



# FROM ME TO WE: THE FIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL COMMITMENTS REQUIRED TO RESCUE THE PLANET, YOUR ORGANIZATION, AND YOUR LIFE

BY BOB DOPPELT



Economic breakdown, rising unemployment, and escalating political hostility, coming at a time of intensifying climate upheaval—storms, floods, heat waves, and droughts—have left us all confused and disempowered. Everywhere we look, the systems we depend on seem to be collapsing.

Our first reaction is to blame others for these problems, be they greedy Wall Street bankers, rapacious corporations, or dishonest politicians of either the conservative or liberal persuasion.

But here's some news for you. Playing the blame game is merely an ingenious avoidance technique. It allows us to place the focus outside of ourselves and steer clear of having to look at our own contribution to today's troubling situations. Don't get me wrong. I know some people and organizations do bad things. But we often project onto others the very things we need to examine in ourselves.

The economic, social, and environmental ills we face today are of our own making. They are the outcomes of how we see and respond to the world. Unethical corporations and disreputable politicians might seem to cause the most egregious harm, but they are merely taking today's dominant cultural perspectives to the extreme. The challenges our society faces today illuminate the changes we each need to make in ourselves.

To resolve a problem, you first need to understand its cause. The roots of our troubles are simple, yet for most of us completely hidden from view. We have been living in a dream world, controlled by false perceptions and beliefs. Our personal lives, as well as the activities of the organizations with which we are involved and society at large, have been guided by fundamental misjudgments about how our planet functions and what it means to live a good and decent life.

The most harmful illusion is that each of us exists on Earth as an independent, separate entity. This belief, now dominant in Western culture, has pro-

duced an extreme form of individualism. Most of us today believe in the "sacredness" of the individual. Anything that threatens our ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want, is seen as a danger to our economy, personal freedom, and way of life.

The belief in separation leads us to accept the notion that self-interest is the dominant driver of human behavior. This is false. A selfless concern for the welfare of others is also encoded in our genes. It is a powerful form of feedback that keeps the self-interested aspects of our personalities in check. By emphasizing only our selfish traits and denying our selfless qualities, we have denied our capacity for self-restraint and promoted behaviors that undermine the health of the planet and put billions of people in peril, including you and me.

Our belief in separation and the extreme individualism it has spawned is a fantasy—with startling consequences. It prevents us from seeing that we humans exist only due to the complex web of interlocking ecological and social systems that exist on Earth. Because we have failed to restrain our activities to conserve those systems, the Earth's surface temperatures are on a trajectory to rise by around 2°C, and possibly much more this century. If this occurs, the consequences will be disastrous. Temperatures might climb gradually, in fits and starts, for a while. But then sudden shocking changes that no computer model could ever predict are likely to occur. Rapid and chaotic climatic shifts will trigger destructive heat waves or long-term drought, followed by food shortages, resources wars, and maybe the destruction of a major city or two by rising sea levels or horrific storms. Without a swift, dramatic change in direction, the coming decades will be a wild and turbulent ride.

To navigate the troubled waters that lie ahead and eventually emerge in a healthier condition, we must overcome the erroneous perspectives that have led to this predicament. At the most fundamental

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level, this involves a shift from responding to the world exclusively through the perspective of extreme individualism—the lens of “Me,” which includes our personal, family, and organizational goals and desires—to meeting our needs by renewing and caring for an expansive “We”—the many people, organisms, and interconnections we are part of that make life possible and worthwhile.

As opposed to “first-order change,” which slightly improves the efficiency of a system without fundamentally changing its goals, structures, or ultimate outcomes—which is what most so-called sustainability initiatives focus on—the shift from “Me” to “We” constitutes a “second-order change,” which establishes altogether new and truly sustainable objectives, designs, and results. As we make this transformational shift, our personal awareness will increase and the fear and emptiness that pervade us will diminish. We can once again find promise, meaning, and inspiration in our lives.

Five powerful commitments can help you make the conversion from focusing exclusively on “Me” to consistently accounting for the many people, organisms, and interdependencies involved with an emphasis on “We.” None of the commitments is actually new. On the contrary, throughout human history, sages have proclaimed them to be universal truths. They are often discussed today in a disjointed way, and at times you might practice one or more of them.

Although not particularly complicated, these five commitments are profoundly important because they are based on “natural laws” of sustainability. These are universal truths about how humans must interact with the Earth’s ecological systems and with each other if we are to successfully transition through the rocky times ahead and emerge in a better condition.

Each of the commitments can be applied immediately. You don’t need to wait for other people or institutions to change. You and your organization only need to change your own thinking and behavior.

Each time you put the commitments into practice, the myths that have such a powerful hold on you will be weakened. You and the groups you engage with will then be better equipped to do your part to resolve the systemic breakdowns that threaten us all.

As you make the shift from “Me” to “We” that is at the heart of sustainable thinking and action, an extraordinary inner journey will begin that will radically change your life. Your optimism about the future and your self-confidence will grow. Hope and inspiration will be your hallmarks. You will become a beacon of light for others to follow.

### **The First Commitment: See the Systems You Are Part Of**

How do you see the world? Does your image include all of the things that actually exist on the

planet, or is your vision narrowly focused on your personal, family, or organizational needs and wants?

Most of us are not so self-centered as to say that we completely ignore the natural environment or other people. Nor will most people or organizations say they are always selfless and think only of others. But if your focus is mostly limited to your personal or organizational desires, then time and again you will think about little else and fail to see how your activities affect other people, the natural environment, or even yourself.

The difference between an expansive view of the world and a restricted perspective can be understood by looking up for a moment and taking several deep breaths. Feel the air as it fills your lungs. Can you explain what just happened?

Oxygen entered your body and sustained your life. Oxygen supports a process called cell respiration that turns food into energy. Oxygen also detoxifies your blood, strengthens your immune system, and rebuilds your body. Do you know how this oxygen came to be? About three-quarters of it was produced during photosynthesis in single-celled green algae and bacteria in marine environments. The remainder came from the same process in forests and other vegetation. Complex interactions occurring all around you created the oxygen that makes your life possible.

How conscious are you of these elaborate relationships? If you fail to consider the intricate web of interactions unfolding all around the planet, you will often act in ways that impair those life-giving forces. You will also create significant distress for other people—and, ultimately, for yourself.

We humans live in systems. You are a complex system yourself. Think of your heart, lungs, and the many other organs that work together seamlessly to keep your body running. You are also a member of numerous social systems, such as your family, place of work, community, professional societies, and fellow humans around the globe. Additionally, as the oxygen you just inhaled demonstrates, you are a part of the larger complex living system that is planet Earth.

The reality is that everything on the planet is created and sustained by something else. There is nothing that actually exists by itself. This is the Law of Interdependence. It is the most fundamental of all the natural laws of sustainability. It says that each of us exists in this world only as part of a complex web of interlocking systems. There is no truly separate “Me.” Each person is created and sustained by interconnected networks of ecological and social systems—a collective “We.”

Understanding the context in which you exist is essential for progress toward true sustainability. *The first and most important commitment you and the organizations you are involved with must make to*



*realize the shift from “Me” to “We” is to see the systems you are part of.*

What you see in the world is in large part shaped by your assumptions and beliefs. Your thinking, in turn, influences how you interact with everything around you. If you, and the organizations you participate in, desire to begin the journey from “Me” to “We” and thrive in the difficult times ahead, you must abandon your fictional belief in separateness and make a commitment to see the integrated nature of the systems you are embedded within. You must become aware of the context in which you exist.

Systems can be difficult to quantify. But you can map them. Drawing maps of the social, economic, and ecological systems you are part of can be a fun and helpful way to expand your awareness of systems.

Seeing the systems you are part of is only a first step in the transition from “Me” to “We.” You must now look deeper and understand how to think about the consequences of your outdated thinking and behavior on those systems.

### **The Second Commitment: Be Accountable for All the Consequences of Your Actions**

“We reap what we sow.” This timeless proverb means we determine our future by what we do in the present. There is no way to avoid this natural law. We cannot plant seeds of one kind and expect to reap fruits of a different type. Wise people throughout the ages have told us that this is so.

Science has described this principle as well. Newton’s Third Law of Motion says that, “For every action there is an opposite and equal reaction.” If we toss a stone into the air, it will fall to Earth every time. When we push over the first of a row of dominoes, it will fall on the next, which will tumble onto the next and, eventually, cause the entire chain to collapse. Our planet is composed of interlocking webs of systems, so almost everything we do today has a consequence of some type, somewhere, at some point in time. This is the **Law of Cause and Effect**.

The natural Law of Cause and Effect is closely connected to the Law of Interdependence. In fact, it is the flip side of that first law of sustainability because it describes the consequences that naturally occur when we fail to see and care for the Earth’s social and ecological systems.

Most people know that cause and effect exists. Yet those of us who grew up in Western nations were raised in societies that promote the notion of separation and extreme individualism. Personally and organizationally, we tend to focus almost exclusively on our own needs and wants—on “Me”—and deny, discount, or ignore the many ways in which our actions might affect the many systems we are

part of—the broader “We” that makes life possible and worthwhile.

*The second commitment you and the organizations you are involved with must make to realize the shift from “Me” to “We” is to be accountable for all of the consequences of your actions.*

As with systems, cause and effect relationships can be difficult to quantify. But they can be mapped. Tools such as “Fishbone” diagrams can help you understand the possible consequences of your actions.

Awareness is everything. The more mindful you become of the potential effects of your actions, the greater your awareness will become. Like the other commitments involved with the shift from “Me” to “We,” as other people and organizations make a similar commitment, our society will increase its understanding of the implications of our past and current practices, and take another step toward true sustainability.

### **The Third Commitment: Abide by Society’s Most Deeply Held Universal Principles of Morality and Justice**

Imagine, for a moment, that a genie suddenly whisks you away from your everyday life and makes you the world’s most powerful decision maker. At your fingertips is the most up-to-date information about the planet’s economic, social, and environmental conditions. You can use that data to make any type of decision you want about how resources and wealth should be allocated and how things should function.

But, there is a catch. The genie has also given you amnesia. You cannot remember your social status, nationality, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, how much money you have, or even who your parents or family are. Consequently, you don’t know what the effects of your decisions will be on you or your loved ones because you don’t know who you are or where you live. (This exercise is a slight variation of the “veil of ignorance” described by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, Belknap Press, 1971.)

Under these conditions, would you make decisions? Would you use as much energy, consume as many resources, or generate as much solid waste and greenhouse gas emissions as you do today? Would you seek to accumulate as much personal wealth or power?

Not likely. Instead, you would undoubtedly adopt a decision-making process similar to the universal moral principle known as the “Golden Rule” that says: “Treat others as you would like them to treat you.” In other words, you would no longer focus only on your own wants and needs but instead consciously choose to see things through the eyes of people all over the world because those “others” might include you! You would shift your perspective from “Me” to “We.”



As far-fetched as this scenario seems, it describes the reality of the world we live in today. Although you might never have omnipotent power, no matter who you are or where you live, you can be negatively affected by the actions of anyone on the planet at any time. Similarly, your activities, and those of the organizations you are a member of, can affect people around the globe as well as all future generations in surprising ways. To ensure your own well-being, you must therefore make decisions that enhance the well-being of everyone else.

Committing to seeing the social and ecological systems you are part of, and accounting for all of the ways your activities are likely to affect those systems, are necessary conditions for the shift from “Me” to “We.” But this is only a start. You must now decide on the moral principles that will guide your response to those consequences. What moral standards will you hold yourself to as you respond to the breakdown of the climate and biosphere and the social and economic distress they trigger? What principles of morality and justice will your organization base its activities on?

In today’s over-crowded, over-consumed, over-polluted, and over-heating world, morally just behavior is more essential than ever before. That’s because moral action is not based on philosophy or good intentions. It is based on real-world consequences. This is the **Law of Moral Justice**. This natural law of sustainability says that morally just behavior is imperative now because at this moment in history, our survival requires exemplary levels of human self-control, cooperation, and principled action. Without it, everyone will suffer, including you and me.

Although instinctual drives and the capacity to reason shape human behavior, the moral precepts we hold ourselves to determine how those processes play out. *The third commitment you and the organizations you are involved with must make to realize the shift from “Me” to “We” is to abide by society’s most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice.* The most widely held moral precept is to always strive to “do no harm” to the social and ecological systems we are part of.

If you commit to practicing moral justice by striving to do no harm, you can make the tough choices required to help society transition to true sustainability.

### **The Fourth Commitment: Acknowledge Your Trustee Obligations and Take Responsibility for the Continuation of All Life**

In 1972, the Apollo 17 astronauts took the first and most complete picture humanity had ever seen of

our planet—our home—as a whole. Referred to as “the Blue Marble,” the picture shows that there are no discharge pipes allowing us to dump our toxic substances, solid waste, and greenhouse gases into space. Everything we humans make—toxic and otherwise—accumulates somewhere in the land, waters, or atmosphere of our planet. There are no intake pipelines that allow us to import additional resources from other planets. When we deplete non-renewable resources, they will vanish forever. When we push the Earth’s climate and ecological systems beyond their limits, they are likely to flip into permanently degraded and, from a human perspective, unwanted conditions.

The cumulative effects of human activities on the Earth—especially those of the past 50–100 years—have led a number of scientists to proclaim that we have entered a new geological era called the “Anthropocene.” This term refers to the fact that, for the first time, humankind’s influence on the environment is so overwhelming that our activities, rather than natural processes, will now determine the fate of the Earth.

It is a universal moral principle that the more power one has over another, the greater is the duty to use that power benevolently. If human behaviors now determine the fate of the planet, individually and collectively, we have a responsibility to do what is necessary to sustain it. This is the **Law of Trusteeship**. This natural law of sustainability says that no one living today actually owns anything. We are merely trustees with a responsibility to administer the planet’s assets to ensure that they are sustained in a healthy condition into perpetuity.

Acknowledging that we are now trustees of all there is in the world is a difficult task for most people and most organizations. Our belief in extreme individualism, derived from the mistaken idea that we exist independently from all other organisms and processes on Earth, leads us to think that we have no responsibilities for anything beyond our organizations, our families, and ourselves. This belief is erroneous. *The fourth commitment you and the organizations you are involved with must make to realize the shift from “Me” to “We” is to acknowledge your trustee obligations and take responsibility for the continuation of all life.*

The commitment to acknowledge our trustee obligations and take responsibility for the continuation of all life emphasizes our selfless, cooperative, and caring instincts. It thus operationalizes the second of humanity’s most deeply held universal moral principles, which is to “do good.” The Golden Rule succinctly describes this commitment: “Treat others as you would like them to treat you.”

**The natural laws of sustainability and associated commitments are the fundamentals of the shift from “Me” to “We” embodied in sustainable thinking and action.**





## The Fifth Commitment: Choose Your Own Destiny

The natural laws of sustainability and associated commitments are the fundamentals of the shift from “Me” to “We” embodied in sustainable thinking and action. In summary, these laws state that our survival and the survival of all other life forms on Earth is possible only because we are enmeshed within a complex web of interdependent climatic, ecological, and social systems. Given the deteriorating conditions of the planet today, almost every action we take affects those systems somewhere, at some point in time. Our response to these consequences will be shaped by the moral principles we adopt to guide our thinking, behavior, and policies. Because human actions now determine the fate of the Earth, like it or not, each of us is a trustee with the responsibility to care for all life on Earth.

But there is one additional natural law that you must follow to make a successful shift from “Me” to “We.” This law is the key to your ability to abide by all of the others. It is the **Law of Free Will**. This law states that even though your perceptions and behaviors are strongly influenced by your upbringing, today’s dominant cultural worldview, and the physical, political, and economic infrastructure they produced, you have the capacity to change your thinking and practices at any time.

Humans are capable of self-awareness and independent thought. You have a natural ability to reveal, examine, and alter the core assumptions and beliefs that shape your life. This means that at any time, you can choose to abandon views that do not serve you well, keep those that do, and adopt new ways of seeing and responding to the world that pro-

duce substantially better outcomes. *The fifth and final commitment you and the organizations you are involved with must make to realize the shift from “Me” to “We” is to choose your own destiny.*

If you choose to make the shift from “Me” to “We,” you can start by acknowledging the natural laws of sustainability and decide to abide by the commitments here. Likewise, the organizations you are involved with can choose to create a culture of accountability for sustainability organized around the five commitments (see “The Five Commitments”).

All social change happens one person at a time. This means there is only one way to alter the trajectory of the troubling conditions the world faces today, and that is for you to make the shift from “Me” to “We.” You must see for yourself the truths inherent in the natural laws of sustainability and the power of the five commitments. As more people see the world in new ways, social contagion will occur. If you focus on the broader “We” that makes all life possible, and think and act sustainably, great peace and happiness will be yours. You will also become a role model that others will follow. ■

**Bob Doppelt** is executive director of The Resource Innovation Group (TRIG), a non-partisan social science-based sustainability and global climate change education, research, and technical assistance organization affiliated with the Center for Sustainable Communities at Willamette University, where he is also a senior fellow. In addition, Bob is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Planning, Public Policy, and Management at the University of Oregon. He is the author of *Me to We: Five Commitments That Can Save The Planet and Change Your Life* (Greenleaf Publishing, 2012).

THE FIVE COMMITMENTS	
Natural Law of Sustainability	Commitment
<b>Law of Interdependence</b>	See the ecological, social and economic systems of which you are part
<b>Law of Cause and Effect</b>	Be accountable for all of the consequences of your actions on those systems
<b>Law of Moral Justice</b>	When responding to those consequences abide by society’s most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice
<b>Law of Trusteeship</b>	Respond to those consequences as well by acknowledging your trustee obligations and taking responsibility for the continuation of all life on the planet
<b>Law of Free Will</b>	Break free from the false beliefs that control your life and your organization and choose your own destiny