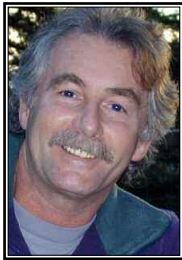


BEYOND THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE: A RADICAL NEW FOCUS FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

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Modern lifestyles are increasingly addicted to information – getting it, sharing it, creating it. No doubt about it, information makes life more interesting and fun. But every little pixel comes at a cost, affecting our quality of life.

REMEMBER THE GOOD OLD DAYS BEFORE THE INTERNET and email? Life was simpler. You could switch off the light, leave the office, go home and relax for the night. No obsessive checking your BlackBerry or iPhone. No YouTube, FaceBook, or MySpace to enthrall you. No compulsive tracking or updating blogs. No late-night browsing for bargains on eBay or Amazon. You had downtime. Remember that? Remember when it all seemed more sane – and safer? Plentiful fresh, wholesome food. Abundant clear, clean water. Breathable air. Cheap gas. And a beautiful big wide world of pristine mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, and oceans to explore. Alas, no more.

Today, the world is exploding with food riots, communities are parched for potable water and gasping for clean air, while others burn up bank balances to feed insatiable SUVs. And pristine nature? Forget it. Even the remotest places on Earth are polluted with plastic, poisoned with countless consumer chemicals.

Yes, we may long for the good old days before the information revolution – when life was far less complicated and more relaxed. Faced with big problems, people mostly knew what to do. It was easy enough to find the right answers. Not now. The recent global financial collapse is just a harbinger of what can happen when blind trust in information technology runs so deep and wide that the true seriousness of the situation is lost in the digital sinews of transnational computer networks. The challenges are huge and mind-numbingly complex. All around us, everywhere we look, we face the long, tangled tentacles of one global crisis after another: Environment. Economics. Education. Housing. Health. Hunger. Religion. Fuel. Food. Air. Water. War. And, of course, weather and climate change.

CRISIS AS A WAY OF LIFE

Faced with a crisis, smart people find out what went wrong and what to do to fix it. But today the problems are so vast, so deeply intertwined, that even our best minds seem to be at a loss. The irony is stark: Blitzed by information overload, we are inspirationally challenged.

It's a common complaint: We have more information than we know what to do with. Yet what we have may not be enough to get us out of the predicament in time.

The problem, though, is not really information – either lack of it or too much of it. The problem is lack of *wisdom*. We have turned our backs on the plain old commonsense that comes naturally with the gift of consciousness. We pay more attention to digital data than to the qualities of mind needed to manage our immensely complex information systems.

Not only do we feel the pain personally, the entire economic system is in jeopardy. In our data-dependent corporate

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“What is your aim in philosophy? – To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.”

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

culture, the worst executive sin is to say “I don’t know.” Information at the finger-tips is the Holy Grail, and if you don’t have it, then bluff it. Managers and politicians are afraid of being found out. Since nobody knows it all, everybody devises spins and stratagems for disguising and protecting their vulnerable information gaps. Corporate life thrives on second-guessing what the other guy knows – if he (and “he” could just as well be “she”) doesn’t know that you don’t know and you don’t know that he doesn’t know ... then who’ll ever know that nobody really knows?

One reason for the epidemic of ignorance and pretense in the worlds of business and politics is, I believe, because corporate executives have embraced new technology as a substitute for the human mind. Information systems have changed our working lives in fundamental ways, yet millions still hardly understand the first thing about computers. (Why, for instance, do politicians accept touch-screen voting, when the software is so vulnerable to hacking?) New technology has taken them – and the rest of us – into a new age where data manipulation is the new designer drug, flowing like super-charged electronic blood through the digital veins of the World Wide Web and its global network of ISP servers. It runs our lives.

To be sure, information technology quickens the pace of business. It helps keep the competition at bay. It gives executives that warm, sexy feeling called “the competitive edge” promised so loudly by the marketing hobnobs from computer and software companies. They can feel it in their fingers, yet in their guts many feel a gnawing uneasiness. The latest software update is just another fix. Gotta have it.

THE MYTH OF PROGRESS

Beyond the drive for ever-enhanced data efficiency is an implicit assumption that progress is good. And because information is essential for progress, ergo, information is good. But information must be managed: Enter computers and networks of information technology. Ergo, information technology is good. To many people, especially those earning a living from information technology, this last statement is taken for granted. However, we would do well to question it.

Information technology may be turbo-driving business and the rest of the world headlong into chaos – blind and oblivious to its impact on the greater ecological systems in which it is embedded. Surprisingly, it strikes many people as counterintuitive that information technology is *far more* environmentally destructive than the impacts of smoke-stack industry. Our local and global computer networks are utterly dependent on industrial technology for extracting, processing, and transporting the raw materials needed to build the networks. Hidden behind the clean and crisp design of your new laptop or cellphone stomps a massive ecological footprint – spewing toxins into air, land, and water. Bottom line: Information technology is pure economic and ecological overhead.

What is true of information technology is true for the business world and modern lifestyles in general. The problem with information – getting it and using it – is that it *costs*. Entropy, a basic law of physics, is now a cliché in the business world: “No free lunches.” It’s the sort of corporate graffiti executives are fond of. Everybody seems to be scrambling for a piece of the pie, before it’s all gone.

The scenario, simplified, runs on two assumptions: First, progress is good and, therefore, desirable. Second, progress should be measured in material gain. Following the logic, we are compelled to pit human ingenuity against the forces of nature.

We manipulate the raw material of the environment into more and more products – manufacturing order out of chaos. That’s the definition of progress. And how do we build order? By gathering, generating, communicating, sharing, and acting on *information*. Order is built up by corralling and concentrating the flow of energy and information from the environment and shaping it to suit our needs. Well, so be it – difficult to argue with that.

But remember entropy? There’s a price tag to every lunch – *we have to pay for the order and information*. The build-up of material order through the constant drive for development of next-generation products *necessarily* dissipates increasing quantities of waste and disorder into the environment. We pay for our order and information by polluting our rivers, lakes, oceans, land and the air that we breathe. That inconvenient truth is no longer so easily dismissed.

SOLD OUT OR SOULED IN?

Another glaring assumption, conspicuously overlooked in the information colonies – the Silicon Valleys, Glens, Glades, Beltways and Godknowswhereelse the information revolution is hatched – is this: Underlying the drive for material progress is the belief that *brute matter is all there is*. Dead stuff. Atoms colliding in the void. The paradigm of scientific materialism. Notice the dichotomy and contradiction here – a kind of metaphysical schizophrenia unconsciously driving the world of business and politics. On one hand, the ideal of progress flows from a divine mandate “Go forth and multiply; fill the Earth and subdue it.” On the other, fulfilling that mandate relies on the methods of secular science. Behind the religious impulse is a concern for the spiritual wellbeing of humans; behind science, is the assumption that what matters is only what you can measure. The digital dances with the divine.

Each shares the idea that *humans are special* – because we alone have souls (religion), or because we have unique brains and intelligence (science) and this gives us the right and the might to take whatever we want or need from the world around us. *Progress*.

But then we have a double price to pay. The advance of our information-addicted civilization is paid for not only by polluting the physical environment but also by degrading the spirit of humanity, our system of values – by *polluting consciousness*.

Values, such as compassion and empathy (not just for humans but for other animals, too), are compromised in exchange for accumulation of material wealth and the eternal pursuit of the almighty dollar. Not only have we “sold out” on nature; we have forgotten how to be “souled in.”

Without a parallel revolution – or paradigm shift – in human consciousness, in our value systems, the information revolution will be worse than meaningless. It will so degrade both our physical and psychological environments that we will self-consume in a globalized “heat death” eons

before that inevitable fate befalls the solar system. The looming environmental collapse is just a symptom of a much deeper and widespread psycho-spiritual malaise.

Unless information technology (and by extension, the entire domain of business, economics, and politics) is geared to what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called “authentic liberation¹,” it will increase psychic entropy in the form of alienation from nature. If the purpose of information is progress,

And, yes, information helps us manage that task. But information technology will not be sufficient to pull us through.

Humans are living examples of teleological systems. We think and act with purpose. Information without intention is like a thermostat without a governor. We need to align technology with *intentionality*. We need to develop and evolve – not only by focusing on the external world of nature, but also by turning the beam of consciousness on



KURT WEISER, *SEMI CONSCIOUS*, CERAMICS.

and progress means transforming our world, it sets humanity *against* our environment, rather than seeing us as part of a single, co-evolving interrelated system.

True authenticity comes with the realization that people are integral subsystems within the nested systems of nature. Unless information, and information technology, serve *self-transformation* we will continue to increase our alienation. Real progress liberates human potential and fulfills our co-evolutionary promise within a complex ecosystem.

BEYOND THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION

More than an information revolution, then, we need a consciousness revolution (that Sixties’ slogan just won’t go away!).

Ultimately, why do we need information? To help us work better. Why do we work? To help us cope and survive, generate order and organization as we face the unrelenting forces of nature. We work to ward off decay and chaos.

consciousness itself. In this way, information transforms into wisdom.

The information model – high-tech as a paradigm for business and human development – sells us short by turning the human/technology relationship on its head. Instead of creating systems that stimulate our highest capacities, we end up reducing people to the status of information processors. Instead of creative stimulation, we settle for mechanical simulation. We become virtual instead of virtuous.

There’s another problem. Digital technology elevates the importance of *memory*. Information is stored as data to be accessed and retrieved on demand. But life is more than memory. Life sparkles with *experience*, with *feeling*, with *creativity*.

Too much emphasis on memory – digital or neural – blots out the live current of experience that animates people interacting with each other and with the world around us. When memory dominates, intentionality is obscured,

and *we forget the driving purpose behind whatever we are recalling*. We lose our humanity in a storm of facts.

The high-tech model turns people into information processors *for something else* – whether it's sales goals, corporate bottom-line, market share, or industry leadership – *not for themselves*. But it is the nature of all living systems to be “for themselves,” to maintain their self-identity, to protect their defining boundaries, to enhance their own well being. When people work “for the organization,” without also ensuring sufficient self-growth, they become self-alienated, and they lose their driving purpose. In time, both individual and system fall prey to dysfunction and entropy.

A CONSCIOUSNESS REVOLUTION

It happens in organizations when people are valued more for what they know – for their information content, for their *memory* – than for who they are. Yet the greatest value someone can bring to an organization is his or her experience; not “experience” in the sense of “accumulated knowledge” (i.e. “memory”) – but experience as the vital flow of consciousness and awareness, the source of human choice and creativity ... in short, the *self*. Only when the self is welcomed, accepted and valued can a memory for facts and information be of any long-term value to the organization and the individual.

The exponential growth of data storage and exchange is inversely proportional to the cognitive, creative capacities of human beings to absorb and integrate information. The more we are exposed to the daily blizzard of digitized facts, the less we are meaningfully informed. Our mental bandwidth is not up to the challenge. The full, life-enhancing value of information can be realized only if coupled with evolution in the consciousness of the person exposed to the information storm. Growth in external, mechanistic information processing requires a corresponding internal development in consciousness – in our ability to create and express *meaning*. More than information processors, *we are meaning processors*.

Without an expansion of consciousness, our minds will remain vulnerable to information overwhelm. With expanded awareness, we may grow to include and integrate more details from the field of information and learn to recognize more meaningful patterns. Expanded awareness enables individuals to more easily single out specific elements from the background context, perceive relationships, and to reflect and act on them purposefully.

A preoccupation with information inhibits creativity and stifles intentionality by isolating the person from the world. Consciousness, as Freire pointed out, is a “problem-posing” faculty – it thrives by confronting problems, by free and open inquiry, and it produces solutions through a process of self-reflection, praxis, and creative transformation of information.

This leads to a new and radical purpose for business: to transform organizations by affirming the human capacity for self-transcendence – for reflecting and acting with integrity and authenticity, true to one's own spirit; and, in turn, contributing to the growth of the organization, and the larger society.

But honouring and nurturing the self is only a first step. While each of us is undoubtedly a unique individual, our individuality gets its uniqueness precisely from our relationship with all that surrounds us. Self-transformation, then, comes with the realization that who we are is literally a co-creation involving, ultimately, the entire world. At bottom, the self is a note in a symphony, a node in the ever-interdependent universal web of life and being. We are not just individuals; we are *interviduals*.

A NEW BOTTOM-LINE

So, what's driving the digital revolution? Well, we rely on information – from the media, from friends and family, from our churches, from science – to know what to think, what to *believe*. How else would we know how to act in the world?

But being informed is not enough. The human body-mind-spirit thrives on meaning. True progress cannot be measured in bits, bytes, or pixels, or even in dollars. In the end, it comes down to a deepening of meaning – a state of mind that improves the quality of life and our relationships with others.

Imagine, then, a new bottom-line for both our personal and professional lives: *transformation* – real honest-to-God progress, humans in harmony with nature. Life beyond the information revolution.

Nice idea. How do we make it real?

In my work as a philosopher and consciousness mentor, I guide students and clients through an easy-to-follow seven-step process. Think of it as a program for flexing the “muscles of the mind.” In consciousness work, the bottom line is always – *always* – a matter of *choice*.

This approach is not about more or better information, it's not about changing beliefs. It's about *letting go* of beliefs – especially those cherished beliefs we just *know* to be true.

BEYOND BELIEF

One of the strangest myths circulating in spiritual or New Age communities is the cliché “You create your own reality” or “Belief can change the world.” Nothing could be further from the truth. We have no evidence for this either from science or from spirituality. Nevertheless, there is a kernel of wisdom in this insight. But it gets lost when people confuse “belief” with “intention.”

Beliefs have no intrinsic power. They are mental abstractions, and never change anything. In fact, beliefs are just frozen fragments of consciousness, habits of mind. And like all habits, they turn us into machines. Habit is the enemy of choice.

By contrast, intention is creative and concrete, and has power to change lives. Intention is like a sharply focused laser-beam of consciousness. But to make a difference, to *manifest*, intention must be acted on through choice. That's what makes things happen. That's what brings about change and transformation.

Belief gets in the way. Sticking to your beliefs is one way to make sure you won't change anything – about yourself or the world. That's why I encourage people to cultivate *experience beyond belief*, as a path to transformation (see sidebar for a seven-step program).

E X P E R I E N C E B E Y O N D B E L I E F

STEP 1 - ACCEPT THAT BELIEFS ARE NATURAL

We all have beliefs. There's no getting away from that. It's a simple fact of life. It's natural to have beliefs – it's what our minds are for. They evolved to give us maps or shortcuts that help us navigate through life. Just don't mistake your beliefs for reality. The map is not the territory. You don't drive your car onto the map and you don't eat the menu. Yes, beliefs are natural, nevertheless they disconnect us from reality.

We turn our feelings into thoughts and words to communicate with others. Thoughts are the 'atoms' of belief.

STEP 2 - RECOGNIZE THE ORIGIN OF BELIEFS

Every belief is composed of thoughts, and every thought begins as a feeling. Think about it: Long before you could think or speak, as an infant your life was flushed with feelings. Feelings came first. They are grounded in your body and connect you with reality.

STEP 3 - REALIZE THAT EVERY BELIEF IS A HABIT OF MIND

Thoughts and beliefs are *abstractions* – literally “snapshots” of reality taken from the ongoing flow of experience as it happens moment by moment. They are frozen fragments of consciousness, mechanical habits that keep you stuck in the past. Mesmerized by your beliefs, real life flows past unnoticed. Here's how it works: You have an *experience*. Then you *interpret* it. Turn it into a *belief*. Then into *dogma*. Beliefs, then, are nothing but mental habits, stepping stones to dogmatism and fundamentalism.

STEP 4 - FOCUS ON FEELINGS IN THE BODY

Feelings are literally the sensations you experience in your body. Learn to pay attention to them. Take time out to sit quietly and just notice what's going on, without trying to change anything. Simply feel your sensations – in your chest, around your eyes, in your legs, your back, your belly... Remember: Every thought begins as a feeling, and feelings connect us with the world. They are messages from nature. Learn what it means to *feel your thinking* – and not just think your thoughts.

STEP 5 - STOP BELIEVING YOUR BELIEFS

“But,” you say, “if I don't have any beliefs, I'll have nothing.” Far from it. In fact, letting go of beliefs opens you up to *what is really happening in your experience – right now!* And experience is the royal road to reality. Have you noticed: Experience and reality always happen together, *right now*. Also, notice I didn't say “stop having beliefs.” That would contradict Step 1. As long as you have a mind, you can't help having beliefs. It's what the mind does naturally, and you have little choice about that. But you do have a choice whether or not you *believe* your beliefs. You do not have to believe that your beliefs are *true*. Instead, you can learn to hold beliefs as “likely stories,” as Plato once said. So, take courage, let go of your beliefs, don't hold onto them, and see what happens. I promise: You won't disappear, you won't die.

STEP 6 - CULTIVATE BEING THE WITNESS

As you practice sitting quietly, feeling the sensations in your body, noticing thoughts as they come and go, arising from your feelings, you will come to a new realization about who you are. *You are not your mind. You are not your thoughts or beliefs.* In fact, you are not even your feelings. In this evolving state of consciousness, you will begin to experience a new sense of freedom. You may begin to notice something quite profound: *someone, or some other part of you, is observing everything that is going on.* The question is: *Who?* That's the sixty-four-billion dollar spiritual jackpot. It's the essence of spiritual practice. Who, then, is observing the flow of thoughts through your mind? Well, *that's* who you are! You are the Witness that unifies self and world. And the way to get to this realization is by practicing experience beyond belief.

STEP 7 - SPEND MORE TIME IN 'SACRED SILENCE'

In the end, the core wisdom of all spiritual traditions is some form of “Let go and let God.” Learn to just *be* – by yourself or in community. Be comfortable beyond thoughts, words, judgments, or beliefs. You don't need to sit still and quiet to practice this, but it helps. It takes some discipline to tame the mind, to wean it off its diet of beliefs, to break the habits of thoughts, desires, and fears that inevitably distract us and distort reality. After a while, when you pay more attention to the Witness, you come to realize that the deepest source of wisdom is not what you think or believe. Rather wisdom lies in that space of “sacred silence” beyond all words and ideas, where *what is* shines forth. Those who open up to it, often call it the Source – awakening to our true nature as “All-One.”

Even after years of spiritual practice, we will still use computers. We will continue to search the media for useful information. It's not either/or. But something will have changed. We will act more from choice, not force of habit. We will overcome the epidemic of digital addiction that strains and stresses our lives – and the life of the planet.

We are entering a new era. Instead of acting as information peddlers, caught up in the global network of digital exchange, addicted to it as though our lives depended on it, we will serve ourselves and the world better by focusing on developing “technologies” of consciousness so that the human spirit is up to the job of rediscovering our place in nature.

Instead of living for the next informational fix to feed our insatiable minds, we will shift attention to something much more life-sustaining. We will experience something deep and vital. We will experience how we are all inextricably interconnected. And that will be a healing – our own and the Earth's, too. This, I predict, is what the next revolution will be².

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum International Publishing Group (2000).

² Details of how we can personally contribute to this revolution are presented in Christian de Quincey's *Consciousness from Zombies to Angels*, Park Street Press (January, 2009). ■