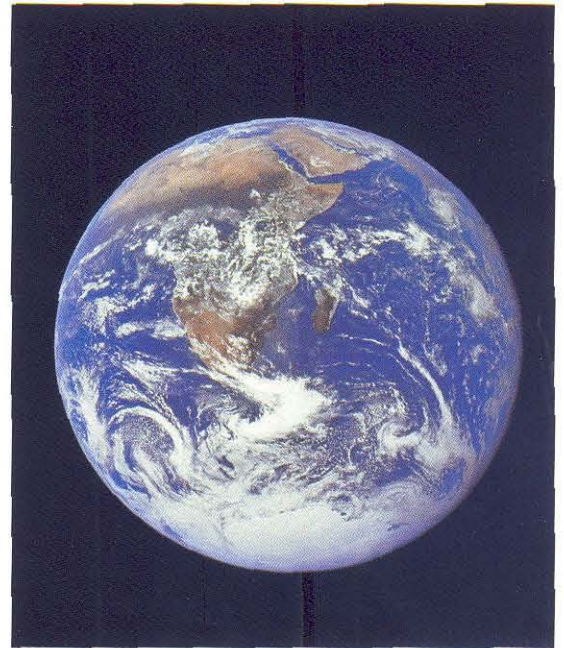


Afterword



What did the “Visions of a Sustainable World” symposium accomplish? Did it provide any new insights, indicate any new directions, produce any *visions*? What did Caltech and the symposium’s organizers hope would come out of three days of intellectual grappling with the difficult issues that face life on Earth? What was this “very impressive group of people—probably one of the greatest groups of PhDs assembled in one room, benevolent about the destiny of the world and trying to save the world from God knows what” (according to Daniel Schorr of National Public Radio), actually supposed to be doing? “We wanted to bring together people to *think* about the issues,” said Murray Gell-Mann later, “about how they’re related, how to conceptualize them. And these are issues that go beyond just the environmental. They include military and diplomatic problems; issues of cultural diversity and the opposite side of the coin, ethnic strife; questions of political organization, poverty, health, demographics—they’re all closely knit together.”

How did this work? In his wrap-up of the sessions on global perspectives, Schorr noted that the symposium was divided along several axes. “The program tells you this is a conference about *vision*. But in the subheads you read that almost every panel is a panel on *transition*. There seems to be some tension about whether the question is where do we want to go? But even that is two questions. One question is where do we get when and if things go on as they are going on now? The other, perhaps more important, question is where do we end up 10, 20, 60 years

from now, given that something is done about it, given that we do manage to make the word *community* a meaningful word and to find ways to implement a sense of community? That’s vision.”

Later, Paul MacCready remarked on “how hard it is to get anybody to look at a vision of where we want to go, as opposed to how we get there.” Too many of the participants were doing what MacCready calls, “Ready, Fire, Aim.” Murray agreed: “The lesson we learned is that the world is not ready to talk about these problems yet, because too few of the scholars, generalists, and specialists who should be involved have even begun to consider them.”

“Not surprisingly, many people simply cannot face the disturbing projections,” said Murray. “They take refuge instead in a protective apathy, enhancing vivid details of the present in order to blot out a frightening future.” Some of those vivid details of the present, however, are also frightening. MacCready likes to jar people into thinking about the global situation with the statement that 250,000 more people are born on Earth every day. And on that same day humans have caused the extinction of 300 species of flora and fauna.

The symposium reminded Schorr of the early days of the arms-control community. “About 25–30 years ago, a group of people—scientists, people interested in foreign policy—came together to try to control nuclear arms. They weren’t taken seriously at first. They came from different fields and different disciplines, but they worked at it and worked at it, and after a while

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they began to have an effect—but only at a point where they had been together long enough and heard one another’s viewpoints often enough that they began to listen to each other, rather than merely speaking to each other. And then they reached a consensus about what to urge governments to do, and slowly they began to work on that.”

Bruce Murray also picked up the analogy later, comparing the symposium to the “Pugwash [for the Nova Scotia town where the meetings were held] phase” in the arms-control movement. “Then intellectual pioneers responded to the unprecedented danger of nuclear weapons. Now, we must similarly create a dedicated, self-recognizing community of scholars and generalists equally committed to mitigating unprecedented hazards.” Harrison Brown, to whom the “Visions” symposium was dedicated, also played an important role in the early arms-control movement. “He brought people together from different countries, from the various national-security establishments,” said Murray. “He made it respectable to talk about the problem.”

How difficult it is to get people to talk about the problem was one of the main lessons learned from the “Visions” symposium, the organizers agreed. According to Murray, “the primary task for the near term is to organize networks and discussions and to get people to realize what the problem is—not so much the solutions.” Schorr expressed confidence “that this is one conference, one step in what will be a series of many conferences; it can’t be done all at one time.”

Others weren’t so sure that talk among the experts was enough. In an early session Carl Djerassi expressed his “enormous frustration this morning at listening to two panelists who impressed me more than almost any panelist I’ve heard in recent years. These were speakers who spoke movingly and persuasively about important issues, and I look at the auditorium, which is either two-thirds empty or one-third full, where I think most of the people are at middle age or beyond. There are few students.” Djerassi assumed that students made an economic decision, a cost/benefit decision, that it wasn’t worth cutting classes to hear a bunch of speakers. “Now consider that for a moment: If they made the decision that way, how will we persuade anyone in a group that is much less persuaded about the importance of the issues?” He challenged the panelists to imagine the auditorium full, not of experts and academics, but of farmers, automobile workers, loggers, fishermen; what would they say then? MacCready concurred: “It can’t just be a bunch of professors talking to

another bunch of professors. We’ve got to make it accessible and interesting to people.”

Daniel Schorr posed a final question at the end of his wrap-up session: “Why did the conference organizers decide against accomplishing anything beyond pontificating? Why no dialog to achieve whatever degree of consensus among scholars is possible? Why no conference statement? Why no plans to mobilize and promote consensus expertise for Brazil in 1992?”

That wasn’t the intent, however. Any conference with *vision* in the title isn’t likely to produce a plan of action or even a consensus (there wasn’t even a consensus on what sustainable meant), and the organizers indeed did not have that in mind. On the occasion of Caltech’s 100th year, they wanted participants to envision what they wanted the world to look like after another century or at least by the middle of the next one. They weren’t looking for short-term prescriptions. Therefore the organizers were disappointed and frustrated to some extent by the panelists’ recurring focus on the near term—the next 10 years—and on solving current problems. “They refused to take on the time scale,” said Murray of some of the participants.

“But there were many excellent insights,” according to Gell-Mann. “The issues of sustainability needed to be discussed all together, and that was understood and done well by most of the participants. It’s a revolutionary way of doing things, because most scientists are not used to taking a crude look at the whole. From that point of view the symposium was a success.”

“The speakers and panelists did address the approaches to the transitions, but we hoped they would go beyond that,” said Gell-Mann. “They were unwilling to address the transitions themselves—what the world would be like afterward, what the desirable states of the world would be.” This was indeed difficult to envision. MacCready’s view was that “even 30 years from now, things are going to be so changed that they will be unrecognizable.”

Perhaps Linda Fetter, a Pasadena resident who, with her husband, had supported the “Visions” symposium financially, best summed up the intended scope of the conference and added a touch of nonpontificating optimism: “We have three sons. We’re very, very interested and concerned about the world for them and for their children.” She also said that she had received a gift through this conference, “and that’s a new respect for the challenges that we all face. I feel a pride in us as a civilization, and I feel that we are going to continue to seek and find the answers to the issues raised.” □