

in·coherence

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The Deficit



The
Coherence
Project

THE COHERENCE DEFICIT

Why Increasing Incoherence is Pushing Our Systems Toward Collapse

For the past 10,000 years, humans have lived inside a world that has been complex yet coherent. Over billions of years in development and evolution, natural ecosystems offer a dense web of relationships, feedback loops, and interdependencies. That complexity was navigable because it was organized through balancing feedback mechanisms that kept systems within regenerative and relatively stable bounds. Human bodies, nervous systems, and cultures evolved inside that kind of complexity.

Over that time, humans have increasingly generated their own interconnected systemic structure (e.g. economic/commercial, technological, social) built with reinforcing feedback loops that amplify speed, scale, as well as volatility, and instability. Many of these systems are developed and supported by mental models and stories that have increased what has been termed “separation” from the reality of life, decreasing our capacity for a truthful relationship with the life systems from which we emerged — our **life-coherence**.

The result is the **Coherence Deficit**: a widening gap between rapidly increasing, unstable complexity and accelerating decline in coherence at individual, collective, and ecological levels. In the **Coherence Deficit Index**, we express this relationship conceptually through several graphs that represent this gap across the various systems, human generated and natural. These graphs tell a tale of an unfolding reality of collapse – the existential human predicament.

Fundamentally, addressing this gap is the work of **The Coherence Project**. Before we engage with the graphs themselves, we need to be clear on three things: what we mean by complexity, what we mean by coherence, and how their relationship has been changing over time.

Complexity: Neutral in Principle, Destabilizing in Practice

Complexity, in the way we use it here, is not a synonym for “complicated” or “difficult”, as is common in lay usage. Here, and in systems parlance, complexity is neutral. It simply describes the nature of the systems relationships and how that affects how the system behaves. Complex systems often involve greater unpredictability because of the dynamic between feedback loops,

the delays in the feedback loops, and more. Feedback loops are often grouped within two structural / behavioral typologies:

- **Balancing feedback loops**, which stabilize system behavior through opposing variables. Examples include population size, limited by natural constraints (e.g., resources, predators) impacting births and deaths.
- **Reinforcing feedback loops**, which amplify change and reinforcing variables, showing up as exponential growth or decline. Examples include a bank account with compound interest or a population size that has ample resources and eliminates predators.

Ecological complexity

Natural ecosystems are examples of **high-complexity, high-coherence** systems, historically governed predominantly by balancing feedback loops. Predator–prey relationships, nutrient cycles, thermal regulation, food availability, climate cycles, and biodiversity all contribute to a kind of dynamic stability. Things change, but within bounds. Disturbances are absorbed, recycled, and integrated. Signals remain interpretable to the organisms living within them.

This is the context in which humans evolved. Our nervous systems and relational capacities were formed inside **balancing-loop complexity**.

Human-constructed complexity

Over the past 10,000 years, and especially in the last few centuries, humans have built systems whose complexity is structured very differently. Agricultural surpluses, hierarchical states, imperial networks, industrial production, global finance, digital networks, and algorithmic platforms are dominated by **reinforcing feedback loops**:

- economic growth demands more growth
- attention economies reward escalation
- political incentives amplify polarization
- extraction fuels more extraction

- technological acceleration feeds further acceleration

Reinforcing loops are not inherently bad. But when they dominate the architecture of a system, they produce **unstable complexity**: dynamics that outpace biological, relational, and ecological capacities to adapt. When un-modulated they can lead to a collapse of the system.

It is this shift — from living within balancing-loop ecological complexity to inhabiting reinforcing-loop civilizational complexity — that underlies the Coherence Deficit.

Coherence: Integrity of Relationship with Reality

Coherence is not the same as stability, intelligence, or certainty. It is not primarily a cognitive trait.

By coherence, we are speaking to the **integrity of relationship with reality** – as we often call it – “**Life-Coherence**”:

- inner–outer congruence (what we sense, feel, understand, and express are in truthful alignment)
- interpersonal integrity (our interactions with others are grounded, responsive, and real)
- ecological fit (our ways of living are in workable relationship with the environments that sustain us)

Coherence is supported by presence. It depends on our ability to:

- sense what is actually happening
- feel the patterns and relational tones around us
- allow meaning to form without distortion
- orient and act in ways that remain honest to what we know.

A coherent life or society is not one without difficulty or change. It is one in which inner and outer reality are in working relationship, and where feedback from the world can still reach us in time to matter.

The Impact of Balancing and Reinforcing Feedback

As noted above, complexity is neutral. It describes the dynamics within a system, just as do the terms simple and complicated. In a complex system, when the dynamics exclude feedback that is received and accounted for, they can drive increasing incoherence. One example includes the lack of feedback received and accounted for from climate CO2 concentrations, rising temperatures, and changing conditions, on the production of greenhouse gas pollution. Another might be the growing number of individuals unable to sustain themselves within an economy, that is neither received nor accounted for by an economy in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer – both reinforcing feedback loops.

Also as noted above, natural systems have stabilized over hundreds of millions of years through the gradual development of feedback loops that are accounted for within its overall and subordinate systems. This may in part be because the reinforcing feedback loops that had developed along the way could not be sustained. And so feedback, received and accounted for, with balancing loops, is inherently necessary for the levels of coherence and stable complexity within a system.

As we will see later on, complexity, whether stable or unstable, also affects the levels and quality of coherence. And in turn, coherence feeds back into the level and quality of complexity. Systems that have greater stability within their complexity, where feedback is received and accounted for, reinforce the quality of coherence within that system, such as in old growth forests. And that level of coherence helps to support the stability of those feedback loops.

Systems that are built on reinforcing feedback loops, and thus less stability in their complexity, do not offer an opportunity for coherence to be sustained. Often this results from the absence or severance of feedback mechanisms that would modulate or limit this ‘runaway’ effect. And without such mechanisms or adequate levels of coherence, those reinforcing feedback loops will continue to escalate the impacts of their behaviors, such as with military conflicts without coherent dialogue or social media systems without recognition of the impacts on the well-being of others.

We can see this relationship within different systems by putting them down graphically.

Where Systems Sit: Plotting Coherence and Complexity

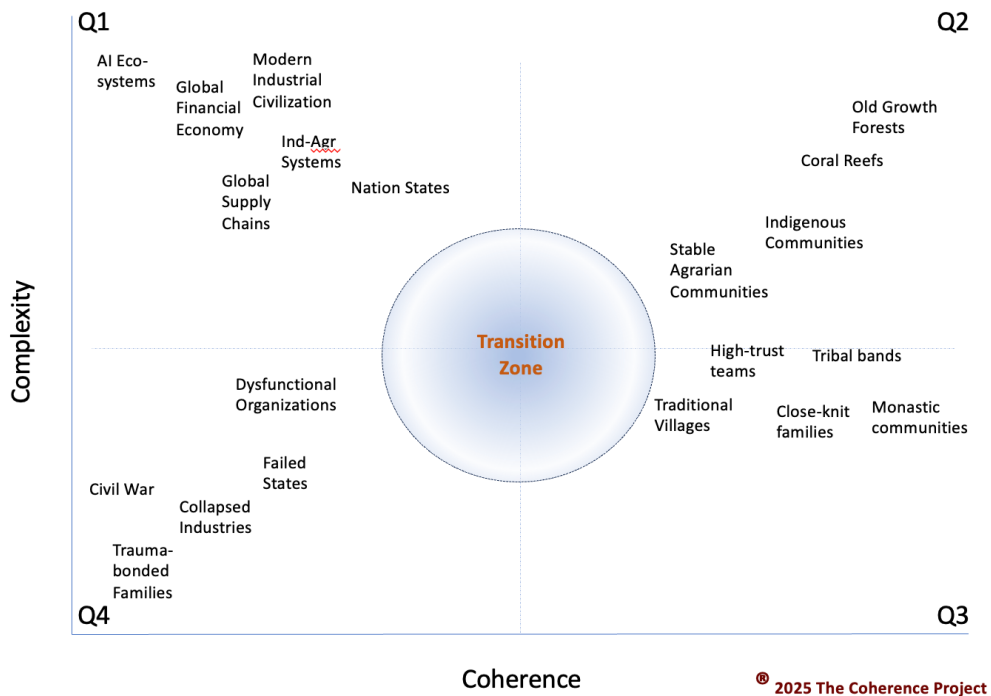


Fig-1. A Plot Systemic Complexity and Coherence. A conceptual framing of different social and ecological systems distributed across levels of combined complexity and coherence.

The above graph maps where different social, economic, and ecological systems might plot across complexity (both stable and unstable) and coherence, viewed in four quadrants:

Q1 - high complexity / low coherence: These systems are the predominantly modern human systems defined by reinforcing feedback loops and greater instability. They are marked by fragility and incapacity to adapt and be resilient, often leading to collapse.

Q2 - high complexity / high coherence: These are primarily natural systems marked longer-term stability through balancing feedback loops. Over time, these systems show adaptability and greater resilience.

Q3 - low complexity / high coherence: These systems are human systems that are more traditional or smaller in nature. They operate in smaller environments with clear objectives and tend not to engage in significant change over time.

Q4 - low complexity / low coherence: These are the systems that may have had higher levels of unstable complexity, and as a result have collapsed. Where relationships have dissipated and functionality ceases with no discernible purpose. Complexity and coherence in these systems are both in continued decline.

Transition Zone: Conceptually, it is difficult to imagine a system being moderate in complexity and coherence. Many systems may transition through the middle on their way, increasing or decreasing in either or both complexity and/or coherence.

The implication of this graph is that modern human systems increasingly are missing the coherence and stable complexity needed to survive over the long-term. And while we can point to modernity, a deeper trend is both simple and uncomfortable: For at least a thousand years, and accelerating sharply in the last two centuries, **human coherence and the natural stable complexity have been in a reinforcing decline.**

Living the Incoherence

Having explored the nature and relationship of complexity and coherence in concept, how do we know whether a system, including our own, is coherent or not? How can we understand whether complexity is stable or unstable? In short, what does this deficit of coherence, or more commonly phrased “incoherence” feel like?

Acknowledging that how people feel may be impacted by numerous factors in their systems, it is becoming increasingly self evident that common experiences of people in increasingly unstable and incoherent social systems include:

- **orientation loss** — struggling to know what is real, what matters, or how to prioritize
- **attention brittleness** — difficulty sustaining focus in environments overloaded with signals
- **narrative fragmentation** — competing stories about reality with no stable common ground

- **relational thinning** — more contact but less genuine connection and attunement
- **somatic overwhelm** — bodies that tighten, numb, or dissociate in the face of constant input
- **emotional volatility** — reactive swings tied to unstable external cues
- **sensemaking fatigue** — the feeling of never quite catching up with events

Not everyone feels this incoherence in the same way. For many, it stays largely unconscious — masked by busyness, normalized by culture, and rewarded by systems that thrive on performance. It is only when something begins to feel off — a somatic signal, a relationship rupture, a sudden inability to keep going as before — that awareness starts to return. That moment of dissonance is not a failure. It is the first threshold of coherence trying to come back into contact with reality.

My own departure from modern systems followed this pattern. When I exited my life in Singapore in 2022, I was experiencing many of the above descriptions, some reinforcing each other until I could no longer continue operating — as part of the system that had grown increasingly unstable and incoherent, I was facing personal collapse.

These are not random symptoms or personal failings within my own life. They are predictable outcomes of trying to live within systems that reinforce instability and incoherence, until they collapse. They are in some ways the feedback that something is off, which may be taken into account early on, or ignored until there is no option but failure.¹

Feedback at the systemic level can look even more striking.

Collapse: The Gap between Coherence and Unstable Complexity

From a structural perspective, collapse can be viewed as the result of an increasing gap between the levels and quality of coherence (including levels of attunement to balancing feedback mechanisms) and the levels and quality of unstable complexity (including the predominance of reinforcing feedback loops). And that gap can bleed into other related systems, at times shifting other systems' stable complexity into greater instability.

We can see this dynamic today in the Earth's ecological systems. Human industrial and economic systems, with their reinforcing feedback loops, unstable complexity, and decreasing coherence, have shifted the relatively stable conditions of our natural environment toward a less stable, less coherent state. In some cases, these are marked by the development of reinforcing feedback loops:

- Industrial emissions of greenhouse gases trap more heat, increasing global temperatures, melting glacial and polar ice, reducing the natural reflectivity of the planet, increasing temperatures further, melting more glacial ice and polar ice.
- Industrial deforestation reduces the capacity of forests (e.g., Amazon rainforest) to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, shifting them toward being a source of carbon emissions, increasing the temperature of the atmosphere and increasing the acidity (carbonic acid) of the oceans, accelerating marine habitat destruction.
- Marine habitat destruction (e.g., coral bleaching from tourism, overfishing) accelerates biodiversity collapse, destabilizing the natural web of relationships, accelerating species extinctions, decreasing the capacity of the oceans to absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen.

This increasing ecological destabilization is a direct result of human industrial production and pollution, exacerbated by the excessive and exponential growth of the human population. These modern systems are underwritten by mental models that are incoherent with life systems and the decreased capacity for presence and attention. These include capitalistic cultures of short-term transactionalism, an economy built on an assumption of perpetual growth, a story of 'dominion' over and a usurious relationship with nature, and the over-reliance and even addiction to digital technologies. These are all both causes and consequences of a decrease in our collective coherence with life systems and an increase in destabilized forms of complexity. It is the gap between coherence and complexity that is the subject we are exploring.

The **Coherence Deficit**, in this context, is not an abstract idea. It is a **warning signal** that systems are moving from strain toward unraveling. A few conceptual models that visualize these patterns will help to illustrate these dynamics.

The Coherence Deficit Index Graphs

The Coherence Deficit Index (CDI) uses conceptual graphs to illustrate how complexity and coherence have diverged across three major domains: ecological systems, human civilizations, and industrial–technological systems. These are not empirical datasets; they are synthesized, theory-based trajectories that make underlying structural patterns visible.

Ecological Systems

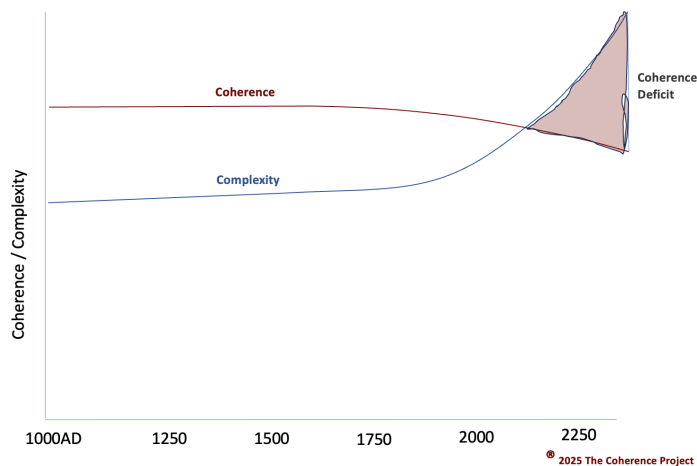


Fig - 2. A conceptual representation of rising destabilizing ecological complexity and declining ecological coherence as human activity drives reinforcing feedback loops in the biosphere (CDI).

Historically, ecosystems coupled high complexity with high coherence through balancing feedback developed over hundreds of millions of years. Very recently, as human systems have grown and disrupted key cycles, ecological coherence has begun to decline. Destabilizing reinforcing feedback (i.e. warming from continuing greenhouse gas emissions) in climate and biosphere dynamics have accelerated both complexity and incoherence.

Human Civilization Systems

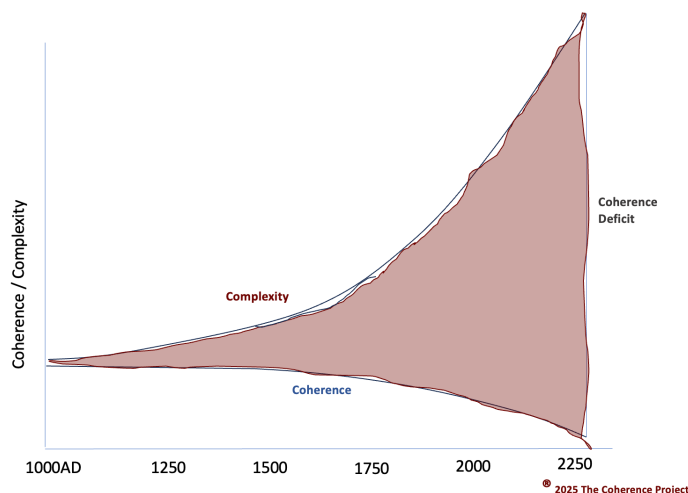


Fig-3. A conceptual representation of steadily increasing civilizational complexity and long-term decline in human social and cultural coherence since roughly 1000 AD (CDI).

As societies became more complex through larger populations, industrialization and trade, and hyper-consumerism, relational, cultural, and ecological coherence eroded. This divergence has accelerated with rapid changes in technology, corporate influence, power and wealth dynamics.

Industrial–Technological Systems

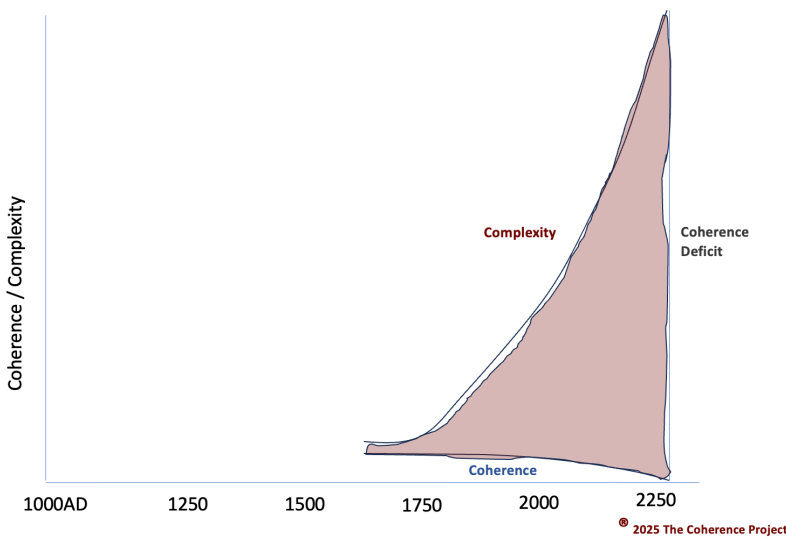


Fig-4. A conceptual representation of exponentially increasing industrial–technological complexity and sharp declines in human and institutional coherence (CDI).

Industrial and digital systems exhibit the fastest and most unstable growth in complexity.

Reinforcing loops dominate: unchecked technological capacity drives more connectivity, more speed, more dependence, and more volatility, while human and institutional coherence weaken.

The Complexity-Coherence Coefficient

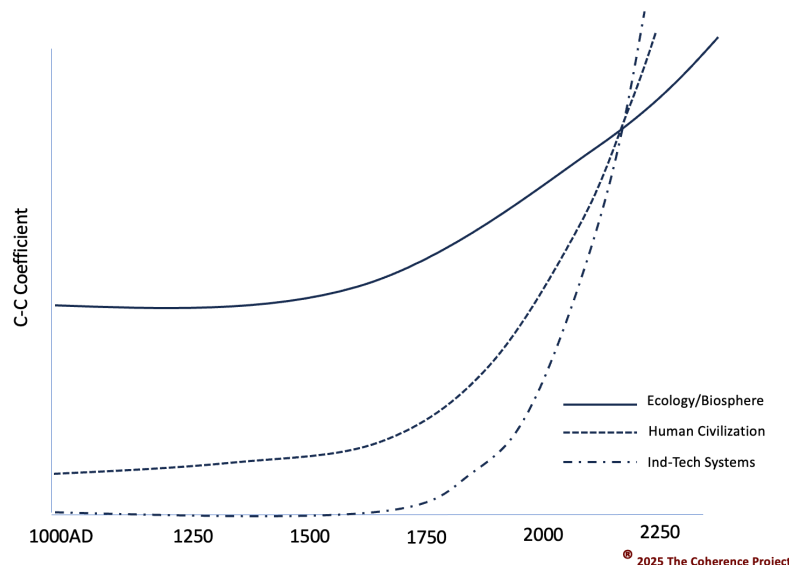


Fig-5. The Complexity-Coherence Coefficient (CCC). A derivative model showing the levels of Coherence Deficit (rising unstable complexity and declining coherence) over time across ecological, civilizational, and industrial– technological systems (CDI).

The Complexity-Coherence Coefficient is the synthesis of the earlier graphs: it shows a comparative frame for the widening Coherence Deficits of all three — the cumulative divergence that underlies rising collapse risk.

The Arc of Coherence and Extraction: How We Arrived at Overshoot

The Coherence Deficit did not appear suddenly. It is the accumulated result of two intertwined civilizational arcs: an **Arc of Coherence**, tracing how humans gradually drifted out of relational, ecological alignment; and an **Arc of Extraction**, tracing how reinforcing-loop systems grew in scale, speed, and destabilizing power.

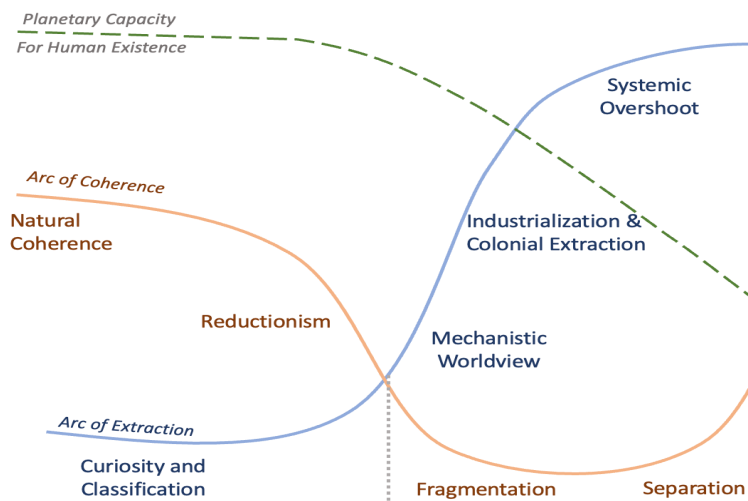


Fig-6. The Arcs of Human Coherence and Extraction. A rise of extraction-based complexity, a steady decline in human and ecological coherence, and a possible turn toward re-coherence.

Natural Coherence and Curiosity → Separation and Systemic Overshoot

For most of human existence, humans lived within ecosystems governed by balancing feedback loops. Social, ecological, and existential coherence were deeply connected — a state the graphic refers to as **Natural Coherence**.

Over millennia, this began to change.

- With agricultural societies, surplus and hierarchies came early reinforcing loops.
- With expanding states, organized religion, and empire came abstraction and role-based identity.
- With the scientific revolution and Enlightenment came **Reductionism**: life understood as parts rather than relationships.
- With industrialization came the **Mechanistic Worldview**: nature as resource, humans as operators, society as machine.

Across these phases — our incoherence and extractive condition flowed together:

Reductionism → Mechanistic worldview → Fragmentation → Colonial Extraction & Industrialization → Separation → Systemic Overshoot.

Human coherence declined as extraction has grown in accelerating fashion, just as it continues today. Our collective ways of sensing, relating, and orienting are now determined by the systems of extraction and economic imperatives that we had developed rather than through lived reality and real relationships.

This has culminated in where we find ourselves today: **Systemic Overshoot with no recourse to reverse course**. We have automated systems of reinforcing-loops that have outpaced the stabilizing capacities of both human societies and the Earth's ecological foundations.

Why This Matters Now

At this point, the central concern is not simply that the world is “more complex.” It is that:

- human civilization's coherence is in long-term decline, individually and collectively.
- the resultant incoherence is now shaping how we think, relate, and sense truth
- reinforcing-loops are amplifying this trend across social and industrial systems
- ecological systems are being pushed into their own destabilizing feedback

The Coherence Deficit is the structural indicator that these dynamics are converging. It tells us that:

- we, through our systems, are less able to sense and respond to reality
- feedback is not being perceived or is being overrun by narrative
- narratives are decoupling from conditions on the ground
- institutional action and ecological limits are increasingly out of sync

Many people talk about “collapse” in vague or apocalyptic terms. What this framework suggests is more specific: collapse becomes more likely when **incoherence deepens while unstable, reinforcing-loop complexity continues to rise.**

The emerging future we are stepping into now is continuing that dynamic across several fronts beyond climate, ecology, and population. From water scarcity, to mis-managed and unregulated artificial intelligence, to an economy increasingly leaving the ‘working class’ behind, to a culture of polarization, isolation, and distrust, to military conflicts that have no real end in sight as new ones rise to the surface of global awareness.

We find ourselves at a moment of global and possibly irreversible collapse. Where the tools that got us to this place will not move us beyond it. We need a meaningful response to this complexity that comes from within us. One that is aligned with the natural systems of life.

Presence as a Coherent Response

As we face the acceleration of reinforcing dynamics in our economic, social and increasingly the Earth’s environmental systems, perhaps it is time to step back to a different way of being and thinking rather than react from the ones that have brought us here.

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” - Albert Einstein

This quote isn’t just notional. It is history. Over the past 50 years of multi-national gatherings and reviews and publications, in the midst of accelerating species extinctions and temperature increases, receding glaciers and sea-ice, and increasing fires, floods, and other “natural” disasters, our systems and our part within them continue unabated. We collectively continue to

extract to feed the economic machine we invented, even as we set goals for ‘sustainability’, we continue to increase CO² emissions, even as we break through the 1.5C above pre-industrial temperature limit set just 11 years ago in the Paris Climate Agreement, and we continue to push ourselves into greater unhappiness and unhealthiness to function within the system, even as we clearly see the increasing trends of depression, suicide, and drug-abuse.

The root problem, and the ultimate solution, aren’t simply systemic. They aren’t technological. They aren’t economic.

The root problem and the root solution are the same: human consciousness and how thought and modern systems have overwritten our natural capacities for presence and orientation. Capacities that support our ability to live within Earth’s natural systems, as they had for hundreds of thousands of years. Capacities that are aligned with our natural systems, both within and around us. Capacities for Life-coherence.

Understanding and re-integrating more coherence into our lives offers a meaningful contribution for a viable path forward.

This is where **presence** becomes central — not just for our wellbeing, but as a practical basis for coherence in our individual lives and for our collective response:

- sensing what is actually happening in and around us
- feeling the relational and ecological patterns we are part of
- allowing meaning to form without rushing to premature conclusions
- orienting and moving in relationship congruently with what we know to be real

For some, this may look like slowing down enough to feel a genuine “no” when everything is pushing toward “yes.” For others, it may mean rebuilding a single relationship on more truthful ground. For all of us, it means learning to stay in touch with what is real, even and especially when the systems around us are not.

Presence is not the full regenerative arc, but it is the ground from which the arc can emerge. It is what allows coherence to begin rebuilding at the only place it can: within the lived moment, in the sensing body, in relationships grounded in reality rather than performance, and in actions that respond truthfully to what is here, rather than to the stories and fears we’ve adopted.

Presence restores the conditions for coherence. Coherence restores the possibility of relationships. Relationships restore the possibility of regeneration. And it is from this place that the practical exploration begins.

Some of these shifts are already visible in many fields: ecological restoration, Indigenous-led land stewardship, transitional governance models, local food systems, relational conflict resolution, and emerging regenerative economies. None of these alone constitute a civilizational solution, but together they point to a possible re-coherence pathway.

The path is viable. It requires a shift from within; a re-orientation for coherence.

Why This Understanding Matters

The Coherence Deficit shows us the structural conditions of collapse. We are moving along related arcs of extraction and coherence toward larger deficits, increasing incoherence and instability that feed off of each other. This loop is resulting in a complexity that is increasingly unnavigable.

Yet those structures don't just sit at a collective or global level. They scale all the way into how we operate as individuals – from how we pay attention to the stories that drive our behavior. Coherence is an individual attribute that scales up, rather a collective one that scales down. And it is with this understanding that we will begin to explore how the stories and qualities of attention operate within all of us.

In the next articles, we will explore how society has overwritten that coherence through the maps, mental models, deals and stories that we inherit and adopt, and how qualities of presence help to re-energize our capability to navigate life when those maps become increasingly misaligned with reality.

For more information on this article or the practice: contact@tcplife.com

ENDNOTES

1 - For research supporting the systemic rather than individual nature of these experiences, see Maslach on burnout as an organizational phenomenon, Case & Deaton on deaths of despair, Mark on attention fragmentation, and Putnam on social capital decline.