



Nurturing the 21st Century Mindset: Honing Positive Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews an important paradigm shift that is currently spreading amongst humanity, instigating a critical analysis of the way we used to perceive matters in past centuries, and encouraging an entirely opposite way of approaching the essentials of contemporary life. To clarify this perceptual change, areas such as education, ethnicity, religion, politics and economics are briefly reviewed in both a past-century as well as a 21st century perspective.

“All things appear and disappear because of the concurrence of causes and conditions. Nothing ever exists entirely alone; everything is in relation to everything else”

--Buddha

Introduction

We have no complaints when it comes to change-related revelations since the new millennium started. These revelations presented themselves positively as well as negatively. To start with the latter, in the United States of America alone we encountered dramatic scenes such as 9/11, Katrina, and the strangling 2008 economic depression. In other parts of the world we also witnessed shattering occurrences varying from major earthquakes and a dreadful tsunami, to a wide range of terrorist attacks and inter- and intra-national hostilities. Murell (2007) even notes, “It may even seem to some of us that this new century, where a few of us actually began the new millennium with hope, is throwing far more at us than we ever anticipated” (p. 28).

Yet, throughout the multiple ominous confrontations, there are also rays of hope that stood out like beacons in the dark. Among the positive developments are a growing European Union, the instatement of Unasur, an intergovernmental union comprising the 12 independent nations of South America, increased opportunities for global citizens through continued growth of the BRIC countries, Brazil, Russia, India, and China, the United Nation’s proclamation of the Millennium Development Goals, which aim toward an overall better

quality of life for all peoples of the world, and the election of America’s first multi-racial president.

Amplified Diversity

In spite of all that we have experienced thus far, it seems as if the change process is just beginning. Within the trend of this still relatively new millennium, we see that, between nations and corporations a power-shift is taking place: existing powerhouses are crumbling, while new ones are emerging. It is along those lines that Hoge (2004) observes, “The transfer of power from West to East is gathering pace and will dramatically change the context for dealing with international challenges” (p. 2).

On top of the power-shift, we see a focus-shift occurring as well: social entrepreneurship and non-profit entities are becoming more prominent in their operations as global awareness about the urgency for increased environmental and social responsibility emerges. Young and Tilley (2006) find, “The ways in which businesses have encompassed changing attitudes towards environmental and social issues has moved through different stages over time” (p. 203). Young and Tilley continue, “Toward the end of the 20th century, thinking in the environmental management arena began to change [...] with the introduction of eco effectiveness as a



guiding maxim to corporate sustainability, the idea that business practices should go beyond pollution control and eco-efficiency toward a way of doing business that restores and enhances the environment” (p. 403)

The nature of relationships is changing dramatically. Nothing is self-explanatory anymore. Our wake-up call is tremendous, even though not everyone recognizes it as such yet. If we dare to review international trends from a holistic point of view, we can see that a major message presents itself to us: the necessity of acknowledging the power of interconnectedness. As Goldstein, Hazy, and Silberstang (2008) stress, “With 2.7 billion people across the world subsisting on only two US dollars or less per day and countless others barely managing to get through extremely challenging circumstances on a day-to-day basis, the need for powerful and scalable social initiatives cannot be overemphasized” (p. 9). This message manifests itself everywhere, in contemporary occurrences at personal, national, and international levels. Diversity is a word that sorts more impact today than it has ever had before. While it may not have sunk in within or been accepted by everyone yet, diversity is the sole healing, resolving, and progressive move we can possibly make toward a better future. Diversity, in this regard, should be seen in a much broader context than just *inter-human* diversity, which is more related to diversity in the workplace and other social contexts. While the spread of inter-human diversity is very important, it is only the beginning. The diversity to which I am referring here is an amplified one: one that needs to be implemented in every area, if we want this planet to succeed. This diversity will need to manifest itself in ideologies, philosophies, and in intercontinental relationships. It is therefore rather a diversity of *mindset*, and not merely one of *appearance*. As an example, China has started to implement this type of ideological diversity to a moderate degree in its communist groundwork with a capitalist sprinkle. Dickson (2007) reports, “The CCP [Chinese Communist Party] is increasingly integrating itself with the private sector, both by co-opting entrepreneurs into the Party and encouraging Party members to

go into business (p. 827). And it seems that more countries are starting to realize the fundamental notion behind guaranteed post-millennial advancement: we will need the best of all worlds, because there is no progress in extremes.

Past-Century Psychological Programming

The fundamental notion mentioned above has already been presented to us in numerous ways and in multiple layers. Now that I have mentioned China, let us briefly dwell on the example of ideologies. Thus far, no ideology has proven to work in its extreme implementation. Feeney (2009) captures the above observation in a pointed way by stating:

“Pure communism and socialism are generally recognized as failures at bringing people out of poverty, and yet pure capitalism has obvious casualties as well, especially during its crisis periods and at times when other systems are failing. For example, education isn’t a path out of poverty if it isn’t effective at making people literate or preparing them for jobs, especially when even the educated can’t find and keep jobs” (p. 59).

Indeed, all three ideologies mentioned above, have failed in their purest state: a reality that has manifested itself blatantly in the past decades:

- Pure communism has turned out to be unappealing, and it drives people away, because it is against human nature. Everyone wants some kind of reward for his or her hard work, study, or other input. Hence, the collapse of this ideology in nations that once applied it, and China’s current blend of capitalist elements in a communist foundation.
- Socialism in its unbridled sense has not worked either for the same reasons: ambitious workers have a hard time supporting slackers at their expense. It is a de-motivator like no other when a cap is placed on the level to which you can progress in life, and it discourages the honest efforts of even the most socially moved individual. It encourages embezzlement of funds from those with an entrepreneurial spirit, on



one hand, while it invites large crowds of users and abusers of the system on the other.

- Pure capitalism has gone the same way. It has now been proven that this ideology in its undiluted form is too individualistic-based, and that it nurtures a small group of have-alls, versus a large group of have-nots. The most recent developments in the U.S. have demonstrated that unrestrained capitalism encourages greed, and with that, manipulation, oppression, and dishonest practices. The major problem with this ideology is the strong foundation of individualism, which is only partially an encouraging factor for human progress, after which it becomes a source of sheer anti-human terror. We are individuals, indeed, but at the same time, we are members of a fascinating blend of communities. Many of us belong to a family, a workplace, a congregation, and one or more social organizations. John Donne, a 16th/17th century Jacobean English poet, emphasized this simple reality in his Meditation XVII, which includes the famous statement,

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee” (Donne, p. 62).

Donne was not the first – or the last – person who underscored our interconnectedness to the whole of existence. Yet, it has become apparent that the awareness of interconnectedness is one that has been psychologically abandoned by many in contemporary society. As people go about their daily lives in modern western societies, many of them have wrapped themselves in a cocoon of “I”, inexorably placing their own selfish advancement ahead of anything else, even at the expense of the well-being of their workplace, community, country, or even the planet. Our current troubles with global warming are the most unadorned demonstration of the effects of prioritizing selfish gains at

the expense of the greater good, even though some powerful stakeholders will go to great lengths to deny this relationship. Short-term advancement and profits seem to be more important to a number of powerful business moguls than long-term preservation of humankind and our planet.

Within the global view, it becomes alarmingly obvious that large numbers of people are still holding on to the above-described obsolete past-century mindset. They have programmed themselves to live in mental boxes, and distinguish themselves from everyone else. Some may include their immediate family in their little box, but everyone else is considered “them” in their mental battlefield that much resembles a rat race, even though they would refuse to refer to themselves as rats.

This diverging past-century psychological programming has penetrated into almost all areas of our lives. It has nestled itself in educational, ethnic, religious, political, and economical distinctions, carefully but persistently creating an “us versus them” attitude.

In the educational arena there is a misperception of superiority that drives many individuals with advanced degrees when they compare themselves to others who have not had the opportunity or did not make the choice to pursue further schooling. Haan, Britt and Weinstein (2007) exclaim, “A unique problem that has surfaced in higher education is that of arrogance. Faculty members, administrators, and college students are sometimes accused of being arrogant” (p. 82). Snobbishness is nothing new in academia, even though these “learned ones”, more than anyone else, should know how little one person can possibly comprehend, and how much will remain unlearned during one lifetime. Yet, the book-smarts have a tendency to look down on the street-smarts until they are in dire need of guidance from the latter. Unfortunately, this trend is going on.

In the ethnic arena there is a similar unwise idea that one group is superior to the other, be it on basis of color, economic status, or any other self-



formulated issue. O'Neill (2009) effectively criticizes the pettiness behind racial discrimination by asserting,

“Racism is the lowest, most crudely primitive form of collectivism. It is the notion of ascribing moral, social or political significance to a man's genetic lineage - the notion that a man's intellectual and characterological traits are produced and transmitted by his internal body chemistry. Which means, in practice, that a man is to be judged, not by his own character and actions, but by the character and actions of a collective of ancestors. Racism claims that the content of a man's mind (not his cognitive apparatus, but its content) is inherited; that a man's convictions, values and character are determined before he is born, by physical factors beyond his control” (p. 529).

Human beings have a need to feel good about themselves, and in searching for that feeling, many of them unfortunately think that they need to put others down. Thus has human history been tainted by repeated episodes of so-called ethnic cleansing, manifested through genocides and the enslavement of others. Unfortunately, this trend is going on as well.

In the religious arena it is not much different. In fact, this might be considered the most concerning trend in recent history. Grim and Finke (2007) admit that there is “high visibility of religiously charged international social conflicts,” and that “religiously charged social conflicts are prevalent around the globe” (p. 633). It seems that religious tolerance has decreased to an all-time low: different extremist groups accuse each other of being infidels and false prophets, while claiming that they hold the only truthful answer to righteous living and dying. The mounting intolerance has been spreading like a rapid and aggressive cancer throughout the world, oftentimes intertwining with political and economical power seizures.

In the political arena, ethnocentrism is alive and well. There is enough evidence till today of highly developed nations forcing their political ideologies onto others, causing turmoil and strife into the victimized countries to a debilitating extend. Oftentimes these political powerhouses with-

draw when the disarray they have created is irreparable and the financial gains tied to their presence have been depleted. They then leave behind a situation of devastation and disruption.

In the economical arena there is an incomprehensible imbalance between a handful of billionaires, a larger cohort of millionaires, and a legion of multiple billions of the underprivileged. While some of the affluent are trying to alleviate needs in certain parts of the world, their efforts are incoherent, highly arbitrary, and never to a degree that their empathy would affect their infinite wealth, and thus the prestige and ranking they hold within their small over-privileged in-group.

In sum, past-century thinking represents a major weakness or inconsistency: its common denominator is divergence.



Figure 1: Past-Century Psychological Programming in Action



The 21st Century Mindset: Unifying Diversity

*“But deluded people don't realize that their own mind is the Buddha. They keep searching outside”
-Bodhidharma*

The unsettling picture painted above is nothing new, and it could therefore be easy for us to shrug the whole thing off and continue our way. Yet, that is not the purpose of this article. This article is written to confront us with facts that we all rather choose to ignore than face, and to inspire us to contemplate on what we can do from our own little corner.

As we have also witnessed important signs of positive transformations in our world from the start of this new millennium, we can allow ourselves to be encouraged by these highlights and actively start seeking for ways to accelerate and expand them. We should start by adopting the awareness of the tremendous potential of unifying diversity in the framework of our minds. Once we become comfortable doing this, we will find ourselves seriously considering the greater effects of everything we do. Yet, it is imperative that we first elevate our awareness to the point where we transcend the obsolete, diverging past-century psychological programming, which drives us toward narrow-minded choices. We need to engage in the converging act of 21st century thinking, feeling, walking, talking, dreaming, and living; in practices that will enhance our understanding of being a global citizen first, and then a member of a smaller group, organization, nation, or continent. When we apply within ourselves this paradigm shift, we will start basing our choices on entirely different sets of criteria. When that happens, the chances for a restoration of disrupted balances get enlarged.

Within the 21st century mindset we will realize that:

- Education is merely a tool to serve ourselves and others in various settings. It is not a source for arrogance. Every person we encounter in any area of our life is a teacher, and therefore a part of us forever thereafter. We will encour-

ter good teachers and bad ones. They all have a lesson to share with us. It is up to us to distinguish this lesson and be grateful to the teacher in the most appropriate way.

- Our appearance is only an external layer of who and what we really are. It is senseless to base our decisions about whom we will embrace and whom we will reject on such a small detail as ethnic difference. This classification has brought too much sorrow in past centuries to still be tolerated in our new millennial awareness. This is, more than ever, the time to realize that, beyond the outer layer of our skin, we are all human.
- Religion can be a source of peace and serenity, but when practiced to an extreme level, it can become a source of destruction. We should be cautious and watchful about that, and realize that every religion was founded by an enlightened person; a trendsetter who was not a follower of this religion, and had no idea that his philosophies would be expanded to their current magnitude. The strict rules and regulations that we currently adhere to have, in most cases, been formulated by later entrants into this religion, who oftentimes harbored much lower levels of awareness and comprehension of the deeper meaning of the founders' mindset. It is very likely that, had all the religious founders lived at the same time, they would be filled with respect toward one another. So, why can't we?
- Political leaders come and go, and so do their perspectives. There is no nation better or worse than another. They are just different, and very much complementary to one another, if their leaders care to explore areas of collaboration. Why, then, would one occupy, oppress, and disrupt another? And why would anyone cooperate in such shortsighted actions?
- Money is an important tool in this world, but it is not the only way toward leading a rewarding life. It is important to perform, and it is



great to be rewarded for our performance, but immense wealth is only bestowed onto a few. If they decide one day to collaboratively set up a strategy for assisting the less fortunate, then that will be nice. However, we cannot wait for that moment to come. It would be more responsible to contemplate what really matters to us in life, and then try our best to achieve that with the well-being of all other life in mind.

In sum, 21st century thinking represents a major strength or consistency: its common denominator is convergence.



Figure 2: The 21st Century Mindset of Unifying Diversity

Concluding Thought: Transcending Our Perceptual Levels

The issues that were crucial in prior centuries may still be important at this point in time, but as our approach to these issues shifts, their roles will change. Problems that were perceived in the past, as major obstacles in human collaboration will become insignificant, and other focus points will emerge once we have attained the higher levels of understanding and the readiness to embrace unify-

ing diversity. An important fact will, again, be proven: that everything looks different when you approach it at a different level. Einstein once stated that problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them. Fortunately, amidst the challenges of our days, we are making tremendous progress in our collective awareness, which will gradually spread in educational, work-related, religious and other areas of life. The changing curricula in higher education, increasing levels of workplace diversity, growing numbers of interfaith networks, increased globalization and regional unification efforts, and mounting attention toward increased social involvement from the affluent among us, are hopeful signs.

The spirit of positive transformation is upon us, and the responsibility to keep this spirit alive and make it flourish is within our hands.

Postlude

May I be a passage of life-enhancing virtues:
Compassion, love, peace, and happiness
Harmony, courage, encouragement;
Truth, trust, comfort and support,
Health, well-being and wisdom.
That I may generate, nurture,
and multiply these virtues
Like golden flowers in my inner-garden,
And hand them to all beings I encounter
In order to help enhance the quality of their lives.
In further hopes that some of these beings
Will decide to nurture
and multiply these virtues as well
And pass them on to others.

Bhavatu Sabba Mangalam
(May all beings be happy)

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