Personhood at the edge of civilizational shift*

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Abstract

Early mentors in the author's life modelled a new paradigm for research that included subject–subject participation, a wider range of acceptable evidence and the capacity to suspend certainty and let coherence emerge. The author uses this kind of approach in exploring the psychological dimensions of the current crises that are occurring globally on three different levels: *real* – breakdown of institutions; *conceptual* – the breakdown of coherence in dominant narratives; and *existential* – fraying consensus about fundamental questions of human existence. To optimize the possibility of survival in such turbulent times a new kind of psychology is needed that is better adapted to new conditions. The International Futures Forum has developed theory, pedagogy and social practices to facilitate transformative innovation. Case examples of others' transformative projects are described and linked to the urgent need to develop and to practise as persons of tomorrow.

Keywords: future; cultural crisis; conceptual emergency; persons of tomorrow; humanistic practice; qualitative evidence; transformative innovation

Shoulders of giants: Irene and Carl

I have been astonishingly blessed with the mentors in my professional life. I entered academic life in the 1960s as a biologist in Britain. I was not a particularly stellar student as an undergraduate, as I found the limiting frames of standard science something of a disappointment. But then I got lucky. I was accepted to do doctoral research in the Botany Department of Leeds University under a brilliant and eccentric woman, Dr Irene Manton, who discovered fundamental aspects of cellular structure using one of the first-ever electron microscopes (Preston, 1990). In the early days of electron microscopy we had no maps for what we were seeing. All one could see on the florescent screen were shadowy features that didn't make much sense. Manton's key lesson to this young researcher was to have patience and to realise that at the edge of new knowledge, inquiry is an imaginative and interpretative enterprise, more like reading poetry, listening to music or art appreciation than it is abstract logic or engineering.

In the 1960s Manton was already playing with

ideas about reality and perception. Influenced by Michael Polanyi, she believed that the implication of early twentieth-century physics was that the ideal of objectivity – the view from nowhere – was an illusion. All knowledge starts somewhere, and inescapably involves personal, subjective, contextual and aesthetic dimensions. Under her guidance I learned that the best science requires both love and courage.

After I moved to the United States to complete my biology doctorate, a brush with mortality prompted a shift in disciplines to psychology. Given that I was ABD (All But Dissertation) as a biologist I did not have much appetite for starting over again, so I took a risk and enrolled in the fledgling Union Institute, which was based in principles of humanistic education – where I could start from where I was. Here I was lucky again when psychologist Dr Carl Rogers, a keen supporter of the educational innovation going on at Union, showed interest in my work and agreed to be my doctoral adviser.

Rogers was a 'process' thinker influenced by Michael Polanyi, Alfred North Whitehead, Abraham Maslow and, later, David Bohm. Like Manton he believed that to know something one had to be open to it; to participate in it and surrender to whatever emerged in the process. For Rogers, empathy was an epistemology. He allowed life to speak to him in its own language, and he was astonishingly attuned to his surrounding – especially nature and the diverse people he met. On his many trips overseas he would welcome opportunities to get outside his own familiar contexts and immerse himself in local traditions. He might attend sessions with shamans, mediums, civil society meetings, engage with diverse racial communities, politicians, or join in traditional dances and festivals.

Rogers was a disciplined scientist yet like Manton he had a wider view than the reductionist categories generally permitted by 'standard science' of what we should consider 'evidence'. He embraced quantitative and qualitative methods, field work, case studies, intuition, art and walks along the beach. Like Manton, he too could suspend preconceived ideas to allow himself to be carried into unknown spaces and let implicit order emerge. Both of them

were at ease in multiple ways of knowing, and were able to make sense of complex and dynamic cognitive and affective situations.

These two giant scientists, born two years apart at the opening of the twentieth century, who literally fell into my life, had an indelible influence on the way I too experience and understand the world. It was years later that I came to fully understand that they were exploring the cusp of two cultural paradigms that defined two civilizations – one grounded in the search for mastery, prediction and control, and another grounded in empathy, participation and love.

From his very early work as a scientist, Rogers agreed with Kurt Goldstein (Goldstein, 1934), that the second law of thermodynamics notwithstanding, the Universe is not an inert accumulation of randomness, but that a 'formative tendency' propels living systems – and perhaps even galaxies – towards the achievement of greater levels of actualization and integration.

This was to me a radically transgressive idea; and actually, it still is. But experiences working in large person-centred community groups, living in more than one culture, as well as countless hours spent with psychotherapy clients and trainees, gradually changed my mind. As individuals and groups sought to rise to the challenge and transcend complex and seemingly intractable problems, I became convinced that given certain simple conditions such as dignity, respect, empathy, unconditional acceptance and authenticity, persons, groups and perhaps even cultures have an astonishing capacity to align with some emergent force within them to invent creative solutions to their challenges (O'Hara, 1997). And when they do, what is perhaps an implicate or an as-yet inchoate order (Bohm & Edwards, 1991) becomes explicit, and moves towards further evolution.

Three emergencies – a 'perfect storm'
There is virtually no area of human life not being profoundly disrupted by the giant tsunami wrought in large part by the global digital revolution of the last few decades. We are experiencing what Zygmunt Bauman calls 'liquid times' (Bauman, 2010). In IFF (the International Futures Forum) we identify three

kinds of emergency which together create a perfect storm that threatens human civilization, and along with it much of the natural world. First there is *the real emergency* where all around us systems upon which we used to rely are not working and are close to collapse. Institutions are breaking down; there is rising inequality, massive migration, global crime and violence, financial instability, populist insurgencies in previously stable societies, and dysfunctional government.

There is also an *epistemic* crisis or conceptual emergency in which the world has become so hyper-connected and complex that it can neither be understood nor controlled. Existing conceptual frameworks, received knowledge and conventional rationalities are mostly inadequate. In any complex public project – health care or tax reform legislation, for instance – regulations will be proposed based in conflicting assumptions about reality that are cognitively at odds. Attempts to reconcile them generate intense dissonance. In the 2017 US tax reform, which will result in a massive transfer of wealth from the middle class to the very rich, some elements were justified by fundamentalist Christian assumptions about an afterlife, some in neo-liberal economic theory terms, and some in nothing more systematic than the personal interests of policy-makers. Dissenting policy makers, journalists and much of the public are bewildered.

Thirdly (and raised by the first two), there is an *existential emergency* where questions once settled re-emerge about concerns such as what does it mean to be a human being, what do we owe each other, and what anchors our community, morality, identity and sense of purpose.

Much of the developed world is undergoing a civilizational transition from life based on the assumptions of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment coupled with the abundance of cheap fossil fuel-sourced energy, to something else – but nobody yet knows what. And no one in leadership wants to face the scope of the crisis, so they fiddle with surface issues while the centre falls apart. The resulting incoherence and chaos (the systemic nature of which goes largely unacknowledged) is

generating pervasive uncertainty, incoherence and instability. With this comes rising mental distress – especially anxiety, depression, addictions and disorders of the self – as people struggle to find psychological and epistemic coherence in a context that doesn't permit it.

Even deeper than the danger to democratic institutions is the disruptive effect social incoherence has on our mental capacity as individuals and as a society to respond to the looming challenges we face (O'Hara & Lyon, 2014; Hämäläinen, 2014).

As psychologists we recognize that at the centre of the crumbling structures of modernity are persons whose education and social context assume a relatively stable, coherent and predictable world – a world quite different from that which we now face. The sustaining structures that for centuries framed the modern mind no longer provide reliable waypoints to navigate the post-modern context. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the world is witnessing a mental health crisis in which as many as one in four are suffering from a diagnosable level of mental illness (World Health Organization, 2002).

The predictable narratives that attempt to explain this epidemic tend to be economic. The fourfold increase in the use of antidepressants over the last decade, for example, is attributed by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to the financial crisis of 2007 and the uneven rate of recovery (Gould & Friedman, 2016). Clearly austerity measures after the financial collapse affected mental well-being, but the WHO statistics suggest that the global rise in mental distress has been going on for far longer than that. Furthermore, the effects seem to be similar in both affluent and poorer nations. A more plausible link can be made between rising mental distress and intensifying social and personal incoherence created by the three emergencies (Antonovsky, 1987; Eriksson & Lindstrom, 2014; Hämäläinen, 2014).

Incoherence at personal, organizational and cultural levels generates high levels of anxiety to which there are at least three kinds of common

psychological responses. The most familiar is defensive, taking such forms as the denial that anything has changed, finding scapegoats to blame, suppressing deviance, and restoring an old sense of order through rigid regressive rule-making. Though adaptive as a short-term response to heightened anxiety, from a survival point of view defensiveness is costly because it requires control and effort, permits us to ignore the realities we face until it is too late to remediate, and reduces creativity, setting up a vicious circle, raising anxiety and reducing effectiveness even further.

A more radical – and potentially far more dangerous – response is collapse, in which the existing order is allowed or even encouraged to collapse, with consensus to disintegrate to be replaced by anarchy. Such anarchistic sentiments have been expressed in the USA by Steve Bannon who, until recently, was White House Chief Strategist. Bannon made it clear that his (and Trump's) agenda was to 'deconstruct the administrative state' and allow an unregulated marketplace to select the winners and losers. But the far right is not the only place where collapse is encouraged. There have been times when humanistic thinkers allied with the New Age wing have flirted with such a scenario, naively assuming that after the collapse of the industrial age a new 'Aquarian revolution' would follow (Ferguson, 1980).

More likely, if history is any guide when order collapses as rules are violated with impunity, aberrant conduct that would have previously been sanctioned may become normalized. Nothing is dependable, decisions are arbitrary and a common view of truth or a firm moral consensus no longer organizes action. Experience from individual psychotherapy and from group and organizational dynamics suggests both denial and breakdown are ultimately maladaptive in so far as they narrow available action options, lessen resilience and limit the requisite cognitive diversity available for creative problem solving.

But if these were the only ways forward it is doubtful human beings would have reached this stage in our development as a conscious species.

A third possibility exists and that is to embrace the complexity and seize the opportunities present. If we engage with the turbulence, listen deeply to the cultural edges that are often to be found in transgressive and dissident voices, creative possibilities arise. When formal institutions and structures begin to lose their effectiveness, in the gap between the old certainties and human imagination a space often opens up for innovation. Creative alternatives to the status quo are frequently to be encountered at the margins of a society. When conceptual or institutional structures no longer provide the boundaries of what is acceptable, transformative and even transgressive innovations become possible. If these are allowed space, supported and nurtured they may spread and become norms that are a better fit to the world as it is. Disorder and uncertainty though disorienting are not always toxic. Where there is enough environmental support a certain amount of disorder can be tolerated – even welcomed. History provides many examples of such cultural tipping points. In my life time such a shift from the margins to the center occurred in the process by which same sex love and marriage went from being a crime to being an acceptable life choice in the US with all the same protections as heterosexual marriage.

What seems to make the difference between whether disorder moves people in the direction of denial and collapse or spurs transformation is their level of flexibility and adaptability which itself is a function of inner psychological security, psychological capacity and – importantly – environmental support. If people are psychologically capable of tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity long enough, and can embrace complexity rather than resist it, what seems like chaos may contain the seeds of self-organization to higher levels of order more adaptive to the new situation (Glover et al., 2002).

Personhood, culture and civilization
Every age and every culture (large and small) has its own ideal of what it means to be a person. The view of personhood at the center of twentieth century

Western civilization, for instance, arose to address the conditions of life in the industrial age. Westerners tend to consider themselves sovereign individuals who 'have' a culture – seriously underestimating the degree to which culture 'has' us. Culture will tell us what it is to be meaningful, who we are, what it is to be successful, how to express our values in context, how to engage with those who are different. It will shape our identity, regardless of whether we conform or rebel. As we grow into the culturally expected and affirmed ways of being and acting by participating in family life, governance, education, economics, workplace and art, we reproduce the conditions that will produce the next generation. These cultural effects go very deep. Where daily life requires independence and agency neural activities develop that lay the ground for autonomy and an individualized sense of self. Alternatively, where daily life requires collaboration, culturally patterned neural activities emerge that support interdependence and cooperation. (Kitayama & Park, 2010)

So what happens when the routine tasks demanded by a new world are not in sync with our native psychological patterns and we find ourselves 'over our heads'? (Kegan, 1994). What happens when authorities disagree on core values or when the basis for truth claims are contested with no higher authority to turn to? How can we rise to the occasion and learn to play the new game?

It is becoming clear that though astonishingly successful in creating the technology-based modern civilization that has improved the lives of untold millions, as the negative unintended consequences pile up and as the future of the ecosystems on which we depend is threatened, this psychology is no longer adequate to the challenges of the times and may in fact be a liability. As the civilization framed by the ideals of the Enlightenment and modernity comes apart, the image of its ideal personhood also unravels. Views about important elements such as sense of self, gender, intelligence, citizenship, moral rectitude, trustworthiness, responsibility, obligation and aspiration that are at the center of modern education, law and governance systems become contested and may no longer be adaptive in the

face of the cascade of challenges postmodernity brings. And if that weren't destabilizing enough, just poking above the horizon of cultural consciousness are the inevitable but unpredictable effects of our wraparound interaction with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media.

This is where a 21st century Humanistic Psychology can and should play a significant role.

Persons of tomorrow for a world of tomorrow

In a famous talk to graduating students in 1969, Carl Rogers referred to a new kind of person he saw emerging in the turbulent culture of the 1960s. He called them 'persons of tomorrow.' Rogers described these new persons as more open to experience and less defensive. They desire authenticity, enjoy diversity, live in the process, value intimacy, distrust bureaucracy, are caring and empathic, less materialistic and seek spiritual fulfillment (Rogers, 1980). With amazing prescience about how radically the times were changing, he wrote, 'the striking thing is that these persons will be at home in a world [...] with no solid base, a world of process and change, in which the mind, in its larger sense, is both aware of, and creates, the new reality' (p. 352). In Rogers' view persons of tomorrow are unusually resilient, flexible and creative and have the emotional courage to look at the emerging future and make themselves at home in it. And because of that they have the necessary competencies to make a transformative difference. 'They will be able to make the paradigm shift' (p. 352). Rogers' admitted that his notion of a person of tomorrow was tentative, and he left a challenge to future humanistic psychologists to fill it out.

So after he died I took him up on it. I wanted to find the sources of hope for the current generation. Even in these dark times could there exist possibilities for transformative innovation at personal and cultural levels that could head off the worst and perhaps point the way to a more human and sustainable future? Is it possible that the incoherence and instability might provide the enabling conditions for the evolution of a new kind of personhood better adapted to life in powerful times?

Transforming the world of today

In 2000 along with thirty experts from multiple disciplines I co-founded the International Futures Forum (IFF) in St Andrews, Scotland. We took as our starting point the observation that the new global realities were putting immense destabilizing pressure on humanity in four areas of life – economics, governance, environment and consciousness. We found ourselves in a world that had become too complex to either understand or control. As a group we believed that the Enlightenment values and institutional structures that framed modern reality were rapidly becoming obsolete. For a new global digital age a Second Enlightenment was needed that could offer new social theory and practice that could support a transformative rather than a reactionary response. Our intention was to go beyond theory and to restore effectiveness in action (Leicester & O'Hara, 2009).

We found that wherever our inquiry took us – housing projects, government offices, engineering marvels, urban renewal, chemical plants, women's shelters, media labs, elementary schools – at the center of success or frustration were human persons and it was here that the struggle between transformation and reaction was being waged. What we found in successful projects we encountered (and not all were) were people who seemed to exhibit a new kind of consciousness that included a wider range of capacities than those privileged by the highly cognitized conceptual habits of modernity. They were not limited to competencies or 'skill sets' being taught to leaders in business schools and universities. In particular what became obvious to us was that these people were comfortable in the complexity, were empowered not overwhelmed and knew how to make others comfortable and empowered too.

To understand better what contributes to effective action in highly complex 21st century situations IFF set out to learn from people in positions to make a difference in business and non-profit settings.[1] Pairs of IFF researchers shadowed a selection of such leaders as they went about their ordinary activities. Not surprisingly they all exhibited the capacities such as rationality, objectivity, analytic and critical thinking, competitiveness and agency that are prized by modernity. But these were accompanied by capacities that were once devalued and even abandoned after the Enlightenment but are nevertheless still salient in many non-Westernized societies (Heine, 2008). We were struck by the level of emotional intelligence, systems awareness, group sensitivity, cultural literacy, imagination, empathy, relational awareness, pattern recognition, intuition, and bodily knowing. They were comfortable switching between systems of thought depending on the kind of challenge they were facing. Though their range of capacities was wide, what was remarkable was their spiritual, emotional and cognitive depth. Interestingly, many had personal life practices that included meditation, mindfulness, yoga, Buddhist practice, prayer, athletics, music, dance, painting, theatre, and depth psychotherapy – activities that encourage a trust in feelings, holistic thinking, pattern recognitions, relational awareness, fluidity, embodied knowing and acceptance.

We identified three core capacities that appear to enable people to both thrive and take effective action in an incoherent world: psychological literacy – knowledge of self and understanding others; cultural literacy – understanding the way cultural contexts affect consciousness and that one exists within a particular culture which exists within other cultures; and epistemic literacy – understanding the relationship between different truth systems and what we take as reality, and being able to shift across multiple truth systems beyond the logics legitimized by Enlightenment thinkers.

Playing a bigger game

The shadowing exercise focused principally on individuals and their contexts, but if humanity is to survive the perfect storm underway and thrive as a species, transformation must become a feature of entire communities and even civilizations. We must collectively learn to play a bigger game. A tall order. Are there grounds for hope that we can make a difference at this scale? I believe there are.

It is sometimes possible to identify signs,

however faint, of the creative impulse already present in groups – even ones that at first sight appear demoralized or overwhelmed (O'Hara, 2016). By making this emergent edge explicit, and allowing a new pattern to configure, hope may then be restored and barriers impeding innovation reduced. Such an emergent process is epistemologically equivalent to the process inquiry favored by my mentors Manton and Rogers as a way to get below the surface, identify emergent patterns, and sense the future-forming possibilities already existing in the present. Such a praxis offers promise as a holistic mode of inquiry and intervention for liquid times.

Transformative Cultural Practice

In a project[2] in 2002 in Falkirk, Scotland (O'Hara, 2016) the city manager asked for help with a regional renewal project that had been prompted by the closure of the refinery that was a major employer in the region. The city council already had a strategic plan but the manager and some of her staff knew they were capable of something bolder and more transformative. The IFF group went on a learning journey to several communities and organizations and listened to everyone who had some kind of commitment to solving the problems and inventing the future. We listened to stories of hopes, disappointments, successes and failures. We listened for theoretical frames, metaphors, themes, emotions, imaginings and visions. We felt their sense of loss, despair and overwhelm. And we listened for signs of the creative impulse which even in troubled contexts is never far below the surface. Gradually a new far bolder version of the future emerged and a new bolder – empowered – psychology was evident. Importantly this new vision did not come from the IFF members but sprung up among the citizens as they engaged with the reality of their situation. The management team was excited, and figuratively holding each other's hands, ready to take a risk. And citizens were eager to join in. Even children got active in designing a recreation park that would attract teenagers. Once the collective imagination was fired up the creative vision they conjured became impossible to ignore. Ten years later

Falkirk and its region is a different place.

The SHINE[2] project supports innovation in the National Health Service to help elders live longer and healthier lives at home. SHINE started with five frustrated health care workers who believed health could be improved and costs lowered if elders were considered resources not costs.

The NUKA Scotland[2] project brought a team of native Alaskan health care workers, who in their own communities use indigenous traditions as a framework for psychological and cultural recovery to a deprived area of Glasgow. Local history, Scottish mythology, music, food, dancing are brought together to help local Glasgow people develop a healthier way of life as individuals and as a community.

Kitbag[2] is a collection of self-care resources based on principles of resilience, self-direction, relational competence, wellness and growth. It is used in schools, prisons and shelters.

Prompt Cards[2] were developed from the post-Enlightenment wisdom that showed up on workshop flip charts. They are now used by individuals and groups to provoke new ways of thinking.

NIFTI – National Infrastructure for Transformative Innovation – is a platform for peer support for transformative innovators. Starting as one breakfast meeting in London there is now a network of breakfast meetings in several UK cities and one in the US.[3]

IFF considers its practice as a kind of social acupuncture – which relies on a formative tendency in nature. IFF interventions are small and designed to stimulate the self-healing capacity intrinsic to any living system if given a chance. It scales up not by building bureaucracies but by stimulating others to try something small themselves. Creativity is everywhere, it just needs space and faith in the future potential.

IFF projects are just a small part of larger movement of transformative innovation going on world-wide. It turns out there are 'persons of tomorrow' everywhere one looks who are engaged in large and mostly small creative and effective initiatives to address the multiple challenges humanity faces in the 21st century (Hawken, 2007). Festivals, conferences, arts events and design projects are springing up around the world as people decide to step outside

limiting frames. They have given up on mainstream institutions that seem less and less able to deliver what they were originally built for. Increasingly citizens who are awake to the crises bearing down ,and are motivated to make a difference, are deciding to take the work of creating a new civilization into their own hands. They are not waiting for established institutions to solve problems but getting to work with a small group of like-minded colleagues to put their own skills to work solving the problems directly.

Expanding what we think of as resources

In IFF we have come to believe that 'persons of tomorrow' are developed not in the classroom – at least not in the mainstream classrooms of modernity – but in transformative action projects in the real world. In the same way that the modern mind emerged through participation in a secular world of science, machines, characterized by alienation from nature, power hierarchies of class, gender and race, people become 'persons of tomorrow' by engaging in the complex realities of tomorrow (which are now today), and by working together as whole persons to build the twenty-first-century civilization.

The good news is that there are literally millions of people world-wide who are already engaged in building the next cultures. They have learned how to marry advanced scientific methods such as computer-assisted analytics with older holistic skills such as dialogue, intuition, story, visual language, pattern recognition, folk experience, narrative, music and somatic wisdom.

On a cautionary note, however, those who want to move towards a culture of tomorrow shouldn't be naïve. Disruptions to the status quo are not always or even usually welcome. When threatened, the empire will strike back and try to resist paradigmatic change. This need not be a battle of new against old, however. The existing institutions and ways of life may be coming to the end of their shelf life, but for now they are still the way things get done. A great deal of human resources are dedicated to keeping them going so persons of tomorrow must develop the capacity to live in more than one world at a time, respecting the value of the old paradigms at the same time as exposing their limits and offering alternatives.

Rising to the occasion

If we are to surmount the crises that now threaten our planet humanity we need to mobilize our most precious resource – ourselves. We will need to expand our consciousness and become 'hospice workers' for the dying culture (treating the wounded and those left behind with empathy, care and love), and 'midwives' for a new world being born in supporting people through the inevitable anxiety-creating activities. We will need facilitators who can create settings to nurture awakened citizen-leaders for the next stage of the human journey. We need designers of new organizational forms, and we will need to sponsor transformative initiatives in the service of a sustainable and humane global society.

And above all, I suggest, it is urgent that as an alternative to the current narratives of despair, fear and division, we promote narratives of hope and solidarity not just with other humans but with all the species on the planet. These narratives already exist in the hearts and minds of those who are making a difference.

We are in this together. At whatever level we have leverage we must avoid innovations that simply prop up existing dysfunctional paradigms, and offer a true alternative – a new worldview, with ways of knowing, seeing, valuing, interacting, building communities, raising children, cherishing people throughout their lives and making judgements that reflect this new story. The future culture that our descendants will inhabit and be formed by will be built by choices we make now, and by taking transformative action that takes us beyond the received frames of the last 200 years. ❺

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Notes

[1] Described in more detail in O'Hara and Leicester's *Dancing at the edge: Competence, culture and organization in the 21st century*, Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press, 2012.

[2] Descriptions of the Fallkirk, SHINE, NUKA and other projects can be found in publications listed on the IFF website. Several versions of kitbag and prompt cards can also be found there at www.internationalfuturesforum.com/.

[3] The NIFTI process is described in detail in Leicester's *Transformative innovation: A guide to practice and policy*, Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press, 2016.

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