

This paper is one of a series of individual essays written within the conceptual constraints provided by "Forms for a Future." The collection of essays will become the individual episodes of the podcast.

'... Forums for A Future...'

Podcast (#15) Personal and Private Tools for Change
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Prelude

Part I of my podcast series contains a brief 2-minute promotional and a conceptual foundation for thinking about change as the convergence of economic, political, social and personal perspectives. Part II is a set of four podcasts providing a philosophy for the 21st century. Part III is a set of four podcasts describing three lessons from modern history on the interplay of Power, Wealth and Belief for informing the present. Part IV contains three prescriptive principles for having a future. Part V describes of two "Tools for Change." Today, in Podcast # 15, I will discuss the first of these two tools, those that are: Personal and Private.

Key Concept

We have a uniquely personal and private responsibility for the future that is the foundation for our sense of self and for a coherent sense of self-direction.

Introduction

Of the four pillars identified at the beginning of this podcast, three are structural and thus impersonal. They are:

- **Economic** as exemplified by the writing of Thomas Friedman in his book, The Earth Is Flat.
- **Social** as exemplified by the writing of Jared Diamond in his book, Collapse.
- **Political** as exemplified by the writing all Gwynne Dyer in his book, Future: Tense.

These three pillars of wealth, belief and power, respectively, are the timeless structures that have shape human history. The record of these forces are the traces of human progress we call history. Historical scholarship is the examination of these records to explain the past, to understand present, and, in the process, to be prescriptive for future.

But, there is also a fourth element. It is human beings who have used wealth, belief and power to forge, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse, how history has unfolded. Individual people are responsible the reality of our present, and ultimately, for our hopes and

potential for the future. Thus, the fourth pillar, the **Psychological**, is one that is uniquely Personal and Private.

Although we, as individual people, often feel helpless in the hands of fate, paradoxically, it is only us -- individually and collectively -- that can, and will, deliver the future. Perhaps for the first time in history of the planet, the future, for which we are the authors, will not be for our great-grandchildren, our grandchildren, or even our own children. Rather, it will be our own future.

Intergenerational now has new meaning. The youth and the adults of today, unlike any other time, now share a common future and have a joint responsibility for transforming the present, and for delivering to themselves their own joint future.

What an exciting time to be alive.

Convergences

Thomas Friedman entitled the last chapter of his book "imagination." That is what he thinks it will take for individuals to survive in the new flat world we have just entered. Imagination is the capacity to think outside the box. Given that we, today, are the first of the new millennium, our choice is either to be on the leading edge of change, or to be left behind, as an individual, a company or a country. Imagination is required to embrace and to fly ahead of change, to already be there when it arrives.

Jared Diamond reached similar conclusions in his book on "how societies choose to fail or to succeed," but based social sciences concepts. It is the capacity of individuals to let go of core values and beliefs, when they are no longer valid, in order to be able to adapt to new circumstances. This requires a social system that makes change and adaptation possible. Social values, such as sustaining the quality of life, need to have sufficient counter weight to balance simpleminded economic and political forces that gives preeminence to accumulated wealth and power. There in lies the power of balance.

Gwynne Dyer in his book describes how a dysfunctional political ideology in the United States has thrown the world off-track and has brought it to the edge of disaster. Alternative concepts to the current national politics are required to recover a future, not just for the United States, but for the planet itself. His truly awesome proposition is that it is us, in the United States -- as the most powerful nation in the world -- who must assume this leadership. If we do not, figuratively speaking, we are going to be the ultimate suicide bomber that takes out the world through the pursuit of narrow short-range thinking, just like the failed societies described by Diamond. That is why we in the United States have a special responsibility for the future.

Each of these three authors wrote popular, best-selling books. All three were trying to talk to each of us, as individuals, to capture our minds. Each author was cautiously optimistic that this human experiment on the planet Earth could work out. Their books are not about doomsday predestinations. Rather, they are about an urgent opportunity to demonstrate that human intelligence can be used to design and sustain human progress. Jared Diamond gave a deeply

personal answer in response to the question “Jared are you optimistic or pessimistic about the world’s future?” His answer:

“I am a cautious optimist... by that, I mean that, on the one hand, I acknowledge the seriousness of the problems facing us. If we don't make a determined effort to solve them, and if we don't succeed at that effort, the world as a whole within the next few decades will face a declining standard of living, or perhaps something worse. That's the reason why I decided to devote most of my career efforts at this stage of my life to convince people that our problems have to be taken seriously and won't go away otherwise. On the other hand, we shall be able to solve our problems -- if we choose to do so. That's why my wife and I did decide to have children 17 years ago: because we did see grounds for hope.” (Page 521)

Thus, all three authors are telling us that economically, socially and politically we are at an inflection point in history. We are at a time when old concepts and old ways of thinking have reached their end point. Now is a time for creative and imaginative thinking. It is thinking that will challenge long-standing, often unquestionable, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors.

Psychological Aspects

How do we do this? How do we as individuals rise to this enormous challenge? How do we put into practice a personal Philosophy for the 21st Century? One that will allow us to create new, alternative constructions of how we interpret and understand the world in which we now live. A world in which answers from the past must all be treated as suspect.

The answers to these questions are at one and the same time very simple and straightforward, yet, exceedingly difficult to carry out. They are difficult simply because it is very hard for people to let go of core beliefs and values. This is because long-standing, unquestioned beliefs, values and behaviors are integral parts of our definition of self -- who it is we know ourselves to be. People do not let go of their sense of self easily. Indeed, what we are talking about is to open the possibility for the emergence of a different person.

Why would anyone undertake such a difficult personal journey? The answer is because to not do so will be even more dangerous. We each have that choice to make. We now live in a time when many people are disillusioned with politics and the political process. Many feel helpless in the face of economic globalization. Politically, we are increasingly asked to fear others who would harm us, thus competitively setting “us” against “them.” We are asked to relinquish our freedoms in order to confront those we are asked to fear at a time when greater world cooperation is essential to reduce the dangers. Yet, to regain a stronger coherent sense of self, we need to resist this pressure, to question what we are doing, and to seek new constructions with alternative visions.

Such times of change are both threatening, because so much is unknown, and exhilarating because so much is possible. Psychologically, how do we cross over bridge and make the personal choice to re-examine issues that go to the core of our sense of self? What are the psychological tools? Some guidelines are:

1. Avoid Absolutes. Events and issues in the real world do not owe allegiance to any particular explanation or viewpoint. They just exist. It is human beings who impose meaning and interpretations on them. Like all human actions they are subject to a wide range of perspectives.

2. Remember Ideas Are Inventions. Our core beliefs and values, our attitudes and judgments are inventions – they are conceptual tools created by our imagination. This does not mean that every idea and every viewpoint is just as good as any other. Our interpretations must prove themselves to be worthy of retention by being useful, and if they are not, then we must have the honesty to abandon them and adopt other beliefs.

3. Treat Life As an Experiment. The test for any constructs is how well it works. When issues or events occur which contradict the principles, then adjustments are required. It is outcomes in the real world that provide the feedback to refine and make more sophisticated our ideas and concepts. It is an endless self-correcting process of invention -- not discovery. We do not discover "the truth"; rather, we create approximations by trying new ways of thinking when old ones fail.

4. Use Imagination. Living creatively is an imaginative process. In a world without absolute truths, progress inches forward by creating better and more useful constructs to explain the past, to understand the present, and prescriptively to reach for the future.

5. Ask Yourself “What If.” What if you were in another person’s shoes, how would you react? What if another country was occupying our country, how would you react to their troops? What would you do or think if you had a serious sickness in your family and no health care nor money to pay for the treatment.

6. Try Different Perspectives. Try out different perspectives the way you try on a new article of clothing. See how it fits. We can do this by seeking out others who hold different views or who are in a different position and ask them what they think and why. Do this honestly, not as an argument but as a genuine curiosity. There is no need to “educate” them about your views to contrary. It is your goal to be able to explain them, to see how they see the issue, and to consider whether it is reasonable given their assumptions.

These are but a few of tools that psychologists and others have created for helping people to be flexible and adaptive. There are many books devoted to this process. The important point is not the list of specific tools, but rather a choice to find and use the tools that are best for each of us. This means making a deliberate choice to examine the economic, social and political issues raised by Friedman, Diamond and Dyer, respectively, and to start the process of personal rediscovery.

A Coherent Sense of Self-direction

When I created the Forums for a Future podcast around the notion of these four pillars, the graphic image in my head was the economic, social, political and psychological anchoring the four corners of a box. Inside the box was our individual sense of self. Each of us is "caged",

economically by the resources available to us, socially by what others have done, politically by what governments do, and psychologically by our constructions (that is our interpretations and understandings) of our situation.

There is no escape from the matrix formed by these four pillars. These are the human constraints within which each of us makes our individual choices. It is from these choices we gain our sense of self. We gain a coherent sense of self-direction when we start to assume personal and private responsibility for how wealth, belief and power are harnessed for the benefit of human kind. This means reversing the effects of economic globalization in order to decrease national and world wealth and income disparities, adapting life styles and standards of human activities to fit within the capacity of the planet to sustain itself, and to create world political structures capable of advancing the level of international cooperation necessary for a safe and secure world. Such a world is one that is free of the fear, hunger and despair that foster disorder, oppression and terror. Playing competitively to win as a national citizen, in the new flat world, is to lose it all. Playing cooperatively not to lose it all, as a citizen of world, is to win.

Not playing at all is to lose a sense of self and to be without a coherent sense of self-direction. Today, local is global, and the future is now. What an exciting time to be alive!

Although this journey must begin within ourselves, and is therefore personal and private, it must end with others and eventually become political and public. Making the transition from the personal and private to the political and public is the subject of the next podcast.

(I will close with a recording of Dylan Thomas reading his poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night".)

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.