

### Context and Possibilities in Times of Crisis

Depending on the context, leadership demands different knowledge sets and skills. Traditional crisis leadership assumes that there will be a return to 'normalcy', to the status quo. The Great Unraveling/Great Turning offer no such assurances. When there are intersecting crises looming; when the changes coming are of such magnitude that they threaten to alter the fabric of our world; when the givens we base decisions on and plan actions with are no longer reliable, then what knowledge and skills might be valuable, and how might we choose to respond?

Crises of this magnitude cannot be managed in the traditional sense. They are the result of multiple systemic failures. Management implies that control is possible, and in such conditions, control is fleeting. Outside resources may not be available. Only minor local and immediate situations can be managed for brief periods before the larger crisis undermines their stability. Another characteristic of systemic crises is that they reveal the weaknesses of the foundational epistemological and ontological assumptions of the current system, and put them into play. These kinds of assumptions are typically of a philosophical/religious nature, which is to say that they are in some sense theological. During such times, those in religious leadership may perhaps be a likelier position to influence events. Religious leadership would then seem to require a flexible and imaginative awareness of both the existing and possible.

If we imagine these conditions in terms of the Great Unraveling/Great Turning, we can discern three broad contexts for leadership. There is the period prior to the crisis, when we attempt for forestall, diminish, or prepare for, the changes the crisis will bring. There is the period of the crisis itself, when we attempt to survive the changes. And there is the period after the crisis, in which we attempt to adapt to the changes. There may not be clear boundaries between these times. I believe that each has

different demands that require different skills, but also that there are skills and knowledge sets that have value across them all.

It seems doubtful that, barring some unforeseen events or a radical change in the way we manage our civilization, the oncoming Great Crisis can be averted - although the possibility remains of diminishing its intensity and duration. Humanity is in the period just prior to the crisis, and within our lifetimes (and certainly within the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren) it will enter into the period of the crisis itself. How long the crisis will last is unknown, but I think we can predict its duration to be many generations and its effects to be permanent. Beyond that, much is unpredictable and uncertain.

Facing such an unpredictable and uncertain world, where the outcomes are unknown, a spiritual leader needs knowledge, skills, and tools that allow for a wide range of imaginative and creative solutions. This means they must be both profound and practical. Profound in their spiritual and religious understanding, practical in that they must be able to generate meaningful actions in complex and unpredictable situations.

They must also be of a different order than the assumptions that got us into trouble in the first place. As Albert Einstein once said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." It is my intention as a religious leader to explore and share different ways of thinking in the hope that these may provide the means of introducing new elements into our shared experience as opportunities arise, both before and during the crisis.

### **Which brings us to Bugs Bunny!**

Bugs Bunny is fearless, optimistic, and creative. Bugs is bold, quick-witted and intelligent. He is an impersonator, a shape-shifter, a situation-reverser, a context changer, a deceiver... in short, Bugs is a Trickster.

Tricksters have played a role in a great many creation stories and mythologies, and there have been many books and treatises written on that subject. Tricksters have played the role of inventors of new things, and as teachers to the new beings present after Creation. On the North Pacific coast, the trickster Raven made the first fishhook; he taught the spider how to make her web and human beings how to make nets. In Norse mythology, Loki made the first fish net. "Trick" is *dolos* in Homeric Greek, and the oldest known use of the term refers to a quite specific trick: baiting a hook to catch a fish.

(Lewis, 1998)

Yes, Bugs is an animated character. So what? We're trying to get out of the mindset and thinking that got us into this mess. Why can't an animated character be a role model? And it is the qualities of fearlessness, optimism, imagination and creativity; of being quick-witted and intelligent and bold, that we need in the days to come. The point is that if there are many realities, spiritual and otherwise, then we can open others up to new ways of being and knowing. Creative cleverness and a some trickster context changing and teaching may go farther than appeals to reason or threats of doom.

Being able to open these doors to those stuck in the current paradigms of industrial growth society will be absolutely necessary in the coming years. Being able to imagine fresh creative responses in the midst of crisis requires that we see all participants as equal co-creators in a new world.

Bugs is precisely the kind of role model we need when things get weird. Here's the thing about Bugs Bunny: his trickery works because in each case, he perfectly embodies the reality he is projecting. Bugs Bunny enacts that reality, and entices or engages his opponents into co-creating that reality with him.

### **Locked In, Locked Out**

Human beings and their cultures can tend to get 'locked in' to particular worldviews and ways of thinking and being. Some of this is because of path-dependent choices and outcomes that actually do

lock us into economic or political systems and remove alternative choices. We see this in our current oil dependent, consumption-driven way of life. Even if we want to make other choices about how to live, it is either impossible or very hard. It can be hard to imagine any alternatives. Yet we know alternatives must exist. Some of our “lock in” can come from holding too tightly to beliefs rather than any actual limitations. This is true of all sides in the debates about the Great Unraveling/Great Turning. How can we unlock worldviews and beliefs and ways of thinking and being?

### Imagination

*Imagination is the ability of forming mental images, sensations and concepts, in a moment when they are not perceived through sight, hearing or other senses. Imagination is the work of the mind that helps create. Imagination helps provide meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge; it is a fundamental facility through which people make sense of the world, and it also plays a key role in the learning process. (Wikipedia)*

The act of prediction is an act of imagination. So is modeling, and extrapolating data. Imagining complex system dynamics and future results from past experience are also acts of imagination.

Imagination also allows us to think of creative solutions, to evoke *new* worlds - worlds other than the present one. Imagination is a key ability and spiritual practice for everyone in all contexts of the crisis.

New scenarios can be introduced, not as fixed outcomes, but as acts of imagination in which people are invited to participate. Imagining different ways of thinking and knowing, of living and being in relationship, can be invited in from all.

### Belief

There is a line between imagination and belief that varies from individual to individual, influenced by religion, tradition and culture. What was originally an act of imagination becomes a belief in the possibility of the imagined conditions, and the necessity of the practical activity demanded by those

conditions. Belief is tricky stuff, though. The line between belief and imagination is one that can be sharply delineated or broad and fuzzy. It can just as easily eliminate possibilities as expand them. I think it is important to keep the element of play alive in our imaginations and our beliefs, and to “Believe fully without attachment.” This allows us to act and yet be open to changing our beliefs if new conditions warrant it.

In times of great change people can cling to their beliefs because they can derive a sense of safety and certainly from them. It is important to honor those beliefs in the same way one honors a faithful companion, yet open them up to the possibility of a new friendships.

We must also remember that beliefs are typically seen as part of our personal identity. To change our beliefs is to change who we are. This is not something everyone wants to do. To attack beliefs is to attack the person. This can generate fear, anger and distrust. We should hone our skills at gently inviting those beliefs back across the border into imagination.

### **Embodied Knowledge**

It can be hard to shift ourselves out of ways of thinking. We tend to separate thinking from being – our epistemology from our ontology. This is a holdover from the Cartesian-Kantian worldview so deeply embedded in Western culture. (And now to some extent within globalized culture.) Jorge Ferrer thinks that this is not actually the case. In envisioning a participatory spirituality, he proposes that knowing, especially spiritual knowing, occurs by virtue of being.

“...an embodied presence pregnant with meaning that transforms both self and world. We could say, then, that *subject and object, knowing and being, epistemology and ontology, are brought together in the very act of spiritual knowing.*” (Ferrer, 2002)

The practical effect of this disclosure is that changes to thinking may be initiated by changes in the body through action. This effect has actually been studied as a methodology in changing beliefs about energy use. (Grist, 2010) Resistance to change may actually be carried in the body as emotions, as patterns of behavior, and as solidified beliefs in the form of well-worn neural pathways.

It is important then to be aware of how people are holding both the present and the future in their bodies. Awareness of this may allow opportunities for change by releasing emotions, changing behavior patterns, and jolting people out of well worn neural pathways. Seek to bring imagination into the body through playfulness. Imagine acting out the present and the future, and interactions with other life forms and our imaginary descendants.

### **Randomness**

Most situations tend to share characteristics that partake of both the real and the imaginary. Human beings tend towards the linear and monocular in our thinking. Simplifying has a great deal of value in many ways, and too much complexity can be overwhelming and make it difficult to imagine pathways to solutions. It can be helpful to introduce new elements into situations in order to cast new light on them.

When things seem complex, simplify. When things seem too simple, complexify. When dialog founders, introduce a third and a fourth voice. Take the single voice to an extreme. When it seems like the situation is too big, make it personal and particular. When it seems like things are too personal, go big. Cross-dress the situation. Paint it different colors. Place it in a different context. Throw the dice.

### **New Orders of Thinking**

I've presented some of the other skills and abilities I think we need to cultivate before addressing the idea of new orders of thinking. This is important because these skills prepare the field, so to speak, for

new ways to take root and grow. Beliefs and ideas give rise to what is typically called a worldview. The late Rev. Maori Marsden defined world views this way:

*Cultures pattern perceptions of reality into conceptualizations of what they perceive reality to be; of what is to be regarded as actual, probable, possible or impossible. These conceptualizations form what is termed the 'world view' of a culture. The World view is the central systematization of conceptions of reality to which members of its culture assent and from which stems their value system. The world view lies at the very heart of the culture, touching, interacting with and strongly influencing every aspect of the culture. (Royal, 2002)*

World views limit possibilities as part of their bounded nature. Human history is filled with sources for possible worldviews. Particularly rich sources are indigenous worldviews, because indigenous worldviews seek unification and identity with the world, rather than salvation and meaning outside it. In particular, these worldviews can contribute modes of relationship and process with the other-than-human in ritual and process. Indigenous worldviews spring from a practical, grounded desire for whole, healthy, living relationships with everything that cohabits the world with them precisely because they know and experience how deeply intertwined human identity is with the web of life.

We share this desire, but we need a more complex understanding that fits our modern and post-modern sensibilities. Human identity in our global culture is no longer so closely bound to the natural world, but I am of the opinion that the human experience is essentially of a spiritual nature that is rooted in the embodied reality of existence. Health and wholeness and identity are still bound into the landscape/cityscape/worldspace.

I like the concept of a worldspace because it allows for a world in which multiple worldviews and ways of knowing and being are possible – rather than a world in which possibility and choice has been narrowed to just a few worldviews, and maybe down to a single worldview.

Another possibility lies in some of the recent work being done in transpersonal theory that I alluded to earlier in the section on Embodied Knowledge. Jose Ferrer gives us an idea of how such a worldspace might operate:

*“... a transpersonal understanding of spiritual phenomena as multilocal participatory events (i.e., emergences of transpersonal being that can occur not only in the locus of an individual, but also in a relationship, a community, a collective identity, or a place.)”*

*“The participatory vision is reacting against intrasubjective reductionism, that is to say, the reduction of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena to the status of individual inner experiences.*

*Let us now have a closer look at this view of transpersonal phenomena as multilocal participatory events. The participatory vision conceives transpersonal phenomena as (1) **events**, in contrast to intrasubjective experiences; (2) **multilocal**, in that they can arise in different loci, such as an individual, a relationship, a community, a collective identity, or a place; and (3) **participatory**, in that they can invite the generative power and dynamism of all dimensions of human nature to interact with a spiritual power in the cocreation of spiritual worlds.*

*As events, they are neither objective nor subjective; they cannot be possessed (they are not anyone's property); they can be optimized but never forced; and they can emerge spontaneously with the coming together of certain conditions.*

*Multilocal means that the spiritual can not only be communal or reside in places, but can also occur in the locus of collective identities, such as the ones that can emerge from archetypal, phylogenetic, ancestral, racial, or cultural morphic fields.*

*Participatory alludes to the fact that, after the break with Cartesianism, transpersonal events - and the knowledge they usually convey - can no longer be objective, neutral, or merely cognitive. On the contrary, transpersonal events engage human beings in a participatory, connected and often passionate knowing that can involve not only the opening of the mind, but also the body, the heart and the soul.*

*Participatory also refers to the fundamental ontological predicament of human beings in relation to spiritual energies and realities. Human beings are - whether they know it or not - always*

*participating in the self disclosure of Spirit by virtue of their very existence. This participatory predicament is not only the ontological foundation of the other forms of participation, but also the epistemic anchor of spiritual knowledge claims and the moral source of responsible action.*

*Participatory refers to the role that individual consciousness plays during transpersonal events. This relation is not one of appropriation, possession, or passive representation of knowledge, but of communion and cocreative participation.”*

That’s a long quotation, but his ideas are very rich, and deserve full consideration. They remove the old ideas of human separation from the world and each other. They remove the divisions between knowing and being, mind and body, object and subject. If we look closely, we can see that the difference between ordinary knowledge and being, and spiritual knowledge and being, are only a matter of definition, and that this division may be no more real than any other. If that is so, then we are all empowered to actively co-creating a worldspace of a radically different character – rather than being passive participants, and whether we are religious or not.

It is worth saying that worldviews are not constructed from scratch as complete systems. They are organic pastiches, the result of creative responses to life. In a dynamic worldspace, bits and pieces of different ways of thinking, knowing, and being from many worldviews can contribute – some because they are useful, some because they are beautiful. All are true because they are enacted. Source material is everywhere, and nothing should be overlooked.

### **Passion**

Passion is strong feeling. It is the strong feeling we have for life, the love of life that inspires us. Passion is the source of our empathy, our juice, the fire in our belly. The Latin root of the word *passion* means to suffer, to endure, and unless we have endurance, we may give up. Passion is therefore vital in the face of the Great Unraveling/Great Turning.

What we can imagine, and believe possible enough to be of such grave concern is also deeply emotionally disturbing. A shattered world eliminates so many possible futures for ourselves, our descendants, and for the current life on Earth – and it holds a possibility of no future at all for life as we know it. To acknowledge the potential for this loss is to acknowledge the possibility of something so horrific that it can deaden the soul to contemplate it. This possibility is so horrific precisely because we deeply love, and are passionate about, life - at the very least our own life, and the lives of our families and immediate communities - and perhaps that love may extend to all of the life around us. And we may even be passionate about future life, imaginary life, possible life.

Indeed, it is our feelings, and the feelings of others, that may be the biggest barriers we face. Sadness, anger, grief, hope, and joy are at the heart of our humanity. One may persuade with the facts, but unless we also deal with the emotions, we will fail. As Ferrer shows us, feeling and thinking cannot be divorced. Our emotions color our reason, and vice versa. The mind/body/heart is one thing, connected to the world through the senses. Passion is embodied and visible in the world, and is a source of inspiration to others.

### **Compassion**

From passion springs the word *compassion*, to suffer with, to feel with. Compassion is marked by empathy and sympathy. Without compassion we cannot care about anything at all. Awaking compassion in others is one of the tasks we face in times of crisis. Staying compassionate for others, and ourselves, in the middle of the struggle is something we must constantly strive to do.

### **Optimism**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it best: *It is more sensible to be pessimistic; disappointments are left behind, and one can face people unembarrassed. Hence, the clever frown upon optimism. In its essence optimism*

*is not a way of looking at the present situation but a power of life, a power of hope when others resign, a power to hold our heads high when all seems to have come to naught, a power to tolerate setbacks, a power that never abandons the future to the opponent but lays claim to it.*

Bugs Bunny never gives up, and neither should we. To do so is to abandon the future. The power that Bonhoeffer describes does not reside in us, but in life itself, and we can access it through prayer and ceremony and meditation, play and imagination, love and compassion.

### **Inventing and Teaching**

My hope is that the skills and knowledge outlined are above fulfill my original intention to seek those that are “Profound in their spiritual and religious understanding, practical in that they must be able to generate meaningful actions in complex and unpredictable situations.” They are not intended to be an exhaustive set of such tools, skills and knowing - but rather a set of meta-skills and ways of framing that can inform and vitalize other ones . Other skills, such as humor, are also important.

I intention is to further develop these ideas into a set of practices designed to enhance these skills and explore the terrain of new ways of thinking. Some of this may be original, some may come from other sources. The target audience would be leaders involved in the struggle against climate change, ecological collapse, and the work of the Great Turning.

### **Current Affairs**

The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, observed that a new idea goes through three stages in becoming “the norm”: First, it’s ridiculed. Second, it’s violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as self-evident. How much more complex things become when a series of new ideas, or the intersections of them, come into play at once.

Here in America, violent opposition to the ideas of catastrophic climate change and ecological collapse is at its peak. This opposition is coming from those who are most invested in the status quo. The idea of peak oil is already moving into stage three after a much shorter time period and with less resistance.

There is a lot of excellent research that has recently been done in the area of targeted communications about climate change. Recent setbacks in the public opinion can be reversed as these creative efforts come online. In the meantime, we need to keep up the creative narratives and offer creative solutions. We need to be bold and imaginative in shifting the context and drawing people into imagining new worlds with us. We need to keep Bugs Bunny on our shoulders.

In the area of climate communications, I would especially like to call attention to the work of The Resource Innovation Group, specifically two of their innovative programs around climate change:

The Climate Leadership Initiative and The Social Capital Project. They've researched and published a great many useful guides and manuals. A short list includes:

*Climate Communications and Behavior Change: A Guide for Practitioners* (2010) distills global warming, behavior change, and communications research and practitioner expertise into tools and recommendations that climate leaders can easily apply.

*Climate Crossroads* (2009) provides communications insights to engage environmental supporters and recommends how to reframe global warming to promote behavior change.

*Re:Green-The Ecological Roadmap* (2008) is a national segmentation study on American social values that identifies barriers to environmental engagement and offers new communications and advocacy approaches with the potential to mobilize the base of support for environmental protection.

I highly recommend the entire site and the rest of their publications.

We are on the perilous cusp. Let us act wisely, with imagination and heart.

**Bibliography and Resources**

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