

THE HEALING CENTURY

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Despite the widespread frustrations of our time, I believe that we can, and must live with hope. We are capable of making a profound positive shift in our thinking over the next few years. The heart of this shift would be for us to conceptualize the twenty-first century as the healing century just as the twentieth will certainly be defined in the future as the economic and technological century. I shall prove that only a change toward a more caring and compassionate culture at all levels from the personal to the ecological can avoid massive breakdowns.

I am all too well aware, however, that the message of hope I intend to send will only be welcome to those who are aware that the current directions of the global culture are unacceptable and unsustainable. If you still believe that our current commitment to maximum economic growth and international competitiveness, based on ever-increasing technological competence, will solve our problems then my message will seem pessimistic and, indeed, highly negative.

We currently face a series of unavoidable crises which are already visible to those who care to look beyond the dominant headlines. These crises are due to our past successes rather than our failures. We have achieved what we wanted to. We have so far failed to recognize that it is now time to move on and to seize the new opportunities which are currently available to us. We urgently need to rework our concepts of success.

Fortunately, the Chinese have taught us that crises bring both danger and opportunity. Danger predominates when we ignore changing realities as our dominant communication systems are doing today. Opportunity emerges when we commit to breaking the psychic trance that numbs us at the current time. Our challenge is to find ways to support the mindquakes we need if we are to realistically perceive the radically different world which is already emerging around us.

I shall start with the economic, social, environmental, moral and spiritual crises of our time. I shall show that there must be profound shifts if we are to avoid the breakdowns that threaten our future. I shall move rapidly through this part of my talk realizing that I shall not convince you by my arguments if you are not already in sympathy with what I am saying. I shall then deal with the processes that will support the discovery of a radically different future.

But before I can even start on the description of the current crises, we need to understand why we have no choice but to move rapidly in new directions. The core reality of our time is that we live in a period of rapidly increasing stress. It has developed because the twentieth century has seen a profound change in all the realities of our world but neither our institutions nor our visions have kept up.

At the beginning of the century, the population of the world was 1.6 billion. It is now almost 6.0 billion. We have moved from an empty world to one that is already pressuring space and resources and will do so more severely even if the most hopeful assumptions about

population growth are realized. And yet there are still powerful voices that refuse to support the need for decreasing births as rapidly as possible.

In this same century, we have moved from a world where natural resources, especially air, land and water were relatively abundant, to one where shortages loom and are already causing havoc in certain parts of the world. At the same time, it is clear that the wastes from our technological, industrial culture are having severe impacts on the quality of the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe: many diseases are becoming more frequent such as cancer and asthma. Nevertheless, many powerful institutions still refuse to recognize the need for more intelligent development and growth strategies.

In this same century, we have moved from a world in which access to information was still severely limited to one in which we are all drowning in infoglut. And yet we act as though it is desirable to publish still more words which few people read and even fewer absorb. I am convinced that when information doubles, knowledge halves and wisdom quarters.

In this same century, most of those in the developed countries have seen our standards of living increase to the point that more stuff does not add to our satisfactions. There is a growing commitment to breaking out of the consumption race – a trend which has shown up over recent Christmases as people refuse to buy, buy, buy.

In this same century, more and more people are recognizing that there can be no single correct view of the world. Competing viewpoints now strive for acceptance. None of our traditional understandings enable us to deal with these radical divergences of view. We are now learning to explore the skills of dialogue and common ground work in order to close the gaps in understanding. This will prevent conflicts from escalating into violence.

In this same century, our understanding of how the world is, and should be structured, has changed dramatically. Scientific theorists no longer believe that Newtonian models of reality can be used to describe complex human and natural interactions. They are moving to new explanations such as those contained in fractal, chaos and complexity theory.

It is this last shift which is perhaps the most dramatic, although largely unseen solvent, of past realities. Our institutions are based on the belief that people at the top should have the power to coerce and dominate. These institutions are now increasingly ineffective because people no longer accept that traditional leaders have the ability to decide how they should live their lives.

It is these shifts, and many others, which are bringing about the crises that I shall now describe briefly. These changes are irreversible. A new world is already being born around us. We can choose to ignore its imperatives and suffer terrible costs. Alternatively, we can work with the positive forces that are already developing to create the higher quality of life that is possible for the future.

The Economic Crisis

Economists have managed to hide the most basic economic reality from the public. To listen to the discussions, one would think that the real issue is how to produce enough. In reality,

the core problem has been how to ensure that demand kept up with production so that factories could keep humming and services would be purchased.

The solution in the nineteenth century was for the colonial powers to send goods to their dependencies and to accept debt in return. The United States also benefited from this strategy. The early twentieth century approach was to provide workers with a living wage. The late twentieth century strategy has been to encourage people to go into debt. Demand has also been generated by the movement of people in many poor countries into the middle class. On the other side of the equation ever-increasing inequality makes it more difficult to maintain levels of consumption.

Demand has also been maintained by high investment in certain developing countries, notably the Asian tigers. The current Asian crisis has exposed the dangers of the strategies that have been used over recent decades. There is now massive overcapacity in the world in many areas of production, such as computers and automobiles.

The conventional view is still that the economies of the rich countries are so strong that the Asian crisis will have little negative effect. Others share my deep concerns. It is now possible for Asian countries to sell goods at prices far below those achievable by Western producers. The consequences of this reality seem potentially far more serious than most analysts seem willing to recognize. We may well see deflation rather than inflation: this can carry acute dangers for economic systems.

The Social Crisis

Regardless of our economic future, it is now abundantly clear that the existing social system is currently producing profoundly dangerous trends. The overwhelming world-wide direction is the development of a super-rich class in all but a few countries. At the other end of the income ladder more and more people are becoming mired in poverty.

Within this overall pattern, there are different developments in various parts of the world. In Europe, Canada Australia and Japan, unemployment is at levels which would have been totally unacceptable as little as a decade ago. This is leading to increasingly acute xenophobia and the dangerous increase in the acceptability of extreme right-wing nostrums that deny the fact that we live in an interconnected world.

In the United States, levels of unemployment have fallen to levels which were considered impossible at the beginning of the nineties. But more and more jobs are at low income levels and do not provide benefits. Poverty problems are hardly being touched by the apparent prosperity of the country and the demand for food is outrunning the potential of food banks. Extreme hardship continues to spread and charitable giving is falling rather than rising.

Some countries previously poor are growing rapidly in economic terms. But the current pattern is that most of the population remain mired in poverty while a small proportion enters the middle class and some people become super-rich. The social contracts in these areas are being disrupted by the growth patterns and discontent is growing rapidly.

Finally, there are all too many countries where poverty has worsened over the last twenty years. The gap between the wealth of the rich countries and the penury of the poor nations has become even more extreme. At the same time the amount of money that the rich countries have been willing to provide in aid has declined.

These trends will intensify so long as we maintain the paradigm in which we currently think, They will lead to massive breakdowns not only through social unrest but also because of massive epidemics of old and new diseases. The threat of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse riding again is all too real.

The Moral Crisis

I do not personally understand how anybody with a moral conscience can accept the trends which are currently developing. Many of you will have seen the coverage of the Calcutta slums which were shown in the period before the Mother Theresa funeral. Is there nothing which will shock us into a realization that we already live in an intolerable world?

I am told that things have to get bad enough before we shall be prepared to change our thinking and our actions. On my worst days, I fear that human beings can accustom themselves to anything. We seem prepared to turn our eyes away from the massive tragedies in the world and hope that they will not affect us. This assumption is naïve for we are moving inexorably toward a more interconnected world.

Political and business elites throughout the world are clearly out of touch with the vision and beliefs of most citizens. There is a need for a new movement which will express the belief that we can provide for everybody's need but not for everybody's greed.

The Technological Crisis

Our current prosperity is based on an incredible growth in technological knowledge. It has enabled us to subdue diseases. It has provided us with a level of comfort and convenience that would have been thought inconceivable at the beginning of this century.

Unfortunately, these gains have bought new dangers. On the health front, we have been creating highly resistant bugs which defy current medications. We are just realizing that the race between mutations and new knowledge will inevitably be lost. Similar dangers loom in terms of our agricultural practices.

More seriously, we are discovering that our interlinked systems are dependent on technologies that can fail. The collapse of a power system in New Zealand, the consequences of an ice-storm in New Zealand, the failure of a satellite in the USA have all reminded us of our vulnerability.

The next months are going to make this issue dramatically more evident. The Y2K, or Millennial Bug issue, will show that an apparently trivial decision – to describe dates with two

digits instead of four – will cause immense costs. There is also the certainty of disruptions as we move from 1,999 to 2,000. Many fear catastrophes.

The Ecological Crisis

The response from economists and politicians to what I have said so far is, of course, well known. All we have to do, we are informed, is to be more committed to what we have been doing for the last twenty years. The medicine we have been taking is good for us: the doses have just not been large enough. There must be further technological fixes to current technological issues.

Fortunately, I am an economist and I can tell you that this attempt to demand unquestioning obedience to a set of destructive dogmas is based on blind faith rather than reason. The strategies which are being tried will not yield positive results however ferociously they are applied. It is our commitment to continue to pursue past success criteria which is the cause of our current problems. We have been hoodwinked.

At some point, our increase in population and production will overstrain ecological systems. The argument about when this happens is not yet settled but this statement is unarguable. Some believe we have already moved beyond sustainability. Others think that there is still some flexibility in the system.

The harsh truth, however, is that we shall exceed ecological limits at some point in the next century unless we move beyond an economic system which is only viable on the basis of materialism and maximum economic growth. And as we do not know where the real limits are, the only prudent course is to move as rapidly as possible to limit population, production and wastes.

The Spiritual Crisis

Those people who concentrate on economic statistics are seeing the end of the nineties as a golden age. Those who look more broadly at the overall realities of our time bemoan the fact that leaders are not taking advantage of the current economic prosperity to deal with the crises I have described above. They argue that the failure to look beyond the immediate is undermining our capacity to produce a high quality of life for the twenty-first century.

Despite many disruptions, it has been easy to see the nineties as a period of remarkable stability and a forerunner of an ever brighter future. From my perspective, this viewpoint has only been achieved by ignoring the obvious long-run dangers. I am convinced that this surface calm has now been permanently disrupted and we shall see more and more challenges which our current social and political systems are not designed to handle.

There is broad agreement on one issue among those who look at the future – there will be enormous change in the next decades. It is the direction of this change that is not agreed. The argument is between those who believe that economic growth, supported by

technological change, remains the wave of the future and those who are convinced that the true crisis lies much deeper and can best be described as spiritual.

I am one of those who holds this latter view. I am aware that the word spirituality is still booby-trapped for many people. The essential point I want to make is that our current emphasis on what can be measured and owned is disguising what we all really want and need from life. I believe that we are hungry for authentic relationships with other individuals and with the natural world. I believe that we are mammals and that we cannot escape our long evolutionary history.

This does not mean I am a technophobe. But I believe we can no longer assume all technologies will automatically benefit us. Rather we must learn how to make decisions in ways which will enhance the quality of life of this and future generations. Our challenge is to find the future which will enable the continuation of the extraordinary journey which has taken place on this planet over millions of years.

Discovering the future

It is easy to fall into despair when one recognizes that the current ways we think and act are disastrously flawed. Indeed some spiritual counselors would argue that a black night of the soul is necessary to move to a point where one is willing to contemplate the level of changes which are required to shift our consciousness sufficiently to discover an alternative way of facing the future.

I want to propose to you this afternoon that the only way to break out of this monstrous set of problems is to conceptualize the world in which we live in a totally different way. I shall state a number of beliefs which I am convinced make it possible for societies to have a totally different feel and structure. The world in which I choose to live, which is based on these beliefs, has totally different patterns and potentials than those of the industrial era.

This set of beliefs is grounded in a profoundly different view of reality. It goes beyond the logical analysis I have made about the breakdowns now going on in the society and proposes a more positive vision of how human beings can interact with each other and nature. It starts from the following assumption.

All organisms possess a drive to health.

This vision is so different to that which has driven our culture for so long that it is difficult to even broach this subject within our dominant modes of thinking. We have become so used to "fixing" things that this is often the only approach we consider. We fix our hyperactive children with Ritalin, our depression with Prozac, our lack of self-worth with alcohol and drugs. We fix our social problems with legislation. All too often we fix our environmental difficulties with more intervention to cure past failures. And we fix our illness problems with drugs which cause resistance in the next generation of germs and viruses: this is causing an increasingly recognized threat to our ability to deal with past and future diseases.

And yet we have abundant evidence that there are alternatives to our current strategies. Anybody who looks at the available evidence will find that bodies will often cure themselves if given time and space -- indeed some of the cures which are clearly on the record can only be classified as miraculous. The most dramatic recoveries from environmental problems have occurred when the insults which have been causing the degradation have been removed and natural forces freed up to work -- this has been true, for example, in the Great Lakes and the Hudson River. In the social field, it has been the commitment of individuals and groups that have led to the most remarkable turn-arounds in neighborhoods and communities rather than legislation.

Most people, most of the time, want to develop themselves and help others develop. This is the natural order of things. It is this order that has been broken by our industrial norms which have pitted us against each other and against nature. We have come to accept that we must live in ways that are destructive to our own dreams and to those of others. John Maynard Keynes, arguably the greatest economist of our times, made this point in an essay entitled "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren." He said that our descendants would be able to recognize for the vices they actually are those actions we now proclaim as the highest virtues.

The time has now come to make the moral shift he foreshadowed. If we are to survive the twenty-first century, we must abandon the negative vision of the world in which we live and learn to live within a positive vision of hope. We can talk, as Matthew Fox does, about replacing the concept of original sin with that of original blessing. Or we can talk about the reenchantment of the world and our lives; a theme used by a growing number of authors.

Before I leave this topic, I need to be clear. I am only too well aware that the drive to health is blocked in many people, institutions and systems. There are a huge number of reasons for these blocks. But we shall work very differently with them once we recognize that our task is to break through to inherent, natural, healing forces.

I am not arguing that all people or systems can be healed. There are people who have been so warped by their experiences that there is no way their behaviors are going to change. I am not a Utopian. I believe that the systems we bring into existence must recognize that a small proportion of people will, for any foreseeable future, try to take advantage of others. Nevertheless, our global culture can only hope to survive when we accept that the drive is fundamental. It is true that we fail all too often. But we need to concentrate on our positive efforts rather than to be fixated on our failures.

Finally, at a different level, we do need to remember that while ecological systems do tend to recover if given a chance, there are all too many examples of times and places where they have been so stressed that they move permanently into new, and less, desirable forms. The underlying threat of the twenty-first century is that the human pressures and wastes of an excessive population will break the natural equilibrium in ways that cause the four horsemen of the Apocalypse to ride again.

The move toward health needs to be accompanied by several other shifts in consciousness if we are to be able to live well in the twenty-first century.

We need to live as if we are on a journey rather than travelling toward a fixed destination.

Many years ago I produced a dialogue on work. One of the authors caught the way we have viewed life in the twentieth century. He argued that we “prepared to work, prepared to retire and prepared to die.” His point was that we were always looking to the future rather than enjoying the present. Life has been conceptualized as having a destination and our success or failure was to be measured in terms of whether we eventually reached the destination we had set for ourselves.

In the future, we shall live as though we are on a journey. We shall recognize that all our choices determine where we move throughout our lives and that major breakpoints often emerge from apparently trivial causes. We shall come to understand that we can only live well if we concentrate on the moment in which we are actually living.

I have been fascinated to see the emergence of this journey rhetoric in popular culture. The implications are, of course, deep and wide. If we cannot plan our lives, then most of the tactics and strategies we have learned during our educational process are no longer valid. Instead of strategically planning the future, we need to develop a vision which permits us to make the decisions which are best for us as we move through an endless series of choice points.

One is more intensely conscious when one lives one’s journey. One no longer exists in a cultural trance accepting the norms and values of others as absolutes. On the other hand, one is also intensely aware of the need to understand the patterns of behaviors of friends and colleagues so that shared decisions and directions are possible.

We need to operate in partnership rather than be forced to act through top-down power (the dominator model) or by pretending that everybody’s skills and knowledge are equal.

One of the largest changes in the last fifty years is around our thinking about leadership and authority. When I was growing up it was widely assumed that those at the top of systems understood what was needed by virtue of their position. Today, this assumption is increasingly challenged. But despite the doubts of more and more people, we still hope that there will be some individual who will come along and resolve all the problems of the world. Although we know, intellectually, that it is not going to be possible for an elected leader to order the future, the rhetoric of elections suggests that the fate of the country, and possibly the world, is in the balance.

The alternative view which has emerged to challenge the traditional top-down authority is that of flat systems where everybody is equally competent. Today, a growing number of systems are paralyzed because there are no processes that permit decisions to be taken. Issues can

be opened and reopened on an endless basis: there is no willingness to accept what has been decided and move on.

Part of the problem here is that we have attempted to substitute the law for the process of public debate and dialogue. There are two reasons for this. One is that people seem less and less willing to take on the responsibilities of citizens. The other is that we want tidy solutions rather than the messy processes that are inevitably part of a well-functioning society.

It is past time that we recognized that neither top-down nor flat systems will enable effective decision-making. In Riane Eisler's term, we need partnership approaches. This means that we are constantly in tension between two choices. On the one hand, we are aware that we have the skills in certain areas to make good decisions but we also know that if we do so people will not learn. On the other hand, we know that we need to let people try out their wings but there are certain choices that are critical and where one's superior knowledge needs to be applied so as to avoid catastrophic failures.

This shift toward partnership is part of a far broader area of change. Our current thinking is largely based on dichotomies between right and wrong, good and evil, top-down and flat. We are discovering that the real world is far more complex and less clear-cut. Shifting to be able to deal with uncertainty and continuous choice is one of the primary challenges of the twenty-first century.

Issues need to be examined in positive rather than negative terms, in search for strengths and breakthrough potentials.

Western culture has a profound bias toward examining the negative rather than the positive. In this area, as in all others, there is a need for balance. We need to search for the strengths that people, organizations and cultures have without ignoring the fact that these strengths, taken to extremes, inevitably lead to weaknesses.

In more and more fields of study and work, the emphasis is shifting. For example, community work increasingly looks at potentials rather than deficits. The result is to set free potential which has been hidden by an emphasis on the difficulties which neighborhoods and communities are experiencing. The same thing happens as people are reminded of their potentials.

The problem with this line of argument is that it is all too often taken to extremes. There is great strength in positive thinking. But if one forgets the shadow side, people are all too likely to ride roughshod over the needs of others who have less strength, power or position than they do. There is a need to respect the needs of others as well as to search for one's own bliss.

In addition, it is all too possible to forget that there are real limits. The belief in the possibility for endless maximum economic growth is an example of what can happen on a societal level when positive thinking loses all sense of context and reality.

All people and situations are unique. Our tendency to rely on statistical realities disguises more than it reveals.

Just as the journey rhetoric is becoming common in ordinary discourse, so is the argument that everybody is unique. Interestingly, one hears it particularly in financial ads which proclaim the ability of financial firms to look after each investor separately. The fact that this claim is bogus does not detract from the fact that these companies are tapping into a deep desire of people to be seen as their own person.

But we need to remember that this is a profoundly new trend. Only a short time ago, people wanted to be seen as part of the crowd. Their behaviors were defined by age, sex, class, color, sexual orientation. These patterns are now breaking down and it is less and less possible to be sure how people will think because of these obvious characteristics. People are learning to think for themselves and to make up their own minds. One specific result of this trend is the growing unwillingness to define oneself in terms of relative levels of consumption.

Our tendency to think in terms of averages and statistical norms is however deeply ingrained. One of the examples that fascinates me is in terms of family size. It is now obvious that there has to be a rapid decline in the number of children born. The normal proposal is that each family should have a smaller number of children. I have never heard somebody suggest that the obvious answer is that many people should not have children because they do not want to be parents while some people, who have great nurturing skills, should have larger families.

Once we think in terms of uniqueness, the issue of diversity is transformed. It becomes clear that fixation on obvious characteristics can separate rather than unite. A deep understanding of this reality would make it possible to transform the currently sterile debate about helping those who deserve more help from the society than others. We would see that we should be concentrating on the dispossessed, regardless of age, sex, color etc.

Effectiveness requires people to be profoundly present in the moment. This is only possible if people have time to center themselves through the reduction of stress and fatigue.

How often have you been in meetings when you had an eerie feeling that people were really agreeing with each other but were just arguing about words? Have you sometimes actually stopped the flow of the discussion and said “But aren’t you actually saying the same thing?”

There are at least three critical reasons for this failure to communicate. The first is that people are typically aiming to advance their agenda and listening to the flow of conversation in terms of how they can use it. They are not concerned with the potential synergies that could emerge through the presence in the room of this particular group of people.

The second is that people are so tired, so stressed, so overloaded that they are rarely “present” in their activities. They are thinking about their other responsibilities and urgencies.

There is little chance that they will connect with new ideas and potentials if they are caught within their ongoing problems and crises.

The third is that we have been taught to listen for disagreement rather than agreement. The dominant style of our culture is to respond with “but” rather than “and.” We do not look for the agreements we can share but for the disagreements we have – or often can create. This style reaches its true absurdity in academic settings where totally unrealistic sets of assumptions are accepted as true and we argue about details. In the process reality gets totally lost.

It is fair to say that my life was transformed when I recognized that the way to work with people was to enter a conversation looking for the point where there was common ground. Once I could find it, I could build on it and it often took us in directions which none of us anticipated.

People can only learn what they are ready to understand. Surfacing issues that people do not yet grasp or are denying etc. is a waste of time. Teaching and organizing take on a very different flavor in these conditions.

When we disagree with people, we normally assume that the other person “hears” what we are saying and is reacting negatively to it. In reality, the most important disagreements occur when the other person is unable to grasp the basic point that is being made. The argument is not between one idea and another but rather between a new idea and a total incomprehension of what is being said.

I call this the “black hole” problem. The way to deal with a black hole is not to become more intensely focussed and, probably, more angry. People do not learn truly different ideas by being beaten on the head. The process is far more indirect. “Mindquakes” occur indirectly as people are invited to look at the world in different ways.

From my perspective the key question is whether we shall see an effective movement launched to challenge the current materialistic and technological drives of our culture? As a rational analyst, I fear that we shall not. The inertia of the current system is enormous. There is a tendency to do what seems to be necessary without looking for the alternatives which exist.

The tragedy behind this rational conclusion is that a deep, inchoate yearning for profound change already exists and its visibility only awaits an effective catalyst. My lifetime’s work has shown me that people are now ready to challenge the current conventional wisdom. Many know that their lives, their work, their professions, their political parties are without the deep meaning for which they yearn. They are waiting for a wake-up call that will give them the faith and the courage to believe that their actions will make a difference. We do not have to convince people of the need to change direction: this work has already been done. We need to have the imagination and the skills to propose spaces in which each of us can explore the dramatic changes required to regain our souls.

This is a time for courage and risks. It is a time to argue for a higher vision of human purpose than that we have accepted in recent years. It is a time for us to face the challenges and to

resolve to meet them. This is a moment when the actions of each of us can make a profound difference.

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