

# RENEWAL

REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF OUR THINKING ABOUT THE STATE OF THE WORLD



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*It is 2am and I am exhausted. Barely two hours ago Suna and I were among thousands of other revellers at Patong Beach in Phuket. We had come together for one purpose - to greet the New Year.*

*The air was treacly humid, acrid, resonant with the sounds of unfamiliar dialects and the crackling explosions of firecrackers. It seemed as if the whole world was gathering in this place to engage in some primordial ritual. From one end of the beach to the other fireworks lit up a sky already shimmering from hundreds of tiny hot air balloons wafting upwards on a breeze of anticipation.*

*In spite of the enormous crowds we both felt safe, not in the least threatened by people we had never met and who looked so different from us. On the contrary, a profound sense of happiness filled our hearts. We felt fortunate to be able to connect with such a diverse range of people so spontaneously and so caringly. I knew comparable encounters and feelings must be resounding around the world, uniting humanity in a deeper, if transient, sense of belonging.*

*Ten, nine, eight, seven... The countdown grew into a deafening roar. Wherever we looked complete strangers were laughing, shouting and embracing. We smiled and held each other. Sawasdee bimai.*

*In that moment I realised that together we humans can achieve anything if we put our minds and hearts to it. Indeed that the term 'impossible' would be superfluous if we could just use such joyous optimism and openness to our mutual advantage.*

*It is now late afternoon here. The day hangs fire. Last night's crowds have dispersed and life is slowly returning to normal. Whatever that means....*

It is not just the existence of global issues like insufficient potable water, rising costs of food, global warming or peak oil that matter, nor indeed their discernible escalation, but the way we thought (and continue to think) about such issues.

If we could identify and were prepared to acknowledge the flaws in thinking that gave rise to our current circumstances we would surely be far better placed to design systems that are beneficial, rather than toxic, both to humanity and the planet?

In so doing we might find ways to halt and possibly reverse some of today's more damaging trends. We might also appreciate the unintended consequences of our decisions with greater precision. At the very least we would better understand the likely consequences of different options. And we would certainly be in a better position to ask ourselves if the world we are busy creating is the world we actually want.

Patterns of human thought are mostly regulated by *what* we see (which is then articulated through language and other forms of expression) and *how* we then construct meaning to interpret what we have seen.

If, for whatever reason, it is not feasible to explain what we see, communicating it to others through some form of intelligible utterance, then for all practical purposes it may as well not exist. In essence we continuously *talk* our world into being. This is why persuasion and influence are such critical elements of conscious change.

Until science *fiction* becomes science *fact* and allows other expressive devices to emerge, the ability to convey our individual and collective comprehension of the world through language is the most precise means we have, other than mathematics, for sharing ideas and committing to consensual action. It is precious for that very reason. Without access to a mutual language, purposeful unity of thought and deed, becomes next to impossible.

Unfortunately, as history repeatedly shows, the contrary appears not to hold true. Insurrection, brutality, conflict and oppression, usually motivated by greed, resentment or envy, do not require access to a refined language in order to thrive. They arise from our most primal instincts and cannot be brought to order by appealing to rational logic or altruistic notions of the common wealth.

Extremely negative emotions, such as rage and torment, will often arouse and sustain strife in all its forms well beyond any reasonable limit or the imposition of law. Indeed it is often a condition of conflict in its many forms (especially in its early stages) that any declarations advocating consensus between opposing parties arouse suspicion. It is almost always assumed such messages signify an inherent weakness. At such times propaganda and the beating of war drums is all that really matters. Reason and truth are considered an irritant and are thus consigned to the margins.

Of course sometimes we only see *what we want* to see, what we are *told* to see, or what we *expect* to see. Given the insidious yet irresistible conditioning that arises from individual context and experience, much influence is subliminal. It is virtually impossible for us to believe things are contrary to what we perceive them to be. We often refer to that which cannot be seen as a blind spot. In other words we remain blind to its very existence. It is not easy to prise ourselves off an habituated reality. It is even more difficult to admit the legitimacy of opposing possibilities. Denial is far less troublesome.

Equally misguided is the belief that *what* we see must be the same for everyone else - irrespective of geography, upbringing, gender, religion, culture, education, intelligence and a host of other factors. In other words that there is a single truth shared by all. Some part of mind may be partially conscious of this deception. Nevertheless it is both dangerous and misleading, allowing irrational fears and superstitions to inhabit and guide our thinking. Such absurdities fuel conflict and disagreement as much as any inability to access more positive communicable forms of expression.

Time and time again throughout history, we have managed to turn problems into opportunities simply by seeing things differently. What has all of this to do with the current credit crisis? The rising cost of food? Climate change? The price of oil. Or terrorism for that matter? Quite a lot as it happens.

As I have tried to make clear here, what we *do* in the world is circumscribed by the *way we see* things. Equally, the *way we see* the world is determined by what we are able to *do* in it. Unfortunately much of the negative 'noise' we fabricate around today's most critical issues have arisen because of the kind of cognition problems exemplified by this paradox.

Cynicism and doubt have become so deeply etched into social convention that we tend to see problems first and opportunities only later, if at all. This habit is nourished and reinforced by the indoctrination we received from political, educational and media institutions to the extent that we routinely create quite arbitrary limits on how we see issues - thereby compromising what we can do about them. To be an idealist in this world is to risk ridicule and even hostility. If you are not convinced just ask Richard Branson, Aung San Suu Kyi, John Pilger, Jane Goodall, Mohammed Yunus or the Dalai Llama!

If that were not a huge disadvantage in itself the mechanisms upon which we have traditionally relied for enacting extensive change (including the law, corporations, governments, community engagement and the political process) are tools that, in their current form at least, no longer serve us well. They are sluggish, staid, self-serving and out of touch with a context that is dynamically complex. Trapped in assumptions that are more and more irrelevant in a globalised world these institutions are exposed and vulnerable.

This degree of exposure, in the face of quickening change, has created a vacuum in what Gregory Bateson might have called an ecology of mind regarding our overarching social purpose. This has allowed unchecked hyper-individualism to prevail in ways we are only now beginning to regret.

Even allowing for the extraordinary prosperity generated since the industrial revolution and ignoring the darker side of free enterprise, this vacuum has left society without an integral vision of how things might be better, at the same time permitting countless independent factions, mostly driven by unbridled self-interest (activists, industry lobbyists, criminal networks, media barons and well-heeled entrepreneurs included) to hijack the social order and manipulate it to their own ends.

Such is the model of extreme capitalism – a greed-ridden model shared with extreme communism, despotic regimes and other tyrannies! It was sometimes tough to deny the economic logic and seductiveness of such models when the world was inhabited by a population of less than 3 billion people and at a time when natural assets appeared to be unlimited.

Today, however, such extreme models are creating havoc. Almost everything we hold dear is threatened by ideological models that elevate avarice to a virtue and decouple the sacred, mutually dependent relationships between individuals,

communities and the natural environment. In their stead we need what a few of us are beginning to refer to as *responsible* capitalism.

The main issue in the model of extreme capitalism seems to be that we all find ourselves in competition with each other. The accumulation of so many diverse impulses and vested interests have effectively erased any sense of universality - a compelling vision of human advancement that can be shared and to which we can all aspire.

While extreme capitalism enables individuals to acquire assets, power and influence it has largely been at the expense of the common wealth. Furthermore in developed societies, shrouded in material comforts and excessive opulence, individual contentment has eroded still further. Yet another paradox to ponder given that economic growth and development is supposed to make us happy! All rigorous research indicates the opposite to be the case.

At the same time we have become so interconnected, our messages so entangled, that truths concerning the human condition have become a frightful burden. And so, seeking both *assurance* that we are not culpable (which is simply untrue) and *constancy* in relating current patterns to a more comforting past (which verges on the irresponsibly nostalgic) we increasingly resort to burying our heads in the sand.

We habitually disregard signs of trouble, distort information and rationalise the most alarming statistics, all the while trying to pretend that our predicament is not so serious after all. By denying the pain of our condition we imagine we can escape the harshness of the realities facing us. Life can continue much as before.

Except that it cannot. Human-induced environmental shock is not a beat up by cranks or a bunch of weirdos! Nor is it a Hollywood disaster movie. This is as real as it gets. In addition almost every emerging symptom of this shock poses a challenge for humanity that is exceptional. Philosophers have been warning us for aeons that there can be no escape from a future wrought from a past in which the unintended consequences of our insatiable desire for more of everything were not foreseen - or were judged to be worth pursuing whatever the attendant risks.

Naturally we would be presented with a far easier situation if the socio-political and economic systems we consciously chose to put in place over the course of the past 300 years had palpably failed. They have not. In truth they have been responsible for generating unprecedented prosperity in industrialised nations and are still raising millions of people around the world out of the poverty trap each year, most noticeably in countries like China and India. One might reasonably argue that if these systems are fraying at all it is only at the edges.

But these same systems have dealt the environment a near fatal blow. The earth's ecosystems are in meltdown - quite literally if we observe the rate at which summer ice is disappearing in the arctic, for example. There can no longer be any doubt that this environmental emergency has been caused by the dirty industrial practices we use to meet growing demands, the capability to produce

more goods cheaply, and the use of technologies and distribution methods that require energy derived from coal and oil.

This ecological crisis is far more grave than the current credit squeeze which is attracting so much hand-wringing and over-the-top hyperbole. Why? Because the systems we put in place generations ago are now on the verge of being usurped by nature herself. Critical tipping points, such as the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, for example, may already have past. If that is the case we no longer running the show. However much we try to prevent further collapse we will not succeed because the situation is worsening exponentially, generating conditions that are unparalleled – at least in terms of our collective ability to react responsibly and with wisdom.

The best way to reignite hope and inspire wiser action is to start a new, more positive conversation. A universal conversation that integrates differences while growing the confidence needed to discover new possibilities. A conversation that facilitates a willingness and capability to transcend those policies and behaviours that caused our current predicament and that allow it still to persist. A conversation that will enable us to embrace emancipatory principles in redesigning the most critical of our socio-economic and political systems.

Moreover we are morally beholden to find that courage to act before everything that matters to us spins entirely out of human control and only ruin remains to be inherited by future generations.

This is no time for political inaction and procrastination. Exactly how much time we have left is unclear. Certainly a grim picture is materializing from the integral canvas of uncommon insight and wisdom. That picture becomes more vivid and undeniable each day, as scientists describe increasingly dismal scenarios based on alarming new evidence.

We should be thankful that scientists rather than sorcerers have dared assert the facts of these matters, even though it appears many of us pay more attention to daily horoscopes than to scientific facts. At first the scientific community itself appeared divided which did nothing to create public confidence that they understood what was happening. But no longer. Originally opposing views are aligning in ways that point to a series of cascading ecological and social disasters on a massive scale - at least if no concerted action is taken to prevent such a catastrophe.

That there is little sense of urgency amongst those who have been elected to represent our interests should come as no surprise. Politicians, industry leaders and bureaucrats can hardly shoulder the blame for fundamental faults in the systems we helped create. We are all complicit actors in this drama.

Actually there are numerous systemic deficiencies that need to be reconfigured in order that our civilisation can endure with renewed purpose. The majority of these are design defects that can be traced back to flaws in our thinking. These flaws are easily identified - though more difficult to correct, even if we could all agree this was a necessary step. I want to consider the more obvious of these.

## Limits to Growth

The principle that economic growth and development equates to everything that is good and worth striving for must be overturned. Once again we must learn to ask fundamental questions that challenge cost-value trade-offs at an early design stage.

For example, it is simply nonsense to believe the planet's natural resources will continue indefinitely. Indeed it is inevitable that known fields of coal, oil and gas will be gradually depleted until they become too costly to extract.

Until that day arrives the continued use of fossil fuels will result in the discharge of ever-increasing quantities of toxic materials into the environment, eventually polluting the planet beyond recognition and destroying much that we take for granted and that makes life worth living. Do we really want that?

The prospect of further unrestrained growth has enormous ramifications for all of us - not least of course in the developing and non-industrialised nations. We cannot morally deny people in Beijing, New Delhi, Malawi or Kabul the quality of life we ourselves enjoy. But there is no likelihood that a world with a ballooning population of between 7 and 9 billion inhabitants can flourish given the extent of our natural capital and how we use it.

Clearly the prevailing patterns of human production and consumption will have to change, adapting as rapidly as possible to a world of limited resources and an increasing populace. The paradigmatic solution to the issue of limited resources is likely to be a combination of at least five factors comprising responsible capitalism:

- i. Ways must be found to distribute wealth more equitably, including those we may at times consider our enemies. This is a major way we can lessen the gap between those that have enough and those that have next to nothing in comparison. It may also enable enemies to become friends. Essentially this will mean regulating markets differently and decreasing the distance between market supply and demand – in other words producing goods closer to consumers. It may also imply the need for a different set of intentions to those that currently prevail - particularly regarding ownership and the commons, the private accumulation of capital, social welfare policies and the yawning gap between the lowest and most highly paid.
- ii. Sufficiency values must be more widely practiced but at levels that are appreciative of local conditions. In other words nation states must be encouraged to produce and consume goods that fulfil their actual needs, rather than continuing to acquire wealth and bargaining power through the over-zealous production and export of goods, together with the manipulation of credit, that add neither value nor happiness. This will entail educating the public to regard “more” (as in material affluence and assets) with suspicion - potentially at odds with the responsibility we have for each other; reconceptualising the role of money and banking in

society; reconfiguring tax regimes to ensure the true cost of production is factored into prices; and taking appropriate steps to inculcate a culture of adequacy throughout the developed and rapidly-developing world.

- iii. Greater emphasis must be put on achieving efficiencies in production (both agrarian and industrial) especially in terms of creating industrial ecologies that increase yield while minimising source materials and the energy consumption used to produce and distribute essentials like food, water, health care, medicine, education and shelter.
- iv. A critical mass of existing and future technologies must be engineered to transcend the harmful practices used to spawn an industrial society in which “more” and “new” and “better” are still the dominant strategic drivers and where “waste” is deemed to be an unavoidable by-product of production.
- v. Universal policies need to be recalibrated in ways that favour the use of renewable resources and that penalise any form of toxicity – be it in the form of energy used, manufacturing process, or subsequent product. The intolerable face of ecological vandalism (epitomized by the coal industry) should be taxed out of existence as soon as feasible. On the other hand, technologies that imitate nature and have a benign, even positive, impact on the environment should receive massive tax breaks in order to attract capital investment while minimising risk and encouraging further biomimicry.

### **Competition versus Cooperation**

In order for the above set of proposals to succeed we must wean ourselves off competition as the central organising principle underpinning human activity. Since Thomas Henry Huxley (known as Darwin’s Bulldog for his enthusiastic promulgation of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution) we have persisted in engineering society’s most indispensable systems to conform to notions that are actually damaging to a great many people.

Darwin was at pains to point out was that it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but those best equipped to adapt to adverse conditions. Over the years Darwin’s observations have been variously misconstrued to the extent that, believing competitive behaviour (and only competitive behaviour) to be intrinsic to human nature, we have designed almost every aspect of our world to reflect that assumed trait. We do this meekly, without challenge or much complaint. Indeed it has become the most blatant of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Thus the achievement of a mutually-beneficial balance between competition and cooperation invariably eludes us. Instead, competition rides roughshod over even vital services such as health care and education.

For example, we blithely accept a belief that, however we construct reality, there will always be winners and losers. Why should that be the case? Are we not



capable or intelligent enough to design systems in which everyone benefits? Just because we have been brainwashed to believe that competition is in the nature of things does not mean that we should meekly submit to such myths.

On the contrary, it is important to challenge such assertions. Certainly current assumptions regarding the balance between competition and cooperation cannot be allowed to endure. For example, the proposition that competitive behaviours (as in unregulated capital markets, access to essential services, hostile military forays and even prevailing models of democracy) are more successful in advancing human potential while meeting our utilitarian needs must be recast in an age where collaboration and cooperation across conventional boundaries has become the path to better, more prosperous futures for all.

### **Unshackling the human spirit**

Asserting the pre-eminence of cooperation as a guiding principle will do much to help our world change course towards more sustainable futures. There are other factors too, equally significant, on which we must focus. These will help liberate human aspirations and restore confidence in a world fast losing any sense of hope.

The invention and widespread acceptance of the city, and subsequently the state, as the primary means for managing communities has had a mixed history. The model appeared to serve citizens well at certain times in the past – as in ancient Rome and renaissance Europe for example. But it is not perfect by any stretch of the imagination and is now a real impediment to human advancement as we attempt in vain to apply a derivative of the same model to collective universal action.

Why should this be? I suspect the main reasons this model will not work in the situation we now find ourselves has to do with the viability of the whole system or, more precisely, the lack of appropriate mechanisms to ensure viability of the whole. Of particular concern in this regard is the abuse of power to gain social control and the unfortunate tendency of state bureaucracies for oppression.

It should be clear to most people that cities are becoming pre-eminent again. Urbanisation has been brought about partially by cities becoming the preferred habitat for the majority of the world's people but also because they are magnets for innovation, commerce and culture. Cities are also well disposed to open cooperative partnerships with each other, which nation states still find challenging.

But there are problems with cities. For one thing the sheer numbers of people migrating to metropolitan areas, lured by the promise of a better life, is proving to be an almost irresolvable problem for planners. Put simply, there are just too many people living in cities that were designed for far smaller numbers clustered in small neighbourhoods. Today many cities are in danger of becoming a collection of lifeless ghettos, slums and disconnected business districts in which there is little sense of shared kinship and where life is utterly miserable for fringe dwellers.

In terms of an operating systems nation states are no better than cities. Here the governance models we have tended to install, including everything from representative democracy to dictatorial regimes, have elevated powerful elites at the same time as alienating ordinary citizens.

Another issue has to do with focus. While governments and policy makers like to concern themselves with the built environment and other material things (particularly infrastructure, transportation, employment, financial regulation and housing) it is other, more intangible stuff, which governments tend to downplay or discount, that hold the resolution to better, more sustainable designs.

I am talking about aesthetics, community, relationships... And governance. The processes of globalisation have caused these elements to stretch and warp. They are no longer held together, as they once were, by the church, the family or the local club. Nowadays the glue is more likely provided by social networks and online personal communities. And yet we seem to be oblivious to this change, attempting to continue much as before - at least if most of the conceitedly clumsy attempts by government to confer with local communities are any indication.

Let me explain what I mean using the great management cyberneticist Stafford Beer as my exemplar. Purists will need to excuse the brevity of my explanation of his Viable Systems Model [VSM] in the context of this discourse. Naturally those readers who are not familiar with his work will discover a treasure trove of alternative thinking about organizations by doing a Google search.

Taking the architecture of the human brain and central nervous system as his yardstick Stafford Beer noted the need for five interdependent and recursive systems to be functioning in order for an organisation of any kind to endure, or remain viable. In Beer's terminology a viable system is any enterprise organised in such a way as to survive in a changing environment. His five systems can be summarized as follows:

Systems 1 to 3 are concerned with the *here and now* of organizational operations and are identified with the autonomic nervous system:

- System 1 has to do with the organization's primary operational activities.
- System 2 represents the information channels that allow these activities to communicate with each other and also allow System 3 to monitor and coordinate these activities.
- System 3 represents the structures and controls that are put in place to establish the rules, resources, rights and responsibilities of System 1 and to provide an interface with Systems 4 and 5.

Systems 4 and 5 are concerned with the *there and then* of the organization's future:

- System 4 embodies cognition and conversation. It is concerned with appropriate strategic responses to the effects of external, environmental and future demands on the enterprise and is therefore responsible for looking outwards to the external environment to monitor how the

- organization may need to adapt in order to remain viable.
- System 5 represents higher brain functions, including introspection and decision making. It is concerned with balancing immediate and emerging demands so as to give policy directives that maintain the enterprise as a viable, purposeful entity.

Beer almost got the chance to prove the veracity of his model at a state level. In 1970 he was approached by Salvador Allende's elected socialist government to develop a real-time computerized system, based on the VSM, to run the entire Chilean economy. Sadly the project was never completed. When Allende was removed from power by General Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup the project was abandoned.

However the VSM has since been used successfully in a number of highly challenging situations, not least as part of my own and Marvin Oka's Strategic Navigation methodology, originally designed in conjunction with the Australian Tax Office to help administer the Australian taxation system.

Assuming Stafford Beer was correct in his assumptions about the conditions and functions required for an entity to remain viable, and I am convinced of that from the results we continue to achieve with Strategic Navigation, it should be possible to map Beer's template onto the most critical aspects of Gaia itself to discover what *idealistic* implications emerge that might *practically* add to our current knowledge about responding to complex issues - like climate change.

In that regard the following points spring immediately to mind:

1. In spite of the anticipated benefits of globalization we have not really used the opportunity to initiate a coherent set of strategic responses and activities (System 1) underpinned by a universal philosophy (System 5) to the issue of our environment that would advantage both humanity and the planet. What we do have are numerous competing worldviews and belief factions (NGOs, governments and the business community) all fighting for our attention and sufficient capital to invest in clean technologies.
2. Almost all regulations and tactical planning (System 2) a propos climate change are still being driven by the individual policies (motivated by self-interest) of state governments. Most of these policies feature some economic variation of a carbon 'cap and trade' system – a pathetically inadequate industrialist's compromise to just one aspect of the issue. Some countries have not yet engaged in dialogue. Some are demanding that the industrialized world moves from rhetoric to action. Some are simply waiting for others to lead. But there is no possibility of leadership without some form of universal council (System 5) representing all nations and the interests of future generations.
3. Although the use of strategic and ambient intelligence (System 4) to inform us about shifts in the external environment and guide appropriate decision-making is critical, we do not routinely act as though this is the case, relying

more on the latest statistics from the United Nations, persuasive celebrities like Al Gore, alarmist media reports, translated summaries and sheer rumor. Without a comprehensive understanding of what is changing, how it is changing, and in what direction and velocity shifts are occurring, there is no way any coalition of nations, let alone the UN, can accurately contextualize the nature of strategic solutions required by an issue like climate change. This is a common error made by national governments of every persuasion who still position policy (System 5) as nothing more than the realization of election promises. But it is bizarre that this has also become the habit of multinational efforts to combat climate change.

4. A further environmental scanning-related issue (System 4) concerns our ability to remain alert to algedonic signs that indicate one or more systemic performance failures. Mostly we continue to treat Gaia's distress symptoms (including global warming, the loss of bio-diversity and water scarcity, for example) as discrete issues requiring discrete answers. There seem to be few attempts by to connect these symptoms in any meaningful way with the intention of surfacing globally leveragable solutions (System 3).

### **Prisons of our own invention**

All of this merely suggests that past and current ways of thinking about the state of the world are defective. But they are prisons of our own invention and can therefore evolve if that is what we desire.

We have created a global economy based upon greed and a society driven by hyper-individualism intent on accumulating personal wealth rather than on contributing to a shared sense of our humanity. If this is the kind of world we want then we just need to adhere to current policies and practices.

But if we want to live in a society where we are active participants and not merely consumers, where our actions reflect our own and society's higher aspirations, and where Gaia is viable, possibly even capable of sustaining its pristine beauty, we will need to change much of what we currently take for granted.

All things considered our continued attachment to economic growth and industrial development is making our lives worse, individually and collectively. Like any addict, we are mostly unaware of the threats to our health as we put all our effort into maintaining our addiction.

But the facts speak for themselves. Those of us in post-industrial nations are living abundant lives. We are affluent beyond belief, substantially better off than was dreamed possible barely a generation ago. But none of this material comfort appears to satisfy us. Instead we have seen dramatic rises in the rates of depression, alcoholism, drug abuse and homelessness. If our aim was happiness, then the extraordinary amount of effort and resources expended in its pursuit since around 1945 has been a spectacular failure.

Even people living in the poorest parts of the world, we now realise, are no happier with greater wealth, at least once their basic needs have been met. Growth does not even guarantee prosperity. It does, however, generate instability and inequality.

Furthermore, classic growth and development is now colliding with physical limits so substantial that continued economic expansion may be as impossible as it is hazardous. In spite of all of the evidence that our civilisation is not working as we had intended, nations and individuals alike are still obsessed with the accumulation of even more stuff and the further destruction of the planet's natural resources.

Of course there are alternatives to these maladies, some of them staring us in the face. But the willingness to adopt the radical solutions we actually need is in drastically short supply.

For example we could shift the balance between the attention we pay to the health of the economy and the health of the environment. But would the media support such a notion? Would they be able to stay in business if they did?

We could adjust our short-term thinking and practices to align with longer, broader-term, societal intentions and goals. But would investors and company directors be willing to go along with this? And would the electorate be willing to transcend the vested interests of political parties in order to guarantee a better future environment for their children?

We could change our thinking to become more integral and fully appreciative in ways that would challenge our most deeply-ingrained beliefs and assumptions about human advancement. But would our schools and universities and business executives be capable of adjusting their priorities and conditioned reflexes to such an extent?

Then there is civic life. Currently the economy is being propelled towards a point where the behavioural contingencies vital for nurturing social stability (cultural engagement, intimate personal relationships, tightly knit communities and local capital investment for example) are rapidly being eroded. So we could re-localize economies and embolden community by deploying a model of capitalism based on greater responsibility towards each other. But are we willing to do away with the inequalities we designed into the system in the first place? And are we really able to take sincerely the conviction that people, along with their attitudes and beliefs, will change if they are offered alternative experiences?

We might step into new epistemologies, envisaging entirely new possibilities for our civilization that also benefit the planet. But are we able to reframe how we see reality in ways that focus on possibilities rather than on problems? Are our politicians prepared to stop playing ware games and divert the billions of dollars spent on weapons and conflict to more constructive ends?

Do we have the foresight, audacity and courage as a global community for such renewal? I believe we do. After all we are surrounded by marvels of human invention. So much of contemporary life used to be an impossible fiction now

made ordinary through human ingenuity and invention. In that regard I am reminded of the words of the great theologian, musician and philosopher Albert Schweitzer:

*I am persuaded that far more idealistic aspiration exists than is ever evident. Just as the rivers we see are far less numerous than underground streams, so the idealism that is visible is trivial in comparison to what men and women carry locked up in their hearts. Humankind is longingly awaiting those among us who can unravel what is tangled and bring underground waters to the surface.*

*This paper was written as a New Year's gift for friends and colleagues who share my concerns for the future of our civilisation. Also to those who will be designing and facilitating the 2009 State of the World Forum in Washington DC in the hope that substantive breakthroughs for consensual action can emerge and take flight...*