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*By the end of this century, we will live in a world that is sustainable, peaceful, and just, or we will live in a world that is unstable, violent, and insecure. We have the opportunity to make the choice, and thus we have the responsibility to do so wisely and well.*

*The 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be characterized by massive and rapid change – a time of great danger and great opportunity.*

*The institutions of higher education will be the crucible in which both individual and societal responses to this challenge are shaped.*

*At College of the Atlantic we are striving to understand the epic nature of this challenge and to meet the responsibilities it presents. We believe that human ecology is the key.*

WE FACE A TIME OF CHALLENGE AND CHOICE

When the history of the 21st century is written, it will be dominated by a single characteristic -- the exponential increase in the pace and magnitude of change. In the last years of the 20th century, a number of factors have interacted to create an environment of revolutionary change never before experienced by humans or natural systems.

- No major natural system of this planet remains untouched by human activity
- The human claim on primary productivity of this planet is greater than at any time in history.
- The momentum of human population growth and its implications is staggeringly difficult to comprehend.
- The potential for violence and the imperative for peace have never been greater.

And we have a limited window of opportunity.

As we choose our future, we face a time of the greatest moral choice in human history. There are four major dilemmas which are essentially moral choices:

- Alleviating poverty
- Removing the gap between rich and poor

- Controlling the use of violence for political ends
- Changing our patterns of production and consumption and, and achieving the transition to sustainability

The world in which future generations live will, in large measure, depend on how we respond to each of these challenges, and we are philosophically and institutionally unprepared for the decisions we must make and implement.

The societal institutions available to us to meet these challenges are demonstrably incapable of long-range planning, dominated by peculiar and special interests, fragmented in authority and responsibility, and designed to allocate abundance not scarcity. The achievement record of these institutions, measured both in terms of human well-being, and ecosystem well-being, is not encouraging. Currently dominant institutions are organized around principles and assumptions which are increasingly questionable. These include:

- The belief that human progress can be defined primarily in terms of acquisitive materialism, and that well-being and prosperity are to be achieved through western models of development.
- The belief that security appropriately rests not on equity and justice, but on coercive power.
- Reliance on the scientific method to generate truth as well as facts, on legal-rational systems to produce justice, and on elite dominated political processes to produce.

If we are to hope that business as usual will lead us to a sustainable world, we must believe that the same institutions and processes which have led us to this point in human history can lead us somewhere else in the future. Moreover, we must argue that substantial inequities in distribution of political power and material wealth are either inevitable or just.

On the other hand, to abandon our dominant institutions and attack the status quo indiscriminately would have tremendous implications for natural systems and human well-being as well. Neither slavish adherence to the arrangements of the past nor unthinking rejection of them will guide us through the transition to a world that is sustainable and just. We must reject neither our history nor our future.

## THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY

It is the institutions of higher education that are most essential to actively challenging the forces which threaten both human and natural system well-being. We have reached a point where we must seriously postulate the existence of discontinuity between our values and our institutions. It is in the academy of practitioners and scholars that we will be able to debate and clarify our basic values, and develop a broad understanding that institutions are only the vehicles for those values. If we hold firm to the values, the institutions will respond. The purposeful, conscious and active evolution of our values and institutions must begin with higher education.

The task before us will be difficult, yet it is necessary; no other societal institution can play this role. "All experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed" (American Declaration of Independence). C.P. Snow, writing about the dissolution of the British Empire, observed:

*I can't help thinking about the Venetian Republic. Like us they had been fabulously lucky. They became rich, as we did, by accident. They had acquired immense political skill, just as we have. A good many of them were tough-minded, realistic, patriotic. They knew, just as clearly as we know that the current of history had begun to flow against them. Many of them gave their minds to working out solutions – but it would have meant breaking the pattern into which they had crystallized. They never found the will to break it.*

Education is the force which will enlighten, enable and empower our choices. If we are ultimately successful in negotiating the transition to a just sustainability, it will be because of what we do.

We educate.

There are competing etymologies for the English verb “educate”, but the one I prefer considers the word itself to be based on the Latin word, "ducos" – to lead, and the prefix “E” – out or out of. In the ancient foundation of the very word is the challenge of our future.

Higher education must move beyond the responsibility to prepare students to live in the world as it will be -- we must embrace the responsibility to prepare students to shape the world in which they will live.

## COLLEGE OF THE ATLANTIC AND HUMAN ECOLOGY

Robert Kennedy paraphrased George Bernard Shaw to say, “There are those that look at things the way they are and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?” At College of the Atlantic the investigation of both questions is our quest.

We are a small and essential element of a global network of thought and action focused on improving the relationships among humans and between humans and the environment. We believe that these relationships can be made more sustainable, more peaceful, and more just. We believe that humans are firmly and inextricably embedded in the natural world, and that each person can make a difference.

At College of the Atlantic we study the relationships among humans and the natural world. The province of human ecology is no more – and no less than that. We focus on the interaction of four worlds -- the natural world, the social and cultural world of humans, the virtual world that permeates our lives, and the world of the imagination. Our

commitment to teaching and to a pedagogy of high-value, personal interaction is magnified by our singular focus on human ecology.

Why have we chosen this singular focus?

It is no accident that problems with clean air, clean water, toxic pollution, genetically-modified organisms, extermination of species, nuclear waste, overpopulation, desertification, deforestation, and global warming have emerged in the same, incredibly brief moment in human history. Nor is it an accident that human ecology has emerged as a new academic focus in this same period. The historic role of education has been to provide society with the capacity to understand, anticipate, and respond to the needs of their society. We now live in a global society, and there is no natural system which our actions do not affect. The responsibility of education is no longer just to help understand the world in which we will live, but to shape the world in which we want to live.

In the beginning of my remarks, I mentioned that we face a time of Moral Choice. We are the first generation of humans to have the realistic possibility of building a world that is sustainable, peaceful and just.

We have the knowledge.

We have the technology.

We have the wealth.

And we have the motivation -- we can see what we will become if we do not change.

No one of imagination and insight can sincerely assert that business as usual as of the end of the 20th century can produce a world in which we want our children and grandchildren to live at the end of the 21st century.

Our dream must be that our future will be worthy of the best of our past.

We can meet the challenge of our times with ideas and with action, but we must choose to do so.

It is appropriate that we approach radical ideas and rapid changes conservatively, fearfully, and skeptically, but it is necessary that we approach them. This is the challenge of our time, it is the challenge to higher education, and it is the aspiration of College of the Atlantic.