

RESTORING PLANETARY HEALTH THROUGH PARTNERISM

Teddie M. Potter, PhD, RN, FAAN, FNAP

Abstract

The continuation of life as we know it is currently threatened by human-caused disruptions to the Earth's natural systems. Modern behaviors and attitudes orienting toward domination contribute to extraction, exploitation, and thoughtless disregard for the needs of future generations. The planetary health paradigm weaves together ancient Indigenous knowledge systems, traditional wisdom, and modern science. Planetary Health is a transdisciplinary field and a social movement that addresses human disruptions of Earth's natural systems and the impact these disruptions have on human health and on all life on the planet. Planetary Health calls for global cultural transformation, a "Great Transition" that will require rapid structural changes across all human institutions. The scale and urgency of change that is necessary will call for a paradigm and set of values to guide thought and action. *Partnerism* is an alternative narrative to domination, and its emphasis on linking rather than ranking offers the essential thinking and economic model to drive massive cultural transformation around the world. This paper concludes with a vision for a future where planetary health and partnerism thrive.

Key words: Planetary Health, cultural transformation, partnerism, Great Transition

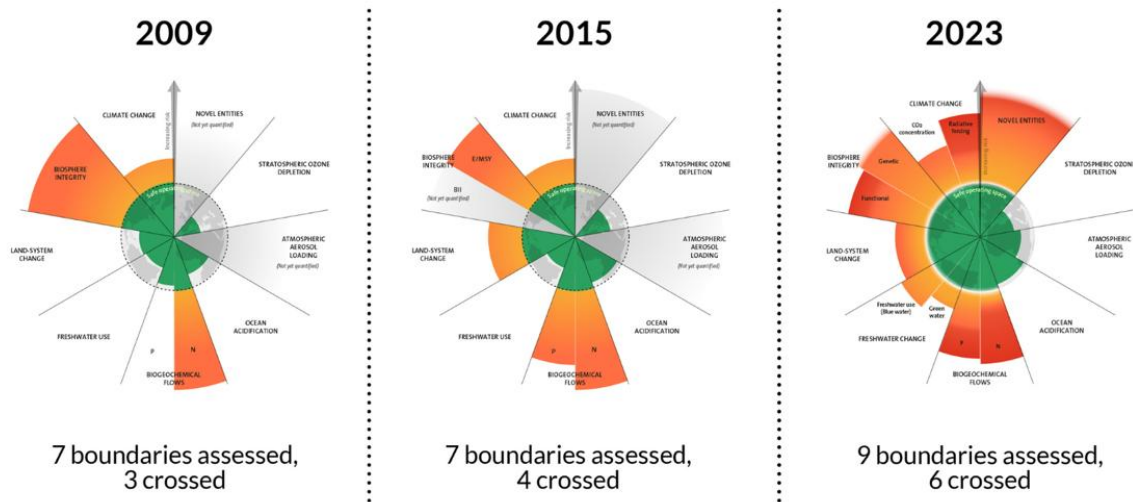
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Background

Humanity is facing an existential crisis precipitated by values and behaviors that support domination of one another and the rest of Nature. The Earth's natural systems on which we depend are threatened. The Stockholm Resilience Centre (2023) measures

nine planetary boundaries: climate change, biosphere integrity, land-system change, freshwater use, biogeochemical flows, ocean acidification, atmospheric aerosol loading, stratospheric ozone depletion, and novel entities. Staying within those boundaries is necessary if humanity is to continue to survive and thrive. As shown in Figure 1, six of the nine boundaries were crossed in 2023 (Richardson et al., 2023).

Figure 1. Evolution of the Planetary Boundaries Framework



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The Earth functions as a complex integrated system based on relationships between subsystems, including the geosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere, and atmosphere. Through most of the planet’s history, feedback loops have created a stable environment for life to thrive. According to Richardson et al. (2023), human behaviors or “anthropogenic activities,” such as the burning of fossil fuels, caused climate and land system changes to exceed their boundaries as early as 1988 (p. 10).

These human-caused disruptions to Earth’s natural systems are impacting global health. For example, 2024 marked the highest recorded global average temperature over 12 months (Copernicus, 2024), and the heat was directly linked to a significant rise in human deaths (Howard et al., 2024). Yet heat is only one of the threats; others include

illness and death related to extreme weather events, food insecurity, contaminated water, wildfires, floods, and shifting patterns of zoonotic diseases.

The United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 2022) recognizes these changes as the *Triple Planetary Crisis*: climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Each of these urgent crises impacts human health. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) estimates there will be an additional 250,000 deaths per year due to climate change; in 2019, air pollution caused an estimated 6.7 million deaths globally (WHO, 2024); and human-caused disruptions of the biosphere are leading to a rise in zoonotic diseases (Keesing & Ostfeld, 2021).

The field of Planetary Health analyzes the multiple ways that humans are disrupting Earth's natural systems and the effects these disruptions have on human health. The Planetary Health Alliance (PHA) states:

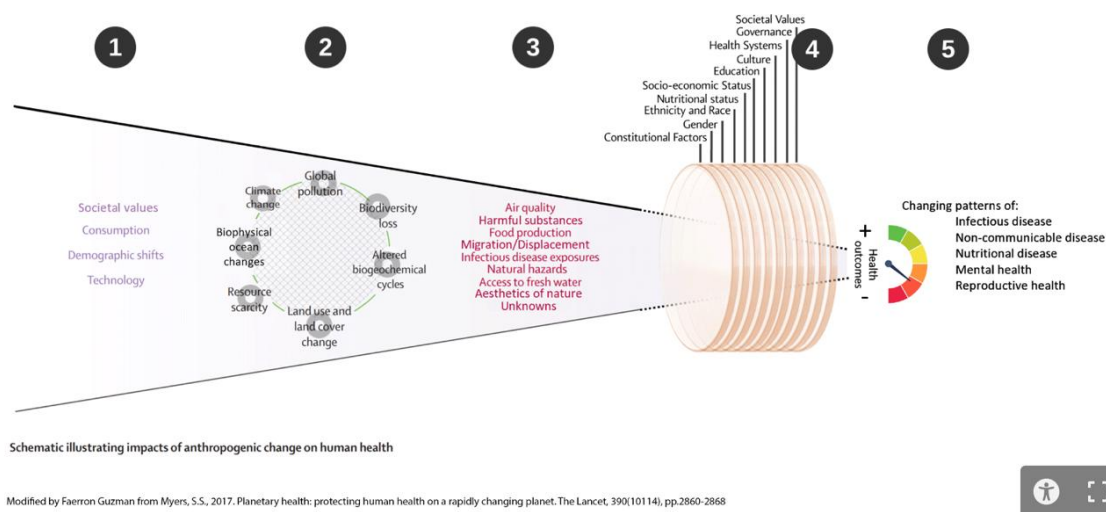
Never before has humanity's footprint on Earth's natural systems been so large. We are outstripping available resources from the only habitable planet we know. Since 1950, the human population has increased by nearly 200%; fossil fuel consumption by over 550%; and marine fish capture by over 350%. We've placed dams on about 60% of the world's rivers, we've cleared nearly half of temperate and tropical forests, we use nearly half of accessible freshwater every year, and we appropriate about half of the planet's livable surface to feed ourselves. (PHA, n.d.a.)

Almost every day, new papers are published demonstrating this complex link of planetary health and human health. For example, Frank's (2024) analysis demonstrated that the decline in bat populations due to a fungus that causes white nose syndrome in these mammals can be connected to a noticeable rise in harmful plant insects and parasites, requiring farmers to increase their use of insecticides and other pesticides by 31%. Frank was able to link this increased pesticide use to a 7.9% increase in infant

mortality and a 28.9% decline in crop revenues in areas with white nose syndrome in bats (p. 3).

Human behaviors are the root causes of this planetary crisis. As shown in Figure 2, number 4, the impacts are not distributed equally, and are disproportionately weighted based on factors including socioeconomic status, gender, and access to health care.

Figure 2. Schematic Illustrating the Impacts of Anthropogenic Change on Human Health



Note: Modified from Myers (2017) and Duff et al. (2020). Used with permission.

The Anthropocene as a Manifestation of Domination

While we urgently attempt to find solutions to these planetary threats, it is essential to mitigate further damage by analyzing and addressing the human behaviors that contribute to the crisis. The impacts of human behaviors are so significant that some scientists call our current geologic era the Anthropocene.

Human activities are driving changes to Earth's natural systems at unprecedented rates. These changes are driven by deep technological, consumption, and demographic shifts that increase the use of resources globally. These underlying

drivers of change occur at large scales and transform our natural systems, changing fundamental conditions for human health and well-being. All of this is underpinned by societal value systems, codified in our socio-economic systems, that drive change and worsen the habitability of the Earth. (PHA, n.d.b.)

These behaviors are classic indicators of societies that orient toward domination. According to Riane Eisler's cultural transformation theory (1988), domination systems are based on rigidly ranked hierarchies maintained by using fear, shame, blame, and power to control others. Rankings are based on gender, age, race, religion or culture, socio-economic status, and even humans over non-human beings (Center for Partnership Systems [CPS], 2024a).

Behaviors that specifically threaten the biosphere include exploitation, extraction, and ranking the value of various geologic and biologic elements based on their values to humans. This latter worldview is known as *ecosystem services*. "Ecosystem services are the direct and indirect benefits that ecosystems provide humans. Agroecosystems, rangelands, and forests provide suites of ecosystem services that support and sustain human livelihoods" (US Department of Agriculture Climate Hub, n.d.). We can indeed be grateful for the many ways that ecosystems benefit human health and quality of life; what makes the term ecosystem services orient more toward domination is that it reflects a unidirectional rather than reciprocal relationship between humans and the rest of Nature. It also commodifies the relationship and implies a "power over" hierarchy.

A cultural story based on domination that perpetuated the myth of separation from Nature was necessary for indiscriminate use of land, water, forests, minerals, and other members of the ecosystem. Separation permits ranking, objectification, and exploitation of humans and non-humans. Ranking justifies ownership of human and natural resources, and promotes immediate gratification and wealth accumulation without consideration for the needs of future generations.

Other than a few exceptions, future generations are not considered in policy decisions or regulations of industries that produce greenhouse gas emissions; pollute soil, air, and water; or contribute to the current 6th mass extinction. The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health (Whitmee et al., 2015) points to these domination behaviors and values:

The explanation is straightforward and sobering: we have been mortgaging the health of future generations to realize economic and development gains in the present. By unsustainably exploiting nature's resources, human civilization has flourished but now risks substantial health effects from the degradation of nature's life support systems in the future. (p. 1973)

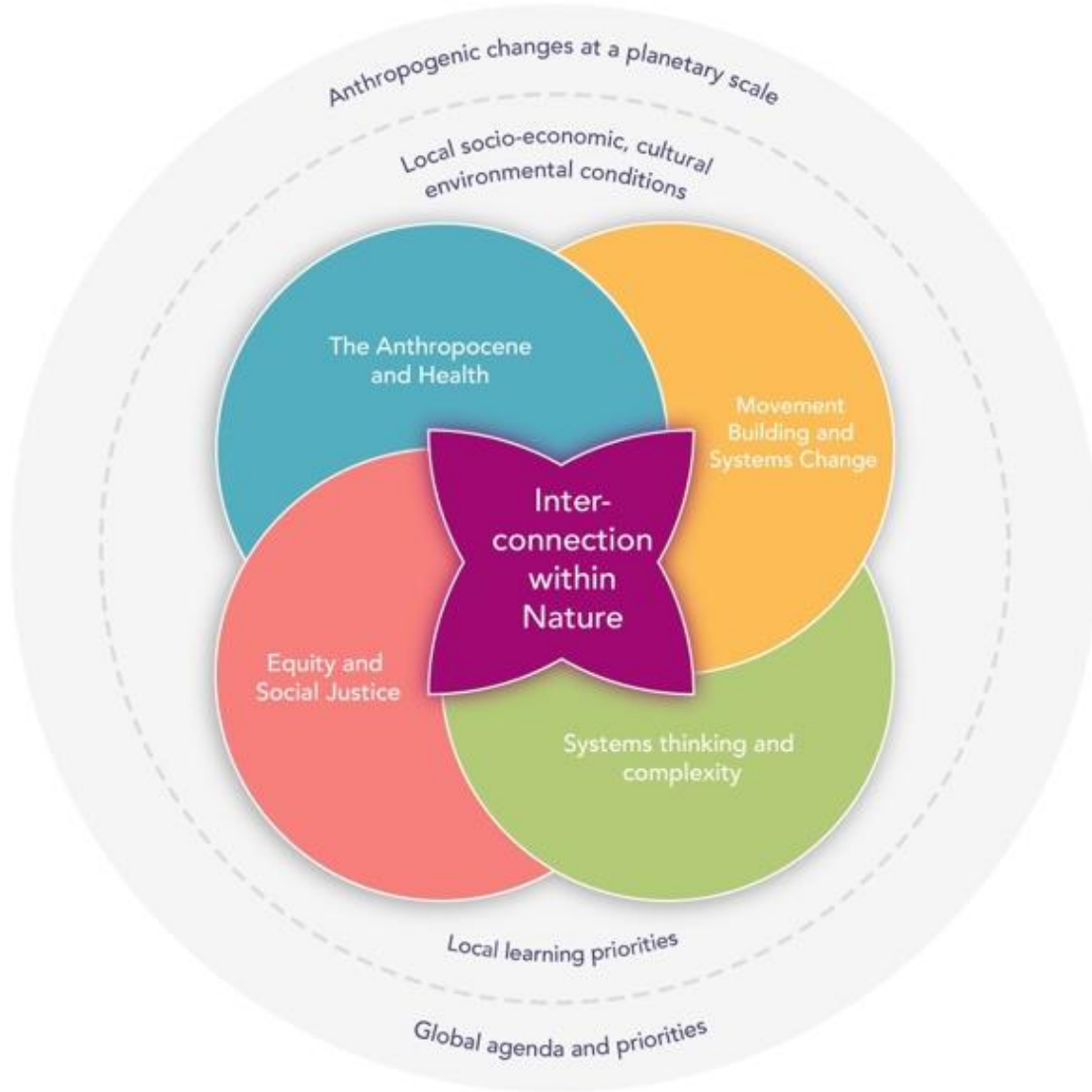
Planetary Health

We need to rapidly shift our cultural narrative to reverse the harm that threatens life. Indigenous knowledge systems reflect the relationships, mutual respect, and reciprocity necessary to restore balance. More recently, science is reconnecting to these traditional knowledge and wisdom roots through the emerging field of Planetary Health.

According to the Planetary Health Alliance, “Planetary Health is a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field and social movement focused on analyzing and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to Earth's natural systems on human health and all life on Earth” (PHA, n.d.c.). Planetary Health recognizes that solutions to our current environmental threats will require highly effective cross-sector collaboration.

Transdisciplinary collaboration is fostered through a shared language and a shared vision. The *Planetary Health Education Framework* (Faerron Guzmán et al., 2021a) seen in Figure 3 proposes five planetary health domains of knowledge that all higher education students should learn regardless of their specialty. This framework is not meant to be a list of competencies, but rather a foundational document to guide development of planetary health knowledge, values, and practice. In essence, it is designed to promote cultural transformation to restore planetary health.

Figure 3. Planetary Health Education Framework



Source: Faerron Guzmán et al. (2021a). Used with permission.

The five Planetary Health domains are:

Inter-connection within Nature. Humans are part of, and inseparable from, Nature. Disruptions of the Earth’s natural systems lead to disruptions of human physical, social, and emotional systems. The important word to note here is “within.” This word choice

reflects Indigenous knowledge systems that understand that humans do not need to reconnect to Nature; our separation is a false narrative. Instead, we need to recognize our inherent interconnection.

The Anthropocene and Health. The disruptions to Earth's natural systems are directly related to human behaviors. These are not natural patterns or signs of an aging planet. Humans are culpable; therefore, human behavior needs to change to restore planetary health.

Equity and Social Justice. The health impacts of ecosystem destruction are not equally distributed. Frontline and fence-line communities must be prioritized. Proposed solutions should be designed with equity, social justice, and the rights of Nature and future generations in mind.

Systems Thinking and Complexity. We are beginning to understand that Nature is an extremely complex system, and feedback loops can cause unintended consequences when the relationships within the system are not considered.

Movement Building and Systems Change. Understanding planetary health is not enough; students must learn how to build transformative movements to restore planetary health. (Faerron Guzmán et al., 2021b).

A shared language is just the first step in shifting the paradigm. We also need to have a shared vision to inspire and guide our actions. The *Sao Paulo Declaration on Planetary Health* (Planetary Health Alliance, 2021) states:

We need a fundamental shift in how we live on Earth, what we are calling the Great Transition. Achieving the Great Transition will require rapid and deep structural changes across most dimensions of human activity It will also require rethinking our values and relationship within Nature and to each other

from human exceptionalism, domination, and scarcity to interdependence, equity, and regeneration. The Great Transition offers the possibility of greater richness of experience, greater well-being, and an enhanced opportunity for all beings to thrive Every person, in every place, from every calling, has a role to play in safeguarding the health of the planet and people for future generations. (Planetary Health Alliance, 2021, p.2)

Key features of the declaration's vision include rethinking relationships, basing them on mutual respect and inclusivity; and co-creating structural changes. These values align with Riane Eisler's cultural transformation theory (1988) and the values behind *partnerism*; therefore, Eisler's work can be a valuable tool for those working toward a Great Transition.

Partnership and Partnerism

The *Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (Eisler, 1988) describes cultural transformation theory and the characteristics of two cultural narratives that shape human societies from relationships in families to relationships within and between nations. On one end of the continuum are systems that orient toward domination, with its rigid hierarchies and use of power over others. The other end of the continuum is where individuals and cultures orient toward partnership.

Like domination, partnership has classic characteristics. The partnership paradigm emphasizes mutual respect, linking rather than ranking, communication that flows both ways, egalitarian and equitable adult relationships, respect for diversity and human rights, and values based on caring, empathy, and nonviolence. Instead of "power over," power is used to lift people to their full potential in what is known as "hierarchies of actualization" (Center for Partnership Systems [CPS], n.d.a).

In *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, Eisler (2008) builds an economic case for the partnership paradigm. Partnerism is a combination of the social construct of partnership and Eisler's economic model. She defines *partnerism* as a

“socio-economic system where all relationships, institutions, policies, and organizations are based on principles of equitable partnership that supports linking rather than *ranking*, and *hierarchies of actualization* rather than *hierarchies of domination*” (CPS, 2024 n.d.b.).

Partnerism and Planetary Health

The Center for Partnership Systems states, “We can’t safely build a 21st Century world on an 18th Century operating system. The economic and social systems of the world are failing humanity and our planet” (CPS, 2024 n.d.b). The Planetary Health Alliance also calls for the transformation of values and cultural norms to restore planetary health (Faerron Guzmán, 2021a; Planetary Health Alliance, 2021). The Center for Partnership Systems (n.d.c.) teaches us the four cornerstones of transformation that make this shift from domination to partnership systems possible:

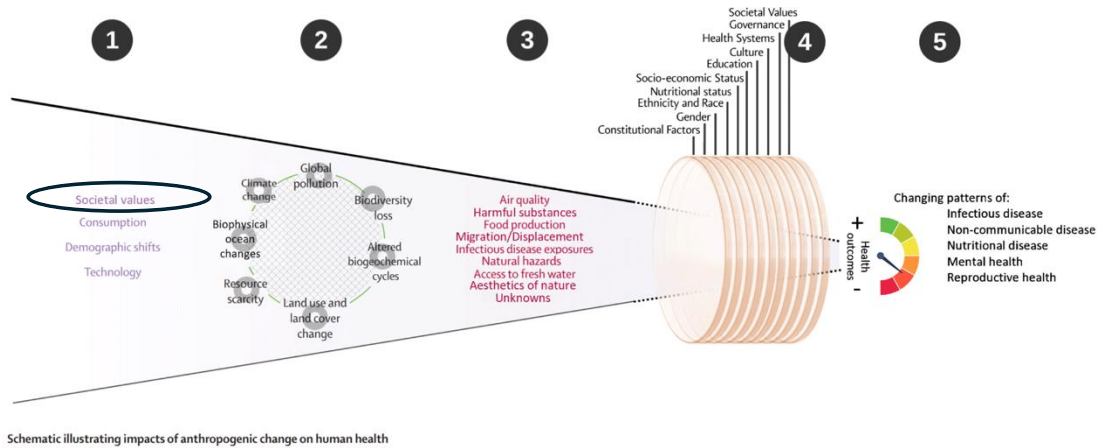
- Family/childhood relations: Partnerism values the work of caring.
- Gender relations: Partnerism values all people regardless of gender or other differences.
- Economic relations: Partnerism recognizes that the real wealth of the world consists of the contributions of people and Nature.
- Narratives/ Language: Partnerism supports empathetic, mutually beneficial, caring relationships.

These four cornerstones support and amplify our interconnection within Nature. They provide an alternative to the values and behaviors that have brought forth the crises of the Anthropocene. Their emphasis on valuing all people will help us design solutions grounded in equity and social justice. All together they build an economic model that challenges consumption and considers the rights of Nature and future generations.

In Figure 4, number 1, *Societal values* is circled to indicate a leverage point where *partnerism* may provide the necessary shift in values to create transformative changes. In shifting our social values from domination to partnership, and our economic model from capitalism to partnerism, we can potentially reverse our current life-threatening

behaviors that disrupt the Earth’s natural systems. Shifting values toward partnership and hierarchies of actualization may allow us to create the urgent structural changes necessary for the Great Transition.

Figure 4. Schematic Illustrating the Impacts of Anthropogenic Change on Human Health with Highlighted Lever for Systems Change



Modified by Faerron Guzman from Myers, S.S., 2017. Planetary health: protecting human health on a rapidly changing planet. The Lancet, 390(10114), pp.2860-2868



NOTE: Highlight of social values added by author. Modified from Myers (2017) and Duff et al. (2020). Used with permission.

Conclusion: Vision for the Future

As previously mentioned, the Planetary Health paradigm is deeply connected to Indigenous ways of knowing. To imagine a better future, we can turn to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, a centuries-old partnership of five Indigenous nations in the eastern United States. The confederacy is one of the oldest democracies in the world, and it is founded on the Indigenous understanding that law, societal values, and Nature are equal partners, and each have an essential role to play (Haudenosaunee Confederacy, n.d.) The Great Law of the Confederacy states that all decisions should be made keeping future generations in mind.

In all of your deliberations in the Confederate Council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self-interest shall be cast into oblivion. ... Look

and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground—the unborn of the future Nation. (Constitution of the Iroquois Nations, n.d., Article 28)

Following this principle and applying guidance from partnership and Planetary Health, we can imagine a future where all life has an opportunity to flourish for generations to come.

When we transition from domination to partnership, we will ensure that all humans are valued and respected. Communication will be honest, and decisions by policymakers will be transparent and geared to the “welfare of the whole people.” All genders, races, faiths, and cultures will be able to participate fully in society and contribute ideas to solving emerging challenges.

There will be fewer unintended consequences of our actions because our actions will be guided by concern for future generations. Rather than immediate consumption and wealth accumulation, we will apply caution and refuse to act until we have carefully considered potential harms. We will deeply understand the relationships between Earth’s subsystems and the ways that disruptions to Earth’s natural systems impact health. Our primary value will be preserving the health of the biosphere upon which all life depends.

Affirming our interconnection within Nature will shift our relationship with Nature from one of domination to one of partnership. Nature will be recognized as kin, with its own inherent rights. The health of rivers, mountains, other species, and the atmosphere will be protected because the rights of Nature will be respected (Voice for Nature, 2024).

People will not be alone in their work to co-create a better future. The Planetary Health Alliance will facilitate cross-sector global relations to rapidly address emerging issues and threats. Global policies will be established by the UN General Assembly in full and

equal partnership with civil society. Together they will effectively promote actions to preserve and protect the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

A sustainable future is more likely to come to fruition if we work together to shift our society's values from domination to partnership, keep the shared vision of the Great Transition before us, and prioritize the health and well-being of future generations of all life on the planet.

To learn more:

Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies mission: “The mission of the journal is to be the essential anthology for scholarly writing about cultural transformation and partnership. We encourage interdisciplinary contributions from both scholars and practitioners worldwide to explore and promote the partnership paradigm of mutual respect, social and economic justice, and gender and environmental balance, through research, innovation, and community-based applications.” (*Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, n.d., vision and mission. pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/ijps/visionandmission)

Planetary Health Alliance mission: “To promote, mobilize, and lead an inclusive, transdisciplinary field of Planetary Health and its diverse science, stories, solutions, and communities to achieve the Great Transition, a comprehensive shift in how human beings interact with each other and Nature, in order to secure a livable future for humanity and the rest of life on Earth.” (Planetary Health Alliance, n.d., about PHA. www.planetaryhealthalliance.org/about-pha)

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