

in·coherence

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Issue #5

The Collapse of the Deal



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Editor's Note

In our last issue, [*The Arc of the Deal \(Issue #4\)*](#), and this Issue (#5), we offer a new, yet not foreign, way of understanding humanity and its current struggles. It is a lens through which we see dynamics at play at both macro and micro levels in our lives and the lives of the communities and nations in which we exist. We call it the “Deal Lens,” and believe it is helpful to bring new awareness, understanding, and conscious choice for what is often invisible, yet impacting our lives and setting the course for human civilization.

In Issue #4, we traced the hidden architecture of these agreements that have quietly governed modern life and the stories that helped to generate them. Deals we didn’t consciously sign onto, but nonetheless we helped to create and sustain. We explored how these implicit bargains shape behavior, organize institutions, and condition our sense of safety, worth, and identity. And how they often determine how we make meaning of life.

But internal alignment can be external misalignment - and incoherence. When deals are built inside systems misaligned with life, they carry within them the seeds of collapse. And yet we act - we believe - as if being successful in these misaligned systems means something real.

“It is no measure of health to be well adapted to a profoundly sick society.”
- Jiddu Krishnamurti

The Collapse of the Deal (Issue #5), is the natural next step from the Arc. In it we explore how the understanding we have of life, built into modern society, is flawed. It discusses how the accelerating logic of capitalism and technology have pushed core societal functions – governance, stewardship, even belonging – into greater incoherence. And as those deals falter, it becomes ever more clear: what’s unraveling isn’t just institutional. It’s relational. It’s existential.

Where Issue #4 offered a map of the terrain, Issue #5 sits in the disorientation of the moment. It walks through the noise, tracing the fractures not to despair but to deeper understanding. The goal is not to fix the broken deals. It’s to stop pretending they still hold, and begin the difficult, necessary work of returning to coherence with life.

If #4 was a story of structure, #5 is a story of rupture — and of the human capacities that remain when the scaffolding falls away. We invite you to read #4 first, but you can also begin here, and follow the thread wherever it leads.

Please note that what follows may in moments feel uncomfortable. Not because it's unfamiliar, but because it names what many of us have sensed but not said aloud. The goal isn't to indict the choices we've made within these systems — most of us had no alternative and it was all we knew. It's to understand why the ground is shifting, so we can meet what is unfolding with something other than confusion or blame.

— Garrett Weiner
Editor, In•Coherence

Part I: Age of Silent Collapse

We're living through a slow unraveling. Not the drama of revolution or the spectacle of a singular catastrophic event, but the steady erosion of implicit agreements that have held society together for centuries, if not millenia.

These agreements — what we're calling deals — have long shaped how we understand our place in the world and our relationship to the systems we inhabit. Most were never written down. Some are encoded in law or policy, but the majority are transmitted through cultural expectation, institutional norms, and habitual practice.

At the core of each deal lies a simple transactional premise: **“If you give us this, we will give you that.”**

If you go to school and work hard, you'll have career security, a sense of status and identity, and financial stability.

If you follow the rules and participate in civic life, you'll be safe and adequately represented.

If you produce and consume according to expectations, the system, and your life, will remain stable and predictable.

These were the foundational promises that organized life throughout the 20th century. They were never universally fair. They were never universally true. But for enough people, in enough places, they offered a frame — a way of making sense of the system and a reason to keep participating in it.

Today, many of those deals are breaking down. That often isn't announced dramatically — like rubble or revolution. It may manifest initially as stagnation. As withdrawal or confusion.

Sometimes it may simply begin with mounting pressure rather than outright rupture.

In this article we will explore what's happening in the deals, what they have displaced within us, and, at the end, how we might respond. We will trace the web of deals that have shaped

modern life and show how they're breaking down. To understand why this collapse was inevitable – not because of policy failures or leadership incompetence, but because these deals were built within systems that were never aligned with life itself.

Part II: What's the Deal with Coherence?

Today, many people use "coherence" as a measure of internal consistency or integratedness.

Coherence, within our framework, means alignment with life systems. With the actual patterns, limits, reciprocities, and dynamics of the living world — the reality we, all living organisms, exist in.

Over billions of years of evolution, coherence was a measure of fitness for any organism or species within its specific environment. If it did not fit, it would collapse — go extinct. Fitness meant more than individual survival — it included the consequences of an organism's interactions with its environment and others of its kind. Those interactions often took the form of symbiotic deals — a web of balanced relationships:

- A pack of lions looks after each other's cubs for overall safety.
- A bee is fed while transporting a flower's pollen to germinate other flowers, ensuring more flowers are there to feed from.
- A predator feeds on the weakest or sickest of the prey, ensuring the prey maintain a healthy population.
- An animal feeds on the vegetation grown from the dung of its predator.
- A mycelial network informs the forest about moisture and nutrients, while benefiting from the protection of its cover.

These systems sustain over time because they behave in balancing patterns. A species' population grows, consumes local food sources, declines as resources thin, and stabilizes as those resources regenerate. Feedback loops maintain dynamic equilibrium. The system corrects itself.

For most of human history — hundreds of thousands of years — the deals that sustained us were similarly symbiotic, embedded within these same balancing patterns.

Modern human systems, in contrast, have broken free of such constraints. Through agriculture, extracted energy, industrial production, profit-focused economies, and technologies that reinforce one another, human population, extraction, and waste have increased exponentially — shifting civilization into ever-greater misalignment with the planet's life systems.

The pattern has become clear: When systems break from balanced relationships — when they accelerate beyond what life can sustain — they don't just malfunction. They move toward collapse. In the sections that follow, we'll trace how that's happening now, and why the inherent deals we are part of have displaced our natural capacities to respond.

Part III: Accelerants, Supplements, & Amplifiers

Our lives consist of more than just one deal. We live inside a web of them — supporting and influencing our lives at the same time. When one strains, it creates pressure throughout the web.

The most common and fundamental deals are the “Container Deals” — structures that have held and sustained human interaction and relationships for thousands of years. These are critical to civilizational health. Examples are community, governance, stewardship, and “career” or “role” deals, which we will explore later.

We begin with deals that are more recent in origin. They have evolved in a time of acceleration underwriting, and seemingly overwhelming, modern society. These deals can facilitate, disrupt, or push Container Deals into levels of unnatural instability through acceleration and amplification. So we explore these before the The Containers. These deals include the Capitalism Deal and the Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and Media (TAIM) Deals.

The effect of these deals on Container Deals, and society as a result, is to accelerate and amplify the underlying misalignments and incoherence in the structure of these container deals. Now, in an age of digitalized capitalism, media and AI, the misalignment we identified earlier is accelerating and amplifying — extending beyond the natural environment into communities, governance, and the stewardship of common welfare.

Two forces form the core of this acceleration.

Capitalism Deal

The Deal: “If you work hard, invest, and take advantage of the rules of capitalism, the economy will reward you with exponential growth of wealth, security, status and a luxurious lifestyle.”

If this deal sounds like it's for owners and investors - it is. Workers are offered a different deal: “work hard, follow the rules, and the system will reward you with stability.”

That is the deal of the economy and prior to capitalism that was the deal for pretty much everyone, including owners: “Contribute to the community through labor, craft, or trade, and

receive what you need to live.” Value was tied to use – food, shelter, tools, care. This was a Container Deal, organizing exchange around mutual provision and sustained by relationships of interdependence and symbiosis.

When capitalism fully arrived a few hundred years ago, it didn’t replace the Economy deal. It layered on top of it as a supplement.

The seeds of the Capitalism Deal were sparingly planted over several hundred years and across civilizations, but emerged with substance in the 1700s. Initially theorized by Adam Smith, later evolving into structures of mass production (factories) and global financial markets. Capitalism provided for limited liabilities of owners and a shift to “exchange-value,” and the valuation and trade of profits themselves. This, along with the exponential growth of human population, has unleashed an accelerating spiral of capital and profit seeking that has pushed now interlinked economies into periods of exponential “growth” and “crashes” ever since.

Today’s technologies, and now AI, have accelerated that growth and potential for crash, driven by the improved capacities for extraction (environmental and social). Today the incoherence of infinite growth on a finite planet dominates the narrative, while natural and human “resources” continue to be commoditized.

As a result:

- the few have become richer and the many have become poorer
- workers have less and less job security and real wages have declined
- household debt and delinquency rates continue to increase
- healthcare has become more expensive and difficult to access
- environmental protections have been overridden by corporate interests as our planetary health declines

In short, the deal for economic and social prosperity is unraveling, even as overall wealth has grown. Corporate profits have increased, as most families find it harder and harder to afford the essentials. Surveys indicate extreme dissatisfaction among the public and a pessimistic view of the future.

What is displaced from within us:

- Trusting our capacity to meet needs directly
- Felt connection to natural systems we depend on
- Self-sufficiency and resourcefulness
- Responsibility for consequences beyond the transaction

As industrialized society distances us from a real connection with nature, we stop understanding and being responsible to the life systems we depend on. This deal makes this and the above capacities seem unnecessary — and in their absence, we become dependent on a system that was never designed to sustain us.

In short, these displacements don't arrive as losses. They arrive as convenience — until the capacity is needed and no longer there.

The TAIM Deal (Technology, AI, and Media)

The Deal: "If you give us your attention, continuous engagement, and access to your life, we will give you connection, global information, convenience, and entertainment."

TAIM doesn't just change what we do or how quickly we do it. It changes how we think, how we feel, how we relate, how we make choices. It restructures the conditions under which human perception, attention, and cognition operate.

- It fragments attention into micro-segments optimized for engagement
- It isolates and objectifies people, reducing relationships to digital exchanges and damped collective empathy, releasing our worst instincts and assumptions
- It floods perception with more information than anyone can meaningfully process
- It flattens the distinction between truth, opinion, and fabrication
- It facilitates and accelerates a post-truth world where it's difficult to discern what is real

We are increasingly narratively overstimulated and relationally undernourished — constantly exposed to problems we can't directly affect, while under-resourced in the capacities required to respond.

TAIM hasn't just accelerated capitalism. It has made capitalism harder to question — because now we're not merely consumers or workers. We're simultaneously the product, the audience, the labor force, and the brand.

What is displaced from within us:

- Sustained attention and presence
- Unmediated relationship (Interbeing through screens becomes transactional)
- Discernment between signal and noise, truth and fabrication
- Creative resourcefulness — the capacity to figure things out

To operate, TAIM extracts minerals, water, and energy, but it also extracts these capacities directly and most powerfully from us. What's left is a population less equipped to see clearly, think independently, or to sense and respond to what's actually happening.

We have everything at our fingertips, so we stop figuring things out. We stop working with the basics. We lose the muscle those capacities require. We become cognitively and emotionally unfit — more manipulatable, more vulnerable, and despite access to all the world's information, more ignorant.

What makes TAIM particularly potent is that it doesn't feel like extraction. It feels like connection, entertainment, efficiency. The displacement happens in the background.

The Accelerant Loop

Capitalism and TAIM don't just coexist. They reinforce each other.

Capitalism drives the logic of extraction, accumulation, and endless growth. TAIM provides the infrastructure, capturing attention and turning us – the people logging in – into the products. So it monetizes engagement, concentrates wealth and influences the masses at an unprecedented scale. Together, they form a self-reinforcing loop that accelerates both their expansion and the destabilization of the foundational deals we depend on.

This loop doesn't just pressure those deals from outside. It reshapes them from within – converting community into market, governance into commodity, stewardship into short-term extraction. And it systematically displaces the capacities we need to recognize what's happening and to respond.

In the next section, we will explore these other deals, how they function, are related to each other, and how they are affected by these accelerator deals.

Part IV: Container Deals Under Strain

Deals come in all shapes and sizes. Some function as accelerators, and some function as containers. The “container deals” (e.g., community) are structures meant to hold, protect, and sustain ourselves, individually and collectively. Other deals act as substitute deals (e.g., division) offered by one party to the deal to quell the discontent of the other party from previous deals they failed to deliver on.

The container deals have been used throughout human history, first forming within hunter-gatherer societies, over time developing in form and complexity with civilization. In fact, we can look at these deals as the structures that support societies. Yet as incoherence increases along with unstable complexity, these deals begin to unravel, along with the other threads of society.

What follows is an exploration of some of those container deals in modern society – Community, Governance, Stewardship, Career – how they interact with each other but also how they are affected by the accelerator deals of capitalism, technology, media and now artificial intelligence, discussed above.

Often these deals are subconscious, nested within the systems that they operate in and support. Almost all of these deals are requisite, however, within a society where there are no real alternatives.

Community

The Deal: “If you participate in communal life, contribute to the well-being of others, and care for those around you, we will hold, include, value, and support you in turn.”

For most of human history, community provided mutual support through family networks, neighborhoods, and civic groups. The logic was reciprocal — you showed up for others, others showed up for you.

Today, in the advent of the accelerator deals, this deal has become severely strained:

- Geographically dispersed families and networks
- Digital interactions replace embodied presence
- Transactional mindsets affecting relationships, commitment and compassion
- Schedule overload compressing relational time
- Polarization making genuine connection feel risky

You know this if you've realized you're not sure who you'd call in an emergency. Community was the backstop. Without it, collapse becomes profoundly personal.

What is displaced from within us:

- Practices of mutual aid and reciprocal care
- Capacity to navigate conflict directly
- Willingness to ask for and offer help
- Felt belonging that doesn't require performance

So we stopped practicing the capacities that make community real: mutual aid, conflict navigation, reciprocal care, direct asking and offering. The knowledge lives in doing. We haven't been doing it.

Community was the original container - the first safety net. When it frays, we feel it — even if we can't name it. We feel the vulnerability and risk because community, for hundreds of thousands of years, has been the mechanism of our survival.

Governance

The Deal: “If you follow the law, participate in civic life, and fulfill your obligations as a citizen, we will protect your rights, safety and an orderly society, represent your interests, and work toward collective well-being.”

For most of the 20th century, this held well enough. Institutions functioned. Voting seemed to matter. The rules felt like they applied to everyone.

Today, the cracks are visible:

- Laws are enforced selectively based on wealth and political alignment
- Corporate lobbying and corrupted campaign financing pushes corporate representation over the people's wellbeing
- Institutional paralysis to move on challenges (e.g., healthcare, climate, fair wages) that actually matter

People followed the rules. They showed up. But increasingly, the process appears performative — outcomes predetermined by power rather than principle. This isn't producing rebellion. It's producing quiet retreat.

What is displaced from within us:

- Trust in collective discernment and shared process
- Political engagement beyond spectatorship
- Capacity to hold power accountable directly
- Willingness to organize outside captured institutions

Capitalism captured regulatory systems. TAIM fragmented discourse into algorithmic outrage. And the deal itself said we wouldn't need the capacities for self-governance — political discernment, direct organizing, holding power accountable outside captured institutions. Elect representatives. Trust experts. Follow the process. So we stopped practicing. Now we can see the dysfunction, but we've forgotten how to respond collectively.

The retreat is quiet. But it's everywhere.

Stewardship

The Deal: “If you grant us authority over natural resources, economic infrastructure, and shared systems, we will manage them responsibly — protecting what is essential, sustaining what is fragile, holding the long view against short-term pressures.”

For generations, this gave governments and institutions the legitimacy to manage commons, regulate harmful activity, and make decisions on behalf of future generations. The promise was balance. Foresight. Care.

But stewardship has collapsed into its opposite:

- Systematic deregulation removing environmental and financial safeguards
- Resource extraction prioritizing immediate profit over sustainability
- Climate negligence even as consequences become undeniable
- Economic policy designed primarily as wealth transfer to those already holding power

Politicians still speak of protecting the future. But the actual behavior — policies enacted, regulations dismantled, investments made — tells a different story. No one with the power to change course is actually steering for the long-term welfare. Instead, moneyed interests are defining how the natural environment and society is extracted from and exploited. As a result, we find both of these systems to be unraveling.

What is displaced from within us:

- Ecological literacy — capacity to read living systems
- Felt responsibility extending beyond our own lifetimes
- Long-horizon thinking and planning
- Direct relationship with the land and its limits

It's not just that we trusted institutions to handle the long view. We adopted mental models that made the long view disappear. Capitalism trained us to think in quarters, not generations. Education became preparation for economic contribution rather than cultivation of presence or ecological awareness. Technology promised solutions would arrive in time. So we stopped learning to read the land, recognize ecological feedback, hold time horizons beyond our own lifetimes. We lost our ecological literacy — and the felt sense that we belong to something larger than the next target.

No one is steering for the long term. And we can feel it deeply - this is why collapse plays on the subconscious, increase the general tensions in society, even if some aren't willing to acknowledge it.

Career and Identity

The Deal: "If you work hard, develop valuable skills, and follow professional norms, we will reward you with economic stability, social status, and a coherent sense of identity."

For much of the 20th century, this held. Career wasn't just income — it was who you were. It structured daily life, organized social identity, provided meaning and purpose. The deal said: specialize, comply, be productive, and you'll be rewarded with stability and dignity.

Education reinforced this. Schools became pipelines for economic contribution — sorting, credentialing, preparing workers. What wasn't cultivated: presence, self-knowledge, relational

depth, ecological awareness, the capacity to ask "who am I?" outside of what the market needs. The deal promised those capacities wouldn't be necessary.

Today, the cracks are visible:

- Job security eroding as permanent employment gives way to gig arrangements
- AI threatening even highly skilled white-collar roles
- Educational costs massively outpacing economic returns
- Productivity gains no longer translating into wage increases
- Entire professions restructured faster than workers can adapt

Because career became so tightly fused with identity, this isn't merely an economic problem. When the career deal collapses, people don't just feel financially insecure. They feel unseen. Unvalued. Purposeless. The question "what do you do?" becomes unanswerable — and with it, "who are you?"

The substitutes being offered don't resolve this. Side hustles. Personal branding. Influencer culture. These aren't real deals offering reciprocity and stability. They're performances of a collapsing deal — asking us to become our own institutions, our own safety nets, our own meaning-making apparatus, all while operating within the same extractive logic that produced the collapse.

This ripples outward. Without stable identity, people withdraw from community — they don't know how to show up when they don't know who they are. They disengage from governance — civic participation feels pointless when you're in survival mode. They lose capacity for stewardship — long-term thinking requires a self that extends beyond the next paycheck.

What is displaced from within us:

- Self-knowledge beyond role or credential
- Intrinsic sense of worth not dependent on market validation
- Resilience to absorb loss and reorient
- Capacity to ask "who am I?" when the structure falls away

The deal said we wouldn't need to know who we are beyond what we do professionally. Education prepared us for contribution, not presence. So we stopped asking the deeper questions — what do I actually care about? What can I offer that no credential validates? Who am I when the role falls away?

We let career answer the question of identity so completely that we forgot the question was ours to ask. Now, when career fails, we face not just unemployment but a kind of emptiness that has no name. The deal didn't just provide structure. It prevented us from building the internal scaffolding that would let us stand without it.

So when the career deal fails, it's not just a job that's lost. It's the answer to 'who am I?'

Community, Governance, Stewardship and Career are what I call “container deals” because they contain how we operate within society – the substance of our relationships of modern life. When container deals weaken or unravel, the ground shifts for a person or communities life and sense of stability. And into that instability other deals arrive — not to repair what's broken, but to exploit the cracks in the containers.

Part V: Substitute and Supplement Deals

What happens when a deal begins to unravel? When it fails to deliver what was promised? Or when the conditions it depended on no longer hold?

Sometimes a new deal emerges to take its place. We call this a *Substitute Deal* — offered when the original can no longer function. Authoritarianism, for example, often arrives as a substitute for governance deals that have lost legitimacy or failed to deliver.

Other times, a deal is layered on top of a failing one — not to replace it, but to shore it up or distract from its failures. We call this a *Supplement deal*. Division operates this way: it doesn't replace authoritarianism, but supplements it by redirecting attention away from the deal's failures and toward a convenient target.

These categories aren't rigid. Deals can shift from one to another as conditions change. But the distinction helps us see what's actually being offered — and what's being concealed.

Authoritarianism

The Deal: “If the existing deal within the messiness, inefficiency, and complexity of democratic governance isn't delivering as you wanted or at the speed you expect, you can give us your power to choose, your voice, your discernment, and in return we will promise you whatever it is you want, safety, “law & order”, certainty, and privilege, as well as tell you what to think, and what is real, regardless of the factual evidence.”

This authoritarian deal emerges often out of governance and stewardship deals that a portion of a population is dissatisfied with, often because of either a real or narrated story of its failure to deliver or respond to changing conditions.

This deal often includes promised restoration — whether it be national pride, economic stability, and/or protection from chaos or external or internal threats – most often through force or the threat of force. It mandates that their supporters not question or criticise them, and pledge their loyalty and trust to them and them alone. The key is that the supporters provide total faith in the

leader, no matter what actions they take, laws they break, or what measures they use to enrich themselves.

Unlike with other deals, this is a two-sided deal. One is a promise, the other is a threat:

The Deal's Other Side: "If you do not agree to the deal we've offered above, we promise to govern against, demean, harass, harm, imprison, or even separate life from you."

In this, authoritarianism uses threat and outright coercion to gain enough agreement to its deal in order to effectuate its governance..

Unlike container deals, which provide participation and choice, authoritarianism captures and constrains their supporters. At their end, these deals do not simply unravel into other deals. They cling on as long as they can, however they can, because they often violate the constitutional norms and laws of other forms of governance deals along the way, exposing them to criminal judgment. As a result, the end of an authoritarian deal is most often through a forced and violent collapse,

What is displaced within us:

- Critical thinking and courage to face reality
- Trust in self and collective discernment
- Openness to shared humanity across differences
- Creative initiative — acting from inner direction, not imposed order
- Tolerance for complexity and uncertainty
- Inner alignment — the capacity to self-orient without external authority

What authoritarianism displaces is not just participation, but the capacity to think with others, to feel complexity without retreat, to *act without seeking a savior*, and to *trust our own sense of what is true and aligned*. We begin to live from someone else's direction, not our own.

Yet because it violates natural orientations — toward truth, connection, freedom, and the courage to face the unknown — authoritarianism must maintain external threat.. One mechanism is another type of deal, a supplemental deal we call a "Distraction". The example distraction deal we explore below is the "Division Deal."

Division Deal

The Deal: "If the current deal, mostly of the authoritarian variety, is violating basic human values or failing to deliver on its promises, we will offer you this emotionally enticing deal to distract you from these failures of the current deal. We will identify, for your convenience and pleasure, a separate group to blame and to hate for your disappointments and resentments — rather than ask you to do the work of understanding the root cause (often us) and engaging in critical thought and action that would undermine our position."

This deal is different from the others. As mentioned above, it is used as a supplement, when other deals begin to fail. Authoritarian leaders use division to deflect from accountability and their culpability, when their deals begin to unravel. And it erodes too — failing, dissipating or collapsing suddenly, until another substitute deal is offered and a new target is named.

Division often shows up when:

- Political leaders don't deliver on what they promised
- Economic systems fail to provide the stability they guaranteed
- Social trust thins and people feel unmoored
- Complexity overwhelms and simple answers become desirable

Media deals amplify it because conflict generates engagement. Religion has long used it to define insiders and outsiders. And ordinary people adopt it because it offers psychological relief — a simple explanation in a moment of profound disorientation.

But the relief is false. The Division Deal doesn't address what broke. It redirects the pain toward communities of people who look, pray, love, or speak differently. In an increasingly diverse society, the targets are many. Division leverages the brain's distrust of the unfamiliar — and offers it an object to unleash that angst upon.

You may have observed it: the rush of clarity when someone names the enemy. The satisfaction of knowing who's to blame. It doesn't matter if it's true ("They're eating the pets"). It matters that it lands — that it converts confusion into conviction, overwhelm into certainty. Division offers something seductive: a simple answer when everything feels complicated. But the relief requires a target. And the target is always a group that can be differentiated, singled-out.

What is displaced:

- Trust across difference
- Empathy that extends beyond the familiar
- Curiosity toward the unfamiliar (Adventure capacity)
- Collaborative capacity — working with, not against
- Self-authorship — forming views from discernment, not tribal signal

At its core, Division is the deal of non-presence. It ensures that the felt presence of reality is ignored, denied, and avoided. It keeps people in reaction rather than reflection, highly vulnerable to manipulation and belief. The capacity to sense what's actually happening — to oneself, to others, to the systems we live inside — is precisely what Division displaces.

And it destroys the very capacities — trust, dialogue, collective sensemaking — that would be required to rebuild anything functional. Instead of recovery, there is recursion. The divide deepens. The capacity for collective response diminishes.

Part VI: Web of Deals

These deals don't operate in isolation. They form a web — pressing on each other, absorbing strain, transmitting instability.

When accelerant deals intensify, container deals destabilize. Capitalism's logic infiltrates governance through lobbying and campaign finance. TAIM reshapes community by moving connection onto screens and fragmenting shared attention. Career deals absorb pressure from both — demanding more and more to satisfy the insatiable profit directive. More performance, more self-branding — while offering less and less compensation and security in return.

And when container deals weaken, substitute deals find openings. Authoritarianism rises where governance and stewardship fail to deliver. Division intensifies where community has already frayed.

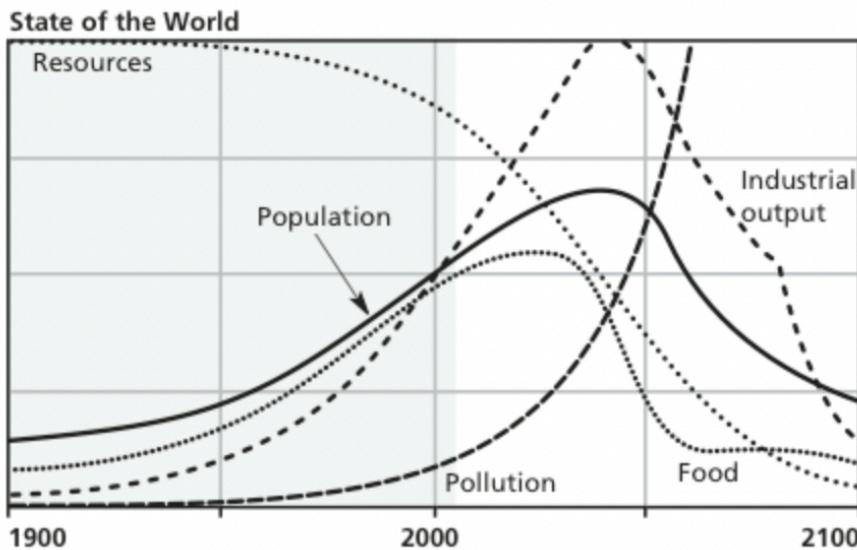
A full map of these interconnections is beyond this piece. But the pattern is visible: pull one thread, and the whole web shifts. The deals are failing not one by one, but together — because they were always entangled.

What drives this convergence isn't any single deal's failure. It's something underneath them all. Something bigger than any of these systems, yet is ignored by all.

Part VII: Facing Collapse

What is it like to face collapse? As we've explored and many of us are experiencing, modern systems of governance, economy, and community are showing signs of strain. The same can be seen in the larger systems of our ecology that often show the largest cracks. For over 70 years, our modern systems have motivated us to pretend that collapse wasn't possible. That the warning signs are 'false alarms.' To externalize the consequences from the systems we've created and ignore the warnings of scientists.

One example was Donella Meadows' team at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) that released their predictive work "Limits to Growth" in 1972. This work, based on their computer model "World 3," highlighted the systemic challenges driven by human population and industrial production growth. They ran different scenarios to predict how humanity and its modern systems might experience the next century. 54 years later, we find ourselves tracking right along with their predictions.



State of the World graph from "Limits to Growth" (Meadows, 1972/2002).

<https://donellameadows.org/archives/a-synopsis-limits-to-growth-the-30-year-update/>

The climate data tells the same story, with yearly records of CO2 concentrations and annual global temperature increases exceeding expectations by the broader scientific community. We have already effectively exceeded the target set just 10 years ago in the 2015 Paris Agreement, 1.5C above pre-industrial temperatures. And over the 30 years of climate summits, CO2 emissions have accelerated, not decelerated, let alone decreased.

The "Deal Lens" can help us see more clearly why the world's leaders have been so incapable of addressing, or even acknowledging, what lies ahead. And if we refocus the Deal Lens just a little more, we see that underneath these deals and systems rests the root cause we have already noted:

Many of the systems we hold as being paramount for our individual and collective success were not designed in alignment with life. They are, in a word, incoherent.

By "designed," I primarily mean the development of the systemic structures drawn over time from the evolving mental models humanity held on those relationships. Take the mental models that underlie our economic systems and the assumptions that frame them:

- That natural resources are infinite on a finite planet
- That perpetual exponential growth is possible and necessary
- That human systems can operate independently of ecological limits
- That living systems are externalities rather than the foundation of our existence
- That consequences can be deferred to future generations for our own convenience

These assumptions underwrote the systems that delivered extraordinary material abundance for several generations. But they did so by externalizing consequences — pushing them into other

ecosystems, other populations, and future generations who would inherit what we have refused to face.

The deals made within these systems inherited this logic. They promised security, prosperity, and stability by borrowing against a future that couldn't sustain the debt. They worked as long as consequences remained distant. They break when that distance vanishes.

What we're experiencing now isn't a temporary crisis that better policy can resolve. It's the structural result of building civilization on premises misaligned with living reality.

Natural systems operate through stable complexity – relationships organized around balancing feedback loops that maintain dynamic equilibrium. The systems we've built operate through unstable complexity – organized around reinforcing loops that accelerate growth, extraction, and concentration with no inherent mechanism for balance. They push further from equilibrium until something breaks.

Technology and AI introduce a particular dynamic: financially, they're like adrenaline injected into a weakened animal — temporarily reviving it while accelerating the underlying degradation. We see them propping up markets and destabilizing the container deals simultaneously.

And as these deals break, we discover that what they displaced along the way are the capacities we need to respond to these challenges:

The practices of mutual aid and reciprocal care that make community real. The political discernment and direct organizing that make self-governance possible. The ecological literacy to read living systems and recognize limits. The self-knowledge to answer "who am I?" beyond a role. The presence to stay with reality rather than reach for distraction, denial, or blame.

These capacities weren't taken from us. They atrophied — because the deals said we wouldn't need them. And we didn't notice, because we can experience modern systems as internally consistent, logically organized, even psychologically satisfying — while they remain fundamentally misaligned with life.

This understanding changes what's possible in response.

I believe that the collapse of these systems is not the end of the world; it is an opportunity to develop new systems based on a new understanding of our life, of who we are, and what we are capable of together. It is a new understanding of life itself, drawn from natural orientations and capacities that we can return to that helps us answer the question:

What does it mean to meet collapse — not with denial, not with despair, but with presence?

Not a program. Not a prescription. But something simpler — and harder.

Part VIII: Returning to Coherence

Coherence is a quality of relationship — with ourselves, with others, with the living world we're part of. It can't be manufactured. It's lived. It's practiced. It emerges when we're in alignment with what is actually real.

The deals we've examined promised to handle orientation for us — what to value, how to think, where to direct attention, what success looks like, who we are. In exchange, we stopped practicing the capacities that would let us orient ourselves.

But those capacities were never destroyed. They atrophied. And what has atrophied can be reclaimed.

This begins with presence — the willingness to stay in contact with what's actually here, rather than reaching for the next distraction, the next deal, the next substitute for direct experience.

You may already know what this feels like. Moments when the deals fall away — even briefly. A conversation where you said what was actually true. A connection that wasn't transactional. A choice made from something deeper than habit. A step into the unknown that felt like aliveness rather than threat.

From presence, four natural orientations become accessible again:

Truth — contact with reality as it is. Seeing what is actually happening, beyond the stories we've inherited and the deals we've absorbed. The capacity to sense and assess the deals we are engaged in, and to bring coherence into new ones, depends on presence in truth.

Connection — genuine relationship with ourselves, with others, with the more-than-human world. Not connection as transaction or networking — the non-presence forms of contact that modern systems have normalized. The depth of connection we need in a time of collapse must be regenerated through presence.

Freedom — the recovery of authorship over our own responses. Not freedom from constraint, but freedom to respond from wholeness rather than conditioning. Within presence lies the capacity to sense the options available to us through creative thought, compassion, and collective engagement. With freedom comes responsibility to the systems we are part of — something the collapsing systems never taught us.

Adventure — the capacity to move into uncertainty with aliveness rather than fear. To meet the unknown as invitation, not threat. The systems we operated in told us to stay put, stay with the known, follow convention, fear the wild. That kept us in line — but cut us off from the inspiration and insight that an engaged relationship with life's natural systems would provide.

These orientations aren't new. They're what humans have always used to navigate reality — before the deals told us we wouldn't need them. They don't tell us what to do. They help us find our way from within.

The collapse of these deals and the systems they help to construct is not the end of the world. It's the end of arrangements that were never sustainable – and never aligned with life.

What remains, beneath the deals and the displacement, is life itself. The capacity to sense, to respond, to relate, to orient. These were never gone. Only unpracticed.

The work now is not to build new deals on the same premises. It's to reclaim what was displaced. To practice again what we forgot we knew. To meet what's coming — not with nostalgia for what's collapsing, but with presence for what's emerging.

What that looks like is yours to discover. We're all finding our way in this together.

Thank you for reading. Please stay tuned for Issue #6 of In-Coherence, due out soon!

In the meantime:

Read: [The Arc of the Deal \(Issue #4\)](#)

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