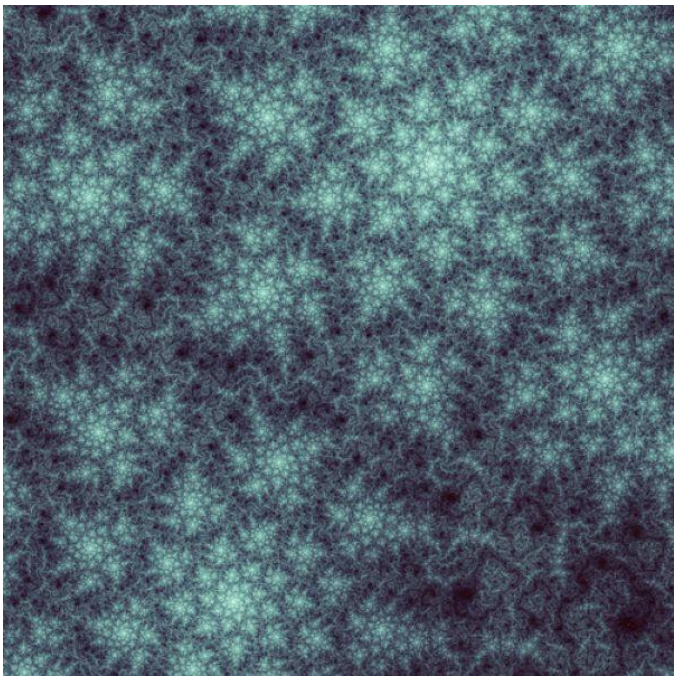
The Problem of Scale

Why Small Groups May Matter More Than We Think



Many of the crises defining our time—climate disruption, ecological strain, institutional fragility, political polarization, technological acceleration, and widespread psychological stress—are usually discussed as separate problems. Each has its own field of expertise and its own set of proposed solutions.

Yet when we step back, these challenges appear less like isolated failures and more like the behaviour of an entire system under stress. They arise together, reinforce each other, and resist simple fixes. The growing sense that we are facing a *metacrisis* suggests that something deeper may be at work.

This raises a question: what if the underlying problem is not any one crisis, but the scale at which modern systems now operate?

Human beings evolved to live and cooperate within small relational groups. Anthropological research, including the work of Robin Dunbar, suggests that human social capacities tend to cluster around three natural scales: roughly five, fifteen, and one hundred and fifty people. These are not rigid rules, but patterns that recur across cultures and communities. Each scale appears to support a different form of human intelligence.

At the smallest scale—around **five people**—we find our closest circle of trust. These are the relationships where vulnerability and intimacy become possible and where identity can be explored without strong defensive boundaries. This scale supports emotional depth and personal honesty.

At the next scale—around **fifteen people**—a different phenomenon becomes possible. Groups of this size are large enough to contain diverse perspectives, yet small enough for everyone to remain visible to one another. Here something like **relational intelligence** can emerge: insight that arises not from any single individual, but from the interaction of many attentive minds.

Beyond that lies the scale of **human community**, around **one hundred and fifty people**. Historically this corresponds to villages, tribal groups, or tightly knit communities. At this level reputation regulates behaviour, trust circulates, and shared norms remain visible.

Modern civilization, however, operates at scales far beyond these natural limits. Our economic, technological, and political systems link millions and billions of people through networks of institutions and algorithms that no individual can fully perceive.

The philosophical foundations of modern society may also have reinforced this scaling problem. Since the Enlightenment, Western thought has increasingly imagined society as a collection of autonomous individuals pursuing their own goals, coordinating their activities through rules, markets, contracts, and institutions.

This view has been extraordinarily productive and was, in many respects, a necessary step in human development. Yet as the problems of scale become more visible, its limitations also come into view. The primacy of the individual tends to obscure the relational contexts in which human intelligence actually develops. When relationships are replaced by mechanisms, systems may scale efficiently—but often at the cost of social coherence.

When systems expand to this scale, several recurring dynamics appear.

Power and resources concentrate in a small number of actors. Competition escalates into arms races across technology, finance, and geopolitics, making conflict increasingly difficult to avoid. Shared problems become increasingly difficult to coordinate, even when everyone recognizes them. And economic growth pushes ecological systems beyond their long-term regenerative capacity.

These are not moral failures. They are structural consequences of scale.

If this diagnosis is even partly correct, a natural question follows: what forms of organization remain coherent at human scale?

One possible answer lies in rediscovering the intelligence available within small relational groups.

In recent years, experiments with relational dialogue—such as the **Between-Us groups**—have explored the conditions under which a shared field of attention can arise between people. These relational containers cultivate simple conditions that encourage transparency, autonomy, and careful listening.

When attention stabilizes in such an environment, participants often report a subtle shift. Individuals begin to see themselves reflected in the presence of others with unusual clarity. Narratives soften. Experiences that had remained unspoken find language. Insight appears not as the property of one speaker, but as something emerging between the participants.

Diversity of perspective creates a form of creative friction that deepens understanding rather than fragmenting it.

Transformation often follows naturally. As individuals feel clearly seen and held within the relational field, defensive identities loosen and reorganize. In this sense the group begins to function less like a collection of individuals and more like a shared sensing capacity.

Coherence within the group creates a stability that allows both deeper connection and the flourishing of individual uniqueness within a profound shared sense of belonging.

If groups like these were to multiply and connect with one another, they could begin to operate as **nodes in a wider network**.

Such a network would allow many small sites of innovation rather than relying on centralized authority. Diversity of perspective could be preserved rather than flattened. Failures remain local, while useful discoveries travel through the network.

Nature offers many examples of this structure. Ecosystems, mycelial networks, and coral reefs operate through distributed nodes rather than through central control. Adaptation emerges through interaction among many small units.

Perhaps something similar may become necessary for human societies navigating an age of systemic complexity.

If the metacrisis is partly a problem of scale, the future may not lie in building ever larger systems of coordination. It may lie instead in cultivating networks of relationally intelligent groups—small enough to remain human, yet connected enough to learn from one another.

The task ahead may be less about designing ever more elaborate institutions and more about rediscovering something older and simpler: the human capacity to think, sense, and respond together in relationship.

At scales where people can truly see one another, intelligence does not disappear into abstraction. It becomes visible again—alive in the space between us.