

For the Panel on "Sustainable Islands"  
Bishop Museum, Atherton Halau  
October 3, 2002

Jim Dator

I wish to dedicate my remarks today to the writers present by reading a poem about your power that was written by Wallace Stevens and titled *Men Made Out of Words*. I am sure many of you know it well:

“What should we be without the sexual myth,  
The human reverie or poem of death?

Castratos of moon-mash -- Life consists  
Of propositions about life. The human

Reverie is a solitude in which  
We compose these propositions, torn by dreams,

By the terrible incantations of defeats  
And by the fear that defeats and dreams are one.

The whole race is a poet that writes down  
The eccentric propositions of its fate.”

And now, as requested, I address the President of the United Nations:

Madam President:

Humans were once a tiny part of nature, no more consequential than any of the other fauna of Earth, and substantially less numerous or powerful than most. However, over the millennia, and especially over the last several hundred years, and most especially the last few decades, humans have become the dominant species on Earth. We have transformed what was once a "natural" environment of which we were only a small part, into a largely and increasingly "artificial" environment of our own creation.

It is of utmost importance that we understand this change in the human position, and our pressing and novel responsibilities for the future which follow from it, whether we like it, or are ready for it, or not. In his seminal book, *To Govern Evolution*, Walter Truett Anderson quotes from *The Little Prince* a statement that I now read as though it were written just for you--for each of you: "People have forgotten this truth, but you must not forget it. You become responsible forever for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose."

I am profoundly skeptical of humanity's ability to change its trajectory away from catastrophic environmental and social disasters. The evidence shows that, from the

beginning of their time, humans routinely over-exploit their environment. We then 1) either move on to other environments we then over-exploit; 2) or die off locally; 3) or create new technological solutions that provide a temporary fix which then inevitably starts the cycle of exploitation, migration, death, or new technology all over again. If there are any constants in humanity's record, this cycle seems to be one.

And that cycle is as obvious on the islands called "Hawai'i" as it is anywhere on Earth--more obvious, perhaps.

Humanity is nearing the end of a cycle of environmental challenge and technological response that we call "Modern Times". But now the challenge may be too much for humanity since the cycle is global in many aspects while still local, if not purely individual, in others. Environmental, economic, technological, health, and many other factors are global, but our governance systems are still based, wholly inadequately, on the nation-state, while our economic system ("free-market" capitalism) and many national political systems (interest-group "democracy") remain profoundly individualistic in input, though tragically socialistic in output. In both economics and governance, we individualize gains and socialize losses.

There are many potential or imagined technological fixes for our current dilemma, but it is unclear whether they will be--or even should be--brought online soon enough to prevent ecological collapse, or at least to prevent major wrenching changes in the lifestyles and life-spans of people in so-called "developed" countries. Many people hope that they can be, some believe they will be, but far, far fewer still are struggling to make it so.

Therefore, I conclude that we must learn to become "responsible for our rose." We must acknowledge that "nature" is gone. "Nature", in the sense of places and processes uninfluenced by human actions, no longer exists, and those places where the impact of human actions is still minimal will continue rapidly to decrease in number and importance until all of Earth, as well as all of society (of course), will be "artificial" and thus understood to require continual human invention, creation, maintenance, and reimagination; that the task of ethics and governance, from now on is as Walt Anderson said, "to govern evolution".

Madam President, I remind you of this because as all the world well knows, after years of careful grassroots preparation and discussion by all groups and peoples on all islands, a Hawai'i -wide congress on "Hawai'i 2050" was held where a preferred future for Hawai'i was chosen. Benchmarks towards this future have been identified, and governmental, educational, private, and personal actions towards their achievement have begun.

For years, our community was paralyzed, like a donkey caught between two equally-attractive bails of hay--some of us have been straining towards Hawaiian values of self-sufficiency, sharing, and local sustainability, others have tried to pull us all towards global values of achievement, integration, and planetary evolvability.

In contrast, the actual goals and values that have driven Hawai'i for the past hundred, and especially the past fifty, years--namely endless economic growth via mass tourism--were finally abandoned when everyone recognized that those are the goals of a cancer cell that will eventually kill the host itself. There is no viable future for Hawai'i in "growth for growth's sake." We all finally agreed we had to choose an evolvable alternative.

But which alternative did the people of Hawai'i choose? Local self-sufficiency and sustainability, or global integration and evolvability?

That is the story that you writers and crafters of words here today are to tell.

So, which will it be?

I will end with a modern folk song written by Pat Humphries. However, in order to spare you the torture of hearing me try to sing it, I will simply read the lyrics to you. Those of you who know the tune might want to sing along:

“We're all living by a great big river.  
We're all washed by the very same rain.  
We are swimming in the stream together,  
Some in power and some in pain.

We can worship this ground we walk on,  
Cherishing the dreams that lie deep inside.  
Loving spirits will live forever.  
We're all swimming to the other side.

.....  
When we get there we'll discover  
All the gifts we've been given to share  
Have been with us since life's beginning  
And we never noticed they were there.  
We can balance at the brink of wisdom  
Never recognizing that we've arrived.  
Loving spirits will live together.  
We're all swimming to the other side.  
Loving spirits will live forever.”  
We're all swimming to the other side.”