



Institute of World Culture

“At some critical point, the realization will set in that we share a common planet, that we are all affected, and that our neighbors’ suffering is not unlike our own. At that juncture recriminations and retributions will be of little avail in addressing the enormity of the crisis at hand. Only by concerted action that establishes a collective sense of affiliation with the entire biosphere will we have a chance to ensure our future. This will require a biosphere consciousness.”

– *Jeremy Rifkin*

The Empathic Civilization

In a new book circle beginning Monday, September 5th, discussion will focus on *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* by Jeremy Rifkin. The author predicts that “we are at a decisive moment in the human journey where the race to global empathic consciousness is running up against global entropic collapse.” To support this view, Rifkin describes the history of several civilizations and then explains the entropic biological, technological and environmental changes that threaten the continuation of civilization and may destroy the empathic capacities in human nature. In the Introduction to the book, Rifkin explains the purpose of his study as follows:

“This book presents a new interpretation of the history of civilization by looking at the empathic evolution of the human race and the profound ways it has shaped our development and will likely decide our fate as a species. “A radical new view of human nature is emerging in the biological and cognitive sciences and creating controversy in intellectual circles, the business community, and government. Recent discoveries in brain science and child development are forcing us to rethink the long-held belief that human beings are, by nature, aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian, and self-interested. The dawning realization that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society.

“These new understandings of human nature open the door to a never-before-told journey. The pages that follow reveal the dramatic story of the development of human empathy from the rise of the great theological civilizations, to the ideological age that dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the psychological age that characterized much of the twentieth century, and the emerging dramaturgical period of the twenty-first century.

“Viewing economic history from an empathic lens allows us to uncover

new strands of the human narrative that lay previously hidden. The result is a new social tapestry – The Empathic Civilization—woven from a wide range of fields, including literature and the arts, theology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, and communications theory.

“At the very core of the human story is the paradoxical relationship between empathy and entropy. Throughout history new energy regimes have converged with new communications revolutions, creating ever more complex societies. More technologically advanced civilizations, in turn, have brought diverse people together, heightened empathic sensitivity, and expanded consciousness. But these increasingly more complicated milieus require more extensive energy use and speed us toward resource depletion.

“The irony is our growing empathic awareness has been made possible by an ever-greater consumption of the Earth’s energy and other resources, resulting in a dramatic deterioration of the health of the planet.

“We now face the haunting prospect of approaching global empathy in a highly energy-intensive, interconnected world, riding on the back of an escalating entropy bill that now threatens catastrophic climate change and our very existence. Resolving the empathy/entropy paradox will likely be the critical test of our species’ ability to survive and flourish on Earth in the future. This will necessitate a fundamental rethinking of our philosophical, economic, and social models.

“The most important question facing humanity is this: Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the Earth?”

Jeremy Rifkin has been a highly regarded advisor to the European Union and an influential author. His previous publications include *The Hydrogen Economy*, *The Future of Work* and *The European Dream*. All are welcome to join in the book circle discussion that will critique Rifkin’s paradox and pose questions about the empathic and entropic impact of modern, networked institutions such as global corporations, governments and non-profit organizations.