


# Second Renaissance

## Theory of Change II: “How”

*How paradigmatic change and a second renaissance can come about*

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# Background

This essay takes for granted a number of **assumptions** discussed in detail in [our first essay](#) on a [Second Renaissance](#):

1. We are surrounded by signs of an unravelling civilization: ecological, political and social crises.
2. These interconnected crises have common roots in innate human tendencies combined and exaggerated by the decaying cultural paradigm of modernity in which most of humanity now lives
3. Cultural paradigms can change – we can see they have evolved throughout history.
4. As modernity declines, a new paradigm is beginning to emerge, and conscious participation in shaping a ‘wiser, weller’ future is possible and desirable.

Cultural behaviours at a civilisational scale can be interpreted as arising in significant part from **cultural paradigms**. These deep frameworks of coextensive **views and values** are fundamental to the way humans perceive (and act in) the world as individuals and societies, but typically they operate unconsciously - presenting simply as ‘the way things are’. (Views and values that constitute a paradigm don’t necessarily *originate* in the paradigm but become fixed and reinforced by it.)<sup>1</sup> Dominant cultural paradigms **evolve** in stages or eras throughout history, with new paradigms arising gradually as cultures encounter and solve problems inherent in or emerging from established civilization.

The many crises the world currently faces have roots in the declining paradigm of **modernity**. Modernity was itself a period of extraordinary transformation and human achievement, arising from a period of great rebirth or ‘**Renaissance**’ following the collapse of mediaeval society in Europe. The core ideas of modernity cast a long shadow, however, and civilization is once again in a period of **transition** and possible collapse. The next paradigm is emerging, but much is yet to emerge - and this moment calls for conscious participation in shaping a desirable future from first principles: a ‘**Second Renaissance**’ (**2R**). At such a time, energised by awareness of what’s not working in our current civilization, the seeds of intentional transition to what comes next can be nurtured and cultivated.

Based likewise on earlier discussion, we imagine a number of desirable features of a future paradigm. A wiser, weller civilisation on a finite planet includes consideration of interconnected life, personal and collective flourishing, orientation towards inner (as opposed to material) growth, and awareness of the need for community to co-create such a future. We call this an **awakening society**. Others working in similar spaces have introduced terms like Integral, Metamodern, Teal, Ecological or Regenerative.

We arrive at some foundational aims for all invested in this future:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, aspects of individualism existed before modernity -- they may even be deep-seated in human nature -- but they become dominant and a major "part of the culture" in modernity.

- Support conscious transition to the next paradigmatic stage of human flourishing
- Preserve and imagine the desirable features of an **awakening society**
- Co-initiate a **Second Renaissance - a transformation of foundational views and values towards that wiser future.**

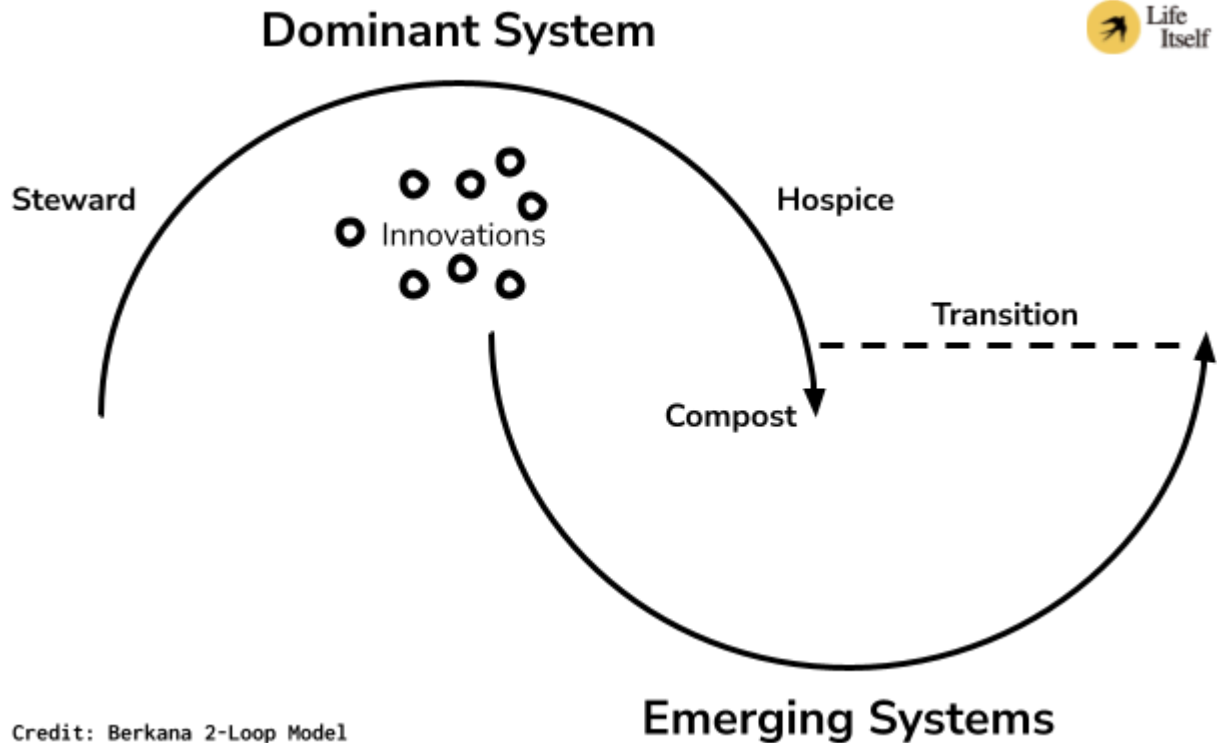
## Terminology

We borrow the term 'Second Renaissance' from Francisco Varela, the great Chilean cognitive scientist and co-founder of Mind and Life (see also [page x](#)). While the model we present here is offered as generally relevant, we emphasise that the terminology of 2R represents just one frame among many surrounding a profound turning point in globalised civilisation. Its intention is not totalising, and its Eurocentric comparisons will not be universally resonant. Here, 2R is primarily a communications device that employs some recognizable characteristics of one period in (European) history to help us comprehend the scale of another. Drawing upon the experience of the historic period widely labelled 'Renaissance'; we evoke the ways in which shifts in cultural mindset or paradigm have in the past led to profound civilisational change - helping us to imagine the possibility of similarly profound transformation in the future. 'Second' doesn't imply that no other periods of renewal have taken place in other cultures at other times - rather, this device intervenes in a particular western discourse within which there was one (capital R) 'Renaissance'.

## How do paradigmatic transitions happen?

### Paradigm Life Cycles: Birth, Growth, Maturity and Decay

Socio-cultural paradigms may be seen as following a life-cycle, from birth, through growth to maturity and then obsolescence. When core views and values of a dominant system begin to create more problems than they solve, decline begins. Following an ecological model, as an old paradigm decays, space and energy become available, and opportunities arise for new ways of seeing the world - fertile ground for the birth of a new paradigm.



While the decline of a previous paradigm (**push factor**) may be a principal element in paradigm shift, here we're largely concerned with how individuals and groups may set about proactively building what comes next (**pull factor**).

We propose that the initial phase of conscious cultural transition involves cultivating **networks** of people and initiatives in which new paradigmatic thinking, being and acting can flourish. Within this network-building we identify three kinds of mutually dependent groups: **pocket**, **sangha** (see [below](#)) and **movement**.

## Level 1: Pocket

**Paradigm shifts don't occur in whole populations at once. New structures of thought emerge first in 'pockets': small, dense groups of people engaging in 'conscious culture-making' and experimenting with new (or renewed) ways of being, thinking and acting together. These 'islands of coherence' are surrounded by mainstream cultures still operating the earlier dominant paradigm. Pockets are a source of leadership; pioneering new cultural models while engaging in advocacy that can broaden participation.**

Think of a saucepan of water being heated. Even before the whole saucepan boils, we see bubbles forming. Small pockets of water that have heated faster than the rest, and undergone a state transition from to gas within surrounding liquid. Unlike water boiling however, this early phase of paradigm shift doesn't follow observable rules. Patterns may form or be preserved, but the process of creating culture change is experimental and produces much diversity at

this early stage. From decline of the current paradigm, manifest in tangible global crises, to cultural activism deliberately changing the narrative, currents of 'heat' transmit energy for change unevenly - although with enough time and heat, the whole pan will boil.

We can see examples of paradigmatic change emerging in pockets throughout history. Take for example the first period widely termed 'Renaissance'. The foundational views and values that would come to exemplify the modern paradigm were studied, practised and developed first by small, close-knit groups of radical practitioners in 14th Century Florence. Here, [Dante Alighieri](#) and [Francesco Petrararch](#) revived an interest in classical art, literature and philosophy. Petrararch founded his Humanist school upon a proto-modern value of **rationalism** derived from the ancient texts of Cicero. The scholars' idealisation of classical thought ignited a popular trend. At a similar time, artists such as Bondone and Brunelleschi began experimenting with new methods, developing techniques of **realism** and linear **perspective** that would underpin artistic revolution, and architecture began displaying neo-classical features. The wealth of Florence, coupled with appetite for renewal following recent collapse (the end of the Mediaeval age and black death plague), supplied ideas with energy and opportunity, and classical revival spread throughout Europe - typically via further 'pockets' of creative thinkers with eager popular audiences, such as playwrights and poets.

Likewise within more established paradigms, we still see changes in norms emerging in pockets. For example, in the 1870s, a secret British society called the [Order of Chaeronea](#), whose members included George Cecil Ives and Oscar Wilde, was among the earliest instances of advocacy for gay rights in modern Europe. A century later, by the 1960s, pockets of coherence, and the support they established for core views and values through **cultural activism**, had become widespread, large and influential enough to constitute a global LGBT movement - which in turn influenced public opinion to the point of changing legislation (more on movements and their relationship to pockets below).

Such examples demonstrate that the formation of pockets isn't arbitrary but can be contingent on upon particular **conditions**:

**Collapse / renewal:** In the case of the Renaissance, the large-scale decline of an earlier way of life in the form of societal and population collapse became a basis for renewal.

**Marginal / dissatisfied populations:** like bubbles forming close to the surface of our saucepan, individuals and communities likely to form pockets may be those marginalised by the current paradigm, or reluctant to participate in the status quo and ready to contemplate living differently.

**Attractive new visions:** In all cases, pockets form not just due to negative 'push' factors, but also the *pull* factor of a better future; new ideas and ways of being that inspire the imagination and motivate commitment.

**Resource / patronage:** Scholars argue that existing Florentine wealth and the willingness of the Medici dynasty to commission art and advocate patronage was a major factor in the Renaissance.

## A way of life

While the location and motivating context for pocket formation may vary widely, one characteristic of pockets is universal: commitment. For a set of views and values to become the basis for a new cultural model requires consistency of practice and support. Pockets are by definition “going against the flow”, and new ways of life are too difficult to maintain if day-to-day life generates friction and pressure to conform to the status quo. To embed change, habits must be oriented *towards* change. For a ‘pocket’ to become a strong centre of gravity, participants require a minimum threshold of interaction with others who share a common purpose of transition. We should note that this does not necessarily mean cutting off connection with wider society - regular interaction is important, but alternative approaches and attitudes are difficult to sustain if the bulk of interactions are with people who think differently.

Thus, roughly defined, a pocket is **an environment in which the majority of members share a commitment to the new way of life – and the majority of interactions are with members of the pocket, at least in some domain such as work or daily life.**

Early-stage pockets may take the form, for example, of conscious co-living, neighbourhoods or enterprises. They may grow out of existing networks such as businesses and social organisations. They may form online. Later in development, pockets may link to become larger regions.

## Cultural activism

Pockets function not only to trial new ways of life but to advocate them within wider communities. Often these pioneer groups produce high volumes of analysis and thought leadership to popularise key principles and seed support in the mainstream.

## Level 2: Sangha

Like all things ecological, cultural evolution requires not only new emergent organisms, but hospitable environments in which they can flourish. Surrounding healthy pockets, then, are **communities of strong interest: people sympathetic to core views and values and engaged with thought leadership and even certain practices, but not necessarily committed full-time to embodying cultural transition.** Regular contact reinforces shared beliefs and habits, but day-to-day life is more mainstream.

In Buddhism, **Sangha** (Pali; association) refers not only to a community, but a **community of practice**, and we adopt this term to name the dedicated wider community. The sangha nourishes the pocket, engaging with content and demonstrating support and connection within mainstream society. In turn the pocket supplies the sangha with analysis and leadership. In the early stages of transition, a revolving door likely persists between the two, as community members become engaged and experiment with different levels of commitment. Whole communities may condense into pockets under the right conditions.

## Level 3: Movement

As different pockets, communities and tribes become established and aware of one another, they develop a larger sense of **collective identity** - locating their own efforts within a bigger picture of shared purpose for cultural change: a movement. As a movement grows, it gains visibility, growing participation and awareness within the mainstream. Within this big tent, larger, more diffuse populations engage with and normalise new ideas and ideologies. Approaches meet, cross-pollinate and evolve, memes propagate through cultural content, and common narratives, vision and principles emerge.

The movement is interdependent with the pocket and the sangha, who engage in proactive movement-*building* to support and accelerate this process. In turn the movement supports pockets to flourish, both practically and memetically. Participation in a movement may involve lower time and lifestyle commitment and much greater numbers but pockets and their sanghas require mainstream support to remain viable longer-term.

A broad-based, popular movement for change may begin to aspire to political influence. Participation at scale supplies both mandate and energy for cultural transformation.

## Where are we, in the current transition?

Cracks are appearing in globalised civilization that point to paradigmatic decline. Considering climate risk alone, today's societies are on a trajectory to some level of breakdown, perhaps even collapse. Factoring in risk from escalating authoritarianism, nuclear proliferation, AI and other threats, fragile systems are at significant risk of cascading collapse in the medium term. In other words, 'push factors' are ever more tangible.

Pull factors are emerging. 2R pockets are forming, establishing wider communities, and to a certain extent, networking and engaging in nascent movement-building, focused specifically on paradigmatic transition. But pockets remain small and scattered. Digital communities are growing around particular frameworks. Larger communities exist around more established themes and practices that appear likely or desirable elements of a wiser, weller new paradigm - such as inner development, integral living, alternative land management and permaculture, co-ops and commoning, alternative education and more. In particular, the flourishing and popularity of Eastern contemplative traditions within western culture, and the growing networks of dedicated practitioners around them represent 2R pull-factors emblematic of Varela's vision:

*"...it is my contention that the rediscovery of Asian philosophy, particularly of the Buddhist tradition, is a second Renaissance in the cultural history of the West."*

- Varela: *Ethical Know-how*

## Diagrams: overview of how transitions happen

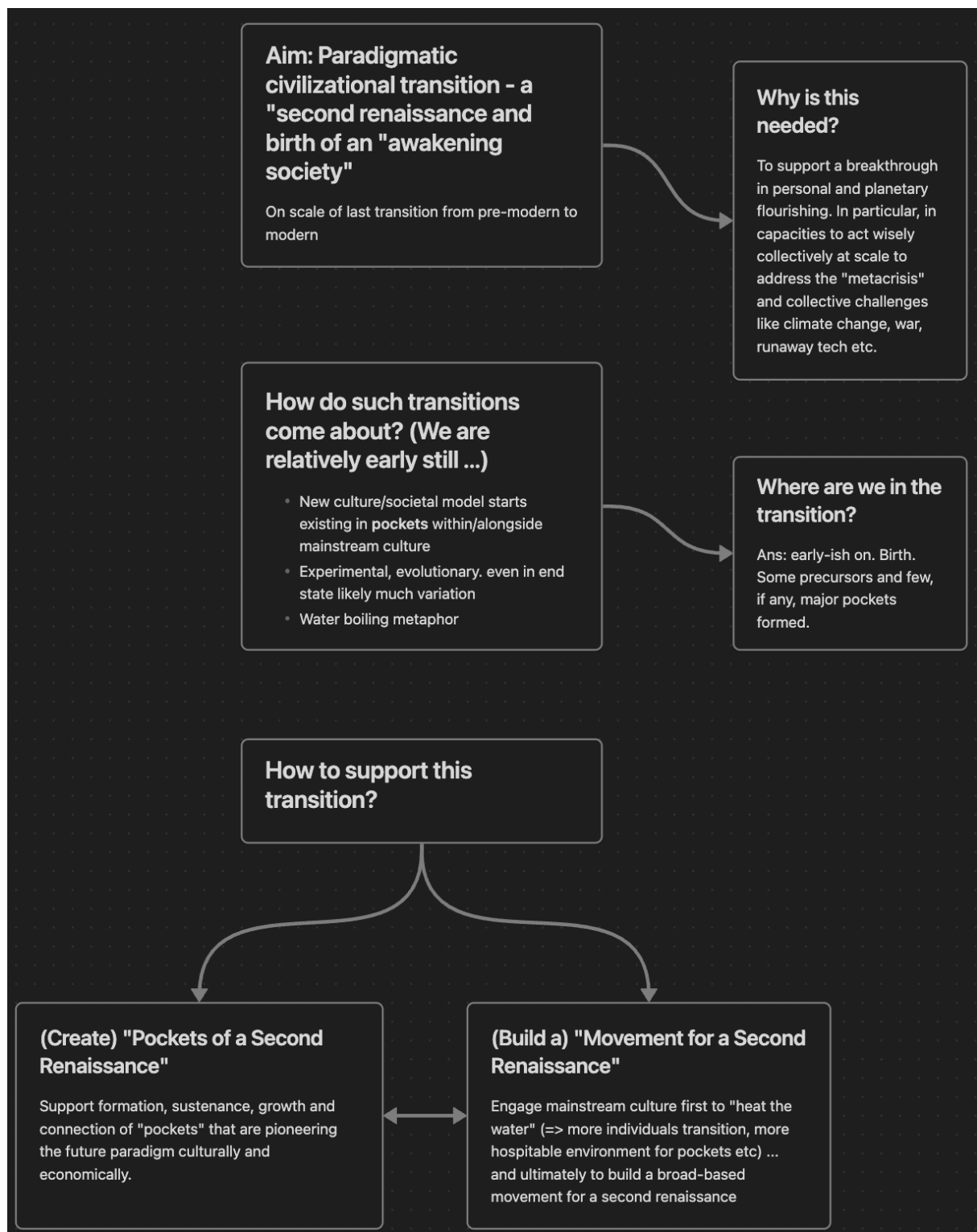


Fig 1: Diagrammatic summary of this paper's thesis for steps to a second renaissance and a paradigmatic transition (Rufus Pollock, Sylvie Barbier and collaborators. *Life Itself*)



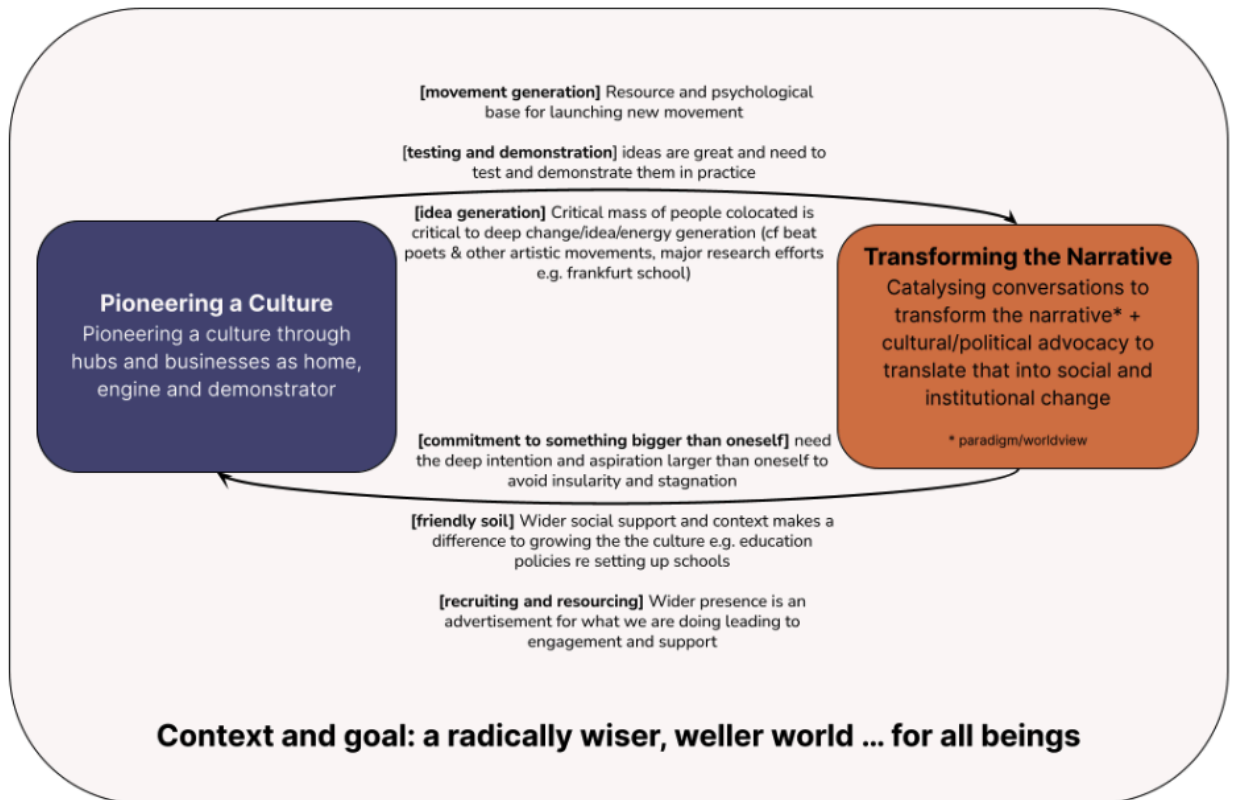


Fig 2: more detail on the interdependence of pioneering pockets and wider efforts to transform the narrative

## How to support wise transition in practice?

### Bottom-up thinking

*"The times are urgent; let us slow down"*

- Bayo Akomolafe

In the long-term, the 'levels' we have described are interdependent and their interactions non-linear. It isn't enough, therefore, to start small and hope that the rest takes care of itself - and consideration and resourcing of nascent communities and movement should accompany cultivation of robust pockets. Ultimately, cultural transition is a political project that will involve some 'mainstreaming' of particular ways of being, thinking and acting, and some kind of political or movement-building aspiration is necessary from an early stage to maintain a sense of larger purpose.

However, to hold power *well* takes a lot more maturity than is typically demonstrated by those in power, and history is littered with examples of scaling efforts gone badly wrong. Before seeking to drive social change at scale therefore, pockets require deep care, grounding and wisdom established through years of bottom-up innovation and experience. Pockets must

focus primarily on building cultural foundations and community, and developing leadership through committed practice.

## Emerging intentional communities: learning from historic examples

From eco-villages and co-living communities to teal businesses, coaching groups, online collectives meeting daily or weekly, 2R pockets may take many forms. Some are already emergent and becoming networked.

Pioneer communities can't accurately model how to function sustainably under a completely different set of future operating conditions. However, even to flourish in the short term, they need ways to become economically and culturally sustainable which can translate into replicable principles. A particular target for innovation is the route social and economic trust between people - to support committed transition from community to pocket; socially and economically self-sustaining.

2R communities may draw inspiration (and hard lessons) from past efforts at new forms of community-based socioeconomic organisation. For example, the Kibbutz movement models successful, collectively owned and run land-based communities. Auroville in India was an early pioneer among novel intentional communities, weaving conscious development and outer change, and still flourishing after 50 years.

Of course, the very notion of intentional community can tend to raise eyebrows because of the many famous examples that have become deeply distorted. Corrupt, charismatic leaders flourish in such environments, and continued success requires high integrity, intelligent design and strong accountability. As important as the ideas that underpin a new paradigm will be the practices that allow communities to embody it wholesomely:

## Deliberately developmental spaces

Life in pockets embodies, practices and develops **collective ways of being** constitutive of a new, regenerative paradigm. **Foundational** among these is the principle of cultivating **inner development**: the intentional deepening of self- (and other-) understanding, and conscious cultivation of faculties of mind and heart that support wisdom, discernment and flourishing. (It's important to distinguish desirable characteristics *of* a new paradigm from characteristics originating *in* a new paradigm. Many practices and traditions for inner cultivation date back thousands of years and come through many, diverse lineages.)

This kind of deliberate inner development is *the* ingredient - or perhaps even the *container* - that allows pockets to function differently from other types of intentional community. Take for example the frameworks through which groups approach collective decision-making and conflict-resolution. In collaborative spaces, conflict naturally arises around difference of opinion. Groups rooted in a modern paradigm tend to approach such matters hierarchically - decisions are made by those in charge, with little obligation to take the views of others into account. (High decisiveness, low enfranchisement.) In more post-modern spaces,

anti-hierarchical structures entail that consensus is sought before decisions can be made, often resulting in hamstrung groups struggling to make progress. (High enfranchisement, low decisiveness.)

By contrast, groups that cultivate particular wisdom skills such as de-centering and perspective-taking may reduce reactivity arising within decision-making spaces, loosening personal attachment to views and allowing larger numbers of people to 'disagree better'. Habituating the tendency to take a 'meta'<sup>2</sup> perspective can allow groups naturally to admit multiple viewpoints without descending into relativism - and indeed such skills can support groups to *discern* whether a process more akin to unilateral decision-making or consensus seeking is more appropriate to a given scenario. Realised well, such skills may allow higher enfranchisement and higher decisiveness to coexist.

Inner development tends to lead to significantly greater wellbeing and is a necessary condition for human flourishing. This in itself is reason enough to consider it foundational to a desirable metamodern paradigm. However, cultivating inner capacities is moreover a necessary basis for co-creating desirable **new structures and institutions** - in other words it is a core constituent of wise societal and political innovation and transition. Inner development is crucial to finding new ways to organise politically and economically without the dysfunction associated with flat or wholly hierarchical structures. Such modes of organisation are already nascent in certain pockets.

One inner capacity critical to this process is sometimes called '**valueception**'. Within the modern paradigm, emphasis on empiricism has led us to value or to treat as 'real' only what we can measure, with increasingly catastrophic consequences for our world. Consider for example, the still widespread prevalence of GDP as a measure of societal success, often neglecting other less tangible factors crucial to human wellbeing. If we seek a new paradigm that values ineffable qualities that have hitherto been neglected, then we need ways to establish value that go beyond calculation and measurement. However, to readmit other 'ways of knowing' value beyond objective calculation can lead quickly to dark places without genuine collective skill and subtlety in such knowing. Roughly then, 'valueception' names the ability, often sharpened through contemplative practice, to attune to the greater good in a given scenario; to use discernment to distinguish bias from wise intuition, and choose wisely and whole-heartedly. Valueception is the skill of valuing what is real-but-unmeasurable, and its cultivation is the territory of inner development. (Naturally, emphasis on valueception requires parallel vigilance regarding charismatic leaders who claim to possess it.)

Inner development can be core to unlocking other aspects of a desirable new paradigm, such as a fundamental principle of **inter-being**: a felt understanding of identity with all life and commitment to ethics that reflect a balanced and loving participation in the world as a whole. Related tenets such as spiritual enquiry, complexity awareness, emotional attunement and emphasis on art and imagination are likewise fundamentally supported and accessed through inner development.

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<sup>2</sup> And a [metta](#) i.e. loving-kindness 😊 perspective ...

## **Building a movement for a Second Renaissance**

Personal, group and societal transition support one another. As pockets form therefore, there exists a parallel task of engaging mainstream culture to build understanding and recruit support for core ideas.

Neither element comes first, rather, both evolve together. Pockets cultivate the ideas that carry movements; movement adopters coalesce to form networks that become the bases for more engaged, committed pockets. Both require resource and attention.

In a best-case scenario, as a supportive movement grows and ideas spread, more robust pockets can form that further propagate ideas among mainstream society, eventually reaching a critical mass beyond which culture at large may become transformed. (In the worst case that bears consideration, pockets may function to select and preserve desirable ideas throughout the continued decline of existing culture, until collapse precipitates renewal. Our future reality likely lies somewhere between these two poles.)

## **Fostering cultural and political activism**

Within pockets and sanghas, groups are already writing articles and papers like this one, creating art, hosting events, having conversations, practising and publishing philosophy, organising and attending political demonstrations, and a great deal more. All of this intervention is aimed at - delicately or firmly - surprising people out of conventional mindsets and encouraging them to consider alternative cultural principles. This includes both amplifying push-factors - for example publishing analysis on likely societal trajectories without change - and pull-factors - for example the draw of intentional community and deep purpose in an increasingly fragmented and nihilistic world. Over time, this work begins to weave a sense of a bigger picture in which to navigate and find a home. Cultural activism generates an intellectual and pragmatic structure for shared understanding and action; a meta-narrative around which a movement can cohere.

The meta-narrative emerging in this arena makes space for hope while remaining realistic about the precarity, complexity and pain of our current circumstances. It offers a pathway beyond mere critique of the status quo, to a role in co-creating a future, without promising that breakthrough is assured or even that collapse can be avoided. This 'pragmatic utopianism' invites optimistic imagination and the space of possibility that comes with it, without claiming that 'everything is going to be fine'.