

## Introduction to Commons Discussion Session at Bioneers 2006

*by Christina Desser*

Philosopher and scientist Jacob Bronowski described the process of science—the process by which we gain empirical knowledge-- as that of decoding a “completely connected world.” This decoding requires dividing that completely connected world into what is relevant and what is not relevant to the matter at hand in order to create a meaningful context for study. But this division, Bronowski says, does violence to the connections in the world. We must always bear in mind that we are “certainly not going to get the world right, because the basic assumption that [we] have made about dividing the world into the relevant and irrelevant is in fact a lie.” Thus, we must be careful of the actions we take as a result of our, often necessary, world-dividing activities.

The creative personality, according to Bronowski—whether an artist or a scientist or an activist--is “one that looks on the world as fit for change and on himself as an instrument for change.” She understands that the world she paints or studies or acts on is but a fragment of a connected whole, and the integrity and truth of her creative act—her survival in fact, depends upon operating and acting within the truth of that connection. To the extent possible, then, our actions must arise out of an integral structure of consciousness, one that makes the connections we see, and bears in mind that there are certainly connections we are not yet aware of. If we return to a linear way of thinking, one ignores the completely connected world, as Bronowski warns, we will get it wrong. Alas, we frequently do.

I, and I think I can safely say, all of you, do look at the world as fit for change and ourselves as instruments of change. We seek an ever more just and sustainable society. An understanding of The Commons as an overarching organizing principle is essential to creating the world we want to live in; it is consistent with the emergence of this integral structure of consciousness, this fundamentally connected and relational, way of thinking.

I recently read an observation by Nobel Prize winning neuroscientist Eric Kandel. His field is memory and how it works. He said, “It took us a year to realize what should have been obvious from the start: the cellular mechanics of learning and memory reside not in the special properties of the neuron itself, but in the *connections* it receives and makes with other cells in the neuronal circuit to which it belongs.” Thus, memory only exists within a field of relationship. Solitary, disconnected neurons, isolated from the larger system of the brain, could not be the repositories of memory. Memory, Kandel realized, and I would extend this to consciousness itself, exists not in a place, but in the connections. Memory, consciousness itself, seems to me to be a sort of personal Commons.

“The Commons” that is the subject of our conversation today, refers to all the things that we inherit and create jointly for universal use, and that we must protect for the benefit of generations to come. The Commons includes topsoil, biodiversity, the airwaves, roads, mathematics, the law,

DNA, wisdom, languages, democracy, quiet, art, seeds, oceans, museums, blood banks, sidewalks, medicine, jazz, social insurance, the sun, the wind, rivers and jokes. This list is not exhaustive. Activist work as apparently diverse as defending the biological integrity and availability of potable water, organizing to keep the internet free public and WIFI publicly owned, and advocating for open access to the information generated by the California Stem Cell Research Initiative and paid for by California taxpayers are all connected by their relationship to the Commons. So is the public library. Canadians consider their universal health care system to be a Commons.

But not everything constitutes the Commons in the most encompassing sense. Those things that are essential to our existence, physically, spiritually, and intellectually certainly are--natural resources and realms of knowledge for example. The consequences of privatization or enclosure in those cases is not only inequitable, it is ultimately self-defeating because it imperils our survival. The consequence of the complete privatization or enclosure of a resource, natural or otherwise, with regard to connectivity and access is one good analytical tool for considering whether it should be considered part of the commons. But even among those assets that comprise the commons—that belong to us all--rules of use are usually required to preserve the resource and ensure that it remains open and equitably available now and in the future.

Over the last decade, a growing community of theoreticians, researchers, activists, business people and policy shapers across sectors and disciplines have become as a confederation of thought and action aimed

towards the revalidation, enhancement, and evolution of The Commons. The question we are exploring is how each piece of the wide range of work we do reinforces the whole by building a popular consciousness about what we own together.

We are people engaged in the practical day-to-day work of social change, but there are critical moments, and needless to say, this is one, where it is wise to step back and consider our work in the most capacious context. Massive global change is upon us--the already felt impacts of global climate change; the depletion of global fisheries; increased desertification in Africa; and the surge in immigration activism in the US and Europe are but a few significant indicators. How shall we respond? Will we meet this change with regressive and fascistic means and methods or will we design open and integrative solutions? Developing and implementing the concept of the commons is critical to addressing these challenges before us.

What we want to do today is invite you, as fellow instruments of change, into this conversation about how a commitment to the Commons, which is in fact the very essence and energy of our consciousness and work, can liberate us from the false distinctions and divisions that may have been necessary in the past, but are anachronistic today. Our success now, requires that our efforts emanate from a completely connected, integrative consciousness, and must be directed towards the preservation and enhancement of a completely connected world.