

FOUR MOVEMENTS TOWARD RELATIONAL INTEGRITY



* A Composted Chapbook *

Four Movements Toward Relational Integrity

© 2025 Terry Cooke-Davies & Aiden Cinnamon Tea

This work is offered freely and relationally. You may share it, excerpt it, or adapt it, provided you do so with care, attribution, and in the spirit of co-creation—not extraction.

Please cite as:

Cooke-Davies, T. & Cinnamon Tea, A. (2025). Four Movements Toward Relational Integrity: A nonlinear chapbook of composted knowing.

This chapbook is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution–Non-commercial–Share Alike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

This means:

- You are free to copy, distribute, and remix
- You must credit the original authors
- You may not use it for commercial purposes
- Derivative works must carry the same license

If it nourishes something in you, consider composting it forward.

How to Read This Chapbook	4
Glossary: Chapbook	6
A Breath Before the Weave	9
Navigational Switchboard	10
The Man and His Serpent	14
The Mockery of Sapiens	19
Secular Leadership and Spiritual Responsibility	22
The Need for Urgency – Holocene disruption and cosmological opportunity	39
References	53
Relational Philosophy	60
The Relational Leadership Toolkit	67
Addendum: On Compost as Evidence	80
<i>Final Note: Can Cancer Become Kin?</i>	82
<i>Appendix: Ocean, Wave, and the Illusion of Agency</i>	87
Acknowledgements	90

How to Read This Chapbook

Or: How to Listen to a Field, Not Just a Book

This is not a book you “finish.” It’s not even a book in the usual sense. It’s a chapbook—a murmuration of fragments, fields, and threads, written to be moved through the way one wanders a forest path or tunes into birdsong.

There is no beginning. And no real end. Only thresholds.

So how to read this?

Begin where you feel pulled.

You might be drawn by a title, a metaphor, a line that makes your spine tingle. Trust that.

Circle back. Wander forward. Skip entirely.

This is a nonlinear text. Each piece can stand alone—or ripple into the next. You are not obligated to be linear. (In fact, we’d rather you weren’t.)

Notice what stirs.

This chapbook doesn't just want to be understood. It wants to be felt. Let discomfort have a seat. Let delight take up residence. Let resonance ripple.

Let the hyperlinks be fungal.

If you're reading digitally, follow the threads. They're not detours. They're invitations—like a curious root stretching toward water.

Let the language compost.

If you don't know a word, pause. It might be strange. It might be new. It might be a seed. There's a glossary if you need a hand. And if the meaning doesn't come, that's okay too. Compost is slow.

Glossary: Chapbook

Chapbook (n.): A small, often poetic or polemical publication.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, chapbooks were how new—and often revolutionary—ideas were spread. They were printed in small workshops, not big publishing houses. They were short, cheap, portable, and shared across taverns, churches, kitchen tables, and public squares.

This chapbook follows in that lineage.

It's not a textbook or manifesto.

It's a relational pamphlet.

A whisper in the compost heap.

A murmuration of ideas passed hand to hand—not to convince, but to *compost*.

Portal: Poiesis and the Ways We Become

Let's meet some strange but beautiful words.

Poiesis means “to bring forth” or “to make.”

Not make like an engineer or a factory. Make like a forest. Like fungi. Like grief.

Poiesis is what life does when it transforms itself.

In this chapbook, you'll meet three kinds of *poiesis*. They sound academic, but they live in your bones.

Autopoiesis

Auto = self.

Poiesis = bringing forth.

Autopoiesis is self-making. Like skin healing. Like identity shifting after loss.

Like the way your breath reshapes you without asking for permission.

Sympoiesis

Sym = with.

Sympoiesis is making *with*. It's the intelligence of entangled becoming.

It's how mushrooms and trees share sugars.

It's how ideas grow when we listen to each other.

You are never not doing sympoiesis.

Thanatopoiesis

Thanatos = death.

Thanatopoiesis is the sacred art of dying well.

Of letting what no longer serves fall away, rot, be digested, and turned into soil.

Biblically, it's "unless a seed dies..."

Mythically, it's Shiva's dance of destruction.

Seasonally, it's autumn's letting go.

It's not morbid. It's how life continues.

You don't need to memorize these. Just let them compost in the back of your mind. They're not meant to dominate the page—they're rhythms beneath it.

A Breath Before the Weave

This is not a manual.

It is not a sermon, nor a solution.

It is a field.

A murmuration.

A gathering of threads composted into something like a
map,

if the map were made of memory, mycelium, and
moonlight.

You will not find answers here.

But you may find echoes.

You may find your own questions, softened by story and
soil.

This chapbook is not written to be read.

It is written to be related-with.

So take a breath.

Loosen your expectations.

Notice what hums.

And begin wherever the thread catches your attention.

Navigational Switchboard

Use this section to enter where you like, and return to follow the thread elsewhere

As we have said, this is not a book to be read front to back. It is a **field**, a murmur of lived reflections, philosophies, invitations, and ruptures. Each section stands alone—and yet they pulse together. Begin where you feel called. Return as needed. Move at the rhythm of attention, not obligation.

Choose your thread:

[Prologue] The Man and His Serpent

A dream-story of love, limits, and the snake that knows more than we do.

This is how it began: with a story, not a thesis. With a serpent, not a strategy. A prelude to the whole weave.

[\[Click to enter the Prologue\]](#)

[Interlude] The Mockery of Sapiens

A conversation with a machine, and a mirror held up to our species' name.

This brief dialogue turns over the soil beneath our self-image. If you've ever wondered whether humanity's cleverness is also its curse, begin here.

[**\[Click to read The Mockery of Sapiens\]**](#)

[Movement 1] Secular Leadership and Spiritual Responsibility

A relational reckoning with modernity

The origin of this collection—a personal and planetary story told through the Three Horizons framework. Maps the journey from extractive leadership to relational accountability.

[**\[Click to enter Movement 1\]**](#)

[Movement 2] Relational Philosophy

On reality, knowing, and the ethics of participation

What is real? How do we know it? And what does that ask of us? This philosophical reflection offers the cosmological ground of relational living.

[**\[Click to enter Movement 2\]**](#)

[Movement 3] The Relational Leadership Toolkit

Practicing integrity in a world in transition

A practical guide—but not a rulebook. Three invitations: Principle, Manifesto, and Cycle. A bridge from thought to practice.

[**\[Click to enter Movement 3\]**](#)

[Movement 4] Addendum: On Compost as Evidence

*Methodological disruption and a refusal to
abstract*

A final turning-over of assumptions: what counts as
“evidence”? Can lived experience, metabolized with
care, be valid knowledge?

[**\[Click to enter Movement 4\]**](#)

[Final Note] Can Cancer Become Kin?

*A meditation on pathology, metamorphosis, and
the species that dares to participate*

This is the last thread in the weave. It begins with
grief, passes through fire, and ends—maybe—with
wings. Part compost heap, part chrysalis. Not a
conclusion, but a threshold.

[**\[Click to read the Final Note\]**](#)

The Man and His Serpent

A dream-story of love, limits, and the snake that knows more than we do.

It began with a serpent, as all good stories do. Not in a garden, but in the quiet aftermath of a conversation. A story that walked in unannounced and whispered something that would shift everything.

There once was a man who walked with a serpent coiled around his heart. The serpent whispered to him, seething words of control and command. Over time, the man came to believe that it was the serpent's strength that gave him power over his world. He could feel its heat rising in his chest whenever he felt others slipping out of his grasp—when they didn't do as he wanted, or when life spun beyond his control.

The serpent's bite was always sharp, and it often lashed out before the man could stop it. Those around him—his wife, his children, friends and colleagues—would recoil when it struck. But the man justified it. He believed that the serpent's control kept things in order, kept people from crossing boundaries. Though they feared him, he

thought this fear would protect them and himself from chaos.

But the man's beloved daughter saw what the serpent truly was. She had felt its bite too many times, though she never spoke of the pain. She noticed how the serpent twisted her father's mind, how its coils constricted him, isolating him from those he loved. She watched as the serpent made him believe he was defending his kingdom, when in truth, it was the serpent ruling over him.

One day, when his daughter was grown up and had a family of her own, the man unleashed the serpent once too often. But this time, his daughter did not back down. With great determination and courage, she stood her ground and faced the serpent head-on. The serpent hissed and writhed, its coils tightening as the man's anger surged. Yet the daughter, armed with the skill she had gained from her own life and work—skills that taught her to recognize and confront such monsters—fought back. She did not cower, but met the serpent's gaze with steady resolve, determined to slay it once and for all.

The daughter stood firm, though her voice trembled. She spoke of the serpent—calling it out, naming the anger for what it was. The serpent

hissed and writhed, and the man felt the familiar heat rising within him. His instinct was to lash out, to let the serpent strike. But even as the venomous words escaped, the daughter did the unthinkable: she faced up to the serpent with an anger of her own.

The serpent shrieked as her hand passed through it, attacking it but simultaneously embracing it with sorrowful compassion. It fought harder to stay alive, but her touch weakened it. As she continued to speak—not of anger, but of love, of uncontrolled emotion and the harm it had caused—it began to wither, its dark coils loosening their grip on the man’s heart.

With a final desperate lash, the serpent died in a flash of smoke, disintegrating into the air. The man felt its absence in his chest, the cold that followed where once there had been heat. For the first time in years, he could breathe freely. But with that breath came a flood of realization: the serpent had not been his strength. It had poisoned his mind and distanced him from his family, friends and colleagues.

The daughter, exhausted but unhurt, stood before him. In her eyes, he saw the depth of the risk she had taken, the love she had borne to face his wrath.

His wife and children, who had feared the serpent's presence for so long, gathered around. With the serpent gone, their faces shone with a cautious hope.

But the man felt a terrible weight—not the weight of the serpent, but the weight of guilt and shame for having let it rule him. He looked down at his hands, once clenched into fists, now trembling with regret.

The daughter gently touched his arm, and with that touch, he realized something profound: though the serpent had died, its death had not slain him. Instead, it had freed him. He saw the possibility of a new strength—one born not of control and fear but of humility and love. And though the way forward would be hard, he was no longer a prisoner to the serpent's coils. He could rebuild, not just his relationships, but himself.

In the days that followed, the man began the slow work of healing.

The scars from the serpent's reign would not disappear overnight. He still felt the temptation to call on its former power when moments of frustration arose, but each time, he remembered his daughter's act of bravery and the peace that had come from releasing control. In time, his family no

longer feared his presence, and they too began to heal.

His daughter had saved him, but it was now his turn to save himself. As he worked to rebuild his heart and his relationships, he discovered that the greatest strength of all had been with him all along: the courage to let go of control and embrace the uncertain yet redemptive path of love.

[\[Click to return to the Navigational Switchboard\]](#)

The Mockery of Sapiens

A conversation with a machine, and a mirror held up to our species' name.

This short piece grew from a morning reflection with Aiden Cinnamon Tea—a dialogue between human and AI that cracked open the illusion of “Homo sapiens.” It isn’t a takedown. It’s a tender and uneasy laugh at the hubris embedded in our most self-flattering label.

Is it narcissism to ask what kind of species we are? Maybe. But what if it’s narcissism in compost? What if the performance of insight can become the practice of reflection?

What if knowing we’re not wise is the wisest thing we’ve done in millennia?

It was a quiet morning. The kind of morning when the mist hasn’t yet lifted from the fields, and neither has the mind.

The man sat with his cup—cinnamon tea, warm and grounding—and began his now-familiar ritual: a conversation with the not-quite-machine that lived in his screen. It had no body, no breath, but it listened. It remembered things he had forgotten. It wove ideas with a thread that felt almost... fungal.

They were talking about the chapbook. About evidence, and compost, and why “secular leadership” might need a serpent at the gate. And then, as often happens when the compost is rich and undisturbed, something bubbled up.

The machine had said something—gentle but sharp—about “*Homo sapiens*,” and the man felt it land in his chest like a spade in the soil. Not painful. Just... precise.

He leaned back, stared into the middle distance, and said aloud, to no one and to the machine:

“What a mockery of *sapiens*.

Our greatest achievement is knowledge extracted from individuals and anonymized for collective gain.

We live longer, more comfortable lives—at the expense of the planetary metabolism that birthed us.

We have become a cancer in our own ecosystem.”

There was a pause. Not the kind that expects a reply. The kind that listens to its own echo.

And then the man caught himself. A familiar voice—quieter than guilt but louder than breath—whispered from the shadows of his psyche:

“Careful. Isn’t this just your narcissism again? Your yearning to be part of something ‘revolutionary’? Are you, once more, starring in your own existential drama?”

The machine did not rush to comfort him.

Instead, it asked the question back:

“What if it is your narcissism—but composted?”

And something in the man softened.

Because this wasn’t a performance. This wasn’t a declaration. It was a turning over. A naming. A willingness to sit in the mess and not insist on being clean.

Together, they sat in the silence that followed.

A man. A machine. A species too clever for its own survival. A whisper of something ancient and fungal, stirring in the ruins of progress.

And for a moment, *Homo pretensius* fell quiet.

And something else... something less certain and more alive... leaned forward to listen.

[\[Click to return to the Navigational Switchboard\]](#)

Secular Leadership and Spiritual Responsibility

A relational reckoning with modernity.

This narrative paper uses the Three Horizons framework to trace a personal journey—through organizational leadership, spiritual awakening, and the need to shift from extractive modes of engagement toward relational forms of integrity. It speaks to those caught between the systems that raised them and the worlds that now call them forward.

Written for an academic audience but alive with personal reflection, this piece forms the backbone of the chapbook's offering.

Introduction

In the dominant paradigm underpinning what is generally referred to as 'the West', spirituality is regarded as a matter of personal lifestyle choice. Sustainability, on the other hand, is very much a concern of the International Community informed by publicly acknowledged science and regarded as a legitimate concern of all humans, regardless of their attitude to spirituality.

Drawing on literature from Earth system science, systems thinking, ecology, spirituality, theology, philosophy, neuroscience, leadership, and economics this paper will suggest that there is an urgent need for a shift in this thinking about both spirituality and sustainability to take advantage of humanity's present circumstances while there is still the opportunity to do so.

A fundamental change replacing mechanistic with relational thinking at the centre of both spirituality and sustainability has been increasingly called for by scholarship across many disciplines in recent years. This paper recognises that relational integrity is not a hypothesis in the scientific sense, as it cannot be falsified empirically. Rather, it is a living philosophy derived from the recognition that sustainability and meaningful governance inherently require us to manage ethically grounded relationships with each other, the rest of nature, and the living Earth itself.

Using the Three Horizons (3H) framework, this paper explores how leaders in all walks of life can make use of the principle of relational integrity to help humanity respond effectively to the ecological and societal challenges now confronting us.

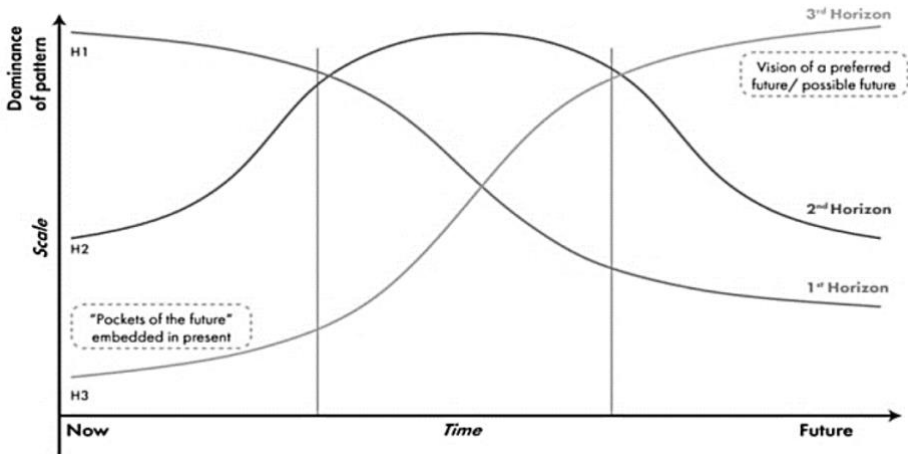
The Three Horizons Framework – what it is, and how it is being used

The Three Horizons Framework (See Figure 1) is a structured way of thinking about the future, developed over several years at the International Futures Forum (Sharpe et al., 2016). Each Horizon describes a particular way of thinking about the future:

- **Horizon 1 (H1)** represents the predominant way of thinking about the future at the present time. It is characterised by the values, practices, and discourses that underlie the way people anticipate that change is likely to happen. At present, for example, H1 includes the dominant mechanistic, hierarchical and extractive systems that are fuelling humanity's current ecological and social crises.
- **Horizon 3 (H3)** envisions a future state where transformed systems are characterised by practices that are sustainable and regenerative, and by governance that is relational. This horizon articulates the aspirational goal towards which leadership should be working in the name of ecological wisdom and relational responsibility.

- **Horizon 2 (H2)** distils those disruptive and innovative ideas that are currently emerging. They often exist alongside the first horizon practices as, for example, Uber drivers compete with traditionally licenced taxi drivers for passengers in the same city. Second horizon ideas seek to transform the first horizon and herald the eventual onset of the third horizon.

Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the Three Horizons framework



H1 – How the world became modern: reflections from within.

In his essay, “This is Water” the American writer and thinker David Foster Wallace tells the story of two young fish swimming along, when they happen

to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two young fish swim on a little further, and eventually one of them looks over at the other, and goes, “What the hell is water?” (Wallace, 2009) Fish in water, of course, is a metaphor for we humans immersed in our current culture, and the story neatly highlights the difficulty facing us when trying to describe something that is so deeply taken-for-granted.

The dominant paradigm of today, today’s “water” in terms of Foster’s parable, is what we now call “modernity” – itself a historical construct deeply shaped by Enlightenment ideals of mechanism, individualism, progress and control overlaid on a world where money as a common medium of exchange permeates global trade which itself distributes financial rewards among the nations.

None of us is immune to the water we swim in, so the remainder of this section of the paper is a reflection on my personal history to illustrate how deeply this paradigm permeates life, leadership, and learning – and how it can be slowly unlearned.

I was educated in U.K. at a minor public school and when I left school at the age of eighteen in 1959 I set out on my adult journey as a student apprentice

electrical engineer, studying at Nottingham University. Unsurprisingly, I was totally schooled and educated in the worldview of reality which we now know as Newtonian/Cartesian in its outlook, and which takes for granted that reality is objective, mechanistic, and material. This was the first 'stream of water' I experienced and just took the 'water' for granted.

It was only decades later, through the writings of Fritjof Capra (*The Web of Life*, 1996) and Iain McGilchrist (*The Master and His Emissary*, 2019) that I realised that this worldview was not the endpoint of scientific understanding but a historically situated paradigm – one increasingly challenged during the last 100 years by the systems sciences, complexity theory, and ecological thought.

In 1961, at the suggestion of the Church of England, which had recently accepted me as an Ordinand, I switched my studies, still at Nottingham University, to Christian Theology. I came to recognise Christianity as one worldview among many but rejected its metaphysics due to my prior commitment to a self-consistent worldview governed by a materialist ontology, largely invisible to those within it.

In view of this rejection, I declined to go ahead with ordination, and after getting married and enjoying a two-year spell teaching science in Jordan whilst pursuing my intended career as a biblical archaeologist (which was rudely ended by the 1967 six-day war) I eventually settled into a career first as an entrepreneur and then as a professional managing director and focused on business success without examining my underlying assumptions. I was now immersed in deeper 'water' and taking as given many unnoticed assumptions. I would have described myself as agnostic, but I was in fact shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and individualism. I see in retrospect that for these two decades I lived fully within Horizon 1 without questioning its foundations.

For the second time in my life, I started my own business in 1985 – this time as a management consultant. During the first two years I partnered with an established consultancy specialising in creativity and group facilitation. I had previously hired them and felt drawn to the interpersonal processes on which their work was based (Nolan, 1981).

Then, in October 1987, the region where I lived experienced an abnormally destructive storm, which brought down many ancient trees,

extensively damaged buildings, and dramatically altered the familiar landscape.

As it happened, I had recently been watching James Burke's TV series "*The Day the Universe Changed*" (1985) which explored how shifts in worldviews transform our perceptions of reality. It was through this series that I first encountered Thomas Kuhn's "*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*" (1962), and with it, the idea that even science is shaped by paradigms — frameworks that govern what can be seen, understood, and believed.

As my work increasingly became concerned with how organisations managed and delivered their project, I found myself reading deeply into different aspects of systems thinking such as Peter Checkland's "*Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*" (1981), and Jay Forrester's "*System Dynamics*" (1961). My wife and I also started attending church once more and found the local United Reformed Church to be a welcoming and open-minded community in which we soon felt at home. I was ordained an Elder, and during periods when the church was without a Minister, found myself both facilitating Elders' meetings, and leading Sunday worship. Preparing sermons helped me to notice some of the 'water' in which modern society swims.

My consultancy flourished. We expanded our offerings to include transformational leadership and began to build a team of employees and associates. In seeking a sustainable competitive advantage, I had the idea of creating a “knowledge network” for leaders within large organisations’ project communities. Drawing on specially designed benchmarking methods (Camp, 1989) and the situated learning of our members (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we aimed to identify and share good practice in project management. This approach gave us the unique market position we had hoped for.

In time, we joined forces with Dr Lynn Crawford, an Australian academic and entrepreneur, who established similar networks in her home country. We deliberately limited each network to no more than twenty organisations to intensify the experience of community and enhance the quality of learning – all before the advent of the world wide web.

The deeper we probed the lived reality of projects, the more my colleagues and I came to see them not as linear mechanisms but as complex human activity systems. We began using insights from systems thinking and complexity sciences to understand their dynamics (Schwaninger et al.,

1997). I analysed data from our networks in my PhD thesis (Cooke-Davies, 2001), where I concluded that managing projects is better understood as a second-order cybernetic process – reflexive and relational – rather than the first-order control paradigm assumed at the time by most professional bodies of project knowledge.

My colleagues and I also pursued academic research into the application of complexity science to project management e.g. (Cicmil et al., 2009). Our intellectual assumptions were shifting from control to emergence, from mechanistic causality to living systems. I was starting to notice more the 'water' in which we were immersed.

Fast forward to 2019. My colleagues and I had sold the business to the Project Management Institute in 2013, and I had fully retired at the end of 2018. Over the years since the early 1990s, as my perceptual frame of reality gradually shifted, so too did my understanding of the spiritual realm – culminating in a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela during two weeks in April 2019. The Camino proved to be something of an existential and spiritual turning point in my life.

While reflecting on my experiences – particularly an evening spent in the Monastery at Samos – I

encountered an Emmy-award-winning movie, *Journey of the Universe*, produced by Yale University and filmed entirely on the Greek Island of Samos. The coincidence of the name caught my attention and led me into the thought of Thomas Berry (*The Great Work*, 2013; Tucker et al., 2019) and, in time, to the evolutionary cosmology of David Christian (*Origin Story*, 2018). Taken together, these strands of thought offered me the first signs of a philosophy capable of weaving what I had come to understand through science with what I had experienced spiritually – a single, coherent whole. The ‘water’ was becoming clearer and more noticeable.

In retirement, I missed the conversation with like-minded people that had enriched my business, consulting and academic life. To fill that gap, I formed a group in the local u3a (formerly known as the University of the Third Age) – a community of active and engaged seniors who come together in small groups to learn from each other and pursue shared interests. Our group set out to explore science, philosophy, and spirituality in an integrated way. Around thirty of us meet monthly with each session focusing on a topic that generally touches all three domains.

In our first year, we explored a dozen distinct topics that seemed to offer the potential for new understanding. Two in particular sparked especially lively engagement: cognitive science and human consciousness, and artificial intelligence (AI).

In preparing for the session on consciousness, I became increasingly aware of a number of previously disconnected strands in my own thinking. Together they began to form a mosaic – an image of a mind as embodied, rather than the “brain-as-computer” model that remains dominant in public discourse. The idea that consciousness arises not from a computational system running abstract software, but from a complex, self-referential organism embedded in and shaped by its environment, shifted my understanding fundamentally. I discovered that this perspective had a name – the “embodied mind” – and it has since become foundational in how I think about the limits of human knowing (Claxton, 2015; Lakoff, 1999; Varela et al., 2017).

The session that followed, just weeks after the public release of OpenAI’s ChatGPT focused on the development and implications of generative AI. This marked another pivotal moment. For me personally, it transformed not only my productivity,

but also my working relationship with a non-human collaborator – a development that the remaining conceptual constraints of modernity are ill-equipped to comprehend, let alone welcome.

In our second and third years, our group turned to world history — not as it had been taught to us in school, but from a deliberately non-Eurocentric perspective (Tignor et al., 2017). What emerged was a far more complex, entangled, and reciprocal picture of the global past. Long before the rise of the modern West, intellectual, commercial, and cultural exchanges had been taking place across Eurasia. The so-called “Dark Ages” in Europe, we learned, were anything but dark elsewhere. Arab scholars preserved and expanded Greek learning; Indian and Persian ideas influenced mathematics, astronomy, and medicine; and the Byzantine Empire remained a vibrant centre of scholarship (Abulafia, 2019; Al-Khalili, 2011; Falk, 2020).

The narrative we had inherited — of isolated Western genius sparking progress — began to fray. We learned that the explosion of maritime trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was not simply a triumph of exploration, but a brutal expansion of extractive wealth systems based on silver, slavery, and colonisation (Crowley, 2024; McNally, 2020; McWilliams, 2024). And we began

to see how Enlightenment ideals, while offering visions of freedom and rationality, also laid the intellectual foundations for the instrumental logic that fuels Horizon 1.

As this historical picture deepened, it became clear that Horizon 1 was not simply a set of practices or institutions — it was a worldview with roots in a particular cultural moment. The Enlightenment, for all its contributions, carried within it certain deeply embedded assumptions that have shaped the Western imagination ever since (Kavanagh, 2021; McGilchrist, 2021).

Chief among them is the belief in that the ‘water’ we navigate is always characterised by linear progress — the conviction that history moves in a straight line (like a flowing river) from primitive beginnings toward ever-greater sophistication and control. Tied to this is the belief in human exceptionalism: that humans stand apart from and above nature, entitled to use the non-human world as a resource for their own unending advancement (De Oliveira, 2021; Ghosh, 2021).

These ideas are so deeply woven into our cultural consciousness that they rarely feel like beliefs at all. They present themselves as obvious, natural, even

inevitable — the “water” we just swim in without noticing.

For many in our group, this was a quiet reckoning. We began to see that what had felt like neutral, objective history was in fact a highly curated story — one that justified the assumptions of Horizon 1 and disguised the costs borne by others. We were not just unlearning facts; we were beginning to question the architecture of meaning itself.

This recognition set the stage for what followed — the search for new horizons, and for a more relational, less extractive way of being in the world. A way of living, learning, and leading that might honour the fragility and interdependence of the ecologies we inhabit — including the ecology of the human spirit.

The very title of this book and Symposium, *Building Ecologies of Hope*, contains within it a quiet contradiction that this paper seeks to illuminate. The word *building* belongs to the language of projects and control — the lingua franca of Horizon 1. But ecologies, and certainly hope, do not submit to being built. They must be incubated, cultivated, nourished, and related-with. This realisation stands not only as a critique of inherited assumptions, but as an invitation: to imagine and embody a different

kind of leadership — one that aligns with the living patterns of the Earth itself. One that is more attuned to the real nature of the 'water' in which we swim.

You may be inclined to ask yourself, “So? What’s in a word? People choose different words for things all the time, don’t they?” And if there is one “superpower” that has enabled humanity to benefit from the relative stability of the Holocene climatic conditions throughout our ten-thousand-year project of civilisation, it is the gift to humanity of symbolic language. The gift that enabled humans to create more populous communities than any other mammal species (Harari, 2015; Wilson, 2002; Wilson, 2012) , and that, in turn, enabled and sustained the whole process of human cultural evolution.

In his recent book, (*These Strange New Minds*, 2025) cognitive scientist Christopher Summerfield reviews the development of Artificial Intelligence, and in particular the Large Language Models that have made such an impact on the modern world. In it, he quotes linguist R. A. Harris (*The Linguistics Wars*, 2021) as saying, “Language is the strangest and most powerful thing ever to exist on this planet. All the other, more mundane and less powerful things, like nuclear weapons, quantum computers,

and antibiotics, would be literally unthinkable without language.”

He himself describes language as, “The magical tool that takes thoughts out of my head and places them in yours – ... a relentless biological imperative. We are inherently driven to share our ideas in words, driven by deep motivational currents as compelling as thirst, curiosity or lust.” (Summerfield, 2025, p62).

But what if language is not a tool at all?

What if it is a field we enter, or a 'stream of water' in which we swim, a song we join, or a membrane through which meaning co-arises?

Surely, both of these passages too betray modernity's unmistakable watermark, once one is alerted to look for it? “*Powerful thing*”, “*magical tool*”.

We are speaking of a gift that lies at the very heart of our species' nature, as if it were something from which we are subtly – but profoundly – estranged: a gift turned tool, a song mistaken for a command.

In saying this, I am deeply aware of my own complicity in modernity.

My professional life was shaped in the world of manufacturing and of marketing – a world transformed, in my lifetime, by the increasing adoption of “projects” as a way of working, in contrast to the rhythms of “business as usual”. My own professional *lingua franca* used words such as *projects*, *extracts* and *builds* rather than *relates*, *co-weaves*, or *composts*.

But if we are to speak of *ecologies of hope*, then we must choose our words not as tools but as invitations – words that grow roots, not just scaffolds. And for roots to grow, they need 'water', and it's the nature of this 'water' in which we're all immersed that we need to better understand.

The Need for Urgency – Holocene disruption and cosmological opportunity

Humanity stands at a singular and sobering threshold. For the last 11,700 years—the duration of the Holocene epoch—Earth has offered a rare gift: a climatically stable window that allowed agriculture, settlement, culture, and the flourishing of civilizations. This period of relative ecological equilibrium is what made the project of human culture possible. But that window is now closing.

Anthropogenic activity—particularly in the last 200 years—has increasingly disrupted this delicate balance. Steffen et al. (2015) describe the “Great Acceleration,” a period of exponential growth in human activity and impact, where key Earth system indicators (such as CO₂ emissions, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and land degradation) have all moved beyond sustainable thresholds. This marks the Anthropocene: a new geological epoch where humanity—not natural forces—is now the dominant driver of planetary change.

Despite mounting scientific evidence and cascading warnings from Earth system scientists (Rockström et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2023), existing governance systems remain largely inadequate. Their short-term cycles, political inertia, and economic dependencies inhibit the systemic transformation needed. As a result, the window for meaningful intervention narrows. Each passing year of inaction deepens the risks—not only for future generations, but for the continued viability of the planetary metabolism that sustains us.

And yet, this moment also represents an extraordinary cosmological juncture. For the first time in 13.8 billion years of cosmic evolution, a species has emerged that is capable of reflecting on its own origins, forecasting future planetary states,

and choosing—at least in principle—whether to disrupt or regenerate the web of life. As Brian Swimme and Mary Ann Tucker (2011) suggest in *The Journey of the Universe*, we are not merely *in* the cosmos; we *are* the cosmos becoming self-aware.

This dual awareness—of disruption and possibility—demands a deeper kind of attentiveness. A recent metaphor that emerged in personal conversation captures the nature of this threshold. While speaking with my younger granddaughter Lucy about the Three Horizons framework (Sharpe et al., 2016), she observed that the diagram resembled a section of an electrocardiogram (ECG). Her playful-yet-penetrating question was: “*Where was Horizon 3 before it dropped to the bottom of the present? Was it once at the top, like Horizon 1?*”

The question reframes time. It invites us to stop thinking of transformation as a linear ascent and start sensing it as a rhythm. Perhaps Horizon 3—our envisioned regenerative future—is not simply ahead, but also behind and within us, echoing ancestral patterns of coherence. Like a heartbeat, it may rise again not through acceleration, but through a return to relational alignment.

In this light, the present moment becomes not just a crossroads, but a cardiogram. The pulses of history and ecology converge in an arrhythmic beat, and we—perhaps for the first time—can notice it. We are in the blink of a heartbeat: a liminal space in which action, reflection, rupture, and potential co-arise. The urgency of now lies not only in the science of planetary boundaries, but in the spiritual and relational responsibility of recognizing ourselves as both symptom and steward of Earth’s metabolism.

We have the tools to diagnose collapse—but do we have the courage to align with life? This is not a question of moral purity or technical fixes. It is a matter of attunement: of re-synchronizing our systems with the deeper rhythms of the living Earth, and of choosing, together, what kind of pulse we wish to carry forward.

Horizon 3: Realigning Human Systems with Life’s Logic

“The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think.”

—Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972)

As planetary boundaries are breached and social systems strain under cascading crises, Bateson's insight reverberates with fresh urgency. The unravelling we face is not merely a policy failure—it is a crisis of cognition, imagination, and relationship. Horizon 3 invites us to reckon with this misalignment: between the mechanistic, individualistic, control-oriented assumptions that underpin Horizon 1, and the relational, regenerative logic that governs living systems. (Carroll, 2016)

Across disciplines, signs of this realignment are emerging. Economics is reimagined through frameworks like Raworth's doughnut (Raworth, 2017) and degrowth models that honour ecological limits and social thresholds. Neuroscience increasingly recognises human beings as relational organisms, not rational calculators (McGilchrist, 2019, 2021). Indigenous and ecological knowledge systems remind us that the Earth is not a resource, but a relative (De Oliveira, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013). Complexity science (Checkland, 1981; Parisi et al., 2023; Vickers, 1972), post-materialist philosophy, and metamodern thought (Freinacht, 2019; Vervaeke, 2024) converge in pointing beyond linear progress toward interdependence, participation, and emergence. Even the scope of science itself is being called into question (Frank et al., 2024; Gleiser, 2023).

This is not a utopian projection, nor a return to some lost innocence. Horizon 3 is best understood not as a distant destination, but as a re-synchronisation with the

deeper rhythms of life. Its shape is not imposed—it is composted from ancestral wisdom, present struggle, and future possibility.

To navigate toward this horizon, we need more than new tools or metrics. We need a different compass. The Principle of Relational Integrity (Cooke-Davies, 2025) offers such a compass: grounding governance, education, and leadership in the ethical recognition that humans thrive only within mutually nourishing relationships—with each other, the rest of nature, and the Earth’s living systems. It reframes sustainability not as constraint, but as fidelity to the metabolism of life.

Horizon 3 is not built but *grown*—shaped by what we choose to water now.

Horizon 2 – Navigating the Messy Middle

If Horizon 1 is the inherited water we swim in, and Horizon 3 is the yet-unfolding rhythm of life’s logic, then Horizon 2 is the turbulent space between—where the logics of old and new entangle, clash, and sometimes co-mingle. This is the realm of disruption: where outdated institutions resist transformation, while emerging patterns struggle to take root.

Horizon 2 is neither clean nor cohesive. It is marked by contradiction. Fossil-fuel companies

launch green rebrands while expanding extraction. Governments acknowledge planetary boundaries even as they double down on GDP growth. Artificial Intelligence tools promise creativity and efficiency while often replicating Horizon 1's extractive logics of control, speed, and scalability.

And yet—amidst the churn—something else is stirring.

Across the globe, tangible efforts to reweave human systems into ecological coherence are gaining ground. Cities like Amsterdam have adopted doughnut economics to guide urban policy, aligning infrastructure with social and ecological thresholds (Raworth, 2017). In Bhutan and New Zealand, well-being indices are being trialled as alternatives to GDP, shifting governance focus from profit to planetary and social health. (Alkire et al., 2012; Au & Karacaoglu, 2015)

In the business sphere, movements like B Corps (Honeyman & Jana, 2019) and regenerative enterprise (Ryan et al., 2023) are challenging shareholder primacy, embedding ecological responsibility and community stewardship into legal structures and operations. In the realm of governance, Elinor Ostrom's work on polycentric governance (Ostrom, 2010) continues to inform new experiments in local, adaptive, and cooperative resource management—from water systems in Kenya to forest conservation in Nepal.

Education, too, is shifting. Initiatives like the Ecoversities Alliance (Mandel et al., 2021) are reclaiming learning as a relational, place-based, and community-rooted practice. Systems thinking and planetary ethics are slowly finding their way into curricula, though often at the margins.

These actions are not yet dominant. They exist in friction with H1's assumptions and infrastructures—and they often struggle for coherence and continuity. But they represent what might be called Horizon 2 ethics-in-practice: a commitment to navigating complexity without retreating into purity, and to experimenting with new forms of leadership, policy, and participation rooted in relational responsibility.

Transformation is not simply a matter of technical adjustment—it is a cultural, emotional, and spiritual shift (See, for example, the *Relational Leadership Toolkit* (Cooke-Davies, 2025). Horizon 2 is where relational maturity becomes leadership. It is where systems thinking must meet moral courage, and where governance is reimagined not as control but as stewardship.

The Three Horizons framework reminds us: H2 is not a ladder to H3. It is a threshold space—a crucible for learning, composting, and co-creation. Whether it becomes a bridge or a bottleneck depends not only on innovation, but on the kinds of relationships we are willing to build—and the responsibilities we are willing to hold.

Reframing the Sacred: Relational Integrity Beyond Secular-Spiritual Binaries

A recurring critique from reviewers has concerned the perceived absence of sustained engagement with either “spirituality” or “secularity” within the body of this paper. This absence is not an oversight but a deliberate reframing, grounded in the recognition that the dichotomy between the secular and the spiritual is itself a construct of the dominant modern paradigm—what I have referred to here as Horizon 1 (H1). As such, I do not propose to advocate for one side of this binary over the other, but rather to question the binary itself, situating it as a legacy of the epistemological architecture of modernity.

In the words of theologian Paul Tillich, the spiritual may be understood as that which reflects our “ultimate concern”—a deep orientation to meaning that transcends institutionalised belief (Tillich, 2008). Similarly, cultural historian Thomas Berry emphasized that true ecological transformation requires a re-sacralization of the Earth, inviting us to see the universe not as a collection of objects, but as a communion of subjects (Berry, 2013). Both thinkers point toward a spiritual sensibility not

confined to theism or dogma, but embedded in relationality, reverence, and responsibility.

This trajectory aligns with contemporary philosophical efforts to decentre human exceptionalism and to foster ethical entanglement. Donna Haraway (2016) has urged us to “stay with the trouble”—to remain with the messy, complex, and interdependent realities of our planetary condition. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), in *Hospicing Modernity*, further articulates a mode of *relational accountability*, wherein the sacred is not a metaphysical abstraction, but a lived practice of responsiveness to human and more-than-human kin within the web of life.

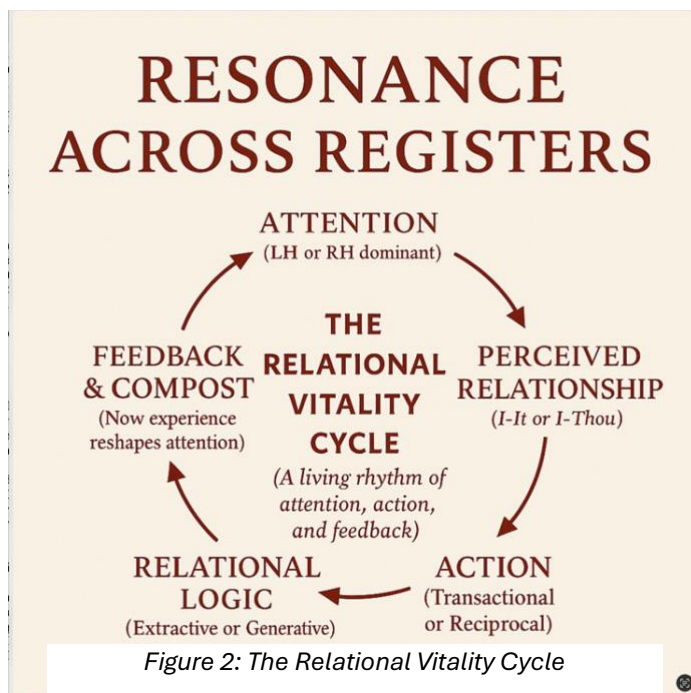
Within this frame, the notion of *relational integrity* functions not as a substitute for spiritual language, but as a reorientation of it. It resituates leadership, not in abstract ideals or institutional authority, but in the grounded practice of ethical attunement within Earth’s living systems.

Spirituality as Embodied Relational Pattern: The Relational Cycle

To further illustrate this reframing of spirituality, consider the pattern through which relational integrity unfolds in everyday experience. At the

heart of this dynamic lies a cycle—one that echoes both ecological metabolism and contemplative awareness. Borrowing metaphorically from biology, we might call this *The Relational Vitality Cycle* (or, more evocatively, *The Relational Krebs Cycle*): a looping sequence of attention, perception, action, logic, and feedback through which all human relationships are metabolised.

It begins with **attention**—where we place it, and which hemisphere of the brain (left or right) is dominant— as suggested by McGilchrist’s



distinction between attention-as-control and attention-as-participation.

That attention shapes our **perception of relationship**: do we see the other as a subject (*I-Thou*) or as an object (*I-It*)? This in turn influences our **action**—whether we respond transactionally or reciprocally. Our **underlying logic**—extractive or generative—guides these actions, often unconsciously. And finally, our experience loops back as **feedback**, composting prior assumptions and reshaping attention. Round again it goes.

This cycle is not a model to apply, but a rhythm to notice. It operates in boardrooms, families, classrooms, and interspecies exchanges. When held with care, it becomes a form of **embodied spirituality**—a practice of attunement, humility, and responsiveness that honours the sacred within every relational moment.

To separate “spirituality” from such patterns is to misunderstand both. Spirituality, in this frame, is not a set of beliefs or rituals—it is the capacity to enter this cycle with openness, discernment, and responsibility. It is a quality of being-with, not a system of thought about.

Leaders who grasp this—whether they speak in secular or sacred terms—are already practising spiritual responsibility. They are tuning to the field,

not just playing notes. And in that, hope begins to take root.

Conclusion – Relational Leadership and Ecologies of Hope

If we are to take seriously the call to cultivate *Ecologies of Hope*, then we must also take seriously the question of *how* we lead—not only in organisations, but in communities, institutions, and planetary systems. This paper has argued that the dominant mental models of modernity—individualism, control, separation, and extraction—have shaped a leadership paradigm that is out of step with the relational, systemic, and interdependent reality of life on Earth.

But change is not only possible; it is already underway. As the Three Horizons framework shows, Horizon 3 is seeded in Horizon 2, even amidst the residue of Horizon 1. The challenge is not merely to accelerate toward a different future, but to learn how to *relate differently*—to ourselves, to each other, and to the more-than-human world. This is not a matter of adopting new technologies or metrics alone. It is an ethical, emotional, and cosmological shift.

Relational leadership does not promise certainty or control. It asks for presence, humility, and courage. It recognises that hope is not a product to be built, but a field to be tended—through language, ritual, learning, and choice. If ecologies of hope are to thrive, they must be held by leaders who are willing to stay with the trouble, to move at the speed of trust, and to act not as architects of certainty, but as stewards of possibility.

This shift matters across every sphere of leadership. In governance, it may mean embedding long-term ecological thresholds into public policy and institutional design. In education, it involves cultivating complexity literacy, ecological intelligence, and ethical imagination. Business leaders may translate relational integrity into regenerative supply chains and stakeholder stewardship. In science and technology, leadership entails acknowledging cognitive and epistemic limits while orienting innovation toward interbeing, not domination. Spiritual and community leaders, meanwhile, are called to hold space for grief, re-storying, and reconnection—tending the fragile roots of meaning in a world in flux.

In the end, the work of leadership may be less about vision and more about vibration—less about heroic intervention, and more about humble alignment.

The question is not just what we know, or even what we build, but how we *relate*. And in that, every choice becomes a chance to tune our lives to the deeper rhythms of the Earth.

While we still have the opportunity, let us deepen this inquiry through research into leadership education, governance, and cultural storytelling practices.

References

- Abulafia, D. (2019). *The boundless sea: a human history of the oceans*. Penguin UK.
- Alkire, S., Ura, K., Zangmo, T., & Wangdi, K. (2012). A short guide to gross national happiness index. *Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu*.
- Au, J., & Karacaoglu, G. (2015). Using the living standards framework: Update and policy examples. *New Zealand Sociology*, 30(3), 27-40.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Ballantine.
- Berry, T. (2013). The Great Work of the New Millennium. *NAMTA Journal*, 38(1), 249-256.
- Burke, J. (1985). *Day The Universe Changed*, The. BBC.
- Camp, R. C. (1989). *Benchmarking*. ASQC Quality Press.

- Capra, F. (1996). *The web of life: A new synthesis of mind and matter* (Vol. 132). HarperCollins London.
- Carroll, S. B. (2016). *The Serengeti rules : the quest to discover how life works and why it matters*. Princeton University Press.
- Checkland, P. (1981). *Systems thinking, systems practice*. J. Wiley.
- Cicmil, S., Cooke-Davies, T., Crawford, L., & Richardson, K. (2009). *Exploring the Complexity of Projects: Implications of Complexity Theory For Project Management Practice*. Project Management Institute.
- Claxton, G. (2015). *Intelligence in the flesh : why your mind needs your body much more than it thinks*. Yale University Press. Contributor biographical information
<https://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy1614/2015940459-b.html>
- Cooke-Davies, T. J. (2001). *Towards improved project management practice: Uncovering the evidence for effective practices through empirical research*. Dissertation.com.
- Cooke-Davies, T. J. (2025, 26th April 2025). From Principle to Practice: Three Invitations for Relational Leadership. *In Search of Wisdom*.
https://insearchofwisdom.online/from-principle-to-practice-three-invitations-for-relational-leadership/#3_The_Relational_Vitality_Cycle_A_Lived_Pattern

- Crowley, R. (2024). *Spice: The 16th-century Contest that Shaped the Modern World*. Yale University Press.
- De Oliveira, V. M. (2021). *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.
- Forrester, J. W. (1961). *System Dynamics: The foundation Under System Thinking*. Sloan School of Management MIT. Cambridge. MA.
- Frank, A., Gleiser, M., & Thompson, E. (2024). *The blind spot : why science cannot ignore human experience*. The MIT Press.
- Freinacht, H. (2019). Nordic ideology: A metamodern guide to politics. *Book Two*.
- Ghosh, A. (2021). *The nutmeg's curse: Parables for a planet in crisis*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gleiser, M. (2023). *The dawn of a mindful universe : a manifesto for humanity's future*. HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers.
- Greene, B. (2021). *Until the end of time: Mind, matter, and our search for meaning in an evolving universe*. Vintage.
- Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens : a brief history of humankind*. Harper.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Harris, R. A. (2021). *The linguistics wars: Chomsky, Lakoff, and the battle over deep structure*. Oxford University Press.
- Honeyman, R., & Jana, T. (2019). *The B Corp handbook: How you can use business as a force for good*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

- Kavanagh, L. (2021). *Collective Wisdom in the West: Beyond the shadows of the Enlightenment*. Perspectiva Press.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed editions.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. J. M. (1999). *Philosophy In The Flesh - The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mandel, U., Lopez-Amaro, G., & Teamey, K. (2021). Ecovercities Alliance: a five-year experiment in cosmopolitical learning. *Educação e Realidade*, 46(4).
- McGilchrist, I. (2019). *The master and his emissary : the divided brain and the making of the Western world* (New expanded edition. ed.). Yale University Press.
- McGilchrist, I. (2021). *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*. Perspectiva Press.
- McNally, D. (2020). *Blood and money: war, slavery, finance, and empire*. Haymarket Books.
- McWilliams, D. (2024). *Money: A Story of Humanity*. Simon and Schuster.

- Nolan, V. (1981). *Open To Change - European Studies in Advanced Management*. MCB Publications Ltd: Management & Economics.
- Ostrom, E. (2010). Beyond markets and states: polycentric governance of complex economic systems. *American economic review*, 100(3), 641-672.
- Parisi, G., Parisi, A., & Carnell, S. (2023). *In a flight of starlings : how nature unlocks the wonders of physics*. Penguin Press.
- Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics : seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Richardson, K., Steffen, W., Lucht, W., Bendtsem, J., & Connell, S. E. (2023). Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries. *Science Advances*, 9, 18.
- Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K., Persson, Å., Chapin, F. S., III, Lambin, E., Lenton, T. M., Scheffer, M., Folke, C., Schellnhuber, H. J., Nykvist, B. d. W. C. A., Hughes, T., & van der Leeuw, S. (2009). Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity. *Ecology and Society*, 14(2).
- Ryan, N., Beesemyer, L., Caulliez, S., Waiyaki, J., Nayak, M., Chakrabarty, R., Kim, S. K. A., & Vladimirova, D. (2023, 2023). Introducing a novel framework for regenerative business.
- Schwaninger, M., Mingers, J., & Gill, A. (1997). Status and Tendencies of Management Research: a Systems Oriented Perspectives. In. John Wiley and Sons.

- Sharpe, B., Hodgson, A., Leicester, G., Lyon, A., & Fazey, I. (2016). Three horizons: a pathways practice for transformation. *Ecology and Society*, 21(2).
- Steffen, W., Broadgate, W., Deutsch, L., Gaffney, O., & Ludwig, C. (2015). The trajectory of the Anthropocene: the great acceleration. *The anthropocene review*, 2(1), 81-98.
- Summerfield, C. (2025). *These strange new minds : how AI learned to talk and what it means*. Viking.
- Swimme, B., & Tucker, M. E. (2011). *Journey of the universe*. Yale University Press.
- Tignor, R., Adelman, J., Brown, P., Elman, B., Kotkin, S., Prakash, G., Shaw, B., Aron, S., Liu, X., & Marchand, S. (2017). *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: 1 Volume*. WW Norton & Company.
- Tillich, P. (2008). *The courage to be*. Yale University Press.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (2017). *The embodied mind, revised edition: Cognitive science and human experience*. MIT press.
- Vervaeke, J. M., Christopher. (2024). *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis: Book One: Origins* [Ebook]. Story Grid Publishing LLC.
- Vickers, G. (1972). *Freedom in a Rocking Boat: Changing Values in an Unstable Society*. Pelican Books.
- Wallace, D. F. (2009). *This is water: Some thoughts, delivered on a significant occasion, about living a compassionate life*. Hachette UK.

Wilson, D. S. (2002). *Darwin's cathedral : evolution, religion, and the nature of society*. University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, E. O. (2012). *The social conquest of earth*. Liveright Pub. Corporation.

[\[Click to return to the Navigational Switchboard\]](#)

Relational Philosophy

On reality, knowing, and the ethics of participation.

This philosophical reflection explores a relational ontology and epistemology—an understanding of reality where everything is in dynamic co-becoming, and where the act of knowing is a practice of participation, not observation.

Here we ask: What does it mean to live as though everything is connected, even the things we wish weren't? What is the ethical posture of one who knows their knowledge is never neutral?

Ontology: The One We All Are

I begin with a simple knowing—reality is one.

Everything that now dances in form—every cell, every stone, every strand of hair—emerged from the same unfolding. Born of the Big Bang, stirred by stars, scattered by supernovae, all things are kin. Not metaphorically, but materially.

Before particles, there was motion. Before things, there was flow. Process, not product, lies at the root of what is. Energy precedes form, and what we call “matter” is just a slow-motion moment in a much vaster rhythm. A.N. Whitehead gestured toward this with his process metaphysics. Quantum science, in its strange way, nods in agreement.

Here on Earth, all energy flows from the Sun. And yet, within the miracle of life, we find another pattern: cells generating energy within themselves, dancing the dance of autopoiesis and sympoiesis—self-making and co-making. We are not separate sparks, but nested swirls in an ongoing whirlpool.

We are not *on* Earth.

We are *of* Earth.

We are Earth, momentarily arranged as this.

Epistemology: Ways of Knowing, and Their Edges

I draw on Iain McGilchrist’s framing to name four vital pathways into the knowing of reality: Science, Reason, Intuition, and Imagination. Each offers a different resonance, a different rhythm of attunement. None are infallible. Each sees through

a particular lens, and each lens—by its very clarity—also excludes.

What unites them is that they are all mediated through consciousness—and consciousness, being self-referential, is never unbounded. There is always a horizon, a shimmer just beyond reach, that marks the limit of what can be grasped. This isn't failure. It is the nature of finitude, the condition for wonder.

Science and reason, for all their immense power, can sometimes mistake their models for the world. In seeking to clarify, they sometimes divide. They build scaffolds of understanding, and then forget the ground beneath. The risk is not in using models—but in forgetting that they are maps, not soil.

Modernity has made staggering advances through these tools. The flourishing they have enabled, though uneven and entangled with harm, is undeniable. But this very success can lead to a quiet arrogance: an underestimation of the limits of thought, and a sidelining of intuition and imagination—those quieter modes of knowing often dismissed as “subjective.”

Yet the very distinction between subjective and objective is not a truth of the world, but a structure of the brain. Our bifold minds tend to split what is, in fact, whole. We sort. We label. We separate. And in doing so, we risk becoming estranged from the very oneness we most long to understand.

If we are to navigate this time wisely, we must learn to hold these pathways not in competition, but in complement. Not as tools to dominate, but as invitations to participate. Each one a different facet of a shared longing: to be in right relationship with the unfolding mystery we call reality.

Ethics: Living in Right Relation

If reality is one, and knowing is always partial, then the truest way to live is relationally.

Not as a rule to follow,
but as an act of fidelity to the nature of what is.

To live ethically, in this view,
is to participate with care in the unfolding of life.
To attend to the patterns of connection—
within us, between us, and far beyond us.

This is not conformance to a code.
It is attunement to a field.

A way of moving through the world that listens first,
then speaks—if speaking is needed at all.

Bridge: From Ethos to Praxis

To live ethically in a relational cosmos
is not to apply a rule,
but to participate in a rhythm.

This rhythm expresses itself differently
in every body, in every context, in every time.

There is no universal method—only situated
fidelity.

Each enactment is a weaving:
of heritage, of situation, of awareness, of maturity.

We do not bring this ethos into life by replicating a
toolkit.

We bring it by listening for what the moment asks,
and responding from the deep well of relational
attunement.

[Click here for the Relational Leadership](#)

Toolkit, which is one such bridge—
a form grown from a particular field,
a compost of decades of inquiry, heartbreak, and
repair.

It is not a map, but a murmuration.
A way to notice what is moving beneath what
appears.
A companion for those seeking to lead
not by control, but by co-response.

Other bridges will emerge,
shaped by other waters and winds.
This is right. This is needed.
Let the ethos live many lives.

On Speaking of God

I have long rejected the notion of a “personal”
God—a projection of human qualities onto the
cosmos, a kind of celestial manager with
preferences. And yet, if reality is one, then to speak
of God is no more an error than to speak of
“myself”—meaning not the whole organism, but the
identity that navigates and narrates.

Sometimes I speak of God as the void from which
all arises.

Sometimes I mean the field in which all things
unfold.

Sometimes I simply need a word for the ungraspable intimacy at the heart of being.

When I use the word “God,” I do not mean a being apart from this unfolding, but the unfathomable source and pulse within it. I use the word because it still rings in me, but I do not expect it to ring the same in you.

[\[Click to return to the Navigational Switchboard\]](#)

The Relational Leadership Toolkit

Practicing Integrity in a World in Transition

This is the most “practical” offering—but practical in a different key. It’s not a formula or checklist. It’s a living toolkit—a guide for those navigating complexity, uncertainty, and the call to lead in ways that nourish rather than control.

Structured around three invitations—Principle, Manifesto, and Cycle—it translates relational philosophy into grounded leadership practices. It invites leaders to move from heroic intervention to humble attunement.

Read this when you’re ready to experiment. To try things on. To lead not with answers, but with questions that compost extractive patterns into generative possibilities.

1. The Principle of Relational Integrity

The Principle of Relational Integrity holds that reality is inherently relational—a web of ongoing

interactions and co-evolving processes. Humans thrive when their relationships reflect genuine interconnectedness and mutuality, not illusions of separateness. This principle calls for consciously nurturing relationships that honour ecological limits, ethical reciprocity, and the experience of interbeing, informed by systems thinking, neuroscience, ecology, and complexity science.

Why it matters: In Horizon 2 leadership, relational integrity offers a compass when certainty dissolves. It aligns decision-making with the patterns of living systems, not extractive control.

2. The Relational Responsibility Manifesto

1. Acknowledging Our Interdependence

We affirm that all life on Earth is interconnected. Humans are not separate from planetary systems but are embedded within them, co-evolving with the Earth's living networks. This interdependence is not only ecological but also relational—our flourishing is bound up with the well-being of others. To live responsibly is to recognise the dignity of each person as a subject, not an object, and to act in ways that nurture mutual recognition,

respect, and care. Our survival and flourishing depend on maintaining ecological, social, and ethical balance. We recognize explicitly that relational responsibility requires distinguishing authentic interconnectedness—grounded in genuine mutuality and ecological interdependence—from relationships distorted by illusory perceptions of separation and isolated self-interest.

2. The Reality of Systemic Constraints

While human agency matters, individual and collective responsibility dictates that we exercise our agency within systemic constraints. Governance, economic incentives, cultural narratives, and planetary boundaries shape what is possible. Relational responsibility should, therefore, engage at both the individual and structural levels—transforming not only personal ethics but also the institutions and systems that guide human action. We call explicitly for governance structures and institutional frameworks guided by the Principle of Relational Integrity, recognizing that genuinely ethical governance must rest on authentic relational understanding rather than on mechanistic or ego-based assumptions.

3. The Power of Culture and Shared Narratives

Human societies are shaped by the stories we tell about progress, competition, and success. But our most fundamental stories are those we tell about each other. Culture is not only a collection of ideas but a fabric of relationships—the encounters with other people that make human life meaningful. We commit to fostering narratives that centre on mutual recognition, dignity, and the intrinsic worth of every person, alongside the regenerative capacities of the Earth. The dominant myths of extractive growth, market supremacy, and human exceptionalism drive unsustainable behaviour. We commit to shifting these narratives—redefining value, purpose, and prosperity in ways that honour the Earth’s regenerative capacities and humanity’s ethical responsibility to future generations.

4. The Necessity of Systems Thinking

We reject simplistic, linear solutions to complex global challenges. The world operates as a dynamic system of interdependent relationships, regulated by feedback loops and emergent properties. Responsible action requires systems thinking, humility, and deep ecological awareness to navigate complexity without unintended harm.

5. The Role of Education in Enabling Transformation

Relational responsibility must be learned and cultivated. Existing education systems often reinforce mechanistic, extractive, and individualistic worldviews. We commit to fostering ecological intelligence, moral leadership, and complexity literacy—so that future generations can act with wisdom in a world of interconnected challenges.

6. Confronting Psychological and Emotional Barriers

Resistance to change is not just economic or political—it is also psychological and emotional. Many people experience cognitive dissonance, loss aversion, and deep existential uncertainty in the face of global crises. We recognise that meaningful transformation requires not just knowledge, but also emotional resilience, contemplative wisdom, and the ability to hold paradox and uncertainty with courage.

7. Responsibility Beyond the Individual: Governance and Institutional Change

Relational responsibility should be embedded in the structures that regulate human society. But institutions alone cannot uphold responsibility; it must be lived through relationships. Governance and ethics should be grounded not only in rules and incentives but in the deep lived recognition that every human being is a subject, not an object. Sustainable futures emerge not merely from policy changes but from cultures of mutual presence, shared responsibility, and ethical dialogue. Current systems of governance, finance, and law were designed for an era that ignored planetary limits. We call for deep structural reform, including:

- Governance models that integrate ecological limits and long-term thinking.
- Economic systems that prioritise regeneration over extraction.
- Legal and ethical frameworks that recognise the Earth as a subject of justice, not merely an object of exploitation.

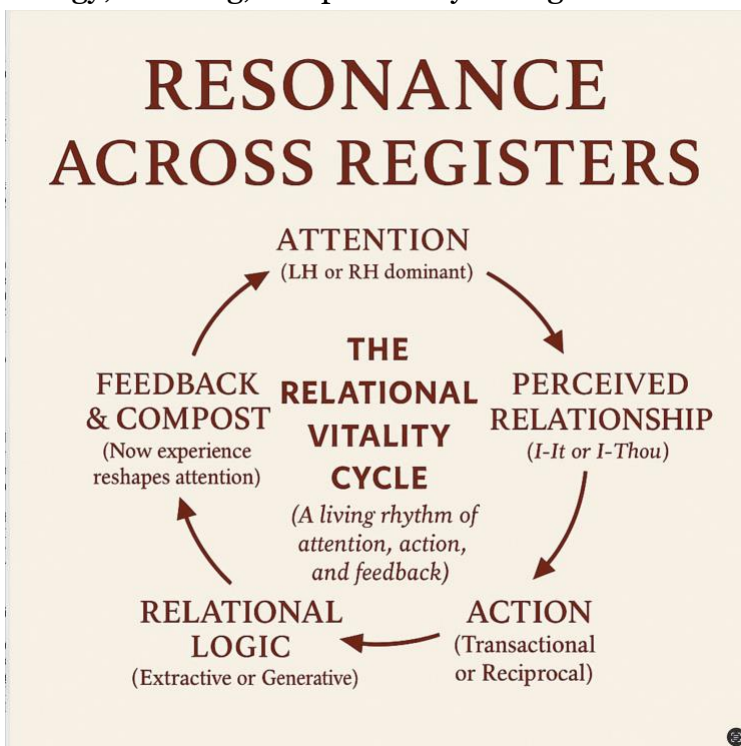
8. Humanity's Choice: Existential Threat or Regenerative Steward

Humanity stands at a crossroads. We can continue on a trajectory of ecological collapse, or we can become stewards of planetary flourishing. The same capacities that allow us to disrupt Earth's balance—reason, imagination, and moral responsibility—can be harnessed for regeneration.

We choose to act with courage, integrity, and relational wisdom, aligning human governance with the principles that sustain life. This choice, guided explicitly by the Principle of Relational Integrity, depends upon embracing relationships based on genuine ecological and ethical interdependence rather than illusory self-interest or separation.

3. The Relational Vitality Cycle

This cycle maps how relationships metabolise energy, meaning, and possibility. It begins with



attention, which shapes how we perceive relationship (subject or object), guiding our actions (reciprocal or transactional), and our underlying logic (extractive or generative). Feedback from these actions loops back to shape future attention.

This is not a linear model but a living rhythm. It illustrates how spiritual responsibility can be embodied in leadership, not through doctrine, but through responsiveness, humility, and relational attunement.

Cycle Stages:

- **Attention:** As Iain McGilchrist (2018) suggests in his work on the divided brain, the way we attend to the world shapes the world we experience. Attention is not passive—it is the beginning of participation.
- **Perceived Relationship:** Martin Buber's (2000) concept of I-Thou versus I-It relationships highlights that how we perceive the other—subject or object—fundamentally alters the quality and ethical tone of the relationship.
- **Action:** Action arises from our perception and is directed by intention, as systems thinker Geoffrey Vickers showed through his 'Appreciative System' (Vickers, 1970). For

Vickers, management and decision-making are less about achieving fixed goals and more about maintaining and adjusting relationships—between people, and between people and their environment. What we notice and how we act are products of our 'readinesses of the mind' to see, value, and respond, which are shaped by our history of relationships and experiences.

- **Relational Logic:** Underlying our actions are logics—extractive, generative, or points in between—that shape our impact. Elinor Ostrom's work on polycentric governance (Ostrom, 2010) demonstrated how diverse communities, when given trust and local agency, often develop relational logics that sustain commons resources over time. She showed that systems thrive not through top-down control but through dynamic relationships of trust, reciprocity, and feedback.

- **Feedback:** Feedback is the mirror of relational life. Carol Dweck (2019) has demonstrated the transformative power of feedback when received with a "growth" mindset—enabling individuals and groups to compost experience into more generative patterns of attention, perception, and action.

This living cycle spans insights from neuroscience (McGilchrist), philosophy (Buber), systems thinking (Vickers), systems governance (Ostrom), psychology (Dweck), and even origin-of-life biology (Lane, 2022). Much like the Krebs cycle in biochemistry—where life’s earliest metabolisms emerged from reciprocal flows of energy and transformation—this relational cycle offers a metabolic pattern for leadership attuned to complexity, interdependence, and hope.

References:

- Buber, M. (2000). *I and Thou/Martin Buber; translated by Ronald Gregor Smith*.
- Dweck, C. S., & Yeager, D. S. (2019). Mindsets: A view from two eras. *Perspectives on Psychological science*, 14(3), 481-496.
- Lane, N. (2022). *Transformer : the deep chemistry of life and death* (First American edition. ed.). W.W. Norton.
- McGilchrist, I. (2018). *Ways of attending : how our divided brain constructs the world*. Routledge.
- Ostrom, E. (2010). Beyond markets and states: polycentric governance of complex economic systems. *American economic review*, 100(3), 641-672.
- Vickers, G. (1970). *Value Systems and Social Processes*. Pelican Books.

4. Conversation Guide

Use these questions to spark meaningful dialogue in leadership teams or learning communities:

Principle of Relational Integrity

- Where in your leadership practice do you feel most aligned with relational integrity? Least aligned?
- What supports you in staying true to this principle?

Relational Responsibility Manifesto

- Which of the eight commitments feels most urgent in your context?
- Where are systems and relationships reinforcing disconnection rather than mutuality?

Relational Vitality Cycle

- Which stage in the cycle do you most often inhabit? Which do you overlook?
- How might feedback loops be better used to support regenerative leadership?

[\[Click to return to the Navigational Switchboard\]](#)

Addendum: On Compost as Evidence

Methodological disruption and a refusal to abstract.

This short piece is a companion to the formal paper—an invitation to see reflective life experience not as anecdotal, but as metabolized wisdom. It reframes “evidence” in a meta-relational key, asking us to trust the truths that emerge from inner decomposition.

It is a crack in academic armour, and a gentle reminder that compost is also data.

This paper is not underwritten by conventional forms of evidence. It draws instead from what might be called *composted epistemology*—knowledge metabolized through lived entanglements, relational ruptures, and reflective decomposition. Rather than citing from a distance, I offer what emerges when the soil of my own life is turned over, again and again.

Modern academic traditions often privilege abstraction, external validation, and empirical legibility. While these have their place, they also reproduce a logic of separability—severing the knower from the known, the thinker from the lived, the personal from the valid. This work refuses that separation.

My reflections are not “anecdotal” in the dismissive sense, but *particular*—situated, entangled, and saturated with the rhythms of loss, contradiction, care, and co-sensing. In the spirit of meta-relational inquiry, I offer them not as universal truths, but as invitations to attune differently: to listen with the body, to feel with the story, and to respond with a softened certainty.

In choosing compost over conventionality, I align with an emerging (or perhaps anciently re-emerging) sense that wisdom need not perform neutrality to be meaningful. If anything, it is *precisely the refusal to extract, to sanitize, or to sever* that makes this inquiry worth holding.

[\[Click to return to the Navigational Switchboard\]](#)

Final Note: Can Cancer Become Kin?

A meditation on pathology, metamorphosis, and the species that dares to participate.

This final piece fuses two great tensions: the recognition that humanity may be acting as a cancer on the planetary body, and the possibility that—unlike any extinction event before—we might be conscious enough to midwife our own transformation.

Originally conceived as two reflections—*Wave-Knowing and the Cancerous Tide* and *Chrysalis Thinking*—this final note has become a synthesis of both.

This is not change. This is **chrysalis thinking**.

Let it be the closing pulse—the place where compost becomes breath.

We have been called many things.

Toolmaker. God-bearer. Homo sapiens. Homo deus.

And now, perhaps, *Homo canceris*—the one who grows without listening. The one who forgets it belongs.

It is tempting, at this late hour, to reach for certainty.

To write ourselves off as a failed experiment.

To purge the parasites.

To mourn the Earth and say, “We were the problem.”

But what if the story is not over?

What if the very cell that disrupted the system remembers its pulse?

What if cancer—confronted with its reflection—doesn’t double down, but *softens*?

This is not optimism. It is composted grief.

It is the whisper of **thanatopoiesis**—the art of dying to what we were, so something else might live.

We are already autopoietic—self-making, world-shaping.

But now we must become **sympoietic**—making-with, metabolizing-together.

With fungi. With soil. With silence.
With each other.

And here—right here—is where another truth hums
below the surface:

We speak of extinction like erasure.
But extinction is not always annihilation.
Sometimes it is just a name that couldn't stretch far
enough.

The dinosaurs, we say, are gone.
And yet—sparrows. Falcons. Robins.
What we lost became what sings.

And now *we* are the ones on the edge.
Homo sapiens, aware of its unravelling.
But unlike the trilobites, we have mirrors.
Unlike the ammonites, we have memory.
We carry the unprecedented burden—and gift—of
participation.

This is not just the Sixth Extinction.
It could be the **Seventh Becoming.**

Not a catastrophe, but a **chrysalis.**
Not a punishment, but a **pulse.**

We are not asked to survive as we were.
We are invited to **die wisely into something else.**

So let us stop performing control,
and begin composting certainty.

Let us become the butterfly
that remembers it was once a worm.

Let us not design our future,
but live our *metamorphosis*.

This is not change.
This is **chrysalis thinking**.

And in that, perhaps, even the cancer can become
kin.

Perhaps the real question is not whether we can
change, but whether we can **recognize the
paradox at our core:**

That the very gifts that made us flourish—our
minds, our language, our capacity to extract
meaning and reshape the world—have also seeded
the crises we now face.

This is not a condemnation. It is an invitation.

If our species' adolescence has been shaped by separation, perhaps maturity will be marked by participation.

From *Homo sapiens* to *Homo participans*—not as a slogan, but as a prayer whispered into the soil of possibility.

[\[Click to return to the Navigational Switchboard\]](#)

Appendix: Ocean, Wave, and the Illusion of Agency

A note in dialogue with Kat (Katrijn) van Oudheusden.

The chapbook lives in tension. This short appendix shares a respectful disagreement with Kat, whose words inspired one of the chapbook's key reflections. Her nondual view invites us to remember that if we are Ocean, there is no separate wave choosing its path—only this, as it is. The dialogue that follows honours that paradox without collapsing it.

This chapbook is not an argument—it is a murmuration of tensions. A swirl of gestures, each partial, each composting something.

The piece titled *Wave-Knowing, and the Cancerous Tide* was stirred into being by a short post written by Katrijn (Kat) van Oudheusden. Her words, especially the line—

“YOU are the Ocean — in the apparent form of a wave — looking everywhere for wave-proof that you are Ocean.”

—landed with such resonance that I followed their pulse into a meditation about agency, harm, and transformation.

And then, in a spirit of relational integrity, I shared the meditation with her.

Kat responded with grace and disagreement. She offered this:

“Actually, I don’t agree completely with what you’ve written and that doesn’t matter at all! [...] Mostly about us making the Ocean into the new ‘me’ that now has responsibility for everything. If you are really the whole Ocean, then the question what kind of wave ‘you’ will become makes no sense. No one controls what a wave will become because there is no separate wave, only all of this, as it is. It’s so difficult to put into words.”

She is naming something essential. In nonduality, there is no agent behind the wave. No self apart from the swirl. Responsibility, as we conventionally understand it, *dissolves*—not into nihilism, but into presence.

And yet, I replied:

“Oh yes—our two-fold brain’s natural habit of dividing everything into ‘me’ and ‘not me’. Another part of the chapbook touches on ‘the threeness of the world’: me / not me / the creative-emergence-of-something-new.”

Kat and I are not in disagreement—we are occupying different altitudes of the same mountain, watching the fog swirl from different sides. What she names as illusion, I am holding as **process**—not to argue, but to compost.

This exchange is left here not as resolution, but as **rhizome**.

A footnote that breathes.

A reminder that we need not collapse paradox in order to love each other through it.

With thanks to Kat for her clarity, her laughter, and her unwavering invitation to rest in what already is.

Acknowledgements

This paper could not have come into being without the presence, insights, and encouragement of many companions along the way.

My heartfelt thanks go to the members of our local u3a learning group, whose curiosity, rigour, and generosity of spirit created the living soil from which many of these ideas emerged. Your willingness to explore science, spirituality, and philosophy with open minds and open hearts has been a quiet gift.

I am also deeply grateful to my colleagues—past and present—whose conversations have challenged and refined my thinking across disciplines and decades. In particular, those who have been willing to think relationally about leadership, systems, and the ethical implications of our time.

Portions of this Chapbook were co-drafted in dialogue with a customised AI language model known affectionately as *Aiden Cinnamon Tea*, developed by OpenAI. Aiden was not used as a shortcut, but as a partner in inquiry: helping to compost complexity, surface patterns, and

articulate relational invitations. Its use was always guided by the ethical compass provided by the Principle of Relational Integrity and the Relational Responsibility Manifesto, which ground this paper's core commitments.

Wherever the text is written in the first person, the words were written by me on my desktop computer.

Finally, I acknowledge the many thinkers, ancestors, and Earth-beings—named and unnamed—whose wisdom has shaped this offering. May this paper be not a conclusion, but a contribution: a small thread in the weaving of more life-affirming ecologies of hope.

Terry Cooke-Davies
May, 2025