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Some guidelines for surfing the edge of chaos, while riding dangerously close to the black hole of trauma

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Abstract

The political scene in the USA has changed dramatically with the election of Donald Trump, and antidemocratic forces appear to be gaining momentum in other countries as well. Using a post-traumatic lens to view these political forces, the author summarizes social psychology research on authoritarianism, terror management theory, and obedience studies to illustrate some of the challenges that lie ahead for citizens who want to restore Enlightenment values to their rightful position and, in doing so, defeat the antidemocratic, authoritarian and antiscientific forces that are on the rise. Then, drawing upon the growing knowledge base about the power of organizational culture and the change process, the author emphasizes the importance for any group aiming at progressive ideals to embrace a shared knowledge base, a set of shared values, a shared language and an array of shared tools for practical application in a group.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, democracy, human rights, sanctuary model, terror management theory, Trumpism

1 | INTRODUCTION

We are in crisis – all of us. The United States has reached a turning point, a moment that will determine much of what happens next. In chaos theory, this is a very special place, when a system – whether individual or group – becomes so turbulent that it moves toward the “edge of chaos”, also called the place of “far-from-equilibrium” conditions (Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 2000). The next few months and years will determine how long we stay in that uncomfortable and anxiety-producing state before returning to what has been an increasingly corrupt equilibrium or leaping into the unknown to a profoundly new creative state – a true paradigm shift.

Living systems, be they individual people or whole societies, are constantly maintaining homeostasis, a state of healthy equilibrium. Illness represents a disturbance in this homeostasis, an imbalance that must be corrected if health is to be restored. We all heard this repeatedly expressed in the phrase “things will never be normal again” after the

World Trade Center attack in 2001. That statement represents a deep understanding that a traumatic experience is a sudden, transformative event from which there is no turning back. It cannot be ignored or forgotten without dire consequences to the well-being of the survivor. There are basically two fundamental ways that people – or a people – respond after trauma. The sought-after outcome is post-traumatic growth, which represents a transformative leap into an unknown future that makes it more likely that we learn from our mistakes and avoid repeating the traumatic experience. The person then establishes a new equilibrium that he or she has never been in before and that leads to a more integrated and holistic view and experience of the world and their place in it (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998).

However, the second and very common outcome of a traumatic experience is problematic and represents the current most significant threat to the continuing survival of humanity. The trauma survivor becomes “stuck” in time. Unable to return to a previous equilibrium state because of the fragmentation of function, ideals, and meaning secondary to the traumatic experience, they also cannot move forward. Trapped in the ever-present moment of the traumatic events, they keep repeating the horror, circling round and round what has been called “the black hole of trauma” (Pitman & Orr, 1990). If other human beings fail to provide the help they need, fail to perceive the “cry for help” that is embodied in their behavior, then, ultimately, they will fall into that black hole and, if they are in control of whole countries, they might very well take the rest of us with them. Black holes represent a region of space having a gravitational field so intense that no matter or radiation or person can escape from it.

Watching the early months of the Trump administration, it has become clear that its members are desperately trying to return to the former equilibrium state enshrined in their campaign slogan “Make America Great Again”, while circling a black hole that America has been post-traumatically orbiting for a long time. As a people, we have many deep wounds that go all the way back to our origins in genocidally invading someone else's country and to slavery, and run on to all the inhumanity of the Industrial Age and, more recently, to the devastating losses of the twentieth century: World War I, World War II, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, imperialist involvement in Latin America, Vietnam, assassinations of key leaders, 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, are all examples that readily spring to mind. But for many of the Trump voters – most of whom are white – the wounds are much more recent and the traumatic experiences have been up-close-and-personal – losses of jobs, homes, family, communities, opportunity and hope – all the effects of globalization and the vast and desperate depletions associated with our current conceptualization of capitalism. “Make America Great Again” is a cover-up piece of propaganda to lure people into believing that there might be a way to recapture a lost and idealized past, to roll back time to the 1950s when the Allies had won the big war, the economy was thriving, we still had productive factories, our infrastructure was being built or was sound, black people stayed in their place, gay people remained hidden, women stayed home, had babies and shut up, and the pace of change wasn't nearly as rapid as it is today. But time only runs one way – there is no going back.

This clarion call, like all totalitarian inclinations, is for a return to the idealized past that never truly existed (Eco, 1995). It matters little whether the ideology is called “Communism”, “National Socialism”, “Christian Fundamentalism”, “Jewish Fundamentalism”, “Islamic Fundamentalism”, “Alt-Rightism”, “Traditionalism”, or “Fascism”, the endorsement and practice of correctness is ultimately all the same: antidemocratic, autocratic, coercive, oppressive, opposed to human rights, suppressive of free speech and ultimately violent.

Extremism, whether it comes from the political left or the political right meets around the back of the circle of reality at the same point: creating a logical justification for dehumanization, the mechanization of living systems, the ceaseless accumulation of wealth and ultimately the annihilation of all life. Out of these systems of thought emerge actions that create the “black holes of trauma” and represent not transformational change but degradation and a loss of complexity. It is important to remember that, in seeking a past equilibrium in an ever-changing living system, the most stable equilibrium is death.

So, what does this mean for all of us on our vulnerable and glorious time-traveling ship who do not wish to be pulled into the black hole that is hovering ever closer on the horizon? It means that, collectively, we need to keep up the pressure. We need to keep pushing our system toward the “edge of chaos” – as uncomfortable as that is. When therapeutic change happens for an individual trauma survivor, the art is in figuring out how to increase the likelihood

of, and provide the opportunity for, a transformative experience, a creative leap into a more highly adaptive and enriched life experience: post-traumatic growth. But the danger of being out there on the edge of chaos is very real. What is to prevent a leap into catastrophe? Likewise, what is to prevent a hopeless repetition of the past as we keep circling that black hole?

This is where those of us who have been bearing witness to the individual, family, and organizational catastrophes of the last few decades have something to offer. Here, briefly, are some key lessons for people who recognize the need for collective action and the long siege that lies ahead. These lessons can be divided into four main categories: a shared knowledge base made available to everyone that serves to orient and anchor the culture in science; shared values that are practical and informed by universal principles necessary for human groups to operate; a shared language that makes communication across silos of knowledge simpler; an array of tools that allow all of this to be coherently and practically embraced.

2 | START WITH SHARED KNOWLEDGE

2.1 | Knowledge about the short- and long-term impacts of trauma, adversity and violence

This has grown exponentially since the 1980s. We now know a great deal about early childhood development and how development can be derailed by relentless stress, toxic stress and traumatic stress and how the effects of that derailment can be passed down through the generations. This is not knowledge just for specialists. This is scientific knowledge that needs to be as common and available as knowledge about the health effects of smoking and poor diet (Bloom, 2013; Bloom & Farragher, 2010, 2013).

The bottom line is that most of our major health, mental health and social problems are preventable if we chose to provide all children and their families with what they need to become healthy citizens of a thriving and equitable democracy. Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay has worked with Vietnam veterans throughout his career and has shown that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) makes it difficult for people to participate in the demands of democratic processes (Shay, 1995). But veterans are the least of this problem. We have large masses of people so torn by their own histories that their lives have become unwittingly and blindly organized around their unresolved experiences of abuse and neglect in childhood. This leaves many vulnerable to the lures of fascism and demagoguery in all its forms. As a country, we are and have been failing our children and, in doing so, we are dooming our future. This is what makes violence, adversity and trauma the most serious threat to our public health and to our democracy.

2.2 | Post-traumatic social psychology

What we know about this is extensive. As an example, terror management theory is well-researched and describes how simple it is to move whole populations to become more autocratic by even vaguely threatening the possibility of mortality, a concept the authors call mortality salience (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). As a species, we remain in such confusion about and awe of the reality of death, that any attempt to break through our protective denial arouses such numinous and disorganizing terror that it must be eliminated, often through projection upon another group in a time-honored human xenophobic fashion. Republican ideology for the last few decades has been immersed in this understanding, whether it has been carefully studied or intuited. The entire country has been driven rightward and our fear of the other has been constantly manipulated. This is not to say that there is no one to fear. It's simply that the more we design policies to manage unconscious terror, the more likely we are to create situations that are more, not less threatening – as the intelligence community has recently pointed out about the so-called Muslim Ban.

Then there is all we know about the fundamental dangers of fundamentalism. Milgram's Obedience studies and the Stanford Prison Experiment have demonstrated how easily people can be manipulated by authority to do anything

they are ordered to do (Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 2007). The Nazis were expert at getting seemingly normal people to “just follow orders”. As Timothy Snyder has pointed out in his new book *On Tyranny*, “The European history of the twentieth century shows us that societies can break, democracies can fall, ethics can collapse, and ordinary men can find themselves standing over death pits with guns in their hands” (Snyder, 2017, p. 12).

Over the last few weeks and months, commentators have become increasingly overt about noting the bizarre, untruthful and contradictory nature of Trump’s public (and tweeted) pronouncements. But it is possible to understand what that is about, and not just in Trump but in many others associated with him. Robert Altemeyer has researched and written extensively about right-wing authoritarianism as a cognitive dysfunction (Altemeyer, 1996). According to *The Authoritarian Specter*, right-wing authoritarians do not spend much time examining evidence, thinking critically, reaching independent conclusions, seeing whether their conclusions mesh with the other things they believe, but instead largely accept what authorities have told them is true. They have more trouble identifying falsehoods on their own because they are not as prepared to think critically. They tend to copy other people’s opinions rather than critically evaluate them and decide for themselves, and so end up believing many contradictory ideas. People high in right-wing authoritarian traits blatantly self-contradict more often than those who are low, and apparently do not notice what they are doing, even when the contradiction occurs within a minute or so. They also appear to examine ideas less than most people do and, since they tend to surround themselves with people who agree with them, no one usually contradicts them.

Those high in right-wing authoritarianism do not believe everything they hear however – they will reject “dangerous ideas” from “bad sources” or what Trump calls “fake news” (CNN, MSNBC, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*). Likewise they show a hefty double standard when testing for truth: evidence for disagreeable conclusions is scrutinized more critically than evidence supporting what the authoritarian wants to believe (Fox News). They tend to disengage critical thinking when considering religion and demonstrate high reliance on social reinforcement for their beliefs rather than on thinking for themselves. This makes them vulnerable to mistaken judgments in many fields. They will be particularly vulnerable to an insincere communicator who tells them what they want to hear and are astoundingly gullible. To quote Altemeyer (1996, pp. 100–111):

Let us say that you are a crooked, unscrupulous person who wants to win high public office. You will say whatever you have to say to get elected. Which block of voters are you going to target? The High Right-wing authoritarians of course . . . their votes are yours if you just say the right things about law and order, the flag, patriotism, abortion, tax cuts and so on.

3 | CLEARLY ARTICULATE, GET ENDORSEMENT FOR, AND COMMIT TO PRACTICING A MEANINGFUL SET OF SHARED VALUES

Since the Republicans first began seizing the territory of values through their “family values” agendas, the rest of us have lived in bewilderment about the values we do indeed believe are vital, part of our heritage, and fundamental to our national identity. Over the course of the last several decades, the Republican Party has moved increasingly toward the political right developing an extremist agenda while still calling itself “conservative”, a term that used to refer to people who had a conservative interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. Consistent with terror management theory, they have consistently and repeatedly beaten the drums of war so that the white separatists’ calls to ban immigrants, particularly those who are non-white and/or Muslim, is entirely consistent with the need of the “alt-right” to focus on an external enemy to justify inhumane, isolationist and violent policies. Unfortunately, the Democrats have not been able to capitalize on long-term liberal commitments to tolerance, liberty, civil rights, freedom of speech, the press and worship, and basic humanitarianism. As a result, American voters – those who do vote – have consistently voted against their own interests. Until very recently, and thanks to Trumpism, there was no good way for many Americans to clearly differentiate a Republican agenda from a Democratic agenda. Trump was elected by many otherwise

reasonable and caring people who just wanted to “shake up the system”. Those voters have gotten much more than they bargained for.

It has become increasingly obvious that the “social immune system” of the Republicans, especially those pledged to defend the Constitution, has failed along the way, probably when they did not attend adequately to President Eisenhower's warning that “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist” (Ledbetter, 2011, pp. 2–3). Similarly, the Democrats, who in our system are obligated to balance any extremism of the other party in order to bring us back to a workable, practical middle way, have failed to convince the social body that they can actually lead and have not provided a viable pathway to the future. Without leaders of sufficient courage and passion who can successfully contain and transform the fascist and racist element that has always existed on the margins of our culture, our democracy will fail (Hedges, 2006).

But why is this the case? As multiple surveys have demonstrated, Americans no longer have trust in any of our institutions except the military – a very pessimistic and frightening reality (Fournier & Quinton, 2012). This is largely because Americans do understand that our system has become fundamentally corrupt. That does not mean that, as an individual, everyone, Republican or Democrat, is corrupt, but that it is impossible to win an election except by being bought by the highest bidder, and those with the most money – now the ultrarich and corporations – are the ones who win. This will not change until we have publicly funded elections and we eliminate the absurd and archaic Electoral College so that we can have direct elections.

Another aspect of this fundamental corruption is the gerrymandering or redistricting that often determines elections. In the last 15 years alone, the Democrats have won the popular vote twice but lost the presidential election because of this careful, politically determined altering of voting districts. The most recent bout of gerrymandering was engineered by the Republicans and could be prevented if we took the responsibility for redistricting out of the hands of politicians entirely. The result of this fundamental corruption, extended by the Supreme Court in the infamous Citizens United case in which corporations magically became human beings, is that we end up in the extremely dangerous situation we are in now (Bentley, 2016).

We need a system of values, grounded in American humanistic principles, that honors the civil rights of every individual and the basic tenets of democratic participation. Holding a group accountable to a system of values, however, is exceedingly challenging as we see in the behavior of Congress who are, and have been, having significant difficulties in upholding the basic tenets of the Constitution. Perhaps one of the problems is that those values are “enshrined” – which unfortunately appears to mean that we no longer need to actively learn what those values actually are or contemplate what those values mean in practice. Over 90 million Americans, over 40% of the population, failed to vote in this election. Each one is individually responsible for this basic failure, but the system is rigged to discourage voting through restrictive processes in place since the country began but that hide under the cover of normality, like having elections on working days when many people simply cannot get to the polls before they close. Voter restriction efforts have escalated in recent times as Michael Waldman has pointed out in his book about the fight – not the right – to vote (Waldman, 2016). Similarly, the importance of civic engagement is directly related to civic education of the young which is woefully undervalued, if valued at all, in today's education system (Cole, 2016). As Waldman (2016, p. 261) points out,

The fight for the vote has been driven, above all, by the aspirations of those who seek to make their voices heard. And it has never been a smooth glide. At every step of the way, entrenched groups, fearing change, have fought back and tried to reduce the opportunity for political participation and power.

It is not easy to hold small groups accountable to a set of shared values, much less a whole society. But there is a great deal to learn from small group approaches that could be applicable to larger collective settings. An approach framed as the Sanctuary Model is an evidence-supported, trauma-informed, organizational culture intervention to create and sustain trauma-responsive organizations (Bloom & Farragher, 2013). In the Sanctuary Model, the shared values of a group become the core around which everything else flows. They are the anchors for complex decision

making and problem solving, the tests against which every individual in a group must evaluate their own conflicting desires and needs. The Sanctuary Commitments explored below can apply to any group of people since they are about using principles based on knowledge about human nature and human rights to establish social norms.

3.1 | Violence

Violence in any form – physical, psychological, social or moral – is contagious. Human beings quite naturally retaliate to injury – reciprocity is built into our basic structure as complex social beings. That means, therefore that violence will inevitably escalate if we do not engage in nonviolent behavior in the face of threat. Practicing nonviolence in the face of threat is not passive but is exceedingly difficult. Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Vaclav Havel, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama and a host of other heroic people have clearly demonstrated the power of nonviolence in the face of authoritarianism and the courage that is required to commit to nonviolence in the face of violence. But, lest non-violent protest be attributed only to those who make headlines, the fact is that people who work in all kinds of human services demonstrate nonviolent behavior all of the time as part of their routine practice in encountering challenging and difficult human beings.

A useful way to think about the interaction between the individual and the group is through the metaphor of our own immune system. We are each surrounded by potentially harmful bacteria and viruses all the time, and yet we usually stay well. What keeps our immune system healthy? As long as you are healthy, your immune system is steadily working to keep infectious and carcinogenic agents away from your vital organs, and as a result, you don't get sick. But if you are overtired, stressed, depleted, or if the infectious or cancer-causing agent is overwhelmingly powerful, then your defenses are breached and you get sick. Once the immune system is vulnerable, all kinds of problems can snowball.

The social body is vulnerable in a similar way, and we call a group's ability to protect itself "social immunity". We define social immunity as "the social body's ability to recognize and respond to threats to its well-being" (Bloom & Farragher, 2013, p. 154). Currently, our social immune system has responded belatedly to the multiple threats associated with Trump, the so-called "alt-right" and its underpinning of white supremacy. We are still very poor at recognizing, containing and transforming bullying behavior and the seductions of authoritarianism that are deeply embedded in the history of humanity.

Practicing nonviolent protest often confronts us with paradox. We are confronted by a President whose speech, like the actions he is promoting, is fundamentally violent, cloaked in trigger words such as "protection" and "security" and "danger". Yet if protest in the face of this violence becomes itself violent, then it will inevitably result in an endless cycle of violent suppression of freedom, which surely is the intent of arousing violent passions in the first place. At the same time, not responding to the violence and the threat of violence gives consent. In his book *American Fascists*, Chris Hedges quoted Karl Popper, the philosopher of science who had fled the Nazis, as saying,

We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal. (cited in Hedges, 2006, p. 1)

Because nonviolent practice is therefore a complex and paradoxical intervention, the skills for it need to be taught and rehearsed, as happened in the Civil Rights era (Collyer & Zepp, 2016).

3.2 | Emotional intelligence

The accumulated knowledge held in the libraries of psychiatry, psychology, social work, sociology, counseling and all other related fields is extensive, even though currently poorly integrated into the wider society. We must develop a deeper understanding of individual and group behavior and motivations, both conscious and unconscious and be able to recognize those people within our social body who pose serious threats to our collective well-being and refuse to

give support to their activities. Of necessity, in the current political climate, that means becoming aware of the multiple ways that our opinions, points of view, and emotions are being deliberately manipulated through the power of propaganda channeled through the media.

3.3 | Social learning

Humans learn by trial and error, and that is how creative solutions to complex problems emerge. Therefore, creating systems where people learn from their mistakes, rather than denying problems because of the fear of punishment, is essential. We need to get over the delusion that punishment is an effective way of intervening to change behavior in anyone. Research repeatedly has shown that it works very poorly, if at all (Bloom & Farragher, 2010). Human beings respond much more strongly to reward, support and encouragement.

3.4 | Open communication

In its briefest form this commitment is: "Say what you mean, mean what you say, and don't be mean when you say it". The Commitment to Open Communication is essential for free speech and therefore for a free press. But there must be social norms of civility and respect in place or "free speech" can easily become "hate speech" and lead to violence. Open communication does not mean that there are facts and "alternative facts", that every idea should have equal exposure and equal weight. The development of critical thinking and the ability to integrate feelings, beliefs, values and thoughts is a vital adult achievement that must be encouraged and modeled throughout our educational system and is vital to the survival of a thriving democracy.

Antidemocratic forces have served to significantly decrease the opportunities in our schools for that important component of education. In his book, *Democracy and Education*, American philosopher John Dewey wrote,

Knowledge is humanistic in quality not because it is about human products in the past, but because of what it does in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy. Any subject matter which accomplishes this result is humane, and any subject matter which does not accomplish it is not even educational. (Dewey, 1997, p. 230)

That being the case, many adults must learn, as adults, how to think critically and make reasoned and thoughtful judgments about what they see and hear.

The press and the media are the educators for the adult population, not only revealing the truth but ideally responsibly educating the public about what those truths mean. At last, our most prestigious press and media outlets have been responding to the provocation of the Trump administration that would like to find ways to control them if not silence them entirely. This is not a coincidence. As has been pointed out by many of those who have studied fascist regimes, silencing the press is a primary imperative (Paxton, 2004). So far, that is not working. As much as the rest of us may want to bury our heads, turn on entertainment and get away from the stress of all this, we must allow ourselves to know what is actually happening, as the current administration, in order to pursue their stated agenda, inevitably tries to hide or disguise more and more of its actual intent and actions.

3.5 | Democracy

Trauma is fundamentally about the abuse of power. The emergence of democracy around the world has, until now, meant a decrease in violence because it curbs the abuse of power that human beings are prone to exercise once they have control over others (Rummel, 1997). It is also the best method we have evolved thus far to address complex problems, although as a species we have a long way to go in this area of our collective development as the dilemmas of globalization and the environmental crisis illustrate (Lane, 2017). Still, without democratic processes at every level, beginning in the family, and then moving on to schools and workplaces, and, of course, government, creative solutions for complex problems are far less likely to emerge.

Most importantly at the current time, the American people need to see the Commitment to Democracy modeled by those who take an oath to the Constitution – Congress and the Judiciary. Trump does not appear to know what democracy actually means, how it is to be practiced, or to have any interest in democratic participation. He appears to be functioning on a premise that he has been made king, but that form of leadership was summarily dismissed by George Washington and those who followed him. Trump's appointments thus far have been extremist and he is failing completely to recognize that more than half of the country, at least the ones who bothered to vote, do not endorse his policies and that by law he is now supposed to be responsible to and for “all” of us. It is our hard-earned taxes that pay for this government and his opulent homes – all of it – and he is responsible to “us”.

3.6 | Social responsibility

This commitment is about the constant necessity in all human groups to balance our individual needs and desires with those of the collective good, demonstrated most importantly in the day-to-day practice and policies of the justice system. With the depletion of natural resources and the loss of economic stability globally, we need values that guide socially responsible business and an economic system that supports those values.

Perhaps the most dangerous threat to American democracy is the widespread loss of trust in our institutions. But loss of trust in our institutions isn't just loss of trust in our government. It is loss of trust in ourselves. Why? To be socially responsible citizens, we cannot go on ignoring the underpinnings of our economic system, capitalism and free market ideology, that at some intuitive but largely denied and unconscious level, most Americans know is the problem.

But it is only with great difficulty that those words can even be spoken because we are all fundamentally dependent on the economic system working, as unfair as it may be. James Carville famously urged his campaign strategists to remember what they needed to focus on in President Clinton's ultimately successful run for President against President George H. Bush in 1992, “It's the economy, stupid!” (Jasinowski, 2015), and 25 years have not changed that insight. Our economic system cannot go on the way it is without a fatal outcome. The world is changing, the climate is changing, critical natural resources are almost depleted and we are sharing a mass delusion, more bizarre than any symptom one hears in a psychiatric hospital, that we can keep consuming without conserving, that we can have all the services, privilege and luxury we desire without having to pay for it.

We have forgotten what has made us prosperous, including the importance of government. As one recent book has pointed out:

We suffer from a kind of mass historical forgetting, a distinctively American Amnesia. At a time when we face serious challenges that can be addressed only through a stronger, more effective government . . . we ignore what both our history and basic economic theory suggest: We need a constructive and mutually beneficial tension between markets and government rather than the jealous rivalry that so many misperceive – and, in that misperception, help foster. (Hacker & Pierson, 2016, p. 2)

In reality, capitalism, unchecked and as it is currently practiced, has become a malignancy. This administration is doing all it can to promote this malignant proliferation by removing even the most basic regulatory bodies and rules that constrain unchecked exploitation. In healthy bodies, cell growth and proliferation is balanced with other demands on health and is therefore constrained in service of the whole body. The primary value is in keeping the body as a whole alive and functioning. In cancer, there is a profound and ultimately fatal loss of constraint of cell growth and proliferation. From the point of view of the cancer cell, it must keep profiting from the vital nutrients of other parts of the body until there is nothing left – until the organism has died and the cancer cells along with it. If human beings were perfect, perhaps we could have an unregulated economy. But human beings are not perfect and therefore that balance between individual desire and the collective good can only be responsibly maintained through enforced mutual responsibility. There is no free lunch and, ultimately, if we destroy the Earth, the living body within which we all are cells, even the billionaires, the dictators, the demagogues and all of their inequitable wealth, will perish as well.

3.7 | Growth and change

The pace of change has greatly accelerated and, unless we intend to end our civilization entirely in the longed-for apocalypse of the extreme fundamentalists – that acceleration is going to continue. This basically means that we either grow or die. But change necessitates loss. As a species, we don't resist change – we resist loss. Currently the subliminal and largely unconscious recognition of impending further loss is what has led to the psychotic level of denial on the part of the Trump administration and all of his followers about the complex and global problems that surround us. The threat of loss is so great that it must be projected outward in ejecting millions of people, building a wall around us, arming everyone with powerful weapons. This is a paranoid stance, a defense against loss that is destined to fail miserably, but before failing is likely to lead to yet another – and possibly final – World War. The only way out of the threat posed by the reality of upcoming losses that are unfolding even as these words are written is a new set of “attractors” – a new vision of what life could be like if we make it through these crises of loss. Human survival thus far has not depended on brute strength as much as it has depended on boundless creativity and innovation and the joy of finding solutions collectively that benefit everyone.

4 | DEVELOP A CLEAR, EASY TO UNDERSTAND LANGUAGE THAT CAN BE USED TO STAY ON TRACK IN ANY PROBLEM-SOLVING EFFORT WHILE STILL CREATING THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

One such simple tool is “SELF” – Safety, Emotions, Loss and Future. S.E.L.F. is meant to serve as a compass that allows us to navigate through any problem or decision without losing track of vital concerns. The words are simple, user-friendly, and can be taught to anyone and yet using them in concert prevents the loss of complexity.

4.1 | Safety

What are the safety issues surrounding the issue we are discussing? Remember, safety is not just physical – it also means evaluating how safe individuals are with themselves, how safe we are together, and how safe we are in being consistent with our fundamental values. That means that decisions must be considered along four safety dimensions: (i) What are the concerns for physical safety?; (ii) What are the concerns in regard to psychological safety?; (iii) What are the concerns in regard to social safety?; (iv) What must we concern ourselves with around issues of moral safety? Trump's ban on Muslims provides a meaningful dialogue around safety. His stated concern is that the reason he is doing this is because the country is not safe. Presumably he is referring only to physical safety, implying that, just by being a Muslim from any of the seven countries designated for exclusion, a person is a threat to our national physical well-being. It also means, presumably, that if you are socially affiliated in some way with a person who is a Muslim you are not safe with them and other people may not be safe with you. And, obviously, in this kind of a discriminatory environment, no one that practices the Islamic faith is safe from personal physical, psychological and social harm. This whole logic presents a challenge to our moral safety because discriminating against someone because of their religious faith contradicts a very basic and constitutionally enshrined American value.

4.2 | Emotions

In any issue that is contentious, strong emotions are aroused. Being able to name our emotions and manage emotional states is a developmental task that begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. Adults are expected to be able to manage feelings, even distressing emotions, and not act on impulse. Social and political disagreements can arouse very strong emotions related to basic identity and can therefore be difficult to manage. In this recent election, the lack of civil discourse and basic respect was disturbing and toxic and continues to be so. When navigating a difficult discussion or issue, some basic emotional management expectations must be set through reasonable ground rules. Advance preparation for what emotions should be considered can be a very useful tool.

4.3 | Loss

When encountering a problem that has already resulted in loss, that loss needs to be honored. But many losses can be anticipated, even though they have not yet occurred. In problem-solving it is always useful to consider multiple options for action and contemplate with each option what each of the actors will have to give up in order for change to occur. Preparing people for change by recognizing in the balance what will be lost helps overcome resistance to change.

4.4 | Future

When contemplating a thorny problem, such as impending loss, beginning with an imagined outcome may help get oneself and others on the same page. Can we start with some agreement on where we all want to end up? Can we find some meaningful common ground? What has been sorely missing from the current political discussion is a clearly articulated vision of what America will look like if the Trump administration's policies are put into place. Instead, we have slogans like "Make America Great Again" which is essentially meaningless. It would be a welcome sign if Trump could clearly outline what his policies will look like so that people would really know and not just imagine what they are supporting. So far, based on what we have clearly heard and seen through executive orders and other communications, the imagined future would hold:

- No Medicare or Medicaid or any federal program that entitles citizens to basic services
- More people, especially poor people in for-profit prisons
- No universal health care – continually more expensive health care that discriminates against the poor, the elderly and the sick
- Hugely expanded military with more technologically sophisticated weaponry
- Deep cuts in all social services and education
- Private, for-profit schools
- Private, for-profit hospitals
- Continued economic inequity and exploitation
- Continuing rise in poverty and deep poverty absorbing many in the working and middle class
- Further legalization of prohibition against unions and union organizing
- Significant increase in drug use – both legal and illegal – and alcohol consumption with diminished opportunities for treatment
- Militarization of police accompanied by a rise in crime
- Unbridled discrimination against LGBT people, people of color, immigrants, women and Jews
- Unbridled exploitation of the environment with a loss of any regulations that protect the public if they are in conflict with corporate financial interest
- Education schemes that are anti-science
- State-supported religion
- Abortion and birth control criminalized
- Suppression of dissent – criminalization of protest.

It is vitally important that politicians and political commentators utilize the capacity of moral imagination first articulated by Adam Smith and now defined as “an ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting in a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action” (Johnson,

1993, p. 202). If one uses moral imagination to consider the consequences of any of these policies, far less of all of them, the result is not about making America great – it is about creating an unlivable future dystopia.

5 | DEVELOP A TOOLKIT THAT EDUCATES GROUPS OF PEOPLE ABOUT GROUP DYNAMICS THAT CAN SABOTAGE THEIR COLLECTIVE EFFORTS AND THAT HELP THEM TO ARTICULATE AND RESOLVE PROBLEMS AS THEY ARISE

5.1 | Self-analysis and historical review

Developing a toolkit can start with a self-analysis of the existing or forming group carried out by the members of the group. One of the first group tasks is to decide the composition of the group and ascertain if there are any voices not yet represented. Then, the group needs to establish some safety rules for the way they are going to work together and some guidelines for what it is going to take for the various members of the group to be productive together. If the group already has a history, then that history will have to be articulated and explored and any skeletons in the group closet must be surfaced and given proper burial. It's important to remember that "safe" is not the same as "comfortable". No process of change is ever comfortable but it can be physically, psychologically, socially and morally safe for the people engaged in the change process.

5.2 | Loss assessment, goal setting, mission statement and guiding principles

Group members can then anticipate the difficult emotions that may be aroused as they move forward and plan for how they are going to individually and collectively manage stormy emotions without becoming destructive. The group has next to consider what they are going to have to give up in order to change – again, individually and collectively and what losses the group has already sustained that may be affecting group function. Importantly, the group has to consider what the goal of the work is – what is the future they want to achieve? It will help the group process if the future short-term and intermediate goals are made as concrete as possible so that everyone agrees on the work they are planning to do together. The long-term goals can be both ideal and idealistic, but not impossible. The outcome of this analysis should enable a group to agree on a mission statement and some guiding principles that then become the anchors for all decisions and actions moving forward.

5.3 | Educational plan

Some early decisions that need to be made include deciding on the knowledge base that everyone involved in the group is required to have and a plan for how that education process is going to occur. Each group may have different requirements, but, regardless of the organizational mission, all citizens need to know about the history of social change, the impact of stress and adversity on individuals, organizations and systems and be able to recognize problematic group processes that may interfere with goal attainment, such as group polarization, groupthink, conformity pressures and all of the forms of group influence that are utilized by propagandists. The group should also decide on its expectations of leaders and leadership styles while defining the responsibilities of both leaders and followers.

5.4 | Conflict management and conflict resolution review

There are several other processes that, in the excitement of initial group commitment, may be overlooked but that can sooner or later sabotage forward movement of the group. These processes underlie the creation of a social learning environment and may determine whether or not the group is sustainable. The group must define specific and shared methods and tools for resolving conflict and coming to consensus – human groups over time rarely if ever agree on

everything, but democracy requires collaboration, negotiation, bargaining and sometimes giving way. For the group to learn from experience there must be nonpunitive processes in place for reviewing decisions that had negative outcomes as well as methods in place for evaluating progress and celebrating success.

5.5 | Recruitment, orientation, communication, succession, marketing, funding and metrics

As the group develops, other tasks will unfold and the group should develop tools that emerge from that process including recruitment methods and materials, orientation materials for new group members, communication plans that address old-school and newer forms of communication, a viable marketing plan for outreach and development, a funding method for group activities, a methodology to evaluate progress, and metrics that demonstrate what has been achieved. Because progressive social change is evolutionary, group members must develop a long-term point of view and therefore always be thinking about succession planning – asking themselves with every lesson learned, how are we going to pass the baton to the next generation? How are we going to retain the memory of what we have learned so that those who follow us do not have to make the same mistakes we have made?

6 | CONCLUSION

The Trump administration's future for America is not the America I want to live in and I do not believe that most Americans do either. The resistance movement indicates that a growing number of my fellow citizens reject the ideas and policies that Trump and his advisors are promulgating. But how can concerned citizens reclaim the territory and redefine the problematic discourse that serves as propaganda for the desperate and historically poorly educated people who support extremist policies and who deny the validity of science, fact and Truth itself?

The process of organizing and implementing constructive change is a creative process that takes time, regardless of whether we are focused on the individual, family, organization, community or society. Parallel processes occur between and among all of these levels of living systems and they interact with each other within an ecological framework that constitutes life on Earth. In contrast, destructive change – killing a person, blowing up a city, destroying a culture – can happen almost instantly. The difference between nurturing a living organism and exploding a bomb is the ease with which destruction is facilitated and cannot be undone, while building or creating something takes so much carefully planned out time and effort.

There is an expanding understanding that the antidemocratic malignancy of authoritarianism, ignorance and unchecked greed, born out of alienation, xenophobia and fear, must be kept in check or it will be the cancer that destroys us from within. Like fighting any cancer, the forces of destruction must be kept in check by the forces of living creation. Democratic principles and practices are like targeted cancer treatment, inhibiting processes that are encouraging cancer cell growth and division, while minimizing harm to normal cells. But it's hard, hard work, as any cancer survivor can tell you and it demands a long-term, lifetime commitment to maintaining health and constraining the forces of deterioration. John Philpot Curran was a late 18th-century Irish politician who wrote that “the condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt” (Curran, 1811, p. 236). Any parent, company founder, police chief or mayor can affirm that eternal vigilance is what is required to keep living systems alive.

A vital part of the vigilance necessary to keeping living systems alive is an appreciation of the past that includes a recognition of not only the continuing problems but the progress that has been made as well. The core values of the United States are a product of the Enlightenment that began in Europe and served as the underpinning for the American Revolution. These principles include democracy; racial and sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression and the press; eradication of religious authority from the legislative process and education; and full separation of church and state (Israel, 2009). Long-term resistance cannot just oppose: it must offer a substantial and positive vision of the future that attracts and motivates the populace. Enlightenment core values must

be retrieved as well as the orchestration of coherent celebrations of all that humanity has accomplished, not just self-flagellation for all that is left to do. As historian Yuval Harari has pointed out, the problems that have beset humanity throughout history – famine, plague, war:

. . . have not been completely solved, but they have been transformed from incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces of nature into manageable challenges We know quite well what needs to be done in order to prevent famine, plague and war – and we usually succeed in doing it During the last hundred years, technological, economic and political developments have created an increasingly robust safety net separating humankind from the biological poverty line. Mass famines still strike some areas from time to time, but they are exceptional, and they are almost always caused by human politics rather than by natural catastrophes Whereas in ancient agricultural societies human violence caused about 15 per cent of all deaths, during the twentieth century violence caused only 5 per cent of deaths, and in the early twenty-first century it is responsible for about 1 per cent of global mortality. (Harari, 2017, pp. 2–4).

A hundred years ago, women in the United States could not even vote, black people were still being lynched, and child abuse was not even recognized as child abuse much less as a crime. Until 1945, there was no Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and no Human Rights Movement. In the last 30 years alone, our knowledge about childhood adversity and trauma as major sources of physical illness and emotional dysfunction has exploded leading to the potential for reducing and even eliminating most chronic physical and mental illness as well as criminal behavior. And, although there is still much to be done, as recently as 10 years ago, the idea of LGBTQ people being free to marry and parent children was an impossible dream. We must not allow the hopelessness and cynicism of the present right-wing discourse to distract us from the very real project of elevating the human spirit and human culture that began centuries ago and continues today. Although not yet perfect and still vulnerable to corruption, government can and does work and the administration's current efforts to destroy our government instead of improving it must be opposed and stopped.

The process of organizing and implementing constructive change is a creative process that takes time. System change is known to take at least seven years. With a clearly stated process it is possible to reduce that time, but the growth to maturity of an individual, a family or a group requires much patience and perseverance, high degrees of tolerance, a willingness to find common ground with opponents, a thorough knowledge about how groups function and how they fail, and a great deal of hard work. Unity among a diverse group of people does not come easily or without conflict and that is why having dedicated democratic leaders, a shared, scientifically grounded knowledge base, clear principles of conduct, a shared language, and a shared practice are vitally important for the years ahead. We must be prepared for the long haul. The struggle ahead requires us to remain steadfast, respectful of our differences and as many are declaring, INDIVISIBLE, committed to freedom and justice for all.

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