

The Ocean in a Drop:

A Narrative of Reintegration for an Era of Disintegration

“We are not a drop in the ocean. We are the ocean in a drop.”

-- *Rumi*

Rosalind Savage

Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works

Faculty of Professional and Social Sciences, Middlesex University

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Public Works

The public works that I bring to the foreground in this context statement are set out below. A fuller, but by no means exhaustive, list of background works is set out in Appendix 1.

Item	Notes
VOYAGES	
First woman to row solo across three oceans:	Disseminated through:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2005-6 Atlantic from Canary Islands to Antigua (2,935 miles, 103 days) ○ 2007 Failed attempt on the Pacific, ended 10 days from California coast ○ 2008 Pacific I from San Francisco to Hawaii (2,324 miles, 99 days) ○ 2009 Pacific II from Hawaii to Kiribati (3,158 miles, 104 days) ○ 2010 Pacific III from Kiribati to Papua New Guinea (2,248 miles, 46 days) ○ 2011 Indian Ocean from Australia to Mauritius (3,675 miles, 154 days) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Daily blog posts at www.rozsavage.com, averaging around 10,000 unique visitors a day, peaking at 30,000 on arrival days ○ Regular posts on Facebook (posted by shore team as I had insufficient bandwidth on the boat) ○ Regular posts on Twitter from satellite phone ○ Podcast (between once and three times weekly) ○ Media appearances and news items, particularly around arrivals and departures ○ Documentary film: <i>Rowing The Atlantic</i>
Used adventures to highlight major ecological challenges, e.g. plastic pollution in the North Pacific Garbage Patch, impact of climate change on small island states such as Kiribati.	

BOOKS

Savage, R. (2009). *Rowing The Atlantic: Lessons Learned On The Open Ocean*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Also featured in over a dozen books by other authors, on leadership, career, courage, ambition, innovation, mindset, life purpose, life skills, oceans, etc.

Savage, R. (2013). *Stop Drifting, Start Rowing: One Woman's Search For Happiness And Meaning Alone On The Pacific*. London: Hay House.

TED and TEDx Talks

TED Mission Blue, Galapagos Islands: Why I'm Rowing across the Pacific

Published April 2010 on [YouTube](#)

TEDxYale: An Ocean Rower's Perspective

Published June 2013 on [YouTube](#)

TEDxCambridgeUniversity: The Mindful Approach to Ocean Rowing

Published April 2014 on [YouTube](#)

OTHER

Yale undergraduate course: Courage in Theory and Practice

Senior Fellow at Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, Jan-May 2017

The Sisters Global:

Women's organisation, founded 2018

<https://www.thesisters.global/>

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Abstract

It has been twenty years since I left the corporate world to pursue a life of greater meaning and fulfilment, driven less by the pursuit of wealth, and more by purpose. Initially, that purpose took the form of a mission to raise awareness of our environmental challenges which led me to row solo across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, between 2005 and 2011, using my adventures as a campaigning platform. In this context statement, I evaluate the successes and failures of that mission. I conclude that while I succeeded in creating both the platform and the inner resources to be an effective advocate for change, I largely failed in generating that change, due to my naivety regarding both the scale and the structural strength of the forces – particularly the psychological, social, and economic forces – that preserve the status quo. I then explore the subsequent insights that have led me to a more holistic, systems-level approach to societal transformation, which is inseparable from action at the individual level. These insights spring from an eclectic mix of sources, including Taoism, and their implications for leadership as partnership. During the writing of this critical commentary I was inspired by the pandemic to write on the gifts of solitude, the liminal space that enhances the bricolage of the mind to develop insights and be open to uncertainty. I have then extrapolated from the bricolage of my rowing experiences to the bricolage of ideas to generate a narrative that supports the fundamental shift in consciousness that I believe is required for us to escape our existential crisis. This shift in consciousness has become the foundation for a new work in progress, which I include as an Appendix 6 to this statement.

Prologue

On undertaking this particular doctoral programme, that requires a critical engagement with the artefacts that embody the researcher's own practitioner knowledge, it took long and considered discussions about a critical framing that would respect the relationship between the practitioner and what they produced, would respect practitioner knowledge and also meet the criteria for a doctoral award. It needed a reference to epistemologies of practice. From this emerged my own epistemology of practice for exploring my own works: *The Yin Nature of Embodied, Enacted Wisdom*.

What produces the public works may not be what makes a good researcher in the traditional theory-oriented sense. In our practices, we all have theories-in-use as that is how our practices improve. I did not set out in my engagement with the world to prove or disprove hypotheses against a hinterland of discipline-based knowledge. I set out as a human being to explore the world, challenge my limitations and then share with others the learning from that practical, lived, embodied experience. At the end of my rowing voyages I wanted to inspire others to protect our planet, and this I continue to do as an explorer of the planet and an explorer of ideas, unfettered by academic boundaries of what constitutes truth and knowledge. This doctoral narrative is an account, inquisitive and evolving, of how I came to create these public works, the context in which they have been achieved, and the intellectual minds that helped me to make sense of my observations. The first lesson of all research is observation. For the practitioner-researcher it is followed variously by participation, sense-making, inspiration, illumination, sharing and learning.

Introduction

“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.”

— John Muir

For many years now, I have believed that our current approach to solving the environmental crisis is flawed. My metaphor for this crisis is a many-headed sea monster - we can keep cutting off the heads of climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, and so on, but the monster will just keep on growing new heads. We should do no less than strike at the heart of the monster which is the delusion that we are somehow separate from nature and can continue to inflict damage on our planet while somehow remaining immune to the effects. Until there is a fundamental shift in consciousness, and the world is seen through the lens of radical interconnectedness, our best efforts will continue to fall far short, and the monster will continue to grow beyond our reach.

Humans are a problem-solving species, which has led to many wonderful innovations as we have progressively overcome problems of famine, inhospitable weather, disease, discomfort, and so on. The limitation of this approach, however, is that while we narrow our focus to solving a problem, we do not notice that the solution may in turn create new problems. We are now living in a world that is the sum total of unintended consequences.

Generating a shift in consciousness to a holistic and interconnected worldview as a mission statement might sound annoyingly vague, defies measurement and does not deliver the dopamine rush of “fixing” a neatly-defined problem. Yet it is my belief that nothing less will do. Further, I also believe that the shift in consciousness is not only *eminently* possible, but *imminently* possible.

As humans, we sit in an interlocking web of narratives we tell ourselves and each other, and our perception of reality is formed by the narratives to which we align. These narratives are the focus of this context statement, even as the context statement is in itself a narrative. As I unpack and describe the evolution of my own individual narrative, I also propose a new version of our collective narrative. What these two narratives, the individual and collective, have in common, is to place consciousness front and centre as the primary creator of our reality.

Bombarded daily by bad news about extinction, pollution, and political corruption, it is easy to fall into despair, but despair is not helpful. As advocates for a better future, my intended audience of practitioners needs to stay calm, grounded, clear-eyed and realistic, while also

believing that our actions and attitudes can and will make a difference. It may sound esoteric to state that the nature of our consciousness makes all the difference in the world, but in my new public work, which is still in progress, I attempt to build what I believe to be a compelling case, at both the individual and collective levels. I explain how I have arrived at this perspective, based on my own research, reflection, and experience. I go on to describe the ramifications and benefits of such a worldview, and propose a method of disseminating it throughout our cultures.

There is a huge challenge inherent in attempting to fit one's own life, with all of its messy interplay between rationality, intuition, and circumstance, into a tidy narrative. Inevitably, there is a certain amount of ex post facto rationalisation, but this is a large component of this doctorate; the bid to explain to oneself as well as to others why one has chosen to do what one did in the way that one did it. My intention has been to draw useful and transferable inductions from lived experience, often in the light of subsequent theoretical frameworks that were not known or had not even been published at the time. This is entirely consistent with my exploration of yin aspects of living and leadership, and could be described as the epistemology of yin, the embodied, enacted knowledge from lived experience.

A Note on Epistemology of Practice and the Framework of Yin

"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced."

This context statement is academically unconventional, and for that I make no apology. It is in the nature of the Doctorate of Professional Studies by Public Works to encourage a personal reflection upon the candidate's life and work, which meshes neatly with my own self-reflective character. While I would not go as far as Socrates in saying that the unexamined life is not worth living, I believe strongly in the value of experimentation, evaluation, and critical reflection in order to continue the evolutionary process of maturation through consciously cultivating insight, wisdom, and knowledge based on experience.

The language that I use, therefore, often diverges from the conventionally academic, as I attempt to articulate insights born not out of detached theorising, but out of deeply embodied experience:

¹ Often attributed to Soren Kierkegaard, but more likely Dr Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, quoted in Steel, D. R. (ed.) (2002). *Genius - in Their Own Words: The Intellectual Journeys of Seven Great 20th Century Thinkers*". Open Court. p159

“Ordinary cognitive discourses are not well suited to address noncognitive dimensions of professional experience. A pathic language is needed in order to evoke and reflect on pathic meanings. Pathic understanding requires a language that is sensitive to the experiential, moral, emotional and personal dimensions of professional life.”²

There is an increasing and significant body of academic writing relating to the value of epistemologies of practice. This has been hard-won, with traditional paradigms inhibiting other approaches to knowledge and knowing in academic settings for a considerable time. Scott et al³, drawing on the work of the educationalist Peter Scott⁴, present his five attributes of the modern world which have required academia to expand its approach to knowledge and knowledge creation and reassess its role in society: a) ‘acceleration’ as in ‘increasing volume of intellectual, aesthetic and technological goods’; b) ‘simultaneity’ relating to time and space compression; c) ‘increasing risk’ due to ‘dissolution of collective identities and loci of custom’; d) ‘non-linearity, complexity and chaos’ meaning that ‘knowledge is now revisable and that it is ceaselessly revised through interactions with endlessly changing environments’, and finally e) ‘reflexivity’ which weakens the boundaries ‘between knowledge producers and users’; ‘knowledge foundations are discredited and shown to be expressions of particular economic and valued interests; it becomes more difficult to identify progress in society’ and we ‘construct our own reflexive biographies’. This has given rise to a range of professional doctorates, from the early pioneering in the vocational sectors (Health, Education, Engineering) to the broader spectrum of professionals across diverse sectors. A distinguishing feature of this evolution is the development and use of qualitative approaches to research and, even more recently, to the critical reflection of a practitioner’s own practice and environment. The role of the researcher from instrument of the paradigm to accountable agent is a significant shift. I see the Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works as part of this shift, which brings to the fore not only the value of critiquing one’s own practice, but also the learning which can be extracted for oneself and others when critically engaging with one’s own artefacts, evidenced as having influenced thinking and practice in particular sectors, and which acknowledge that the agent of change has become embodied knowing. This evolution of ‘academic’ knowledge has seen individuals offering other ways of knowing, including those who have been marginalised and diminished for challenging existing

² Van Manen, M. (2007). “Phenomenology of Practice”. *Phenomenology & Practice*, Volume 1, No. 1. p22.

³ Scott, D., Brown, A., Lunt, I., Thorne, L. (2004). *Professional Doctorates Integrating Professional Knowledge and Academic Knowledge*. Society for Research in Higher Education & Open University. p9

⁴ Scott, P. (2000). The crisis of knowledge and the massification of higher education, in Barnett, R. and Griffin, A. (eds) *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education*, London: Cassell.

structures, and also those who, for reasons of tenacity or circumstance, have highlighted the limitation of traditional perspectives in this new paradigm.

The literature on the epistemology of practice centres around the somewhat self-evident assertion that for knowledge to be useful, it has to be relevant and applicable to the reality encountered by its practitioners, and that this reality is not the controlled experiment of the laboratory, but the messy, complex, multi-variables reality of humans and the world we inhabit. Applied knowledge has to be emergent rather than absolute; as in the natural world, there is a constant dynamic response to the environment in which the practitioner finds herself, as expressed in the military adage attributed to the Prussian field marshal, Helmut von Moltke (the Elder), that no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy⁵.

The hazard of research from the safety of an ivory tower is that confirmation bias may act subconsciously to reinforce theory. In the real world, life has a tendency to bring forcefully to one's attention the flaws in one's preconceptions. However, a successful epistemology of practice nevertheless requires a willingness to surrender incorrect theories in order to explore new possibilities. Raelin references Bateson's framing of this as third-order learning.

“In order to achieve this level of scrutiny, a special type of learning is required, referred to as ‘third-order’ by Bateson (1972). In first-order learning, we move from using pre-existing habitual responses (zero-order learning) to learning about them. In second-order learning, we learn about contexts sufficiently to challenge the standard meanings underlying our habitual responses. Using second-order learning, we find ourselves capable of transferring our learning from one context to the other. By third-order learning, we become aware that our whole way of perceiving the world has been based on questionable premises.”⁶

There is a meta-referential aspect to the concept of the epistemology of practice in the context of several themes that will come up in the course of this statement:

- Complexity and emergence

⁵ Hughes, D. (1993). *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*. Presidio Press. pp45

⁶ Raelin, Joseph A. (2007). “Toward an Epistemology of Practice.” *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, vol. 6, no. 4. pp. 501.

- Synthesis, rather than separation
- The yin nature of embodied, enacted wisdom

1. Complexity and Emergence

While theoretical approaches may be said to attempt to abstract themselves from the untidy interplay of multiple variables, practice-based analysis fully recognises the importance and impact of the context in which the practitioner operates. While theory attempts to predict and control, practice is a dynamic, emergent process that responds in the moment to what is unfolding. The process is not the application of pre-learned concepts, but a spontaneous response to the demands of the situation, grounded in years of experience that have produced an intuitive knowing. This level of mastery cannot be instilled by a teacher; it depends on subtle nuances that defy predictive formulae. To use Kahneman's terminology, it is the gut feel of System 1 thinking, rather than the cognitive processing of System 2⁷.

Kincheloe writes:

“In this ‘zone of complexity’, learning is viewed more as a dynamic and unpredictable process. As a complex, changing, unstable system, it resists generalized pronouncements and universal steps detailing ‘how to do it’. Complex systems interact with multiple contexts and possess the capacity for self-organization and creative innovation.”⁸

However, many contemporary societal systems prefer a reductionist approach, rejecting mastery in favour of measurability. Kinchloe observes, in the context of education:

“The teaching and learning processes, advocates of standardization believe, are sufficiently consistent and stable to allow for precise measurability... advocates of reductionist standardization see little complexity in the effort to hold teachers accountable... Simplicity sells, complexity doesn't.”⁹

Not only does this undervalue the craft of good teaching, it does a disservice to students whose forms of intelligence fall outside the academic norm. These students are thereby excluded from opportunities in higher education and academia, resulting in a research community that lacks

⁷ Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁸ Kincheloe, J L. (2006). “A critical complex epistemology of practice.” *Taboo*, vol. 10, no. 2. p94.

⁹ Kincheloe, J L. (2006). “A critical complex epistemology of practice.” *Taboo*, vol. 10, no. 2. p96.

diversity, further exacerbating its insularity and detachment. Valuing the epistemology of practice, therefore, is not merely a mild aspiration, it is an imperative for a balanced body of knowledge, and hence for a balanced society.

2. Synthesis, Rather than Separation

Theory-based approaches imply a superior perspective, rising above the hubbub of humanity to arrive at the “thirty-thousand feet view” through “blue sky thinking”, as if the theorist is positioning herself as a godlike, omniscient being with a clear view of the “right” approach, and by implication there is also a “wrong” approach. Practice-based knowledge rejects this either/or thinking in favour of both/and (with a component of “maybe”), depending on the context. The knowledge thus emerges from the dance between the practitioner and their context as an act of co-creation. This is consistent with my view that we are shifting from the era of the supremacy of the individual into an era of collaboration through collective consciousness, and my intentional cultivation of the magical, seeing the world as a rich weave of patterns and clues, and life not as a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be investigated.

I do not propose that such a worldview is empirically correct, but it is one that enables me to imbue life with joy and meaning, compared with what seems to me a rather barren, dull contemporary alternative:

“our (post)modern sensibility of reality has become a metaphysics of nihilistic enframing that treats all entities (including human beings) instrumentally, available for our use.”¹⁰

This corresponds with what Seeley calls an “extended epistemology”:

“An extended epistemology stresses the need to know phenomena in many ways beyond, but not excluding, the intellectual. How individuals encounter, understand and respond to themselves, others and their contexts comes from knowing through their senses and bodies as well as the ideas, assumptions and theories that live in their minds.”¹¹

To me, it seems self-evident that life itself is a (if not *the*) primary source of useful knowledge about life. However:

¹⁰ Van Manen, M. (2007). *Phenomenology of Practice. Phenomenology & Practice*, Volume 1, No. 1. p19.

¹¹ Seeley, C. (2014). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* (Vols. 1-2). London. SAGE Publications Ltd. p329.

“Much research starts from the assumption that knowledge is cognitive and reflective and thus it already passes over other, more pathic forms of knowing that may actually constitute a major dimension of our experience and practice.”¹²

This is not to disrespect academic endeavour, nor the rigours of research. I could equally turn the critical spotlight on myself and question the value of my own career of motivational speaking. No matter how beautifully told my stories or well-articulated my theories, I can never do more than convey a fraction of the experience, and I can never be certain of the impact on individuals within the audience, and the relevance to their lives. After grappling with my conscience over this, I have concluded that the most constructive framing for both myself and the audiences is for me to trust their intelligence in applying the principles I share in the context their life and work. We both have active roles to play in the transference of knowledge.

“In order to create mutuality between theorists and practitioners, the two need to become partners in both the production and the dissemination of knowledge, with the ability to make modifications as knowledge is applied in practice or as new knowledge or theory is produced from the field. Theory in this sense is not generated for its own sake but as a way to gain new insight into the fundamental assumptions behind our actions.”¹³

3. The Yin Nature of Embodied, Enacted Wisdom

Whether the distinction is framed in terms of yin and yang¹⁴, or the right and left hemispheres, the latter is abstracted, theoretical, cognitive, and head-centred, while the former is embodied, enacted, intuitive, and body-centred.

In accordance with my overarching thesis that human societies would benefit from greater balance between yang and yin ways of being, this statement is in itself a manifestation of my own yin way of being, relying heavily on knowledge that has come to me through active participation in the world, rather than clinical theorising. This way of moving through life requires a degree of trust in the subconscious, intuitive right hemisphere, and a relaxing of the vice-like grip of the egotistical, controlling left hemisphere.

¹² Van Manen, M. (2007). *Phenomenology of Practice. Phenomenology & Practice*, Volume 1, No. 1. p21.

¹³ Raelin, Joseph A. (2007). “Toward an Epistemology of Practice.” *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, vol. 6, no. 4. pp. 499.

¹⁴ The Taoist concepts of yin and yang will be explored in greater depth and detail later in this statement.

It is my strongly-held, personal preference to seek embodied, applicable and applied knowledge, rather than abstracted, theoretical knowledge. As a child, I witnessed this dynamic playing out in the contrast between my parents. My father was the autodidact, eager to acquire information on cosmology, physics, and mathematics from books, but there seemed to be little opportunity for him to relate this knowledge to his everyday life. It seemed to me that my father loved learning for learning's sake. My mother, by contrast, had little time for reading, being fully occupied raising children, running a house, and working. She is not much interested in the inner world of reflection, and finds my proclivity to self-analysis quite baffling.

I have tried to find a middle way between their two paths, a synthesis of my father's quest for knowledge with my mother's practicality, by seeking knowledge that is serves useful practical purposes, particularly in relation to living a good and fulfilling life. Books such as *The Surrender Experiment*¹⁵, and practices like the engaged Buddhism of Joanna Macy, have inspired me to treat my life as an ongoing voyage of exploration into how to live better, with both knowledge and spirituality being cherished for their applicability, rather than as ends in themselves.

There was thus a conscious choice, after my maiden voyage across the Atlantic, to make time to reflect on my experience and to integrate the lessons learned. Writing the book and giving talks supported this integration process until the learning became embodied and automatic. I will now have a parallel opportunity in applying the insights contained within this statement to my current work with Samara, a decentralised organisation within the ecosystem of the SEEDS currency. While the writing of this statement may have been in the pursuit of an academic reward, its true value to me is in its relevance to my current and future work. I strive to achieve congruence between insight and action, through "reflection-in-action".

"Donald Schön (1983) coined the term, 'reflection-in-action,'" to characterize the rethinking process that attempts to discover how what one did contributed to an unexpected or expected outcome, taking into account factors unique to the interplay between the individual practitioner and his or her local operating context as well as the interplay between theory and practice. In this way a real-time learning environment would be created, which permits and encourages practitioners to test their mental models. Mental models constitute the images, assumptions, and stories that we carry in our minds of ourselves and of others. An epistemology of practice would bring these mental models, which are often untested and unexamined and, consequently, often

¹⁵ Singer, M. A. (2015). *The Surrender Experiment: My Journey into Life's Perfection*. New York. Harmony Books.

erroneous, into consciousness in such a way that new models would be formed to serve us better.”¹⁶

In summary, I recognise that the academy requires an articulated justification or rationale for this statement’s claim to knowledge. This knowledge, although grounded in *practice*, still requires reference to *academic* materials. I have chosen to do this with reference to epistemologies of practice that have emerged from traditional perspectives and for me are still influenced in language and reference to those traditions. This feels at times as if I am referencing abstracted, theoretical articles to legitimise the principles that I have reached through many years of experience, experimentation, and reflection. This democratisation of knowledge from the rarefied halls of academia into lived experience is an unfinished process which are required by recent changes in the world, which compel us to dive deeper and faster into exploring creatively and open-mindedly if we are to mitigate irreversible threats which traditional leadership and thinking have failed to prevent. This is perhaps about working towards a process of exchange and mutual understanding based on mutual respect for different perspectives regarding experience and truths, and not the hegemony of one over the other.

It seems to me that the primacy accorded to abstract theory over embodied experience is a further manifestation of the masculine worldview prevailing at the expense of the feminine. In her Final Note on Extended Epistemology and Gender, Seeley comments on this:

“In some spheres – business, academia, organisational life – intellectualism is tacitly highly valued and tacitly associated with the masculine metaphor of linear, self-contained, potentially rigid and controlling stability, whilst other ways of knowing are either dismissed (or repressed) as non-masculine or associated with the metaphorically feminine qualities of a more embodied, sensuous (and potentially smothering) fleshiness. Taken separately, there is clearly much scope for degenerative power relationships between these two approaches to knowing and expressing what we know.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Raelin, Joseph A. (2007). “Toward an Epistemology of Practice.” *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, vol. 6, no. 4. pp. 499.

¹⁷ Seeley, C. (2014). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* (Vols. 1-2). London. SAGE Publications Ltd. p332.

In other words, a dualistic view in which there has to be a winner – either the intellectual or the embodied – does a disservice to both. The sweet spot lies in the non-dual complementary interaction of the two.

Ultimately, theory is important, yet should be recognised for its limitations as well as its strengths. Everything is emergent, dependent on the people, place, context, and moment in time in which a person or an organisation finds itself. If we think of theoretical research as an ocean chart, it is useful as a record of what our predecessors have discovered on their journeys, but while there are some features that are relatively constant (land masses, lighthouses, rocks and reefs) there are others that are not (large waves, bad weather, pelagic creatures). Useful theoretical models will focus more on the constants, less on the variable conditions. Even better, theory may presume not to equip the sailor with facts, but with the meta-skills that will empower her to navigate a safe crossing, such as passage planning, celestial navigation, maritime communications, and sea survival.

I have modest expectations regarding the impact of this statement upon its readers. When I was preparing for the Atlantic I quizzed every ocean rower I could find, extracting every ounce of knowledge I could from them, and yet still about ninety-five percent of what I learned, I learned through experience during the voyages themselves. However, I would humbly propose that, ultimately, the point of this statement, and of academic discourse in general, may be less about imparting expertise, and more about giving the reader the confidence and the inspiration to leave the harbour, so that they may embark on their own voyage of discovery.

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men and women to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”¹⁸

Timeline

I completed this original work on the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was given the opportunity to update it, which I have done as of November 2020. During the update (and the lockdowns), as someone who has had several experiences of solitude, I was inspired to write and publish *The Gifts of Solitude*, a work summarising my own lessons learned in solitude, and including conversations with those who have chosen solitude and what emerges from that

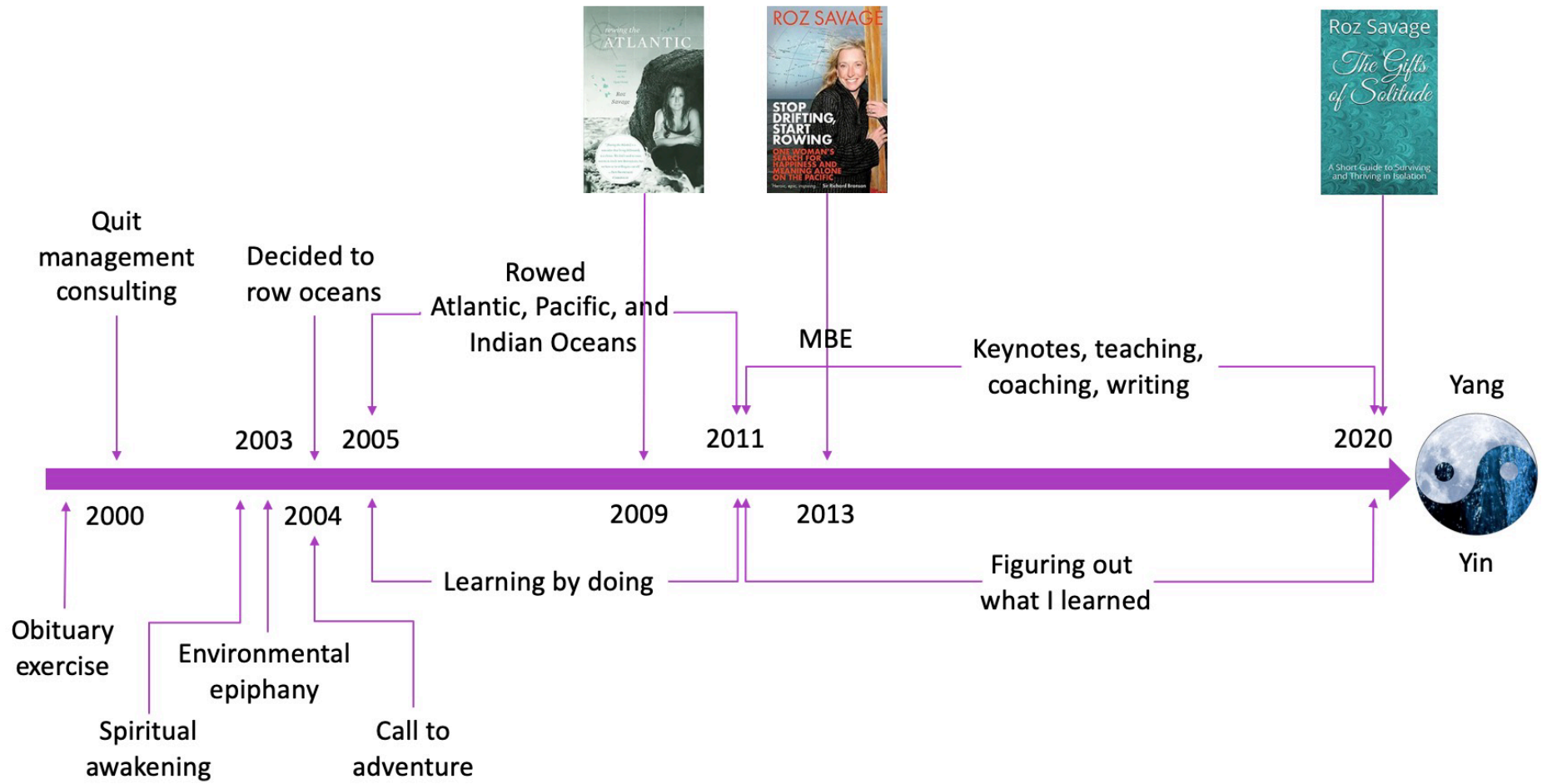
¹⁸ Generally attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/08/25/sea/>. Accessed 4th April 2021.

choice. I also began to compile a new work, inspired by what has been emerging for me from this critical engagement with my own outputs. This work acknowledges the individual's role in shifting paradigms to set a different course for the future, and develops the bricolage of the individual mind to that of the collective, via theories of collapse and approaches to change. (See Appendix 6)

My learning is continuous. It is never-ending with various resting points to reflect on what learning means, its purpose and its implications for my life and the lives of others. This context statement represents my best attempt to articulate my worldview as of November 2020, but if 2020 has taught us anything, it is that life is subject to change without prior notice. Worldviews likewise.

Apart from a relatively brief summary of my earlier years (which I am not going to call my formative years, because all my years have been formative), this statement focuses mostly on the last twenty years, from the time when I started to wake up to the perverse incentives and counterproductive pursuit of happiness within our current civilisation. I attempt to dig deep below my public works, the outer manifestations, in order to explore and reveal the inner shifts that were taking place. I believe that the deeper one delves into the personal, the more universal the insights become.

The following diagram illustrates my mental model of this process. Above the line are the yang, explicit, visible aspects of my public works, which reflect the yin, implicit, invisible shifts going on below the line.



Method of Engagement: Bricolage

“Combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought.”
– Albert Einstein¹⁹

When I was introduced to the concept of bricolage early in this doctoral programme, it resonated deeply. In my meandering quest for truth over the last twenty years, I have gathered ideas from all kinds of sources. In this statement I make reference to such diverse inspirations as Albert Einstein, Aldous Huxley, the CEO of Netflix, and Winnie the Pooh.

Bricolage seems particularly well-suited to present times. Unlike more conventional approaches, it freely acknowledges the context in which research takes place, rather than trying to uncover trans-historical truths. In other words, in times of COVID, the past is going to be a very poor guide to the future. As a consequence, sense has to be made in the here and now, rather than trying to create timeless models of meaning.

In the context of myth-making, Levi-Strauss (1962) wrote about bricolage as the process of using things for purposes for which they were not originally intended. In a very real sense, this is what I had to do many times on my expeditions. When one is stuck in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean with four broken oars, and no hardware store for a thousand miles or so, necessity becomes the mother of invention.

I have, in many ways, taken that same mindset of repurposing and combining in new ways and applied it to the world of ideas, shamelessly cherry-picking from different schools of thought in something akin to what Einstein calls “combinatory play”.

Like the surrealists that Levi-Strauss mentions in *The Savage Mind* (1962²⁰), I use intuition to help me find my gems. The surrealists apparently believed that our everyday encounters and chance findings are psychologically pre-ordained by our subconscious, so ‘found’ objects were in fact pre-existing embodiments of our inner yearnings, waiting to be discovered. To actively seek out these encounters, the Surrealists would visit flea markets in the hope of being ‘called’ by certain

¹⁹ Einstein, A. *Ideas and Opinions*. (First published 1954. 1995 edition). Condor Books. p27

²⁰ Levi-Strauss, C. (First published 1962, New Ed edition 1994). *The Savage Mind*. Oxford University Press.

items, with the loosely-held attitude of seeking out the unusual, anomalous or quirky, rather than adding more of the same to consciously curated collections. This in turn evolved into amalgamating the found objects into sculptures, trying to achieve the same principle as with collage and automatic writing, of shaping the object directly from the unconscious.

When we move from the bricolage of things to the bricolage of ideas, the purpose shifts, and yet in many ways the method stays the same. The surrealists wandered past objects in the hope that something would call to them, resonating in some unpredictable way with their subconscious in order to reveal their inner desires. When it comes to the bricolage of ideas, we wander past ideas – through books, conversations, movies, and so on – looking for something that calls to us. Are we seeking clues to our inner truth?

This, I would say, is our best hope of bypassing the cultural conditioning which operates primarily on the conscious ego-mind. The culture in which we are raised tells us what we should believe, what we should aspire to, which messengers are trustworthy, what is real and what is not. If we start to question those core cultural tenets with our rational mind only, we can find ourselves stuck in an infinite regression. We may find ourselves unable to transcend our conditioned paradigm, especially if we trust only the sources of information that the prevailing paradigm deems credible and acceptable.

And thus we end up, as Iain McGilchrist (2009²¹) describes in relation to the self-reinforcing nature of the left-hemisphere view of the world, trapped in a hall of mirrors from which there is no escape. As William FitzJames Oldham (probably) said, “A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices”²².

The bricolage of ideas can save us. Blaise Pascal wrote, “*Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point*”²³ (the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of), so when we approach ideas with the same detached curiosity that the surrealists employed in the flea market, we allow our heart to speak. Although we may not know why a new concept appeals to our intuition, we can pick it up and pop it in the cauldron of our subconscious, where it can bubble away with other

²¹ McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Yale University Press.

²² According to QuoteInvestigator.com, “Bishop Oldham” was reported by the Zion Herald of Boston, Massachusetts, to have said these words in 1906, and was probably the first to do so. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/10/merely/>

²³ Pascal, B. *Pensées* (1670, ed. L. Brunschvicg, 1909) sect. 4, no. 277

random ideas we have picked up, waiting for some kind of alchemical reaction to occur leading to a paradigm shift in our personal worldview. In the language of complexity theory, the new paradigm becomes an emergent property of this witch's brew of ideas.

I started to be deliberately open to this kind of intellectual serendipity in early 2004 as a result of reading *The Perennial Philosophy*, by Aldous Huxley, in which he says:

“...the divine Mind may choose to communicate with finite minds either by manipulating the world of men and things in ways which the particular mind to be reached at that moment will find meaningful.”²⁴

While I am agnostic as to whether the world does indeed arrange itself for our education and edification, I have found it helpful to adopt this attitude as if it is true: *if* this event or person or circumstance was presented to me in order for me to learn from it, what might that learning be?

There are also foreshadowings of bricolage in Chinese philosophy. Rather than pursuing novelty or originality (which are illusory anyway, almost every idea being on some level the offspring of ideas that have come before), the *Zhuangzi* (庄子), a classical Chinese philosophical and literary text, conceives of creativity not so much as innovation, but rather *integration*. Akin to evolutionary biology, instead of aiming at something radically new, it aims to create something that fits well with the context of which it is a part.

“Living well in general involves... a spontaneous integration between contrasting types such as the hard and the soft, as well as the learned and the spontaneous, the active and the passive, and even the unproductive and the productive... In other words, living well involves creativity.”²⁵

Bricolage, to me, seems to be a more honest account of how creativity happens than the myth of blinding flashes of inspiration. Richard Dawkins (1976²⁶) first coined the word *memes* as the cultural equivalent of biological genes; in the Darwinian process of natural selection, new memes

²⁴ Huxley, A. (First published 1945. 2009 edition.) *The Perennial Philosophy*. First Harper Perennial Modern Classics. p29

²⁵ Chung, J. (2020). Psyche. *To be creative, Chinese philosophy teaches us to abandon 'originality'* <https://psyche.co/ideas/to-be-creative-chinese-philosophy-teaches-us-to-abandon-originality>. Retrieved October 2020.

²⁶ Dawkins, R. (First published 1976, 2nd revised edition 1989). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford Paperbacks.

are usually relatively subtle mutations of ideas that have come before, and the memes that survive are the ones that fit best with the environment in which they arise. If a meme is too far ahead of its time, it will encounter a hostile environment, and swiftly die, taking its unique genetic code with it. But memes, like genetic mutations, shape the world into which they are born, so if there has been a succession of previous successful mutations, the meme finds a congenial habitat and thrives.

While I am open to the possibility that radical new ideas might emerge spontaneously as a result of human ingenuity or divine intervention, the ideas that are more likely to live long enough to make a difference are probably a bricoleur's assemblage from old ideas that were lying around, that came together in just the right way, at just the right time, to be useful.

In the course of my research over the last twenty years, I have been influenced by thinkers across many different disciplines, and I believe that to address our global, existential issues, there are valuable clues to be found in many domains. Long before I became aware of the term *bricolage*, I had enjoyed the journey of identifying and weaving together these disparate strands into a robust fabric of personal meaning. Throughout my quest for greater understanding of the world, I have taken a transdisciplinary approach, in the broadest meaning of that word, to include many exotic yarns from outside the realm of academia to arrive at metanoia, another way of knowing not just for myself but recognising this in others.

When assessing information from many diverse sources, I maintain an open mind, combined with a strong faculty for critical thinking and a healthy scepticism. Being aware that the brain has a strong preference for coherence over accuracy has helped me; if confronted with new information that runs counter to what I thought I knew, I do not automatically reject it, but first assess whether it carries the heft of truth. If it does, I run an "as if" thought experiment; if I see the world *as if* this information is true, does the world make more sense, or less? This may on occasion mean I need to hold two contradictory views at once, pending evidence either way. Far from indicating a lack of intellectual rigour, I believe that knowingly holding inconsistent views is a valuable and necessary skill in these times of unprecedented challenges that require intellectual flexibility.

I explain this because I cite many diverse sources in this statement, and I want to make clear that these sources have helped me to know what on some level I already knew, but had not yet articulated to myself. This is what gives new material the "heft of truth" mentioned previously;

an insight that seems surprising for a moment because it runs counter to our culturally conditioned beliefs, but then we realise that it might be a better explanation of reality than the version we had before.

This, in turn, is what I attempt to do for others through my blog posts and speeches; to express the inexpressible, to bring truth from subconscious to conscious, out of the shadows and into the light, where it can serve them usefully.

In my analysis, bricolage has the following beneficial features:

- Inclusion of unconventional agents
- Holistic rather than reductionist approach
- Valuing the humanity of the researcher
- Greater nuance and richness in the production of knowledge
- Voice to the voiceless

Inclusion of unconventional agents

Insight comes in many different forms and from many kinds of agents. According to my worldview, when inspiration is ready to emerge from the collective unconscious into the conscious, it does not always choose the most obvious messenger. Indeed, possibly some would regard *me* as an unconventional agent.

In a fittingly maritime analogy, Joe L. Kincheloe describes the voyage of the bricoleur:

“...the bricoleur becomes a sailor on troubled waters, navigating a course that traces the journey between the scientific and the moral, the relationship between the quantitative and the qualitative, and the nature of social, cultural, psychological, and educational insight.”²⁷

If I had focused solely on input from mainstream academia, I would have missed valuable input from those who have been excluded from that world by dint of gender, socioeconomic bracket, or educational privilege, and may not have even be aware that I was doing so.

²⁷ Kincheloe, J.L. and Berry, K. (2004) *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research: Conceptualising the Bricolage*. Open University Press. Chapter 1: Introduction: the power of the bricolage: expanding research methods, p4

“Dominant discourses shape the research process emerging as technologies of power that regulate which knowledges are validated and which ones are relegated to the junk heap of history. Bricoleurs watch carefully as power operates to privilege the data coming from particular academic or political economic locales. The insidious way this process operates is testimony to the axiom that power works best when it is not recognised as power... often we are not even aware that it is operating. Indeed, it works best when everything seems normal and comfortable.”²⁸

There is an implicit arrogance, possibly in every civilisation, but certainly in current Western civilisation, that leads to overwhelming belief in its own rightness, and consequently dismisses as primitive the thought systems of other times and other cultures. The participants in a culture are blind to their own enculturation; their bubble of belief is invisible to them. They believe they are objectively correct. As the anthropologist and originator of bricolage, Claude Lévi-Strauss, writes:

“Every civilization tends to overestimate the objective orientation of its thought and this tendency is never absent.”²⁹

I therefore make no apology for including nuggets gleaned from the Hopi tribe of North America, nor for ranging far and wide for treasures from feminism, psychology, economics, political theory, and spirituality. As I trust will become clear by the end of this statement, I care deeply about inclusivity, not merely as an end in itself, but as essential to solving our global challenges.

Holistic rather than reductionist approach

Kincheloe writes:

“The monological quest for order so desired by many social, political, psychological and educational researchers is grounded in the Cartesian belief that all phenomena should be broken down into their constitute parts to facilitate inquiry. The analysis of the world in

²⁸ Kincheloe, *ibid*, p7

²⁹ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1966). *The Savage Mind*. Translated from the French, *La Pensée Sauvage*. Chicago [Illinois] : The University of Chicago Press ; London [England] : Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd.

this context becomes fragmented and disconnected. Everything is studied separately for the purposes of rigour.”³⁰

I will return at several points in this statement to the theme of the right and left hemispheres of the brain, but I raise it here to agree with Iain McGilchrist³¹ that the world is becoming increasingly left-brain-oriented, characterised by a reductionist approach that takes things apart in an attempt to understand the whole. While this is arguably a valid approach in some contexts, such as medicine and law, in other contexts it overlooks the necessary integrity of the thing, where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This insight first occurred to McGilchrist³² in the context of his original discipline, English literature, where to reduce a poem, for example, to its constituent lines and words, and examine them as individual entities, is to destroy the poem as a whole, much as reducing a cow to its constituent parts destroys its existence as a cow. Bricolage attempts to mitigate this excessively left-brain orientation by deliberately including unconventional perspectives in a relatively holistic approach.

Valuing the humanity of the researcher

Bricolage creates the conditions for the humanity of the researcher to be not just included, but positively valued, recognising that she/he is not a neutral generator of outputs as the classical scientific method would have us pretend, but rather, brings their own opinions, experiences, and cognitive biases to the research act.

“Thus, an important aspect of the work of the bricoleur involves coming to understand the social construction of the self, the influence of selfhood on perception, and the influence of perception on the nature of inquiry.”³³

This ontological awareness is crucial when assessing the work both of others, and one’s own work. It is immensely challenging to be aware of one’s blind spots and cognitive biases, but in the interests of intellectual rigour, I have attempted to make explicit the forces that have shaped the lens through which I see the world, so that even if I am unable to step completely outside of

³⁰ Kincheloe, *ibid*, p5

³¹ McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and His Emissary*. Yale University Press.

³² As related by Iain McGilchrist in a workshop in Broadway, Gloucestershire, May 2016

³³ Kincheloe, *ibid*, p6

my own self to see the world through a completely transparent lens, I have at least been open and honest about what influences may have tinted my lenses.

Greater nuance and richness in the production of knowledge

In what he calls “rigour in the absence”, Kincheloe points out that drawing on a much wider range of sources allows the bricoleur to generate a more vivid portrayal of reality compared with the relatively rarefied, one-dimensional perspectives offered by more conventional academic research. The strengths of bricolage that he identifies are immensely consonant with my mission: to envisage a better world, and find the leverage points that can bring that world into being:

“...bricoleurs seek to cultivate a higher form of researcher creativity that leads them, like poets, to produce concepts and insights about the social world that previously did not exist. This rigour in the absence can be expressed in numerous ways, including the bricoleur’s ability:

- To imagine things that never were;
- To see the world as it could be;
- To develop alternatives to oppressive existing conditions;
- To discern what is lacking in a way that promotes the will to act;
- To understand that there is far more to the world than what we can see.”³⁴

This last point indicates the attempt to overcome the powerful and pervasive cognitive bias for which Daniel Kahneman coined the term WYSIATI: the false belief that What You See Is All There Is³⁵.

Kincheloe makes further bold claims for bricolage as a methodology:

“The bricolage provides a beginning framework for helping all people in all walks of life construct systems of meaning-making. Such systems grant us ways of producing knowledge that help us make sense of our species’ past as well as our own personal past. Such knowledge empowers us to construct a more equitable, exciting, just, and intelligent future... bricoleurs expand the envelope of social research, of what we can understand

³⁴ Kincheloe, *ibid*, p20

³⁵ Kahneman, Daniel. (2012). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Penguin.

about the world. They are empowered to produce knowledge that can change the world.”³⁶

For the findings of research to be read, understood, and adopted, the outputs need to be relatable for a wide segment of the public. When I look at the speeches of the great orators and reformers – an example would be Dr Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” – I can see how they weave together references to a spectrum of cultural influences such as history, religion, society, and economics, with powerful metaphors for maximum impact. Dr King knew that he was speaking to a diverse crowd, and in order to unify them behind his purpose he needed to give each person a meaningful doorway into his speech, to give them a sense of inclusion and belonging. For any social change movement to succeed, it has to draw people in, and the best way to do this is to speak in a language that can be understood by the majority of the audience. The broad church of bricolage enables this in a way that narrower methodologies do not.

Voice to the voiceless

As I will describe later, I am advocating for the under-represented yin, feminine, or right-brained aspect, with its more inclusive, holistic dynamic, so it seems only fitting that I would be drawn to bricolage as a research method to embrace the totality of human experience and thought. Yin relates to matter, rather than energy; it is embodied and grounded rather than the theoretical and abstract approach of the yang. And, of course, it represents the feminine, which pleases my feminist sensibilities: when Kincheloe writes of “what has been dismissed, deleted, and covered up”³⁷ and “the ideological devices that have erased the lived worlds and perspectives of those living at the margins of power”³⁸, he is using language that could exactly describe the plight of the feminine over the last several thousand years.

He also alludes to the power of bricolage to escape the trap of “business as usual”. Humans tend to get trammelled by the way that we have done things in the past. The brain is naturally averse to change for at least two reasons:

- a) The thinking required in order to do things a different way is energy-intensive, so the brain prefers to rely on an arsenal of convenient heuristics in order to save energy.

³⁶ Kincheloe, *ibid*, p19

³⁷ Kincheloe, *ibid*. p20

³⁸ Kincheloe, *ibid*. p20

- b) The brain has a strong bias towards the status quo for survival purposes. By definition, the way it has done things in the past has not killed it. If it now decides to do things a different way, there is a risk the new way could threaten its survival.

However, when it comes to large but invisible and slow-moving threats like climate change, this logic breaks down. As the popular coaching adage goes: if you keep doing what you have always done, you will keep getting what you have always got. So researchers – and leaders – would be wise to open themselves up to exploring a wider range of possibilities, beyond the obvious, and beyond the narrow intellectual horizons of the classes that have traditionally held power:

Bricolage is a research technology whose time has truly come. As the world faces unprecedented challenges, and old paradigms are failing us, it is time to take off our epistemological blinders and cast our eyes to new territories currently uncharted by conventional academia, not just out of a sense of social justice, but out of existential necessity.

An Ontological Perspective: My Life's Journey

In keeping with the ethos of bricolage, which acknowledges the humanity of the researcher as a product of their culture, experiences, and biases, I attempt here to make explicit the influences that have shaped my worldview. While transparency is not the same as objectivity, I trust that this transparency will at least convey awareness of my own subjectivity.

Inheritance and Early Years

Although I do not believe that we each have a predetermined destiny, I am open to the spiritual concept that souls choose the family and circumstances into which they are born in order to pursue the next stage of their spiritual evolution. If nothing else, this belief encourages acceptance of the one thing we have no conscious control over: the circumstances of our birth. Even the resolutely non-spiritual will concede that our early years are a powerful determinant of later outcomes, and so I will share a brief overview of my childhood.

I was born towards the end of 1967 as the first child of Hamer Savage, a newly ordained Methodist minister from Leeds, and Rita (née Cullingworth), a Methodist deaconess from South Africa. They named me Rosalind, simply because they liked the name. Literally, it means “like a rose”; whether my dominant characteristic is the bloom, the fragrance, or the thorns, I will leave to others to judge. The best-known literary Rosalind is the cross-dressing, comedic heroine of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*: again, I leave it to others to judge any resemblance. As for my last name, “Savage” has drawn many comments over the years, and may have contributed to my ongoing fascination with nominative determinism.



January 1967, aged 2 weeks, with my mother

My parents moved house every four or five years, usually a distance of a couple of hundred miles, so my schooling was chopped and changed under the varying educational policies of different counties. I was a shy, mostly well-behaved child, usually to be found with my nose in a book. I had friends enough in school and at church, and in the Brownies and then Guides, but envied the more confident and popular girls. Life at home was emotionally secure for me and my younger sister by seventeen months, Tanya, with spare time after homework being spent on handicrafts, reading, working for Guide badges, and occasionally dancing to Abba.

It has been said that clergymen have middle class aspirations but working class incomes. Certainly, money was tight when I was growing up, and to this day I do not have a particularly comfortable relationship with it, which could be partly responsible for my interest in complementary currencies, of which more later.

Neither of my parents had been to university; each had lost a parent at the age of thirteen, so they had been required to step early into adulthood. My mother has a very practical intelligence, while my father had enormous intellectual curiosity – he devoured books on physics and cosmology with the passion of the incurable autodidact.

Although they had chosen to devote their careers to preaching, neither of them was religiously dogmatic. They both believed their most important role was to demonstrate God's love, primarily through pastoral work. It could be said, with hindsight, that they modelled *being* Christian, rather than imposing their Christianity onto others, and hence were an early yin influence. They also exemplified humility, and being in service to the greater good.

Being a daughter of clergy shaped me in other ways: early on I got used to getting along with people from a broad range of ages and socioeconomic groups at church events; as the minister's family we often had to sit on the stage at church events, so I was somewhat used to being on show, and having people know more about me than I knew about them; and our frequent house moves gave me a higher than average degree of self-reliance and adaptability to new circumstances. Overall, it was a contented childhood.

In 1984, when I was sixteen, my father did a six-week work exchange with a Methodist minister in San Diego, and the whole family went with him. The standard of living in California was bewitching for a teenager already chafing against the financial constraints of our life in England. I was also exposed, for the first time, to the American Dream: the idea that you can become whatever you want if you are willing to work hard enough. The positive aspect of the dream is

the power of self-determination, the invitation to dream big rather than settle for more of the same. The shadow, for me, was California-grade materialism, and the belief that money, and all the things it could buy, would make me happy – a belief that would determine the course of my early adulthood.

Individuation

“Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.”

– C.G. Jung³⁹

In 1998, I had been working for about ten years as a management consultant and project manager. After getting a law degree from Oxford, I had been delighted to get the job offer, seeing it as my passport to a life of financial security and material comfort. Yet I had never really settled in. Looking back now, I can see that I was under-achieving because there was nothing in the work that resonated with my values. Unfortunately, I did not have that degree of self-awareness at the time. I thought I was just a failure.

My self-esteem plummeting, I turned to self-help books. In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*⁴⁰, I stumbled across an exercise that would change my life. Habit Number 2: Begin with the End in Mind. Try beginning with the ultimate end in mind – your own funeral. What will people be saying about you – as a friend, as a colleague, as a human being? And what do you *want* them to be saying about you?

As I wrote the version of what I wanted people to be saying about me, it was as if I had opened a door into a parallel universe in which I was living a thriving life of passion and purpose. Drawing on the obituaries column in the newspaper, and thinking about the characters who had inspired me, I painted a picture of someone who lived courageously, who repeatedly reinvented themselves as if to pack several lifetimes into one, who was a staunch friend, stood up for their principles, and made their mark on the world. I would be remembered as confident, determined, unstoppable, filled with an energy and a life force that made everybody around me feel good.

³⁹ Jung, C.G. (Author), Adler, Gerhard (Editor). (1973). *C.G. Jung Letters, Vol. 1: 1906-1950*. Princeton University Press.

⁴⁰ Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character ethic*. New York: Free Press

The obituary that I was actually heading for, needless to say, was very different. Safe, secure, but frankly rather boring. I looked at the two versions with a mix of emotions. The fantasy version had been thrilling, exciting, full of possibility – and, strangely, very real, as if this life really was mine to live. I also noticed that it made no mention of material wealth. Rather, the emphasis was on richness of experience. It looked as if, while I had been stumbling up the ladder of success, I had leaned it against the wrong building.

But this fantasy obituary was also potentially explosive. I was married to a man who would not even let me quit my day job to become a photographer. He would hardly countenance the exotic life I had just imagined for myself. And what would I actually *do*? How would I make money? This was clearly an impossible dream. So I put my handwritten notes away in a drawer and tried to forget about them. But something had shifted. I had eaten the forbidden fruit, and I couldn't now un-see what I had seen: that there was a very different life wanting to emerge through me.

To cut a long and messy story short, over the next couple of years my subconscious (or spiritual) self managed to sabotage everything in my life that was holding me back. One by one, the bars of my gilded cage fell away, until I found myself single, unemployed, without home or income – and although it may have looked like a disaster, I was delighted to find myself living in a magical world, a liminal space of infinite possibility.

Environmental Awakening

It was in Peru that my environmental awakening began. I went with a band of pilgrims to Ausangate, a mountain in the Andes above Cusco, to celebrate the festival of Qoyllur Rit'i. Thinly veiled as a Catholic pilgrimage, it is really an animistic celebration of the sun, the moon, the mountains, the glacier and its life-giving meltwater streams. My companions told me that each year they had to trek a bit further to reach the glacier, because it was retreating. This was my first encounter with climate change.



The Festival of Qoyllur Rit'i

It piqued my curiosity, and on my return to England I read extensively on climate change⁴¹, which rapidly came to seem like the single most important issue facing the world. I felt that I absolutely must do something to raise awareness and spark action.

The only problem was... what?

Purpose Revealed

With this question unresolved, in early 2004 while on a on a self-organised, isolated retreat for a month in Ireland with many recommended books, it was a new book that called to me from the shelf of a Christian bookshop in Sligo that would turn out to have the most significance for me.

⁴¹ e.g. Hartmann, Thom. (2004). *The last hours of ancient sunlight : the fate of the world and what we can do before it's too late*. New York: Three Rivers Press



The cottage outside Sligo

In *Conversations with God*, by Neale Donald Walsch, these are the words that called to me: “Do not allow your life to represent *anything* but the grandest version of the greatest vision you *ever had* about Who You Are”⁴² (author’s italics).

This was a world away from the humility and deliberate “playing small” of my parents. I did not experience it as a self-centred or egotistical aspiration to greatness but a call to contribute to the collective spiritual evolution of my species. I would later come across Abraham Maslow’s quote that expressed the same sentiment: “What a man can be, he must be!”⁴³

I now had, not just permission, but an obligation to dream big. It validated and contextualised my as-yet-imaginary role in the world which had its seeds in writing that obituary. This obligation became the driving force for what I went on to do. Other books I read in Ireland, including Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*⁴⁴, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*⁴⁵, and *Cave in the Snow*⁴⁶, the story of Tenzin Palmo⁴⁷, reinforced my desire to do something spiritual, solitary, and spectacular to raise awareness of our environmental crises.

⁴² Walsch, N. D. (1999). *Conversations with God, Book 3: An Uncommon Dialogue*. Hodder & Stoughton. p186

⁴³ Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. Harper & Row. p93 (according to https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abraham_Maslow)

⁴⁴ Huxley, A. (First published 1945. 2009 edition.) *The Perennial Philosophy*. First Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

⁴⁵ Thoreau, Henry David. (1992). *Walden ; and, Resistance to civil government : authoritative texts, Thoreau's journal, reviews, and essays in criticism*. New York: Norton

⁴⁶ Mackenzie, Vicki. (1998). *Cave in the Snow: Tenzin Palmo's Quest for Enlightenment*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing

⁴⁷ Tenzin Palmo is a British-born Buddhist nun who spent 12 years living in a cave in the Himalayas in pursuit of enlightenment. I recently had the honour of interviewing her for my 2020 book, *The Gifts of Solitude*.

Another work that influenced my direction was on societal collapse. In *Coming Earth Changes*, based on the predictions of Edgar Cayce, the early 20th century clairvoyant is quoted as saying:

“Tendencies in the hearts and souls of men are such that these [upheavals] may be brought about. For, as indicated through these channels oft, it is not the world, the Earth, the environs about it nor the planetary influences, not the associations or activities, that rule man. Rather does man – by his compliance with divine law – bring order out of chaos; or, by his disregard of the associations and laws of divine influence, bring chaos and destructive forces into his experience.”⁴⁸

He goes on to foresee geological changes on a global scale, caused by a dramatic movement of the Earth’s magnetic poles:

“There will be a shifting of the poles. There will be upheavals in the Arctic and the Antarctic that will make for the eruption of volcanoes in the torrid areas... the upper portion of Europe will be changed in the blink of an eye. The earth will be broken up in the western portion of America. The greater portion of Japan must go into the sea.”⁴⁹

This might sound far-fetched – indeed many of Cayce’s prophecies have failed to come true – its impact on me, however, was profound, coinciding as it did with my reading around climate change. Another work that forecast major disruption was *The Hopi Survival Kit*⁵⁰, describing the prophecies of the Hopi tribe of North America.

The traditional Hopi believe that we are on the cusp of transformation; that we are currently in the Fourth World, and on the threshold of the Fifth. Each of the three previous worlds have seen the destruction of humanity through war and detrimental practices. When one world comes to an end, a small inter-dimensional tunnel allows a small number of humans to escape the carnage and emerge into the next world. This is symbolically represented by an opening in the domed roof of the Hopi kivas, the chambers they use for spiritual and political meetings.

[See *Appendix 2: The Statement of the Hopi Elders*, which has been a recurring motif since I first read it in Ireland, and continues to colour my view of the times ahead.]

⁴⁸ Hutton, William. (1996). *Coming Earth Changes: Causes and Consequences of the Approaching Pole Shift*. Are Pr.

⁴⁹ Hutton, *ibid*.

⁵⁰ Mails, Thomas. (1997). *The Hopi Survival Kit: The Prophecies, Instructions and Warnings Revealed by the Last Elders*. Penguin.

Alone in my cottage in Ireland, without the moderating effect of cynical friends, these ideas rooted deeply. Once I returned to society, the impact of the ideas abated somewhat, but did not leave me entirely, and continue to inform my worldview.

The Call to Adventure

It was about five months after I returned from Ireland. I was on the long drive up to Yorkshire to see my parents, my father having suffered a sudden stroke, when an idea suddenly popped into my head: I would row around the world, and use these adventures as a platform for my environmental crusade. I knew immediately that this was the answer I had been looking for all these months.

Then my rational brain kicked in with why this was a terribly bad idea and could not possibly work, how it would end in failure and possibly death, and that I really had no right to contemplate such an outrageously audacious plan.

My brain kept raising objections, and my heart kept defending the idea, until the brain had to reluctantly concede that this project did, indeed, meet all my criteria. By the end of the week, I had started to consider *what if* I were to do this, and once I had started to fill out a spreadsheet with a To Do list, there was no turning back.

I would struggle to articulate where the flash of inspiration came from: it could be that my immersion in the subject and my persistent inner wondering about what I could do had formed a network of neuronal connections that suddenly generated an insight, much as a mathematician or scientist struggling with a knotty problem might, after much perspiration, finally achieve inspiration. It could have emerged from the intuitive, creative, free-thinking, implicit and visual right hemisphere of the brain, or it could have been an archetypal “call to adventure”.

The literature is rather vague on what “call to adventure” actually means. Even Joseph Campbell, whose Hero’s Journey analysis pivots on the call to adventure as the initiating event, wrote that “it is not always easy or possible to know by what it is that we are seized”⁵¹, although the impact of receiving such a call is clear: “a person who is truly gripped by a calling, by a dedication or a belief, by a certain zeal, will sacrifice his (or her) security, personal relationships, prestige. He (or

⁵¹ Campbell, Joseph. (2004) *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*. New World Library. p109.

she) will give themselves entirely to their personal myth”⁵². But how we get from the not-knowing to the knowing remains mysterious.

The problem this presents, from the perspective of the person who has received “the call”, is that we know we must do the thing, while not fully understanding why. Life does not send an instruction manual along with the call. I can clearly see all the desires that were current in my life at that time, and how they contributed to the sense that this mission was the perfect embodiment of those desires, but I also know that this was not a left-brained exercise in putting those desires into a spreadsheet and producing an answer, or even of journaling my way to a solution. My subjective sense was that the vision arrived, perfectly formed, from somewhere outside of myself, the source of which depends on one’s worldview; possibly the rather vague spiritual concept of “the Universe” or “Spirit”, or the Jungian collective subconscious, or somewhere or something else entirely.

Clearly, this is my interpretation. To someone who believes that reality is exactly what it appears to be, my narrative may seem fanciful, far-fetched, grandiose, or just plain crazy. Conversely, that person’s interpretation of what transpired in that moment of inspiration may strike me as prosaic, banal, lacklustre and humdrum. To each their own.

From Inspiration to Reality

I have written substantially about the ocean crossings (see my books about the Atlantic and Pacific voyages⁵³), but summarise them briefly here. This critique is not about the rowing, but rather about the experiences which emerged from those solo expeditions and how I have harnessed them and tried to expand them from personal to transpersonal meaning.

If I had fondly imagined that Mother Nature would smile upon me as the champion of her cause, and give me a smooth ride across the oceans, I was much mistaken. The first ocean, the Atlantic, was especially brutal. To date, 2005 is still the worst year for Atlantic storms since records began. I had multiple equipment failures, losses, and breakages. All four of my oars broke before halfway; the camping stove broke within the first three weeks so I had to eat all my meals cold; for the first month there was insufficient sunshine to power anything other than the essentials – the watermaker, satphone, and GPS – and when the sun came out, my stereo

⁵² Campbell, *ibid.* p109

⁵³ Savage, R. (2009) *Rowing the Atlantic: Lessons Learned on the Open Ocean*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (2013). *Stop Drifting Start Rowing: One Woman’s Search for Happiness and Meaning Alone on the Pacific*. London: Hay House.

promptly broke, meaning that, apart from a couple of days, I had no entertainment other than my own thoughts. I suffered from tendinitis in my shoulders, and saltwater sores on my bottom.

But the technical and physical challenges were as nothing compared with the psychological. I struggled terribly. It was fortunate for me that it is logistically extremely difficult to quit in the middle of an ocean, and I had invested all my savings and fourteen months of my life in preparing for this adventure, so I felt I had little choice but to persevere.

“But when we heed that Call and step off the edge, thinking to firmly set foot on the path which lies ahead of us, to strike out confidently on our new pilgrimage – we may instead find ourselves losing our footing, plummeting down into the dark... It is this Descent, in which we go down and face the dark goddess in the Otherworld, which destroys outmoded forms of being and prepares us to develop the wisdom we need to give birth to our most authentic self – the self that knows its place in the world.”⁵⁴

-- Sharon Blackie

This had been an enormous leap of faith. I was as well prepared as a novice ocean rower could be, having planned meticulously, taken all the requisite courses, and trained for up to sixteen hours a day on the rowing machine, yet this was still a great experiment in trusting myself, and trusting life to lead me where I needed to go. That trust was amply rewarded. As my adventures progressed across the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, it seemed there was a transcendent genius at work, that could see a much bigger picture than I could, and had “known” from the outset that while my voyages may fail by some criteria, in other ways they would equip me with skills that will prove invaluable in the uncertain times that lie ahead.

⁵⁴ Blackie, S. (2016). *If Women Rose Rooted: A Journey to Authenticity and Belonging*. September Publishing. Location 1,750 in Kindle edition.



Reflections on the Ocean Rowing Years

I will pause briefly at this point in my ontological narrative, at the end of the Indian Ocean crossing in 2011, to evaluate the success, or otherwise, of my ocean rowing career. I had two primary intentions in setting out to row across oceans:

- The outer: to raise awareness and inspire action on environmental issues
- The inner: to determine who I was and what I was capable of

There were numerous other elements too, but these are the ones I wish to foreground.

Inner Mission

To speak to the personal mission first, I succeeded. Even though at the time I felt I was failing every day, in retrospect I recognise the gift in all the things that went wrong. If the Atlantic had been, as I envisaged it in advance, a serene and meditative experience, I would not have learned anywhere near as much as I did about my capacity for endurance and tenacity. Almost every day of the voyage, I would feel that I was reaching my absolute limits – of pain, discomfort, fear, boredom, frustration. And yet, every day, I persevered. I went past where I thought my limits were, and realised they had existed only in my mind.

I can now see the perfection in the escalating sequence of challenges that the voyage presented to me. As in Peru, it seems as if some guiding force were at work, consistently testing me to the edge of my abilities, but not beyond. By the time my satellite phone broke, leaving me without communications for the last twenty-four days of my voyage, it felt only appropriate that, having passed my earlier trials, I would now be presented with the ultimate test of self-reliance.

For all the many things that went “wrong” on the Atlantic, I survived it and the learning from it is still evolving, this context statement being an example. Post expedition, I focused particularly on the psychological aspects, and worked hard at integrating the lessons I so that they became part of who I am, no matter what I am doing. New behaviours that were at first effortful were gradually assimilated into the very fabric of my way of being.

They stood me in good stead during the failed attempt on the Pacific, the subsequent three successful legs across that same ocean, and my final and longest voyage, the five-month crossing of the Indian Ocean. I knew and felt that these life skills would be with me always no matter what.

These life lessons were numerous, multi-layered, and interconnected, but if I were to attempt a summary, I would return to my first ever attempt to articulate them. During that maiden voyage on the Atlantic, as these insights came to me, I would wait until the end of the rowing shift, and then eagerly jot them down in the back of my logbook. Shortly after I returned to dry land, the Sunday Times asked me to contribute to their regular column, entitled *I Am What I Am*. The brief was to share my hard-earned life lessons. I was delighted to find that my logbook notes were perfect for the purpose.

The reference to MySpace, bottom right, dates this (and I’m not qualified to comment on the Lanvin platforms, the existence of which completely passed me by), but the distilled wisdom, I hope, is timeless. It has certainly stood me in good stead in the years since.



FOTOFIT.FILMMAGIC.COM, REK

I am what I am

Roz Savage 38, was the first ever solo female to compete in the Atlantic Rowing Race. She crossed the finish line in March after 103 days and more than 3,000 miles at sea

- Don't waste mental energy asking yourself if you can do something. Just do it. You'll surprise yourself. I did.
- Measure success against your own criteria and ignore others. I was last to finish the race – big deal. I did it to learn about myself. Objective achieved.
- The only constant in life (and weather) is change. So don't get depressed by the bad times, and don't get overexcited by good ones. Accept that things are exactly as they are, and that bad times have something to teach us.
- Hope can hurt. Hope for too much and you face disappointment. Be optimistic but realistic. Nothing is as good (or as bad) as you expect it to be.
- Be your own best friend. The more you rely on other people, the less control you have over your destiny.
- Be proud of your own obituary. A few years ago, I wrote two versions of mine – the one I wanted and the one I was heading for. They were very different. I realised I needed to make some big changes if I was going to look back and be proud of my life.

GOING UP



KAREN O
Hot-blooded voice. Don't-care insouciance. Purdy hair and ripped tights. Yeah, yeah, YEAH

EARLY-SUMMER SYNDROME
Giddiness brought on by lighter evenings, greenery and premature thoughts of picnics and beer gardens

THE DFA REMIXES
Where the Chemicals, Gorillaz and Fischerspooner get the DFA boys' maestro-mixing treatment

DE-MOTHBALLING THE EDINA RONAYS
Time for the 1980s Brit knits again, ladies. Pair with cotton dresses for impression of unimpeachable innocence

LANVIN PLATFORMS
The it heels fashionites are catfighting over. Millaow



COMPETITIVE PICTURE BOOKS
Tomes so weighty – Pelé's is 12kg – they could be the coffee table

MYSFACE ADDICTION
When real life starts to look distinctly unfabulous

If I was going to add one more to this list, it would be along these lines, attributed to Lao-Tzu:

“Watch your thoughts; they become words.
 Watch your words; they become actions.
 Watch your actions; they become habits.
 Watch your habits; they become character.
 Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.”

By this I mean that, when I set out on the Atlantic, I was not an ocean rower. I was a burned-out management consultant attempting to create a new life for herself by rowing alone across an ocean. When I reference wasting mental energy in the first item on the published list, I mean that I kept asking myself: “Can I do this? Do I have what it takes?” In response to this rhetorical question, my brain would search back through my memory banks for any analogous experience

that might reassure me that I was indeed capable of doing this. Noticing that this kind of rowing was dramatically different from the rowing I would do before, it would report back in something of a panic, screaming, “No evidence found! This is new! This could be dangerous! Abort, abort!” This did not help.

Eventually I realised that I was asking myself a bogus question, and that the only way I could find out if I could do this was to keep on doing it, and only time would tell if I would succeed.

I sometimes talk about this power of accumulation in the very practical context of environmentalism, if people ask how they can make any difference as just one person in nearly eight billion. I respond that although there have been a number of dramatic environmental disasters, such as the Exxon Valdez, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Deepwater Horizon, and Fukushima, most of the damage has been done by the accumulation of tiny, careless decisions, made by billions of humans, day after day for centuries. But it cuts the other way too. By the same token, one oarstroke did not get me very far, but approximately five million oarstrokes got me across three oceans. The power of accumulation cuts both ways, for good and for ill.

But there is also that deeper level of the power of accumulation, in relation to identity. My interpretation of this is that I had an inner witness when I was on the boat (and all the rest of the time too – it was just more evident then). At first the inner witness was quite confused by this uncharacteristic new pattern of behaviour, and was alarmed by the change, uncertain what the outcome might be. But as time went on, and struggles came and went, but no major disasters ensued, and in fact new learnings emerged, it became reconciled to this strange new normal. As time went on, and I kept on showing up and behaving like an ocean rower, I gradually became one. My sense of identity – who I was and what I was capable of – shifted. I built a new identity, one oarstroke at a time – not just as an ocean rower, but as someone who can cope with most challenges, no matter how daunting, if I can just keep showing up and, literally or metaphorically, keep sticking my oars in the water.

This is what I mean by a shift in consciousness – it is a deep shift in who we believe ourselves to be, as a matter of identity. We are all forging our self-concept on a daily basis, starting with our thoughts, or consciousness. By the end of the Atlantic crossing, I had a fundamentally different concept of myself. Externally, not that much had changed (apart from losing about a quarter of my bodyweight), but I had discovered latent reserves of courage, resourcefulness, resilience and

personal power that, had I continued my life of quiet suburban desperation, I would never have known existed.

I believe that, in order to secure our future as a species, we have to collectively achieve a similar deep shift, from isolated and lonely humans to a deeply interconnected web of conscious agents, from dominators over nature to its stewards, from insatiable consumers to responsible citizens of the Earth. Initially this may feel strange, but as I discovered on the ocean, and as COVID has demonstrated, humans are more adaptable than we dare to believe, and we can quickly accommodate a new normal. If we can create the structures that nurture and reinforce these new ways of being, the shift is possible.

Unfortunately, in my experience, the shift does not happen in a life of ease and comfort. The original meaning of “apocalypse” is uncovering, or revelation, indicating that it usually takes something dramatic for truth to be revealed, including the truth of our own potential to change. It would be going too far to say that apocalypse is therefore to be welcomed, but it might be helpful to remember that it comes bearing gifts.

The Atlantic was the ultimate crash course in how to reframe adversity into opportunities for personal growth, and to appreciate that the quality of consciousness that we bring to external circumstances makes all the difference.

Outer Mission

This is a less positive story. My objective was to raise awareness and inspire action on environmental issues, and I had naively imagined that simply telling people about the issues would be sufficient. For me, everything had changed when I found out about the ecological crisis, so I had extrapolated from my own experience to arrive at the assumption that knowledge was the only prerequisite for action, overlooking the fact that societal structures create and perpetuate resistance to change. My premise, seeing individuals as entirely autonomous beings capable of free choice, irrespective of their cultural context, was overly simplistic to the point of being plain wrong. The world, nearly ten years later, continues to emit more carbon dioxide than ever, while the melting of the polar icecaps accelerates and species go extinct. Any impact I have had has clearly been inadequate in both scale and urgency. I now see more clearly that there were multiple reasons for this failure.

1. System Inertia

My original assumption was that awareness alone would be sufficient. I made the mistake of extrapolating from the personal to the universal, which sometimes works, but not always. When I found out about climate change, it seemed obvious to me that this was the most important issue facing humanity, and something must be done immediately. I set about changing my lifestyle, and spreading the word.

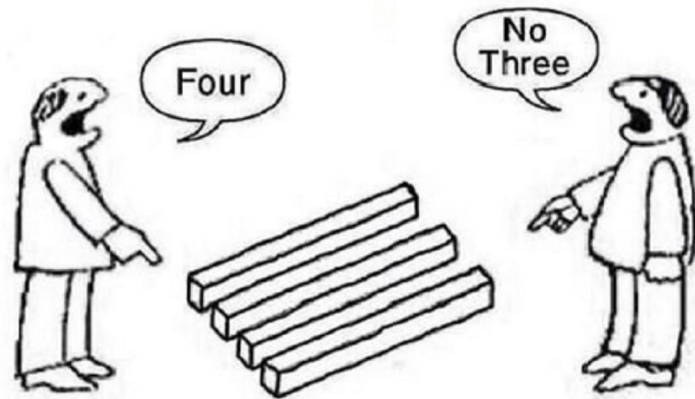
Looking around, I concluded from their behaviour that most people were oblivious to the problem, and felt sure that once they were aware, their behaviour would surely change, as mine had done. I fell into the classic “uninformed, stupid, evil” trap, which goes like this:

- If people are not seeing reality the way I see it, it must be because they are ill-informed. I shall therefore inform them, and then they will agree with me.
- If I inform people, and they still do not see reality the way I see it, it must be because they are stupid. But then I find evidence that they are actually smart, yet are wilfully ignoring what I believe to be a very real danger.
- So I then conclude that they must be evil; if they continue to act recklessly towards our ecosystems, and they are neither uninformed nor stupid, they must be maliciously persisting in making choices that are incompatible with the wellbeing of future generations.

Of course, as I would come to understand, the world is much more complicated than this.

Practically all of us are embedded in structures that enshrine the behaviours and attitudes that have worked well in the past. I will return later to the idea that people’s perspectives are heavily conditioned by their culture and experiences and, as Peter Drucker (might have) said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/23/culture-eats/>



2. Cultural Narrative

I knew from my personal experience with the obituary exercise the importance of the role of story; the stories that we tell ourselves and each other who we are, how the world works, and what life is for. These stories become our reality.

There was a deliberate intention to tell my story on several levels, in the hope of broadening the appeal of my message. I hoped that the majority of people would relate to my story in at least one of these aspects:

- a. An adventure story, the archetypal hero's journey
- b. A human story to give a relatable face to the oceans and to nature as a whole
- c. A story of spiritual growth and living with purpose

My approach to cultural change was based on the assumption that the personal can become universal, based in turn on the assumption that the collective narrative is the sum total of individual narratives. Therefore, by emphasising the power of accumulation across time and population, I hoped to change the collective behaviour.

I am told that I have changed some individual lives – people have written to tell me that they have found the courage to quit unsatisfying jobs and seek greater fulfilment, they have drastically reduced their usage of single-use plastic items, or chosen to fly less. One podcast interviewer remarked that our conversation had “shaken me to my core, and changed my DNA”. However, my impact was apparently not scalable, for reasons that include the following:

⁵⁶ I have not been able to ascertain the credit for this image

Impact too shallow: In a world of noise, it is very hard to get sufficiently deep engagement to generate change and trigger the diffusion effect.

Lack of identification with my story: when people hear that I had rowed at university before tackling the oceans, some visibly relax as if thinking, “well, I’m not a rower, so that lets me off the hook”. In terms of the personal transformation, some refuse to believe that I had ever had a self-confidence problem, which on the one hand is a tribute to the extent to which I have changed, but is also frustrating if I want them to understand how profound that transformation has been.

Many people do not want to change, or even try to change: Psychological research provides us with ample evidence that change is hard for the majority of people⁵⁷, even when it is change for the better.

The whole is not the same as the sum of the parts: I had assumed that the collective narrative was the sum total of individual narratives, but I now doubt this. Such is the nature of complex adaptive systems, in which a perfect understanding of the individual parts does not automatically convey a perfect understanding of the whole system's behaviour, or, as Otto Scharmer of MIT and the Presencing Institute puts it, “We are collectively creating results nobody wants.”⁵⁸

3. Timing

As the French writer, Victor Hugo, wrote, “There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come.”⁵⁹ Conversely, an idea whose time has not yet come will struggle to make headway.

Climate change, in particular, has faced enormous resistance in some sectors, possibly because we are all complicit, eliciting feelings of fear, guilt and shame, which are antithetical to positive action. Responses have ranged across denial (it is not happening), low prioritisation (it is less important than the economy), conspiracy theories (it is a Chinese hoax), finger-pointing (that

⁵⁷ For example, Berkman, E. T. (2018). The neuroscience of goals and behaviour change. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 70(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000094>. Overview in Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-motivated-brain/201803/why-is-behavior-change-so-hard>

⁵⁸ Scharmer, C. O. and Kaufer, K. (2013). *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Location 129 in Kindle edition.

⁵⁹ Original version: *On résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées*. Hugo, V. M. *Histoire d'un Crime* (The History of a Crime) (Written 1852, published 1877). Conclusion, ch. X. Trans. Joyce, T.H. and Locker, A.

country emitted sooner/more), cost/benefit analysis (it will cost our company/country too much) and resignation (it is too late anyway). It has been an ongoing challenge for the environmental movement to generate enough concern to galvanise action, while not generating so much concern that it tips over into fear.

The 2009 Copenhagen climate change conference, the UN COP15, was one of the biggest disappointments of my life. I had been particularly inspired by my time in the Republic of Kiribati earlier that year, having rowed there from Hawaii on the second stage of the Pacific crossing. I had had the opportunity to speak with the Kiribati president, Anote Tong, about the threats to his island nation from rising oceans. Never before had climate change seemed so real and so personal.

I had immersed myself in the climate movement over the previous few months, and had trekked with a group of environmentally concerned women from Big Ben to Brussels to catch the UN Climate Express train to the summit. It looked like the whole world had converged on the Danish capital, with tens of thousands of climate activists making their presence known. With Barack Obama recently elected to the White House, it felt that anything was possible. Sadly, as we now know, the so-called “Hopenhagen” conference did not fulfil its promise. It devolved to a battle of wills between the US and China, and failed to deliver the fair and binding deal that we had all so desperately hoped for.

Unfortunately, humanity’s willingness to act on an idea does not coincide with the scientific imperative as determined by nature’s systems and time lags. The Overton window⁶⁰ is determined by the collective psychology, not by the objectively evaluated critical path. This is a problem.

4. Metrics

The other major flaw in my plan was the metrics I used to measure progress. The voyages were intended as a means to an end; a way to get people’s attention so I could communicate my environmental message. However (and this is certainly not a unique example), I ended up using the easy, proximate metric rather than the difficult, distant metric. It was a lot simpler to gauge my progress by miles covered, oceans rowed, and Guinness World Records achieved, rather than environmental messaging received and acted upon. I have impressive data from a top global PR

⁶⁰ The range of policies acceptable to the general population at a given time.
<https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>

company on how many media impressions I got, but even that does not tell me what difference, if any, I actually made.

Even while conceding that it was probably beyond my capabilities and budget to gather this information, it neatly illustrates the broader systemic problem that as humans we often focus on the easy but crude metric (usually money) rather than the metrics that indicate genuine progress towards our goal. An obvious example is that governments focus on Gross Domestic Product as a proxy indicator of wellbeing, rather than wellbeing itself.

5. Social Structures

I now believe that the main reason for my failure was that I was aiming to create change purely at the level of the individual, overlooking the fact that we are all embedded in structures that perpetuate the status quo, particularly economic structures. For the majority of the world's population, financial survival is a struggle. Some more radical thinkers might suggest that the powerful have designed the human world to be this way; from the education system onwards, people are locked by artificial scarcity into a system that sees them as consumers rather than citizens, as units of production rather than individuals with hopes, dreams, and a unique sense of purpose. When the system of economic incentives has been designed, either intentionally or by historical accident, to keep people compliant, consumerist, and too busy and distracted to step back and think critically about whether the system is really serving their long-term interests, it is very difficult to get their attention, let alone generate the kind of action that will often fly in the face of that very same system of incentives.

In summary, during seven years of ocean rowing I had learned valuable lessons about who I am and what my capabilities are, but wrapped up in my ocean bubble, I had learned relatively little about how the human world works. This was to be the focus of the next seven years and the inspiration for my subsequent works and activities, including this critique and the new work that has emerged from it (Appendix 6).

Life After Rowing

The years since I hung up my oars have given me ample opportunity to continue my advocacy and develop my learning in ways that have reformed and refined my understanding of how and why change happens, and indeed, how and why it does not. As I have developed greater insight into the invisible dynamics that underlie society, and hence human behaviour, I have evolved from debating the top-down versus bottom-up dichotomy to the realisation that we need both approaches and everything in between, with change also rippling out from any and every point within the system. I have arrived at a greater appreciation of the complex and subtle forces that have created the human world of the twenty-first century, with its glorious triumphs and spectacular failures. I see more clearly the systemic structures and the potency potential in a collective, coherent approach to our challenges.

Yale World Fellowship

I was fortunate enough to be one of sixteen Yale World Fellows in 2012, chosen from a pool of around two thousand applicants for Yale's flagship international leadership programme. The one-semester fellowship exposed the cohort to a wide range of disciplines, theories, and perspectives, featuring luminaries varying from a professor of Divinity to a four-star general, a presidential candidate to a Nobel Prize-winning economist.

I arrived at Yale as a frustrated environmentalist. The danger from climate change, and all our other environmental challenges, seemed to me so clear and present that I could not understand why it was not at the top of everybody's agenda.

Alongside the core curriculum of the World Fellowship, Fellows were encouraged to choose other classes to audit. One of the ones I chose was an undergraduate Psychology class called Thinking. Each week we looked at a different logical fallacy, such as confirmation bias, causality, decision making, base rate neglect, ad hominem, sunk cost, etc. I had fondly believed that humans were the rational beings. The Thinking class, if not exactly blowing that belief out of the water, at least demonstrated that our rationality is extremely compromised which started to make sense of why more humans were not paying attention to our greatest existential threat.

It was at Yale I first met George Marshall, who explored this theme in his book, *Don't Even Think About It*⁶¹. Having set out all the ways in which humans are poorly designed to perceive long term and largely invisible threats, Marshall concludes with a relatively upbeat chapter on

⁶¹ Marshall, G. (2014). *Don't even think about it: Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*. Bloomsbury.

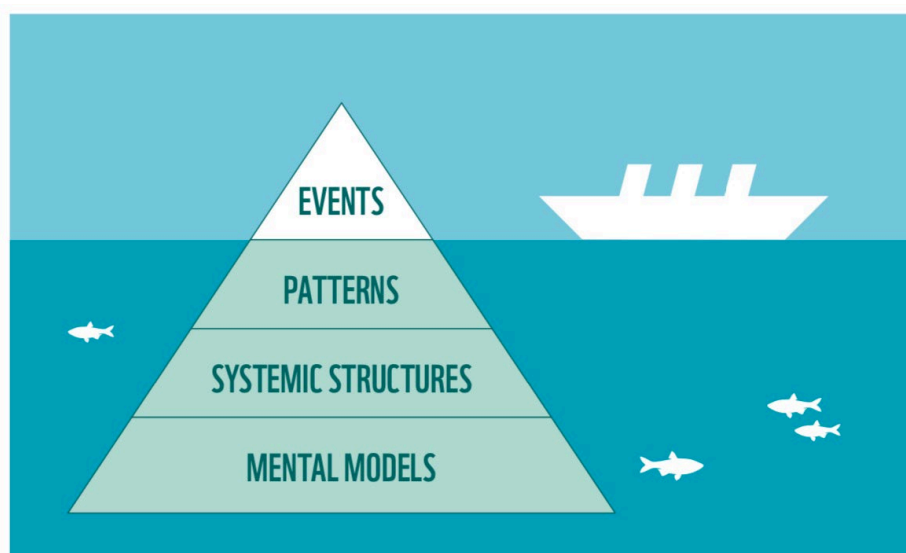
how climate campaigners can circumvent these cognitive biases and galvanise action. However, given all the psychological obstacles set out in his earlier chapters, I had already reached the conclusion that we need to come at climate action from a different and more oblique angle.

Awareness of the Left-Brain World

In 2016 I was onstage at a conference in Windsor called The Stifling Hand of Control, where two other headline speakers were Margaret Heffernan⁶² and Iain McGilchrist. I had already been introduced to Iain's work through his book, *The Master and His Emissary*⁶³ in which he wrote of his concern that the left hemisphere, with its reductionist, linear worldview is coming to dominate our society, at the expense of the right hemisphere which is more holistic and intuitive. He fears that the shift towards the left is becoming a self-perpetuating feedback loop, or "hall of mirrors" as he calls it, due to the left hemisphere's excessive self-confidence and its eagerness to create a world in its own image, hidebound by a multiplicity of tiny rules – hence the name of the conference. His ideas resonated with me, and inform the ideas presented in the Appendix 6.

My Introduction to Systems Thinking

Later in 2016, I read the Living Planet Report, from the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Zoological Society of London. Amidst the sophisticated graphics of the glossy report, it was this simple diagram that leaped out:



⁶² I would like to note that I also very much appreciated, and was impacted by, *Wilful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious*, Margaret Heffernan's book. (2012). Simon & Schuster UK.

⁶³ McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Yale University Press.

This was the first time I had knowingly encountered systems thinking; it made complete sense. Like the quirks of human psychology that hide behind the veil of rationality, there were structural layers that affect the way the human world works, and that the events being reported in the media were only the visible tip of a very large iceberg of deeper, invisible structures. These deeper levels were where change needed to happen in order to change the visible events of our reality.

In 2017 an American friend sent me a copy of Donella Meadows' work on the leverage points in a system. Meadows was the lead author of the Club of Rome-commissioned 1972 report, *The Limits to Growth*⁶⁴, and identified the twelve most powerful leverage points in a system. The full list, in ascending order of effectiveness is:

12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards).
11. The sizes of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows.
10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures).
9. The lengths of delays, relative to the rate of system change.
8. The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against.
7. The gain around driving positive feedback loops.
6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to information).
5. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints).
4. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure.
3. The goals of the system.
2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises.
1. The power to transcend paradigms.

This reinforced my belief in the necessity to focus on the most deeply submerged layer of the iceberg: the mental models, narratives and paradigms, that underpin human civilisation.

⁶⁴ Meadows, D. & D., Randers, J. Behrens, W. (1972). *The Limits to Growth*. Signet. Available as a pdf at <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf>

Economic Awakening

“It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.”

– Upton Sinclair, quoted by Al Gore in *An Inconvenient Truth*

In 2013 I had prepared an application for a grant from Open Society International, which I called the “New Prosperity Paradigm”. My bid was not successful, but the application process gave me reason to research and consider one of the aspects of change that I believed we needed in the world: a new definition of success, accompanied by a new metric to replace Gross Domestic Product. The evidence, as I saw it, suggested that our current definition of success, based on fame, fortune, or position, was not enhancing happiness and wellbeing, but delivering material aspirations that ran counter to the wellbeing of the planet, and hence, ultimately, counter to the wellbeing of humans.

Up to a certain point, yet to be achieved by many developing countries, rising income undoubtedly correlates to rising wellbeing. But once basic needs are met, the marginal benefits of additional income rapidly diminish – but consumption does not. Additional purchasing power does not yield a proportionate increase in *present* wellbeing. In terms of resource extraction and environmental pollution it seriously impacts on the *potential* wellbeing of future generations. My view was that we need a new aspiration, based on sufficiency and compassion, with appropriate metrics to support these values. Capitalism depends on economic growth in order to function, and our economic expansion is now butting up against ecological limits, as Kate Raworth illustrates so clearly in her Doughnut Economics thesis⁶⁵.

Dr Teresa Belton explores this possibility in *Happier People, Healthier Planet*, for which she interviewed dozens of people who have chosen to live simpler lives. Her first and foremost proposition was:

“Consumption patterns in the developed world, and to which many in the developing world aspire, are doing irreversible damage to the global climate and other aspects of the environment, yet they are entirely unnecessary for leading a happy and satisfying life... It

⁶⁵ Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. Random House Business.

is not material wealth but non-material assets, such as strong relationships, active engagement, and thriving communities, that enrich our personal and social wellbeing.”⁶⁶

I agreed with her premise. The benefits of simplicity were, to my mind, twofold:

- a) Time usage: it seemed that a lot of human activity in the western world oriented around the acquisition, maintenance, transport, use, and disposal of stuff. Less stuff meant less time and energy spent on these activities, leaving more time for things that were, in my view, more important.
- b) Environment: the manufacture, transportation, and disposal of stuff has a significant environmental impact.

Although a combination of life on a small boat and my peripatetic lifestyle had led me to appreciate a life of simplicity, a documentary series called *The Century of the Self*⁶⁷ reminded me that this attitude was not universal. The series focused on the ‘grandfather’ of public relations, Edward Bernays, and the extent to which people’s desires have been manipulated. Bernays’ book, *Propaganda*, drawing on the work of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, describes how the intelligent and powerful could – and in his view, should – manipulate the masses:

“If we understand the mechanisms and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it in almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.”⁶⁸

He went on to write of the capitalist imperative to ensure, or even create, a market for its full output:

“Mass production is only profitable if its rhythm can be maintained... that is, if it can continue to sell its product in steady or increasing quantity. The result is that while, under the handicraft or small-unit system of production that was typical a century ago, demand

⁶⁶ Belton, T. (2014). *Happier People Healthier Planet: How Putting Wellbeing First Would Help Sustain Life On Earth*. Silverwood Books. Location 42 in Kindle edition.

⁶⁷ Available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

⁶⁸ Bernays, E. (Originally published by Horace Liveright, New York, 1928. Reprinted version: 2004). *Propaganda*. IG Publishing. p71

created the supply, today supply must actively seek to create its corresponding demand.”⁶⁹

The documentary included quotes ranging from Paul Mazur, who was a banker with Lehman Brothers in 1927:

“We must shift America from a needs- to a desires-culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. [...] Man's desires must overshadow his needs.”

To a contemporary advertising executive:

“It is our job to make people believe they suck if they don't have our product.”

In advocating for simplicity, which I had thought would be a much more appealing message than urging action on climate change, I found myself going up against a highly sophisticated – and successful – \$1.2 trillion industry dedicated to persuading people to desire more than they need. I was clearly not going to win.

The Mystery of Money

My perceptions of the neoliberal capitalist model were further influenced by the Belgian former central banker, and designer of hundreds of complementary currencies, Bernard Lietaer, and his book, *The Mystery of Money*. According to Lietaer, our current economic model is the product of a long history of the systematic suppression of the feminine, both in terms of the oppression of women, and also of the feminine archetypes, particularly the Great Mother. Drawing on Jungian theory, he posits that the suppression of an archetype elevates its shadows, so by oppressing the Great Mother/Provider archetype, we have elevated its shadows of greed and scarcity, which are defining features of our current economy. Thus, the honouring of the feminine is necessary for a healthy economy in which yin and yang are in balance.

⁶⁹ Bernays, *ibid.* p84

This idea of yin/yang equilibrium is beautifully articulated in this article by Lietaer: *Complementary Yin/Yang Currencies: A world in balance?*⁷⁰ I recommend the article in its entirety, but here will offer just the final sentence:

“Ecological pressures, community breakdowns or the spreading of violence in the world can all be successfully dealt with only from this broader perspective, the one that fully reintegrates the legitimacy of the feminine perspective into our worldview.”

Lietaer sees complementary currencies as a way of redressing the balance, complementing rather than replacing conventional currency. Given the notions that I was already entertaining – about the perverse incentives offered by our systems, and the need for a kinder, more compassionate economics – his ideas fell on fertile ground.

The Chalice and the Blade

For most of my life, I had not had a strong feminist sensibility. As with most awakenings, I was previously oblivious to the cultural waters in which I was swimming, and also in common with most awakenings, I am now completely amazed – and not a little embarrassed – by my former obliviousness. I had not been aware of any discrimination against me based on gender: not having brothers, and with only minor examples of sexism at school and at work, I had not perceived any significant disadvantage in being female.

However, I had had a hunch for a while that sustainability and gender equality were somehow connected. I had thought that maybe the ‘stereotypically’ feminine qualities of compassion and nurturing would lead to greater consideration for the non-human and future human inhabitants of Planet Earth.

At the start of 2018, around thirty years after its publication, I read Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade*, which confirmed my hunch and deepened my understanding. As a child, Eisler escaped the Nazi regime and made it to the United States. In her work, she set out to answer the questions:

“Why do we hunt and persecute each other? Why is our world so full of man’s infamous inhumanity to man – and to woman? How can human beings be so brutal to their own

⁷⁰ <https://www.reuniting.info/node/8673>, originally published in published in Reflections, the journal of the Society for Organizational Learning (SOL) Summer 2003. Special issue on “The feminine approach to leadership”

kind? What is it that chronically tilts us toward cruelty rather than kindness, toward war rather than peace, toward destruction rather than actualisation?”⁷¹

She suggests that, under her Cultural Transformation Theory, there are two basic models of society:

1. Dominator model: ranking of one half of humanity over the other, in either patriarchy or matriarchy (as in the last five thousand years)
2. Partnership model: social relations based on linking rather than ranking. Groups can be different without being either inferior or superior.

According to Eisler, the original direction of our cultural evolution was towards partnership, but following a historical period of chaos and disruption, there was a fundamental shift towards domination. From a life-generating and nurturing view of the Universe (the chalice, feminine) there was a shift to worshipping the power to take life (the blade, masculine). She draws on principles from complexity theory to make her point:

“What the archaeological record tells us is startlingly congruent with the new scientific thinking about unpredictable change – or how long-established states of systems equilibrium and near equilibrium can with relative rapidity shift to a far from equilibrium, or chaotic, state. Even more remarkable is how this radical change in our cultural evolution in certain respects fits the non-linear evolutionary model of ‘punctuated equilibria’ proposed by Eldredge and Gould, with the appearance of ‘peripheral isolates’ at critical ‘bifurcation points’.”⁷²

Eisler’s hypothesis is that male archaeologists setting out to investigate the relative roles of the sexes in prehistory presumed that one gender had to be dominant. In the absence of evidence of matriarchy, they concluded that patriarchy had always been the way of the world. However, her interpretation of the archaeological record is that Neolithic artefacts bear compelling evidence of *equality* of the sexes, with the Goddess being the primary object of worship up to and including Minoan Crete. However, a small number of peripheral tribes introduced an aggressive,

⁷¹ Eisler, R. (1988). *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, our Future*. San Francisco: Perennial Library, page xiii

⁷² Eisler, *ibid.* p47

patriarchal system. As these marauding groups started to score victories, previously peaceful tribes had to resort to violence in order to defend themselves, and so the contagion spread.

Eisler's interpretation of the archaeological record has been subject to some dispute, but it is not essential to her point, which is that when domination, rather than partnership, becomes the predominant mindset, it manifests on multiple levels: men dominate women, children, and weaker men, powerful countries dominate less powerful countries, the rich dominate the poor, and humans dominate nature.

To succeed, domination requires "othering" of the oppressed, a dynamic that was horrifyingly evident in the Nazi persecution of the Jews. According to Eisler, our current problems are a result of the dominator model, and therefore cannot be solved within it. She proposes a system that she calls *gylany*, a partnership society based on gender equality:

"Gradually, as the female half of humanity and the values and goals that in androcracy [male-dominated society] are labelled feminine are fully integrated into the guidance mechanisms of society, a politically and economically healthy and balanced system will emerge. Then, unified into the global family envisioned by the feminist, peace, ecology, human potential, and other gylanic movements, our species will begin to experience the full potential of its evolution."⁷³

I have been fortunate to meet Riane Eisler at her home in Carmel, California, and have been strongly influenced by her view that we need to shift from this dominator society to a partnership society, in which we adopt a non-dualistic and synergistic view of strength in unity and balance, if we are to have any hope of a peaceful and regenerative future.

Eisler is, in many ways, speaking the same language as Lietaer, and he cites her work. The empowerment of women now became an important priority for me, and more broadly the rebalancing of stereotypically feminine and masculine behaviours, the yin and the yang. While women in our contemporary culture may have a head start in embracing the feminine, it is certainly not our exclusive prerogative. A balance is needed in society as a whole, and men as well as women can express qualities of nurturing, collaboration, intuition, and compassion. Achieving greater balance at the individual level supports balance at the collective level.

⁷³ Eisler, *ibid.* p198

Transitioning to Leadership

Equipped with the legacy of my ocean-rowing years – greater reserves of courage and tenacity, combined with a tolerance of uncertainty and insecurity, and an ability to observe the human predicament with objectivity – plus these subsequent insights into psychology, systems thinking, and economics, my professional focus has now turned to proposing a new narrative for the relationship between humans and the natural world, and our relationship to future generations, which I believe can help inspire the community of activists, advocates, and concerned citizens who understand that our current track is unsustainable, and our current systems past their use-by date. In 2018, I founded the Sisters, a global network of women committed to creating a more peaceful, equitable and sustainable future. My work with the Sisters (see Appendix 5 for more details) and my next book (see Appendix 6) will be in service to disseminating this new narrative.

If problems cannot be solved from the same level of consciousness that created them, I believe that they also cannot be solved from the same style of leadership that created them. Indeed, the prevailing leadership style is a microcosm of the prevailing level of consciousness, so both have to change in tandem. Hierarchical, command-and-control, autocratic, competitive leadership is falling out of favour, and concepts such as sociocracy, holacracy, biomimicry and autopoiesis are birthing a new style of leadership that is inclusive, decentralised, co-creative, and fractal in the sense that the way that the organisation does one thing is that way that it does everything, and the organisation itself aspires to embody the changes it wants to see in the world. This style of “leadership” barely looks like leadership at all, in that there is little distinction, if any, between leaders and followers, with all agents in the organisation being autonomous, self-determining, and equal, subject only to their reputation amongst their peers, based on contribution. I believe that this leadership culture of collaboration and co-creativity is by far our best hope of generating positive change, and in fact is not new at all – it is as old as Nature itself.

The following section focuses on Taoism and its potential contribution to conscious leadership for the future. It is an extract from a foundational draft of my forthcoming book (see Appendix 6), which starts with the likelihood of imminent civilizational collapse from both theoretical and practical perspectives, and goes on to draw together ideas from complexity theory, neuroscience, psychotherapy, Taoism, and a radical new theory concerning the nature of reality as a network of conscious agents, in order to arrive at a proposed approach as to how as a collection of individuals and individual works can interconnect to bring about a paradigm shift from ego-based, dominator, yang leadership to eco-based, partnership, yin approaches.

This foundational work, as expressed in the Appendix 6, is an artefact that demonstrates how a “bricolage of the mind” approach can release the thinker from traditional paradigms, and allow for the emergence of new ideas. This is not esoteric; it is about science supporting what has been observed, felt, intuited, and embodied – often at significant personal cost – over the centuries in which the greater portion of humans live in the hands of the smaller portion who exert power in explicit and implicit ways. It is not an academic thesis; it is a translation of a bricoleur’s mind that has been drawn to science, philosophy, psychology, politics, pragmatism, and social commentary, in order to articulate a narrative based on interconnecting ideas and individuals (as in my founding of the Sisters and my advocacy on environmental issues through TEDx talks and keynotes). I feel the imperative to do this work because the efforts made to date have not prevented, and will not prevent, this unrelenting movement towards ever-increasing threat, not just to groups which have too often been parked outside our conscious awareness, but to every aspect of the world in which we live.

Yin-Yang Leadership: Extract from Forthcoming Book (see Appendix 6 for more)

“There's nothing fundamentally wrong with people. Given a story to enact that puts them in accord with the world, they will live in accord with the world. But given a story to enact that puts them at odds with the world, as yours does, they will live at odds with the world. Given a story to enact in which they are the lords of the world, they will ACT like lords of the world. And, given a story to enact in which the world is a foe to be conquered, they will conquer it like a foe, and one day, inevitably, their foe will lie bleeding to death at their feet, as the world is now.” – Daniel Quinn⁷⁴

Introduction

This work aims to establish the need for a new narrative about what it means to be a human being in the 21st century, and then to offer a suggestion as to what kind of narrative might serve to reconnect humanity with its biosphere and with itself, ushering in a shift in consciousness that leads to a sustainable and peaceful future.

This small sample focuses on Taoism and psychosynthesis. The Appendix 6 offers a broader sample of the foundations of this thesis, drawing on complexity theory, neuroscience, psychotherapy, and Donald Hoffman's (2019⁷⁵) new theories on the nature of reality.

I believe a shift is needed from a dominator leadership type to a partnership dynamic (Eisler 1988). Although concepts such as servant leadership and conscious leadership are gaining traction, nevertheless, to me “leadership” implies a degree of superiority; leaders imply followers, while partnership implies equality. Some might argue that humans have always created leaders, but I would suggest that in egalitarian or gylanic⁷⁶ societies, leadership used to be contextual; those who were good at tracking would lead at tracking, while those who were good at hunting, butchering, cooking, or gathering, would lead in those activities, which ends up looking more like partnership based on complementarity.

⁷⁴ Quinn, D. (2009, first published 1992). *Ismael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit*. Bantam; Anniversary, Subsequent Edition. p84

⁷⁵ Hoffmann, D. D. (2019). *The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid the Truth from our Eyes*. Allen Lane.

⁷⁶ A term coined by Riane Eisler, meaning a social system based on equality of men and women

Rather than add to the enormous volume of literature on leadership as an end in itself, and recognising that this commercialised brand of leadership is essentially external in contrast to the inner quality of yin-ness that is my main focus, I will concentrate more on the more subtle aspects of leadership as espoused by Lao-Tzu:

“That whereby the rivers and seas are able to receive the homage and tribute of all the valley streams, is their skill in being lower than they; - it is thus that they are the kings of them all. So it is that the sage (ruler), wishing to be above men, puts himself by his words below them, and, wishing to be before them, places his person behind them.”⁷⁷

Essential to this Taoist way of being is the integrity of thoughts, words, and deeds. We are porous vessels in that our inner values and beliefs seep into our outer words and actions. If a leader is conveying pessimism, or a loss of hope, this is contaminating to their communities, whether they are ethnic, national or organisational. Conversely, if they do have hope, their passion and conviction can become positively contagious. This is about character, not personality; beliefs, not words. The commitment to possibility has to be total. Brittle optimism or fragile hope will not make the grade if the leader is to light the way into, if not a better future (we may be too late for that), at least one of possibilities.

It is challenging, however, to write about the yin/being aspect of yin/yang. By its very nature, it is implicit rather than explicit, and our western vocabulary is not well suited to describing concepts that our culture has, since the Age of Reason, dismissed as at best esoteric, and at worst primitive. Necessarily, and with a full appreciation of the paradox, I have therefore invoked various contemporary (and therefore yang/left brain) theories to point the way. I write in more detail on the context and the theories of change in my Appendix 6 piece.

I have previously mentioned that I went through a stage of deep concern about our collective future. While I was in Ireland, input from a variety of sources had convinced me that some kind of major disruption was imminent. Although it has never completely disappeared, this perspective has recently returned to the forefront of my consciousness, prompted by our ongoing rush towards catastrophic climate change, biodiversity loss, and other forms of ecological collapse.

⁷⁷ Lao Tzu, translated by Legge, J. (2016). *Tao Te Ching*. Digireads.com Publishing. 66

In the past, I have taken the prospect of environmental catastrophe as a motivation to action. I have fiercely resisted any expressions of defeatism or resignation. As recently as 2016, when I spoke at Secretary of State John Kerry's Our Oceans Conference in Washington, DC, between John Kerry's opening remarks and then-President Barack Obama's speech, I expressed the need for hope with a quote from the novelist Raymond Williams,

“To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.”⁷⁸

However, on this current iteration of my spiralling journey, I am facing up to the increasing likelihood of impending disaster. Politicians, business leaders, and technologists tend to talk as if human progress will continue in a smooth trajectory, and the past will be a good guide to the future. I have serious reservations. When Stephen Pinker⁷⁹ and others proclaim that we have never had it so good, I wonder if we humans are like turkeys the day before Thanksgiving, feeling fat and complacent, not realising that the very same factors that have created our sense of wellbeing will also be the cause of its abrupt end.

Prophets of doom have probably existed for as long as humans have had the language to express their fears, and so have those who ridicule such prophets. Life has not got any easier for doom-mongers since the boy cried wolf at the turn of the millennium, and again over the Mayan 2012 hysteria⁸⁰. However, we must remember that in Æsop's fable, the wolf did eventually show up. Perhaps the timing was not right. It is my belief that the timing *is* right for other perspectives on notions of leadership to be seriously considered and older wisdoms revived and recontextualised for contemporary challenges.

How then can these principles of Taoism, of integrity of thoughts, words, and deeds be translated practically into our civilisation to shift our direction? I begin with my own experiential engagement with these principles and then my ongoing efforts to disseminate them in different ways. These expanding ripples are supported by and linked to other such movements and concepts which have been coming increasingly to the fore in the last few years.

⁷⁸ Williams, R. (1989). *Resources of Hope*. Verso. p118

⁷⁹ Pinker, S. (2019). *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Penguin.

⁸⁰ See, for example, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_phenomenon

Taoism and the Future



“We do not need a new religion or a new bible. We need a new experience—a new feeling of what it is to be ‘I.’ The lowdown (which is, of course, the secret and profound view) on life is that our normal sensation of self is a hoax, or, at best, a temporary role that we are playing, or have been conned into playing—with our own tacit consent, just as every hypnotized person is basically willing to be hypnotized. The most strongly enforced of all known taboos is the taboo against knowing who or what you really are behind the mask of your apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego.”⁸¹

– Alan Watts

I’m conscious of the strangeness of being a British person with a Methodist upbringing advocating the virtues of Taoism, so before I face any charges of cultural appropriation, I would like to emphasise that Taoism is seen primarily as a philosophy, rather than a religion, and no region or race has a monopoly over it.

I do not claim to be an expert in Taoism, which is an ancient and deep philosophy with a vast literature and sophisticated levels of interpretation. What I will offer here is my personal interpretation of Taoism, as I have been applying it in my life for fifteen or so years now. This could be said to be more of a Taoist-flavoured approach to living, rather than strict adherence to any prescribed model. I arrived at a basic understanding of Taoist principles while I was on the Atlantic Ocean, without having a label for them. This does not make me a genius or a spiritual savant; it simply means that Taoist philosophy makes a great deal of sense, especially when one is facing exceptionally challenging situations.

I had taken the usual Western path through the yang worlds of mainstream British education and preacher-mediated religion, followed by the even more yang world of management consultancy in the City of London. Following the separation from my (also very yang) husband, I had made

⁸¹ Watts, A. (2009). *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. Souvenir Press. p12

new friends and allies, and started to open up to the more intuitive, spiritual side of life. Key books around this time were *Who We May Be*, *The Perennial Philosophy*, and *The Celestine Prophecy*.

It had been quite a dramatic internal shift, a vast new realm of possibility opening up in terms of how to live, like sudden access to a new superpower. My world metaphorically transformed from monochrome to technicolour, or, to draw on a common metaphor for yin/yang balance, I felt like a bird who has been flying on one wing all its life, until one day it wakes up to find it has two. It discovers how much higher and more powerfully it can fly, leading to a dramatic expansion of its horizons, and delights in the sheer joy of soaring over the landscape.

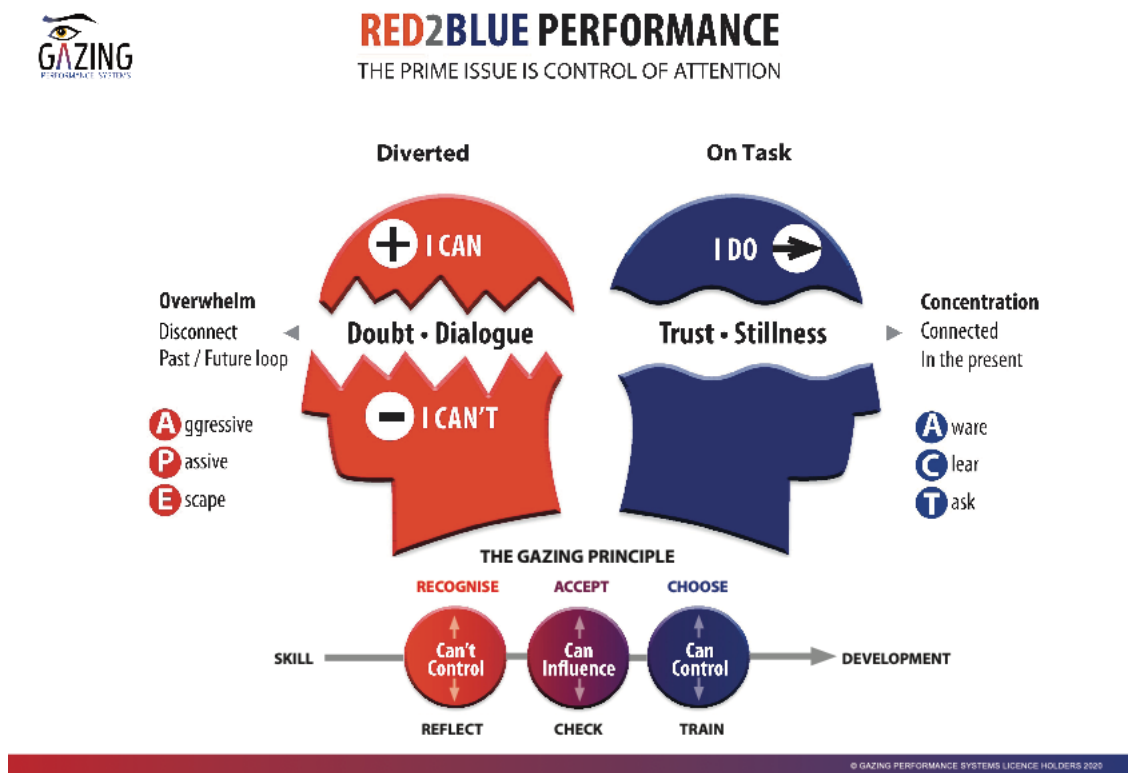
In the rush of preparing for the Atlantic, though, I had defaulted back to the narrow focus required to get through an inordinate amount of preparation in just fourteen months. The yin aspect requires a certain spaciousness in which to operate, spaciousness I had been too impatient to give myself, driven by the perceived urgency of the environmental mission. Once out on the ocean, the sense of impatience and urgency continued, exacerbated by the offer from my only cash sponsor to double their financial support if I beat the women's record for the fastest crossing. I allowed myself to be hijacked by their incentive, and lost sight of my original motivations of raising environmental awareness, while expanding my perceived limitations.

One day, sitting in my cabin to write up my logbook at the end of a rowing shift, my gaze fell upon two items that I had velcroed to the cabin wall. One was a coaster, given to me by my beloved friend, Romy Shovelton.



The other was a crib sheet, given to me by Bede Brosnahan of Gazing Performance, the sports psychologist who had been coaching me in preparation for the expedition. Bede, incidentally, has

a black belt in karate, a martial art grounded in traditional Chinese principles, and the Gazing model is congruent with that philosophy. My eyes had wandered across that laminated sheet of A4 countless times during the voyage, but suddenly it landed. I realised I had been fluctuating hectically between the “I can/I can’t” poles of the red head in a destructive inner dialogue, and I needed to trust myself and find the clear stillness of being on task, as in the blue mindset. I needed to be more Zen Dog, and relax into enjoying the journey, rather than yearning impatiently for it to be over.



According to the Gazing Performance website:

“Whether pressure is perceived as good or bad, we believe the prime issue is about being able to ‘control your attention’. In our view, your attention is either on or off the task - which at Gazing we refer to as having a ‘blue head’ and being ‘off task’ as having a ‘red head’. ‘Red Head’ is an unresourceful state in which you are off task, overwhelmed and

ineffective. 'Blue Head', on the other hand, is an optimal state in which you are on task, concentrating and performing to your best ability.”⁸²

The key point here was to adjust one's attitude. The outer reality would remain the same, but the consciousness through which it was perceived could make all the difference. The lesson struck home, but it was only when my satellite phone broke, and I was left totally incommunicado, that I came fully into “blue head” awareness. I was no longer made madly envious by reports of other rowing crews completing their crossings (or even being rescued, which also seemed preferable to my lonely ongoing slog), nor did I have access to the weather forecasts which had made me fearful of storms, or eager for favourable conditions. I became very present in the moment, and came fully back into balance within myself. The sense of relief was palpable. In *Rowing the Atlantic*, I relay how I described my feelings to camera at the time:

“It's the second day since my satellite phone stopped working, and I can hardly find the words to describe how different I feel. I'm loving it. I feel like I'm starting to regain my energy. I've been rowing along this afternoon, feeling so serene and calm. It's been one of those really magic moments. If I could just bottle this feeling...” I pause for a moment, “I'd make millions.” I look out across the ocean, which is sparkling in the background. I no longer regard it as my enemy, I regard it as my salvation. I continue: “This feeling is better than any drug - a feeling of total self-sufficiency, self-reliance - just me and my little boat in the middle of the ocean. I'm happy and content. I've never known peace like it. It's an absolute total... peace. Yeah, there's no other word for it. It's made it all worthwhile – all the agony, all the suffering, all the pain, all the self-doubt. It's all been worth it for the way I feel this afternoon.”⁸³

The paradox here is that doing something as audacious and apparently attention-seeking as rowing alone across oceans, actually had the effect of profoundly humbling my ego. When you find yourself on hands and knees, naked, on the deck of a pitching rowboat in a howling gale, bellowing in frustration at the sea anchor that has managed to tie itself in knots yet again, ego becomes an unnecessary, even a dangerous, luxury. Mother Nature has shown her supremacy, and you are simply begging to be allowed to cross the ocean with your life and sanity relatively

⁸² <https://www.gazing.com/gazing-performance-systems-blog/the-control-circle-how-to-move-from-a-red-to-a-blue-head>

⁸³ Savage, R. (2009). *Rowing the Atlantic*. Simon & Schuster. p193

intact. Amanda Palmer, the American singer-songwriter, describes well how abject humbling leads to greater courage:

“I highly recommend street performing over attending a conservatory to any musician, especially if they’re going into rock and roll: it wears your ego down to stubbly little nubs and gives your performance balls of steel.”⁸⁴

The ocean was my street performance, and what didn’t kill me did indeed make me stronger, without the inconvenient burden of ego, knowing I had to surrender to the is-ness of the situation if I was going to succeed.

The Tao

As I interpret the philosophy of Taoism, it emphasises the interconnectedness of all things, summed up as the microcosm within the macrocosm, “As above, so below. As within, so without.”⁸⁵ The Taoist way of life seeks to establish balance within oneself while also living harmoniously with the greater balance found in nature, the cosmos being the closest that our western minds can come to the concept of the Tao, although the Tao is a multi-dimensional, all-encompassing cosmos, not merely the physical one.

“There was something formless and perfect before the universe was born.
It is serene. Empty. Solitary. Unchanging. Infinite. Eternally present.
It is the mother of the universe.
For lack of a better name, I call it Tao.
It flows through all things, inside and outside, and returns to the origin of all things.
The Tao is great. The universe is great. Earth is great. Man is great.
These are the four great powers.
Man follows the Earth. Earth follows the universe.
The universe follows the Tao.
The Tao follows only itself.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Palmer, A. (2014). *The Art of Asking: How I learned to stop worrying and let people help*. Piatkus. p62

⁸⁵ Motto from the Emerald Tablet, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

⁸⁶ Tao Te Ching, translated by Stephen Mitchell, quoted by Ma Deva Padma. (2002). *Tao Oracle: An Illuminated New Approach to the I Ching*. St Martin’s Press. p29

Originating with the 64 hexagrams contained in the ancient Chinese divination text, the *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes* (date unknown, but at least 1140 B.C.), the philosophy was elucidated by the scholar Lao-Tzu, about whom little is known, in his book, the *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Book of The Way*.

“He often referred to the Tao as ‘the Mother’ who guides us to live as she lives – gentle yet powerful, resilient yet strong, yielding like bamboo no matter how turbulent the winds. This ability to give way, to ebb, to flow without rigidity, to move with rather than against, will sustain us even during the harshest of times. It is the power that achieves change through effortless effort, through non-doing rather than doing.”⁸⁷

The yin/yang symbol that lies at the heart of Taoism represents the dynamic interplay of the receptive yin principle with the creative yang principle. It is this interaction of yin and yang that give rise to *qi*, or life force. Implied in the symbol is its rotation, a never-ending cycle of rising and falling, waxing and waning, ebbing and flowing, with each phase containing the seed of its opposite, although in fact I should say *complement* rather than *opposite*, as the yin/yang exemplifies the non-dual nature of existence; one aspect cannot exist without the other, like two sides of one coin, so they are not in opposition, but are in fact inherent in each other.

I will now explore each of these features in more detail, as they relate to my overall thesis.

Yin Yang

“Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. This is another paradox: What is soft is strong.” – Lao Tzu

While it is important to maintain a balance of yin and yang for good health and good living, this is a dynamic and ongoing process that relies on the contrast between the two principles. We would not want the black and white of the yin-yang symbol to be homogenised into grey, any more than we would want all humans to be homogenised into something in between male and female. Sexual reproduction shuffles the genes of two separate humans, producing new variations, and hence the evolution and resilience of the species. Likewise, it is the interaction of yin and yang that is the creative force of the cosmos.

⁸⁷ Ma Deva Padma. Ibid. p28

Yin-yang also translates into the principle: “as within, so without” – in other words, how we are in the hidden, internal realm (yin) affects how we show up in the visible, external realm (yang). As leaders, and more generally, as human beings, what we manifest in the world is a reflection of our inner state, as we have previously considered. It is therefore crucial to pay attention to the integrity and sincerity of our attitudes and beliefs if we are not to taint our results.

My role model for this style of leadership is Christiana Figueres, and in particular her account of what happened behind the scenes of the pivotal COP21 in Paris in 2015, when she was Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Over the previous six years, she had slowly built a solid foundation of support, both in terms of the national delegations, and also a series of mechanisms, frameworks, agreements, protocols and amendments that would eventually culminate in the Paris Agreement⁸⁸.

Being interviewed onstage at the Royal Society of Arts in London on 2nd March 2020⁸⁹, she described how she and her team realised, “We can’t settle for what is good, we have to push for what is necessary.” In secret, they set about building an enormous network of companies, bureaucrats, political figures, religious leaders, and other influencers in every country around the globe, and built a system that would enable them to respond to what was happening in the negotiating room in real time.

Christiana’s colleague, Tom Rivett-Carnac, not coincidentally a former Buddhist monk, was inside the negotiating room, and would get the nod from Christiana if one of the negotiators was not being cooperative. He would then call his secret team, who were located in a separate building, and the hidden network would swing into action. Someone on the team would call a person who would call a minister who would call the person in the negotiating room, and with the support of this network of allies, Christiana would get the result that she wanted.

What I appreciated most was Christiana’s description of how she handled the problem that had repeatedly sabotaged previous climate change negotiations. Industrialised countries were refusing to accept their historic responsibility, and were blaming developing countries for their current

⁸⁸ Caroit, J-M. (2 December 2010). “A Cancun, le baptême du feu de Christiana Figueres, nouvelle “Madame Climat” des Nations unies”. *Le Monde*. Retrieved 23 September 2020.

⁸⁹ Video of “The Future We Choose” at the Royal Society of Arts, uploaded 4th March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YQe0OdAVC0>. Accessed 6th October 2020.

emissions. Conversely, developing countries were blaming industrialised countries for having emitted first, and emitting more. Christiana's response was very much in keeping with her Buddhist philosophy, and is at the same time both deeply personal and totally universal:

“They weren't even able to talk to each other about this. There was a constant blaming going on, and a constant ‘who is the victim of who?’ My Buddhist studying at that time had made me realise that if you get into the victim/perpetrator role, that all of us have in so many aspects of our life, that that victim/perpetrator role is one that is completely impossible to win. Because the moment I accuse you of being my perpetrator, you will not stand still. You will then turn around and tell me that I am actually your perpetrator.... And I also realised that I was doing that in my own personal life. I had viewed myself as a victim, and had pointed the accusatory finger at my former husband, who I had identified as being the perpetrator. It was very clear to me that as long as I embodied that reality, what I was responsible for was not going to untangle itself. And because what is true at one level of the system is true at all levels of the system, my first responsibility was to take myself out of that victim/perpetrator role. Because if I continued to do it, I would see all the countries continue to do that, and we would never have gotten to the Paris Agreement.”⁹⁰

So she took it upon herself to do her inner work, unpicking the dynamic between herself and her ex-husband until she could see that, “This really is a completely fruitless and endless discussion that helps no one”:

“The only way out was to exit that and to see everything from the observer role, which is what you're taught in these Buddhist practices. And lo and behold, and although it took a heck of a lot of work, and quite a long time, it was when I shifted that that I began to see the shift in the international negotiations. I'm not claiming a direct causal link, but I'm also not claiming that it was coincidence.”⁹¹

This, to me, is a perfect example of the style of leadership we need, powerfully synthesising yin and yang. She did the yin inner work, but she also used the full force of her yang/left-

⁹⁰ Video of “The Future We Choose” at the Royal Society of Arts, uploaded 4th March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YQe0OdAVC0>. Accessed 6th October 2020.

⁹¹ Video of “The Future We Choose” at the Royal Society of Arts, uploaded 4th March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YQe0OdAVC0>. Accessed 6th October 2020.

hemisphere/executive capacity to build the solid foundation of incremental agreements and the web of communication with allies outside the negotiating room.

She explicitly recognises the fractal nature of the system, and acknowledges that she could not create harmony externally while she was carrying disharmony internally. To change the result she is getting, she changes herself.

In the context of the United Nations, dominator-style leadership cannot work; leadership by consensus is the only way. Hers was a major shift in strategy from the Hollywood-heroic style of leadership, where a lone leader swoops in at the eleventh hour to save the day. In Copenhagen in 2009, I and probably many others had hoped that the newly-elected Obama would be that hero, all-conquering as he then seemed, but even he was not able to secure the cooperation of the intransigent Chinese that year. Christiana, by contrast, buckled down to the long, slow, largely invisible task of incremental progress, consolidated at each stage. This relatively yin approach ultimately proved successful in achieving the objective, where yang approaches had failed, like the water wearing away at the rock.

(For more on this, see Appendix 4: Yin and Yang Maturity, based on a forthcoming book by my friend and colleague, Lisa Marshall.)

Wu-Wei (Effortless Action)

According to the *Tao Te Ching*, ‘The Way never acts yet nothing is left undone’, and it is this paradox that is the essence of *wu-wei*. Yang is characterised as active, while yin is passive, but passive does not mean inert. It takes active effort, especially in our western culture, to practice not-doing. “Those who work much do not work hard,”⁹² said Henry David Thoreau, who also advocated “a broad margin” to his life, a beautiful phrase that evokes the spaciousness of a life not overburdened with busy-work, allowing room to walk and think and *be*.

Recently a new connection on LinkedIn sent a message that started with, “I hope you’re busy...”, and I found myself wondering why he would curse me with such a wish. I apparently convey the impression that I live a busy and productive life, but the reality, as I experience it, is

⁹² Thoreau, H. D. (2009). *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837–1861* (ed. Damion Searles). NYRB Classics. p26.

that I allow plenty of time for yin-style walking, sitting, thinking, and also not-thinking. I aim to be effective, rather than productive. There is more than enough productivity going on in the world; we need more effectiveness.

The desired approach is to align with the rhythms of the Tao. Timing is important; in a yin cycle, it may seem that nothing is changing or being achieved, which could be perceived as frustrating, but it is more helpful to see these times as a fallow period, when although on the surface it may seem that there is little progress, on a deeper level invisible shifts are taking place that will eventually come to fruition when the time is right. Likewise, it is beneficial not to become either triumphalist or lazy during the yang phases, when everything seems to be clicking into place, because that also will not last forever. This ability to work with the flow requires a grounded alertness, in order to be ready to act at the optimum moment.

Patience has not come naturally to me, but oceans will teach a person patience, if nothing else. Apart from the final leg of the Pacific, when the strong winds and currents in the western Pacific whisked me surprisingly quickly to my destination, every other voyage took longer than expected. Hofstadter's Law – that anything always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law⁹³ – was my lived reality. On the Atlantic crossing, my impatience caused me a lot of needless suffering. On the later voyages, I learned to take it one day at a time, and not to plan any future appointments until I had actually set foot back on dry land.

The 2018 work by Steven D'Souza and Diana Renner, *Not Doing: The Art of Effortless Action*, features an illustration of a rowboat on the cover, and opens with a story from the second leg of my Pacific crossing, when I had a difficult decision to make. I could have taken the yang approach, forcing my way across west-flowing currents to get far enough east to land at my intended destination of Tuvalu, where all kinds of logistics and publicity were already in place, or I could take the yin way, and go with the winds and currents and land instead on Tarawa, an atoll in the Republic of Kiribati.

Two factors made my decision easier. First, my watermaker stopped working and could not be fixed with the spares I had on board, so making landfall anywhere at all suddenly became vitally

⁹³ Hofstadter, D. (1979). *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. Basic Books.

important. Second, I was listening to the audiobook of *The Astonishing Power of Emotions*⁹⁴, by Esther and Jerry Hicks. The phrase that leaped out for me from the book was, “nothing you want lies upstream”. Clearly the book was not designed to be used for navigational purposes, but the timing seemed uncanny. Tuvalu was indeed upstream. So with around a week to go before my team were due to fly to Tuvalu to greet me, and with considerable trepidation about their reaction, I changed the plan. Miraculously, a whole new set of logistics fell into place with remarkably little effort (although my shore manager may have a different version of events), and the stopover in Tarawa worked out marvellously well.

The lesson I took from this was that we can try to bend reality to stick with the original plan, but sometimes it is better to change the plan and go with the flow. The difficult part is figuring out whether you are going with the flow as an active choice, or simply being a dead fish; distinguishing between waiting because of an intuitive sense that the time is not yet right, and hesitancy due to fear or laziness. Refining my awareness to the degree needed to draw this distinction is still very much a work in progress.

Ziran (Naturalness)

“The essence of the principle of the Uncarved Block is that things in their original simplicity contain their own natural power, power that is easily spoiled and lost when that simplicity is changed.”⁹⁵

In Taoism, *ziran* means, literally, by-itself-so-ness, or “naturalness” in the sense of being true to its own nature. The metaphor is of the Uncarved Block, or *P’u*, as described in the quote above in *The Tao of Pooh*, with Winnie the Pooh being held up as the epitome of the Uncarved Block.

Things and people are therefore to be honoured and appreciated exactly as they are, in their natural state. Acting spontaneously, in the way that is most in alignment with the natural way of things, requires the least energy and effort, and is therefore maximally sustainable and to be desired. This is not to say that nothing will ever change; what is natural at one stage of life may not be natural at the next, so *ziran* is entirely compatible with growth and evolution.

⁹⁴ Hicks, E. and J. (2008). *The Astonishing Power of Emotions: Let Your Feelings Be Your Guide*. Hay House UK.

⁹⁵ Hoff, B. *The Tao of Pooh*. First edition 1982. 2012 edition, Egmont UK Ltd. p10

This can be easier said than done. For the first couple of months of the Atlantic voyage, I found myself constantly doubting whether I was doing things the *right* way. How was ocean rowing *supposed to be* done? This is the problem when we grow up in a culture that has deemed a small number of ways *right*, and a whole load of ways *wrong*. Eventually I realised that, given the duration of an ocean crossing, it is more of a temporary lifestyle than a sporting event. Perceiving it as a microcosm of life, rather than as a race, shifted my perspective. I may not have much experience of rowing oceans, but I did have considerable experience of life, so I would give myself permission to simply row this ocean *my* way. This worked much better, and is a principle that I continue to use. While it is valuable to gather advice from those who have gone before, it is still important to bring our own style, our own naturalness, to whatever we do.

Relatively recently, some scientists and philosophers have started to relate the *I Ching* to the human DNA code. In 2009, Richard Rudd published *The Gene Keys*, in which he correlates the two mutually-reflecting strands of nucleotides in DNA (the double helix) with the yin and yang, and the sixty-four genetic codons with the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching*. He connects this to breakthroughs in epigenetics that indicate that our attitude affects the health of our cells at the genetic level.

The *Gene Keys* methodology creates a personal profile based on the date and place of one's birth, rather like an astrological reading, and you may or may not buy into this system of thought. I am, I hope, appropriately sceptical, but have found the Gene Keys surprisingly resonant. In particular that the Gene Key representing my Life's Work is the 10th Gene Key: Naturalness, and Rudd's description of Naturalness resonated deeply with my own experiences, both before and during my time on the ocean:

“Individual differentiation is the cornerstone of evolution itself. If we humans do not discover our own identity and uniqueness, we cannot transcend it and move our society to a higher level. The blessing is that the more different we each allow ourselves to be, the more we operate as a unity. This is one of the most beautiful of all human paradoxes.”⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Rudd, R. (2015). *The Gene Keys: Embracing Your Higher Purpose (New Edition): Unlocking the Higher Purpose Hidden in Your DNA*. Watkins Publishing, p65

As in Jungian psychology, each Gene Key has a shadow. The shadow of Naturalness is Self-obsession, but it also seems that the path has to pass through Self-obsession before it can get to Naturalness. It is only once we know ourselves thoroughly that we are able to set aside our conditioning, and see both ourselves and the world through relatively clear lenses.

This process tallies with the archetypal journey set out by Jung in his theory of individuation, which begins with the individual asking: *Who am I? Why am I here?* He acknowledges that this work is not easy.

“It is a most painful procedure to tear off those veils, but each step forward in psychological development means just that, the tearing off of a new veil. We are like onions with many skins, and we have to peel ourselves again and again in order to get at the real core.”⁹⁷

I went through this process on the Atlantic, and it was indeed painful. On Day 49 of the Atlantic, I wrote in my blog post:

“When I told my mother about the latest casualties [more equipment broken and lost] she commented, ‘The ocean is really stripping you down, isn’t it?’. And this is true, metaphorically as well as literally. As I’m left with less and less, it makes me realise how little I actually need, how little is actually important. Everything happens for a reason. So there must be lessons I am meant to learn from this.”⁹⁸

As well as my boat, my sense of self was getting stripped down as well, to its barest essence. (To clarify, I use *self* to mean the essential self, upon which multiple socialised selves accrete over time, and *ego*, as mentioned above, to mean the part of myself that separates itself from and compares itself with others.) In everyday life, we are usually unconsciously playing roles appropriate to our context, revealing different aspects of ourselves depending on whether we are with colleagues, boss, friends, parents, children, or spouse or partner. In *Letter to a Young German*, written in 1919, Herman Hesse describes the importance of seeing beyond these roles:

⁹⁷ Jung, C. G. *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930 -1934*

⁹⁸ <https://www.rozsavage.com/day-49-oarally-challenged/>

“You must unlearn the habit of being someone else or nothing at all, of imitating the voices of others and mistaking the faces of others for your own.”⁹⁹

Alone on the ocean, there was no need to play any role at all. When the demise of the satellite phone released me even from the self-imposed duty to write a blog post every day, I was in relationship with nobody and nothing apart from myself and my surroundings, completely immersed in the experience. This was bracing: my solitude was total, and I had to take total responsibility for my state of mind, for better or worse. The state of my consciousness became the primary, almost the only, determinant of my experience.

I found my solitude liberating, to be free to do whatever I wanted. I peeled back the layers of my identity, letting go of identification with my gender, nationality, ethnicity, education, profession, and so on. Like many ocean rowers, for convenience I usually went naked when at sea, adding to the sense of stripping back to the bare essentials of self, with no armour to protect me, or clothes to make a statement about who I was.

I wondered what I would find at my core: who or what would I be when all was stripped away?

My answer is that I found nothing. Maybe there were more layers still to go; I thought I was stripped down as far as it was possible to be, but at no point did I completely lose the sense of “I”, although at times the “I-ness” was little more than an awareness of being a sensing creature experiencing the warmth of the sun on my skin, the sound of the wind in my ears, the no-smell of open ocean. I had wondered if I might find, buried deep in my core, an essential self, a luminous soul that I could point at and say with certainty, “that is me”, but it did not happen.

Some may choose to see that as support of the hypothesis put forward by Bruce Hood, in *The Self Illusion: Why There is No 'You' Inside Your Head*:

“You only exist as a pattern made up of all the others things in your life that shape you. If you take each away, ‘you’ would eventually cease to exist. This does not mean that you do not exist at all, but rather that you exist as a combination of all the others who complete your sense of self.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Hesse, H. (1971). *If the War Goes on: Reflections on War and Politics*. Letter to a Young German. Farrar Straus & Giroux

¹⁰⁰ Hood, B. (2013). *The Self Illusion: Why There is No 'You' Inside Your Head*. Constable. p215

It could be that my self-protecting ego is resistant to this idea, but I disagree, and would like to suggest that Hood spends several months alone in a rowboat to try out his hypothesis. While recognising the paradox in this, and realising I may equally be in the grip of Hood's self illusion, I choose to interpret my lack of a "me" as supporting Neale Donald Walsch's view that we are all fragments of a unified consciousness, manifested into myriad forms in order to experience existence from as many different perspectives as possible, further to the overall evolutionary purpose. So there was no "me" because, at that deep level of being, we are all one. As Rudd puts it:

"The more you look for your own true identity, the more ephemeral it becomes... the true revelation that comes through the 10th Shadow leads inevitably to the creative explosion that emerges through the 10th Gift of Naturalness."¹⁰¹

"There are so many paradoxes in this 10th Gift – the main one being that you cannot be who you are as long as you think you are someone, but you still have to set off and search for this someone in order to realise that they do not exist."¹⁰²

So Rudd is telling me that I don't exist, as is Hood, and yet I warm to Rudd's version, while I resist Hood's. As I interpret it, the difference is that Hood is saying that my delusion is created by interactions with others, while Rudd is saying that my delusion obscures my oneness with everything. Hood's interpretation feels diminishing, while Rudd's feels empowering. With full awareness that this could be my ego's self-defence strategy, I am going with Rudd on this one, and his view seems more congruent with other thinkers in this field, such as Abraham Maslow.

Further to his original hierarchy of needs, Abraham Maslow later added a further level above self-actualisation, to represent what he called transcendence, i.e. giving oneself to something beyond oneself. He equates this with the desire to access the infinite:

"Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Rudd, R. Ibid, p66

¹⁰² Rudd, R. Ibid, p68

¹⁰³ Maslow, A. (1971). *Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Penguin, New York. p269

In a view entirely compatible with Maslow, the poet, ecological activist, and farmer, Wendell Berry, describes how solitude enables one to develop greater empathy for one's fellow creatures.

“We enter solitude, in which also we lose loneliness... True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation. One's inner voices become audible. One feels the attraction of one's most intimate sources. In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives. The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures.”¹⁰⁴

For me, this was the gift, and also the paradox of my intense solitude on the ocean. While doing something so intensely individual, I became much less attached to my sense of self, while awakening a more powerful compassion for other beings, human and non-human.

This enquiry often involves some withdrawal into a liminal space in order to explore the self, followed by a realisation of the futility of such an exploration, and finally a relaxing into the knowledge of the individualised, differentiated self. Once a person reaches this stage of self-awareness, they are able to bring their unique gifts freely and generously to co-creative endeavours, whether that is within their community or in the wider global arena. Rudd implies that, although there is a sense of confidence and security that arises from this awareness, paradoxically the ongoing mission lies at the edge of chaos:

“This is when you hit the peak of your own mythology and bring something entirely new into the world based on the high principle that has always lain latent within you. This final flowering of your inner being manifests as a challenge to the current norm, since your true nature is always found at the cutting edge of evolution.”¹⁰⁵

It seems to me that embracing our uniqueness is essential if we wish to be of service in the world. The implications of naturalness are profound, for influence, creativity, health and energy levels.

Reinforcing my appreciation of individuation as a step to wellbeing, I was recently asked by a twenty-five-year-old mentee in New Delhi how I manage to create deep and meaningful

¹⁰⁴ Berry, W. (2010). *What Are People For?* Counterpoint.

¹⁰⁵ Rudd, R. Ibid, p69

friendships with like-minded people, as she was finding this a challenge. As I pondered her question, I realised that this has certainly not always been true of my life, and that the shift began when I started the process of individuation around the age of 33. Like many people, I spent my teens, twenties and early thirties trying to fit in, which involved creating a socially acceptable persona that bore some resemblance to me, but was not. The paradox is that, when I gave up on the effort to be socially acceptable, and embraced my uniqueness, I immediately discovered an ability to magnetise wonderful and wise friends¹⁰⁶. Pretending to be who I was not, created a heavy cognitive overhead. Freed from that burden, my energy levels, health, and creativity improved dramatically.

Unfortunately, we live in cultures that try to homogenise us, from the education system onwards. Sir Ken Robinson, in the most widely-watched TED Talk to date, says:

“...academic ability... has really come to dominate our view of intelligence, because the universities design the system in their image. If you think of it, the whole system of public education around the world is a protracted process of university entrance. And the consequence is that many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they're not, because the thing they were good at at school wasn't valued, or was actually stigmatized. And I think we can't afford to go on that way.”¹⁰⁷

Howard Gardner identified eight intelligences: musical, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Later he added existential. Humans are all blends of these various forms, and yet education rewards primarily linguistic and logical intelligence, and ignores the rest. Gardner wrote that an intelligence is:

“...a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture.”¹⁰⁸

In other words, we need all hands, and all intelligences, on deck, if we are to solve our problems. If six out of the eight (or nine) intelligences he identified go unrecognised, unencouraged, and unrewarded in our culture, we are missing out on a massive pool of potential creativity. The quest for naturalness must come from the individual, but it must also be supported by society.

¹⁰⁶ With no offence intended to the friends who have been with me since before that age

¹⁰⁷ https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity/transcript?language=en

¹⁰⁸ Gardner, H. (1999). *Theory of Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice*. Basic Books. p33-4

As I wrote in *The Gifts of Solitude*:

“Whoever you are, you have something totally unique to offer. All your accumulated experiences, desires, ideas – even the way you see the world – are not replicated, nor replicable, in anybody else in the whole world. If you don’t know who you are, it’s going to be an uphill battle trying to find your place and your purpose. It’s all a matter of knowing who you are, and once you’ve done that, you it will become clear where you fit in, and where you will thrive.”¹⁰⁹

Stillness and Presence

“In the midst of the everyday activities of the marketplace, there are times when you need to withdraw from thinking and rest into being. Without this periodic withdrawal, it is easy to become overly identified with one’s position and place in the hubbub of worldly affairs and begin to call it ‘me’. Unfortunately, once you start to believe that life revolves only around serving the demands of this ‘me’, the real treasures of your being are lost. ‘Me’ believes that life’s meaning lies in doing – and if you follow the dictates of that belief you are taken on a long and frustrating journey to achieve something that in the end only takes you away from your own truth.”¹¹⁰ – Tao Oracle

Taoism draws a distinction between acting from essence and acting from ego. Essence is calmly self-assured, at home in its own metaphorical skin, and arises out of the Naturalness discussed above. Ego, the ultimate trickster, has an agenda, and in its ambition to achieve its objective it tends to act unconsciously out of habit and conditioning, often seeking to dominate those who get in its way. Ego is not necessarily a bad thing – it gets things done – but the problem arises when we over-identify with the ego.

I had the honour of interviewing the Buddhist nun, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, originally from London but now living in India, for my 2020 book, *The Gifts of Solitude*. She spent the best part of

¹⁰⁹ Savage, R. (2020). *The Gifts of Solitude: A Short Guide to Surviving and Thriving in Isolation*. Independently published. p121

¹¹⁰ Ma Deva Padma. Ibid, p244

twelve years living alone in a cave above the snowline in the Himalayas, meditating. She subscribes to Tibetan Buddhism, which is not the same as Taoism, but shares much of its philosophical basis. She said:

“...‘being’ is often better than ‘doing’ and that taking time out to be still and think is often a better investment for future productivity than cramming every waking moment with feverish activity.”¹¹¹

Taoism advocates taking time to be still, through meditation or some other practice, in order to gain perspective. The metaphor for this aspect of Buddha nature is to be like a mountain; serene, detached, and objective.

For myself, I find it invaluable to step, not just out of the busy-ness, but also out of our culture, in order to get a clearer view. This started during my ocean rowing years. When I used to come back from several months alone on the ocean, I sometimes felt like an extra-terrestrial landing from a completely different world, and would marvel at the strangeness that is human civilisation. These days, I maintain a foot on each side of that particular edge of chaos, part of the culture, and yet still able to step far enough outside in order to ask, “why is it like this?” For example:

“As Mum and I were given a lift from the Yacht Club to my weatherman’s house, I went into reverse culture shock. The speed of the car seemed unnaturally fast. The skyscrapers of Waikiki seemed dangerously high. And all these people! I felt like a space alien seeing human civilization for the first time. I looked at the shops selling designer clothes, jewellery and electronics. I was quite perplexed that people would spend so much money on such pointless things. If you couldn’t eat it, drink it, or row with it, then what purpose did it serve? A rower’s needs are very simple – enough food and water, and a few miles in the right direction are enough to make it a good day.”¹¹²

This is not to imply judgement, but rather, to question why we humans do things the way we do, and to wonder if we could do them better. In *The Gifts of Solitude*, I quoted the poet David Foster

¹¹¹ Savage, R. *The Gifts of Solitude*. Ibid, p131

¹¹² Savage, R. *Stop Drifting Start Rowing*. Ibid. p99

Wallace, who in 2005 delivered a commencement speech at Kenyon College in Ohio, which was later turned into a book, called *This Is Water*¹¹³. He started his speech with this story:

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’”¹¹⁴

His point was that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. When we are swimming in the water of culture, we rarely stop to question why things are as they are. Most things are taken for granted, as being simply the way things have always been done.

When you stop to think about them objectively, some human ways of being are pretty strange. Why does a western professional woman, before she goes to work, put on expensive, uncomfortable shoes that will probably give her bunions and throw her back out of alignment? Why does her male colleague tie a brightly coloured noose around his neck? Why do we sell our time for money, and why is the footballer’s time deemed so much more valuable than the nurse’s? Why do we show our approval of a performance by slapping our hands together noisily? Why do we show affection by pressing our lips to somebody else’s? Why do we believe that defecating and sex are bodily functions we should do in private, while eating and drinking in public is totally fine? And then there are all those things that only work because everybody has decided that they do, like money, religion, law, and government.

Stillness and presence can help to mentally disengage from enculturated selves to get some perspective, enabling thinking that is critical in at least two senses of that word: analytical, and vital.

¹¹³ Foster Wallace, D. (2009). *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. Little, Brown & Co.

¹¹⁴ Full speech on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhhC_N6Bm_s

Impermanence

“New beginnings are often disguised as painful endings.” – Lao Tzu

The inevitability of change is very apparent on an ocean, as I mentioned in *I Am What I Am*. There is a human tendency (at least in the West) to extrapolate from current reality, assuming some degree of permanence. When we are young, we act as if we will be young forever. When conditions are favourable, only the wisest remember to lay down stores for the future. When at sea, I initially fell into the trap of attempting to calculate future mileages based on what had happened in the recent past. Although not completely pointless, conditions were so changeable that any such calculations often led to excessive optimism or pessimism. I found it psychologically much easier once I gave up the attempt, and just took each day as it came.

Although the Tao is eternal and unchanging, everything else is subject to change. Taoist wisdom invites us to accept that nothing lasts forever, so clinging to the “good” or desperately wishing for an end to the “bad” is a waste of energy. Everything will change soon enough. In the meantime, we have a choice to make about how to respond to external circumstances. For example, I will take two contrasting cards from the Tao Oracle. First, Obstacles, which we may deem “bad”, but there is a silver lining:

“You can bemoan the unfairness of fate, but all that really does is indulge the victim mentality, which further weakens you by draining your potential for empowered action... whatever you’re clinging to is the very thing you’re meant to let go of. As soon as you begin to relax the vicelike grip of fear and stop struggling to keep it all together, the situation will start to feel less overwhelming.”¹¹⁵

Second, Prosperity, which we may deem “good”, but there is a shadow looming:

“It is wise to remember always that what appears to be yours today is in fact on loan from existence, and sooner or later will be reclaimed. We were all born naked and equal, possessing nothing. And when we leave this life we will take nothing with us; in the meantime receive prosperity with gratitude when it comes, and use its golden favours wisely.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Ma Deva Padma. Ibid. p193

¹¹⁶ Ma Deva Padma. Ibid, p93

I have found great wisdom in the writing of Pema Chödrön, whose writings on Buddhism have found a substantial audience in the West:

“The very first noble truth of the Buddha points out that suffering is inevitable for human beings as long as we believe that things last—that they don’t disintegrate, that they can be counted on to satisfy our hunger for security.”¹¹⁷

So it is not impermanence that causes suffering; it is our unwillingness to embrace it. When we accept impermanence – and insecurity – as the way of the world, paradoxically everything gets so much easier. One of the most liberating sentences I ever read was, “The only true riches in life are to be found between your ears”¹¹⁸, by the one-legged Welsh sailor, Tristan Jones. It enabled me to release my craving for illusions of security, and to trust that I, in myself, contain everything that I need, and there is nothing outside of me or in the future that can add to or diminish that fact.

Non-Duality

In a sense, the concept of non-duality flows from, yet contrasts with, the concept of yin and yang. Yin and yang emphasises the dynamic creativity of the polar opposites. Non-duality emphasises their unity.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo again:

“You think you’ve got it when you understand that you are not the thought or feeling – but to go further and know you are not the knower ... that brings you to the question: ‘Who am I?’... And that was the Buddha’s great understanding – to realize that the further back we go the more open and empty the quality of our consciousness becomes. Instead of finding some solid little eternal entity, which is ‘I’, we get back to this vast spacious mind which is interconnected with all living beings. In this space you have to

¹¹⁷ Chödrön, P. (2005). *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. HarperNonFiction; Thorsons Classics edition. p15

¹¹⁸ Jones, T. (1998). *Outward Leg*. Sheridan House. Location 198 in Kindle edition

ask, where is the ‘I’, and where is the ‘other’. As long as we are in the realm of duality, there is ‘I’ and ‘other’. This is our basic delusion – it’s what causes all our problems.”¹¹⁹

We humans, or at least, we Western humans, grow up in a culture that emphasises our individuality. In *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed*, Will Storr traces this mindset back to Ancient Greece, a country of islands, inlets, and small city states, whose geography shaped its people:

“A person’s worth, and success in rising up in society, depended largely on their own talents and self-belief. Celebrities were hailed. Beautiful bodies venerated. A particulate landscape became a particulate nation became a particulate people with particulate minds. ‘The story is ecology to economy to social practices to cognition,’ Nisbett told me. Our Western self is the son of this atomized world. What had been created in Ancient Greece was individualism.”¹²⁰

He contrasts this with the Eastern mindset, which evolved amidst the gentler geography of Ancient China:

“In contrast to the crags and islands of Greece, most of his (Confucius’s) country’s population lived on great plains and amongst gentle mountains... For the Confucian everything in the universe was not separate, but one. It followed from this that they should seek, not individual success, but harmony. This perspective has a number of profound implications for the way the East Asian self experiences reality.”¹²¹

Even though it might appear that China and much of the East has now bought into Western-style capitalism, the cultural differences run deep, and still remain. A study in 2005 tracked the eye movements of test subjects as they looked at photographs, and found that American students spent longer looking at the main object, while the Chinese-born students paid more attention to the context, the background, and the relationships between things.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Savage, R. *The Gifts of Solitude*. Ibid, p129

¹²⁰ Storr, W. (2018). *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed*. Picador. p63

¹²¹ Storr, W. Ibid, pp70-71

¹²² Chua, H. F., Boland, J. E., and Nisbett, R. E. (2005). *Cultural variation in eye movements during scene perception*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (vol 102, p12629)

We in the West have paid a price for this individualistic approach. While it generated competition and hence innovation and improvement, it also left us feeling lonely and vulnerable. As the philosopher, Alan Watts, describes it:

“We have lacked the real humility of recognizing that we are members of the biosphere, the ‘harmony of contained conflicts’ in which we cannot exist at all without the cooperation of plants, insects, fish, cattle, and bacteria. In the same measure, we have lacked the proper self-respect of recognizing that I, the individual organism, am a structure of such fabulous ingenuity that it calls the whole universe into being. In the act of putting everything at a distance so as to describe and control it, we have orphaned ourselves both from the surrounding world and from our own bodies—leaving ‘I’ as a discontented and alienated spook, anxious, guilty, unrelated, and alone.”¹²³

Even our mainstream Western religions have sought to divide, conquer, and alienate us. The doctrine of original sin puts us in the wrong from the moment we are born. Promises of heaven and threats of hell put us at the mercy of a capricious and judgemental god. Contact with the divine is mediated through preachers and saints. Small wonder that comfort is sought in materialism, hedonism, distraction and addiction, in order to numb this existential loneliness.

But as soon as we become aware of this, we can change it. Out of all the wonderful wisdom that Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo shared during our conversation, the section that has stayed with me the most came towards the end of our call, when she said:

“...the [Buddhist] Wheel of Life... [is] like a wheel which is endlessly turning, called *samsara*¹²⁴... At the hub of the wheel are three animals – a pig, a rooster, and a snake. The snake stands for anger, the rooster for desire and greed, and the pig for ignorance. And they’re biting each other’s tails... And their going round and round and round is what sets the whole wheel spinning. And *that’s* the problem. Our delusion about our true nature, which gives rise to greed and desire for what gives pleasure, and aversion and anger towards that which does not give pleasure. And it keeps the whole wheel circling, no matter our best intentions. So the only way to stop the wheel is to break the hub...

¹²³ Watts, A. *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. Ibid, p104

¹²⁴ *Samsara* is the continuous cycle of life, death, and reincarnation

Within those three, the important one is our ignorance, our ignorance of our true nature. We identify with our ego, and although our ego is a good servant, it's a terrible master, because it's blind... Once we realize that the nature of our existence is beyond thought and emotions, that it is incredibly vast and interconnected with all other beings, then the sense of isolation, separation, fear and hopes fall away. It's a tremendous relief!"¹²⁵

To expand further on this, in *The New Story*, the religious scholar Thomas Berry describes the role of consciousness in the cosmos:

“From the empirical inquiry into the real it has become increasingly clear that from its beginning in the galactic system to its earthly expression in human consciousness the universe carries within itself a psychic as well as a physical dimension. Otherwise human consciousness emerges out of nowhere and find no real place in the cosmic story. Man is an Appendix 6 or an intrusion... The Story of the Universe is the story of the emergence of a galactic system in which each new level of being emerges through the urgency of self-transcendence... Man emerges not only as an earthling but also as a worldling. He bears the universe in his being as the universe bears him in its being. The two have a total presence to each other.”¹²⁶

This echoes the Rumi line I quoted on the front page of this statement:

“You are not a drop in the ocean; you are the ocean in a drop.”

This is where the worlds of science and spirituality collide. It would seem that Rumi, Berry, McGilchrist, Hoffmann (see Appendix 6 for these references) and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo are all saying essentially the same thing. You will probably have noticed that Jetsunma's words – “our ego is a good servant, it's a terrible master” – are reminiscent of McGilchrist's concerns about the blind egotism of the left hemisphere, and “the nature of our existence is beyond thought and emotions, that it is incredibly vast and interconnected with all other beings” reminds us of Hoffman's proposal that reality is a network of conscious agents. Hoffman describes his theories as monist, or non-dual, because everything is, essentially, consciousness.

¹²⁵ Savage, R. *The Gifts of Solitude*. Ibid, p134

¹²⁶ Thomas, B. Ibid, p8

What we believe to be the material world is in fact a product of our consciousness, and does not exist without it.

Following on from this, if “ignorance of our true nature” is what keeps the wheel of *samsara* turning, and if we understood ourselves to be a fractal of a universal consciousness, per Hoffman, and knew death to be merely a transition from one form of consciousness to another... could we stop the wheel?

This is at the core of my new narrative. In mainstream Western culture, we are taught from an early age to distinguish between *self* and *other*. Arguably, with its emphasis on competition rather than collaboration, neoliberal capitalism encourages us to promote *self* at the expense of *other* – whether *other* means another company, another social class, another nationality, another gender, or another species. The new narrative entails recognising that collaboration is more powerful than competition, and that “survival of the fittest” does not refer to the strongest, fastest, or biggest, but rather to that which fits in best with its ecosystem, in harmony rather than in conflict. It entails synthesis, not separation.

Synthesis, not Separation

Synthesis, not separation, as in Taoism, has been alive in many forms and attended to by many writers and practitioners in the last hundred years in the western world, drawing on the wisdom of the East. I have extracted from my new work in progress (see Appendix 6) the example of psychosynthesis because of its closeness to the principles of the Tao, and because it speaks to me about consciousness arising from synthesis; where the whole becomes more than the sum of our parts, and we access our untapped energies through penetrating the obstacles to our own consciousness.

Psychosynthesis

“Just as a screen a few millimetres thick can block the most intense solar light, which has travelled millions of miles; just as a piece of porcelain insulates an electrical current strong enough to activate hundreds of motors; just as the lack of a few degrees of heat the keep inert a powder which could blow up a mountain, so a small ‘psychic

insulator’, a lack of warmth, of sympathy and love, can block the expression of immense treasures of feeling and intelligence.”¹²⁷

Roberto Assagioli, quoted by Piero Ferrucci (2009)

In 2004, I read *What We May Be*¹²⁸, by Piero Ferrucci, which had a subtle but long-lasting effect on my thinking. Ferrucci is commenting and expanding on the work of his mentor and collaborator, Roberto Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis. Psychosynthesis is a therapeutic approach that focuses on personal growth and development, through the synthesis of the various aspects of the self to become more evolved and self-actualized.

“The Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli noticed several years ago that a great deal of psychological pain, imbalance, and meaninglessness are felt when our diverse inner elements exist unconnected side by side or clash with one another. But he also observed that when they merge in successively greater wholes, we experience a release of energy, a sense of wellbeing, and a greater depth of meaning in our lives.”¹²⁹

This description is reminiscent of bricolage of the mind, in the sense that we combine seemingly disparate components in order to create a harmonious and synergistic wholeness within our consciousness. “Successively greater wholes” could be interpreted in the light of emergence as a phenomenon of complex systems.

This process of synthesis is a deeply internal, right-hemisphere, or yin/feminine, process. Ferrucci quotes Assagioli:

“One of the main functions of the subconscious, and at the same time one of the most important stages in the educational process, is the elaboration of experiences which one has made, the vital assimilation of what has been perceived and learned. This elaboration can be regarded as a real ‘psychic gestation’ having strict analogies with physical gestation. Both occur in the depths, in the mystery, one in the mother’s womb, the other

¹²⁷ Ferrucci, P. (2009). *What We May Be: Techniques for Psychological and Spiritual Growth Through Psychosynthesis*. Jeremy P. Tarcher. p263

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid. p3

in the intimate recesses of the unconscious... both finally climax in the crisis and the miracle of 'birth', of the manifestation of a new life."¹³⁰

Ferrucci illustrates the principles of psychosynthesis by reference to an assortment of polarities, emphasising that the process is not merely seeking to strike a balance between the polarities, but actually to forge a new and stronger entity through the fusion or synthesis of the contrasting poles. For example, in relation to gender, he refers to an androgynous fictional character:

"...the androgyne is a powerful symbol of our Self, of that place within where opposites are reconciled and possibilities coexist without mutual contradiction... This perfect union of opposites is a highly desirable state and one that can be approached by each of us in a greater or lesser degree."¹³¹

In a parallel example from Native American culture, two-spirit individuals were those who did not conform to either male or female roles or styles of dress, and were regarded as having two identities occupying one body. Depending on the tribe, they were given special status such as the keepers of the oral tradition, matchmakers, craftspeople, name-givers, or ceremonial roles.

Ferrucci describes the complementarity of Eros and Logos: "Eros without Logos is blind and irrational. Logos without Eros is arid and cold." He quotes Assagioli's descriptions:

"[Eros] means love in the widest sense, it is the vital, primordial impulse, the tendency at the source of the fundamental instinct to self-preservation, self-assertion, and reproduction, manifesting itself in the form of innumerable impulses and desires, becoming refined in the most delicate sentiments, and being sublimated into the highest aspirations. Eros is throbbing life, propelling power, warmth, fire... [while Logos is] "the directing principle which regulates and coordinates life. Logos tends to gather and channel the tumultuous torrent, the turbid stream of Eros within firm and straight banks, carrying it toward a set goal. Logos always tends to model the fluid and flexible vital and psychic substance into well-defined forms. Logos is law and discipline. It is order, harmony, and beauty. It is rhythm and measure. It is intelligence and reason, understanding and light."¹³²

¹³⁰ Ibid. p4

¹³¹ Ibid. p286

¹³² Ibid. p290

He goes on to highlight similar patterns in the interaction between sensuality and spirituality, work and play, intuition and logic, prudence and adventurousness, pessimism and optimism, masculinity and femininity, conservatism and renewal, introversion and extraversion, and so on.

“The play of these opposites gives us the opportunity for richness of experience, action, and, eventually, synthesis... A personality is more lively and complete when opposing tendencies are present.”¹³³

This chiaroscuro of the personality depends on juxtaposition, contrast and interplay, with the goal being “to remain conscious of both poles but identify with neither; we need to achieve a creative tension, a balancing between them.”¹³⁴ This allows us to hold a degree of objectivity, to respond to each situation by positioning ourselves at the appropriate point on the spectrum between the two poles:

“in our inner life, a balanced tension between two opposite poles produces a dialectical interchange and mutual enhancement, the outcome of which is our growth... we can observe that all truly integrated personalities exhibit a certain kind of musical quality in their natures: the ability to gracefully and rhythmically dance from one opposite to the other.”¹³⁵

He uses the image of an archway to illustrate the paradox that, as we examine the two poles, we see that each is each pole is not the opposite of the other, but its complement.

“...as we examine the two poles of a dichotomy ever more carefully, we come to see that the contrast between them lessens. Like the two sides of a gothic arch, they approach each other as they mount, till they converge and fuse into a synthesis.”¹³⁶

Assagioli believed that the evolution of our society’s consciousness depended on the participation of many people from various backgrounds. As with the heterogeneous self-organising agents in a complex system, or the birds in a flock, or a Navy SEAL in McChrystal’s

¹³³ Ibid. p291

¹³⁴ Ibid. p296

¹³⁵ Ibid. p297

¹³⁶ Ibid. p298

*Team of Teams*¹³⁷ (referenced in the Appendix 6) he felt it was “crucial that everybody should just mind their own specific area of competence, without interfering with other people’s work, without judging or telling others what they should do or how they should behave.”¹³⁸

His description of psychosynthesis as the societal level is reminiscent of bricolage and emergence:

“...we have already been given everything we need; our task is to assemble and use it in the appropriate way. Nothing is meaningful as long as we perceive only separate fragments. But as soon as the fragments come together into a synthesis, a new entity emerges, whose nature we could not have foreseen by considering the fragments alone. The process of synthesis is visible everywhere in the natural as well as the strictly human world: cells assemble to form an organism, letters join to form a word, musical notes combine to form a melody, and so on.”

He also emphasised the value of silence and solitude, which tallies with my own experience of the benefits of time alone on the ocean:

“The cultivation of silence has an immense therapeutic value. When we succeed in stilling the form-making propensity of our minds, all subjective conflict vanishes, scattering gives way to unity, we save our energy (which we otherwise disperse in countless directions), and we feel healed and purified. Part of this effect occurs because silence gives our organism a chance to harmonise itself spontaneously, without the interfering, harassing influence of the mind with all its problems. In this era of noise and hyperstimulation – of the information explosion and the action-oriented life – soothing, regenerating silence is indeed the ultimate resource.”¹³⁹

What We May Be represents, to me, the notion that we are at our most powerful when we stand with feet astride the centrepoint between two poles, at the golden mean between not too much of one thing, nor too much of its opposite. Like a tennis player, the balls that life launches at us may require us to run to one side of the court or the other, but we need to return to the centre line as soon as we can, in order to face the next shot from a position of strength and balance.

¹³⁷ McChrystal, S., Silverman, D., et al. (2015). *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*. Penguin.

¹³⁸ <https://psychosynthesisrust.org.uk/on-the-threshold-of-mystery/>

¹³⁹ Ferruci, P. Ibid. p317

The optimal state of consciousness is non-dualistic – to use Eisler’s terminology, it arises from the fruitful partnership between the poles of our psyche, rather than allowing one pole or the other to dominate.

Or, to use a sporting analogy closer to my own experience, a sculling boat is long and narrow, only about one foot wide, and hence extremely precarious. It is essential to keep both sculls extended in order to avoid a dunking. The most stable position is when both blades are at full extension, and locked on the water with the pressure of the oarstroke. Drawing on this, it could be said that we are at our strongest, most balanced and resilient when we harness the full range of our emotional spectrum, and are fully engaged with the milieu across which we move, while also sitting slightly above it, remembering to check once in a while that we are heading in the right direction.

To extrapolate from the individual to collective, a society is likewise at its most powerful when it is inclusive rather than exclusive, because exclusivity keeps it in a state of negative, non-creative, suppressed conflict. Few examples of genuinely inclusive societies remain; in *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*¹⁴⁰, Helena Norberg-Hodge describes the beautifully self-regulating, communal, minimally wasteful and mutually respectful way of life in Ladakh when she first went there in 1975, and how swiftly it has become westernised, to its cost.

“Inclusion and diversity” is often misinterpreted as tokenism, a nod to a politically correct representation of minorities and women. In these times of change and disruption, it is so much more than that. A variety of worldviews and perspectives is essential to the resilience of an organisation, a country, or the human species. Operating from a homogenous set of beliefs perpetuates blind spots, decreases creativity and perspicuity, and increases the chances of being blindsided.

Further, there is a growing appreciation of the emergent qualities of the collective, a concept of “the field” or “collective consciousness” which is moving from the fringes into the mainstream thanks to the work of Otto Scharmer, Joe Jaworski, Adam Kahane, Peter Senge, and others, and is the fertile ground of fresh insights that are needed in order to face unprecedented challenges.

¹⁴⁰ Norberg-Hodge, H. (New edition 2000). *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*. Rider.

When a person looks at the ocean, it seems self-evident that the drops of water are all connected to each other, as they form ripples or waves. Is it possible that we humans are likewise connected, and it is only through our sense of ego-centred self that we have lost sight of that connection?

Conclusion: On Courage and Consciousness

“When we get out of the glass bottles of our ego,
and when we escape like squirrels turning in the
cages of our personality
and get into the forests again,
we shall shiver with cold and fright
but things will happen to us
so that we don't know ourselves.
Cool, unlying life will rush in,
and passion will make our bodies taut with power,
we shall stamp our feet with new power
and old things will fall down,
we shall laugh, and institutions will curl up like
burnt paper.”

Escape, by D. H. Lawrence¹⁴¹

I have now set out a selection of ideas (and more in the Appendix 6), which may initially appear chaotic, but I hope it will have become clear that there are several recurring themes emerging from the bricolage.

In this conclusion, and further in my new work in progress (see Appendix 6) I synthesise these ideas into what I hope will be a useful and positive narrative of possibility for others, as it has been and continues to be for me. I will set out a pathway that not only invites, but *requires* the participation of everybody who cares about the future of our planet and the human enterprise. I will describe the kind of leadership that is needed, which barely looks like leadership at all within

¹⁴¹ Lawrence, D. H. (1994). *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*. Wordsworth Editions Ltd; New edition. p397

the existing paradigm (and that form of leadership does not seem to be going so well for us anyway), but which has, I believe, the potency to help us navigate these times of disruption with the human capacity for compassion, grace and dignity. This contemplative period of bricolage has helped shape in me a renewed energy to move from being an individual agent to galvanising a collective of agents, and also will help me to sustain that energy during this challenge to the rigid matrix of structures that have perpetuated the status quo.

The main themes are:

- Impermanence
- The true nature of reality is hidden from us (see Appendix 6)
- Everything is connected across time and space (nonduality)

At their core, all three of these themes are facets of the yin/yang dynamic:

- Impermanence: what rises must fall, day turns to night, summer turns to winter, etc.
- The true nature of reality: what we take to be reality is in fact only (at most) half the story, the yang, explicate order arising from the yin, implicate order
- Nonduality: the illusion of separation arises only in the explicate (yang) order of space-time; in the implicate order (yin), space-time does not exist, and everything is connected in a web of consciousness.

Personally, I do not believe this is a moral universe. During the hundreds of days and nights I spent on the ocean, I had no sense of it being benevolent, malevolent, or even indifferent. These words would anthropomorphise the ocean, and even if it turns out that the ocean has some form of consciousness, as previously discussed, I do not believe that it has morality, nor any opinion about what happens to those who voyage across its waters. My view is that the law of the cosmos is not moral law; it is scientific law. Even if I did believe that the arc of the moral universe tends towards justice, to quote Martin Luther King Jr., whose justice would that be? Who decides?

This, I believe, is the point of free will. Sam Harris¹⁴² and others might argue that free will does not exist, but as the saying goes, even if we don't have free will, we have free won't, i.e. ideas suggest themselves to us based on our experiences and conditioning, and we choose from the

¹⁴² Harris, S. *Free Will*. (2012). Free Press.

options available. I am good, and I am evil; I contain both polarities, but I can make conscious choices about which pole I express. It is the consciousness that we bring to it – if we accept the responsibility of being conscious beings – that determines what the future holds.

There has been this assumption, on the wing of the liberal, sustainable, equitable, political left, that we will win because we think we are right. This assumption is not working. By this logic, then, should we use the same strategies that are working so well for what we regard as the conservative, exploitative, unequal, political right? - because they are apparently winning.

No. We should not.

This judgement, this “othering”, this polarisation, can never succeed. As humans, we have to recognise that we are all, individually and collectively, all of it. Everything is connected. I am you, and you are me. We are them, and they are us. We are all inseparable, all aspects of the one interconnected web of being. While we imagine separation, we are doomed. When we envisage connection, we may yet survive.

In a recent newsletter from the Centre for Action and Contemplation, the mystic and Episcopal priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, quotes the final poem from Thomas Keating’s *The Secret Embrace*, “What Matters”:

“Only the Divine matters,
And because the Divine matters,
Everything matters.”¹⁴³

She describes this as “a powerful new incentive for a compassionate re-engagement with our times”, and goes on to comment:

“In this short poem of eleven laser-like words, Thomas smashes through centuries of theological barricades separating God from the world and contemplation from action, offering instead a flowing vision of oneness within a profoundly interwoven and responsive relational field... Practically speaking, *the map affirms that our actions, our choices, our connections bear more weight than we dare to believe*. We are neither isolated nor helpless but

¹⁴³ <https://cac.org/themes/thomas-keating-the-secret-embrace-part-two/>

immersed in a great web of belonging in which divine intelligence and compassion are always at our disposal if our courage does not fail us.” [her italics]

She identifies the relevance of this insight to these times of disruption and chaos, with the gift being the courage to let go of the old and step out into the unknown:

“...the access route to all new beginning comes by leaning into the diminishment, stripping, and emptiness. Not by trying to distract ourselves, anesthetize ourselves, or use our spiritual tool kit to re-establish the status quo. New beginning is intrinsically disorienting and anguishing; it builds on the wreckage of what has been outgrown but not yet relinquished. As the veils are lifted and our familiar reference points dissolve, it is only on the timeless path of surrender (a.k.a. “letting go,”...) that we find our way through the darkness and into the new beginning.”

Sir John Glubb, a military man, may seem a surprising source of commentary on these matters, but in the conclusion to his essay on the fate of empires, he takes us to this place of unity and connection:

“Perhaps, in fact, we may reach the conclusion that the successive rise and fall of great nations is inevitable and, indeed, a system divinely ordained. But even this would be an immense gain. For we should know where we stand in relation to our human brothers and sisters. In our present state of mental chaos on the subject, we divide ourselves into nations, parties or communities and fight, hate and vilify one another over developments which may perhaps be divinely ordained and which seem to us, if we take a broader view, completely uncontrollable and inevitable. If we could accept these great movements as beyond our control, there would be no excuse for our hating one another because of them.”¹⁴⁴

And he goes yet further, invoking love as the essential quality that should form the foundation of a new way of being in this world:

“However varied, confusing and contradictory the religious history of the world may appear, the noblest and most spiritual of the devotees of all religions seem to reach the

¹⁴⁴ Glubb, J. B. (1978). *The fate of empires and Search for survival*. Edinburgh: Blackwood. p24

conclusion that love is the key to human life. Any expansion of our knowledge which may lead to a reduction in our unjustified hates is therefore surely well worth while.”¹⁴⁵

What does he mean by love in this context? “Love” has many meanings, but as Glubb here follows on to mention “expansion of our knowledge” and “reduction in our justified hates”, I believe he means love in the sense of deep compassion and appreciation that comes from understanding the interconnectedness of everything, cherishing and valuing the contribution of everything to the web of life. Buckminster Fuller described love as “metaphysical gravity”, a force that draws sentient beings together, the glue of existence. I previously quoted Aldous Huxley on the “organised lovelessness” of our current social arrangements. What if we could shift from organised lovelessness to organised – or even spontaneous – lovingness?

I asked Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo for her interpretation of love. The last line of her reply calls to mind Jill Bolte Taylor’s perception of the world during her stroke¹⁴⁶ (see Appendix 6):

“...the Buddhist definition of love is the wish ‘may you be well and happy’. As simple as that. It is a heart connection desiring the happiness of others. In the ultimate nature of the mind which is non-dualistic (no self and other) there is a deep sense of our interconnection with all living beings. As Mingyur Rinpoche explains in his near-death experience, ‘...No separate *me* loved the world. The world was love.’”¹⁴⁷

How then can this philosophy be put into practice? Our political, economic, and social structures, like the problems they have generated, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. It is therefore “easier”, but still extremely hard, to change everything, than to try and change one thing, and as mentioned above, the change has to begin with the way we understand our relationship with each other and with the cosmos – we need a shift in consciousness.

As Buckminster Fuller said, “You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete,” or, to use Donella Meadows’ systems thinking terminology, we need to transcend the existing paradigm. We are not talking here about a revolution against the current way of being, but rather, the creation of an

¹⁴⁵ Glubb, J. B. Ibid, p24

¹⁴⁶ Bolte Taylor, J. (2009). *My Stroke of Insight*. Hodder Paperbacks.

¹⁴⁷ Email dated 13th October 2020

alternative system that, if we get it right, will attract a critical mass of adherents simply because it delivers greater benefits to a greater number of people across a greater span of time than the existing system.

To create the new paradigm demands stepping outside our culturally conditioned ways of thinking, and demonstrating a willingness to experiment with new conceptions of reality and possibility. Conceptualisations like Liminal Thinking and What We Don't Know (see Appendix 6) can help loosen our grip on current views of reality, which are reductionist, linear, and bonded to space-time. We need to leave the shores of the old world, and venture into a radical new Terra Incognita. Once there, we may start to glimpse a new conception of reality that is full of possibilities that would be deemed impossible within the currently prevailing paradigm.

Crucial to this enterprise is locating and partnering with kindred spirits. Over the years that have passed since my solo ocean rowing voyages, I have transitioned from an individual approach to an appreciation of the power of the collective, connected through an alignment of values rather than compliance to a prescribed agenda or system of belief. As activists and advocates, we all have unique approaches, our own boats to row, but we travel in a flotilla, unified by a shared vision of our destination.

I have presented in the Appendix 6 the foundations of a comprehensive proposal for a way forward, to make even more real this notion of the collective. It is my hope that this future work will make a contribution.

There may be those who think my philosophy is akin to Pascal's Wager¹⁴⁸, or a desperate last drag on the hopium¹⁴⁹ pipe. Possibly they are right. I am not suggesting that we give up all efforts at climate change mitigation, or poverty alleviation, or any of the other worthwhile work going on in the world. I am suggesting that, *in addition to* that good work that keeps our left hemispheres feeling busy and useful, we also engage the right hemisphere to see the bigger picture, and engage on that level as well, because we are a fractal of the whole, so by bringing ourselves into balance we help to bring balance to the wider community of humanity. By being the change we want to see in the world we contribute to the healing of the disconnects, and also maximise the creativity and energy we can bring to fulfilling our purpose.

¹⁴⁸ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hopium>

What If?

There is the temptation, at the superego level, to see impending collapse as a disaster, a fall from grace, a punishment for past sins. This is not a helpful attitude. What would it be like if we could reframe the situation into an invitation to evolve, maybe even imagine that, on some level, we put ourselves into this predicament *deliberately* in order to accelerate our evolution?

“You create collectively, and individually, the life and times you are experiencing, for the soul [sic] purpose of evolving.”¹⁵⁰

What would it be like if we took it as given that the evolution of consciousness is always and everywhere a constant?

“We now live not so much in a cosmos as in a cosmogenesis; that is, a universe ever coming into being through an irreversible sequence of transformations moving, in the larger arc of its development, from a lesser to a great order of complexity and from a lesser to great consciousness.”¹⁵¹

If reality is the product of a network of conscious agents, and consciousness is fractal, then anything we think, say, or do as an individual has an actual effect on reality, which may be small, but no individual effort is ever wasted. As Rumi says, we are the ocean in a drop.

Put another way, if (per Lao-Tzu) our thoughts become words, which become deeds, which become habits, which become character, then our consciousness is the sum total of our every thought, and the collective consciousness is the sum total of our individual consciousnesses. On the one hand, this is a great responsibility, as we need to hold ourselves to the highest level of accountability, and on the other hand, it is a great boon, as we understand that tiny actions accumulate to make a vast difference. The shift in consciousness may yet be enough to mitigate the worst impacts, and even if we are ultimately doomed, it will enable us to navigate our final era with a level of effort, rather than capitulation, and in that there is always hope of some spark that will ignite again.

¹⁵⁰ Walsch, N. D. (1997). *Conversations with God, Book 1*. Hodder and Stoughton. p37

¹⁵¹ Berry, T. *The New Story*. Ibid, p26

I have invited you into this story of my transition from believing in my own smallness, vulnerability, mortality, individualism, and aloneness, along a long and, at times, painful path to believing profoundly that the personal is universal, and discovering my individual agency within a community of aligned agents. This is what will sustain me every time I go out on a limb and risk ridicule. I am not alone. Within my community of Sisters we have the resolve and the resources to make a difference in the world, grounded in the love and respect we have for each other.

What would it be like if our every waking moment was suffused with love, in the compassionate sense of “may you be well and happy”? What would it be like if we understood, deeply at the core of our being, that we are all connected – not just to all humans, but to *everything*? What would it be like if we believed that we were actually responsible and contributing, with our every thought, word, and deed, towards our destiny?

“Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.”¹⁵²

-- William Ernest Henley

¹⁵² Henley, W. E. (1891). *A Book of Verses* (Second ed.). New York: Scribner & Welford. pp56–7



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Appendix 1: Summary of Public Works

Note: For the purposes of this context statement, I have focused primarily on my voyages, as being the source material on which all subsequent public works were based.

My Role

Sole author of all published works, and solo rower of my voyages.

Themes

My work has spanned a broad range of themes which may appear disparate, but are all rooted in my unquenchable curiosity to get to the root of the challenges that face humanity, in order to find the most powerful leverage points with which we can forge a better future.

In approximately chronological order over the last 16 years, my focus has evolved – albeit in a looping fashion – as follows:

- Environmental crisis
- Eschatology
- Systems thinking
- Psychology (especially fallacies and incentives)
- Neuroscience
- Feminism
- Economics
- Complementary currencies
- Biomimicry
- Narrative
- Leadership
- (Dis)empowerment
- Democracy
- Corporate structures
- Philosophy (especially Jungian and Eastern)

Public Impact and Evidence

I draw your attention to the following as evidence of public impact:

- Author of two books: *Rowing The Atlantic: Lessons Learned On The Open Ocean* (2009) and *Stop Drifting, Start Rowing: One Woman's Search For Happiness And Meaning Alone On The Pacific* (2013)
- Features and interviews in numerous media outlets, including Huffington Post, Forbes.com, CBS, ESPN, NPR, BBC, ABC, BBC, BBC World Service, Sports Illustrated, NPR, New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail, Express, Evening Standard, Observer, Financial Times.
- Speaking engagements and lectures for many companies and educational institutions, including US Department of State, National Geographic, Royal Geographical Society, TED, Google, eBay, Credit Suisse, Kaiser Permanente, Disney, Hershey, Hootsuite, Qubit, UK Cabinet Office, US Department of State, schools and universities including Yale, Syracuse, Eton, Cambridge and Oxford.
- Half-hour documentary *Rowing The Atlantic*, produced by Journeyfilm, which was a finalist in the Banff Mountain Film Festival 2010, and was screened in 32 countries around the world.
- Profiled in numerous books, including:
 - Posey, A., and Vallely, K. (2020). *Wild Success: 7 Key Lessons Business Leaders Can Learn from Extreme Adventurers*. McGraw-Hill Education.
 - Renner, D., and D'Souza, S. (2018). *Not Doing – The Art of Effortless Action*. London: LID Publishing.
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Arrangement of Artefacts

I have arranged these artefacts into four broad categories:

1. Sustainability and the Need for a Positive New Narrative
2. Systems Thinking and the Shift from Domination to Partnership
3. Capitalism, Economics, and the New Currencies
4. Courage

1. Sustainability and the Need for a Positive New Narrative

[Let's Forget About Climate Change](#) (10th Nov 2009)

[Day 76 of the Atlantic: Positive Thinking – An Epiphany](#) (8th August 2009)

[Narratives, Neuroscience, and No Money – Favourite Books of 2017](#) (4th January 2018)

[Humans Today, Gone Tomorrow](#) (12th April 2018)

[Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology x Wisdom](#) (24th May 2018)

Speech for Our Oceans Conference, 15th September 2016 (see enclosed script, and [video available on YouTube](#), starting at 1:20 mins) – delivered to around 500 people in the room, plus wider livestreaming audience. I spoke after Secretary John Kerry, and before President Barack Obama.

TED Talk, TED Mission Blue in the Galapagos Islands, published April 2010 ([video available on YouTube](#)) – approx. 39,000 views

Lecture at Darwin College, Cambridge, February 2017 – delivered to around 600 people and later published in the book [Extremes](#) (Darwin College Lectures), edited by Duncan Needham and Julius Weitzdörfer

2. Systems Thinking and the Shift from Domination to Partnership

[The Chalice and the Blade](#) (22nd February 2018)

[Wildfire and Gunfire](#) (22nd November 2018)

[Ego System to Eco System](#) (29th November 2018)

[Wicked and Wise](#) (13th December 2018)

3. Capitalism, Economics, and the New Currencies

[Rethinking Money](#) (17th May 2018)

[Yin, Yang, and Jung](#) (7th June 2018)

[Mother Nature and Father Greed](#) (14th June 2018)

[Of Plutocrats and Pitchforks](#) (21st June 2018)

[Of Grabbing and Gifting](#) (28th June 2018)

[A New Bretton Woods](#) (5th July 2018)

[Of Equality, Ecology, and Economics](#) (16th August 2018)

4. The Art of Courageous Living

Based on the class I taught at Yale's Institute of Global Affairs in Spring Semester 2017:

[Week 1: What is Courage?](#)

[Week 2: The Hero's Journey](#)

[Week 3: Intellectual Courage and Critical Thinking](#)

[Week 4: Motivation and Purpose](#)

[Week 5: The Courageous Mindset](#)

[Week 6: Courageous Decision Making](#)

[Week 7: Courage and Truth](#)

[Week 8: Managerial Courage](#)

[Week 9: Nonconformity](#)

[Week 10: Military Courage](#)

[Week 11: Political Courage](#)

[Week 12: Wrap-Up](#)

Other Works

Further examples of my work are available via the following links:

1. [Podcasts](#)
2. [YouTube Channel](#) featuring speeches, interviews, ocean rowing etc
3. [Ocean Rowing Voyages](#) - overviews with links to blog posts, podcasts, and videos:
 - a. [Atlantic Ocean](#)
 - b. [Pacific Ocean](#) overview
 - c. [Pacific Ocean Stage 1](#)
 - d. [Pacific Ocean Stage 2](#)
 - e. [Pacific Ocean Stage 3](#)
 - f. [Indian Ocean](#)

Appendix 2: Statement of the Hopi Elders

"You have been telling people that this is the eleventh hour.
Now you must go back and tell people that this is the hour!
And there are things to be considered:
Where are you living?
What are you doing?
What are your relationships?
Are you in right relation?
Where is your water?
Know your Garden.
It is time to speak your truth.
Create your community.
Be good to yourself.
And not look outside of yourself for a leader.
This could be a good time!
There is a river flowing very fast.
It is so great and fast that there are those who will be afraid.
They will hold on to the shore.
They will feel that they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly.
Know that the river has its destination.
The elders say that we must let go of the shore,
push off into the middle of the river,
keep our eyes open,
and our heads above the water.
See who is in there with you and celebrate.
At this time we are to take nothing personally,
least of all, ourselves.
For the moment that we do,
our spiritual growth comes to a halt.
The time of the lone wolf is over.
Gather yourselves!
Banish the word struggle from your attitude and your vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.
We are the ones that we have been waiting for."

- The Elders, Oraibi, Arizona Hopi Nation

Appendix 3: Comparison of Yin/Yang and Right/Left Hemispheres

There is a striking correlation between the left as yang, and the right as yin. I have compiled the following tables from various sources, to facilitate comparison.

Yin	Yang
Quiet	Loud
Receptive	Creative
Cold	Hot
Water	Fire
Dark	Bright
Moon	Sun
Feminine	Masculine
Still	Dynamic
Slow	Fast
Inward	Outward
Negative	Positive
Passive	Active
Mysterious	Open
Earth	Heaven
Right	Left
Matter	Energy
More material/dense	Non-material, rarefied
Contraction	Expansion
Descending	Rising
Conservation/storage	Transformation/change
Engaging	Aggressive
Far-sighted, long-term	Short-sighted, short-term
Careful, nurturing, infusive	Dramatic, aggressive, intrusive
Long term engagement	Short term penetration

Right Hemisphere	Left Hemisphere
Sharing	Grasping
Melancholy, doubtful	Confident
No speech	Motor speech centre
Implicit	Explicit
Holistic	Reductionist
Natural, prefers living organic things	Mechanical, prefers things it has made
Empathy	Competitive/autistic
Flow	Time as a succession of points
Depth of field	Visually flat
Emotion, apart from anger	Superficial emotions, and anger
Expressive side of the face	Poor at interpreting facial expression
Appreciates narrative	Perceives story as episodes, which it often gets out of sequence
Whole body image	Body as a collection of parts
Embodied	We merely live in the body
Marination	Rush to achieve
Sudden insight	Sequential analysis
Intuitive moral sense	Over-optimistic, denies own shortcomings
Experiences the world as complex, in flux, interdependent	Experiences the world as static, separable, fragmented, categorised
Betweenness	Separation
Sees itself in profound relation to the Other	Pays attention to the virtual world it has created, disconnected from the Other
Relatively unconscious	Relatively conscious
Wisdom	Knowledge
Intuitive	Rational
Personal	Impersonal
Connection with community and place	No such connection
Trusting, surrender	Paranoid, needs control
Allowing	Forcing
Reasonableness	Rationality
Tolerance of ambiguity and paradox	Intolerant, certain and inflexible
Awe and wonder	Cerebral

Implicit social contracts

Does not have the benefit of such a self-reinforcing dynamic

Non-dualist

Network of small complicated rules

Advantages: 1. Has language, logic, and linearity, 2. Hall of mirrors – thinks it knows it all, 3. Self-perpetuating feedback loop

Dualist (and blind to its own dualism, because doesn't even see the "other")

Appendix 4: Yin and Yang Maturity

Source material: *Yin: Completing the Leadership Journey*, by Lisa Marshall (forthcoming)

	Yin	Yang
The Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being deeply at home in the body Maintenance of fitness Stability, resilience, balance Willingness to explore Self-love and self-care Feeling at home in one's ecosystem Listening deeply and using one's voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disciplined physicality At home in one's skin Active exploration Building, making Recognises own impact, and takes responsibility
The Intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embracing contrasting perspectives Capacity to connect the dots Balancing relational and absolute moralities Feeling wonder Curiosity Learning and cooperation Organic, emergent insight A different kind of question A different kind of "more" Comfort with paradox 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Willing to face reality and ask questions Focused Specific Curious and open-minded Able to explore questions without needing to push for answers Leadership as stewardship, not ownership Pattern recognition
The Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affiliation with others and the world Fairness and affection Analogous to good mothering Responsibility for others Ability to hold anxiety without collapsing Holding boundaries without losing connection Curiosity about the unseen Courage to know self intimately 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity for independence Not afraid of emotions Kindness and strength Values presence over size Takes share of responsibility for healing trauma Self-aware Humility Does not seek "greatness" or domination Willing to ask for help
The Spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diffuse, permeable and immanent Gratitude and compassion Awareness of invisible fabric of connection Loving-kindness for everything and everybody as they are Connection to Source Gentle infusion of Spirit into all aspects of daily life Stillness, receptivity Non-judgement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent, highly disciplined spiritual practices Desire for intense experience of the Holy Seeks balance with Yin Servant leadership Surrender of the Ego

Appendix 5: Looking to the Future: The Sisters

I am creating a global women's network, called the Sisters, to bring women together to envisage a more peaceful and sustainable future. Small groups meeting locally for deep conversation are woven into a global web united by common values, and also by a complementary economy to facilitate and encourage meaningful exchanges of value of, not just goods and services, but also wisdom, introductions, and resources, as Sisters collaborate on learning journeys and social impact projects.

In connection with the Sisters, over the last three years I have led five women-only retreats, with another two upcoming, as well as hosting a number of real-life discussion groups and moderating an online group on Facebook. These experiences have taught me a lot about my style of leadership, which has been heavily influenced by my appreciation of partnership/yin principles as being the way forwards.

This community of Sisters is my tribe, my purpose, and my support network. We are creating an ever-increasing, dense weave of relationship and connection. It has been a great joy to see the initial introduction lead to professional collaborations, book tours, coaching relationships, overseas homestays, resource-sharing, and more.

The Sisters organisation also provides a relaxed sandbox for us to experiment with ways of collaborating and sharing. We have generated sufficient mutual trust to enable us to play with new ideas in a low-ego, high-forgiveness environment. Watching the evolution of these relationships and processes gives me hope for the future.

While my current cohort might be made up of relatively high-achieving women, many of them very accomplished in their field, I am particularly keen that as we grow we embrace and enlist members who live in countries where it is challenging for women to be empowered, and to appeal to the “nurturers” – the mothers, housewives, and care-givers who may not currently regard themselves as potential agents of change compared with, say, professional women. I passionately believe that the nurturers have more power than they may realise, including their enormous influence on our next generation of decision-makers.

I will now further expand on the qualities that I am embedding deep into the foundation of the Sisters, and which inform my style of leadership.

Self-organising

As a Brit, I am keenly conscious of our imperial past in which, whether well-intentioned or not, British concepts of the way things should be done were imposed on other cultures. Even now, some non-profits are criticised for inflicting culturally or practically inappropriate solutions without respectful consultation with those on the receiving end.

It also feels important to me that, in line with our intention to embody the strongest form of kinship and sisterhood, we recognise that even though our contributions may differ in form (money, time, enthusiasm, and even the “contribution” of being a willing recipient for the generosity of others, given that every gift needs a receiver as well as a giver), we are all contributing what we can in a spirit of true equality. There are many organisations that do good work redistributing resources from developed countries to the developing, but I want to avoid any possible hint of patronisation.

These factors, combined with a newfound appreciation of biomimetic design, have led me to the idea that for an organisation to be self-sustaining, respectful, fair and equitable, it should be as self-organising as possible. The intention is to generate deep, self-initiated empowerment, not imposing facile, short-term fixes. During my training with the Co-Active Training Institute, we were taught to embody the belief that the client is “creative, resourceful, and whole”, and the role of the coach is to draw forth these latent resources. I carry this ethos forward into the Sisters.

This is not to say that there is not a great deal of work involved in creating a self-organising system. Nature can be said to have “designed” evolution, as the meta-process that creates all other natural processes. On a much humbler scale, the work of a founder is to design the organisational meta-process in such a way that it embodies the values and design principles that will come to define the organisation itself. In other words, the initial process of *designing* the organisation should be the prototype for all subsequent designs that take place *within* the organisation. My role is to find the simplicity beyond the complexity, the autopoietic principles that will enable the Sisters to achieve its own perpetual motion. This is a fundamental tenet of teal organisations¹⁵³.

¹⁵³ Laloux, Frederic. (2014) *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage in Human Consciousness*. Nelson Parker.

Fractal Principle and Inner Work

The previous paragraph expresses the idea that the same principles should be embodied in every level and every aspect of the organisation, rather like a hologram, or a fractal pattern that is self-similar across different scales, created by repeating a simple process in an ongoing feedback loop.

Connected with this idea is my commitment, as a leader, to my own ongoing evolutionary journey. If my intention is for my Sisters to commit to their personal growth, I have to be similarly committed, as a role model, but more importantly, as it is reflected in my way of being. This is the yin way; the recognition that even if something is not explicitly visible, at the holistic level it is known.

Collaboration

A core premise of the Sisters is that we are stronger together. In these times of complexity, few of us have the full skillset that can enable us to succeed as individuals. Further, at the global level, we need to work together as never before. Following on from the fractal principle, we need to embody the practice of collaboration at every level.

Not only does sharing perspectives and skillsets enable us to work more effectively individually and in small teams, but it helps give us energy and optimism. When it seems that the problems facing the world are so numerous and so intractable that one person's efforts pale into insignificance, it empowers us to know that our Sisters are working on creating a better future in their communities, and according to their particular areas of interest. Together, we form a jigsaw puzzle of aligned endeavours, piecing together to form a picture of hope.

Discussions with my Sisters have been a tremendous source of wisdom and strength over the last few years. A retreat always leaves me energised for weeks afterwards. On average, I have around five to seven conversations per week, of an hour or more, with my Sisters around the world, on the topics included in this context statement and many more besides. This is an aspect of my life that I cherish, and part of the vision of the Sisters is to make sure that many more women have access to a network of support and encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Even Sisters who have a strong friend group sometimes benefit from a conversation with someone from a different culture or country, who can offer a different perspective. In an increasingly fragmented world, we need our tribe.

Authenticity

Having spent many years as a management consultant, trying to be something I was not, I now very much appreciate the relief that comes from being unashamedly myself. It liberates an enormous amount of psychic energy to focus on matters in the outside world.

Further, I can now appreciate that I – and everybody else – has something unique to offer in service of the greater good. This is an important part of the work of the Sisters. Unfortunately, many women around the world do not have an adequate sense of self-worth for a myriad of reasons, including the fact that some of the most important work in the world – bearing and raising children, caring for the sick and the elderly – is mostly not recognised nor valued by our current economic model. Further, many cultures send negative messages, either directly or implicitly, to women (and men) who do not conform to the prevailing ideals of beauty or body shape.

Yet if we are to solve our global issues, we need everybody to bring all they are, and all they can be. To feel significant, to have a sense of efficacy and agency, to believe that we matter, is essential to human happiness and wellbeing. This is part of what I hope to achieve through the Sisters; to help women, in particular, to know that the world needs their unique gifts, no matter how much or how little they think they have to offer. As I mentioned in the section on bricolage, I am absolutely committed to inclusivity, not as an end in itself, but because I believe that everyone has the capacity to make a valuable contribution. I hope to be the kind of leader that inspires others to believe that they, too, can be leaders. Whatever the coming times hold, we need all hands on deck, bringing all that they are.

Works in Progress

We are all on a journey, yet in our current hierarchical, patriarchal structures, very often people are made to feel “less than”. No matter where we are on our journey, there will always be some ahead of us, and some behind us. No matter where they are, the greater good is served by acceptance, not judgement.

Although I feel I have come a long way on my journey, I trust that I also bring an appropriate amount of humility. I have learned most of what I know by doing the opposite first: I was materialistic before I embraced simplicity; I was fearful before I developed courage; I was

conformist before I started to question everything; I used to be conservative before I became progressive.

This also helps me to make sure that the courage of my convictions does not turn into dogma, because I have been on the other side of most available fences. Far from having all the zeal of the convert, I do not judge people who are on the other side of the fence, because I used to be there too, and I know that in different circumstances I could still be there. So while I may disagree with them, I hope that I am always respectful, and this ability to respectfully disagree is essential to high quality conversation and psychological safety between Sisters.

The Bifocal Approach

One of the most valuable lessons I learned about coping with liminal situations is not to try and see too far ahead. In my motivational talks, I call this my bifocal approach: through the top half of the lens, hold a clear vision of the far shore, the metaphorical place I want to get to; through the bottom half of the lens, focus on what I need to do right now to get a bit closer to that place; and crucially, do not spend too much time worrying about what lies in between. While, clearly, we need to plan for the future – it is our short-termism that has led to so many of our ecological and social problems – in liminal times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (or VUCA, to use the military acronym), it is more helpful to cultivate the strong guiding principles and skillsets that provide the flexibility and agility to cope with whatever happens, rather than trying to guess at specific scenarios.

This comes back to the growth mindset: I may not know exactly what is going to happen, or exactly how I am going to handle it, but I know I have the self-trust, the tenacity, the ability to cope with difficulty, and the supportive network of friends, that will stand me in good stead.

It is important that we cultivate this growth mindset amongst our community of Sisters. When people have the belief that they can get through hard times, they pull together. Witness Winston Churchill's ability to engender the communal, egalitarian spirit of the Blitz during World War II. When people panic, it becomes every person for themselves. If our challenges are indeed going to get worse before they get better, and if we are going to use this axial time as an invitation to growth, we need to do what we can to promote the competence and confidence that humanity can get through this to a better, wiser civilisation on the other side.

Vision

Following on from the bifocal approach, the creation and articulation of a compelling and timely vision is central to leadership. As a navigator through the troubled waters of liminal ages, the leader describes the destination in a way that galvanises and unifies, and I refer once again to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, which is as inspiring a vision as has ever been proclaimed.

When I envision the Sisterhood several years from now, I see a global community of women from all across the socioeconomic spectrum, participating in an alternative economy that works for everybody, enabling women to access resources, support, skills, knowledge and self-care tools that they would probably not be able to access via our current economic system. Many women believe their lives and skills are not valuable, because they are not valued economically. I, too, have been in that place of undervaluing myself, and underestimating my ability to influence the future, but over the course of many years have taken the long journey from powerlessness to empowered. In this regard, I believe my life's journey is my greatest work. If I can successfully make this journey (still ongoing), I believe that other women can too.

Through the Sisters network, I hope to give these women a sense that they not only matter, but that their contribution is crucial to the future of our world. The choices they make, the way they raise their children, the role they play in their communities, the way they interact with each other – all of these factors can be leveraged to create a more peaceful and resilient future.

In the context of the Sisters, my intuitive sense is that women want to connect and build community, at every scale from the local to the global, and this forms the core of my vision. I remember seeing, in the vast reception lobby at the Google HQ in Mountain View in 2009, a huge screen showing Google Earth, with streams of light beaming out into space. My host for the day, Meng Tan, told me that the length of the beam indicated the number of people in that location who were using Google at that location, in real time. I visualise the Sisters network like that; a global web of interconnected points of light, shining out like beacons into the darkness.

Holding this image in my mind's eye gives me hope, even on the days when more news emerges about the climate crisis or biodiversity collapse, and for sure, there has to be hope. Hopelessness is the enemy of action. Leaders need to construct a bridge between the major anxiety of the time and their vision of the future in such a way that people believe it can come true, and that they have the power to help make it happen.

The Ocean in a Drop - APPENDIX 6:

A Narrative of Reintegration for an Era of Disintegration

“We are not a drop in the ocean. We are the ocean in a drop.”

-- *Rumi*

Rosalind Savage

Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works

Faculty of Professional and Social Sciences, Middlesex University

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Introduction

“There's nothing fundamentally wrong with people. Given a story to enact that puts them in accord with the world, they will live in accord with the world. But given a story to enact that puts them at odds with the world, as yours does, they will live at odds with the world. Given a story to enact in which they are the lords of the world, they will ACT like lords of the world. And, given a story to enact in which the world is a foe to be conquered, they will conquer it like a foe, and one day, inevitably, their foe will lie bleeding to death at their feet, as the world is now.” – Daniel Quinn¹⁵⁴

Here I draw upon a diverse set of theories that have caught my bricoleur's eye over the years. As a voyager upon the uncharted waters of humanity's collective future, I attempt to create a map that might prove useful to those who, like me, are seeking a better way of being in the world, individually and collectively.

My map does not purport to chart the entire ocean; I have only experienced one narrow sliver of the whole, bounded within space and time. Other seafarers may wish to rely on my map at times, and diverge to chart their own course at others. They may prefer not to use my map at all, but maybe my attempts will inspire them to create their own. Whether it is the map itself, or my cartography techniques, or a more general message of possibility, I trust that my example will encourage other pioneers to embark on their own voyages of discovery and sense-making in these turbulent times.

I attempt here to answer the question: in the current era of liminality and disruption, what credible narrative can we embrace that will help us navigate these challenging times with dignity and grace, while also creating new ways of being that support a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable future? Buckminster Fuller's stated mission was: “to create a world that works for 100% of humanity, in the shortest possible time, through spontaneous cooperation and without ecological offence or the disadvantage of anyone.”¹⁵⁵ This seems to me like a worthy goal.

¹⁵⁴ Quinn, D. (2009, first published 1992). *Ismael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit*. Bantam; Anniversary, Subsequent Edition. p84

¹⁵⁵ Buckminster Fuller Institute: <https://www.bfi.org/about-fuller/big-ideas/world-game>

I will set out the basics of a number of pre-existing theories in support of my proposed narrative. These theories may at first appear unrelated, even irrelevant, but bear with me. As a minor plot spoiler, you will notice that consciousness is a recurring theme, and specifically the *kind* of consciousness that we bring to our experience of the world. As Anaïs Nin said, quoting words from the Talmud, “We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.”¹⁵⁶ So if we want to change the things that we see, we need to start by changing ourselves.

After an overview of the theories I will attempt to pull them all together into a cultural narrative that tells a different story of finding purpose and meaning in the lives of we humans, and the courage, motivation and positive mindset to face up to the existential challenges that now face humankind, while also generating the practical behaviours that just might mitigate the worst of the impacts, or failing that, will sow the seeds of mutuality, reciprocity, regenerative mindset, and unity consciousness.

Some of these theories will resonate with some people, others with others. Nor is this compendium of theories intended to be comprehensive. I could have drawn on many additional indigenous and religious traditions. As Aldous Huxley points out in *The Perennial Philosophy*, at their deep fundamental root, all the world’s various religions and philosophies are saying the same thing.

Even if some of these theories on which I depend turn out to be false or partial, that is not necessarily fatal to my endeavour. Human cultural narratives have always evolved over time in accordance with the latest findings of science: from a flat Earth to a spherical Earth, from a geocentric model of the solar system to a heliocentric, from the four humours of the human body to modern medicine. As noted in the section on bricolage, I am not trying to create a narrative to last forever, only to outlast its own purpose.

As for the implications of this narrative for leadership, I have serious reservations about much of the current writing on this topic. As Jeffery Pfeffer writes in *Leadership BS* (and the clue is in the title):

“How can this be—all this failure—after the thousands of leadership books, talks, blogs, classes, and leadership-development programs seeking to make leaders more effective?”

¹⁵⁶ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/03/09/as-we-are/>

How can this be, after more than a century of research seeking to figure out how to select better leaders?”¹⁵⁷

Additionally, as already mentioned in the context of *The Chalice and the Blade*, I believe a shift is needed from a dominator to a partnership dynamic. Although concepts such as servant leadership and conscious leadership are gaining traction, to me leadership nevertheless implies a degree of superiority; leaders imply followers, while partnership implies equality. Some might argue that humans have always created leaders, but I would suggest that in egalitarian or gynanic¹⁵⁸ societies, leadership used to be contextual; those who were good at tracking would lead at tracking, while those who were good at hunting, butchering, cooking, or gathering, would lead in those activities, which ends up looking more like partnership based on complementarity.

So, rather than add to the enormous volume of literature on leadership as an end in itself, and recognising that this commercialised brand of leadership is essentially external in contrast to the inner quality of yin-ness that is my main focus, I will concentrate more on the more subtle aspects of leadership as espoused by Lao-Tzu:

“That whereby the rivers and seas are able to receive the homage and tribute of all the valley streams, is their skill in being lower than they; - it is thus that they are the kings of them all. So it is that the sage (ruler), wishing to be above men, puts himself by his words below them, and, wishing to be before them, places his person behind them.”¹⁵⁹

Essential to this Taoist way of being is the integrity of thoughts, words, and deeds. As the coaching terminology goes, we are all leaky vessels, meaning that our inner values and beliefs leak out through our outer words and actions. If a leader is conveying pessimism, or a loss of hope, this is contaminating to their communities, whether they are ethnic, national or organisational. Conversely, if they do have hope, their passion and conviction can become positively contagious. This is about character, not personality; beliefs, not words. The commitment to possibility has to be total. Brittle optimism or fragile hope will not make the grade if the leader is to light the way into, if not a better future (we may be too late for that), at least one of possibilities.

¹⁵⁷ Pfeffer, J. (2015). *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time*. Harper Business. p2

¹⁵⁸ A term coined by Riane Eisler, meaning a social system based on equality of men and women

¹⁵⁹ Lao Tzu, translated by Legge, J. (2016). *Tao Te Ching*. Digireads.com Publishing. 66

It is challenging, however, to write about the yin/being aspect. By its very nature, it is implicit rather than explicit, and our western vocabulary is not well suited to describing concepts that our culture has, since the Age of Reason, dismissed as at best esoteric, and at worst primitive. Necessarily, and with a full appreciation of the paradox, I have therefore invoked various contemporary (and therefore yang/left brain) theories to point the way.

I invite the reader to remember that the map is not the territory. Having been raised in a fairly conventional western family within a conventional western culture, I too have needed these theories to give my rational mind permission to believe in ideas that would otherwise have seemed at least “out there”, if not downright insane. I suggest that people cannot be liberated from McGilchrist’s hall of mirrors if they are not willing to follow the trail of breadcrumbs, so the breadcrumbs have to look appealing to the average western mind, or my enterprise is doomed.

After setting out these relatively uncontroversial, left-brain-pleasing theories, I will step out into more spiritual and esoteric realms, particularly the principles of Taoism, in order to arrive at a conclusion describing how these ideas might be brought together into a positive and flexible narrative to help navigate the challenging times ahead.

Civilisation in Collapse

“Our present economic, social and international arrangements are based, in large measure, upon organised lovelessness. We begin by lacking charity towards Nature, so that instead of trying to cooperate with Tao or the Logos on the inanimate and sub-human levels, we try to dominate and exploit, we waste the earth’s mineral resources, ruin its soil, ravage its forests, pour filth into its rivers and poisonous fumes into its air.”
– Aldous Huxley¹⁶⁰

I have previously mentioned that I went through a stage of deep concern about our collective future. While I was in Ireland, input from a variety of sources had convinced me that some kind of major disruption was imminent. Although it has never completely disappeared, this perspective has recently returned to the forefront of my consciousness, prompted by our ongoing rush towards catastrophic climate change, biodiversity loss, and other forms of ecological collapse.

In the past, I have taken the prospect of environmental catastrophe as a motivation to action. I have fiercely resisted any expressions of defeatism or resignation. As recently as 2016, when I spoke at Secretary of State John Kerry’s Our Oceans Conference in Washington, DC, between John Kerry’s opening remarks and then-President Barack Obama’s speech, I expressed the need for hope with a quote from the novelist Raymond Williams,

“To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.”¹⁶¹

However, on this current iteration of my spiralling journey, I am facing up to the increasing likelihood of impending disaster. This may not be an altogether bad thing, and I will explain what I mean by that in due course, but first I shall set out some analyses which support the idea that civilisational collapse is all but inevitable.

Prophets of doom have probably existed for as long as humans have had the language to express their fears, and so have those who ridicule such prophets. Life has not got any easier for doom-

¹⁶⁰ Huxley, A. (First published 1945. 2009 edition.) *The Perennial Philosophy*. First Harper Perennial Modern Classics. p93

¹⁶¹ Williams, R. (1989). *Resources of Hope*. Verso. p118

mongers since the boy cried wolf at the turn of the millennium, and again over the Mayan 2012 hysteria¹⁶². However, we must remember that in Æsop's fable, the wolf did eventually show up.

Politicians, business leaders, and technologists tend to talk as if human progress will continue in a smooth trajectory, and the past will be a good guide to the future. I have serious reservations. When Stephen Pinker¹⁶³ and others proclaim that we have never had it so good, I wonder if we humans are like turkeys the day before Thanksgiving, feeling fat and complacent, not realising that the very same factors that have created our sense of wellbeing will also be the cause of its abrupt end.

I will reference several analyses here, as I feel it is essential to build a strong case for the likelihood of imminent collapse in order to explain the need for a new narrative.

In *Immoderate Greatness*¹⁶⁴, William Ophuls identifies six primary causes for civilisation breakdown, which I will summarise briefly here. A fuller analysis is posted on my blog¹⁶⁵.

1. Ecological exhaustion: like bacteria in a Petri dish, the civilisation expands to the full carrying capacity of its ecosystem. Unfortunately, there is a lag between the creation of the impact and the time it is felt, by which point development is already inexorably committed to overshoot.
2. Exponential growth: psychologists and neuroscientists tell us that while we perceive linear growth quite adequately, humans are poorly equipped to comprehend exponential growth and its ramifications. As with ecological exhaustion, once we become aware of the problem, it is already too late.
3. Expedited entropy: the Second Law of Thermodynamics tells us that systems tend towards chaos and disorder. In practical terms, this means that important resources like fossil fuels, precious metals, and agricultural soil tend towards diffusion and degradation, requiring greater effort and increasing cost to yield the same results.
4. Excessive complexity: increasing sophistication leads to problems as technologies, structures, and processes multiply and start to interact with each other. Attempts to solve the problems only add to the complexity until they amalgamate into a problematic of mutually aggravating feedback loops.

¹⁶² See, for example, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_phenomenon

¹⁶³ Pinker, S. (2019). *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Penguin.

¹⁶⁴ Ophuls, W. (2012). *Immoderate Greatness: Why Civilizations Fail*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.rozsavage.com/the-ecological-elephant-in-the-room-goes-up-the-creek-without-a-paddle/>

5. Moral decay: as we shall shortly see in Glubb's¹⁶⁶ analysis, as a civilisation passes its peak its citizens lose their focus, getting distracted into decadence, irrelevancies, and instant gratification. Political polarisation, inequality, materialism, celebrity culture, cynicism and narcissism increase.
6. Practical failure: the people with the power to change the system are the ones who have benefited from the system being exactly as it is. Rather than doing what is best for the population, they do what is best for themselves.

Ophuls writes:

“Those afflicted by hubris become the agents of their own destruction. Like a tragic hero, a civilization comes to a ruinous end due to intrinsic flaws that are the shadow side of its very virtues.”¹⁶⁷

It is, of course, easy to see the relevance of Ophuls' analysis to this present era, when we are keenly aware of rising inequality, ecological degradation, failing democratic processes, populism, and so on, but the more important message is that this is what has *always* happened throughout human history. Every civilisation has risen, and has fallen. Likewise, every civilisation has believed itself to be indomitable, until it wasn't. The cycle is startlingly predictable.

In his 1976 essay, *The Fate of Empires*¹⁶⁸, General Sir John Glubb examined the life cycles of eight empires since 859 B.C., and concluded that each empire (Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome, Arab, Marmeluke, Ottoman, Spain, Romanov Russia, and Britain) spanned around 250 years, or 10 generations, and passed through the following phases:

- The Age of Pioneers: expansion of territory
- The Age of Conquests: more expansion, not always peaceably
- The Age of Commerce: wealth is created through trade and innovation
- The Age of Affluence: all appears to be well, but the seeds of destruction are being sown
- The Age of Intellect: the acquired affluence enables people to pursue the life of the mind. Academic institutions may produce sceptical intellectuals who start to question the dominant narratives of the empire, undermining its authority

¹⁶⁶ Glubb, J. B. (1978). *The fate of empires and Search for survival*. Edinburgh: Blackwood.

¹⁶⁷ Ophuls, W. Ibid. p2

¹⁶⁸ Glubb, J. B. (1978). *The fate of empires and Search for survival*. Edinburgh: Blackwood.

- The Age of Decadence: people indulge in excessive consumption in the pursuit of happiness, while in actuality becoming less happy. The civilisation creates diversions for the populace, from gladiator fights to Facebook and Instagram, while people indulge in addiction and debauchery. The values and discipline that enabled the creation of the empire are eroded
- The Age of Decline and Collapse: inequality grows, increasing numbers are excluded from meaningful work and the means to fulfil their potential. Discontent leads to disruption and the empire collapses.

Glubb points to the heroes of an empire as a key indicator of where it is in this life cycle. During the early phases, pioneers and warriors are lauded. Then come the entrepreneurs and merchants. Once celebrities such as film stars, musicians, and athletes become the main focus of popular attention, no matter how flawed their characters, the empire is in trouble. Clearly this is where many countries in the western world are now. McGilchrist, in the opening of the new edition of *The Master and His Emissary*, corroborates this late-empire hubris from a neuroscientific perspective:

“I think there are, again, several reasons why this characteristic entrenchment [of the left hemisphere] occurs, and indeed is likely to occur whenever a civilisation passes its peak. All of them, to some degree illustrate the self-reinforcing, recursive nature of the left hemisphere’s world, a world subject to positive feedback... In the case of the Greeks, the Romans and the post-Enlightenment West, the decline of civilisation has been associated, not just with more left hemisphere ways of thinking, but appropriately with forms of military or economic imperialism, and a consequent overextension of administration, a coarsening of values, and a failure of vitality, vision and integrity.”¹⁶⁹

During the early stages of an empire, the more masculine left hemisphere takes the lead. Its grasping, acquisitive nature and self-confidence are well suited to the phases of Pioneers, Conquests, Commerce, Affluence, and even up to the Age of Intellect.

But once the civilisation starts to collapse, the rigid thinking of the left hemisphere, and its conviction that it is right, blinds it to the inadequacy of its beloved structures and processes to handle the new reality. It becomes stuck in the mindset of “this has always worked before, so it

¹⁶⁹ Emailed to me privately by Iain McGilchrist on 15th November 2019

will surely work again”, despite growing evidence to the contrary, and this attitude exacerbates the death spiral.

This point is also made by the British historian Arnold Toynbee. In his 12-volume *A Study of History*¹⁷⁰, he argues that the collapse of civilizations is not caused either by losing control over the environment, or attacks from outside. He posits that successful, expanding empires develop strong structures for problem resolution that they then try to apply to all problems. When new problems arise, requiring new approaches, the methodology fails. Current attempts to co-opt neoliberal capitalism into saving the environment by pricing carbon, forest conservation, ecosystems services, and so on, could certainly be interpreted as an example of dogmatic persistence in applying old solutions to new challenges.

In his 2003 TED Talk¹⁷¹, Jared Diamond, author of *Collapse*¹⁷², lists three reasons societies fail to take action when collapse seems obvious and imminent, the first of which is the conflict of interest between the short-term goals of the ruling elite, and the long-term interests of the society as a whole, especially if the elite are able to insulate themselves from the impacts. There is a friction between short term political election cycles and the long-term planning required to build environmental resilience. The media reports examples of wealthy people investing in escape hatches such as remote ranches, homes in gated communities, cryogenic preservation¹⁷³, and tickets to Mars¹⁷⁴. When those with the power to change the system have no interest in doing so, and those who are feeling the brunt of adverse impacts have no power, the disconnect between the poor and the powerful sows the seeds of the society’s destruction.

Collapse need not be catastrophic. According to Glubb’s analysis, the British Empire ended in 1950, yet post-empire Britain gets along reasonably well. The US will reach the 250th anniversary of its founding in 2026, marking the projected end of its dominance, yet it is hard to imagine a dramatic fall in its living standards (although it has been reported that the middle and lower classes have already been suffering such a drop, particularly since the global financial crisis of 2008¹⁷⁵). The only thing that perhaps can be said is that change is not only possible, but likely, and it would be wise to prepare.

¹⁷⁰ Toynbee, A. J. (1947). *A Study of History: Abridgement of Volumes I to VI*. Oxford University Press

¹⁷¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/jared_diamond_why_do_societies_collapse

¹⁷² Diamond, J. (2005). *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*. Viking Press.

¹⁷³ <https://www.cryonics.org/>

¹⁷⁴ <https://futurism.com/elon-musk-puts-a-cap-on-ticket-price-to-mars-colony-heres-how-much-it-could-cost>

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.cnbc.com/id/44962589>

Until now I have only briefly referred to climate change and the other planetary boundaries that we as a species are crossing¹⁷⁶. While our ecological challenges pose a massive existential threat, the point is that history suggests that all civilisations, at some point, overreach themselves and collapse. Climate change may be more serious, and longer-lasting in its impacts than any of the previous causes of decline, but if it was not climate change, there is a good chance that our current civilisation would have found some other way to author its own demise.

The other point to note here is that our economy is now global. Previous collapses have impacted only a specific population within a limited geography. As the 2008 financial crisis illustrated, a relatively small group of individuals (bankers packaging sub-prime mortgages into financial derivatives) in a single country (the US) can precipitate an international economic depression. Our world is now so interconnected and interdependent – economically, socially, technologically, and logistically – that impacts anywhere are felt everywhere, and particularly when the epicentre of the disruption is the US, whose dollar has since Bretton Woods (1944) been the international reserve currency, so the collapse of the US economic “empire” is likely to have far-reaching, essentially global, impacts.

These considerations may appear fatal to hope. Hope is an ambiguous word: while a degree of positivity is necessary to navigate our way through difficult times, hope in itself is not a strategy. I would suggest that what humans need is a clear and calm acknowledgement of reality, combined with a willingness to learn from our mistakes, and a strong system of values that can carry us forward. These approaches might include Professor Jem Bendell’s Deep Adaptation¹⁷⁷ philosophy, which invites participants to face up to the likelihood of abrupt environmental transformation with honesty and courage, and focus on psychological and spiritual adaptation, rather than mitigation.

I believe it is highly likely that we will experience substantial loss over the coming decades and centuries. If Bendell, Glubb and Toynbee are right, not to mention the prophecies of Edgar Cayce, and the Hopi and other indigenous peoples, we are due for a fall. This is anathema to our yang culture, which celebrates expansion, growth, extroversion and positivity. Nature has cycles of day and night, summer and winter, growth and decay, life and death, but western culture has

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

¹⁷⁷ <https://jembendell.com/category/deep-adaptation/>

done its best to innovate its way to eternal day, nonstop summer, infinite growth and everlasting life. We want all of the yang, and none of the yin, and life is not like that.

I believe we are collectively entering a liminal chapter of the human enterprise, in which we will be humbled, challenged to question our own exceptionalism, and to find new and more harmonious ways of living.

Transcending Paradigms

“When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.” – Rudolf Bahro¹⁷⁸

If we are to, as Donella Meadows puts it, transcend the paradigm that has produced our current challenges, there is first the need to relax our grip on the existing paradigm. There are two theories that have helped me with my conceptualisation of what is going on, and have helped me to realise that my perception of the world may not bear as much resemblance to objective reality as I once believed. They also offer the direction that may be the road less travelled but the one that should now be seriously considered. The Liminal Thinking model is based on the book of the same name by Dave Gray, a concept first presented and explored by the anthropologist Victor Turner¹⁷⁹. The What We Don't Know model was inspired by the work of Louise LeBrun¹⁸⁰, but I have developed it further into the form I present here.

Liminal Thinking

“Liminal thinking is a kind of psychological agility that enables you to successfully navigate these times of transition. It involves the ability to read your own beliefs and needs; the ability to read others' beliefs and needs; and the habit of continually evaluating, validating, and changing beliefs in order to better meet needs.” – Dave Gray¹⁸¹

Liminal ages are the times when we stand on the threshold of a new way of being. Liminal thinking is the ability to operate with imagination, creativity, and insight at the threshold of what

¹⁷⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/fromhopetohopelessness.html>, October 2020

¹⁷⁹ Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*.

¹⁸⁰ <https://wel-systems.com/meet-the-founder/>

¹⁸¹ Gray, D. (2016). *Liminal Thinking: Create the Change You Want by Changing the Way You Think*. Rosenfeld Media. Location 175 in Kindle edition

we know, as individuals and as a society, while recognising the significant challenges, fears and losses of letting go of the known for the as yet unknown. I believe it is the mindset with which we need to approach these liminal times if we are to use them productively, rather than clinging stubbornly to outmoded ways of being.

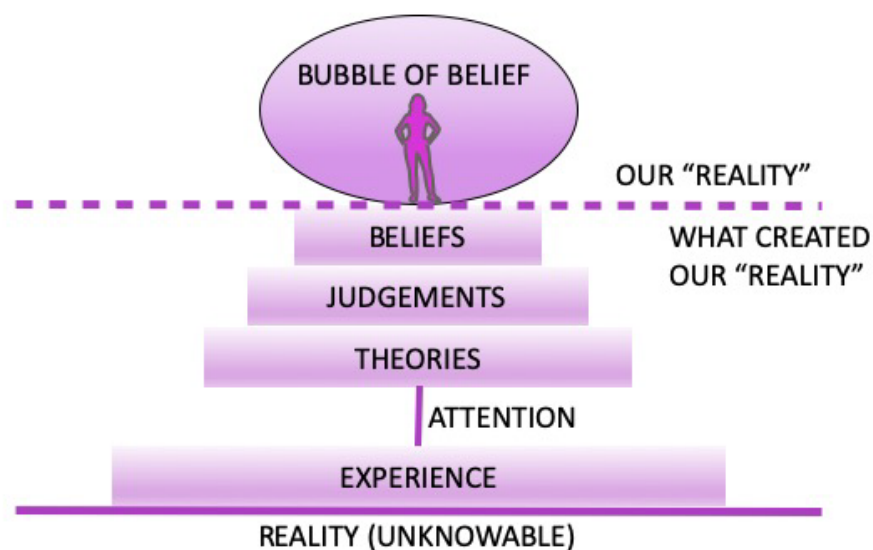
Liminal Thinking is the title of a short book by Dave Gray, which offers what I find to be a useful model to shift embedded ways of thinking into a more flexible mode. The idea he presents is that our brain sits blindly in the black box of our skull, receiving information from our sensory peripherals – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, nerve endings – and doing its best to create a map that is useful in helping us navigate the world. This map may bear some resemblance to reality – but that is by no means essential.

From the moment we are born, our experiences start to shape our view of reality. For example, if we are unfortunate enough to be badly parented, we may be hyper-alert for facial expressions indicating anger, to the extent that we perceive anger where there is none, because a false positive is more useful to us than failing to notice the danger signs when anger is looming.

Human attention is a rather poor and feeble thing – our conscious mind can process 50 bits of information per second, compared with the stunning 11 million bits of information per second that our subconscious can handle¹⁸² – so we have to be very selective where we place our narrow beam of conscious attention. Naturally, the brain picks out the bits of information that have proved to be most useful to its survival in the past, based on our experiences.

Then, based on our experiences and hence our attention, we form theories, judgments and beliefs about the world around us, in order to efficiently assess and predict our “reality”. The human brain uses a lot of energy, and historically every calorie burned by the brain was a calorie we had to find by hunting or foraging, and therefore evolutionary biology selected for brains that were good at shortcuts. The more preconceptions, or heuristics, we have about reality, the less work the brain has to do and the fewer calories it requires.

¹⁸² Wiliam, D. (2006). *The half-second delay: what follows?*. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 14:01, pp71-81, DOI: 10.1080/14681360500487470



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As humans, we sit atop this tottering edifice of assumptions and prejudices inside our bubble of belief, and mistake it for reality. So convinced are we that the contents of our bubble are real, that when we encounter someone who inhabits a different kind of a bubble, we think they must be ignorant, stupid, or evil, simply because they interpret the same “reality” a different way than we do (see, for example, the demonstrable polarisation of American politics¹⁸⁴).

Not only is our ego-mind a harsh judge, but it is also resistant to new ideas that are an uneasy fit with what it has already decided is true. Gray describes the two tests that an idea has to pass before we incorporate it into our worldview:

- First, is it internally coherent? Does it make sense, given what I already know, and can it be integrated with all of my other beliefs? In other words, does it make sense from within my bubble?
- Second, is it externally valid? Can I test it? If I try it, does it work?¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Graphic adapted from Gray, D. Ibid. Location 439 in Kindle edition.

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/political-polarization/>

¹⁸⁵ Gray, D. Ibid. Location 658 in Kindle edition

Unfortunately, rarely is Step 2 taken if the new idea does not get past Step 1. The brain prefers coherence to accuracy, so if the new idea is not consistent with our existing mental models, it will usually get rejected outright.

Too often, a new perspective will only be considered when our old one has failed us, and we become in desperate need of a new way to make sense of the world. When I first read *The Celestine Prophecy* in 2003, it was right on the edge of my tolerance for what I then thought of as New Age metaphysics. However, my long-held belief in materialism – both in the sense of shopping my way to wellbeing, and the view that nothing exists apart from the material world – had not worked out well, so I was willing to at least give this new philosophy a try.

*The Celestine Prophecy*¹⁸⁶ is a novel that presents the spiritual concepts that everything is connected, so there is no such thing as coincidence, and all human interactions are an exchange of energy. I read it shortly before I went to Peru, where the novel is set, and the series of synchronicities that had led me to Peru was at least prima facie evidence that this could be a valid worldview, so I was intrigued to use the trip as an opportunity to experiment with this new paradigm.

It worked. Time and time again, circumstances conspired to reinforce the validity of the principles. One of my specific goals was to write a book about my experiences, having since childhood harboured dreams of being an author, and this goal gave me a degree of detachment from outcomes: whereas before I might have been disturbed by travel disruptions, corrupt border guards, or mountaineering tragedies, in Peru this was all grist to my writer's mill. The desire to create an exciting and engaging story enabled me to overcome my fears and embrace uncertainty. This seemed to me a liberating way to live.

So although at first the *Celestine* principles did not fit with my existing beliefs (per Step 1), I was willing to hold the paradox and proceed to Step 2 to see if it worked. It did, and so now I focus my attention in a different way, based on a new and improved set of experiences.

What We Don't Know

¹⁸⁶ Redfield, J. (1993). *The Celestine Prophecy: An adventure*. New York: Warner Books

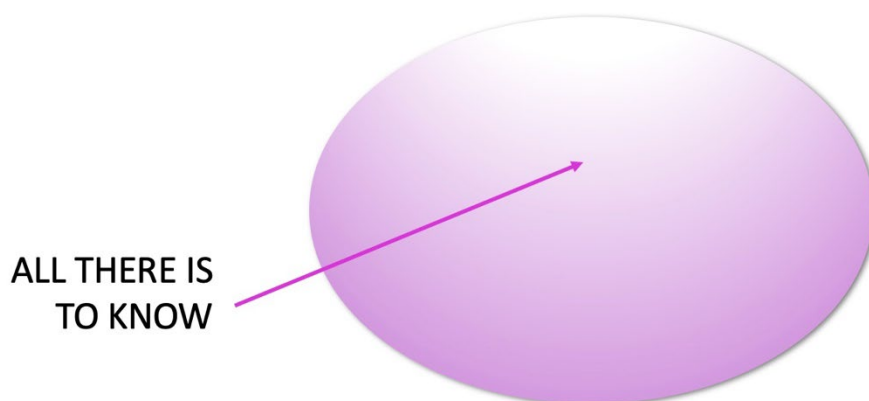
“The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.” —Herbert Gerjuoy¹⁸⁷

Following on from Liminal Thinking, how do we then escape our bubble of belief? It requires a certain amount of mental flexibility, and a willingness to hold incompatible perspectives, at least for a while, until further evidence emerges in support of one side or the other.

The opposite of this flexibility is what William Ophuls calls Practical Failure, when the people in power have no motivation to face up to the new because they are too wedded to the systems that have put them in power, or what Arnold Toynbee meant when he said that the collapse of civilizations is caused from the inside by rigid adherence to old methodologies.

Times of disruption require that we do not ignore or deny unwelcome new challenges or pieces of information, but rather allow them in and let them draw us forward into greater insight and understanding, but this does require a degree of openness and humility, which seems to be largely lacking on our global political stage at the moment, particularly among the so-called strongman leaders like Putin, Trump, and Bolsonaro.

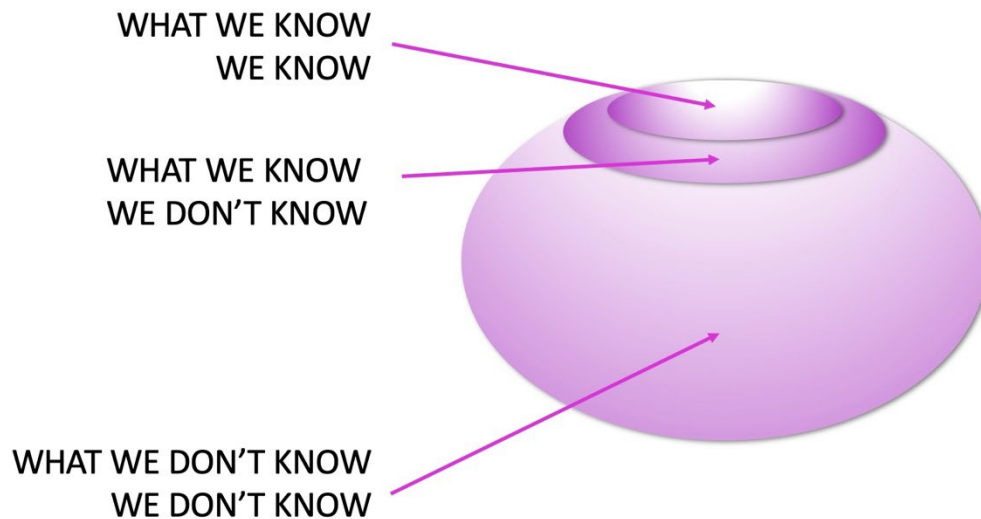
First, let us concede that there is a lot in the universe to be known.



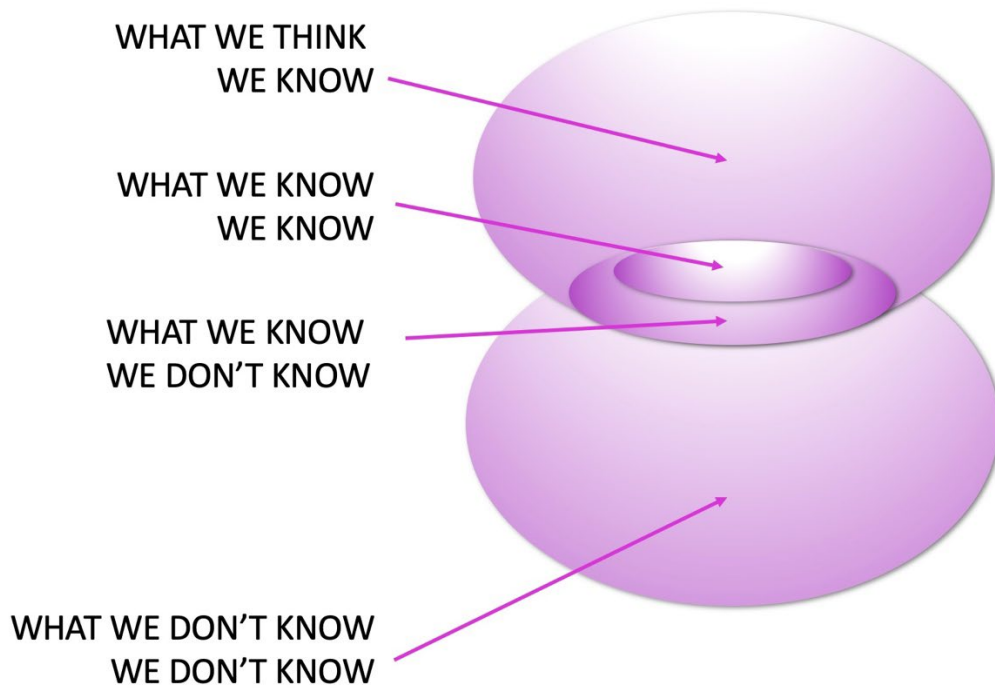
The further the boundaries of scientific knowledge are pushed, the more we realise we do not know. Within the last twenty-five years, for example, we have discovered dark energy, the “wood

¹⁸⁷ As quoted by Alvin Toffler, Futurist, in *Future Shock*. 1970. Flexnib, “That Alvin Toffler Quotation,” www.flexnib.com/2013/07/03/that-alvin-toffler-quotation

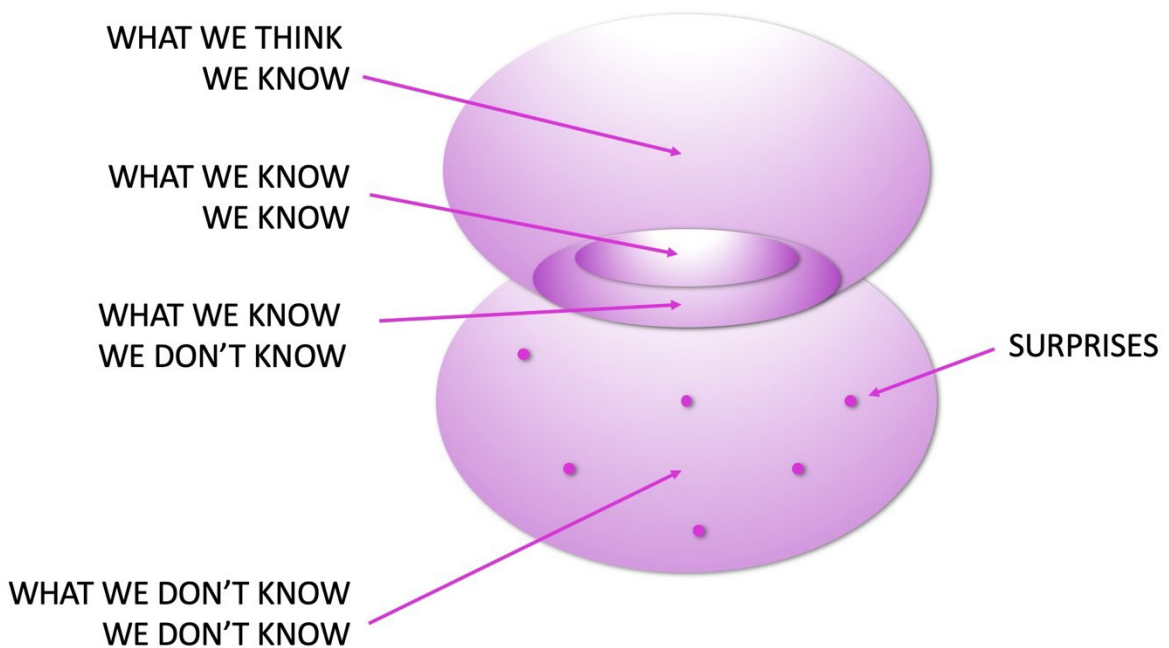
wide web” of mycorrhizal fibres, and the ability of dolphins and many other creatures to communicate. Human reasoning has come a long way from Descartes’ view of animals as automata, and it seems that new discoveries are finding more, rather than less, intelligence in the universe than scientists had assumed.



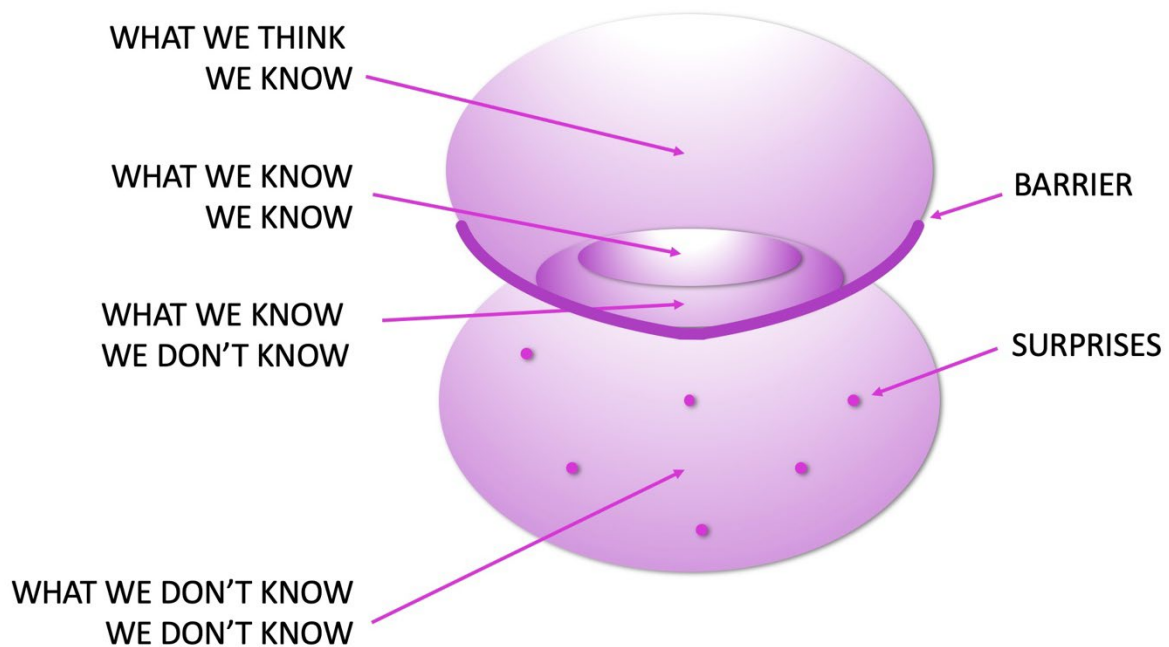
There is also a vast body of information that comprises “what we think we know”; the gallimaufry of belief, religion, opinion, dogma, pseudo-science, superstition and conspiracy theories, and even our own memories that turn out to be faulty. We all, to a greater or lesser degree, mistake the contents of “what we think we know” for “what we know we know”.



The real test comes when we encounter new information, or have a new experience, that surprises us, and what we choose to do with it. Per Gray's two-step test, do we allow it to disrupt our certainty about what we think we know and, after a suitable probation period, incorporate it into a new and expanded realm of knowledge?



Or do we prefer to stick to our old version of reality, which has, after all, served us perfectly well all these years, and slam shut a nice reassuring barrier between our tried and trusted beliefs and the new and surprising information?



Our openness to new ideas, or lack thereof, may not be entirely our choice; neuroscientists have found a relationship between the brain structure of an individual and their self-reported location on the political spectrum between conservative and liberal, with liberalism being associated with the volume of grey matter volume of the anterior cingulate cortex, and conservatism with increased size of the right amygdala¹⁸⁸, but it is not yet clear whether this is correlation or causation, and if the latter, which is the cause and which is the effect.

We are far from having unlocked all the mysteries of the universe, or even our own inner lives, so it is worth maintaining an attitude that combines appropriate curiosity, critical thinking, and willingness to consider new ideas, sometimes from unexpected directions and unlikely messengers. If failing paradigms are to shift, a good start might be to admit that we do not know everything that there is to be known. As Yuval Noah Harari points out in *Sapiens*, maps in antiquity used to pretend to be complete, and it was only when mapmakers became willing to label some areas *Terra Incognita* that exploration took off.

¹⁸⁸ Kanai, R., Feilden, T., Firth, C., & Rees, G. (2011). Political orientations are correlated with brain structure in young adults. *Current biology : CB*, 21(8), 677–680. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2011.03.017>

“Many cultures drew world maps long before the modern age. Obviously, none of them really knew the whole of the world. No Afro-Asian culture knew about America, and no American culture knew about Afro-Asia. But unfamiliar areas were simply left out, or filled with imaginary monsters and wonders. These maps had no empty spaces. They gave the impression of a familiarity with the entire world. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans began to draw world maps with lots of empty spaces – one indication of the development of the scientific mindset, as well as of the European imperial drive. The empty maps were a psychological and ideological breakthrough, a clear admission that Europeans were ignorant of large parts of the world.”¹⁸⁹

Only when there is an admission that we are sailing in uncharted waters, with only a hazy idea of where the far shore lies, or what the land there may look like, or whether it even exists, can we approach the journey with a suitably pioneering mindset.

Most insights and scientific breakthroughs in every domain of human activity have emerged from a level of reflection and musing by innovators who have often gone against the received wisdoms of their times. I do not claim to be at this level, but the process of arriving at insight is one that inspires an honesty about the struggles any human makes to break through their own embedded habits and beliefs, even if what those innovators came up with sometimes caused ridicule or even anger. These were among the risks that the mythologist Joseph Campbell was pointing out about the hero’s journey and return; the risk of rejection and symbolic or real killing of reputation, of spirit or of person. I have arrived at insights that have both sustained me and moved me from individual agency to advocate for collective agency. To some they may look trite, esoteric, or eccentric. To me they have been part of a bricolage of the mind that constitutes more of the sum of the parts, and on each occasion have caused my emotions, empathy and spirit to jostle, sometimes frighteningly, to get into harmony after the disruption. These insights have given me the energy, motivation, and indeed the will, to take action.

Apart from the “everyday magic” of serendipity and synchronicity, there are four specific incidents that surprised me, like rays of light from the realm of what I didn’t know I didn’t know.

¹⁸⁹ Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Vintage Digital. p286

1. As previously mentioned, while in Peru I went to the festival of Qoyllur Rit'i, a pilgrimage to the mountain of Ausangate outside Cusco attended by around thirty thousand indigenous Peruvians. I was hosted by a mostly male group of traditional dancers. Their native tongue was Quechua, so our only shared language was Spanish, which we all spoke very badly. I spent most of the five days freezing cold, sleep-deprived, and utterly confused as to what was going on. Throughout the final night, we trekked under a full moon from Ausangate to a neighbouring mountain to watch the sun rise over the sacred mountain. In the morning twilight, traditional costumes resembling bears and birds miraculously appeared out of makeshift backpacks and grain sacks, and there was a huge celebration of mountains, streams, sun and moon, and life itself. Still in a state of intellectual confusion, I surrendered to the moment, and was overcome by joy and a sense of deep connection to everybody and everything around me.
2. Writing in my journal one day, I idly wondered what it might be like to encounter a ghost, then thought better of it, and put it out of my mind. That night in bed I was suddenly wide awake, with the distinct impression that somebody had just whispered in my ear. In the morning I mentioned the incident to my partner, who said he had been disturbed repeatedly during the night by multiple presences in the bedroom. Neither of us had experienced anything like it before or since.
3. During the early months of the relationship with that same partner, one day while we were kissing, I had the sensation of rising up out of myself, and my energy connecting with his energy several feet above our heads, a feeling so intense that I pulled back in surprise. He had experienced the same sensation, and related it to me before I shared what I had felt. I can best describe it as a moment of metaphysical connection.
4. An experience of unity and transcendence, gazing up at the stars when I was alone on the Pacific Ocean, when for a moment I felt utterly insignificant, so tiny in the middle of this vast ocean on a small planet orbiting one star amongst so many, but also omnipresent, at one with all of the planets orbiting all of the stars in the cosmos.

None of these moments is earth-shaking in itself, but cumulatively they add up to a growing conviction that reality is not exactly what we have been told by conventional Western science – although maybe science is catching up, as will be seen in Donald Hoffman's revolutionary new theories on reality.

Complexity Theory

“How do you bring particles or planets or anything together and all of a sudden the whole has some properties that none of the parts have? Where do they come from? Which is why in the fields of science that study emergence, like evolutionary theory, and biology, and systems science, and complexity theory studies, it’s considered the closest thing to magic that is actually a scientifically admissible term.”

– Daniel Schmachtenberger¹⁹⁰

A complex system is defined as one comprising many distinct elements that interact with each other, for example: financial markets, cities, and natural ecosystems such as forests and oceans. I am particularly interested in the subset of complex systems known as complex adaptive systems, defined as:

“...a system in which a perfect understanding of the individual parts does not automatically convey a perfect understanding of the whole system's behaviour. In complex adaptive systems, the whole is more complex than its parts, and more complicated and meaningful than the aggregate of its parts.”¹⁹¹

The features of complex systems that are most relevant here are:

Emergent Properties

As described above, emergence is the phenomenon in which the sum is greater than (or different from) the sum of the parts. Water is a good example. It is made up of oxygen and hydrogen, which are both gases at room temperature, but they come together to create H₂O, a liquid. In a further step of emergence, six or more molecules of water create “wetness”, a property that a single water molecule does not possess¹⁹².

¹⁹⁰ <https://civilizationemerging.com/media-old/emergence/>

¹⁹¹ Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complex_adaptive_system, referencing Miller, J. H., and Page, S. E. (1 January 2007). *Complex adaptive systems : an introduction to computational models of social life*. Princeton University Press. Also Holland, J. H. (1998). *Emergence: From chaos to order*. Reading, MA: Helix Books.

¹⁹² <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg15320693-200-science-what-really-makes-water-wet/>

Some researchers believe that consciousness is an emergent property of complex brains¹⁹³ (although Donald Hoffman disagrees), so if they are right, the sense that I have of my self-ness is an example of emergence that goes to the very core of my existence as a sentient being.

As another example, many people will have had the experience of mulling over a question for an extended period of time, eventually giving rise to a sudden insight, an “a-ha” moment. Neuroscientists have started to explore the neural correlates of insights¹⁹⁴ (although again, Hoffman might dispute that correlation equals causation), which occur in the right hemisphere of the brain.

My interpretation of what happens in the run-up to an a-ha moment is that, as we acquire data to inform our response to a question, we build up a web of knowledge that gets encoded into our neural network. Eventually this network spontaneously gives rise to a sudden insight, often when we are thinking about something completely different (or not thinking about anything much at all, like in the shower). The sense of surprise that usually accompanies such an insight suggests that the whole (the insight) is greater than the sum of the parts (the data we have been acquiring).

This was certainly my experience when the idea came to me to row across oceans, and use my adventures to raise awareness of environmental issues. As previously related, I had been pondering for about six months what I could do to support the environmental cause, during which time I had been reading, thinking, and conversing in relation to my quest, and also in areas that had seemed unrelated but which had helped create the ground from which this idea emerged. When the a-ha moment came, during a long drive, the idea was astonishing and yet also perfect, meeting all my criteria - and more besides, as I would discover over the years that followed.

The crucial elements, in my experience, are humility and patience. Inspiration rarely arrives on cue, and impatience will only drive it further away. It has to be wooed by creating the fertile void of uncertainty (yin) into which the thunderbolt of yang creativity can strike. As Margaret Wheatley writes:

¹⁹³ Feinberg, T. E., & Mallatt, J. (2020). Phenomenal Consciousness and Emergence: Eliminating the Explanatory Gap. *Frontiers in psychology, 11*, 1041. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01041>

¹⁹⁴ Kounios, J., and Beeman, M. (2014). *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Insight*. Annual Review of Psychology 2014 65:1, pp71-93

“Knowledge is born in chaotic processes that take time. The irony of this principle is that it demands two things we don’t have – a tolerance for messy, nonlinear processes, and time. But creativity is only available when we become confused and overwhelmed, when we get so frustrated that we admit we don’t know. And then, miraculous, a perfect insight appears, suddenly... Great insights never appear at the end of a series of incremental steps. Nor can they be commanded to appear on schedule, no matter how desperately we need them. They present themselves only after a lot of work that culminates in so much frustration that we surrender. Only then are we humble enough and tired enough to open ourselves to entirely new solutions.”¹⁹⁵

I now deliberately cultivate such insights through a process of mental bricolage. The gathering of information is analogous to placing ingredients into the melting pot of my subconscious mind, where I leave them to bubble until they alchemize into something new, exciting, and unpredictable. I also allow generous mental down-time, to allow space for the idea to emerge. As I discovered on the ocean, when there is too much information pouring into the mind, there is no way for ideas to come out, so this disengagement from input is an essential part of the process. The hypnopompic period just as I am waking up is especially fruitful; there is a precious window of opportunity before my conscious mind has fully engaged, as the loud voice of the conscious tends to drown out the more creative subconscious. Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison, amongst others, deliberately manipulated their sleeping patterns in order to optimise access to the creativity of their subconscious, and the phenomenon is well documented¹⁹⁶.

Emergence is therefore both a scientific or mathematical phenomenon, and an intensely experiential one.

The Edge of Chaos

The edge of chaos is the narrow zone between order and disorder, towards which all complex adaptive systems tend to evolve.

¹⁹⁵ Wheatley, M. J. (2007). *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. p153. I have an American friend, a creativity coach, who deliberately takes her clients to this place of confusion and frustration in order to create breakthroughs.

¹⁹⁶ For example, Andreasen N. C. (2011). A journey into chaos: creativity and the unconscious. *Mens sana monographs*, 9(1), pp42–53. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0973-1229.77424>

“...all these complex systems have somehow acquired the ability to bring order and chaos into a special kind of balance. This balance point—often called the edge of chaos—is where the components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence, either.”¹⁹⁷

The phrase “edge of chaos” was coined by Christopher Langton, inspired by a scuba dive where the continental shelf met the deep ocean:

“It made you realise that all the diving you had been doing, which had certainly seemed adventurous and daring, was really just playing around on the beach. The continental shelves are like puddles compared to ‘The Ocean’... so there you are at the edge, alive and appreciating that enormous fluid nursery. And that’s why ‘the edge of chaos’ carries for me a very similar feeling because I believe life also originated at the edge of chaos.”¹⁹⁸

It is the creative boundary between the status quo and anarchy at which the system conducts its evolutionary experiments. We can deliberately seek it out, rather than shying away from its turbulence, in order to maximise the innovation and insight that we need to envision a new reality.

This philosophy is already being embraced by some companies. Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, said in a 2020 interview on the Freakonomics podcast:

“...all of Netflix is managing on the edge of chaos. You want to be right up to that edge where it’s dynamic and there’s freedom. It has not fallen into chaos, but it’s kind of right on the edge of it.”¹⁹⁹

He adds the caveat that this is not a suitable model for all organisations. We probably would not want healthcare providers to be operating on the edge of chaos (not intentionally, anyway), but for cutting-edge companies in innovative industries like entertainment, Hastings believes this is how they maintain their (so to speak) edge.

¹⁹⁷ Waldrop, M. M. (1994). *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos*. Penguin Books. p293

¹⁹⁸ Waldrop, M. M. Ibid, p231

¹⁹⁹ Freakonomics podcast. What if Your Company Had No Rules? 12 September 2020. <https://freakonomics.com/podcast/book-club-hastings/>

Phase Transitions

Phase transitions occur when a parameter that has been changing slowly for a period of time crosses a boundary (the tipping point) between one stable equilibrium and a different stable equilibrium. Using water as an example yet again, if temperature is the parameter that is changing gradually, when the water reaches the tipping point of one hundred degrees centigrade, it will cross the boundary and make the phase transition from liquid to gas.

We are currently hearing regularly about tipping points in the context of environmental collapse, where the decreasing Arctic ice cap, deforestation of the Amazon, ocean acidification, and the melting of the tundra create self-reinforcing feedback loops (also known as positive feedback loops, or the “snowball effect”) that may cause long-lasting alterations in our ecosphere that are inimical to human life. These feedback loops are a feature of complex systems, and by their nature they are virtually impossible to model and predict accurately, especially when multiple feedback loops interact with each other.

Phase transitions have also been applied to social dynamics of change. One example would be the diffusion of innovations curve, first popularised by Everett Rogers in 1962²⁰⁰.

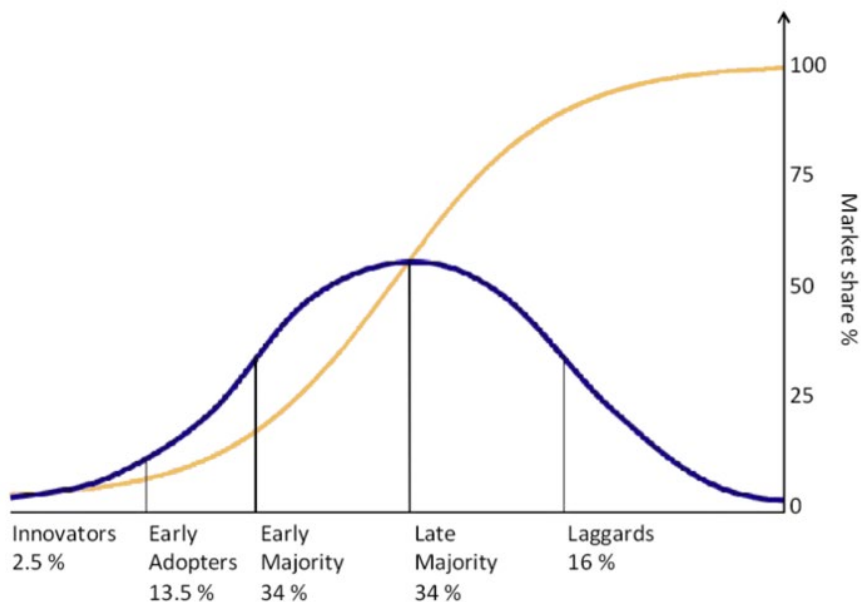


Figure 2: Roger's Bell Curve - Diffusion of Innovation in the Technology Adoption Lifecycle (Rogers, 2003)

²⁰⁰ Rogers, E. (2003). *Diffusion of Innovations, 5th Edition*. Simon and Schuster.

The process of social change depends on: the qualities of the innovation that make it (or fail to make it) attractive; the effect of trusted messengers and peer networking; and the interactions of the five segments of users illustrated in the chart above²⁰¹. The five determinants of whether an innovation will successfully pass the so-called chasm, or valley of death, that lies between the early adopters and the early majority, are:

1. Relative advantage: the perceived benefits of the innovation over what was previously available, according to the subjective perception of the potential users
2. Compatibility with existing values and practices: anything too radical will fail
3. Simplicity and ease of use: if the transition is not straightforward, most users will not persist
4. Trialability: users prefer to “try before they buy”
5. Observable results: if the user perceives no significant benefit, they are less likely to recommend the innovation, and peers are less likely to be prompted to ask for information²⁰².

The good news is that the tipping point of social change occurs at a relatively low percentage of the total. Once a new technology or idea achieves 16% uptake (2.5% innovators + 13.5% early adopters), it has a good chance of achieving widespread adoption.

So while environmental tipping points may rightly be a cause for concern, familiarity with the determinants of diffusion can help social change advocates tailor their approach to optimise chances of success.

However, the innovators and early adopters need to be able to find each other. In 2001, Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson published the results of questionnaires suggesting that 50 million Americans, a little over a quarter of the adult population, were “Cultural Creatives”²⁰³, deeply involved in spirituality and social activism, and identified with values of equality, conservation of nature, altruism, optimism, curiosity and universalism. But many of them felt lonely and isolated, believing that kindred spirits were few and far between, and not to be found in their social circle nor in the media.

²⁰¹ Robinson, L. (2009). A summary of Diffusion of Innovations.
http://www.enablingchange.com.au/Summary_Diffusion_Theory.pdf. Retrieved October 2020.

²⁰² Robinson, L. Ibid.

²⁰³ Ray, P., and Anderson, S. R. (2001). *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*. Crown Publications.

This implies the need for a mechanism to bring these individuals together to combine forces. What might that mechanism be? Yuval Noah Harari, author of *Sapiens*, has a suggestion:

“The truly unique trait of ‘Sapiens’ is our ability to create and believe fiction. All other animals use their communication system to describe reality. We use our communication system to create new realities. Of course, not all fictions are shared by all humans, but at least one has become universal in our world, and this is money.”²⁰⁴

In the conclusion of this section, I will return to how advantage could be taken of the ubiquity of money to leverage transformation.

Self-Organisation

Agents within a complex system interact with each other from the bottom up according to a relatively simple set of rules, rather than being orchestrated in a top-down, hierarchical structure.

In a flock of birds, for example, three rules are at play:

1. Separation: each bird stays far enough apart to avoid colliding with its neighbours
2. Cohesion: each bird stays within a certain distance from the centre of the flock
3. Alignment: each bird lines up with birds nearby

Self-organising dynamics at work in evolution through natural selection can be observed. Nature is constantly generating new genetic mutations, some of which will prove to be biologically favourable, others less so²⁰⁵. The former do better in the reproductive stakes, the latter die out. The gene pool is thereby constantly improved, favouring the fittest, where “fittest” does not necessarily mean the biggest or strongest, but the one that *fits best* within its ecosystem.

Nature, therefore, has a tendency towards higher levels of intricacy and sophistication in its evolution. Thinkers such as Barbara Marx Hubbard have extrapolated from this to identify a human evolutionary impulse, suggesting that, as the only species that has scientifically established

²⁰⁴ Harari, Y. N. (February 2015). *What Makes Humans Different? Fiction and Cooperation*. Smithsonian Magazine. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/what-makes-humans-different-fiction-and-cooperation-180953986/>

²⁰⁵ Glancy, J., Stone, J. V. and Wilson, S. P. (2016). *How self-organization can guide evolution*. *R. Soc. open sci.*3160553

the existence of evolution, we are now in a position to consciously guide that evolutionary process:

“Our new scientifically-based evolutionary universe story has given us the insight that nature and we ourselves are evolving. There is a direction in this process toward more complex order, more awareness, and more freedom to destroy or to evolve. Many of us are working together toward something we have never seen on any scale before — a sustainable, evolvable, co-creative society in which each person is encouraged to do and be his or her best.”²⁰⁶

Thomas Berry, the American religious scholar, also alluded to this:

“Increased capacity for differentiation is inseparable from this capacity for communion. Together this distance and this intimacy establish the basic norms of being, of life, of value. It is the destiny of our present and all future generations to develop this capacity for communion on new and more comprehensive levels.”²⁰⁷

This philosophy is broadly reflected in the proposals for more public engagement in the processes of governance²⁰⁸, and in the shift towards decentralised “teal” organisations like Buurtzorg Nederland, as advocated by Frederic Laloux in *Reinventing Organisations*²⁰⁹.

To quote Reed Hastings again, he likens Netflix’s organisational structure to the spontaneous jamming of a jazz band, rather than a centrally coordinated (or conducted) orchestra:

“If you think about a conductor and an orchestra, it’s an incredible thing, the level of synchronization, the level of precision, and it creates great art... And then, there’s this renegade little branch of music. And people are riffing off of each other and responding and everyone is highly skilled. To be able to do that, you need incredible practice and a great ear. And we model ourselves more on that. It’s less on top-down precision. It’s less

²⁰⁶ <https://greatmystery.org/barbara-marx-hubbard/>

²⁰⁷ Berry, T. (1978). *The New Story*. Published for the American Teilhard Association for the Future of Man, Inc., by Anima Books. p12

²⁰⁸ Watkins, A., and Stratenus, I. (2016). *Crowdocracy: The End of Politics*. Urbane Publications.

²⁰⁹ Laloux, F. (2014). *Reinventing Organisations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage in Human Consciousness*. Nelson Parker.

on efficiency and order and synchronization. And so it's a little bit chaotic, also very beautiful in a different way.”²¹⁰

This democratisation of society sounds promising, but its efficacy will depend on where we are in the lifecycle of complexity. In *Immoderate Greatness*, Ophuls quotes Donella Meadows:

“Self-organizing, nonlinear, feedback systems are inherently unpredictable. They are not controllable. They are understandable only in the most general way.... Our science itself, from quantum theory to the mathematics of chaos, leads us into irreducible uncertainty.”²¹¹

And goes on to note:

“Beyond a certain point, growth leads to a fundamental, qualitative change in the nature of systems. Specifically, it leads to what scientists call “chaos,” meaning that a system is characterized by so many feedback loops operating in a nonlinear fashion that its behaviour becomes more and more impenetrable and unpredictable and therefore less and less manageable, because neither the timing nor the severity of specific events is foreseeable.”²¹²

This is both empowering, and daunting. How to stay at the edge of chaos, without falling over it? We are all actors in the highly interrelated complex system of 21st century living, rife with feedback loops of which we have very limited understanding. We buy things without knowing where the raw materials and labour have come from; we throw them away without knowing where they go; we communicate without knowing where our words might land; we travel to places without seeing how our presence affects the locals. Everything we do makes a difference, but we do not know what that difference is, and we have no way of fully knowing.

Ophuls quotes Scott Page:

²¹⁰ Freakonomics podcast. What if Your Company Had No Rules? 12 September 2020. <https://freakonomics.com/podcast/book-club-hastings/>

²¹¹ Ophuls, W. Ibid. p31

²¹² Ophuls, W. Ibid. p36

“An actor in a complex system controls almost nothing, yet influences almost everything.”²¹³

How, then, to handle this responsibility? I will return to this point later on, regarding the importance of feedback, but first, heterogeneity and the role of enriching diversity, not destroying it.

Heterogeneity

Diversity is essential to this vibrant evolutionary process, and hence to a thriving and resilient ecosystem. Changing conditions will favour a different subset of genetic possibilities, and the more options that nature can select from, the more likely it is that some will survive. This is one of the major concerns about agricultural monocultures, and the more general loss of biodiversity due to human activities.

This need for diversity carries over into human sociological situations. Diversity as a desirable end in itself, rather than as a nod to political correctness, seems to have escaped many corporate boards. In 2018, excuses given by representatives of FTSE 350 companies on the lack of female representation included: “We have one woman already on the board, so we are done - it is someone else’s turn”²¹⁴. The corporate leadership literature is replete with examples of companies like Kodak and Blockbuster that failed to see a juggernaut of change heading their way because all the decision-makers shared virtually the same educational background, worldview and sources of information. In human organisations, as in nature, homogeneity is fatal to resilience, so a wise management team overcomes its natural preference for seeking sameness. Reed Hastings calls this “farming for dissent”.²¹⁵

We see the positive impacts of diversity in transdisciplinary academic approaches. MIT’s Building 20 became known as the “Magical Incubator” because it spawned an exceptional number of ground-breaking developments. It was hastily constructed as a temporary structure during World War II, and became the overflow building for researchers from a wide variety of disciplines. The numbering of the rooms was very eccentric, so people would frequently get lost

²¹³ Ophuls, W. Ibid. p37

²¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/may/31/pitiful-views-on-women-in-boardrooms-permeate-ftse-firms>

²¹⁵ Freakonomics podcast. What if Your Company Had No Rules? 12 September 2020. <https://freakonomics.com/podcast/book-club-hastings/>

and wander into offices to ask for directions, leading to random conversations and cross-fertilisation of ideas. The cheap construction – it was also known as the “Plywood Palace” – meant that the inhabitants would often take it upon themselves to modify the structure to suit their purposes. It was chaotic, anarchic, heterogeneous, self-organising, and unbelievably creative. And now, sadly, demolished, a mere 55 years after its “temporary” construction.²¹⁶

Taking the principle of heterogeneity into a military context, in *Team of Teams*, General Stanley McChrystal describes how the Joint Task Force in Afghanistan in 2003 was forced into a major rethink of its operations when it became apparent that the scrappy, self-organising, low-tech David of Al Qaeda was running rings around the mighty Goliath of the American military. As with all complex adaptive systems, the Task Force discovered an energy differential between their system and its environment, and adapted accordingly. They realised that, if they were to compete with Al Qaeda, they would have to sacrifice MECE (mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive) efficiency in favour of messy effectiveness, embracing the full diversity of their resources.

“We did not want all the teams to become generalists—SEALs are better at what they do than intel analysts would be and vice versa. Diverse specialized abilities are essential. We wanted to fuse generalized awareness with specialized expertise. Our entire force needed to share a fundamental, holistic understanding of the operating environment and of our own organization, and we also needed to preserve each team’s distinct skill sets. We dubbed this goal—this state of emergent, adaptive organizational intelligence—shared consciousness, and it became the cornerstone of our transformation.”²¹⁷

Organisations can thrive when they embrace this adaptive and co-creative dynamic. I have experienced this first-hand with my Sisters organisation²¹⁸, especially since the start of the coronavirus lockdown when we stepped up the frequency of the Sisters calls to every Monday. The line-up of participants varies from week to week, but the conversation is always emergent and fruitful, and as we weave an ever-denser web of connection between our members, getting to know who is passionate about what, and who to go to with what kind of question, we have

²¹⁶ <https://infinitehistory.mit.edu/video/mits-building-20-magical-incubator>

²¹⁷ McChrystal, S., Silverman, D., et al. (2015). *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*. Penguin. Location 2,751 in Kindle edition

²¹⁸ See Appendix 5 for detail about the Sisters

forged a kind of distributed mind analogous to McChrystal's shared consciousness, encompassing far more wisdom, insight, and experience than any of us could bring individually.

McChrystal's description is reminiscent of the flocking birds – separation, yet also cohesion and alignment – and like nature, the Task Force had to give up on long-term planning and strategy, and instead rely on rapid prototyping, evaluating the success or failure of each experiment as they went:

“Little of our transformation was planned. Few of the plans that we did develop unfolded as envisioned. Instead, we evolved in rapid iterations, changing—assessing—changing again. Intuition and hard-won experience became the beacons, often dimly visible, that guided us through the fog and friction. Over time we realized that we were not in search of the perfect solution—none existed. The environment in which we found ourselves, a convergence of twenty-first-century factors and more timeless human interactions, demanded a dynamic, constantly adapting approach. For a soldier trained at West Point as an engineer, the idea that a problem has different solutions on different days was fundamentally disturbing. Yet that was the case.”²¹⁹

“A problem has different solutions on different days” indicates that the challenges faced by the Task Force were what Alan Watkins and Ken Wilber call “wicked problems”:

- “1. A wicked problem is multi-dimensional
2. A wicked problem has multiple stakeholders
3. A wicked problem has multiple causes
4. A wicked problem has multiple symptoms
5. A wicked problem has multiple solutions
6. A wicked problem is constantly evolving”²²⁰

As complexity increases, more and more of the problems faced by a system become “wicked”. When we look at this list of features, it can be seen that they describe much of what ails us: climate change, economic inequality, racism, and so on. As an additional kicker, wicked problems do not just evolve; they often evolve *in response to* the very actions that attempt to resolve them.

²¹⁹ McChrystal, S. Ibid. Location 163 in Kindle edition

²²⁰ Watkins, A., and Wilber, K. (2015). *Wicked and Wise: How to Solve the World's Toughest Problems*. Urbane Publications. Location 402 in Kindle edition

How, then, to escape this quagmire? It seems that the more we struggle to escape, the deeper we sink. McChrystal has proposed one way, and we will return to this later.

Feedback

Now I return to the question of how we deal with the responsibility of knowing that everything we humans do makes a difference, but not knowing what that difference is. As new ideas, processes, and narratives are generated in order to transcend our failing paradigm, how do we know what is working, and what is not? As the system continues to evolve in complexity and unpredictability, how do we know which experiments to abort, and which to continue?

Nature has a simple but effective way of delivering feedback on the viability of new species. If it is a positive adaptation, it lives for long enough to pass on its genes. If not, it dies, and its genes die with it. How can we mimic this, but less fatally?

Much of our trouble arises due to deeply imperfect feedback on our actions. The consequences of our choices are largely invisible to us. Many of our information flows don't provide essential feedback on a timely basis, if at all. For example, the systemic failures that led to the 2008 sub-prime mortgage fiasco and the resulting global financial crisis have not yet been resolved, because the feedback loops didn't work. Governments bailed out the banks, and the perpetrators of the crisis still took home outsized bonuses. They received no meaningful feedback that their strategies had failed, and worse still, had caused massive hardship for many people. They did not see that hardship, so it was not real to them. There is every danger they would do the same thing again.

Another example would be climate change, in which all of us in the developed world are complicit. But wilful blindness is easy and tempting. Unless consumers go out of their way to watch often depressing documentaries about ecosystem collapse, they do not see forests being cleared to make way for cattle. They do not see the lengthy supply chains that bring food and products. They do not see the methane emitted by the food tossed into a bin, which ends up in landfill. Most of them do not see the melting Arctic, or the sea level rise affecting small island nations. They lack meaningful feedback that might motivate them to make different choices.

General McChrystal recognised the importance of reliable, timely data. Daily O&I (Operations and Intelligence) briefings lasted an hour and a half, and were mandatory for the seven thousand personnel across the region, enabling them to share crucial information and best practice. In the Joint Operations Centre at their bunker at Balad, McChrystal's task force could see on an array of screens what was happening all across the region in real time.

“A wall of screens at the front of the space showed live updates of ongoing operations: video feeds of small skirmishes or ongoing raids, JOC log entries recording the outcomes of successful captures or “friendly” casualties, maps of our gains and losses in different regions of the country.”²²¹

What would it be like if we had a similar command centre for our world? Some might suggest that Russia already has one, albeit designed for less positive purposes. What would it be like if we had trustworthy, unfiltered, real-time information about the consequences of our actions, individually and collectively, against key metrics? If I could use my smartphone to scan the barcode of a grocery item, and immediately see a time-lapse video of all the resources that went into its production, packaging, and transportation (and even its slaughter if it is fish, poultry, or meat), might I make very different purchasing choices?

For many people, the key metric of success is how many “likes” they just got on Facebook or Instagram, but what could the world be like if we had access to real-time metrics that actually mattered? What if ignorance could no longer be an excuse?

Margaret Wheatley writes:

“Measurement is critical – but only when it provides feedback. All life thrives on feedback and dies without it. We have to know what is going on around us, how our actions impact others, how the environment is changing, how we’re changing. If we don’t have access to this kind of information, we can’t adapt or grow. Without feedback, we shrivel into routines and develop hard shells that keep newness out.”²²²

²²¹ McChrystal, S. Ibid. Location 2,873 in Kindle edition

²²² Wheatley, M. Ibid. p158

She emphasises the need for the *right kind* of information, contrasting feedback (which I interpret as yin, or right-brained information, biomimetic) with measurement (yang, left-brained, mechanistic):

Feedback	Measurement
Context-dependent	One size fits all
Self-determined. The system chooses what to notice.	Imposed. Criteria are established externally.
Information is accepted from anywhere	Information is put in fixed categories
The system creates its own meaning	Meaning is predetermined
Newness, surprise are essential	Predictability and routine are valued
Focus is on adaptability and growth	Focus is on stability and control
Meaning evolves	Meaning remains static
The system co-adapts with its environment	The system adapts to the measure ²²³

Thus intelligence can be built into the system. In a perfect world, which we do not have, but we can envision it, and work towards it, the self-organising agents are able to see, directly and immediately, the impacts of their prototypes, and can abort, adjust, or continue as appropriate. Although the situation will still be chaotic and unpredictable, they can change course before going too far down the wrong road.

Maybe we could even reengineer our financial system to provide this feedback, to reflect the true costs and benefits of our actions, in order to encourage prosocial and regenerative behaviours, and discourage destructive activities.

Attractors

As implied by the name, an attractor is an element in a complex system that draws elements towards it. In a *point attractor* system, the activities in the system tend towards a single point, like a marble set rolling in a round-bottomed bowl will tend to come to rest at the bottom. In a system driven by a *periodic attractor*, actions repeat at regular time intervals, like the cycle of traffic lights. A system driven by *strange attractors* may at first appear to be random and chaotic, but careful observation over time reveals complex patterns.

²²³ Wheatley, M. Ibid. p159

I will come back to strange attractors in the conclusion, but here I am particularly interested in point attractors and their role in systemic change, as Glenda Eoyang describes in *Coping With Chaos*:

“Scientific data has shown that changing attractors is not an easy, intuitive task. It requires two complementary actions.

- A seed for the new attractor must be created outside the existing attractor regime.
- Random noise or shocks must be introduced into the existing attractor regime.”²²⁴

Or, as Milton Friedman put it:

“There is enormous inertia—a tyranny of the status quo—in private and especially governmental arrangements. Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”²²⁵

So this is the good news to emerge from our consideration of complex systems. While the current global system may be unbelievably complex, with a multiplicity of agents, connections, feedback loops, and wicked problems, Eoyang’s proposal offers us a possible lifeline out of the quagmire. It might be as simple, and as hard, as establishing a seed outside the current system that has the power to attract enough support to leap the valley of death and achieve the tipping point on the innovation diffusion curve. Possibly this seed even exists already, and just needs to be advertised and amplified – like a complementary currency, for example. I shall return to this possibility later.

Left and Right Hemispheres of the Brain

“If I am right, that the story of the Western world is one of increasing left hemisphere domination, we would not expect insight to be the key note. Instead, we would expect a

²²⁴ Eoyang, G. (1997). *Coping with Chaos: Seven Simple Tools*. Lagumo. p110

²²⁵ Friedman, M. (First published 1962, Fortieth Anniversary Edition 2002). *Capitalism and Freedom*. University of Chicago Press. Preface, p xiv

sort of insouciant optimism, the sleepwalker whistling a happy tune as he ambles towards the abyss.” – Iain McGilchrist²²⁶

According to the philosopher and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, author of *The Master and His Emissary*, our world is becoming increasingly left-brain dominant, and this is not a good thing. (As an aside, Iain is a dear friend of mine, and I would like to emphasise that any liberties and/or errors I have introduced in interpreting his work are mine, not his.) The human brain, and the brains of most other animals, are made up of two hemispheres: the left hemisphere is good at linear and reductionist thinking, categorisation, logic and analysis, mechanical concepts, and tasks requiring focused attention. It is optimistic, individualistic, has the monopoly on verbal language, and is blessed with an extremely robust perception of its own abilities. The right hemisphere is in many ways the converse, the yin to the left hemisphere’s yang. It is good at conceptual and holistic thinking, imagination, intuition, compassion, prefers the organic to the mechanical, and has a wider orbit of peripheral vision, metaphorically speaking. It is the seat of most emotions, apart from anger, which is the specialisation of the left hemisphere. It has no verbal language, and has a high tolerance for paradox, and tends to be pessimistic, melancholy and doubtful.

Our best theory at the moment is that the two hemispheres were a positive evolutionary adaptation that allowed us to maintain tight focus on the task at hand (like eating our lunch) while also maintaining awareness of our surroundings (thereby not becoming some other creature’s lunch).

Ideally, the two hemispheres operate in harmony, each playing to its strengths. But here we run into a snag, which inspires the title of McGilchrist’s book. The story, originally referenced by Nietzsche, goes that there was once a wise and spiritual master who had a small but prosperous domain, but as his subjects grew in number, he trained a number of trusted emissaries to oversee the welfare of its far-flung outposts. In his wisdom, he chose not to micro-manage his emissaries, but to respect their autonomy. Unfortunately, his most ambitious emissary began to abuse his power in order to further his own wealth and influence. “And so it came about that the master was usurped, the people were duped, the domain became a tyranny; and eventually it collapsed in ruins.”²²⁷

²²⁶ McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Location 6323 in Kindle edition.

²²⁷ McGilchrist, I. *The Master and his Emissary*. Ibid. Location 519 in Kindle edition

Following this metaphor, the right hemisphere should ideally be the chief strategist, given its wider and wiser perspective, while the left hemisphere plays to its strengths as administrator and executive. As McGilchrist writes, “the purpose of the left hemisphere is to allow us to manipulate the world, not to understand it”.²²⁸ The dynamic between the two hemispheres is reminiscent of the creative tension between yin and yang:

“Another way of thinking of the difference between the hemispheres is to see the left hemisphere's world as tending towards fixity, whereas that of the right tends towards flow. All systems in nature, from particles to the greater universe, from the world of cellular processes to that of all living things, depend on a necessary balance of the forces for stasis with the forces for flow. All existing things could be thought of as the product of this fruitful tension.”²²⁹

The hemispheres, therefore, should be a balanced and complementary double-act, and it seems likely that this used to be the case, or at least, more so than it is now. However, given its ebullient self-confidence, the left hemisphere has gradually usurped the power of the right. The right hemisphere knows that it needs the left, but the left has forgotten that the right exists.

According to McGilchrist, we see the symptoms of the dominant left-brain worldview all around us. This shift becomes a positively reinforcing feedback loop, as the left hemisphere creates an external world in its own image:

“Here I suggest that it is as if the left hemisphere, which creates a sort of self-reflexive virtual world, has blocked off the available exits, the ways out of the hall of mirrors, into a reality which the right hemisphere could enable us to understand. In the past, this tendency was counterbalanced by forces from outside the enclosed system of the self-conscious mind; apart from the history incarnated in our culture, and the natural world itself, from both of which we are increasingly alienated, these were principally the embodied nature of our existence, the arts and religion. In our time each of these has been subverted and the routes of escape from the virtual world have been closed off. An increasingly mechanistic, fragmented, decontextualised world, marked by unwarranted

²²⁸ McGilchrist, I. (2012). *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*, Yale University Press. Location 208 in Kindle edition

²²⁹ McGilchrist, I. *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*. Ibid. Location 192 in Kindle edition

optimism mixed with paranoia and a feeling of emptiness, has come about, reflecting, I believe, the unopposed action of a dysfunctional left hemisphere.”²³⁰

It is possible that humans used to retain more of an intuitive sense of the underlying nature of reality, but the reductionist, materialist worldview of the left hemisphere is increasingly blocking out our ability to perceive the invisible realms that exist beyond our senses.

Indeed, it was this reductionist, materialist thinking that reduced the number of our acknowledged senses to a mere five. It has been suggested Aristotle’s *De Anima* was the start of the idea that there had to be an observable physical organ corresponding to a sense for it to be real, rather than imaginary or “extrasensory” perception²³¹. Individuals who exhibited such extrasensory abilities, such as the ability to communicate with plants for medicinal purposes, have for the last several millennia been denigrated, persecuted, and killed, leading to the loss of their wisdom traditions and (possibly) inheritable sensory capabilities.²³²

The main point here is that, as we have already seen in the section on Liminal Thinking, our conscious mind can process only a tiny fraction of all the data that our senses gather from our environment²³³. It would seem evolutionarily advantageous if our unconscious mind is able to process at least some of the vast remainder. The more that our left hemisphere enforces its (literally) narrow-minded worldview, the more we cut ourselves off from valuable sources of information. We are gradually losing touch with the more valuable half of our consciousness. According to McGilchrist, we have paid dearly for our increasingly left-hemisphere orientation:

“We know so much, we can make so much happen, and we certainly invest much in the attempt to control our destinies. And yet, if we are honest, we feel as though it ought somehow to have added up to – more than this. Meanwhile, around us we can scarcely fail to see the evident global degradation and destruction of what we now call ‘the environment’, but which is nothing less than the living world; the breaking up of complex, close-knit communities, and their ways of living in harmony with nature, that took at least centuries, if not millennia, to form; the substitution of a way of life that we

²³⁰ McGilchrist, I. *The Master and his Emissary*. Ibid. Location 322 in Kindle edition

²³¹ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20141118-how-many-senses-do-you-have>

²³² Rasmussen, S. (1998). Only Women Know Trees: Medicine Women and the Role of Herbal Healing in Tuareg Culture. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 54(2), 147-171. Retrieved October 7, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3631728>

²³³ <https://www.britannica.com/science/information-theory/Physiology>

have already determined in the West to be lacking in meaning, often aesthetically barren, driven by commercialism and morally bankrupt, devoted to the pursuit of pleasure and happiness, but delivering anxiety and systemic dissatisfaction; the erosion, and in some cases the trashing, of ancient artistic and spiritual traditions; and the loss of the sense of uniqueness as everything becomes abstracted, generalised, categorised, mechanised, represented and rendered merely virtual... Meaning emerges from engagement with the world, not from abstract contemplation of it.”²³⁴

And indeed, not just individuals or societies, but entire empires have also paid dearly for our abstraction from the natural world. McGilchrist sees, in accounts of the fall of the Greek and Roman empires, evidence of increasing left hemisphere dominance:

“But [the flourishing] did not last. It may be that an increasing bureaucracy, totalitarianism and an emphasis on the mechanistic in the late Roman period represents an attempt by the left hemisphere to ‘go it alone’.”²³⁵

Drawing on the work of Hans Peter L'Orange, whose book, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire*, is a study of the relationship between the architecture and broader values of this period, McGilchrist finds ample evidence of a shift from multiplicity and variety to left hemisphere style homogeneity, uniformity, hierarchy and rigidity, concluding:

“Out of the history of Greece and Rome come confirmatory and converging lines of evidence that it was through the workings of the emissary, the left hemisphere, that the ‘empire’ of the mind expanded in the first place; and that, as long as it worked in concert with the Master, the right hemisphere, faithfully bringing back the knowledge and understanding gained by it, and offering them to the right hemisphere so as to bring a (now more complex) world into being, an ability which belongs to the right hemisphere alone, the empire thrived. On the other hand, once the left hemisphere started to believe that its dominion was everything, once the wealth it created began to remain obdurately in its own province, as though it could survive on its own, rather than being returned to the world that only the right hemisphere could bring about, then the empire

²³⁴ McGilchrist, I. *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*. Ibid. Location 420 in Kindle edition

²³⁵ McGilchrist, I. *The Master and his Emissary*. Ibid. Location 7712 in Kindle edition

– not the Roman Empire, which the world could do without, but the empire that the hemispheres between them had created, which we cannot – began to crumble.”²³⁶

An uplifting counterpoint and complement to McGilchrist’s rather bleak prognosis is the account given by the neuroanatomist, Jill Bolte Taylor, who suffered a catastrophic left hemisphere stroke at the age of 37. Given her professional expertise, she was able to observe, with (mostly) dispassionate calmness, her life-threatening predicament, which she describes in her TED Talk²³⁷ and book, *My Stroke of Insight*. As the blood wreaked havoc in her left hemisphere, shutting down its functions, she found herself seeing reality in an entirely different way which, far from being terrifying, was extremely alluring:

“As the haemorrhaging blood interrupted the normal functioning of my left mind, my perception was released from its attachment to categorization and detail. As the dominating fibres of my left hemisphere shut down, they no longer inhibited my right hemisphere, and my perception was free to shift such that my consciousness could embody the tranquillity of my right mind. Swathed in an enfolding sense of liberation and transformation, the essence of my consciousness shifted into a state that felt amazingly similar to my experience in Thetaville. I’m no authority, but I think the Buddhists would say I entered the mode of existence they call Nirvana... In the absence of my left hemisphere’s analytical judgment, I was completely entranced by the feelings of tranquillity, safety, blessedness, euphoria, and omniscience.”²³⁸

She uses phrases that could equally be used by someone describing a peak meditative experience, or the effects of hallucinogenic drugs, such as “peaceful bliss of my divine right mind”²³⁹, “glorious bliss”²⁴⁰, and “sweet tranquillity”²⁴¹. Aldous Huxley’s “unitive knowledge” of *The Perennial Philosophy* is reflected in her description:

“My left hemisphere had been trained to perceive myself as a solid, separate from others. Now, released from that restrictive circuitry, my right hemisphere relished in its

²³⁶ McGilchrist, I. *The Master and his Emissary*. Ibid. Location 7857 in Kindle edition

²³⁷ https://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_my_stroke_of_insight (2008)

²³⁸ Bolte Taylor, J. (2009). *My Stroke of Insight*. Hodder Paperbacks. p49

²³⁹ Bolte Taylor, J. Ibid, p61

²⁴⁰ Bolte Taylor, J. Ibid, p67

²⁴¹ Bolte Taylor, J. Ibid, p67

attachment to the eternal flow. I was no longer isolated and alone. My soul was as big as the universe and frolicked with glee in a boundless sea.”²⁴²

She also hints at the extent of our cultural conditioning. As children we are trained in what it is normal to perceive, and conversely, what not to perceive. From the age of several months and lasting into adolescence, or possibly even into our twenties²⁴³, our brains undergo synaptic pruning that reduce the number of synapses²⁴⁴. This coincides with a child’s period of “socialisation”, during which it adapts itself to the world around it, following the example of its parents and society at large. As Bolte Taylor’s mother, G.G., helped her with her rehabilitation, she has to be taught how to perceive conventional “reality”.

“It still blows my mind (so to speak) that I could not see colour until I was told that colour was a tool I could use. Who would have guessed that my left hemisphere needed to be told about colour in order for it to register? I found the same to be true for seeing in three dimensions. G.G. had to teach me that I could see things in different planes.”²⁴⁵

Bolte Taylor equates the left hemisphere with head, thinking, mind consciousness, small ego mind, small self, masculine, and yang consciousness, and the right with heart, feeling, body’s instinctive consciousness, capital ego mind, inner or authentic self, feminine, and yin consciousness. I am certainly not suggesting that we would be better off without our left hemisphere – it evolved for a very good reason, and is essential to our ability to function in the world – but I invite you to imagine what it might be like if we were able to subdue the left hemisphere at will, and connect intentionally with the worldview of the right hemisphere, or we can simply learn from Bolte Taylor’s account:

“My stroke of insight is that at the core of my right hemisphere consciousness is a character that is directly connected to my feeling of deep inner peace. It is completely committed to the expression of peace, love, joy, and compassion in the world... It is my goal to help you find a hemispheric home for each of your characters so that we can honour their identities and perhaps have more say in how we want to be in the world. By

²⁴² Bolte Taylor, J. Ibid, p69

²⁴³ *Extraordinary neoteny of synaptic spines in the human prefrontal cortex*. Zdravko, P., Miloš, J., et al. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Aug 2011, 108 (32) 13281-13286; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1105108108

²⁴⁴ Tierney, A. L., & Nelson, C. A., 3rd (2009). Brain Development and the Role of Experience in the Early Years. *Zero to three*, 30(2), pp9–13

²⁴⁵ Bolte Taylor, J. Ibid, p99

recognizing who is who inside our cranium, we can take a more balanced-brain approach to how we lead our lives.”²⁴⁶

It seems to me that Bolte Taylor is agreeing with McGilchrist that both an individual and a society function optimally when it knows when best to invoke right brain consciousness, and when to rely on the left. A quote usually attributed to Albert Einstein (who, according to a 2013 study, was blessed with an unusual corpus callosum that had more extensive connections between certain parts of his cerebral hemispheres compared to the brains of both younger and older control groups²⁴⁷) states:

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.”²⁴⁸

Einstein also hinted that he preferred to dwell in the metaphorical, image-based world of the right hemisphere than in the verbal world of the left, which may offer a clue as to how he was able to envisage possibilities beyond the ken of just about anybody else, before or since:

“I very rarely think in words at all. A thought comes, and I may try to express in words afterwards.”²⁴⁹

Bolte Taylor believes that most of us (with exceptions in indigenous cultures, and assorted individuals in the western world who may practice as healers, intuitives, and so on) will have to work mindfully (literally) to reverse the shift and re-create balance in our predominantly left-brain-oriented world. We would do well to remember who is the master, and who is the emissary, which is the sacred gift and which is the servant, and to nurture the optimal co-creative and balanced dynamic between the two.

This may not be as far-fetched, nor as difficult, as it sounds. While I was at Yale, I had the privilege of several meetings with the psychiatrist and neuroscientist, Dr Judson Brewer, who

²⁴⁶ Bolte Taylor, J. Ibid, p132

²⁴⁷ Men, W.; Falk, D.; Sun, T.; Chen, W.; Li, J.; Yin, D.; Zang, L.; Fan, M. (24 September 2013). "The corpus callosum of Albert Einstein's brain: another clue to his high intelligence?". *Brain*. 137 (4): e268. doi:10.1093/brain/awt252. PMC 3959548. PMID 24065724.

²⁴⁸ Alternatively, according to <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/09/18/intuitive-mind/>, Einstein was indirectly reported to hold this view by Bob Samples in his book, *The Metaphoric Mind: A Celebration of Creative Consciousness*. (1976). Addison Wesley Longman Publishing Co.

²⁴⁹ Massironi, M. *The Psychology of Graphic Images: Seeing, Drawing, Communicating*. (2001) Psychology Press. p163

specialises in using meditation to treat addiction. Apparently, the posterior cingulate cortex gets activated when we get hooked into a craving, and ultimately, it is not the craving that causes the problem, it is our brain's willingness to engage with it. Meditation can help an addict to disengage from the craving, and the posterior cingulate cortex quiets down. To help addicts focus their meditation on calming this particular region of the brain, Brewer has developed biofeedback devices that translate their brainwaves into visual signals that are red when the region is activated, and turn blue once it is calm. I am curious as to whether such devices could help to calm the left hemisphere, and allow the right more airtime. Wireheading²⁵⁰ is another possibility, although more controversial as it relies purely on technology to produce the desired effect, rather than self-induced meditative states.

²⁵⁰ <https://thedeepdish.org/wireheading/>

Synthesis, not Separation

To pursue further this idea of harmonising heterogeneous agents into a co-creative whole, here I will look at two perspectives on strength through synthesis, as a way to heal the disconnects that exist at the individual and societal levels in the current Western world.

Psychosynthesis

In 2004, I read *What We May Be*²⁵¹, by Piero Ferrucci, which had a subtle but long-lasting effect on my thinking. Ferrucci is commenting and expanding on the work of his mentor and collaborator, Roberto Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis. Psychosynthesis is a therapeutic approach that focuses on personal growth and development, through the synthesis of the various aspects of the self to become more evolved and self-actualized.

“The Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli noticed several years ago that a great deal of psychological pain, imbalance, and meaninglessness are felt when our diverse inner elements exist unconnected side by side or clash with one another. But he also observed that when they merge in successively greater wholes, we experience a release of energy, a sense of wellbeing, and a greater depth of meaning in our lives.”²⁵²

This description is reminiscent of bricolage of the mind, in the sense that we combine seemingly disparate components in order to create a harmonious and synergistic wholeness within our consciousness. “Successively greater wholes” could be interpreted in the light of emergence as a phenomenon of complex systems.

This process of synthesis is a deeply internal, right-hemisphere, or yin/feminine, process.

Ferrucci quotes Assagioli:

“One of the main functions of the subconscious, and at the same time one of the most important stages in the educational process, is the elaboration of experiences which one has made, the vital assimilation of what has been perceived and learned. This elaboration can be regarded as a real ‘psychic gestation’ having strict analogies with physical

²⁵¹ Ferrucci, P. (2009). *What We May Be: Techniques for Psychological and Spiritual Growth Through Psychosynthesis*. Jeremy P. Tarcher

²⁵² Ferrucci, P. Ibid. p3

gestation. Both occur in the depths, in the mystery, one in the mother's womb, the other in the intimate recesses of the unconscious... both finally climax in the crisis and the miracle of 'birth', of the manifestation of a new life."²⁵³

Ferrucci illustrates the principles of psychosynthesis by reference to an assortment of polarities, emphasising that the process is not merely seeking to strike a balance between the polarities, but actually to forge a new and stronger entity through the fusion or synthesis of the contrasting poles. For example, in relation to gender, he refers to an androgynous fictional character:

"...the androgyne is a powerful symbol of our Self, of that place within where opposites are reconciled and possibilities coexist without mutual contradiction... This perfect union of opposites is a highly desirable state and one that can be approached by each of us in a greater or lesser degree."²⁵⁴

In a parallel example from Native American culture, two-spirit individuals were those who did not conform to either male or female roles or styles of dress, and were regarded as having two identities occupying one body. Depending on the tribe, they were given special status such as the keepers of the oral tradition, matchmakers, craftspeople, name-givers, or ceremonial roles.

Ferrucci describes the complementarity of Eros and Logos: "Eros without Logos is blind and irrational. Logos without Eros is arid and cold." He quotes Assagioli's descriptions:

"[Eros] means love in the widest sense, it is the vital, primordial impulse, the tendency at the source of the fundamental instinct to self-preservation, self-assertion, and reproduction, manifesting itself in the form of innumerable impulses and desires, becoming refined in the most delicate sentiments, and being sublimated into the highest aspirations. Eros is throbbing life, propelling power, warmth, fire... [while Logos is] "the directing principle which regulates and coordinates life. Logos tends to gather and channel the tumultuous torrent, the turbid stream of Eros within firm and straight banks, carrying it toward a set goal. Logos always tends to model the fluid and flexible vital and psychic substance into well-defined forms. Logos is law and discipline. It is order,

²⁵³ Ferrucci, P. Ibid, p4

²⁵⁴ Ferrucci, P. Ibid, p286

harmony, and beauty. It is rhythm and measure. It is intelligence and reason, understanding and light.”²⁵⁵

He goes on to highlight similar patterns in the interaction between sensuality and spirituality, work and play, intuition and logic, prudence and adventurousness, pessimism and optimism, masculinity and femininity, conservatism and renewal, introversion and extraversion, and so on.

“The play of these opposites gives us the opportunity for richness of experience, action, and, eventually, synthesis... A personality is more lively and complete when opposing tendencies are present.”²⁵⁶

This chiaroscuro of the personality depends on juxtaposition, contrast and interplay, with the goal being “to remain conscious of both poles but identify with neither; we need to achieve a creative tension, a balancing between them.”²⁵⁷ This allows us to hold a degree of objectivity, to respond to each situation by positioning ourselves at the appropriate point on the spectrum between the two poles:

“in our inner life, a balanced tension between two opposite poles produces a dialectical interchange and mutual enhancement, the outcome of which is our growth... we can observe that all truly integrated personalities exhibit a certain kind of musical quality in their natures: the ability to gracefully and rhythmically dance from one opposite to the other.”²⁵⁸

He uses the image of an archway to illustrate the paradox that, as we examine the two poles, we see that each is each pole is not the opposite of the other, but its complement.

“...as we examine the two poles of a dichotomy ever more carefully, we come to see that the contrast between them lessens. Like the two sides of a gothic arch, they approach each other as they mount, till they converge and fuse into a synthesis.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁵ Ferrucci, P. Ibid, p290

²⁵⁶ Ferrucci, P. Ibid, p291

²⁵⁷ Ferrucci, P. Ibid, p296

²⁵⁸ Ferrucci, P. Ibid, p297

²⁵⁹ Ferrucci, P. Ibid, p298

Assagioli believed that the evolution of our society's consciousness depended on the participation of many people from various backgrounds. As with the heterogeneous self-organising agents in a complex system, or the birds in a flock, or a Navy SEAL in McChrystal's *Team of Teams*, he felt it was "crucial that everybody should just mind their own specific area of competence, without interfering with other people's work, without judging or telling others what they should do or how they should behave."²⁶⁰

His description of psychosynthesis as the societal level is reminiscent of bricolage and emergence:

"...we have already been given everything we need; our task is to assemble and use it in the appropriate way. Nothing is meaningful as long as we perceive only separate fragments. But as soon as the fragments come together into a synthesis, a new entity emerges, whose nature we could not have foreseen by considering the fragments alone. The process of synthesis is visible everywhere in the natural as well as the strictly human world: cells assemble to form an organism, letters join to form a word, musical notes combine to form a melody, and so on."

He also emphasised the value of silence and solitude, which tallies with my own experience of the benefits of time alone on the ocean:

"The cultivation of silence has an immense therapeutic value. When we succeed in stilling the form-making propensity of our minds, all subjective conflict vanishes, scattering gives way to unity, we save our energy (which we otherwise disperse in countless directions), and we feel healed and purified. Part of this effect occurs because silence gives our organism a chance to harmonise itself spontaneously, without the interfering, harassing influence of the mind with all its problems. In this era of noise and hyperstimulation – of the information explosion and the action-oriented life – soothing, regenerating silence is indeed the ultimate resource."²⁶¹

What We May Be represents, to me, the notion that we are at our most powerful when we stand with feet astride the centrepoint between two poles, at the golden mean between not too much

²⁶⁰ <https://psychosynthesisistrust.org.uk/on-the-threshold-of-mystery/>

²⁶¹ Ferrucci, P. *Ibid*, p317

of one thing, nor too much of its opposite. Like a tennis player, the balls that life launches at us may require us to run to one side of the court or the other, but we need to return to the centre line as soon as we can, in order to face the next shot from a position of strength and balance. The optimal state of consciousness is non-dualistic – to use Eisler’s terminology, it arises from the fruitful partnership between the poles of our psyche, rather than allowing one pole or the other to dominate.

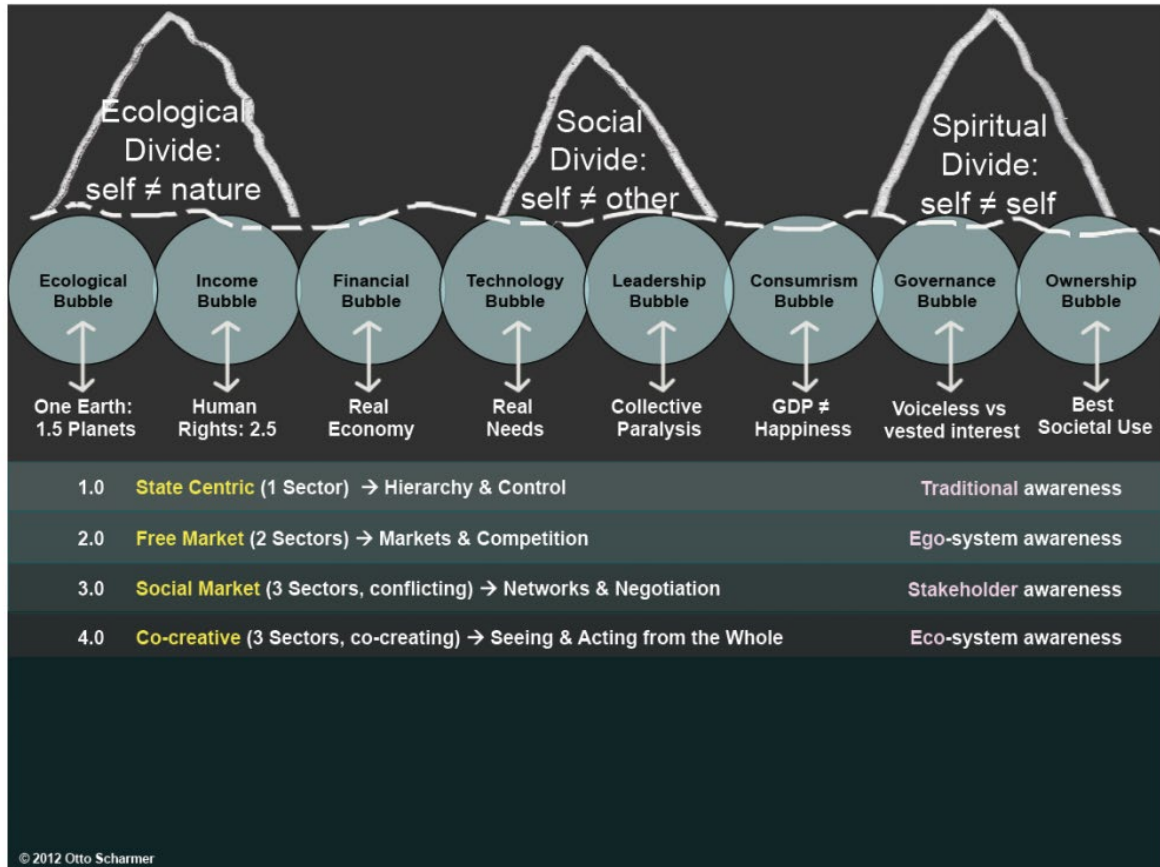
Or, to use a sporting analogy closer to my own experience, a sculling boat is long and narrow, only about one foot wide, and hence extremely precarious. It is essential to keep both sculls extended in order to avoid a dunking. The most stable position is when both blades are at full extension, and locked on the water with the pressure of the oarstroke. In other words, we are at our strongest, most balanced and resilient when we harness the full range of our emotional spectrum, and are fully engaged with the milieu across which we move, while also sitting slightly above it, remembering to check once in a while that we are heading in the right direction.

Theory U

Otto Scharmer, a lecturer at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, co-founded the Presencing Institute in 2006, and in 2009 published *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. Described as an “action research platform at the intersection of science, consciousness, and profound social and organizational change”²⁶², the Presencing Institute has had a significant and widespread impact on addressing global challenges such as the ecological crisis, inequality, finance, healthcare and education. Summarising their work as enabling the transition “from ego-system to eco-system”, the Institute identifies three fundamental disconnects that need to be healed in order to create an equitable and sustainable future: the ecological divide, the social divide, and the spiritual divide.

The “bubbles” illustrated below are well worth exploring in detail, but that is beyond the scope of my present purpose, so I will focus on the top-level divides: the Ecological Divide, the Social Divide, and the Spiritual Divide.

²⁶² <https://www.presencing.org/aboutus>

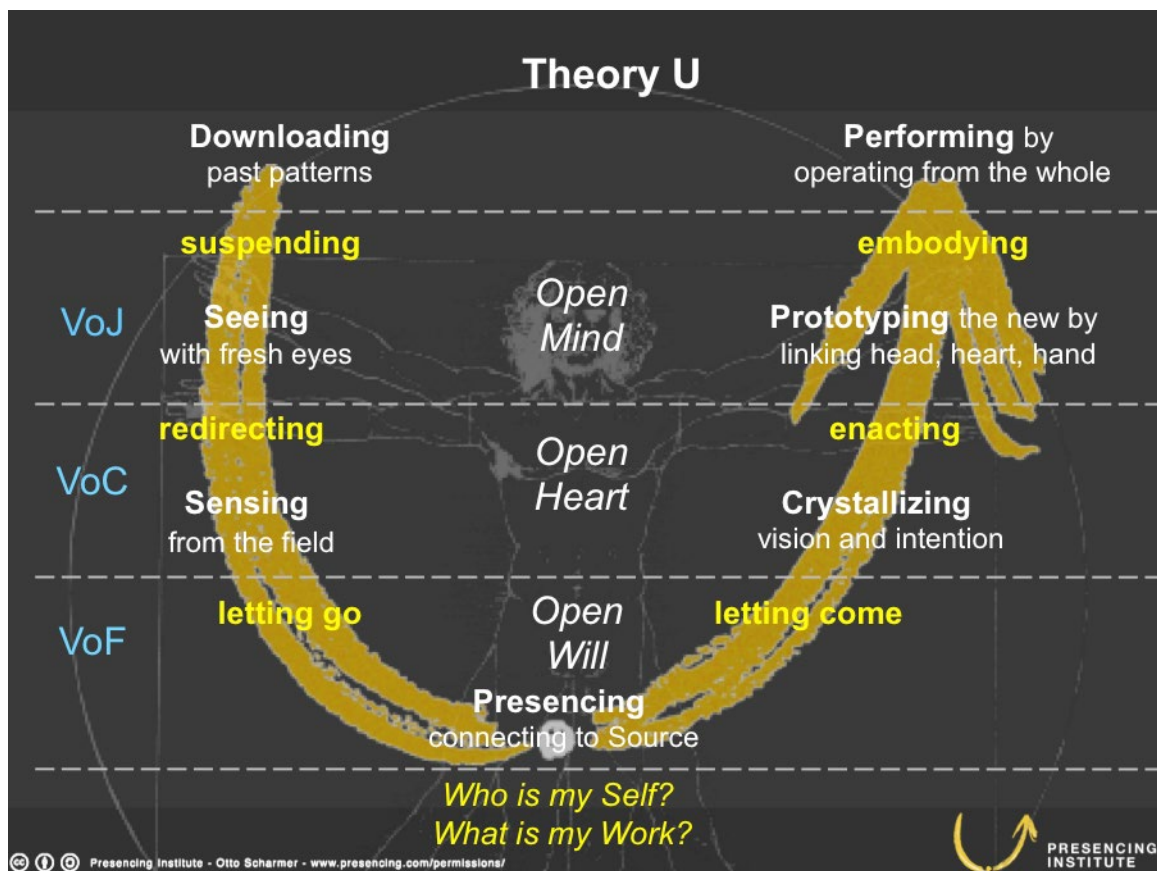


It was quite a few years ago that I first encountered this model, and it immediately made sense to me. As already mentioned, I had been saying for a while that our environmental challenges resemble a many-headed sea monster – we can cut off the heads of climate change, deforestation, plastic pollution, etc., but until we get to the heart of the monster, it will simply keep sprouting new heads – and the heart is the mistaken idea that we are somehow separate from nature, independent of it, rather than deeply interconnected with it. It is only when this interdependence is fully understood that we will start to treat the natural world with the respect it deserves, recognising that to harm nature is to harm ourselves. It is maybe one of the biggest failures of the environmental movement’s communications that it has focused on “save the whale” or “save the planet”, when an appeal to “save the humans” might have galvanised swifter and more effective action.

It is easy to see how this disconnect came about. Nature can appear unfriendly, even dangerous - and I speak from personal experience. Early man understandably wanted to protect himself from famine and drought, extremes of heat and cold, and so he systematically set about creating a more comfortable and secure life with agriculture and homes, and later supermarkets and supply

chains. In the course of this systematic attempt to conquer nature, most of us have become tragically disconnected from the systems that support life, to the extent that we liberally douse our land in pesticides, herbicides, and industrial pollutants, somehow imagining that we will be immune to the cumulative effects.

The Presencing Institute uses the emergent properties of working groups to generate creative new ideas. Theory U refers to the process of letting go of preconceptions in order to open up to new insights.



This concept was in part inspired by a conversation that Scharmer's colleague and collaborator, Joe Jaworski, had in London with the physicist David Bohm, concerning the implicate order of reality. Bohm took two cylindrical jars, one slightly smaller than the other, with the smaller one having a crank on top. He placed the smaller cylinder inside the larger one, and filled the space between with viscous glycerine. When he placed a single drop of ink in the glycerine and turned the crank, the ink was drawn out to a fine ribbon until it seemed to disappear. When he reversed the motion of the inner cylinder the ink reformed to its original state as a visible drop.

What Bohm was illustrating here was that we think that the object, or ink drop, ceases to exist when we can no longer see it, but it does exist – it has merely returned from the explicate to the implicate world. As Jaworski writes:

“All matter and the universe are continually in motion. At a level we cannot see, there is an unbroken wholeness, an ‘implicate order’ out of which seemingly discrete events arise. All human beings are part of that unbroken whole, which is continually unfolding. Two of our responsibilities in life are to be open and to learn, thereby becoming more capable of sensing and actualizing emerging new realities.”²⁶³

This insight proved to be a major influence on Jaworski, and subsequently also on his colleagues Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer.

“Bohm had shared with me in London an explicit mental model of the way he believed the world works and the way he believed human beings learn and think. To Bohm it was clear that humans have an innate capacity for collective intelligence. They can learn and think together, and this collaborative thought can lead to coordinated action. We are all connected and operate within living fields of thought and perception. The world is not fixed but is in constant flux; accordingly, the future is not fixed, and so can be shaped. Humans possess significant tacit knowledge—we know more than we can say. The question to be resolved is how to remove the blocks and tap into that knowledge in order to create the kind of future we all want.”²⁶⁴

Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer refer to this process of flow in *Leading From The Emerging Future*, which describes the Presencing process:

“Presencing is a blended word combining sensing (feeling the future possibility) and presence (the state of being in the present moment). It means sensing and actualizing one’s highest future possibility—acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge.”²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Jaworski, J. (2011). *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. p148

²⁶⁴ Jaworski, J. Ibid, p109

²⁶⁵ Scharmer, C. O. and Kaufer, K. (2013). *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economics*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Location 337 in Kindle edition

It also influenced Jaworski's work with the American Leadership Forum, which he founded. Through intensive courses and retreats, he sought to optimise the conditions for emergence:

“C. G. Jung's classic, *'Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle'*, defines synchronicity as 'a meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved'. In the beautiful flow of these moments, it seems as if we are being helped by hidden hands... Over the years my curiosity has grown, particularly about how these experiences occur collectively within a group or team of people. I have come to see this as the most subtle territory of leadership, creating the conditions for 'predictable miracles.'”²⁶⁶

To summarise this section, and building on the previous one about the hemispheres of the brain: through adopting the principles of psychosynthesis, as advocated by Assagioli and Ferrucci, we can find harmony between the warring elements, as if locating ourselves metaphorically in the corpus callosum between our two hemispheres, in the sweet spot between, while still fully embracing, our internal extremes. Theory U reminds us that we need to heal the disconnects between self and nature, self and other, and self and self.

In the conclusion, we will see how these principles of balance and synthesis can contribute to generating the shift in consciousness.

²⁶⁶ Jaworski, J. Ibid. Location 140 in Kindle edition

The Interface Theory of Perception

Overview of The Case Against Reality

“...what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly? And if also one should point out to him each of the passing objects and constrain him by questions to say what it is, do you not think that he would be at a loss and that he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things now pointed out to him?”²⁶⁷

At least since Plato’s allegory of the cave, humans have wondered about the true nature of reality, and suspected that what we perceive with our senses may not be in itself real, but in fact a projection of a deeper reality. In his book, *The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid The Truth From Our Eyes*, Donald Hoffman, a quantitative psychologist at the University of California at Irvine, sets out a radical new theory of reality, based primarily on evolutionary biology and backed up with mathematics. Like me, he is a preacher’s offspring, and his curiosity about the nature of reality arose from the incompatibility between the version of reality he heard on a Sunday from his fundamentalist father (creationism, transcendent God, heaven and hell, etc.) and what he was hearing on weekdays from his science teachers.

I will first of all summarise the basis of his theories, and then focus on the aspects that are most relevant to my case concerning the nature and role of consciousness²⁶⁸.

This theory does great violence to most people’s intuitions about what is objectively real and what is not, but I invite you to remember Liminal Thinking and What We Don’t Know, and suspend disbelief for long enough to consider that the theory just might be plausible, and if so, it might start to reconcile science and spirituality. I have a mental picture of science and spirituality divorcing each other around the time of Galileo and the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th

²⁶⁷ Plato. The Allegory of the Cave, P. Shorey, trans. from Plato: Collected Dialogues, Republic VII, ed. Hamilton & Cairns. Random House, 1963. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-fscj-philosophy/chapter/the-allegory-of-the-cave/>

²⁶⁸ Sources:

Hoffmann, D. D. (2019). *The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid the Truth from our Eyes*. Allen Lane.

Interview with Rob Reid for the After On podcast: <https://after-on.com/episodes-31-60/053> (30th July 2019)

Interview with Chris Anderson for The TED Interview podcast: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/donald-hoffman-has-radical-new-theory-on-how-we-experience/id1437306870?i=1000456654524>

century, and after several hundred years of estrangement, they are now starting to once again flirt with each other. If Hoffman and his colleagues are right, we may in our lifetimes see them consummate their reunion.

Hoffman proposes that over the course of millions of years, evolutionary biology has favoured organisms that perceive reality in a useful way, rather than an accurate way. Computer simulations have proved repeatedly that, other things being equal, an organism maximises its evolutionary potential when it optimises for “fitness payoffs” such as fight, flight, feeding, and mating, compared with organisms that optimise for truth. In other words, creatures that see the world *usefully* maximise their chances of passing along their genes, while the *accuracy*-perceiving creatures are weeded out of the gene pool. As Hoffman puts it, “The truth won’t make you free. It will make you extinct.”

Hence, over the course of generations, human perception (and presumably that of other creatures) has progressively crafted an interface between us and the true nature of reality. This interface is extremely useful, and enables us to manipulate our world in ways that are beneficial to our survival and procreation, but we should not mistake it for reality itself. When asked, if reality is not actually real, would he be willing to throw himself in front of a fast-moving freight train, Hoffman replies that he would not, because there is a good reason that we have evolved to perceive throwing ourselves in front of trains as a bad and career-limiting idea: he says, “I take reality seriously, but not literally.”²⁶⁹

He uses the metaphor of a computer desktop. Maybe I have an icon in the top right corner of my desktop that is blue and rectangular and represents a folder. This is not to say that there is an actual blue rectangular object that contains my documents and spreadsheets. The reality is that my data lies in the ones and zeroes in the circuit boards of my computer, but if I had to manipulate the data at the level of electrical impulses (even if I knew how to), it would take me a very long time to get any work done. So successful generations of computer programmers have created this extremely useful interface that enables me to do my work effectively. The user interface on my computer screen conceals the reality of the electrical pulses that constitute my data.

²⁶⁹ <https://soundcloud.com/wakingcosmos/is-there-an-infinite-mind-donald-hoffman-phd-the-waking-cosmos-podcast>

In the consideration of the hemispheres of the brain already mentioned, Iain McGilchrist hints that this deception may originate in the left-hemisphere:

“The left hemisphere is not in touch with reality but with its representation of reality, which turns out to be a remarkably self-enclosed, self-referring system of tokens... But the most curious aspect of the story of the left hemisphere is yet to come. It turns on how a self-consistent system of signs, such as the left hemisphere's world, can come to seem more real than the lived world itself.”²⁷⁰

We already know that non-human creatures perceive reality differently than we do. With its bill, the platypus can locate its prey using electroreception. Bats use echolocation to find their way. Snakes can detect infrared. Birds and bees navigate by perceiving polarised light to calibrate their magnetic compass²⁷¹. So this makes it less of a leap of the imagination to conceive that our perceived “reality” is not the only reality.

Hoffman also presents the example of synaesthetes, the approximately 4%²⁷² of humans who have some degree of crossover between their senses. He references Michael Watson, a chef who perceives flavours as physical objects that hover in front of him, invisible, but which he can feel with his hands as if they were real. The taste of mint translates into a smooth column of ice. Angostura bitters becomes a basket of ivy. Other synaesthetes experience numbers as colours, people as sounds, or different musical instruments as a physical sensation in different parts of their body.²⁷³ It is as if evolution is experimenting with novel ways to perceive reality to see if they enhance or diminish the usefulness of our user interface.

I will now home in on the aspects of Hoffman’s theory that are most relevant to my proposal.

Space-Time

Hoffman started out from the “hard problem of consciousness”, the stunning failure of science to explain why we each have a sense of self-ness, as a being that experiences sensory input from our nerve endings, eyes, ears, nose and tongue, and has memories, opinions, and preferences.

²⁷⁰ McGilchrist, I. *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*. Ibid. Location 254 in Kindle edition

²⁷¹ <https://www.bioexplorer.net/animals-with-best-sensors.html/>

²⁷² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3222625/>

²⁷³ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/mar01/synesthesia>

Neuroscientists have done a good job of identifying neural correlates of consciousness, i.e. finding out which parts of the brain respond to which stimuli, but correlation does not establish causation. As Hoffman explains, an alien observer might see people gathering on a train platform, (almost) invariably followed by the arrival of a train, and deduce that the people caused the train to arrive. What the alien would not know about would be the existence of a timetable, which supplies the invisible missing link between the arrival of the passengers and arrival of the train. Just because two things always happen in the same sequence does not mean that the first one causes the second one. There could be a third factor that connects the two of them. Likewise, neuroscientists can put a person in their laboratory and expose them to stimuli, and they can measure corresponding brain activity, but they have yet to prove a causal link between the two. To date, there is no viable scientific theory that describes how brain activity creates subjective experience.

So Hoffman decided to flip the question on its head. If we cannot show that matter gives rise to consciousness, could it be that consciousness gives rise to matter? His interim conclusion is that it does, that reality is in fact “a network of conscious agents”, and that space-time is a product of consciousness, which evolution has created so that we can navigate our way through life.

Could this be what Einstein meant when he said, “Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one”? It also tallies with the theories of Einstein’s fellow physicist, David Bohm, who believed everything in the universe to be intrinsically linked as a whole, even when seemingly separated. According to Hoffman and Bohm, we are therefore very much mistaken if we think that what we see is all there is.

The Interaction of Consciousnesses

Hoffman and his colleagues have created a mathematical representation of consciousness²⁷⁴. When they use this to mathematically represent the interaction between two consciousnesses, the resulting representation is also a consciousness, and so on in ever increasing levels of complexity. Consciousness therefore appears to be fractal, with the organism at each level having a degree of consciousness, but not able to access the consciousness of the organisms at the levels above or

²⁷⁴ Hoffman, D., and Prakash, C. *Objects of Consciousness*. (2014). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 17 June 2014. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00577>

below. It is like a set of nested Russian dolls, but each doll is unaware of the consciousness of dolls larger or smaller than itself.

There is some evidence of this in the lived experience of split-brain patients, the poor unfortunates who not only had their corpus callosum surgically severed to treat the most severe forms of epilepsy, but are then subjected to a lifetime of experiments by inquisitive neuroscientists like Roger Sperry and Michael Gazzaniga²⁷⁵. There are reported cases of the two hemispheres having quite different personalities, for example, the woman whose right hand and left hand would fight in the supermarket over what items she wanted to put in her trolley²⁷⁶, or the student whose right hemisphere wanted to be a racing car driver, while the left wanted to be a draftsman²⁷⁷.

Yet, despite these apparently warring hemispheres, when these split-brain patients were asked if they felt any different after the surgery than they had before, they replied that, other than being freed from their debilitating seizures, they felt the same. This initial answer came from the only verbal hemisphere, the left one, so the researchers asked the right hemisphere the same question, providing it with a pencil or a set of Scrabble letters so it could reply non-verbally, and the right hemisphere produced the same answer: no difference. So even though there was now no physical connection at all between the two hemispheres, the subjective perception of the patient was that they were still a unified consciousness.

So if consciousness is fractal, and perceives itself as unified even in the absence of physical connection, this could disrupt our perception of ourselves as isolated individuals. It could be that all the bacteria, viruses, etc. in my microbiome have a consciousness, albeit a limited one, and that I am the sum total of, and yet hopefully more than, these consciousnesses. As in chaos theory, it could be that my whole is greater than the sum of my parts. As Ed Yong writes in *I Contain Multitudes*:

“Every one of us is a zoo in our own right – a colony enclosed within a single body. A multi-species collective. An entire world.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Gazzaniga, M. (2016). *Tales from Both Sides of the Brain: A Life in Neuroscience*. Ecco Press.

²⁷⁶ <https://www.nature.com/news/the-split-brain-a-tale-of-two-halves-1.10213?nc=1487269420197>

²⁷⁷ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-superhuman-mind/201211/split-brains>

²⁷⁸ Yong, E. (2017). *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grand View of Life*. Vintage. p3

Jill Bolte Taylor's description of her altered state during her stroke is consistent with Hoffman's theory of reality as a network of conscious agents:

“I saw myself as a complex composite of dynamic systems, a collection of interlacing cells capable of integrating a medley of sensory modalities streaming in from the external world. And when the systems functioned properly, they naturally manifested a consciousness capable of perceiving a normal reality.”²⁷⁹

Could even the non-physical aspects of ourselves, such as our emotions, have consciousness? In conversation with my insightful friend, Martia Nelson²⁸⁰, in September 2020, she said:

“Each emotion is a conscious being to me. I treat them like they're conscious beings that exist in us, and all conscious beings – and by conscious, I don't mean that they have to know who they are, they're just present, like cats are conscious, gophers are conscious, amoebas are conscious, even though their consciousness is different from what we think of as human consciousness - they're all on a path of evolution. (I don't really know about amoebas – I just threw that in!) Their essence is always on a path of greater alignment with our true self. We're all on a path of evolution to be more aligned with pure unconditional love, unconditional wellbeing, every lovely word you can think of, because that's what Source is.”²⁸¹

Could this unification operate at the species-wide level? The controversial biochemist, Rupert Sheldrake, proposes the theory of morphic resonance, which states that “natural systems... inherit a collective memory from all previous things of their kind”²⁸², and that morphic resonance explains “telepathy-type interconnections between organisms”²⁸³.

Less controversially, as the idea has stayed in the relative safety of the realm of philosophy and theology rather than claiming the mantle of science, is the concept of the noosphere, a term

²⁷⁹ Bolte Taylor, J. Ibid. p45

²⁸⁰ <https://martianelson.com/about-martia/>

²⁸¹ Zoom conversation with Martia Nelson, recorded 24th September 2020

²⁸² Sheldrake, R (2011). *The presence of the past: Morphic resonance and the habits of nature*. Icon Books.

²⁸³ But note Hood, B. (2009). *Supersense: Why We Believe in the Unbelievable*. HarperOne. p. 232. “Sheldrake proposes that the sense of being stared at and other aspects of paranormal ability, such as telepathy and knowing about events in the future before they happen, are all evidence for a new field theory that he calls "morphic resonance." ... The trouble is that, whereas electric and magnetic fields are easily measurable and obey laws, morphic resonance remains elusive and has no demonstrable laws. No other area of science would accept such lawless, weak evidence as proof, which is why the majority of the scientific community has generally dismissed this theory and the evidence.”

originally coined by the Russian biogeochemist Vladimir Vernadsky (1863-1945), and popularised by the French Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Teilhard believed that all sentient beings on Earth are engaged in a collective evolutionary process that started with the geosphere, which gave rise to the biosphere, which will in turn birth the noosphere, which will lead to the Omega Point, the final point of unification. The noosphere, according to Teilhard, is of the same complex systemic nature as the biosphere or the hydrosphere, but is comprised of human thought, or consciousness.

Moving to the next step up the scale, James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis proposes that the Earth is a self-regulating, synergistic system whose living organisms interact with their ecosystem to optimise conditions for their continued survival. Stephan Harding interprets the hypothesis thus, which sounds very much like a collective consciousness at the planetary level. Could it be possible that there is something that it is "like" to be a planet – in other words, a planetary consciousness?

"It is at least not impossible to regard the earth's parts—soil, mountains, rivers, atmosphere etc,—as organs or parts of organs of a coordinated whole, each part with its definite function. And if we could see this whole, as a whole, through a great period of time, we might perceive not only organs with coordinated functions, but possibly also that process of consumption as replacement which in biology we call metabolism, or growth. In such case we would have all the visible attributes of a living thing, which we do not realize to be such because it is too big, and its life processes too slow."²⁸⁴

Hoffman's theory, taken to its logical extreme, implies that everything is unified into an overarching collective consciousness, commensurate with the entire cosmos, and here we are verging on the metaphysical. Hoffman does not shy away from this question:

"The theory says that yes, this goes on ad infinitum... the mathematics allows that this could go on to infinity so there are conscious agents with an infinite range of experiences. So once we get to that area – conscious agents with an infinite variety of conscious experiences – now we are treading on the turf of spirituality. We're talking about infinite consciousnesses. But we have mathematical precision – we can actually

²⁸⁴ Harding, S. (2006). *Animate Earth Science, Intuition and Gaia*. Chelsea Green Publishing. p44

start to prove theorems about these higher level consciousnesses and the relationship to finite consciousnesses.”²⁸⁵

This idea may sound radical, but it is certainly not new. The German theologian, Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), is quoted in Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* as saying:

“The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge.”²⁸⁶

Huxley also quotes the Blessed John of Ruysbroeck (1293-1381), in a passage which could be interpreted as a holographic representation of consciousness:

“The image of God is found essentially and personally in all mankind. Each possesses it whole, entire and undivided, and all together not more than one alone. In this way we are all one, intimately united in our eternal image, which is the image of God and the source in us of all our life.”²⁸⁷

Some modern secular texts, such as *Conversations with God*, emphasise that “We Are All One” in a way that seems more than metaphorical, describing our sense of self as being a delusion that separates us from each other and from our spiritual source.

“We are all One. That is what is meant by ‘whatsoever ye do unto the least of these... ye do unto me.’... Consciousness is a marvellous thing. It can be divided into a thousand pieces. A million. A million times a million. I [God] have divided Myself into an infinite number of ‘pieces’ – so that each ‘piece’ of Me could look back on Itself and behold the wonder of Who and What I Am.”²⁸⁸

Even Einstein had something to say on the matter:

²⁸⁵ <https://soundcloud.com/wakingcosmos/is-there-an-infinite-mind-donald-hoffman-phd-the-waking-cosmos-podcast>, at approx. 59 mins

²⁸⁶ Huxley, A. (First published 1945. 2009 edition.) *The Perennial Philosophy*. First Harper Perennial Modern Classics. p12

²⁸⁷ Huxley, A. *Ibid.* p57

²⁸⁸ Walsch, N. D. (1999). *Conversations with God, Book 3: An Uncommon Dialogue*. Hodder and Stoughton. p138

“We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness.”

At the very least, research shows that an appreciation of the interconnectedness of all life, if not going as far as “We Are All One”, has been shown to be beneficial to compassion, altruism, and psychological wellbeing.²⁸⁹

“A variety of philosophical, religious, spiritual, and scientific perspectives converge on the notion that everything that exists is part of some fundamental entity, substance, or process. People differ in the degree to which they believe that everything is one, but we know little about the psychological or social implications of holding this belief. In two studies, believing in oneness was associated with having an identity that includes distal people and the natural world, feeling connected to humanity and nature, and having values that focus on other people’s welfare... The belief in oneness is a meaningful existential belief that has numerous implications for people’s self-views, experiences, values, relationships, and behaviour.”²⁹⁰

So while the jury may still be out on whether consciousness is nested in a hierarchy of ascending levels, rather than isolated and discrete as most of us perceive, we may wish to choose a narrative that embodies this new possibility simply on the grounds that it makes us better human beings.

Death May Not Be the End

Daring to go where most scientists would fear to tread, Hoffman proposes that, if his theory of consciousness is correct, that space-time is an illusion and that consciousness gives rise to the phenomenon of matter, death may not be as final as Western secular culture would have us believe.

He uses a metaphor from virtual reality: if I and my friends put on our VR headsets to play a game of beach volleyball, we would have the very convincing perception that we were suddenly transported to a beach with a volleyball court, a net, and a ball. We would play for a while inside

²⁸⁹ <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/beautiful-minds/what-would-happen-if-everyone-truly-believed-everything-is-one/>

²⁹⁰ Diebels, K. J. and Leary, M. R. (2019). *The psychological implications of believing that everything is one*. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 14:4, 463-473, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2018.1484939

this virtual interface, and then maybe I would say that I am thirsty and I am going to fetch a drink. I take off my VR headset. To my friends, I would appear to either collapse, lifeless, to the ground, or I would disappear altogether, depending on how the interface was programmed. In either case, I would appear to have expired, but in fact I would simply have stepped out of the interface to get refreshment.

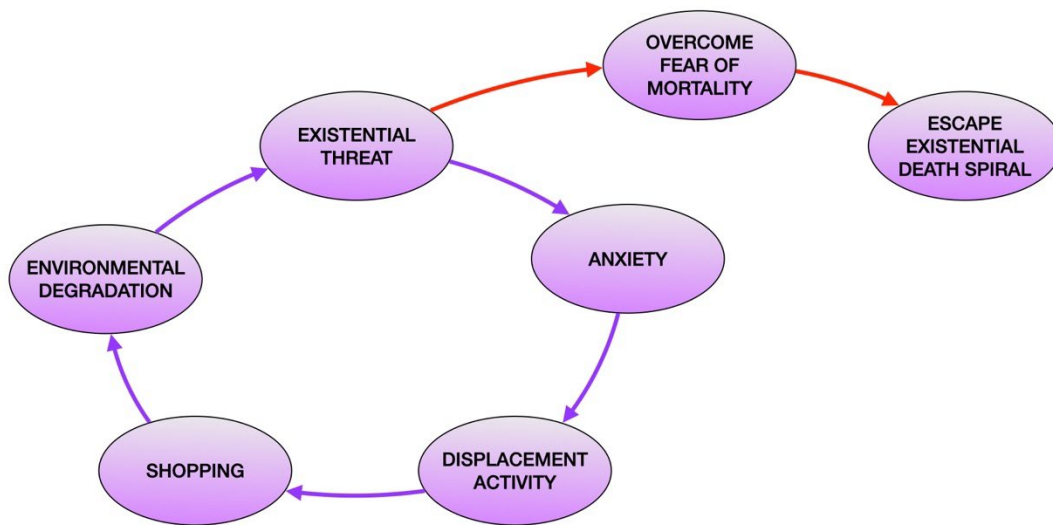
If, as Hoffman suggests, death is no more than stepping out of the earthly interface or, as the Dalai Lama has put it, equivalent to a change of clothes²⁹¹, this would have major impacts on the story that most non-religious people tell themselves about the finality of death, with all the anxiety that brings. We have bought into the story of our own smallness, our vulnerability, our mortality, our individualism, our aloneness in the universe.

Compelling research suggests that fear of death makes us less happy, unsurprisingly, and more materialistic²⁹². Adopting a different belief around death could enable us to opt out of what I call the existential death spiral, in which climate change (or any other existential threat) makes us anxious, so to divert ourselves and/or to create a reassuring external representation of permanence and immortality we go shopping, which exacerbates the very problem that made us anxious in the first place, leading to still greater anxiety, and more retail therapy, and so on.

If death lost its sting, in other words, we might be more relaxed, indulge less in the purchase of superfluous consumer goods, and improve the long-term prospects of our species.

²⁹¹ <https://hackspirit.com/dalai-lama-explains-happens-die-can-prepared/>

²⁹² For example, Urien, B. and Kilbourne, W. (2008). *On the Role of Materialism in the Relationship Between Death Anxiety and Quality of Life*, in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 35, eds. Angela Y. Lee and Dilip Soman, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 409-415, and Christopher, A. and Drummond, K and Jones, J. and Marek, P. and Therriault, K. (2006). *Beliefs about One's Own Death, Personal Insecurity, and Materialism*. Personality and Individual Differences. 40. 441-451. 10.1016/j.paid.2005.09.017.



When modern psychological research and theories on the fundamental nature of reality appear to be converging with ancient wisdom from just about every religious tradition across the world, it is at least worth paying attention to. As the joke goes, the scientists finally make it to the mountaintop, only to find a band of raggedy monks have already been sitting there for centuries. The monks say, “What took you so long?”

Taoism

“We do not need a new religion or a new bible. We need a new experience—a new feeling of what it is to be ‘I.’ The lowdown (which is, of course, the secret and profound view) on life is that our normal sensation of self is a hoax, or, at best, a temporary role that we are playing, or have been conned into playing—with our own tacit consent, just as every hypnotized person is basically willing to be hypnotized. The most strongly enforced of all known taboos is the taboo against knowing who or what you really are behind the mask of your apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego.”²⁹³

– Alan Watts

²⁹³ Watts, A. (2009). *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. Souvenir Press. p12

I'm conscious of the strangeness of being a British person with a Methodist upbringing advocating the virtues of Taoism, so before I face any charges of cultural appropriation, I would like to emphasise that Taoism is seen primarily as a philosophy, rather than a religion, and no region or race has a monopoly over it.

I do not claim to be an expert in Taoism, which is an ancient and deep philosophy with a vast literature and sophisticated levels of interpretation. What I will offer here is my personal interpretation of Taoism, as I have been applying it in my life for fifteen or so years now. This could be said to be more of a Taoist-flavoured approach to living, rather than strict adherence to any prescribed model. I arrived at a basic understanding of Taoist principles while I was on the Atlantic Ocean, without having a label for them. This does not make me a genius or a spiritual savant; it simply means that Taoist philosophy makes a great deal of sense, especially when one is facing exceptionally challenging situations.

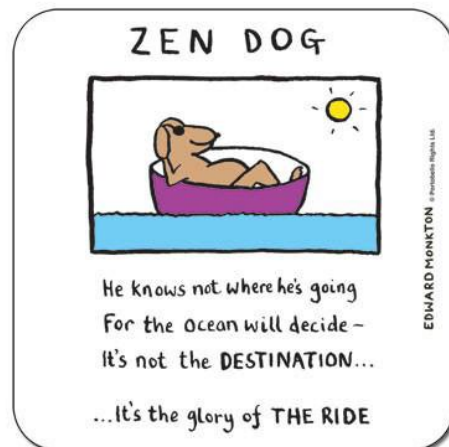
I had taken the usual Western path through the yang worlds of mainstream British education and preacher-mediated religion, followed by the even more yang world of management consultancy in the City of London. Following the separation from my (also very yang) husband, I had made new friends and allies, and started to open up to the more intuitive, spiritual side of life. Key books around this time were *Who We May Be*, *The Perennial Philosophy*, and *The Celestine Prophecy*.

It had been quite a dramatic internal shift, a vast new realm of possibility opening up in terms of how to live, like sudden access to a new superpower. My world metaphorically transformed from monochrome to technicolour, or, to draw on a common metaphor for yin/yang balance, I felt like a bird who has been flying on one wing all its life, until one day it wakes up to find it has two. It discovers how much higher and more powerfully it can fly, leading to a dramatic expansion of its horizons, and delights in the sheer joy of soaring over the landscape.

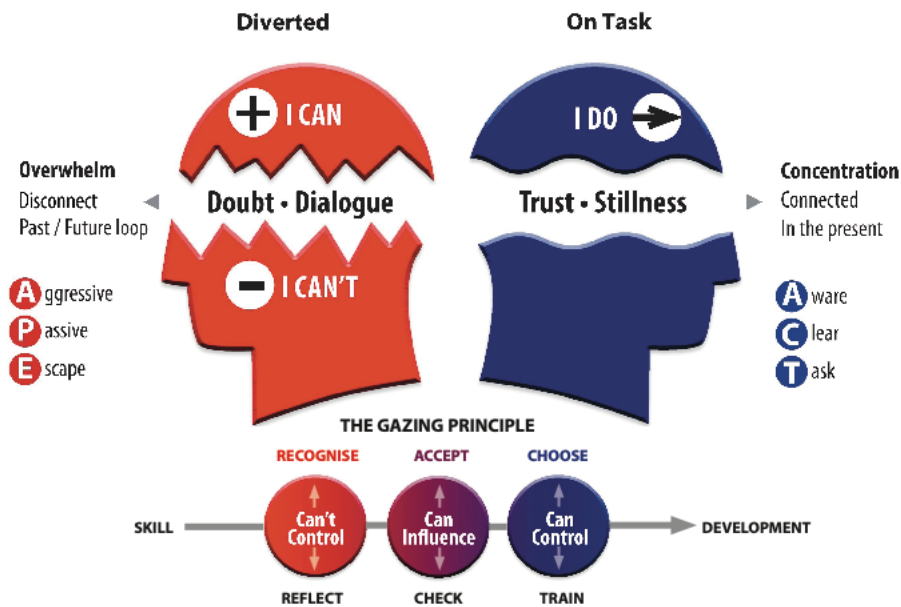
In the rush of preparing for the Atlantic, though, I had defaulted back to the narrow focus required to get through an inordinate amount of preparation in just fourteen months. The yin aspect requires a certain spaciousness in which to operate, spaciousness I had been too impatient to give myself, driven by the perceived urgency of the environmental mission. Once out on the ocean, the sense of impatience and urgency continued, exacerbated by the offer from my only cash sponsor to double their financial support if I beat the women's record for the fastest

crossing. I allowed myself to be hijacked by their incentive, and lost sight of my original motivations of raising environmental awareness, while expanding my perceived limitations.

One day, sitting in my cabin to write up my logbook at the end of a rowing shift, my gaze fell upon two items that I had velcroed to the cabin wall. One was a coaster, given to me by my beloved friend, Romy Shovelton.



The other was a crib sheet, given to me by Bede Brosnahan of Gazing Performance, the sports psychologist who had been coaching me in preparation for the expedition. Bede, incidentally, has a black belt in karate, a martial art grounded in traditional Chinese principles, and the Gazing model is congruent with that philosophy. My eyes had wandered across that laminated sheet of A4 countless times during the voyage, but suddenly it landed. I realised I had been fluctuating hectically between the “I can/I can’t” poles of the red head in a destructive inner dialogue, and I needed to trust myself and find the clear stillness of being on task, as in the blue mindset. I needed to be more Zen Dog, and relax into enjoying the journey, rather than yearning impatiently for it to be over.



According to the Gazing Performance website:

“Whether pressure is perceived as good or bad, we believe the prime issue is about being able to ‘control your attention’. In our view, your attention is either on or off the task - which at Gazing we refer to as having a ‘blue head’ and being ‘off task’ as having a ‘red head’. ‘Red Head’ is an unresourceful state in which you are off task, overwhelmed and ineffective. ‘Blue Head’, on the other hand, is an optimal state in which you are on task, concentrating and performing to your best ability.”²⁹⁴

The key point here was to adjust one’s attitude. The outer reality would remain the same, but the consciousness through which it was perceived could make all the difference. The lesson struck home, but it was only when my satellite phone broke, and I was left totally incommunicado, that I came fully into “blue head” awareness. I was no longer made madly envious by reports of other rowing crews completing their crossings (or even being rescued, which also seemed preferable to my lonely ongoing slog), nor did I have access to the weather forecasts which had made me

²⁹⁴ <https://www.gazing.com/gazing-performance-systems-blog/the-control-circle-how-to-move-from-a-red-to-a-blue-head>

fearful of storms, or eager for favourable conditions. I became very present in the moment, and came fully back into balance within myself. The sense of relief was palpable. In *Rowing the Atlantic*, I relay how I described my feelings to camera at the time:

“It's the second day since my satellite phone stopped working, and I can hardly find the words to describe how different I feel. I'm loving it. I feel like I'm starting to regain my energy. I've been rowing along this afternoon, feeling so serene and calm. It's been one of those really magic moments. If I could just bottle this feeling...” I pause for a moment, “I'd make millions.” I look out across the ocean, which is sparkling in the background. I no longer regard it as my enemy, I regard it as my salvation. I continue: “This feeling is better than any drug - a feeling of total self-sufficiency, self-reliance - just me and my little boat in the middle of the ocean. I'm happy and content. I've never known peace like it. It's an absolute total... peace. Yeah, there's no other word for it. It's made it all worthwhile – all the agony, all the suffering, all the pain, all the self-doubt. It's all been worth it for the way I feel this afternoon.”²⁹⁵

The paradox here is that doing something as audacious and apparently attention-seeking as rowing alone across oceans, actually had the effect of profoundly humbling my ego. When you find yourself on hands and knees, naked, on the deck of a pitching rowboat in a howling gale, bellowing in frustration at the sea anchor that has managed to tie itself in knots yet again, ego becomes an unnecessary, even a dangerous, luxury. Mother Nature has shown her supremacy, and you are simply begging to be allowed to cross the ocean with your life and sanity relatively intact. Amanda Palmer, the American singer-songwriter, describes well how abject humbling leads to greater courage:

“I highly recommend street performing over attending a conservatory to any musician, especially if they're going into rock and roll: it wears your ego down to stubbly little nubs and gives your performance balls of steel.”²⁹⁶

The ocean was my street performance, and what didn't kill me did indeed make me stronger, without the inconvenient burden of ego, knowing I had to surrender to the is-ness of the situation if I was going to succeed.

²⁹⁵ Savage, R. (2009). *Rowing the Atlantic*. Simon & Schuster. p193

²⁹⁶ Palmer, A. (2014). *The Art of Asking: How I learned to stop worrying and let people help*. Piatkus. p62

The Tao

As I interpret the philosophy of Taoism, it emphasises the interconnectedness of all things, summed up as the microcosm within the macrocosm, “As above, so below. As within, so without.”²⁹⁷ The Taoist way of life seeks to establish balance within oneself while also living harmoniously with the greater balance found in nature, the cosmos being the closest that our western minds can come to the concept of the Tao, although the Tao is a multi-dimensional, all-encompassing cosmos, not merely the physical one.

“There was something formless and perfect before the universe was born.
It is serene. Empty. Solitary. Unchanging. Infinite. Eternally present.
It is the mother of the universe.
For lack of a better name, I call it Tao.
It flows through all things, inside and outside, and returns to the origin of all things.
The Tao is great. The universe is great. Earth is great. Man is great.
These are the four great powers.
Man follows the Earth. Earth follows the universe.
The universe follows the Tao.
The Tao follows only itself.”²⁹⁸

Originating with the 64 hexagrams contained in the ancient Chinese divination text, the *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes* (date unknown, but at least 1140 B.C.), the philosophy was elucidated by the scholar Lao-Tzu, about whom little is known, in his book, the *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Book of The Way*.

“He often referred to the Tao as ‘the Mother’ who guides us to live as she lives – gentle yet powerful, resilient yet strong, yielding like bamboo no matter how turbulent the winds. This ability to give way, to ebb, to flow without rigidity, to move with rather than against, will sustain us even during the harshest of times. It is the power that achieves change through effortless effort, through non-doing rather than doing.”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Motto from the Emerald Tablet, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

²⁹⁸ Tao Te Ching, translated by Stephen Mitchell, quoted by Ma Deva Padma. (2002). *Tao Oracle: An Illuminated New Approach to the I Ching*. St Martin's Press. p29

²⁹⁹ Ma Deva Padma. Ibid. p28

The yin/yang symbol that lies at the heart of Taoism represents the dynamic interplay of the receptive yin principle with the creative yang principle. It is this interaction of yin and yang that give rise to *qi*, or life force. Implied in the symbol is its rotation, a never-ending cycle of rising and falling, waxing and waning, ebbing and flowing, with each phase containing the seed of its opposite, although in fact I should say *complement* rather than *opposite*, as the yin/yang exemplifies the non-dual nature of existence; one aspect cannot exist without the other, like two sides of one coin, so they are not in opposition, but are in fact inherent in each other.

I will now explore each of these features in more detail, as they relate to my overall thesis.

Yin Yang

“Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. This is another paradox: What is soft is strong.” – Lao Tzu

While it is important to maintain a balance of yin and yang for good health and good living, this is a dynamic and ongoing process that relies on the contrast between the two principles. We would not want the black and white of the yin-yang symbol to be homogenised into grey, any more than we would want all humans to be homogenised into something in between male and female. Sexual reproduction shuffles the genes of two separate humans, producing new variations, and hence the evolution and resilience of the species. Likewise, it is the interaction of yin and yang that is the creative force of the cosmos.

Yin-yang also translates into the principle: “as within, so without” – in other words, how we are in the hidden, internal realm (yin) affects how we show up in the visible, external realm (yang). As leaders, and more generally, as human beings, what we manifest in the world is a reflection of our inner state, as we have previously considered. It is therefore crucial to pay attention to the integrity and sincerity of our attitudes and beliefs if we are not to taint our results.

My role model for this style of leadership is Christiana Figueres, and in particular her account of what happened behind the scenes of the pivotal COP21 in Paris in 2015, when she was Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Over the previous six years, she had slowly built a solid foundation of support, both in terms of the national

delegations, and also a series of mechanisms, frameworks, agreements, protocols and amendments that would eventually culminate in the Paris Agreement³⁰⁰.

Being interviewed onstage at the Royal Society of Arts in London on 2nd March 2020³⁰¹, she described how she and her team realised, “We can’t settle for what is good, we have to push for what is necessary.” In secret, they set about building an enormous network of companies, bureaucrats, political figures, religious leaders, and other influencers in every country around the globe, and built a system that would enable them to respond to what was happening in the negotiating room in real time.

Christiana’s colleague, Tom Rivett-Carnac, not coincidentally a former Buddhist monk, was inside the negotiating room, and would get the nod from Christiana if one of the negotiators was not being cooperative. He would then call his secret team, who were located in a separate building, and the hidden network would swing into action. Someone on the team would call a person who would call a minister who would call the person in the negotiating room, and with the support of this network of allies, Christiana would get the result that she wanted.

What I appreciated most was Christiana’s description of how she handled the problem that had repeatedly sabotaged previous climate change negotiations. Industrialised countries were refusing to accept their historic responsibility, and were blaming developing countries for their current emissions. Conversely, developing countries were blaming industrialised countries for having emitted first, and emitting more. Christiana’s response was very much in keeping with her Buddhist philosophy, and is at the same time both deeply personal and totally universal:

“They weren’t even able to talk to each other about this. There was a constant blaming going on, and a constant ‘who is the victim of who?’ My Buddhist studying at that time had made me realise that if you get into the victim/perpetrator role, that all of us have in so many aspects of our life, that that victim/perpetrator role is one that is completely impossible to win. Because the moment I accuse you of being my perpetrator, you will not stand still. You will then turn around and tell me that I am actually your perpetrator.... And I also realised that I was doing that in my own personal life. I had

³⁰⁰ Caroit, J-M. (2 December 2010). “A Cancun, le baptême du feu de Christiana Figueres, nouvelle “Madame Climat” des Nations unies”. *Le Monde*. Retrieved 23 September 2020.

³⁰¹ Video of “The Future We Choose” at the Royal Society of Arts, uploaded 4th March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YQe0OdAVC0>. Accessed 6th October 2020.

viewed myself as a victim, and had pointed the accusatory finger at my former husband, who I had identified as being the perpetrator. It was very clear to me that as long as I embodied that reality, what I was responsible for was not going to untangle itself. And because what is true at one level of the system is true at all levels of the system, my first responsibility was to take myself out of that victim/perpetrator role. Because if I continued to do it, I would see all the countries continue to do that, and we would never have gotten to the Paris Agreement.”³⁰²

So she took it upon herself to do her inner work, unpicking the dynamic between herself and her ex-husband until she could see that, “This really is a completely fruitless and endless discussion that helps no one”:

“The only way out was to exit that and to see everything from the observer role, which is what you’re taught in these Buddhist practices. And lo and behold, and although it took a heck of a lot of work, and quite a long time, it was when I shifted that that I began to see the shift in the international negotiations. I’m not claiming a direct causal link, but I’m also not claiming that it was coincidence.”³⁰³

This, to me, is a perfect example of the style of leadership we need, powerfully synthesising yin and yang. She did the yin inner work, but she also used the full force of her yang/left-hemisphere/executive capacity to build the solid foundation of incremental agreements and the web of communication with allies outside the negotiating room.

She explicitly recognises the fractal nature of the system, and acknowledges that she could not create harmony externally while she was carrying disharmony internally. To change the result she is getting, she changes herself.

In the context of the United Nations, dominator-style leadership cannot work; leadership by consensus is the only way. Hers was a major shift in strategy from the Hollywood-heroic style of leadership, where a lone leader swoops in at the eleventh hour to save the day. In Copenhagen in 2009, I and probably many others had hoped that the newly-elected Obama would be that hero,

³⁰² Video of “The Future We Choose” at the Royal Society of Arts, uploaded 4th March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YQe0OdAVC0>. Accessed 6th October 2020.

³⁰³ Video of “The Future We Choose” at the Royal Society of Arts, uploaded 4th March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YQe0OdAVC0>. Accessed 6th October 2020.

all-conquering as he then seemed, but even he was not able to secure the cooperation of the intransigent Chinese that year. Christiana, by contrast, buckled down to the long, slow, largely invisible task of incremental progress, consolidated at each stage. This relatively yin approach ultimately proved successful in achieving the objective, where yang approaches had failed, like the water wearing away at the rock.

(For more on this, see *Appendix 4: Yin and Yang Maturity*, based on a forthcoming book by my friend and colleague, Lisa Marshall.)

Wu-Wei (Effortless Action)

According to the *Tao Te Ching*, ‘The Way never acts yet nothing is left undone’, and it is this paradox that is the essence of *wu-wei*. Yang is characterised as active, while yin is passive, but passive does not mean inert. It takes active effort, especially in our western culture, to practice not-doing. “Those who work much do not work hard,”³⁰⁴ said Henry David Thoreau, who also advocated “a broad margin” to his life, a beautiful phrase that evokes the spaciousness of a life not overburdened with busy-work, allowing room to walk and think and *be*.

Recently a new connection on LinkedIn sent a message that started with, “I hope you’re busy...”, and I found myself wondering why he would curse me with such a wish. I apparently convey the impression that I live a busy and productive life, but the reality, as I experience it, is that I allow plenty of time for yin-style walking, sitting, thinking, and also not-thinking. I aim to be effective, rather than productive. There is more than enough productivity going on in the world; we need more effectiveness.

The desired approach is to align with the rhythms of the Tao. Timing is important; in a yin cycle, it may seem that nothing is changing or being achieved, which could be perceived as frustrating, but it is more helpful to see these times as a fallow period, when although on the surface it may seem that there is little progress, on a deeper level invisible shifts are taking place that will eventually come to fruition when the time is right. Likewise, it is beneficial not to become either triumphalist or lazy during the yang phases, when everything seems to be clicking into place,

³⁰⁴ Thoreau, H. D. (2009). *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837–1861* (ed. Damion Searles). NYRB Classics. p26.

because that also will not last forever. This ability to work with the flow requires a grounded alertness, in order to be ready to act at the optimum moment.

Patience has not come naturally to me, but oceans will teach a person patience, if nothing else. Apart from the final leg of the Pacific, when the strong winds and currents in the western Pacific whisked me surprisingly quickly to my destination, every other voyage took longer than expected. Hofstadter's Law – that anything always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law³⁰⁵ – was my lived reality. On the Atlantic crossing, my impatience caused me a lot of needless suffering. On the later voyages, I learned to take it one day at a time, and not to plan any future appointments until I had actually set foot back on dry land.

The 2018 book by Steven D'Souza and Diana Renner, *Not Doing: The Art of Effortless Action*, features an illustration of a rowboat on the cover, and opens with a story from the second leg of my Pacific crossing, when I had a difficult decision to make. I could have taken the yang approach, forcing my way across west-flowing currents to get far enough east to land at my intended destination of Tuvalu, where all kinds of logistics and publicity were already in place, or I could take the yin way, and go with the winds and currents and land instead on Tarawa, an atoll in the Republic of Kiribati.

Two factors made my decision easier. First, my watermaker stopped working and could not be fixed with the spares I had on board, so making landfall anywhere at all suddenly became vitally important. Second, I was listening to the audiobook of *The Astonishing Power of Emotions*³⁰⁶, by Esther and Jerry Hicks. The phrase that leaped out for me from the book was, “nothing you want lies upstream”. Clearly the book was not designed to be used for navigational purposes, but the timing seemed uncanny. Tuvalu was indeed upstream. So with around a week to go before my team were due to fly to Tuvalu to greet me, and with considerable trepidation about their reaction, I changed the plan. Miraculously, a whole new set of logistics fell into place with remarkably little effort (although my shore manager may have a different version of events), and the stopover in Tarawa worked out marvellously well.

³⁰⁵ Hofstadter, D. (1979). *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. Basic Books.

³⁰⁶ Hicks, E. and J. (2008). *The Astonishing Power of Emotions: Let Your Feelings Be Your Guide*. Hay House UK.

The lesson I took from this was that we can try to bend reality to stick with the original plan, but sometimes it is better to change the plan and go with the flow. The difficult part is figuring out whether you are going with the flow as an active choice, or simply being a dead fish; distinguishing between waiting because of an intuitive sense that the time is not yet right, and hesitancy due to fear or laziness. Refining my awareness to the degree needed to draw this distinction is still very much a work in progress.

Ziran (Naturalness)

“The essence of the principle of the Uncarved Block is that things in their original simplicity contain their own natural power, power that is easily spoiled and lost when that simplicity is changed.”³⁰⁷

In Taoism, *ziran* means, literally, by-itself-so-ness, or “naturalness” in the sense of being true to its own nature. The metaphor is of the Uncarved Block, or *P'u*, as described in the quote above in *The Tao of Pooh*, with Winnie the Pooh being held up as the epitome of the Uncarved Block.

Things and people are therefore to be honoured and appreciated exactly as they are, in their natural state. Acting spontaneously, in the way that is most in alignment with the natural way of things, requires the least energy and effort, and is therefore maximally sustainable and to be desired. This is not to say that nothing will ever change; what is natural at one stage of life may not be natural at the next, so *ziran* is entirely compatible with growth and evolution.

This can be easier said than done. For the first couple of months of the Atlantic voyage, I found myself constantly doubting whether I was doing things the *right* way. How was ocean rowing *supposed to be* done? This is the problem when we grow up in a culture that has deemed a small number of ways *right*, and a whole load of ways *wrong*. Eventually I realised that, given the duration of an ocean crossing, it is more of a temporary lifestyle than a sporting event. Perceiving it as a microcosm of life, rather than as a race, shifted my perspective. I may not have much experience of rowing oceans, but I did have considerable experience of life, so I would give myself permission to simply row this ocean *my* way. This worked much better, and is a principle that I continue to use. While it is valuable to gather advice from those who have gone before, it is still important to bring our own style, our own naturalness, to whatever we do.

³⁰⁷ Hoff, B. *The Tao of Pooh*. First edition 1982. 2012 edition, Egmont UK Ltd. p10

Relatively recently, some scientists and philosophers have started to relate the *I Ching* to the human DNA code. In 2009, Richard Rudd published *The Gene Keys*, in which he correlates the two mutually-reflecting strands of nucleotides in DNA (the double helix) with the yin and yang, and the sixty-four genetic codons with the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching*. He connects this to breakthroughs in epigenetics that indicate that our attitude affects the health of our cells at the genetic level.

The *Gene Keys* methodology creates a personal profile based on the date and place of one's birth, rather like an astrological reading, and you may or may not buy into this system of thought. I am, I hope, appropriately sceptical, but have found the Gene Keys surprisingly resonant. In particular, I find it interesting that the Gene Key representing my Life's Work is the 10th Gene Key: Naturalness, and Rudd's description of Naturalness resonated deeply with my own experiences, both before and during my time on the ocean:

“Individual differentiation is the cornerstone of evolution itself. If we humans do not discover our own identity and uniqueness, we cannot transcend it and move our society to a higher level. The blessing is that the more different we each allow ourselves to be, the more we operate as a unity. This is one of the most beautiful of all human paradoxes.”³⁰⁸

As in Jungian psychology, each Gene Key has a shadow. The shadow of Naturalness is Self-obsession, but it also seems that the path has to pass through Self-obsession before it can get to Naturalness. It is only once we know ourselves thoroughly that we are able to set aside our conditioning, and see both ourselves and the world through relatively clear lenses.

This process tallies with the archetypal journey set out by Jung in his theory of individuation, which begins with the individual asking: *who am I? Why am I here?* He acknowledges that this work is not easy.

“It is a most painful procedure to tear off those veils, but each step forward in psychological development means just that, the tearing off of a new veil. We are like

³⁰⁸ Rudd, R. (2015). *The Gene Keys: Embracing Your Higher Purpose (New Edition): Unlocking the Higher Purpose Hidden in Your DNA*. Watkins Publishing, p65

onions with many skins, and we have to peel ourselves again and again in order to get at the real core.”³⁰⁹

I went through this process on the Atlantic, and it was indeed painful. On Day 49 of the Atlantic, I wrote in my blog post:

“When I told my mother about the latest casualties [more equipment broken and lost] she commented, ‘The ocean is really stripping you down, isn’t it?’. And this is true, metaphorically as well as literally. As I’m left with less and less, it makes me realise how little I actually need, how little is actually important. Everything happens for a reason. So there must be lessons I am meant to learn from this.”³¹⁰

As well as my boat, my sense of self was getting stripped down as well, to its barest essence. (To clarify, I use *self* to mean the essential self, upon which multiple socialised selves accrete over time, and *ego*, as mentioned above, to mean the part of myself that separates itself from and compares itself with others.) In everyday life, we are usually unconsciously playing roles appropriate to our context, revealing different aspects of ourselves depending on whether we are with colleagues, boss, friends, parents, children, or spouse or partner. In *Letter to a Young German*, written in 1919, Herman Hesse describes the importance of seeing beyond these roles:

“You must unlearn the habit of being someone else or nothing at all, of imitating the voices of others and mistaking the faces of others for your own.”³¹¹

Alone on the ocean, there was no need to play any role at all. When the demise of the satellite phone released me even from the self-imposed duty to write a blog post every day, I was in relationship with nobody and nothing apart from myself and my surroundings, completely immersed in the experience. This was bracing: my solitude was total, and I had to take total responsibility for my state of mind, for better or worse. The state of my consciousness became the primary, almost the only, determinant of my experience.

I found my solitude liberating, to be free to do whatever I wanted. I peeled back the layers of my identity, letting go of identification with my gender, nationality, ethnicity, education, profession,

³⁰⁹ Jung, C. G. *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930 -1934*

³¹⁰ <https://www.rozsavage.com/day-49-oarally-challenged/>

³¹¹ Hesse, H. (1971). *If the War Goes on: Reflections on War and Politics*. Letter to a Young German. Farrar Straus & Giroux

and so on. Like many ocean rowers, for convenience I usually went naked when at sea, adding to the sense of stripping back to the bare essentials of self, with no armour to protect me, or clothes to make a statement about who I was.

I wondered what I would find at my core: who or what would I be when all was stripped away?

My answer is that I found nothing. Maybe there were more layers still to go; I thought I was stripped down as far as it was possible to be, but at no point did I completely lose the sense of “I”, although at times the “I-ness” was little more than an awareness of being a sensing creature experiencing the warmth of the sun on my skin, the sound of the wind in my ears, the no-smell of open ocean. I had wondered if I might find, buried deep in my core, an essential self, a luminous soul that I could point at and say with certainty, “that is me”, but it did not happen.

Some may choose to see that as support of the hypothesis put forward by Bruce Hood, in *The Self Illusion: Why There is No 'You' Inside Your Head*:

“You only exist as a pattern made up of all the others things in your life that shape you. If you take each away, ‘you’ would eventually cease to exist. This does not mean that you do not exist at all, but rather that you exist as a combination of all the others who complete your sense of self.”³¹²

It could be that my self-protecting ego is resistant to this idea, but I disagree, and would like to suggest that Hood spends several months alone in a rowboat to try out his hypothesis. While recognising the paradox in this, and realising I may equally be in the grip of Hood’s self illusion, I choose to interpret my lack of a “me” as supporting Neale Donald Walsch’s view that we are all fragments of a unified consciousness, manifested into myriad forms in order to experience existence from as many different perspectives as possible, further to the overall evolutionary purpose. So there was no “me” because, at that deep level of being, we are all one. As Rudd puts it:

“The more you look for your own true identity, the more ephemeral it becomes... the true revelation that comes through the 10th Shadow leads inevitably to the creative explosion that emerges through the 10th Gift of Naturalness.”³¹³

³¹² Hood, B. (2013). *The Self Illusion: Why There is No 'You' Inside Your Head*. Constable. p215

³¹³ Rudd, R. Ibid, p66

“There are so many paradoxes in this 10th Gift – the main one being that you cannot be who you are as long as you think you are someone, but you still have to set off and search for this someone in order to realise that they do not exist.”³¹⁴

So Rudd is telling me that I don't exist, as is Hood, and yet I warm to Rudd's version, while I resist Hood's. As I interpret it, the difference is that Hood is saying that my delusion is created by interactions with others, while Rudd is saying that my delusion obscures my oneness with everything. Hood's interpretation feels diminishing, while Rudd's feels empowering. With full awareness that this could be my ego's self-defence strategy, I am going with Rudd on this one, and his view seems more congruent with other thinkers in this field, such as Abraham Maslow and Wendell Berry.

Further to his original hierarchy of needs, Abraham Maslow later added a further level above self-actualisation, to represent what he called transcendence, i.e. giving oneself to something beyond oneself. He equated this with the desire to access the infinite:

“Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.”³¹⁵

In a view entirely compatible with Maslow, the poet, ecological activist, and farmer, Wendell Berry, describes how solitude enables one to develop greater empathy for one's fellow creatures.

“We enter solitude, in which also we lose loneliness... True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation. One's inner voices become audible. One feels the attraction of one's most intimate sources. In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives. The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures.”³¹⁶

For me, this was the gift, and also the paradox of my intense solitude on the ocean. While doing something so intensely individual, I became much less attached to my sense of self, while awakening a more powerful compassion for other beings, human and non-human.

³¹⁴ Rudd, R. Ibid, p68

³¹⁵ Maslow, A. (1971). *Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Penguin, New York. p269

³¹⁶ Berry, W. (2010). *What Are People For?* Counterpoint.

This enquiry often involves some withdrawal into a liminal space in order to explore the self, followed by a realisation of the futility of such an exploration, and finally a relaxing into the knowledge of the individualised, differentiated self. Once a person reaches this stage of self-awareness, they are able to bring their unique gifts freely and generously to co-creative endeavours, whether that is within their community or in the wider global arena. Rudd implies that, although there is a sense of confidence and security that arises from this awareness, paradoxically the ongoing mission lies at the edge of chaos:

“This is when you hit the peak of your own mythology and bring something entirely new into the world based on the high principle that has always lain latent within you. This final flowering of your inner being manifests as a challenge to the current norm, since your true nature is always found at the cutting edge of evolution.”³¹⁷

It seems to me that embracing our uniqueness is essential if we wish to be of service in the world. The implications of naturalness are profound, for influence, creativity, health and energy levels.

Reinforcing my appreciation of individuation as a step to wellbeing, I was recently asked by a twenty-five-year-old mentee in New Delhi how I manage to create deep and meaningful friendships with like-minded people, as she was finding this a challenge. As I pondered her question, I realised that this has certainly not always been true of my life, and that the shift began when I started the process of individuation around the age of 33. Like many people, I spent my teens, twenties and early thirties trying to fit in, which involved creating a socially acceptable persona that bore some resemblance to me, but was not. The paradox is that, when I gave up on the effort to be socially acceptable, and embraced my uniqueness, I immediately discovered an ability to magnetise wonderful and wise friends³¹⁸. Pretending to be who I was not, created a heavy cognitive overhead. Freed from that burden, my energy levels, health, and creativity improved dramatically.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that tries to homogenise us, from the education system onwards. Sir Ken Robinson, in the most widely-watched TED Talk to date, says:

³¹⁷ Rudd, R. Ibid, p69

³¹⁸ With no offence intended to the friends who have been with me since before that age

“...academic ability... has really come to dominate our view of intelligence, because the universities design the system in their image. If you think of it, the whole system of public education around the world is a protracted process of university entrance. And the consequence is that many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they're not, because the thing they were good at at school wasn't valued, or was actually stigmatized. And I think we can't afford to go on that way.”³¹⁹

Howard Gardner identified eight intelligences: musical, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Later he added existential. We are all blends of these various forms, and yet education rewards primarily linguistic and logical intelligence, and ignores the rest. Gardner wrote that an intelligence is:

“...a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture.”³²⁰

In other words, we need all hands, and all intelligences, on deck, if we are to solve our problems. If six out of the eight (or nine) intelligences he identified go unrecognised, unencouraged, and unrewarded in our culture, we are missing out on a massive pool of potential creativity. The quest for naturalness must come from the individual, but it must also be supported by society.

As I wrote in *The Gifts of Solitude*:

“Whoever you are, you have something totally unique to offer. All your accumulated experiences, desires, ideas – even the way you see the world – are not replicated, nor replicable, in anybody else in the whole world. If you don't know who you are, it's going to be an uphill battle trying to find your place and your purpose. It's all a matter of knowing who you are, and once you've done that, you it will become clear where you fit in, and where you will thrive.”³²¹

³¹⁹ https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity/transcript?language=en

³²⁰ Gardner, H. (1999). *Theory of Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice*. Basic Books. p33-4

³²¹ Savage, R. (2020). *The Gifts of Solitude: A Short Guide to Surviving and Thriving in Isolation*. Independently published. p121

Stillness and Presence

“In the midst of the everyday activities of the marketplace, there are times when you need to withdraw from thinking and rest into being. Without this periodic withdrawal, it is easy to become overly identified with one’s position and place in the hubbub of worldly affairs and begin to call it ‘me’. Unfortunately, once you start to believe that life revolves only around serving the demands of this ‘me’, the real treasures of your being are lost. ‘Me’ believes that life’s meaning lies in doing – and if you follow the dictates of that belief you are taken on a long and frustrating journey to achieve something that in the end only takes you away from your own truth.”³²² – Tao Oracle

Taoism draws a distinction between acting from essence and acting from ego. Essence is calmly self-assured, at home in its own metaphorical skin, and arises out of the Naturalness discussed above. Ego, the ultimate trickster, has an agenda, and in its ambition to achieve its objective it tends to act unconsciously out of habit and conditioning, often seeking to dominate those who get in its way. Ego is not necessarily a bad thing – it gets things done – but the problem arises when we over-identify with the ego.

I had the honour of interviewing the Buddhist nun, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, originally from London but now living in India, for my 2020 book, *The Gifts of Solitude*. She spent the best part of twelve years living alone in a cave above the snowline in the Himalayas, meditating. She subscribes to Tibetan Buddhism, which is not the same as Taoism, but shares much of its philosophical basis. She said:

“...‘being’ is often better than ‘doing’ and that taking time out to be still and think is often a better investment for future productivity than cramming every waking moment with feverish activity.”³²³

Taoism advocates taking time to be still, through meditation or some other practice, in order to gain perspective. The metaphor for this aspect of Buddha nature is to be like a mountain; serene, detached, and objective.

³²² Ma Deva Padma. Ibid, p244

³²³ Savage, R. *The Gifts of Solitude*. Ibid, p131

For myself, I find it invaluable to step, not just out of the busy-ness, but also out of our culture, in order to get a clearer view. This started during my ocean rowing years. When I used to come back from several months alone on the ocean, I sometimes felt like an extra-terrestrial landing from a completely different world, and would marvel at the strangeness that is human civilisation. These days, I maintain a foot on each side of that particular edge of chaos, part of the culture, and yet still able to step far enough outside in order to ask, “why is it like this?” For example:

“As Mum and I were given a lift from the Yacht Club to my weatherman’s house, I went into reverse culture shock. The speed of the car seemed unnaturally fast. The skyscrapers of Waikiki seemed dangerously high. And all these people! I felt like a space alien seeing human civilization for the first time. I looked at the shops selling designer clothes, jewellery and electronics. I was quite perplexed that people would spend so much money on such pointless things. If you couldn’t eat it, drink it, or row with it, then what purpose did it serve? A rower’s needs are very simple – enough food and water, and a few miles in the right direction are enough to make it a good day.”³²⁴

This is not to imply judgement, but rather, to question why we do things the way we do, and to wonder if we could do them better. In *The Gifts of Solitude*, I quoted the poet David Foster Wallace, who in 2005 delivered a commencement speech at Kenyon College in Ohio, which was later turned into a book, called *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. He started his speech with this story:

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’”

His point was that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. When we are swimming in the water of a culture, we rarely stop to question why things are as they are. We take most things for granted, as being simply the way we have always done things.

³²⁴ Savage, R. *Stop Drifting Start Rowing*. Ibid. p99

When you stop to think about them objectively, some human ways of being are pretty strange. Why does a western professional woman, before she goes to work, put on expensive, uncomfortable shoes that will probably give her bunions and throw her back out of alignment? Why does her male colleague tie a brightly coloured noose around his neck? Why do we sell our time for money, and why is the footballer's time deemed so much more valuable than the nurse's? Why do we show our approval of a performance by slapping our hands together noisily? Why do we show affection by pressing our lips to somebody else's? Why do we believe that defecating and sex are bodily functions we should do in private, while eating and drinking in public is totally fine? And then there are all those things that only work because everybody has decided that they do, like money, religion, law, and government.

Stillness and presence allow us to mentally disengage from our enculturated selves to get some perspective, enabling thinking that is critical in at least two senses of that word: analytical, and vital.

Impermanence

“New beginnings are often disguised as painful endings.” – Lao Tzu

The inevitability of change is very apparent on an ocean, as I mentioned in *I Am What I Am*. There is a human tendency (at least in the West) to extrapolate from current reality, assuming some degree of permanence. When we are young, we act as if we will be young forever. When conditions are favourable, only the wisest remember to lay down stores for the future. When at sea, I initially fell into the trap of attempting to calculate future mileages based on what had happened in the recent past. Although not completely pointless, conditions were so changeable that any such calculations often led to excessive optimism or pessimism. I found it psychologically much easier once I gave up the attempt, and just took each day as it came.

Although the Tao is eternal and unchanging, everything else is subject to change. Taoist wisdom invites us to accept that nothing lasts forever, so clinging to the “good” or desperately wishing for an end to the “bad” is a waste of energy. Everything will change soon enough. In the meantime, we have a choice to make about how to respond to external circumstances. For example, I will take two contrasting cards from the Tao Oracle. First, Obstacles, which we may deem “bad”, but there is a silver lining:

“You can bemoan the unfairness of fate, but all that really does is indulge the victim mentality, which further weakens you by draining your potential for empowered action... whatever you’re clinging to is the very thing you’re meant to let go of. As soon as you begin to relax the vicelike grip of fear and stop struggling to keep it all together, the situation will start to feel less overwhelming.”³²⁵

Second, Prosperity, which we may deem “good”, but there is a shadow looming:

“It is wise to remember always that what appears to be yours today is in fact on loan from existence, and sooner or later will be reclaimed. We were all born naked and equal, possessing nothing. And when we leave this life we will take nothing with us; in the meantime receive prosperity with gratitude when it comes, and use its golden favours wisely.”³²⁶

I have found great wisdom in the writing of Pema Chödrön, whose writings on Buddhism have found a substantial audience in the West:

“The very first noble truth of the Buddha points out that suffering is inevitable for human beings as long as we believe that things last—that they don’t disintegrate, that they can be counted on to satisfy our hunger for security.”³²⁷

So it is not impermanence that causes suffering; it is our unwillingness to embrace it. When we accept impermanence – and insecurity – as the way of the world, paradoxically everything gets so much easier. One of the most liberating sentences I ever read was, “The only true riches in life are to be found between your ears”³²⁸, by the one-legged Welsh sailor, Tristan Jones. It enabled me to release my craving for illusions of security, and to trust that I, in myself, contain everything that I need, and there is nothing outside of me or in the future that can add to or diminish that fact.

³²⁵ Ma Deva Padma. Ibid. p193

³²⁶ Ma Deva Padma. Ibid, p93

³²⁷ Chödrön, P. (2005). *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. HarperNonFiction; Thorsons Classics edition. p15

³²⁸ Jones, T. (1998). *Outward Leg*. Sheridan House. Location 198 in Kindle edition

Non-Duality

In a sense, the concept of non-duality flows from, yet contrasts with, the concept of yin and yang. Yin and yang emphasises the dynamic creativity of the polar opposites. Non-duality emphasises their unity.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo again:

“You think you’ve got it when you understand that you are not the thought or feeling – but to go further and know you are not the knower ... that brings you to the question: ‘Who am I?’... And that was the Buddha’s great understanding – to realize that the further back we go the more open and empty the quality of our consciousness becomes. Instead of finding some solid little eternal entity, which is ‘I’, we get back to this vast spacious mind which is interconnected with all living beings. In this space you have to ask, where is the ‘I’, and where is the ‘other’. As long as we are in the realm of duality, there is ‘I’ and ‘other’. This is our basic delusion – it’s what causes all our problems.”³²⁹

We humans, or at least, we Western humans, grow up in a culture that emphasises our individuality. In *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed*, Will Storr traces this mindset back to Ancient Greece, a country of islands, inlets, and small city states, whose geography shaped its people:

“A person’s worth, and success in rising up in society, depended largely on their own talents and self-belief. Celebrities were hailed. Beautiful bodies venerated. A particulate landscape became a particulate nation became a particulate people with particulate minds. ‘The story is ecology to economy to social practices to cognition,’ Nisbett told me. Our Western self is the son of this atomized world. What had been created in Ancient Greece was individualism.”³³⁰

He contrasts this with the Eastern mindset, which evolved amidst the gentler geography of Ancient China:

³²⁹ Savage, R. *The Gifts of Solitude*. Ibid, p129

³³⁰ Storr, W. (2018). *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed*. Picador. p63

“In contrast to the crags and islands of Greece, most of his (Confucius’s) country’s population lived on great plains and amongst gentle mountains... For the Confucian everything in the universe was not separate, but one. It followed from this that they should seek, not individual success, but harmony. This perspective has a number of profound implications for the way the East Asian self experiences reality.”³³¹

Even though it might appear that China and much of the East has now bought into Western-style capitalism, the cultural differences run deep, and still remain. A study in 2005 tracked the eye movements of test subjects as they looked at photographs, and found that American students spent longer looking at the main object, while the Chinese-born students paid more attention to the context, the background, and the relationships between things.³³²

We in the West have paid a price for this individualistic approach. While it generated competition and hence innovation and improvement, it also left us feeling lonely and vulnerable. As the philosopher, Alan Watts, describes it:

“We have lacked the real humility of recognizing that we are members of the biosphere, the ‘harmony of contained conflicts’ in which we cannot exist at all without the cooperation of plants, insects, fish, cattle, and bacteria. In the same measure, we have lacked the proper self-respect of recognizing that I, the individual organism, am a structure of such fabulous ingenuity that it calls the whole universe into being. In the act of putting everything at a distance so as to describe and control it, we have orphaned ourselves both from the surrounding world and from our own bodies—leaving ‘I’ as a discontented and alienated spook, anxious, guilty, unrelated, and alone.”³³³

Even our mainstream Western religions have sought to divide, conquer, and alienate us. The doctrine of original sin puts us in the wrong from the moment we are born. Promises of heaven and threats of hell put us at the mercy of a capricious and judgemental god. Contact with the divine is mediated through preachers and saints. Small wonder that we seek comfort in materialism, hedonism, distraction and addiction, in order to numb this existential loneliness.

³³¹ Storr, W. *Ibid*, pp70-71

³³² Chua, H. F., Boland, J. E., and Nisbett, R. E. (2005). *Cultural variation in eye movements during scene perception*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (vol 102, p12629)

³³³ Watts, A. *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. *Ibid*, p104

But as soon as we become aware of this, we can change it. Out of all the wonderful wisdom that Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo shared during our conversation, the section that has stayed with me the most came towards the end of our call, when she said:

“...the [Buddhist] Wheel of Life... [is] like a wheel which is endlessly turning, called *samsara*³³⁴... At the hub of the wheel are three animals – a pig, a rooster, and a snake. The snake stands for anger, the rooster for desire and greed, and the pig for ignorance. And they’re biting each other’s tails... And their going round and round and round is what sets the whole wheel spinning. And *that’s* the problem. Our delusion about our true nature, which gives rise to greed and desire for what gives pleasure, and aversion and anger towards that which does not give pleasure. And it keeps the whole wheel circling, no matter our best intentions. So the only way to stop the wheel is to break the hub... Within those three, the important one is our ignorance, our ignorance of our true nature. We identify with our ego, and although our ego is a good servant, it’s a terrible master, because it’s blind... Once we realize that the nature of our existence is beyond thought and emotions, that it is incredibly vast and interconnected with all other beings, then the sense of isolation, separation, fear and hopes fall away. It’s a tremendous relief!”³³⁵

To expand further on this, in *The New Story*, the religious scholar Thomas Berry describes the role of consciousness in the cosmos:

“From the empirical inquiry into the real it has become increasingly clear that from its beginning in the galactic system to its earthly expression in human consciousness the universe carries within itself a psychic as well as a physical dimension. Otherwise human consciousness emerges out of nowhere and find no real place in the cosmic story. Man is an Appendix 6 or an intrusion... The Story of the Universe is the story of the emergence of a galactic system in which each new level of being emerges through the urgency of self-transcendence... Man emerges not only as an earthling but also as a worldling. He bears the universe in his being as the universe bears him in its being. The two have a total presence to each other.”³³⁶

³³⁴ *Samsara* is the continuous cycle of life, death, and reincarnation

³³⁵ Savage, R. *The Gifts of Solitude*. Ibid, p134

³³⁶ Thomas, B. Ibid, p8

This echoes the Rumi line I quoted on the front page of this statement:

“You are not a drop in the ocean; you are the ocean in a drop.”

So are Rumi, Berry, McGilchrist, Hoffman and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo all saying the same thing? You will probably have noticed that Jetsunma’s words – “our ego is a good servant, it’s a terrible master” – are reminiscent of McGilchrist’s concerns about the blind egotism of the left hemisphere, and “the nature of our existence is beyond thought and emotions, that it is incredibly vast and interconnected with all other beings” reminds us of Hoffman’s proposal that reality is a network of conscious agents. Hoffman describes his theories as monist, or non-dual, because everything is, essentially, consciousness. What we believe to be the material world is in fact a product of our consciousness, and does not exist without it.

Following on from this, if “ignorance of our true nature” is what keeps the wheel of *samsara* turning, and if we understood ourselves to be a fractal of a universal consciousness, per Hoffman, and knew death to be merely a transition from one form of consciousness to another... could we stop the wheel?

Conclusion: On Courage and Consciousness

“When we get out of the glass bottles of our ego,
and when we escape like squirrels turning in the
cages of our personality
and get into the forests again,
we shall shiver with cold and fright
but things will happen to us
so that we don't know ourselves.
Cool, unlying life will rush in,
and passion will make our bodies taut with power,
we shall stamp our feet with new power
and old things will fall down,
we shall laugh, and institutions will curl up like
burnt paper.”

Escape, by D. H. Lawrence³³⁷

I have now set out a selection of ideas, which may initially appear chaotic, but I hope it will have become clear that there are several recurring themes emerging from the bricolage.

I intend now to synthesise all these ideas into what I hope will be a useful and positive narrative of possibility for others, as it has been and continues to be for me. I will set out a pathway that not only invites, but *requires* the participation of everybody who cares about the future of our planet and the human enterprise. I will describe the kind of leadership that is needed, which barely looks like leadership at all within the existing paradigm (and that form of leadership does not seem to be going so well for us anyway), but which has, I believe, the potency to help us navigate these times of disruption with the human capacity for compassion, grace and dignity. This contemplative period of bricolage has helped shape in me a renewed energy to not only move from individual agent to a collective of agents, but to sustain that energy in this challenge to the rigid web of structures that have perpetuated the status quo.

³³⁷ Lawrence, D. H. (1994). *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*. Wordsworth Editions Ltd; New edition. p397

Summary of Theories

Several themes recur throughout the various theories that I have presented, including:

- Impermanence
- The true nature of reality is hidden from us
- Everything is connected across time and space (nonduality)

At their core, all three of these themes are facets of the yin/yang dynamic:

- Impermanence: what rises must fall, day turns to night, summer turns to winter, etc.
- The true nature of reality: what we take to be reality is in fact only (at most) half the story, the yang, explicate order arising from the yin, implicate order
- Nonduality: the illusion of separation arises only in the explicate (yang) order of space-time; in the implicate order (yin), space-time does not exist, and everything is connected in a web of consciousness.

I will summarise these, before going on to consider the implications for our current predicament, and propose a way forwards at both the collective and the individual level.

	Impermanence	The true nature of reality is hidden from us	Everything is connected across time and space (nonduality)
Civilisation in collapse	<i>Immoderate Greatness</i> : every civilisation that has ever existed has fallen		
Left brain dominance	<i>The Master and his Emissary</i> : a failure of vitality, vision, and integrity heralds the fall of empires	We are trapped in a “hall of mirrors” as the left hemisphere has created a world in its own image	<i>My Stroke of Insight</i> : the right hemisphere perceives that we are not isolated beings, but part of a cosmic web
Transcending paradigms	Paradigms are products of their era, can become outdated and be replaced	<i>Liminal Thinking</i> : our perception of reality is based on cultural conditioning	The world is not “other” – it shapes us even as we shape it
Complexity theory	All the action happens at the edge of chaos; stasis is death	Reality is too complex for us to comprehend, let alone model	An actor in a complex system controls almost nothing, yet influences almost everything
Psychosynthesis		In the West, we perceive polarities as opposing, but they are complementary	When fragments synthesise, a new entity emerges which was not evident from the fragments alone
Theory U	We need to “let go” before we can “let come”	We are disconnected from nature, community, and self	Emergence of greater wisdom from the collective
Interface Theory of Perception	Death is no more than stepping out of the constructed space-time user interface	Evolutionary biology has wired us for fitness, not truth	Space-time is a construct of consciousness; consciousness as nested “Russian dolls”
Taoism	New beginnings are often disguised as painful endings	The wheel of <i>samsara</i> is kept turning by the pig of ignorance as to our true nature	Tao flows through all things, inside and outside, and returns to the origin of all things

The Human Predicament

According to the analyses of Sir John Glubb and William Ophuls, it is likely that the globalised world is entering an era of major civilisational disruption, or even collapse. Humanity has created a perfect storm of wicked problems that are interconnected and constantly evolving, reinforced by mutually reinforcing positive feedback loops, which combine with various quirks of human psychology to blind us to the scale and urgency of the problems until it is now probably too late, given the time lags inherent in the system.

It seems that if we had wanted to design our political, economic, and social structures in such a way to guarantee rampant inequality and environmental destruction, we have succeeded magnificently. They served their purpose for a while, but now the goals, the processes, and the culture of the old paradigm have overshot the inflexion point between productive and counter-productive. These structures are founded upon the principles of domination and disconnection, which lie at the root of all our troubles.

The status quo is, by its nature, self-perpetuating. Those who are largely responsible for creating the problems are able to protect themselves from the worst impacts. They have the power to change the system, but not the incentive, as it is the very same system that has given them their power, while those at the sharp end of the impacts have the incentive, but not the power.

Doomsday Circa?

Certainly, the human species as we know it will go extinct at some point, but the when and how, and what do we do in the meantime remain questions. Here are three of the many possible scenarios:

1. **Humanity continues on its current trajectory:** Given the evidence of the last few decades, during which we have proved adept at writing pretty resolutions full of nice words (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, etc.) but less adept at putting them into action (and also less adept at creating fair metrics of progress³³⁸), I am sceptical that we will make the radical course correction that is needed in order to avoid significant

³³⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/30/the-worlds-sustainable-development-goals-arent-sustainable/>

and negative global impacts within the next one hundred years. However, I expect a substantial number of humans will survive, and will adapt to survival in a radically changed ecosphere. We may end up living in an impoverished world where a strip mine sits alongside a shopping mall alongside a landfill, and nature has been entirely subjugated to serving humanity's needs. Maybe the eco-modernists and transhumanists turn out to be right, and we will be able to escape this miserable planet by moving to Mars, uploading our consciousnesses into a computer, and incrementally robotising our bodies until we are virtually immortal.

2. **Humanity takes radical action without a shift in consciousness:** We have already by 2020 passed the tipping point on many of the critical planetary boundaries³³⁹, so it is likely that we will eventually pay attention and make changes. But without a fundamental shift in the way we conceive of our place in the universe, any changes will be shallow rather than deep-rooted, and once the immediate crisis has passed, we are likely to relax and lapse back to our previous ways of being. The inevitable will have been postponed, rather than permanently averted.
3. **Humanity takes radical action combined with a shift in consciousness:** This is the only path that is sustainable, in both the environmental and psychological sense of the word. We need to transcend our existing paradigm of domination and separation, and create a new narrative of radical interconnectedness, in which we take responsibility for the wellbeing of all sentient creatures on Earth, both present and future, and then design our systems – political, environmental, social, technological, legal, and economic – to harmonise to that narrative.

³³⁹ <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

Supporting the Shift in Consciousness

Personally, I do not believe this is a moral universe. During the hundreds of days and nights I spent on the ocean, I had no sense of it being benevolent, malevolent, or even indifferent. These words would anthropomorphise the ocean, and even if it turns out that the ocean has some form of consciousness, as previously discussed, I do not believe that it has morality, nor any opinion about what happens to those who voyage across its waters. My view is that the law of the cosmos is not moral law; it is scientific law. Even if I did believe that the arc of the moral universe tends towards justice, to quote Martin Luther King Jr., whose justice would that be? Who decides?

This, I believe, is the point of free will. Sam Harris³⁴⁰ and others might argue that free will does not exist, but as the saying goes, even if we don't have free will, we have free won't, i.e. ideas suggest themselves to us based on our experiences and conditioning, and we choose from the options available. I am good, and I am evil; I contain both polarities, but I can make conscious choices about which pole I express. It is the consciousness that we bring to it – if we accept the responsibility of being conscious beings – that determines what the future holds.

There has been this assumption, on the wing of the liberal, sustainable, equitable, political left, that we will win because we think we are right. This assumption is not working. So then we wonder – should we use the same strategies that are working so well for what we regard as the conservative, exploitative, unequal, political right? - because they are apparently winning.

No. We should not.

This judgement, this “othering”, this polarisation, can never succeed. We have to recognise that we are all, individually and collectively, all of it. Everything is connected. I am you, and you are me. We are them, and they are us. We are all inseparable, all aspects of the one interconnected web of being.

While we imagine separation, we are doomed. When we envisage connection, we may yet survive.

³⁴⁰ Harris, S. *Free Will*. (2012). Free Press.

In a recent newsletter from the Centre for Action and Contemplation, the mystic and Episcopal priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, quotes the final poem from Thomas Keating's *The Secret Embrace*, "What Matters":

"Only the Divine matters,
And because the Divine matters,
Everything matters."³⁴¹

She describes this as "a powerful new incentive for a compassionate re-engagement with our times", and goes on to comment:

"In this short poem of eleven laser-like words, Thomas smashes through centuries of theological barricades separating God from the world and contemplation from action, offering instead a flowing vision of oneness within a profoundly interwoven and responsive relational field... Practically speaking, *the map affirms that our actions, our choices, our connections bear more weight than we dare to believe*. We are neither isolated nor helpless but immersed in a great web of belonging in which divine intelligence and compassion are always at our disposal if our courage does not fail us." [her italics]

She identifies the relevance of this insight to these times of disruption and chaos, with the gift being the courage to let go of the old and step out into the unknown:

"...the access route to all new beginning comes by leaning into the diminishment, stripping, and emptiness. Not by trying to distract ourselves, anesthetize ourselves, or use our spiritual tool kit to re-establish the status quo. New beginning is intrinsically disorienting and anguishing; it builds on the wreckage of what has been outgrown but not yet relinquished. As the veils are lifted and our familiar reference points dissolve, it is only on the timeless path of surrender (a.k.a. "letting go,"...) that we find our way through the darkness and into the new beginning."

Sir John Glubb, a military man, may seem a surprising source of commentary on these matters, but in the conclusion to his essay on the fate of empires, he takes us to this place of unity and connection:

³⁴¹ <https://cac.org/themes/thomas-keating-the-secret-embrace-part-two/>

“Perhaps, in fact, we may reach the conclusion that the successive rise and fall of great nations is inevitable and, indeed, a system divinely ordained. But even this would be an immense gain. For we should know where we stand in relation to our human brothers and sisters. In our present state of mental chaos on the subject, we divide ourselves into nations, parties or communities and fight, hate and vilify one another over developments which may perhaps be divinely ordained and which seem to us, if we take a broader view, completely uncontrollable and inevitable. If we could accept these great movements as beyond our control, there would be no excuse for our hating one another because of them.”³⁴²

And he goes yet further, invoking love as the essential quality that should form the foundation of a new way of being in this world:

“However varied, confusing and contradictory the religious history of the world may appear, the noblest and most spiritual of the devotees of all religions seem to reach the conclusion that love is the key to human life. Any expansion of our knowledge which may lead to a reduction in our unjustified hates is therefore surely well worth while.”³⁴³

What does he mean by love in this context? “Love” has many meanings, but as Glubb here follows on to mention “expansion of our knowledge” and “reduction in our justified hates”, I believe he means love in the sense of deep compassion and appreciation that comes from understanding the interconnectedness of everything, cherishing and valuing the contribution of everything to the web of life. Buckminster Fuller described love as “metaphysical gravity”, a force that draws sentient beings together, the glue of existence. I previously quoted Aldous Huxley on the “organised lovelessness” of our current social arrangements. What if we could shift from organised lovelessness to organised – or even spontaneous – lovingness?

I asked Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo for her interpretation of love. The last line of her reply calls to mind Jill Bolte Taylor’s perception of the world during her stroke:

³⁴² Glubb, J. B. (1978). *The fate of empires and Search for survival*. Edinburgh: Blackwood. p24

³⁴³ Glubb, J. B. *Ibid*, p24

“...the Buddhist definition of love is the wish ‘may you be well and happy’. As simple as that. It is a heart connection desiring the happiness of others. In the ultimate nature of the mind which is non-dualistic (no self and other) there is a deep sense of our interconnection with all living beings. As Mingyur Rinpoche explains in his near-death experience, ‘....No separate *me* loved the world. The world was love.’”³⁴⁴

So how do we put this philosophy into practice? Our political, economic, and social structures, like the problems they have generated, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. It is therefore “easier”, but still extremely hard, to change everything, than to try and change one thing, and as mentioned above, the change has to begin with the way we understand our relationship with each other and with the cosmos – we need a shift in consciousness.

As Buckminster Fuller said, “You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete,” or, to use Donella Meadows’ systems thinking terminology, we need to transcend the existing paradigm. So we are not talking about a revolution against the current way of being, but rather, the creation of an alternative system that, if we get it right, will attract a critical mass of adherents simply because it delivers greater benefits to a greater number of people across a greater span of time than the existing system.

To create the new paradigm demands that we step outside our culturally conditioned ways of thinking, and demonstrate a willingness to experiment with new conceptions of reality and possibility. Conceptualisations like Liminal Thinking and What We Don’t Know can help us loosen our grip on our current view of reality, which is reductionist, linear, and bonded to space-time. We need to leave the shores of the old world, and venture into a radical new Terra Incognita. Once there, we can start to glimpse a new conception of reality that is full of possibilities that would be deemed impossible within our currently prevailing paradigm.

³⁴⁴ Email dated 13th October 2020

Proposed Plan of Action - Collective

Once we have left the shore and find ourselves on the ocean of possibility, we run into the challenge of how to think thoughts we have never thought before. Peering into our blind spots can at times feel like trying to see the back of our own head, but it is vital that we try. As collaborative, co-creative groups, we have a better chance, especially when we use processes such as Otto Scharmer's Presencing to deliberately cultivate the ground (yin) for inspiration (yang), giving rise to emergent insights not possessed by any of the individual agents in the system.

This kind of creative thinking and imagining takes place at the edge of chaos, the turbulent border between the old and the new where new possibilities are spawned. We see this phenomenon of co-creative tension enshrined in various instances: between yin and yang, between female and male, between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. Diversity is therefore essential to effective and creative self-organisation. A group of homogenous agents will produce more of the same, while a group of heterogeneous agents can co-create surprising new possibilities.

We can also embody the two poles as individuals, by being willing to embrace our shadow as well as our conscious mind. As C. G. Jung wrote, "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."³⁴⁵ This is not to suggest that we act out our shadows, but that we recognise and integrate them, which also enables us to empathise with people who remind us of our shadows, rather than judging them or recoiling from them. We need to shift from othering to inclusion or, as Scharmer puts it, from ego-system to eco-system.

In nature, evolution is essentially a self-organising system. Human society has already started a shift towards co-creative, self-organising structures (teal organisations, crowdocracy, etc.). This seems promising. However, once a complex system reaches a certain point of complexity, results become unpredictable. "An actor in a complex system controls almost nothing, yet influences almost everything." Given this complexity, rapid prototyping combined with high quality feedback is essential, and the feedback needs to be context-dependent, meaningful, and capable of change in response to the real-time needs of the system and its environment, as we saw in *Team of Teams*.

³⁴⁵ Jung, C.G. (1938). *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, Collected Works of C.G. Jung 11. Yale University Press. p131

How do we create effective feedback, while also nurturing this nascent shift? As the investor-philanthropist, Charlie Munger, says: “Never, ever, think about something else when you should be thinking about the power of incentives.”³⁴⁶ The most powerful point of leverage would be a new economy, which can also become a new point attractor outside the current system, rendering the existing model obsolete. Currently we have more or less a monoculture of neoliberal capitalism, but new complementary currencies are cropping up around the world, such as SEEDS³⁴⁷, which stands for Sowing Ecological, Equitable and Decentralized Societies. SEEDS describes itself as a conscious currency for a regenerative and thriving global civilisation. By counterbalancing the existing model with a new economic model that supports a prosocial and environmentally regenerative value system, we may be able to achieve a positive phase transition. To date, attempts to promote sustainability through economic methods have tended to focus on the sticks such as carbon taxes and penalties for polluting. While sticks have their role, I believe we also need carrots (or “seeds”) to encourage, reward, and incentivise positive behaviours. The SEEDS system encourages organisations and individuals to post proposals for regenerative projects, which the community then votes on to allocate funding.

We have also learned that, for a complex system to change to a new paradigm, in addition to the new point attractor we need a shock (or shocks) to the existing system. I don’t believe we need to go looking for these. They will come soon enough, if they are not here already.

Although much of the world is still operating under the old paradigms, there is a large and ever-growing body of literature proposing a slew of new ideas. This list of suggestions that follows is absolutely not intended to be exhaustive, but rather, a small cross-section of examples of how the new narrative of radical interconnectedness might be translated into social structures.

³⁴⁶ *The Psychology of Human Misjudgment*, quoted in the Farnam Street blog: <https://fs.blog/2017/10/bias-incentives-reinforcement/>. Retrieved October 2020.

³⁴⁷ <https://www.joinseeds.com/>

Domain	Examples
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-creative government by crowdocracy • Transparency and accountability • Speakers to represent interests of the voiceless – the natural world and future generations – in political debate
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on carbon drawdown and biosphere regeneration, not just damage mitigation • Reinstatement of the indigenous concept of the <i>honourable harvest</i>, i.e. take only what you need, use everything that you take, etc. • Sustainable management of the commons, per Elinor Ostrom
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New social narrative of partnership rather than domination • Genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion, not as tokenism, but because they are essential to creating a robust and well-run society • Rebuilding resilient, self-reliant communities, with emphasis on meeting needs locally • Respect for land, water, food supply • Education redesigned to prepare students to be good citizens, rather than good worker-consumers
Technological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precautionary principle enforceable by law leads to longer term testing to uncover unintended consequences • Profit motive mitigated by ethical considerations
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecocide established as a crime against humanity • Recognition of rights of plants, animals and ecosystems • Further legislation like Wales' Future Generations Act
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complementary, decentralised currencies such as SEEDS that incentivise regenerative and prosocial behaviours • Disincentives to hoarding wealth • Adjustment of discounting rates to seventh generation mindset • Cost-benefit analyses to incorporate concepts of morality and conservation • Decoupling of wealth distribution from work through UBI or similar

Proposed Plan of Action - Individual

As individuals, we have to believe that we are worth saving. In the run-up to Copenhagen a climate change film was released, called *The Age of Stupid*. At one point, the Archivist of the future, played by Pete Postlethwaite, says: “Why didn't we save ourselves when we had the chance? Is the answer: because, on some level, we weren't sure if we'd be worth saving?”³⁴⁸ If we do not particularly care for ourselves, we are not going to care about anything or anybody else

³⁴⁸ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1300563/characters/nm0000592>

either. As individuals, it is important that we like and respect ourselves enough to believe that we are worth saving, which will counteract our projection of our lack of worth onto others.

There has to be a fundamental belief that everything and everybody is worth saving. Any harm we do to an agent in the web, we do to ourselves. Some degree of harm is necessary in order to eat and live, but it should be done respectfully and minimally, treading lightly upon the Earth.

It requires courage to pioneer these new ways of being, as Joseph Campbell understood only too well; being different; asking people to change their ways to move out of their routines can attract derision as well as applause - as I have found from personal experience. It can result in exile, marginalisation, or ridicule. Or put more elegantly, according to the words often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, but more likely originating with Nicholas Klein in 1918:

“First they ignore you. Then they ridicule you. And then they attack you and want to burn you. And then they build monuments to you.”³⁴⁹

However, we do not have to endure this process alone. There are already many people around the world who are seeking out and prototyping new and better ways of being. Between 2015 and 2019, 130,000 people from 183 countries had taken the Theory U MOOC, called u.lab 1x: Leading from the Emerging Future³⁵⁰. Intentional communities are springing up all around the world³⁵¹. Estimates of the number of complementary currencies vary, but there are probably thousands. GDP is increasingly being found lacking as the pre-eminent measure of wellbeing, and alternatives like the Happy Planet Index³⁵², Genuine Progress Indicator³⁵³ and Human Development Index³⁵⁴ are springing up. There are over 3,500 certified B Corps in more than 70 countries³⁵⁵. It seems possible, even likely, that we are past the pioneer phase and into the early adopter phase on the diffusion bell curve.

³⁴⁹ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/08/13/stages/>

³⁵⁰ https://courses.edx.org/asset-v1:MITx+15.671.1x+3T2019+type@asset+block@u.lab_1x_Syllabus.pdf

³⁵¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_intentional_communities

³⁵² <http://happyplanetindex.org/>

³⁵³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genuine_progress_indicator

³⁵⁴ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>

³⁵⁵ <https://bcorporation.uk/about-b-corps>

Also, it is not so hard to find the courage to pioneer a new way of being when one is highly motivated. The central tenet of the class I taught for a semester at Yale, *Courage in Theory and Practice*, is that:

When motivation > fear = courage

If we are not already highly motivated to find better ways to live, we soon will be, as the evidence of our unsustainable lifestyles mounts up. Our fear of change will be outweighed by our fear of not changing. Once we have started to step out of old ways of being, courage begets more courage in a virtuous feedback loop, and horizons of possibility begin to expand.

And third, Planck's Principle will prevail, for social truth as well as scientific truth:

“A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it... An important scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over and converting its opponents: it rarely happens that Saul becomes Paul. What does happen is that its opponents gradually die out, and that the growing generation is familiarized with the ideas from the beginning: another instance of the fact that the future lies with the youth.”³⁵⁶

But this is no excuse for dumping the responsibility for action on future generations. The best time to have initiated these changes would have been fifty years ago. The second best time is now.

If the odds seem daunting, it helps to remember that change is not linear. There is evidence that once a tipping point is reached, at around 16% uptake, widespread adoption becomes probable. Change agents can improve the likelihood of success by paying attention to five established variables: relative advantage, compatibility with existing practices, simplicity and ease of use, trialability, and observable results. If Cultural Creatives do in fact constitute a large proportion of the population, then opportunities can be created everyone to thrive by creating spaces where diverse people and ideas can meet and co-create in physical and psychological safety, and in an

³⁵⁶ Planck, M. (1950). *Scientific autobiography*. Philosophical Library. p33

atmosphere of mutual respect and reciprocity. Imagine an MIT Building 20 for the new paradigm.

As a *network of conscious agents*, we need to pay attention not just to the quality of our *consciousness*, but also to the quality of our *network*, and this is a major motivation for creating the Sisters³⁵⁷. The power to visualise and build a better “future” (to use the language of space-time) depends on the quality, quantity, and diversity of our interactions. Key to this work is the idea of connection: everything *is* connected. Problems have arisen where we have fallen into the delusion that we are disconnected from nature, from each other, and from any part of our own selves. Recognising and embracing the ultimate interconnectedness of everything, not just as a theoretical construct, can become a path to insight and collective action. It can become a way of life.

Our contribution to the collective process of evolution can be maximised if we can find a purposeful way to show up in the world. Our purpose may be spectacular or it may be subtle, and it may be more about the *way* we do our job than what the job itself is – it matters not, provided that it feels true to us, and only we can be the judge of that. If we have no idea as to what our purpose might be, we could do worse than embrace the techniques of the surrealist bricoleurs, noticing what objects, ideas, or role models appeal to our intuition, and gathering these together to see what wants to emerge from our subconscious/soul. The obituary exercise, or mapping our strong dislikes in order to find their opposite, may also help. We also have an obligation to support others in their journeys to find purpose and meaning. A rising tide lifts all boats, so by supporting the evolution of others we also support ourselves. This is my main focus for now, through projects like curating TEDxStroudWomen, and nurturing the global community of Sisters, my women’s organisation, which I describe in Appendix 5.

Most importantly, we need to stay centred when surrounded by apparent chaos, like the calm in the eye of a storm. We can learn to stay positive, through not being attached to any particular outcome. As the Hopi Elders express it (see Appendix 2 for their full statement), it is those who cling to the old order of things who will suffer the most:

“There is a river flowing very fast.

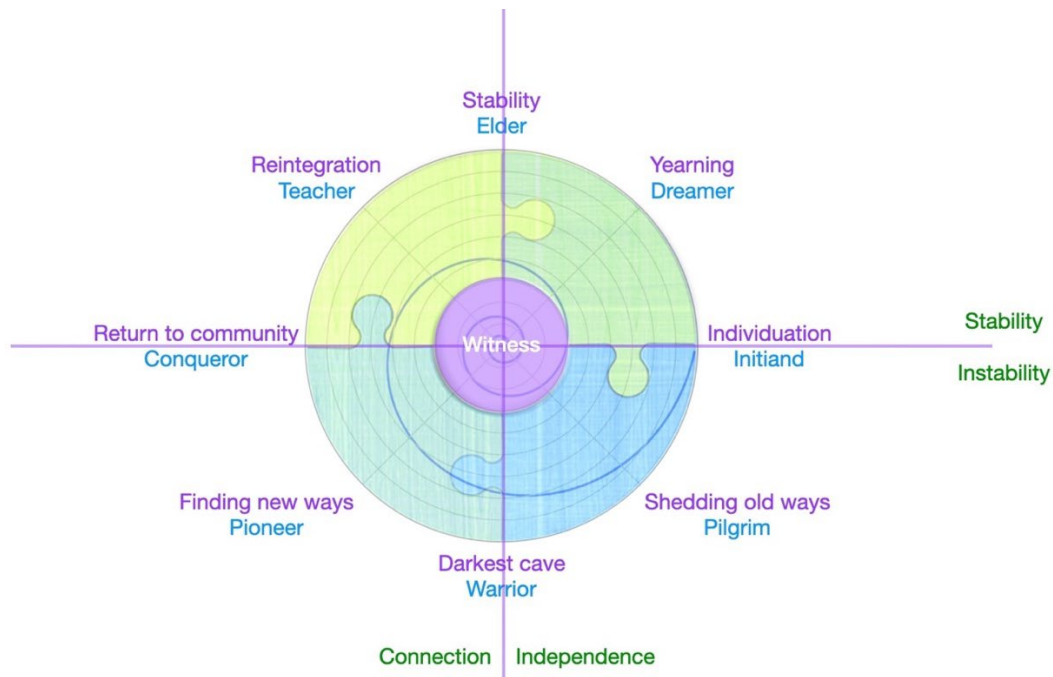
It is so great and fast that there are those who will be afraid.

³⁵⁷ See Appendix 5 for details.

They will hold on to the shore.
They will feel that they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly.
Know that the river has its destination.
The elders say that we must let go of the shore,
push off into the middle of the river,
keep our eyes open,
and our heads above the water.
See who is in there with you and celebrate.”

I designed the following graphic, inspired by and adapted from some of the many conceptualisations that use cyclical or spiralling imagery, including: Glubb’s rise and fall of civilisations, Campbell’s Hero’s Journey, Theory U, the Buddhist Wheel of Life, the Taoist Sequences of Early Heaven and Later Heaven, and Robert Kegan’s poles of autonomy and connection. Like the two Taoist Sequences, the graphic is intended to be read both sequentially as a clockwise cycle, and also as four complementary pairs with the archetype on the opposite side of the circle.

It aims to summarise the spiralling nature of human existence, at both the individual and the collective level, to remind us that disruption and struggle are part of the natural cycle of things, and to emphasise the importance of maintaining balance as the witness to all that is happening, maintaining equanimity even as change rages around us. It reminds us that letting go of the old is an inevitable and unavoidable step on the way to creating the new.



Some of the individual behaviours that arise from the new paradigm set out here are (and again, this list is intended to be indicative, not exhaustive):

1. Trust yourself to intuitively know what to do and how to be.
2. Trust life to be exactly as it is meant to be, knowing that the hardest times are the greatest teachers.
3. Know that there is no point in fighting the existing reality, but there is value in using what is not working to inform a vision of what might work better.
4. Hold the maximization of evolution, of self and others, as the highest goal.
5. Lead by example, not by control.
6. Create a psychological container in which all can flourish and create.
7. Maintain balance between yin and yang, but other things being equal, default to yin/right hemisphere ways of being, because this aspect is currently seriously under-represented.
8. Seek out the right questions, rather than the right answers.
9. Think holistically, not dualistically; operate from partnership, not domination.
10. Develop webs of connection with kindred spirits, like intentional communities and regenerative currencies.
11. Be willing to prototype new ways of being, seek feedback, accept failure and analyse success, leading to ongoing improvement and refinement.
12. Be open to the possibility of “impossible”, believing that we, individually and especially collectively, are capable of more than we have been told.

Final Words

There may be those who think my philosophy is akin to Pascal's Wager³⁵⁸, or a desperate last drag on the hopium³⁵⁹ pipe. Possibly they are right. I am not suggesting that we give up all efforts at climate change mitigation, or poverty alleviation, or any of the other worthwhile work going on in the world. I am suggesting that, *in addition to* that good work that keeps our left hemispheres feeling busy and useful, we also engage the right hemisphere to see the bigger picture, and engage on that level as well, because we are a fractal of the whole, so by bringing ourselves into balance we help to bring balance to the wider community of humanity. By being the change we want to see in the world we contribute to the healing of the disconnects, and also maximise the creativity and energy we can bring to fulfilling our purpose.

What If?

There is the temptation, at the ego level, to see impending collapse as a disaster, a fall from grace, a punishment for past sins. This is not a helpful attitude. What would it be like if we could reframe the situation into an invitation to evolve, maybe even imagine that, on some level, we put ourselves into this predicament *deliberately* in order to accelerate our evolution?

“You create collectively, and individually, the life and times you are experiencing, for the soul [sic] purpose of evolving.”³⁶⁰

What would it be like if we took it as given that the evolution of consciousness is always and everywhere a constant?

“We now live not so much in a cosmos as in a cosmogenesis; that is, a universe ever coming into being through an irreversible sequence of transformations moving, in the larger arc of its development, from a lesser to a great order of complexity and from a lesser to great consciousness.”³⁶¹

³⁵⁸ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/>

³⁵⁹ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hopium>

³⁶⁰ Walsch, N. D. (1997). *Conversations with God, Book 1*. Hodder and Stoughton. p37

³⁶¹ Berry, T. *The New Story*. Ibid, p26

If reality is the product of a network of conscious agents, and consciousness is fractal, then anything we think, say, or do as an individual has an actual effect on reality, which may be small, but no individual effort is ever wasted. As Rumi says, we are the ocean in a drop. Put another way, if (per Lao-Tzu) our thoughts become words, which become deeds, which become habits, which become character, then our consciousness is the sum total of our every thought, and the collective consciousness is the sum total of our individual consciousnesses. On the one hand, this is a great responsibility, as we need to hold ourselves to the highest level of accountability, and on the other hand, it is a great boon, as we understand that tiny actions accumulate to make a vast difference. The shift in consciousness may yet be enough to mitigate the worst impacts, and even if we are ultimately doomed, it will enable us to navigate our final era with a level of effort, rather than capitulation, and in that there is always hope of some spark that will ignite again.

If we succeed in this mission to refine our consciousness, individually and collectively, and if it is indeed the case that space-time exists only as a product of consciousness, then the effects of this refinement could go far beyond our wildest imaginings. Apparent miracles could happen.

I have invited you into this story of my transition from believing in my own smallness, vulnerability, mortality, individualism, and aloneness, along a long and, at times, painful path to believing profoundly that the personal is universal, and discovering my individual agency in my community of aligned agents. This is what will sustain me every time I go out on a limb and risk ridicule. I am not alone. What would it be like if our every waking moment was suffused with love, in the compassionate sense of “may you be well and happy”?

What would it be like if we understood, deeply at the core of our being, that we are all connected – not just to all humans, but to *everything*? What would it be like if we believed that we were actually responsible and contributing, with our every thought, word, and deed, towards our destiny?

“Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.³⁶²

-- William Ernest Henley



³⁶² Henley, W. E. (1891). *A Book of Verses* (Second ed.). New York: Scribner & Welford. pp56-7

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