wrote in the introduction to my first book, *The Tao of Democracy*, uh, we were stuck all together in this fertilizer factory, we were camped out on a fertilizer factory lawn—where do you put 400 people each night? You know, we'd end up in these bizarre places. And this big storm happened, and we all went inside the fertilizer factory, and sort of crowded in there, several hundred people, and the smelly chemicals, and rain pounding on the sheet metal roof. And somebody brought a portable p.a. system in and said, “Hey, we have this problem, why don't we do it sort of like a talking circle, and each person who wants to talk for a couple of minutes into the microphone, and, you know, we don't have anything else to do. So we did that. And as it proceeded, things that I thought should be said in response to something somebody else said, somebody *said* it. It

was like the group called forth the things that needed to be talked about. People were very passionate, on both sides, all sides, and all this information came out, and nobody particularly could escape, we were trapped by (*laughing*) the water fall outside! I don't know, it was about an hour, and then the rain let up, and everybody went out, and I realized that we knew what we were gonna to do. We had never made a decision, we didn't vote, nobody called for consensus, or checked for concerns or anything. It's just we had talked it fully out. And whatever force it is for rain to start and end (*laughing*)—whatever you want to call that—had arranged for us to talk it through sufficiently, and we walked together when we were in the country and strung out when we were in the city—err, together in the city and strung out in the country, called it “city mode,” “country mode.” And I ran to my tent and my little typewriter on the back of a milk crate, and stuck a bunch of carbons in and typed up four copies, “Did you see what happened to us just there—what we did?” I'd never seen anything like that before, it was like a collective mind thinking, “well this or that, and if you do this then it's gonna be this...” and ultimately going, “oh, ok, I guess I'll do that,” you know, the collective me, the royal we as the collective (*laughing*). The collective me instead of the royal we.

Michael: I like it!

Tom: And I had never experienced collective intelligence. I stuck my little write-up inside the porta-potty doors, 'cause that was the only place everybody went every day was to the porta-potties (*laughing*).

Michael: That was wise.

Tom: It's where you stuck your notices. That's right—good use of carbon paper (*laughing*)! And that incident, in particular, was a watershed one, but there were lots of others, too. How does this group of people, who didn't know each other before they came on the march, and very independent spirits, and suddenly they share this incredible purpose of walking across the country for nuclear disarmament, and they, uh.... We made it to D.C. with 1200 people, which was what we started with. And, I just was different after that. I wanted to figure out how progressive groups—peace groups, justice groups, environmental groups, whatever—could operate with that kind of magic, that kind of collective intelligence. And so I began researching different methodologies for doing that, different group processes and ways to do things, and organizational methods and stuff, and I was quite surprised at where that took me was to corporate consultants—corporations are the enemy for me, you know, as a left-wing person. And the most interesting work in this, although good work was being done in community groups and activist groups, the *really* interesting work was being done in corporations 'cause they, in a competitive global environment, they need to figure out how to cooperate, so they had all these different methods to cooperate and

think together, which I was learning and dragging over to try and get the progressive activists to use these methods. And they were very resistant.

Michael: Of course.

Tom: And then I began to think about it. You know, if you can do this in a, for a group, for an organization, you should be able to do it for a community. And why am I so biased trying to help progressive groups when communities could be doing this? Progressive, conservative—people who don't identify in any way in particular, whatsoever—ah, you've got an issue and there are disagreements about it, and everybody's got their ideas and their opinions and their information or whatever, so put 'em all together in various ways. So, I began to shift my thinking to how communities could do it. And very shortly after that I went, why couldn't you do that with a whole democracy? It just feels like our democracy is this battleground, and what I'd seen on the march was transforming the battleground into a collective thinking enterprise. Uh, and I began to find people who are using the language of collective intelligence, like Peter Senge talking about "Learning Organizations," not an organization to help people learn, it's an organization that, as a living entity, learns. And people go through it, you know, you have different people at different times, but it's still an entity, just like we have molecules moving through us all the time but we still have our entity-ness as an emergent organic form. So organizations and communities and societies are just more complex, more massive organic forms, kind of. So, and then I realized other things like, there's a guy named Howard Gardner, who created a theory of multiple intelligences—and I went, okay, there's something funny here, there's something...*(inaudible)*. I'm looking at intelligence, how to be smart, how to have our mental model somehow reflect what's actually out there—it's sort of what I called intelligence was...*(inaudible)*. It's like, how successful can you be? But you're successful because the way you're thinking matches what's there. So, when you do something in the world it has more success, than if you have faulty mental models—if you think something's there that isn't, or something isn't there that is, you know. When you get your ideas straightened out you can behave much more coherently, and, as you've talked about, be in alignment with reality. So here was another, ok, so you have multiple intelligences. And lots of people talk about head and heart, you know, getting head and heart together. And I'd long sort of intuitively felt, yeah, head's pretty necessary. But you also need heart, and intuition, and god. And a guy named Edward de Bono said here's six thinking hats that organizations need to have, all sorts of different ways to think. Okay. Learning styles. These are different ways, different cognitive ways of dealing with the world, of noticing what's going on in the world and relating to it. And, oh, that's another—okay, part of collective intelligence is using that diversity of cognitive styles in a group well. And as a, I was raised as a Quaker in my teens. And the Quakers have this interesting spiritualized form of consensus, where they wait upon the light, they sit there

waiting for God to tell them what to do, and in silence they're sitting, and when somebody feels moved to speak they'll stand up and say whatever it is came to them, on the assumption that spirit moved them, spirit informed them, and they say their thing and they sit down. And that's taken with a grain of salt, but it's accepted as, you know, this is the whole of the Universe, the spirit of the Universe is speaking through the people.

Michael: There's another way to interpret that which isn't quite as, uh, it doesn't trigger somebody who is sort of cautious at....

Tom: I didn't get the question.

Michael: I'm just trying to say that that Quaker... If, like I do, I personify reality, that God is—at the very least, whatever we mean by God—can be nothing less than reality personified, then the Quakers, in their waiting in silence, speak on behalf of what they feel reality is saying in that moment. And it's one of the reasons why, when somebody speaks, sort of, the spirit of the meeting—the word spirit doesn't have to be understood in a disembodied entity—it can be the sense of what the reality in this context is saying to them. I love that way.

Tom: Right.

Michael: So, yeah, my point, simply, was in terms of I find that very inspiring. The Quakers wait on the sense of the meeting, the sense of what is Reality saying to and through us here, and we give voice to that. And I think that's a profoundly important model.

Tom: Mmm-hmm. There's lots of different ways to describe it, but what the quality of experience of the people involved in that is of a waiting, a receptiveness. It's different from putting your own idea forward.

Michael: Exactly.

Tom: It's different from getting, thinking things through. There's a spiritual language—channeling, or whatever. There's an openness, and a sense that the whole—whatever, the whole group, the whole world, the whole whatever, the whole of reality—the whole is giving you a piece of what's needed. And consensus, in the Quaker tradition, is you get lots of different pieces from different people, and they add up, when if you can somehow work them around to being coherent you are then coming very close to what is appropriate for the whole of reality, or what God wants you to do, or what the Light is trying to communicate—whatever your language is.

Michael: Exactly.

Tom: So that felt like another, I began to realize that my inquiry, that collective intelligence was always part of my inquiry. It was like, what does intelligence look like when we take wholeness and interconnectedness and co-creativity seriously. It should theoretically be called “whole intelligence,” you know? So there are a number of dimensions of that, some of which I’ve talked about. Another one is like, aikido, you know, where the person’s attacking you and you move with their energy. It’s not you’re deciding what to do, you are being totally responsive, and getting an outcome that is good for them and good for you out of that responsive engagement. And permaculture, which is a form of organic agriculture which looks at the site—you know the land, and the light, and the water patterns, and all of that, and the animals and plants—and create a design of all that that generates yield of some kind for you, generates food or whatever. And that attitude is very much like aikido, it’s like let’s work with the system, don’t try to dominate or control it, take messages from it and have that tell you how you should be *(inaudible)*. It’s another form of, sort of, holistic—I began to call it co-intelligence, as my rule of *(thumb?)*, my guiding concept, with wholeness being underlying that, all the different ways *...(inaudible)*...And then how to apply all that to democratic theory and practice. So I began to focus on what democracy would look like, and, particularly certain models I stumbled into with, it was like a mixture of *...(inaudible)*. So there’s a model, an interesting democratic deliberative model, of picking a bunch of randomly selected people, like a jury—usually a dozen, but there’s some of them have been done to several hundred, also—and putting them through an informed, deliberative process. They read briefing materials, they have an issue that they’re wrestling with, they’re deliberating, and interviewing experts and partisans in the particular issue field, becoming lay experts, themselves. And then deliberating together, talking about the trade-offs, pros and cons, any bright ideas they have, and coming up with some form of recommendations. And there’s a number of practices around the world to do this, the most widespread is called citizen juries. But there’s consensus conferences, and planning *...(inaudible)*...and studying those and collecting them up, and *...(floating?)* them in various areas. And lately I’ve become very interested more broadly in the idea of random selection, which is interesting, given the function of alleged randomness in evolution. But we have incredible problems in our political culture, which is where the rules of the game are *...(inaudible)* in politics and governance. Where people are corrupting the system, where the information that is being put into the system is bad information, or good information, important information being suppressed, where people’s financial or PR power is manipulating the public consciousness and public behavior, or manipulating the actions of peoples who are making the decisions. It’s a very distorted system that no longer reflects the ideal of what the peoples’ will is. And, in researching my last book, I discovered this remarkable fact. In Athens, ancient Athens, which supposedly our model of an ideal democracy, *...(inaudible)*,

they didn't elect people to public office. They used random selection ... (*inaudible*). 90% of the government offices were filled by random selection—randomly selecting citizens to be in these offices and then you had to do a good job because there were serious consequences if you screwed up on your job, you would be basically tried by a group of your peers, who were randomly selected to figure out what should be done to figure out what should be done about your abuse of your position.

Michael: Oh, wow, that's brilliant.

Tom: But they had, Aristotle wrote this thing that the Athenians felt that elections favored the oligarchs, the elites, and that random selection favored the citizens. And in the process of somebody's life as a citizen—and the citizens, of course, were male members who had a history of being citizens of Athens, residents of Athens; if you were a woman or a slave you didn't have citizen's rights. But the idea of citizens and all citizens participating was something that was pioneered in Athens. And the citizens, of course, voted in the assembly—we knew about that, ah, most people who know anything about Athens democracy know that all the citizens could show up and vote on various proposals in the assembly. But most of the proposals that were presented at the assembly were created by this group called the *boule*, which was four or five hundred randomly selected citizens who served for a year as sort of legislators.

Michael: Wow.

Tom: They didn't pass proposals, but they created them. And, as we know, the people who create the choices that people vote on are the people who hold the real power.

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: So this was, and anybody that citizens usually held one or two official government posts, in the *boule*, or in some bureaucratic function, during their lifetimes—every citizen. This was government—really—government of, by, and for the people, in a way that is so far beyond ours. And the idea of having elected representatives is properly called a Republic. So we call it a Democratic Republic, and the democracy part of it sort of has to do with the rights of citizens more than the actual participation in governance. Our governance system is much more like a Republic. But I was quite fascinated to learn all this.

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: So I became interested in random selection itself. And so I've been studying that in the last year, reading some books and articles, and connecting up with people. I

just did a blog post on it. That's my current interest. What part of the theory is that (and this is done mostly, mostly academics are interested in this). Part of the theory is that the random selection creates what one theorist calls a "blind break"—it creates a period of time and a process during which human agency can't play a role. So there's no reason being applied but there's no non-reason being applied, there's no compassion being applied but there's no cruelty being applied. It's like, it's a break in all human agency. And if you have a functional system, where human agency is being used really well, it would be stupid to have random selection. But when you come in to what we're facing—which is an incredibly manipulated system at all levels—instituting a blind break in some way that afterwards, you fill the space afterwards, with healthy human agency, like in the citizen deliberative councils I was describing earlier—you have a randomly selected group of people where it's really hard to manipulate who gets chosen, and you have information that's being collected to brief them in a way that many people, on all sides of the issue, have a say in how that information is framed, so it has a kind of balanced thing, and then you have impartial facilitators who're facilitating it—you've created this blind break into which you're inserting quality information, quality thinking, you know, independent ability to say what's going on. And that pattern, particularly the insertion of good human agency after a period of no human agency, is something that would be very valuable for activists to understand.

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: And for it to be entered in to, uh, in to our political thinking. If we—what would happen if we replaced the House of Representatives in the United States, for example, with a randomly selected citizens' legislature, where people serve for three years, you know every three years there's another 150 people who are randomly selected from the society, and they served for three years, and then it's like one third is being replaced each time? Uh, that's one of the things that I postulated in my book. And there's a number of people who have written about that in very intriguing ways. Lots of visionaries are beginning to play with this idea, people who are looking at random selection. There's lots more material on this subject, it's a ...(*inaudible*) curve, in terms of publications, over the last 10 or 20 years, really, really interesting.

Michael: Well, one of the...

Tom: In the midst of all that, I want to make clear, particularly given this interview, that this idea of collective intelligence, and co-intelligence, and you know, random selection, accessing the wisdom of the whole—all those concepts—can be held within the narrative of conscious evolution. Evolution is the grandmama or grandpapa of all change processes, of all intelligence processes. Nature is obviously intelligent, (*inaudible*) lots of problem-solving that had gone on through

the process of evolution, largely through trial and error, but not totally through trial and error. And there's now scientists in the field of biomimicry that are actually consulting with nature for the wisdom nature has to solve engineering problems. So there is intelligence in nature, it's just, going back to my original thing: we are nature's creativity on speed, we are nature's intelligence on speed. Uh, you can't have wisdom on speed. And we need, we're missing wisdom, we're missing the ability to think in both the larger picture and the longer term, uh, and with humility, the recognition of our cognitive and the limits of our thinking and our ability to manipulate. We need to get more humble. We need to get bigger picture in our thinking. Right now sustainability is one of the concepts that sort of holds that need. I really love the idea of conscious evolution—not primarily evolution of consciousness in an Eastern, meditative sense—but the conscious evolution of our culture, the conscious evolution of our economic and political systems, for example, that we can learn a lot from the patterns that nature has used in its evolutionary processes. Uh, the one you've spoken of a lot is the idea that if you want to have a multiple, a compound, complex entity or organism, you need to set things up so that the self-interest of the parts that fit into this organism or this entity is served by relating to the larger whole. So when the entities are behaving in self-interested ways, the whole, the welfare and capacities of the whole are being served. And that that's, John Stewart has looked at that, as you know, and developed it over these different layers, you know, molecules, and organic organisms, and multi-cellular organisms, and societies. And we are trying to create a global organism that embraces humanity, uh, human beings and other organisms and natural systems, you know, nature, and our technology, somehow holding all of that in a coherent organism—at a global level—that can sustain itself, and that can, and the only way we're going to do that, given our powers, is to do it consciously. We have to try and make our efforts to come together and be more productive and survive better, into something that embodies that principle, of, you know, our self-interested behaviors need to be designed in, with the idea of internalizing the costs. Uh, the carbon tax is the most common talked-about example of that—the impacts of carbon emissions being included, the costs of those impacts being included in the price of carbon, so that carbon's high expense of carbon, or emissions of carbon, if you want to engage in that, you have to pay a lot more than thank when you are not spewing out carbon dioxide, methane.... So that, if you can design a system so that it internalizes all the costs, then the free market is a very powerful self-organizing tool for self-organizing the transformation, and healing, and improvement, and health of the world.

Michael: Yeah, ...*(inaudible)*....

Tom: If you don't have that principle, the free market destroys the environment that we're living in. So, a lot of it is just conscious design—using understandings of evolution, including, interestingly enough, the random selection and collective

intelligence they are discovering is present in many layers of living reality. So, I've, that's one of (*inaudible*) my books, is looking, trying to translate the kind of work that you and Connie do into activist consciousness, activist motivation, activist guidance. What would it be like to have a social change movement which recognized that *it*—this movement—was a major aspect of evolution becoming conscious of itself? It's not that this is separate from evolution, this *is* what evolution is doing right now:

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: ...the efforts people are doing to transform the social systems and social realities that we live in. And to have a movement that was conscious of that as a spiritually significant, empowering reality would be like Ghandi who was pursuing truth in a way that transformed the world, and King who was pursuing love in a way that transformed the world. This, theoretically, you could have a movement, that if it really saw that and took that seriously, it would have immense power—you know, 13.7 billion years of experience and energy is not something to shake a stick at! (*laughing*)

Michael: Exactly.

Tom: So, that's the overall view of the kinds of things that I work on, and it's horribly big, but it's absolutely fascinating to work with.

Michael: You've touched on a number of things that I want to just briefly comment on, and then, perhaps have you go further into depth around. One of them is, you mentioned John Stewart—not the comedian John Stewart, but the Australian John Stewart, who wrote a book called, "Evolution's Arrow: The Direction of Evolution and the Future of Humanity," and he also wrote a manifesto called "The Evolutionary Manifesto." And this need to, that we've seen throughout evolutionary history at different scale, and now, in the human realm, the way I often think about it is that there may be no more important systemic shift that we need to make than to increasingly create structures, systems of governance where, not only are the self-interest of the parts aligned with the well-being of the whole—that's a little abstract—said more colloquially, that, if a part—that is, an individual or corporation or nation-state—has a positive impact on the entire body of life, systems of governance where the well-being of the part is also aligned with or together with the well-being of the whole. So, if an individual or a corporation or a nation-state has some positive impact on the larger body of life, they benefit. And the more good they do, the more they benefit. So, they're incentivized to do as much good as possible. And where an individual or a corporation or a nation-state has some negative impact on the whole, that there's negative repercussions for the part—so they're taxed or they're penalized or, you know, there're moral

structures, so it really is in their self-interest to do the right, just ecological thing, and to not do the unjust, un-ecological thing. I mean that really does internalize the costs, as you were talking about a few minutes ago. And I think that begins to create a structure where, we start...I mean, one of the things I've so appreciated about your work over the years is that it's really about how do we facilitate...? If groups of people are multi-cellular organisms, and then groups of groups are larger multi-cellular organisms, how do we access and then act on the collective intelligence of those multi-cellular organisms? Because, as we all know and feel in our guts and see on TV, right now we've got a system that almost seems to be exploiting the collective stupidity of groups.

Tom: Which there is. I mean, the collective stupidity, or what I call co-stupidity, has been recognized by other terms for quite a while. Unfortunately "group think" was one of the terms used for it. But I will sometimes go, when I do a talk on, generally, co-intelligence, I will ask people, ask a crowd, you know, "how many people here have ever heard of co-intelligence, or know what co-intelligence is?" And they will stare at me blankly. So I say, ok, "so how many people have ever seen co-stupidity?" And everybody raises their hand fast.

Michael: *(laughing in the background)*

Tom: And I go, "Isn't it interesting that you've never heard either one of these terms before, but you recognize co-stupidity and you don't recognize go-intelligence?"

Michael: Oh, that's interesting.

Tom: It's just fascinating.

Michael: Well, I think it's one of the things that's also contributing to what Brian Swimme, a professor of Cosmology out in California, talks about that we have macro-phase powers—that is humanity is now operating on the body of life, on the geosphere, the hydrosphere, the liposphere, we're operating on the planet and within the planet at a macro-phase, that is a large-scale way—but we're operating with micro-phase wisdom—that is we don't have the humility and the intelligence of, and the wisdom of, how to do what we're doing in a way that allows the larger body of life, upon which we depend—utterly, of which we are a part, utterly—to thrive. And the idea that you can have thriving humans in a sick and dying world is collective insanity.

Tom: You know, I find the concept of wholeness very useful, from the analytic school here, and I think it has implications for how science is practiced. Uh, and there's a mixture of understanding wholeness and understanding the fact that our cognitive capacities evolved, and I think our cognitive capacities—not only the ability to

know but the ability to respond and act appropriately—evolved at the scale of our bodies.

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: That's what's commonly come known as human scale, you know. It's like the 10-to-the-zero, 10-to-the-one, 10-to-the-two, and 10-to-the-minus-one, 10-to-the-minues-two, in terms of measurements, and we are now operating at planetary, intergalactic—err, not intergalactic yet, but interplanetary—and nanotech, uh micro-cosmic and nanotech levels, uh, and we don't, we don't, we don't have ways of...and it's also over time. You know, we're creating impact, like in climate, where the impact is delayed over tens or hundreds of years, and we aren't built to see that.

Michal: Yes.

Tom: So, scientists may, with their special tools, be able to see, and certain technology just be able to impact, but collectively we can impact but we can't monitor that impact very well. Climate change is such a brilliant example of that. And part of the limitations of science and scientific thinking is, oddly enough, the controlled experiment, which is the *sine qua non*, in terms of actually understanding causes and effect, 'cause the controlled experiment is: you are removing—ideally—you are removing every other possible influence but the one that you're studying, so that you can really see what's going on there, did A cause B? And you get real knowledge from that about how A impacts B, and then you take it out into the world, and the world is not a laboratory, the world is filled with other impacts. And you take that knowledge and you apply it in a context where there's multiple causes and multiple effects going on all the time, and you act as if you actually know what you are doing, but you are taking a piece of the whole—the little knowledge you got—and you are bringing it in to the real whole, and then you have the arrogance to call the other things that happen side effects. (*laughing*) It's mind-boggling. Our language is so useful for making us not attend to what's actually going on.

Michael: Exactly, exactly. Well, let's lean into this. I think this is an important topic. Let's lean into this a little bit more. Because, what can you share about how a systemic view of reality—uh, understanding things in terms of wholeness, in terms of complex systems—how can that help us avoid the stupidest of problems from sort of an overly narrow understanding of the way science works, or controlled experiments—and what's being done in this field? What's being done, in terms of helping us to have a broader understanding of the scientific endeavor? I sometimes, the shorthand I sometimes use for what the global scientific endeavor is really about, is trying to find tools that help us consistently access global

collective intelligence, that is, you've got Christian scientists, Buddhist scientists, Hindu scientists, Atheist scientists, scientists from all over the world, with different backgrounds, different philosophies, different metaphysics, but they're all contributing to one common understanding of what's real and what's important. And so a too narrow or too short-term an understanding isn't going to facilitate that. So is there anything you can say about, sort of, whole systems and systemic thinking?

Tom: Yeah, I think one of the interesting trends in science, we used to have a sort of holistic view of the Universe that was built on nature, understandings of nature in a place, you know, kind of Indigenous science, what you need to know to survive well in a place. And we've built up these civilizations that created these giant narratives, philosophies, and, especially, religions that said this is the way the world is. And that worked within those limited times and spaces. And then you have the Enlightenment, the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment, and the idea that things, people and things are all separate and that they interact, and that we can understand and use those interactions, and that created the, you know, electoral democracy and physics, you know Newtonian physics, and all that. And that had tremendous power, at our scale—unprecedented power, technological power—that gave us. But, in the last 100-150 years, there have been new scientific fields that are more holistic and understand interconnectedness and the way different elements are participating in creating the world that we live in. So we have quantum mechanics—relativity and quantum mechanics—which have embedded a certain relativism and probability into our understanding of the world. And then there's ecology, which shows there, in any part of this system that you are trying to understand, you can only understand in the context of all the other parts and their inter-relationships, and the whole, like a forest as a whole protects trees that are in it from the wind and the rain. So, it's like there are dimensions of wholeness, even, that are part of it, not just the parts in the interconnectedness. So, ecology is giving us more of that sensibility. And then you get into chaos and complexity theory, and fascinatingly—and I've been wondering about this lately—fascinatingly, again, probability shows up.

Michael: Mmm-hmm.

Tom: It's like, we can't say, the quantum people are saying we can't say that we can tell the momentum and the location of an electron at the same, at any given time, we can't tell both of those at the same time. So there's a way in which an electron is a field of probability. And then in complexity theory they're saying you have a bunch of, what do you call it, the rabbit-fox, who are, the populations rise and fall—you know there's more foxes there's fewer rabbits, you know, when there's fewer rabbits there's fewer foxes, when there's fewer foxes there's more rabbits. You know, it's like, there's no way to predict exactly what's going to happen to the

fox and rabbit population, but you can chart all that, you know, computers can chart all that, and it ends up like a donut sort of model that's called an attractor, you know, that any given moment the probability of the relationship between the number of rabbits and the number of foxes is, the probability is that it's going to be somewhere in the dark part of that little donut-shaped map. And that's called the attractor. You know, it's like it tends to attract things happening more in the denser part of that chart. But that's not a real-world phenomenon in our sense, you need computers and special trackers, data trackers, to pull that information together. But it's still probability. You hear that in weather, you know it's 50% chance of rain. It's like we're in a different—back when I was a kid it was either going to rain or it wasn't (*laughing*), you know?

Michael: Yeah, one of the things that I, one of the books that I read, actually 15 years ago now, that still is one of the more influential books I've ever read—in fact there was a time I used to buy up all of the used copies on Amazon so I could give them away to people—Joel De Rosnay's book, "The Symbiotic Man," and it was translated from French to English—it should have been, "The Symbiotic Human." What he meant was that humans, living in a symbiotic, mutually-enhancing relationship with our technology and with nature, and that it's almost like we're creating a new life form, at the scale of the planet, from the inside. And one of the things that I really appreciated about Joel De Rosnay's work, and that book in particular, where he talked about the microscope gave us access to the infinitely small and intimate part of us; ah, the telescope gave us access to the infinitely complex or the infinitely far away, and distant in time as well; and the computer is giving us access to the infinitely complex. And so this whole notion of computers, computer technology helping us to pay attention at scales and at sizes and at speeds that our primate hominid brains don't naturally track on, that we need their assistance in this. Anyhow that kind of cycles back to what you were talking about before. I remember, you and I had a conversation years ago about the book, what is it, "New World, Old Mind," or something like that?

Tom: "New World, New Mind."

Michael: "New World, New Mind." And that we were not evolutionarily programmed to pay attention to things that we now have to pay attention to if we are to survive and not cause unspeakable tragedy for countless other species, as well.

Tom: So, if collective intelligence is the ability of a collective to align to what's really there, and if collective wisdom is the ability to expand that to embrace more dimensions of what's there, over greater time spans of what's there, and consider the benefits and the harms to more entities over that time span, etcetera, ah, what are the governance—not necessarily governmental—but what are the governance, the things that shape our collective behaviors, what are the governance systems

that allow us to move beyond our limited, primate cognitive capacities and responsive capacities? We have technologies of, you know, scientific technologies, that allow us to move beyond those limits in our perceptions—for those people who have those tools—you know, in our perceptions and in our ability to impact, but at the larger level of a whole society, you know, does it take a dictatorship of the privileged, knowledgeable, unique that forces everybody to behave according to what's needed rather than to what their self-interested, limited impulses are? Evolution tells us that's probably not gonna work, ah, that we need to design the systems where the self-interested behaviors of the people involved generate the well-being of the whole. And, part of the understanding of collective intelligence is a big part of our power is in our diversity: the fact that people are different in how they think, in what they know, in their positions in the systems that we're dealing with, and how to design collectively wise systems to access that diversity, and, instead of having that diversity become a source of conflict and dissonance, have it become a source of greater capacity to comprehend to comprehend the complexity of the realities that we're dealing with. And science, as you're pointing out, is one approach to that, but my own position is that science deals with particular kinds of knowledge, and if it has its own, just like certain religious fundamentalist, there are certain scientific fundamentalists, who say that what we see is reality. And what I think the modern sciences are telling us is that none of us knows the reality, that we are, in fact, we need to have all of our different perceptions to begin to comprehend the reality that we're thinking of, and to have tremendous humility, and, it's like there's systems that are built for humility, like the, what's it called, the precautionary principle?

Michael: Exactly.

Tom: Which recognizes we're dealing with things that are too complex to just jump in on.

Michael: Yup.

Tom: Once we get a little bit of understanding, we really need to track it—you know, carefully, systematically—before we apply that understanding across the boards. You know? The EPA tests for toxics in our environment, but it tests for toxics of a hundred or 200 substances. There are tens of thousands of substances that have been created and are now flowing through our environment and through our bodies and through the ecosystems, and we have no idea what any one of those does, to say nothing of their interactions and synergies. It's like we are way, way, way beyond in our capacities. So that sense of holding back, restraint—what does collective restraint mean when you feel you are all powerful and all-knowing (*chuckle*)?

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: There's a funny cultural transformation that needs to happen that is aligned with this particular trend in science of understanding we're dealing with probability and tremendous ignorance. The idea of there being, what is it, 96% or whatever, of the Universe is dark matter and dark energy and we don't know what it is (*both laughing*) as a symbol of our ignorance, I just (*inaudible*).

Michael: Yeah, yeah. You know, well, one of the things that this brings me back to is what we talked about probably a half-hour ago. It's fairly easy for many of us to see that the enlightenment was, uh, sort of, the rejection of personification, unconscious personification, proved to be really valuable in many ways. But we're now up against the limits of not having an I-Thou, that is a personal, or an intimate, or a respectful, or honorable relationship with nature and with time, and with mystery. I see those as the three faces of reality, that nature is real, whether you believe it or not; and time is real whether you believe it or not; and mystery is real whether you believe it or not. What does it mean to have an I-thou relationship with reality? And I've come to start using language like, I think that we're in the early stages of what may someday—assuming we survive as a species—come to be known as The Great Reckoning, that is where we've been out of right relationship to reality—either because we've had mythic understandings of reality that we took literally, so we weren't even present to what nature was telling us, as if that was divine, which it is, but we weren't present to that, 'cause we thought God's word was back in the Bible or Qur'an or Bhagavad Gita, or where ever—and we were no longer listening to, “what does the wind tell us? what does the climate tell us? what do the trees tell us? what does the forest tell us?” Thomas Berry called it spiritual autism. And so I think we're beginning to experience The Great Reckoning. My hope, my vision, one of the visions that keeps me inspired, is that we're also, this is also going to be the Great Homecoming—that is, humanity as a species, a prodigal species, waking up to the fact that we've squandered our inheritance and we're now waking up to our predicament that we've rejected reality and it's time to come home—uh, come home to God, to reality, to nature, in an intimate, personal way. And I think this is something that all indigenous peoples, all tribal peoples, had, because they were forced to. If they didn't have an intimate I-Thou relationship with nature, they died, uh, they didn't last very long. And we now, it's almost like science has given us the knowledge of, you know, big history, and knowledge of so many other cultures, and rising empires and contracting empires, and all this kind of stuff. And now here we are, where climate change is pushing us up against some major time limits, where we have to access collective intelligence and have to take certain systemic action in the next five to ten years in order to avoid the worst catastrophes. And we also have to come back in to a respectful or honorable relationship with nature and with time. And these are big challenges!

Tom: It's interesting, your use of the word reckoning, I mean, when you say, "The Great Reckoning," I think of a definition of reckoning that has to do with consequences, you know facing consequences.

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: ...answerability kind of thing. Reckoning also has to do with orientation. You know, if you're navigating. And it's interesting that the consequences can orient us, if we pay attention to consequences they can orient us more to reality, because consequences are always messages from reality...

Michael: Beautiful.

Tom: ...about what we're doing.

Michael: Yup.

Tom: But your phrase, "right relationship with reality," uh, is a way in which that is, if it's taken generatively, is an infinitely powerful inquiry.

Michael: Mmmmm.

Tom: It's like, what does right mean? What does relationship mean? What does reality mean? There can be an assumption of what right and relationship and reality mean, and therefore right relationship to reality is something that we identify and say that's what it is. But I think we are, we are that if part of reality is mystery, you know, we need to have an inquiry, an active inquiry, where we are talking with each other, and we are embedding that inquiry in our educational systems, our scientific systems, our journalistic systems, our governance systems. It's like, what is a right relationship to reality? How do we ascertain that?

Michael: Yes.

Tom: ...that that's, these are powerful inquiries for our cultural evolution.

Michael: Well I agree. And you've actually been my teacher in this regard, because I have a more nuanced and, hopefully, more humble understanding of what it even means to be in right relationship—to yearn for—right relationship with reality, to collectively discern what that even means. And it's been conversations that I've had with you over the last, who knows, seven, eight years, around this meme that has softened my own take on that.

Tom: Well I'm very happy for that. *(Both chuckling.)* There's this guy I bumped into

today, he wrote in response to my post on random selection, oddly enough, but he's a psychologist who has been doing dream work with people for a long time—which is like finding meaning for your life in dreams. And one of his tools has been to take the dream, entities and objects in the dream, and to interview them. So the person who has the dream will look at a particular character or object or situation in the dream. And there's a sense in which they'll kind of personify it, they'll make it into something...

Michael: Of course.

Tom: ...they can talk to...

Michael: Yeah, of course.

Tom: ...and then they will ask it, "What is the meaning you carry? What are you trying to communicate?" Whatever.

Michael: That's brilliant.

Tom: ...and gather information on it. And then he made a leap. He says he's now done work with groups and organizations about situations that they're facing, and, he says that, for each person in the group that he's working with, take that situation: "What is the emotional flavor of it for you?" And really name that. Now, "what is the color of that, uh, and the color of that emotion?" And then immerse yourself in that color and let it condense into some object; it doesn't matter—some object, some person, something—and then interview that. And it may be a horse or it may be a toilet brush—these are examples that he gave. *(Both laughing.)* And he says he finds the answers, that these are almost like independent intelligences—what you'd expect the toilet brush to tell you is not what it tells you. And whether these things have independent existence, or whether they are voices for unconscious dimensions of the people who are there, but he says, what they come up with are things that you couldn't actually do and that they then work in the world. It's like, what is going on there? This is mystery as a source of information. What is the relationship between that and our more "objective" sources of information?

Michael: See, I think this is brilliant, because what it does is it adds a whole new window into what I've been talking about a lot lately, which is, I read a few years ago (I guess it was only about a year and a half ago) James Hillman's book on re-visioning psychology, which were his Yale Terry lectures, delivered in the 1970s I think, '76, '77, something like that—and he spent several chapters talking about the essence of myth, and personification as essential for entering myth. And the whole notion of myth is relationship: you relate to your inner world, your outer world. That is, you relate to those aspects of reality that are beyond your skin and those aspects of reality that are within—and even there it gets somewhat complicated

when you think about Gregory Bateson's *Mind and Nature*. (Let me bracket that for a moment.) And it sounds like what this guy, as you were talking about it, is really sort of re-mythologizing—that is, allowing different aspects of reality to be symbolized and then personified, which is the essence of religion and myth, is to personify some aspect of reality that's not human, more than human, other-than-human—and then find what's the wisdom there? It's not merely *we* are personifying. In some very real sense, reality itself is in a co-creative process with us in that. And this is one of the things I'm taking to religious people a lot these days, is to not only not be ashamed or embarrassed or shy about using mythic language, but to recognize that this conscious personification can be humungously useful in helping to navigate these challenging times that we're in, and to access wisdom that the rational, reasonable side of our brain doesn't access as clearly or as efficiently as this more intuitive, um, you know, the other half of our brain.

Tom: It's funny. It's sort of like updating myth.

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: It's what's wrong with a lot of the literature, the sacred scriptures and all the rest. Uh, it's not that they're myths, it's that they're old myths that were designed for a different situation. (*Laughs.*)

Michael: And they're not recognized as myth, so they're not recognized as personifications, you know.

Tom: Right. There's a funny way in which we need to recognize more of what we call as reality as myths. (*Laughing.*)

Michael: Yeah. No, I agree. Well, you know, Tom, I just want to sort of begin winding down. And there's one question in particular that I've heard you speak about before. I've spoke about it myself, and often give you credit for sort of sourcing this way of talking about it. But you add a new twist to the idea that, we sort of, many of us liberals and progressives sort of instinctually feel that compassion is always a good thing. And you've, uh, repeatedly cautioned against viewing compassion only in it's positive side, and the example I remember you using, the babies in the water. Could you just talk a little about that? How can compassion sometimes get us into trouble?

Tom: It's funny, because I just realized that compassion is one form of human engagement with reality, one form of human agency. And my comments about it actually apply to all forms of human agency. Compassion is great, as is any kind of progress, improvement, whatever, that we do to the extent that we understand the larger wholes we're dealing with, the larger systems we're dealing with, the larger

structure of our own motivations. Uh, it's like, to what extent are we seeing the whole and operating in that way?

Michael: Mmm-hmm.

Tom: And what I've talked about compassion, we need to, compassionate self needs to evolve to embrace holistic and systemic understandings. An obvious and painful truth, or example of that, is our last several hundred years, our historic use of medicine to keep people alive. That, without an understanding of the limits of population growth, the limits of resources and population growth, our efforts to keep people alive are ultimately destroying us. The antibiotics that were the miracle thing that allowed a lot of this population growth to happen, it's now, one of our most urgent emerging problems is that our antibiotics aren't working any more.

Michael: Right. We're close to a post-antibiotic age.

Tom: Yes. And the pre-antibiotic age kept populations very small, you know. That large populations were checked by these micro-organisms. And they are, those micro-organisms are part of the whole. And when we see them as enemies that must be killed, as our approach to maintaining ourselves, we are setting up a situation in the larger system where we're pushing limits in that larger system, and that larger system needs to weed us out somehow.

Michael: Yeah. Yeah.

Tom: And it will. You know? Through hunger or pestilence or war. All the horseman of the apocalypse are ways that the system has of trimming human populations. And part of being conscious evolutionaries is in our structure of the ways we try to relate to reality what are beneficial to us. They need to be, um, benign, beneficial, or helpful to the larger systems that we're in. If they aren't, reality will come back and check us.

Michael: Yup.

Tom: And I see our technologies as largely allowing us to step further and further out on these limbs, and that the limbs are going to break. And the level of crisis, catastrophe, suffering, that happens if we don't check our impulse to keep pushing those limits, is just mind boggling.

Michael: Yeah.

Tom: So, that, it feels like that's our current generation's need to redefine who we are in

the world that is more humbled, that sees us as parts and participants in these larger systems, rather than rulers of them and everything else is a resource for us, and all that.

Michael: Yup.

Tom: And if we don't, you know, we will either be trimmed radically or illuminated totally. So, for me, that's the nature of the challenge. And the fact that all these challenges are perfectly designed for our learning. *(Both chuckling.)* We created the assumptions that are built into our culture, generated them, and they are pointing our attention very directly and powerfully towards those basic assumptions. And we just have to be willing to take the lessons and become evolution, trimming our own and designing our own world with much more wisdom.

Michael: Yeah. Amen. Well Tom, I so appreciate this conversation. Could you say a little bit about your books? Because one of your books, *Reflections on Evolutionary Activism*, still helps keep Connie and I in gas and food money. Say a little about your books, and then how people can learn more about your work.

Tom: Uh, well, the sort of central crossroads for my work is the Co-Intelligence.org website. It has links for my books. It has links for my blogs. Most of my current work is reflected in the blog postings. So, being in my current blog is the best way. And I have the, uh, website and books are sort of collections of what I've learned at a particular stage. The 2003 *Tao of Democracy* was my place to put a lot of different processes, and political visions, group processes, organizational processes, and group visions that would add up to a more holistic form of democracy, in which the people say, "We did it ourselves," which is what the Tao says: if a leader leads well, the people say they did it themselves, which is why I call it the *Tao of Democracy*. Uh, the next book was the *Reflections on Evolutionary Activism*, which, again, covers a lot of the things I talked about here. I was very inspired by your and Connie's work. I had an epiphany about, you know, that spiritualized my evolutionary understandings, which I described at the beginning of that book. And then, what if we took seriously evolution as both an inspiration and a source of information about how we should be social change agents, uh, and played that out? Largely built out of correspondence I had with you and Connie, which I made into chapters in the book. *(Both chuckling.)* So, it wouldn't have happened without the connection with you. Ah, and then I was asked for a—those were both self-published—and then the final one, which is, *Empowering Public Wisdom*, I was asked to do by a small non-profit publisher. And that is a more specific vision of how we could create a new form of democracy, and what its underlying logic would be, and what its forms might look like, which was designed as guidance for a movement for people who are

interested in, you know, sort of wiping the slate clean and doing something radically different that would help us be collectively wise. *Public Wisdom* is the wisdom potential of ordinary people when they have access to information they need and the ability to interact together in creative ways. And how do you embed that into political forms? And I have books sort of bubbling in the background on how to do this with economics, and the whole issue of random selection—those are two, I'm gathering lots of data that could end up as books. But currently you'll have to check out the blog for those things.

Michael: That's great. And one of the things that I want to mention to anybody who's watching or listening to this: if this whole field that Tom has been talking about, in terms of wise democracy, collective intelligence, the wisdom of the whole, and things like that, if this is something that just allures your own heart and soul I would encourage you to be in contact with Tom, because I've been encouraging others to... I think all of us who are carrying a piece of the puzzle that may be important for future generations, especially if we're over 40 or 50 years old, we need to be thinking in terms of mentoring the next generations in where we, our expertise, our sort of field of study is. So, if you think you might want to learn more from and about Tom, and perhaps carry this torch long after he's gone, be in communication with Tom, because I really do believe that this is some of the most important work happening on the planet.

Tom: If anybody wants to be a protégé or intern, unpaid, let me know. (*Chuckling.*)

Michael: Yeah. Alright, well Tom, thank you so much. This has been wonderful, as always. And, I love you brother.

Tom: Fun talking with you Michael. Carry on. Hugs.

Michael: You too.