

## **Title: What is the maximum goodness that we can create together?**

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### **Purpose Minds lecture no 4. By Anneloes Smitsman about understanding economies as living systems<sup>1</sup>**

#### **What is a System?**

From a scientific perspective a system is often seen as interconnected and interdependent elements. To illustrate this, herewith a very basic practical example that I usually give. Let's take a bucket with blocks of Lego. You can then ask: "Do I have a system with these blocks in a bucket? What happens if I take one block away from that bucket, will it fall apart?" If there's no structural disruption to the rest of the blocks, then we would technically say that it's not a system. Now if, for example, we make a little wall with those Lego blocks, and we take one block away. What happens then? Does the wall collapse? If the answer is yes, then that means there are interdependencies and interconnections. Hence it's a system.

If you would now take the example of the body as a system, a living system. You can ask: "Can I take away an organ? What are the implications?" When something happens to one part of the body, it is clear there's also impact somewhere else in the body. Hence, we'd say the body is a living system. This is a very simple example, and there are more factors to living systems, which we can explore further.

Personally, I see life itself as a living system. Especially from the perspective of life and consciousness as a unified reality. At deeper orders of reality, there is no such thing as separation; nothing exists out of that larger wholeness we all form part of. Even that block of Lego and the whole exercise of putting blocks in and taking blocks out, takes place within a larger living system. Those are activities within the systems we form part of.

#### **System Dynamics**

From that deeper philosophical perspective, you could say that life itself is a living system and that the nature of life at deeper orders of reality is unified. The reality of life is also interdependent and interconnected. Once we have that kind of deeper understanding, you move into what I've called *the heart of systems change*.<sup>2</sup> In order to have a sense of the system dynamics of life, you can no longer keep a dualistic perspective of 'me versus you' and us as being different. When we move into the heart of systems change we start to really see the living complexity, and get a sense of that complexity of life, as well as our own complexity within that. Including the deeper paradoxes, without trying to label them as 'this or a that', or into separate categories as humans have a tendency to do.

#### **Fundamental Principles of Living Systems and Evolutionary Coherence**

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<sup>1</sup> Adjusted from transcript by xxx Purpose Minds, January 2021

<sup>2</sup> Smitsman A. (2019). *Into the Heart of Systems Change*. [Doctoral dissertation, International Centre for Integrated assessment and Sustainable development (ICIS), Maastricht University]. <https://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.28450.25280>

When we understand that living systems are interconnected and interdependent, because life is whole and we are each a unique expression of that wholeness, then we can explore systemic integrity and how systems grow.

When living systems start to grow and evolve, it diversifies and becomes more complex. This is a universal principle. Each stage of growth and development also comes with certain systemic boundaries. The boundaries are a feedback loop for the system to regulate its growth and development, and its relationship with the larger systems it forms part of. If I'm going to stretch a little bit more here, and I'm going to also grow more complex and more diversified over there, and the rest of me can't catch up; then I might collapse. Then I lose the balance of my systemic integrity.

Systemic boundaries are like the intelligence, the wisdom of a system, that allows it to actualize its potentiality. And through that process of self actualization, it becomes more diversified and complex, yet in ways that are evolutionary coherent.

Evolutionary coherence is incredibly important in living systems. Evolutionary coherence guides how a system diversifies. Look at yourself as a human being. You were these little cells before, and now you are this amazing complex being. There has been a whole lot of diversification of all the different cells and neural networks that constitute your body, yet somehow your system in all its diversity has managed to stay in tune with itself. The diversity in your body is harmonic and has the capacity to adapt, learn, and fine tune, just like you would have with a beautiful symphony.

The evolutionary coherence of a system is our systemic capacity to stay in tune with the wholeness and unity of life, as we change, grow, and develop. This is incredibly important to understand.

### **Systemic Boundaries and Barriers**

In human-made mechanistic systems, we've developed a growth model that is always based on quantitative growth, and not qualitative growth. We want to continue expanding. If you think that growth means 'having more of certain things', rather than 'better quality' or the deeper dimensions of growth, then those expansive growth impulses will start to hit or harm systemic boundaries of life. In classic economic growth models we don't learn sufficiently from systemic boundaries and systemic feedback. We don't honour sufficiently the feedback that says: "Slow down. Rest. Go within. Make sure you regroup. Make sure you don't lose touch with the interconnectedness you are part of. Listen."

Many of our Western growth models, or rather the imperial building models (which are also dominant in certain Asian countries and Russia), are based on exponential extractive growth. This type of growth seeks expansion at the cost of vital systemic boundaries and thresholds. Instead of learning from the feedback of systemic boundaries, extractive growth mindsets seek to conquer boundaries. Believing it is a limitation to overcome. If you add to this an artificial notion of freedom, believing freedom means: "I can do whatever I want, nobody is going to stop me", then you start to understand why our world is in crisis. Somebody with that mindset would say: "I need to overcome the boundary and conquer it." Not understanding or accepting

the system's intelligence that tells us: "Pay attention here. Listen, be careful. Don't go over that threshold. Make sure you remain within the boundaries that guide system integrity."

Our actions have impacts for the planet and for everyone else. We often ignore the feedback of the pain we cause by constant focus on growth and expansion. Whereas pain is actually a warning of the system communicating: "Be careful, listen". But human-made systems are often not sensitive to learning from pain. In fact, we tend to barge over pain. Hence, expansive growth patterns that harm systemic boundaries become barriers for thriving.

The difference between a systemic barrier or a systemic boundary can be qualified in the following way: If the behavior of a system starts to harm the interdependencies of the system, then it forms a barrier to itself and the systems it forms part of.

It's incredibly important to know the difference between systemic boundaries and barriers. If we look at our sustainability and thriving crisis, including our climate crisis, biodiversity loss and all the other problems, then we can see how these are actually barrier issues. Yet, we are treating it as if it's a boundary issue.

We often think that pain is something that we need to be afraid of, and we tend to ignore it at the systemic levels. Or else, we may believe pain is vulnerability and weakness. Yet by not honoring and including the feedback of systemic boundaries in our growth model, we create systems that create barriers to our thriving and a lot of harm and pain. The consequences of not addressing systemic barriers is the climate crisis, the biodiversity loss, and also the human behavioural crisis.

### **What happens when system pain is ignored?**

When there is no responsiveness to pain, then the trust in a system goes down. Especially when people feel hurt and they do not experience any meaningful response from the systems they form part of to that hurt. Hence trust goes down, and fear, conflicts, and divisions rise up. We then start to see how collaboration between people diminishes. What happens next is that the evolutionary coherence of that system diminishes, and the diversity starts to become competitive. Even to the point that systemic diversity may start to fight against itself. And that's just like a harmful viral pattern. As if the immune system is being overtaken by a viral program and the body now starts to fight against itself.

That's why it's so important to know the difference between a systemic boundary and a systemic barrier. If there's a systemic barrier it means we need to become aware that our behavior is somehow harming the interdependencies - either within or between us. When harm is present, it also indicates how we're not really grounded and present to what's happening in reality. It might also be that our capacity to collaborate is hindered. And that the way in which we're seeing the world is filtered or colored. So that means that our response patterns are not informed by the deeper wisdom of the system itself.

### **How to Work with Living Systems**

For me, the starting point is to become aware of where you are, because there's nothing worse than starting to think about systemic unity while you're completely disconnected from yourself, because you have created a virtual reality. I see this sometimes when people are searching for a spiritual mystical experience and they believe that in order to transcend they need to 'get out of' or 'away from'. If you're moving out, that very movement creates a ripple of resistance. It creates some form of rejection. The starting point may sound very simple. First get present. Ask, "where am I right now? What am I experiencing? What does it mean to be here right now, to live this moment?"

Then get present in your body, and ask: "How much of me is actually here? Where does my awareness go? How much of my awareness is now thinking about the past or future? How much of my awareness is already into thinking about what I am going to do next?" Capture your presence, become aware of yourself, here and now, and what you're experiencing.

Then the next step is to do a brief check. This may again sound so simple, but it's essential: "How am I breathing? Am I breathing in life or anxiety?" When you breathe in life, also let life flow all the way into your toes and fingertips. Don't think yourself connected, feel and be connected. Become part of your environment. What you focus on is what you energize with your attention. The way that you respond to a situation starts to influence how you experienced that situation.

So, if you are experiencing dualism, or feel tense, bring your awareness back to yourself here and now, and change the quality of your attention. Catch where your awareness is going, and then connect with life. And also ask yourself: "How am I experiencing what's happening to the planet and to us in that process?"

### **How to relate with the World from a Living Systems Perspective**

A lot of information that is shared about the climate or our planet is done in a way that's either so impersonal or else it is so emotional that it's just too much to take in for many people. I have noticed in my own research and teaching that many people don't know what to do with that. It's so important that we find other ways to connect with what's happening with our world, that doesn't make us completely numb to what's going on, or else angry or fearful.

What do systemic barriers cause? Almost all of us have been growing up in systems - educationally, politically, and economically - that cause barriers to our interdependence and to our thriving. The first symptom of that is the systemic lack of trust and disconnect from a deeper wisdom of life. Our perspective has become so mechanical that many do not even believe that there is a deeper wisdom of our planet or life itself.

Personally, I had to work through many challenging situations. When I was little I went through some serious health issues. If I had listened to everything that the doctors had told me, I would never have achieved what I did in life. While I experienced how certain of my own systems were not working well, I trusted how there is an intelligence of my body to heal and recreate myself. So that became my focus.

When I look at our planet, I see on the one hand major planetary tipping points - huge biodiversity loss, disastrous emissions, and people continuing with 'business as usual' - yet, I'm also seeing a deep intelligence of our planet to heal, regenerate, and restore herself. What I've noticed in my own body, for example when my hand gets injured, is that there's a whole intelligence of my body wisdom that comes to the injured part, and this intelligence brings resources and healing to the injury.

When I think of our planet, I'm not just seeing her as injured or as dying or suffering. If that's the only reality we connect with, it's so hard from there to feel any kind of hope. What I know is that it's exactly in those areas where we are most vulnerable and hurt that there is a resourcefulness from life that comes up towards those areas.

Hence, I see myself as part of the immune system of the planet. I'm like this little white blood cell, a little scout of mother earth that gets sent to those areas to strengthen that life wisdom, and to bring forward that love to restore the trust. Now that potential is in all of us. In each and every one of us there is that little voice of our planet that inspires us despite the many challenges. Or maybe exactly because of those challenges, to find the resources within yourself that you never knew were there. There are even more resources when we come together - the resources of the collective.

The health of a system, it's intelligence, is always here. Also when a system is highly polluted, intoxicated, suffering, and you may think it has already collapsed. That intelligence does not get lost. It's just that it might not have been able to express or guide deep planetary processes at a rate that is necessary. That, then, becomes our responsibility: *to become the planetary health response.*

*Ask yourself now: "how would I come forth in those crisis situations now?"*

Systemic barriers are there in terms of our fears, distrust, and uncertainty, but you're not that barrier. You are not all these different voices or feelings, you are the awareness that can notice all those different voices and feelings. Don't get stuck on one voice or perspective. Come back to the practice we had when we started, and ask: "What do I choose to focus on now? What am I giving my attention to?"

My motto has always been that if there is 1% of possibility, then *it is possible*. So I really see this as an incredible invitation for all of us to bring forth resources within ourselves and within our togetherness that we never even knew were possible. And for us to become the possibility of an incredibly healthy system. The good news is that this intelligence and wisdom is given. It's up to us now to work with it, to apply that. And as we apply this, we will discover and learn so much more.

### **How do we Transform the System?**

We come out of a throw-away-society, with a mentality of discarding what we don't like or understand, and always trying to create something new and better. If we go back to that principle of interdependence again, we need to realize that throwing away the old system doesn't work. If we then focus on the intelligence of life that's in every system, the question

becomes: “How can we create the conditions for the intelligence of life to emerge, and transform what needs or seeks transformation?”

The golden question is: What can we each do to help transform the systemic barriers (inner and outer) that are harming our systemic boundaries and are creating the harmful tipping points, socially and planetary?

If we take that principle of interdependence and interconnectedness really seriously, then we realize that throwing away the systems that create the systemic barriers is also not a solution. If we want to transform those harmful systems, the first thing that we need to do is start to look at the underlying growth model and our own growth assumptions. This is so important. In a lot of the sustainability movements now there is this focus of making growth bad, of stopping growth. To the point that many are getting scared of growth, because once again we're trying to manage something at the manifest level, rather than working at a deeper causal level and understanding what is truly going on. Having the understanding that there are deeper informational orders of life that are unified and whole, which are not space-time bound, is incredibly important when working with transformation.

If we do not understand those deeper dimensions of life, and we're only working at the level of where things have become a problem, our course corrections may inadvertently become part of the problem. When you enter a situation, dualistically, for example by saying, “oh, this is something I've got to fix”, you will miss the resources of the deeper implicate orders of reality that are whole and unified. The ways to tap into and bring forth the evolutionary coherence which guides complexity to become generative, and not fight against itself.

The systems that seek transformation or need transformation are often the systems that have become decoupled from the deeper implicate orders, and informational architecture, of life. Life is unified and whole, when we understand and apply this we discover the ways and means to redesign and transform our societies for thriving.

When systems are not sourced and rooted in this informational architecture of wholeness, we create systems of duality and division. When a forest grows more complex, with more diverse plants and trees, it doesn't collapse. Instead it becomes more resilient. Diversity and complexity is not the problem, our dualistic and separatist behaviours are the problem. Life shows us how to work with complexity, if we start from unity and wholeness and honour the systemic boundaries that safeguard our wellbeing and thriving.

### **How to Implement Systems Thinking and Sensing**

Living systems are holarchic, not hierarchic. Living systems are collaborative, not competitive. It's about unity in diversity. Realizing there's no dichotomy between unity and diversity. Think quantitative *and* qualitative. Living systems are responsive, not reactive, as well as adaptive. Think resilience first. Think dynamic and flexible, not static and rigid. Living systems are evolutionary coherent, which is not the same as cohesion. Cohesion is about trying to keep things together, cemented. Living systems don't need to do that because they are in tune with the wholeness of life.

I applied this approach in my work for mainstream schools in Mauritius, in four different school systems that included over 20,000 students. In these school systems, the systemic barriers of mainstream economic growth were very present in the educational system and the way learning took place in silos. There was also little collaboration. The competitive economic growth models created economic competitive growth mindsets, which hindered students and teachers to thrive, and accordingly school wouldn't thrive. So what I started to do is implement the strategies that would mimic the deeper implicate orders of life that are unified. To introduce, by design, collaborative practices between students, teachers, and departments, and eventually the school community as a whole.

When you implement the collaborative strategies you create new experiences through dialogue as well, which help restore trust, and helps to experience our diversity as something beautiful and beneficial. This was then followed by implementing ways to measure also the qualitative learning aspects, and not only the quantitative aspects through exams and standardized tests. To measure or make visible learning as a transformative process.

By systematically creating strategies that are the biomimicry component of that deeper wisdom of life, you can create even in mechanistic systems the spaces for the imaginal cells of the butterfly. You then start to create in those mechanistic systems, the possibility spaces or evolutionary spaces, where the intelligence of life can guide and inform, by creating new experiences of what it means to be together. Those new experiences are often much more fulfilling and purposeful for people, which then become the future attractors. After which, you show people how to nurture those attractors and evolutionary spaces for guiding the next levels of behavioral change. That's how you create the conditions for a thrivable ripple effect.

### **Natural Change Processes**

It's all about understanding what needs and what seeks to change, and how a natural change process unfolds. There is natural change and unnatural change. And this distinction is very important. If we merely think we need to change something without awareness of change as a process, your actions may be disruptive and we might be changing the wrong things.

In living systems there are important stabilizers. For example, if you start to disrupt certain interconnections, the whole system stability can start to collapse. So it's again about understanding the difference between systemic barriers and boundaries. Systemic barriers will create certain dynamics and interference patterns that inhibit other change processes, such that the natural change process cannot unfold or emerge fully.

I'll give you an example. In one of my Ph.D. research case-studies of the private sector people had to keep working for long hours. A culture had developed where people were expected to take work home after office hours. Honouring natural change meant: "I need to rest and integrate. I can take a quick break, there is work-life balance." However, many people felt compromised and out of touch with their body's natural change process. The growth pattern of that corporate system had become a systemic barrier for people's natural change, to the point that many people could no longer sense when it's important to pause, stop, and rest.

Life is change. But there are many change processes that we impose upon life and go against the rhythms of life, and thus create disruptive patterns. I always ask people, what's the direction of change? Not every transformational growth or change process will go in the direction of thriving. A system can also change away from its intelligence and unity with life. Then sadly, often the only way for life to continue is via systemic collapse of what is no longer sustainable. At that stage the growth patterns have become so entropic that there's no more energy available for renewal or transformation. All systemic activities then come to a halt and the system collapses. The question then, is what happens to the information of that system after it collapses? You often find that life then regroups and starts a new cycle. We can see this growth process in an apple, in a tree, in the hurricanes, in the cyclones, in your own body.

In every change process there are phases of unification and integration, and phases of expansion and diversification. That's a kind of cosmological law or evolutionary principle. Growth never keeps going in one direction. When there is a movement in one direction, there's always a counter movement in another direction. This often happens invisibly. When something expands to diversify, something else in the system is seeking to make sure that the interconnectedness at deeper orders of reality remain unified.

### **Death, Change and Thrivability**

When it comes to our desire for growth and development, perhaps the biggest challenge in society right now is how to allow for death with dignity. What are the programs, systems, and organizations that we need to let die with dignity? In a dignified manner means in an honorable manner, thanking people for the role that they have served. And then also guiding the resources, people, and information to new possibilities for us to thrive. We should not just leave and declare: "Okay. It's just collapsed. Great, wonderful. The system has collapsed. Now we have a new opportunity." A dignified way of dying means guiding a process through hospice: allowing a person, system, or culture to die and then guiding what is still alive into new ways of working and being with each other that are more conducive for life and us to thrive.

When I feel the impulse or the desire to want to change something, the first question I ask myself is: "Do I want to change this situation or this process because I'm rejecting what's happening?" Check if your impulse to change is coming from a place of rejection, dissatisfaction, or frustration. The first step when wanting to change something, even if we feel frustrated, is not to focus outwards, but to go within. That may seem contradictory, especially when we feel affected by what we want to change. We may also think: "I don't want this, this has to change." When we feel resistance, all our barriers go up. Yet what we reject often comes back in an inverted way, and then we have to deal with it often in far more unpleasant ways. Seek to understand: "What am I projecting on the situation? Does this need to change? Or am I making it mean something that isn't actually there?" These questions are very important because we are not separate from the change process or what we seek to change. The way we stand in that process of change, the way we respond, is also a dynamic that becomes part of that change process, and could become a tipping point for one outcome or another.

Even in times of darkness, despair, and grief, even in what may feel so murky and awful that we want to run away from it, we need to find a way to connect with that light inside. That light,



that connection point, is love. Love is that force that comes forth when the mind thinks, “this is just madness. I don't want to have anything to do with that.” Love is that power that exactly in those moments when we want to withdraw or react, reaches out and reaches from within, seeking to connect with what is life. Especially in what appears paradoxical.

When you touch that potentiality for change through love, what changes comes back to itself, which is completely different from trying to change something by rejection. Because when we start to impose change, then we are already determining what it should be. And then you may find that people change because they feel rejected and scared. Believing there's no place for them, that they have to become something that they're not, and they can't sustain that. So that type of change through rejection is simply not sustainable nor desirable. Hence it's really important to know your motivation for change, where is it coming from? And then to work with the natural change process. Remember, a natural change process always seeks to bring forth more of its true potential. With true potential, I mean the greatness and unity of life that's within. That for me is thriving, that deep innate ability within every living being, every living system to bring forth our innate potentiality of goodness of health. And to be able to initiate and participate in a process that is conducive to our evolutionary learning and development. Where the health of oneself is part of the larger health of life as a living system. That to me is essentially what thriving or the ability to thrive is all about.

Thriving is beautiful because it's an innate capacity and this aspect is often missing in the conversations on sustainability. I did the following experiment with people and asked them: “If I say the word ‘sustainability’ and you were to draw that, how would sustainability look like?” Almost everybody visualized a flat line. But nothing that's alive is a flatline. There's something in the word, sustainability - to sustain - that doesn't connect us with life.

When I asked people to visualize ‘thrive’ and express to me how it feels to thrive, and to have the ability to thrive, then you get a completely different imagery. You don't have this flat line. But we do need to help strengthen and create the conditions for all of us to thrive.

When I was working with sustainability education prior, because that was the language we all had to work with, I noticed how I could not motivate people for the deep inner changes by focussing on sustainability. At a deeper level, it wasn't activating. That evolutionary impulse that is within all beings, and within and between all living systems, also seeks to create the conditions for thriving. Thriving is always interdependent, hence this intelligence also seeks to curate those conditions for your and our thriving, as well as the thriving of life as a whole. And there's also a dimension of joy in this understanding of thriving. It's not enough for me to say: “Let's focus on the minimum harm”. Instead, let's focus on the maximum goodness that we can create together. Let's work from beauty.

### **A licence to operate.**

I often ask business people during my corporate training: “What's your company's license to exist? If you cannot give me a very clear answer to this then why should you have a license to operate from the register of companies?” I've asked this to many CEOs and many of them responded: “Well, we exist because someone else, you know, 10 years ago, set up the company.” I then ask them, “What then is your value addition?”

When you want to be an entrepreneur and you seek thriving, your license to operate has to answer to why you have a license to exist. What value you are committed to co-creating in society that will stay when you are no longer here. As an entrepreneur you need to get clear about: “What’s my purpose? What is my value contribution? What is my value commitment, and how do I embed that into the values of my organization? How do I measure and evaluate that? How am I accountable to that? How am I seeking to improve that all the time? How do I measure the value that I’m creating, and that I’m also dependent on?”

This brings us back to how we started with ‘interdependencies’. As an entrepreneur it’s important to recognize that there are various levels of interdependencies in your organization: Acknowledge how your business activities require help from other people or require resources from our planet. How are you taking responsibility for that? Are you finding ways to be circular about these interdependencies and regenerative? It may take some time to map out these various interconnections and interdependencies, but it’s an incredibly important exercise. Especially if the commitment is thriving? Ask, “what are the interconnections, and what is my strategy for the health of each?”

How do you make sure as an organization that everyone who forms part of your community is in wellness, and that your company or organization has a strategy for dealing with that? Think about that ahead. If you make a profit and you notice that some of your rightsholders may be going down, is there a way that you can come forward to support them? If you have compassion as one of your core values, what does that mean in such situations? And are there ways in which you could exchange services as well, if financial flows are constrained? How can and do you acknowledge the value of someone else? And what value are you giving to others? What does reciprocity mean in practice?

I would strongly recommend that if we want thriving to become truly concrete, and not just a concept, then principles such as interdependence, reciprocity, and compassion need to be translated into concrete strategies, practices, and ways to measure that. This also includes ways to communicate what you have measured, and ways in which you seek feedback from the people you’ve been in contact with. In the beginning, this may seem challenging because you will get a lot of different inputs. Remember that this is what it’s all about to be a living system. Living systems are open to that kind of feedback and input, even the input of pain, because they will seek to learn from that and find new responses. If you can do that, then you create a truly thriving organization that contributes to the thriving for all of us.

### **About Anneloes Smitsman**

[Anneloes Smitsman](#), Ph.D., LL.M., is a visionary scientist, published author, futurist, system architect, and leadership catalyst for the transition to a Thrivable Civilization. She is a Founder and CEO of EARTHwise Centre and holds a Masters degree in Law and Judicial Political Sciences from Leiden University, and a degree of Doctor from the Maastricht Sustainability Institute of Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Anneloes is the co-author of the [Future Humans Trilogy](#) with Jean Houston, Ph.D., and the lead author of the r3.0 Educational Transformation Blueprint, as well as the lead architect of the SEEDS Constitution and strategic advisor of Hypha for co-developing the Regenerative Renaissance tools, currencies, systems, and cultures. She is a powerful teacher of Cosmic Architecture, Evolutionary Leadership, and Transformational Change. Her unique transformation programs and practices have

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