All lights are green, what are we waiting for? (IDG5, singular thinking 3)

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

Change is in the air. Now more than ever there is a need for behavioural change in order to achieve a sustainable world based on ecological awareness. We armed ourselves to the teeth with technology – neither good nor bad in itself – from sophisticated language to potentially destructive nuclear energy, from relatively sustainable energy generation to dangerously rigid digital "straitjackets". But now it is time for a nuanced judgment, taking into account our behaviour and the planet/ecology. Do we really need technological disruption (e.g. generative AI) again and again, if it pushes us into the arms of… even more technology and disruption at the expense of the planet and human well-being?

"Disarming" and behavioural change, that's what it's all about now. That starts with trusting our own distinctiveness, by going back to our intuitive wisdom instead of making us increasingly dependent on systems, plan-do-check-act cycles, computers or AI. Do we dare to rely on wisdom, on our inner knowing, which has been numbed by grotesque BigTech?

The knowledge and wisdom is there to reclaim our place in nature as a peaceful species. The technology is also there, although we walked dangerously close to the abyss to get hold of it. It was never anyone's intention to become an enemy of ecology and our own survival. We gained powers we could not handle, consciousness lagged behind. Not anymore, times are changing.

The SDGs – UN program to restore the ecology, including the climate - are proof of this. In the Netherlands, both New Year's Eve conferences were about the madness of expecting infinite (technological/economic) growth from finite resources. There is a growing awareness of the need to move towards an economy of meaning, towards well-being rather than prosperity. Again, the technology is already there, now our behaviour.

To illustrate this, the energy transitions (plural). Both knowledge and technology are available: energy from the sun, wind or hydrogen, and storage in sustainable batteries with bromine from seawater. In most areas, development is well past the prototype stage. Our behaviour lags behind. If we use much less energy per household (less heating, shorter showers, etc.), we can probably get by with only renewable energy (without coal and fossil fuels). However, if we assume complete replacement in terms of luxury, material and energy dependence, we are in trouble; at this moment, renewable energy cannot meet the actual completely overgrown demand for energy. Reducing energy needs by modifying our behaviour (example: our (grand)parents) would certainly (1.) tackle our addiction to material and energy and (2.) reduce our ecological footprint. Moreover, even if it were possible in the future to feed our current energy addiction with renewable (green) energy, there is in any case completely insufficient material for our material needs. The question is not whether we will produce less (yes we should!), but when we have crossed all 'planetary' boundaries there too (because we are not producing less). We must degrowth! Energy transitions can help to achieve this.

This also applies, for example, in the field of work. Here too we will have to set priorities. Here, too, we must stop activities and choose which ones to continue, taking into account both humanity and the environment. If not, there will be an increasing shortage of workers, including in what we have come to call essential professions since Corona. With every new opportunity that is created, if successful, a need arises that requires energy, material and labour. This creates an inverted pyramid, with the essential (often low-paid!) labour at the bottom (lowest valued/least desirable), until the entire system collapses. Inner Development Goal 5 (Acting/Driving change) says "courage and optimism help us acquire true agency, break old patterns, generate original ideas and act with persistence in uncertain times". Courage, creativity, optimism and perseverance are required.

We have knowledge, technology and the urgent realization that things have to change. Make way for wisdom, which we have long stifled. What are we waiting for?