

System Change

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Human ideas and systems resulting from those ideas have always changed, and probably always will. We live in times of rapid and accelerating change. In addition, we are living largely outside the laws of nature. As a result, it is virtually guaranteed that our economic, political and social systems will change in many ways, and probably soon.

The issue for business and society is: will change be voluntary or involuntary. If we do not begin to plan for a transition to sustainable systems and ways of life, that transition will be imposed on us. We cannot continue to systematically degrade the Earth's life support systems, as we are doing now, and expect there won't be a price to pay. This type of illogical, magical thinking will only bring pain to our children, as it increasingly is doing to us.

To ensure the well-being of current and future generations, we must begin to seriously consider what will come after our current form of capitalism, nation-based democracy and other human systems. Conversations like this have been going on for a long-time. In many ways, we already know what to do. We've developed many of the technologies and systems needed to survive and prosper on this planet. What's lacking is the public awareness and will to implement them.

Business appears to be the most powerful force on this planet. But in reality, the most powerful force *is* reality. Nature will always prevail over human affairs. We have no option to live outside the laws of nature. After nature, civil society is the most powerful force. It could quickly shut down any business or government. However, the public is highly vulnerable to misinformation (a major concern of the Founders of the United States). As a result, civil society often does not understand its best interests or act in a coordinated manner to achieve them. This is supposed to be the role of government. But in this age of global capitalism, government and the military are increasingly becoming the servants of business, rather than civil society.

This might be fine if the interests of business coincided with those of society. Of course, this is the intention of capitalism. However, our economic and political systems were developed largely from a reductionistic perspective that does not take the whole system into account. As a result, in spite of the best intentions, economic expansion is driving growing environmental and social problems and imposing major costs on society.

This has far more to do with our limited ideas and systems than with poor leadership. Our business and political leaders intend the best for society, but operate in systems that seriously compromise their ability to do what's best. Business can lead a coordinated effort among different groups in society to rectify this problem. There should be no conflict between what's best for business and what's best for society.

To ensure its prosperity, business can and should lead the effort to evolve our systems into sustainable forms. As shown in the articles on this site, systemic issues often compel business to damage society and the environment. In the past, it didn't make sense (we thought) for short-term oriented businesses to address the long-term consequences of their actions. Having acted this way for years, the long-term has now become the short-term in many ways.

The negative impacts of business are driving rapidly growing pushback from society, often taking the form of activist campaigns, lawsuits and market rejection. Business prosperity depends upon eliminating

negative impacts because businesses ultimately cannot survive if they systematically degrade the environmental and social realms that support them. Negative impacts cannot be fully eliminated without system change.

There are many economic, political and social system flaws that in effect compel business to negatively impact society and the environment. These could be rolled up into one overarching system flaw – the failure to hold firms fully responsible for negative impacts. In a competitive market, companies cannot fully mitigate impacts and remain in business (costs would become too high relative to firms that were not fully mitigating).

We all understand the importance of holding individuals responsible for murder, robbery and other negative impacts on society. However, it is far more important to hold firms responsible. Individuals can and usually will act responsibly voluntarily. However, regardless of good intentions, companies cannot act responsibly voluntarily in many cases. Regulatory approaches based on voluntary corporate responsibility work up to a point, but rarely, if ever, get near the goal. This has little to do with ethics. It is a system problem. If we do not find practical ways to hold firms fully responsible for impacts, the dynamics of competitive markets will not allow them to act in a fully responsible and sustainable manner. This is why sustainability is not possible without system change.

The remainder of this paper discusses big picture issues, including reality and open-mindedness, systems thinking, wisdom, complexity and doing the right thing. Specific ideas about how business can drive system change are provided in the Articles section of this website.

Reality

Human ideas, worldviews and systems have evolved throughout history. Whenever ideas and systems were not aligned with reality (the inner and outer laws of nature), they evolved into new forms or disappeared. Examples include feudalism, slavery and communism. In the past, people often thought their ideas and systems were correct, but were later shown to be wrong. The same is almost certainly true today.

Modern economic and political systems (and the worldviews from which they spring) are driving degradation of every environmental life support system, causing growing social turmoil in several regions, and making many people unhappy. Human ideas and systems cause humanity to be at odds with nature and reality in many ways.

The question for our generation is: can we voluntarily evolve our ideas and systems into a sustainable form – a form that better meets current needs and allows the survival of future generations. If we cannot evolve our systems voluntarily, reality will evolve them for us, probably into a form we don't prefer.

To achieve meaningful system change, we must be willing to question everything. One could say nothing is sacred except life, that which supports life (the environment), families, communities and the rights of people to prosper and be secure. No human idea or system resulting from that idea (economic, political, religious, social) has any inherent right to exist. Human systems should exist only if they serve life. If they do not, they should be evolved into a form that does.

This is not a philosophical statement. It is simple common sense and logic. In reality, it doesn't matter what's happening in the human mind. Nature will do what nature will do. Reality will always prevail. If our ideas and systems are not aligned with reality, they will go away, whether we like it or not.

The point here is absolutely not to be critical of people supporting ideas and systems that aren't aligned with reality. We should be critical of ideas that don't serve us, but not of people holding these ideas. The

challenges facing modern society are so complex that we can only overcome them if we work together. Criticism forces us apart and makes cooperation difficult or impossible.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking will be needed to evolve our systems into a sustainable form. Systems thinking involves putting the well-being of the whole ahead of the individual, because the individual cannot survive apart from the whole. In reality, everything on the Earth is part of one interconnected system. When the scale of human activity was small in relation to the Earth, it was logical to consider the well-being of the individual apart from the whole. Now, as human activity is degrading every life support system and making many unhappy, it is no longer logical. It would be like considering the well-being of the hand apart from the body to which it's attached.

Modern economic, political and social systems were developed largely from a reductionistic perspective that does not take the whole Earth system into account. As a result, these systems produce unintended consequences that undermine the good they seek to bring about in society.

To survive on this planet, human society must abide by the laws of nature. In effect, this means we must model our systems after nature. The technologies and systems of nature are almost infinitely more sophisticated and complex than human technologies and systems. Fortunately, we are part of nature. We have the capacity to operate at far higher levels of complexity and sophistication than that reflected in our current systems.

Competition at the individual level in nature has been used to justify the development of competitive human systems, such as our current form of capitalism. However, what makes sense at the micro level does not necessarily make sense at the macro level. At the system level, the overwhelming force in nature is cooperation, not competition. In a healthy system, such as a forest or human body, the parts cooperate. When they don't, as with cancer, the system dies. The human mind evolved to serve and protect the individual in a world that was very competitive at the individual level. As a result, it is understandable that the logic of the individual (competition) would be scaled up to the system level to develop human systems.

To achieve sustainability, human thinking must rise to a higher level – systems thinking (cooperation). Through the intuitive function, the level at which nature operates, humans have the ability to operate in harmony with natural systems. The greatest leaps forward in human knowledge have come from the intuitive. However, in a competitive world that instills fear in the individual, we often are not willing to trust the intuitive. Instead, we sometimes make fun of this greatest source of human wisdom, calling it soft and fuzzy.

In many ways, humanity has become arrogant. We often make the mistake of thinking human thought is the highest form of intelligence on Earth. Yet it is obvious we are surrounded by vastly superior intelligence, including in our own bodies. Humanity needs much greater humility. Humility comes from wisdom.

Wisdom

We must become wiser if humanity is to survive and prosper on this planet. Power without wisdom is destructive. This is what we see in the world today. Wisdom must balance power. Power is usually associated with the masculine and wisdom with the feminine, though of course men and women have both qualities. In a fear-filled competitive world such as ours, power (and those manifesting more of it – men) is highly valued. The frequently subordinate position of women around the world makes it clear that men generally manifest greater power than women (power defined here as greater physical strength, the

willingness to use it, and the general willingness to act in a more aggressive, competitive and dominating manner). However, it is often less clear what quality women generally manifest equally more than men. This is largely because that quality (wisdom) is implicitly not valued as much as power.

Wisdom is defined here as the ability to see the big picture – to understand and act upon the interconnectedness of all things – to operate in harmony with others and with nature. This is the wisdom displayed by nature at the system level. Women generally manifest greater intuitive wisdom (for example, the intuitive knowledge that cooperation is usually the more effective course and the willingness to act on this knowledge). However, this is not always obvious because boys and girls are trained to succeed in a world that values competition, as shown by competitive grading and sports in school.

While many men and women value wisdom and act wisely, society overall implicitly does not value wisdom enough because we are not displaying much of it. We are degrading our life support systems, making many unhappy and clearly not operating in balance with nature. We will know we've become wise when we're living in a way that allows future generations to prosper and when there is true equality between men and women. As we increasingly realize human survival and prosperity require greater cooperation and wisdom, the status of those manifesting more of it (women) will rise around the world.

Being intuitively wise requires having the courage to live with uncertainty. Driven by a quest for knowledge and fear of uncertainty, we seek to know everything. But this is not possible at the intellectual level. The human mind cannot know the future or comprehend all the details of the whole Earth system at once. The mind did not evolve for that purpose. The world's great religions have known for ages that the proper role of the mind is to be a servant to something wiser. This produces the most satisfying life, partly because it places the individual in harmony with the larger system of which it is a part.

Older religious beliefs allowed humans to live sustainably on this planet because they saw nature as the manifestation of the divine. This caused them to revere and respect nature, which is logical since nature actually is the source of our lives. If there is a divine manifestation on Earth, it is life and that which gives life – nature. As groups of people began to compete more, religions appeared that had one set of rules for the in-group and another for the out-group. This provided divine justification for defending against attackers.

Now, as humanity evolves further and as technology and population growth in effect make the world smaller, there is no longer an out-group. The core of each religion is essentially the same – to love and respect each other, to care for the poor, to protect the environment. Higher-level systems thinking in the religious area means we increase cooperation and sustainability among humanity by emphasizing these core values and de-emphasizing older cultural ideas that split us apart.

The vast intelligence obviously displayed in nature's creations is often labeled as divine and thought to be largely inaccessible to humans. However, through the intuitive, we have access to this immense wisdom – the wisdom of nature. In effect, we can be infinitely wise. Our education systems usually teach us to be intellectually smart rather than intuitively wise. Teaching more people, especially children, to access, discern and utilize intuitive wisdom through meditation and other techniques is important. It will greatly advance systems thinking, cooperation and sustainability in society.

Religions have called us to a higher level of consciousness for ages. They say, one's needs will be better met by putting others first. Now as quantum physics and common sense show we are in fact part of one interconnected system, this spiritual wisdom is seen as logical and practical. As we train our minds to seek and utilize intuitive wisdom, the frontiers of human knowledge will quickly and vastly expand. Our consciousness will reach a higher level as we see beyond the illusion of separation (fostered by the five senses) to the reality of interconnectedness.

One might ask, why did humans gain the ability to think – to reflect on the past and future, on themselves and others? Perhaps the reason is evolution. In the same way that physical life forms evolve, consciousness also evolves. Human thought occurs mostly at the individual level, since individuals are doing the thinking. This is like the consciousness of an animal in that we focus on ourselves. But consciousness can also rise to the system level.

We can imagine a cell consuming another cell in the human body while at the same time being aware of the whole body system. We also can imagine the consciousness of a lion seeking food in the forest. But can we imagine the consciousness of the forest, or of the whole Earth system? We easily understand consciousness at the whole body level since this is our frame of reference. It is much harder to understand consciousness of the whole Earth system because we do not think at that level.

The symmetry, order, complexity, sophistication and beauty of natural systems show that very high intelligence of some type is present. This intelligence is much greater than that normally occurring in the human mind. Through the evolution of consciousness, our awareness can move from the individual to the system level. This is the function of intuitive wisdom – to be conscious at the system level – to perceive and actually experience our connection to the whole.

It is this experience that transforms lives. One can begin down the path of seeking a better, more fulfilling life by accepting economic, religious and other ideas through blind faith. One moves further along the path by intellectually analyzing ideas to see if they make sense. However, the most profound and meaningful experience of life occurs when one attains deep wisdom through actual experience. Ideas are accepted not because a credible person says them or because they are logical, but rather because their truth is experienced. This activity occurs beyond the intellect, beyond rational thought. It is a means of fully knowing without needing to understand intellectually. Great energy and motivation to change one's life can emerge from this level – from the pursuit and experience of intuitive wisdom.

It should be made clear that intuitive wisdom as used here does not include ego-based or fear-based “hunches”. Intuitive wisdom cannot be wrong because it is the wisdom of nature. It goes beyond human beliefs and ideas to the real laws that govern our existence. The difficulty comes in attempting to discern the difference between intuitive wisdom and products of the so-called rational mind or intellect. It sometimes takes years of discipline and practice to reliably discern true intuitive wisdom.

Wisdom in effect is systems thinking. It involves thinking from the perspective of the whole system rather than the individual. Many economic, political and social ideas and systems that appear to be logical from the individual level are shown to be illogical and even destructive when seen from the whole Earth system level. (The Total Corporate Responsibility and Gross National Happiness articles shown on this site discuss these issues in more detail.)

Business and political leaders often must act without full information. Our greatest leaders are those that seem to know the right thing to do, even when they don't have full understanding of a given situation. Intuitive wisdom guides them to make the right decision. True wisdom, leadership and humility involve recognizing that the mind is part of a whole. It cannot understand everything. The wise mind is one that allows itself to be guided by intuitive wisdom. A person acting in this manner is placed in harmony with others and the overall system. As a result, they live a more satisfying and effective life and are better able to deal with the growing complexity of modern society.

Complexity

The opportunities facing humanity are vast and complex, as are the challenges. To effectively address the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities, we must separate the “what” from the “how”. Evolving systems, such as our economic system, into a sustainable form is immensely complex on its own. However, from a systems perspective, everything is relevant. This means few things can be done in isolation. As a result, effective evolution of our economic system, for example, can only be done in tandem with evolution of political, social and other systems. Clearly the complexity of system change dwarfs any challenge faced by humanity so far.

Often during discussions about how to change systems, concerns about difficulty and complexity are used unintentionally as excuses for inaction. This is why the conversation about the need for system change should be kept separate from discussions about how to change systems. First we must agree that systems need to change. Once we agree this should occur, for example to ensure the survival of our children, then, we can discuss how to change systems. At this point, difficulty, complexity or any other excuse for inaction is not acceptable.

Doing the Right Thing

As noted above, systems thinking involves putting the well-being of the whole ahead of the individual (because the individual cannot survive apart from the whole). Caring for the whole mostly means caring for future generations – for our children. In this sense, all children on the planet are the responsibility of today’s adults. We should be willing to make any sacrifice, short of our own lives, to ensure the survival of our children.

Certainly, we should be willing to sacrifice our comfort, if necessary. Deep satisfaction and happiness in life come from doing the right thing, not solely from being comfortable. Even in prosperous regions like the United States, there are many comfortable yet empty, unfulfilled, depressed people, as indicated by growing obesity, anti-depressant drug use, excessive TV watching, and other compulsive behaviors.

Sacrificing comfort in this case relates mostly to mental comfort. On the physical level, technologies developed but not widely implemented can allow us to substantially reduce environmental and social impacts while providing equal or greater comfort. However, on the mental level, letting go of familiar ideas and systems that no longer serve us can be uncomfortable. Living with uncertainty as we evolve our ideas, worldviews and systems to a sustainable form requires courage. But the payoff is worth it.

Greater cooperation and wisdom in society will increase the willingness of people to live with uncertainty. In our highly competitive world, it often feels as if we’re on our own. This makes people unwilling to let go of the security provided by existing systems and structures. If we do not cooperate and support each other to a much greater degree, many people will not be willing to depart from ideas, lifestyles and systems that appear to work for the individual, but do not work for our children.

Evolving our systems into sustainable forms is doing the right thing for our children. We have the ability to do this. We can be far, far wiser than we are now. We can build a better world for our children and ourselves. We always improve. We always find better ways of doing things. It’s time to step up to the plate again!

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