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From Big History to Big Action

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

Brian Murphy

Thanks to David Christian for his essay "[New Ways of Seeing the World: Big History and the Great Transition](#)." It brings our attention once again to education and knowledge as an indispensable element in our collective effort to envisage and promote a fundamental transition in human affairs, our relations with each other, and—equally important—humanity's relation to the planet.

The issues Christian raises have been a preoccupation in my own work as an activist, an organizer, and an adult educator. In my experience, these activities—organizing and education—are intimately connected. The most effective education is rooted in creative action toward a shared goal, and the most effective organizing is rooted in the mutual learning and knowledge that people create and share when working together to investigate and transform their lives, their community, and their environment.

From this perspective, a movement to promote an understanding and appreciation of "Big History" will focus not only on the content of that history, but on the process through which such learning takes place, and through which history itself—living history—is engaged and affirmed in life and action.

That is, the content and the process of education will need to be premised on, and promote, the critical agency of the learner, encouraging an awareness in each of us that we are agents with effects in and on the world. We are not only on the planet, but *of* the planet, and profoundly, we are not only in the Universe but *of* the universe. That is our significance.

The Big History we need to promote will have this insight at its heart, and be animated by its spirit. It will make evident that if we wish to transform the world, we must be willing to transform

ourselves, and work with others in reciprocity to bring about the knowledge and action required to build the just societies, and the global society, to which we aspire.¹

To get to this point, to achieve a critical mass of people committed to learning and action, we will have to reckon with the reality that it is not knowledge alone that will transform the world; knowledge in and of itself is not power. Power comes from knowledge of self, and an appreciation of who we are in the scheme of things in history and in Big History. In my work, the biggest dilemma of the organizer and the educator is to find the key that turns knowledge into action, to transform abstract information into action-knowledge.²

One of the barriers to that transformation, to that strange alchemy that moves a person from knowledge to action, is that even with all the understanding of history in the world, we cannot know the future. We cannot know whether what we do will be enough, whether it will bring about the transformations that are necessary to avoid human and planetary catastrophe. It is much easier to be a hero if we know that it will make a difference, that in the end we will win.

We will never know that. But we act anyway. For that is what it is to be fully human. And we act together, because it is in mutuality, reciprocity, and social solidarity that we most deeply experience our human-ness. The Big History we need to promote will have this insight at its heart and be animated by its spirit.

Endnotes

1. Brian Murphy, *Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World, An Open Conspiracy for Social Change*, 2nd ed. (Wakefield, QC: Daraja Press, 2021).

2. Brian Murphy, "Learning, Knowledge and Action in Social Movements," in *Beyond Colonialism, Development and Globalisation: Social Movements and Critical Perspectives*, eds. Dominique Caouette and Dip Kapoor (London: Zed Books, London, 2016), 242–258. Available at <https://murphyslog.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Ch13-Doms-book-BrianKMurphy.pdf>.

About the Author



Brian Murphy is an independent analyst, organizer, educator, and writer. Formerly, he was a lead programmer and policy analyst at the Canadian international social justice organization Inter Pares. He is a co-founder and Steering Committee member of the Ottawa-based International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG) and the author of *Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World: An Open Conspiracy for Social Change*.

About the Publication

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