DIMENSIONS OF ONTOLOGY

John Epps

Executive Summary

Human authenticity consists of being in a right relationship with reality. Reality consists of eight interrelated dimensions: <u>Space</u>, <u>Time</u>, <u>Physical Matter</u>, <u>Technology</u>, <u>Socio-culture</u>, <u>Identity</u>, <u>Energy</u>, and <u>Meaning</u>. They seem to occur in closely-related pairs: Space and Socio-culture; Time and Identity; Technology and Energy; Physical Matter and Meaning. Each of these eight dimensions is universal in scope. Each poses its own issues in terms of attaining a right relationship to it. Different dimensions are emphasized at different times, and the present seems to be a time of emphasis on space and socio-culture dimensions.

Introduction

Whenever we're wrongly related to reality, we are in a situation of self-destruction. In religious terms, it is a condition of un-faith or sin. Restoring faith means authentically re-connecting with reality. But conceptions of what constitutes reality vary considerably, and change from time to time. What I'd like to do is first, to attempt a quick summation of what constitutes reality in the contemporary mindset, then second, to indicate the issues we have in relating to it, and finally, to indicate ways in which authentic relations can be re-established or at least communicated. The aim of the paper is to provide the basis for addressing the crises of faith that people experience today and offer the possibilities of encountering life as meaningful.

The matter of clarifying what is real, or what reality consists of, is an on-going effort. One of the latest from the point of view of science is super-string theory which posits that the ultimate entity of which everything consists is not a tiny particle (even a point-particle), but rather is vibrating energy strings. It's a fascinating theory well-explained in the book ***The Elegant Universe*** by Brian Green[1]. In the process of describing this theory, its justifications, and implications, Green indicates that reality

---

[1] Brian Green, ***The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*** (New York: Random House, 2003)

has 11 dimensions, not simply the three spatial and one temporal that we are familiar with.

I do not intend to further elaborate on this theory or even attempt to understand it, but rather I'd like to use the notion of multiple dimensions as a metaphor to attempt to grasp the common understanding of reality's components and the way that "spirit problems" consist of unhealthy relations to reality.

I'd like to begin by providing a sort of roadmap of reality, i.e., an indication of the multiple dimensions of reality that we assume in our normal operation. This is sort of a pop-ontology that attempts to get at the assumptions out of which we live. It's an attempt to state the "common sense of science" that is active these days. Once people thought reality consisted of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Everything else consisted of some combination of the four. That view now seems at best, "pre-scientific." Later, people lived in a "3-story universe" (and that was common sense, not religion, though religion used it to convey its particular insights); today we live in a multi-dimensional universe that must become the mode through which religious insights can be communicated, understood, and embodied.[2]
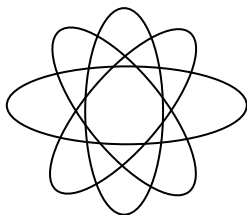
We're all familiar with the above diagram, representing the relationships of the various components of an atom. I'd like to use it as a graphic portraying the relationships among the various dimensions that compose reality. Each of the "orbits" in the diagram affects all the others, though each has its own integrity. That is an important factor to note in our assumptions about reality. Now I'd like to describe the dimensions that we assume as constituents of reality.

---

[2] Some time after the 3-story universe collapsed, a more "scientific" view was developed in which reality was composed of the basic elements contained in the Periodic Table. Still later atoms and the sub-atomic particles surfaced. The point is that notions of what constitutes reality change. This paper attempts to mark the current milestone in that change process.

I. DIMENSIONS AND ISSUES

A. SPACE

"And remember, no matter where you go, there you are." – *Earl Mac Rauch*

The first is **space**. Though invisible, we all know what it is. It ranges in scope from nano- to astronomical. It is about distance and size, and answers the question "Where?" There is no getting away from space; we're in it (and probably it's in us). Interestingly, spatial distances are sometimes measured in temporal categories – light-years, for example. Quite a lot of Einsteinian science has been devoted to showing the interpenetration of space and time. Yet for practical purposes, they are distinct. Matters of space are examined in such intellectual disciplines as Cartography, Geography, and Astronomy. There is some interest in physics about what constitutes space and whether there is such a thing as empty space[3], but those matters are somewhat removed from the practical assumptions with which we are concerned.

Ordinarily we assume that space has features of up-down, left-right, and in-out as the primary three grids on which everything can be located. Common instruments with which we deal with space are maps and measures, and the popularity of Google Earth, Map Quest and Global Positioning Systems have lent a new fascination with the whole phenomenon of locating things within a spatial context. Measurement has become a fascination for physicists who have defined the smallest measure of space as a "Planck length" (10^{-33} centimeters) and the largest distances in billions of light years. Most of us are content with the categories of either the inch-foot-yard-mile system or the millimeter-centimeter-meter-kilometer system, depending on our place of birth. Our dominant interest in space, however, seems less in measuring it than in moving through it: transportation is a major activity in all cultures.

---

[3] There is also interest in the possible curvature of space, and its apparent expansion, much as a balloon expands when being inflated.

We generally manage to tolerate the difficulties space imposes regarding distance. We've learned to communicate across extensive distances and to travel across them and to tolerate the frustrations both entail. We've been so successful in conquering the distance space imposes that we've even created games in which the object is to get across a defined distance through numerous (human) obstacles to a "goal line."

On a more personal level, our spatial surroundings have an impact on our consciousness, subtly producing behaviors that we may not have intended. The space in which we operate sends "messages" to us that may produce relaxation, reflection, anxiety, or motivation. We sometimes encounter spatial chaos in our living or working environments when disorder rears its ugly head. We are somehow compelled to re-arrange or to "clean up" or to beautify the space so that we can be comfortable in it. Bringing order into space helps us to function effectively.

A development has occurred in the arena of space with the invention / discovery of cyberspace, a "place" in which things exist that have no physical presence. A great deal of information exists in and "travels through" cyberspace and much of it has no physical existence at all. It is quite unclear "where" that information resides – perhaps in a computer network which itself is difficult to locate. There appears to be a new generation which is not only familiar with cyberspace, but seems to be quite at home there. We of the older generation find ourselves immigrants to that territory and regard those who "live" there as not quite trustworthy. "Second Life" is almost beyond our comprehension.

Certainly it's possible to escape reality through absorption into cyberspace. But it's also possible and frequent to escape reality by paying no attention to the space in which we show up. Getting mentally attuned to the space we actually occupy requires disciplined effort. Our bodies and minds often seem to occupy different spaces. When that happens, we are dis-related to reality.

We're moving into an era in which space is becoming transparent and raising faith-issues. Here's a quick view of what happened:

Space has collapsed – or at least has shrunk – in terms of its ability to separate peoples of different beliefs, experiences, and values. Once, the distance between peoples of substantial difference served to separate us. Traveling across vast expanses of space was daunting, if possible at all.

Now we think little of moving around the globe, and our reluctance to cross the country is more a matter of convenience and price than one of possibility. Distance no longer separates us from peoples who are different. On a daily basis we confront those whose cultures are not only different from ours, but in many ways opposed to it. Living in a world of diversity is no longer an inconvenient option for liberal-minded freethinkers. It's a daily experience of everyone. This contraction of space has occasioned a significant crisis in the socio-culture dimension in which we have to accommodate competing values and life styles with appreciation and respect. It's no longer spatial size and distance that we find problematic: it's now the compactness of space and its closeness that's causing concern.

Space itself has another and quite different issue. Space that for generations was a sort of neutral background factor in our perceptions has suddenly become a topic of urgent concern. It seems that we can no longer assume our macro living space (the Earth) is secure. According to increasingly frequent news reports, it is threatened by global climate change, atmospheric pollution, rising seas, species extinction, meteoric collision, and resource depletion in addition to the usual suspects of ethnic cleansings, rampant diseases, terrorism, and wars. These reports have brought to consciousness the relative fragility of the space we occupy. If that weren't enough, the mortgage crisis has, in forcing many out of their homes, brought the issue of space to consciousness in a very personal manner.[4]

The major spatial crisis today has to do with finding ways to look after it so that we can be sustained. While the contact with diverse peoples persists and indeed increases its intensity, that is more a matter of socio-cultural than space, and will be addressed later.

Transformation of space requires art, the deliberate arrangement of shapes and colors that subtly and unconsciously communicates a message of meaning by displaying relationships that are not immediately obvious.

---

[4] "Finitude means having no definite place; it means having to lose every place finally….To have no definite and no final space means ultimate insecurity." Paul Tillich, **_Systematic Theology Vol I_** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1951) p. 195

B. TIME

"Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana." – *Groucho Marx*

"Time is that quality of nature which keeps events from happening all at once. Lately it doesn't seem to be working." – *Anonymous*

The second dimension is **time**. It also has three primary grids: past, present, and future, and answers the question "When?" We are also inescapably in time, and time is in us in fascinating ways. We ARE only in the present, though, as Augustine noted, the past lives in us as memory and the future as anticipation. And the present in which we live is fleeting – gone instantaneously and transformed into past. It seems to puzzle scientists why the "arrow of time" goes in one direction only (from past to future, not vice versa)[5]. Curiously, the measure of time is inevitably spatial: how far the hands of a clock have moved, or how far the Earth has rotated. In fact so closely are these two dimensions related that Brian Green, voicing the consensus of current physicists, refers to "spacetime" as a single dimension. Intellectual disciplines that devote themselves to the study of various aspects of time are History, Archeology, Paleontology, and Futurology. It's debatable whether the latter is a recognized discipline, but numerous respectable academics practice the art or science of making predictions. Pollsters, trends analysts, and futurists all relish the practice of looking ahead in time.

For most of us, however, our concern is the passage of time. The measurement of hours and minutes is a major activity in most cultures. Of course with instant global communications, one wonders what the term "now" actually means. Time once divided us into arenas defined by the journey of the sun, but the "same time" in Denver is 15 hours different from that time in Kuala Lumpur. Still, "telling time" is an activity in all

---

[5] Cf. Brian Green, ***The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*** (New York: Random House, 2004)

cultures. The other factor about time that concerns us is routine – when repeating the same activity over and over becomes boring. We all look for a certain variety in our expenditure of time and when it is missing, we regard time as defective in some way, as "wasted time."

Time simply moves ahead quite apart from any control we exert. Whether it actually continues always at the same pace or whether it sometimes drags and sometimes flies is probably a matter of our response to what is going on. But the crisis of time comes when we realize that ours is limited: we are moving relentlessly forward towards our death. Then it becomes a matter of considerable urgency to "make the most of our time."

It's also possible (and frequent) to escape reality by paying no attention to the time in which we show up. With our active memories and anticipations and imaginations, getting mentally attuned to the now requires disciplined effort. Much of Buddhist teaching consists of techniques for focusing on the present. Our bodies and minds often seem to occupy different time periods. When that happens, we are dis-related to reality.

In fact the crisis of time is not so much that our participation in it ends, but that the time we have sometimes seems "empty." It often seems that the knowing or doing with which we fill our time is trivial, insignificant, meaningless. It seems to lack a contribution to anything worthwhile. In those situations we are intensely dissatisfied, looking constantly to find a way to resolve the situation. We may experience those times as boredom or more dramatically, as occasions of depression or despair. In those moments we look for something interesting to fill our time, some activity that is out of the ordinary. It may be a hobby or an act of charity, but whatever it is, it provides some break from the routine in which we are enmeshed. In the business world, people often speak of needing a "work-life balance;" another and more accurate way to state that is to say people need rhythm in their time to vary the way in which it is expended. Rhythm is a key to managing our time. The medium that communicates a transformation of time is rhythm usually expressed in music, the deliberate arrangement of sounds and rhythm that sends a message of meaning.

These days time is not what it used to be. While it never has been the all-constricting enclosure transporting us inescapably from past to future (we've always had memory and anticipation and so able to step

outside the arrow of time, at least mentally, emotionally, and spiritually), still we've been preoccupied by the fact of our physical degeneration and ultimate demise brought on by time's relentless passage.

While our degeneration has not lessened despite all the remedies hyped on TV, our obsession with time's passage has mutated into an underlying rumination. Maybe we've become enamored by the future – or the past. But I suspect rather than time's fading, what we're experiencing is the intrusion of another different and more urgent preoccupation with Space.

C. PHYSICAL MATTER

"Inanimate objects are classified scientifically into three major categories: those that don't work, those that break down, and those that get lost." –Russell Baker

The third dimension of reality that we assume in ordinary existence is **physical matter**. This dimension answers the question "What?" and is the object of sense perception. We do not hear, see, feel, smell, or taste time and space. Our senses are aimed at the physical dimension of reality. The range of "objects" that constitute the physical dimension is vast. Micro sciences probe into the subatomic realities while physics, chemistry, geology, medicine and other sciences probe into the features of more recognizable objects. Perhaps the most significant distinction within the physical dimension is animate / inanimate. Some physical phenomena have the characteristic of life while others do not. Why this is so and what constitutes this characteristic are the subjects of on-going deliberations that need not concern us here.

Just as we are bound in space and time, so also are we caught up in the physical dimension. While this seems arguable to some, we do not exist outside the physical dimension. Our thoughts and feelings may be dissociated from our particular physical environment, but the body in which those thoughts and feelings reside is necessarily composed of and enmeshed in the physical dimension. Not only are we composed of physical matter, also all our interactions, guided by our sense perceptions, are with other physical beings, whether they be animate or inanimate.

Somehow the physical dimension has received "bad press" in that it is widely seen as inferior, a lower order than mental or moral pursuits. People caught up in physical matters seem to have their priorities out of order. Yet the physical dimension has distinctive attractions that beckon our attention and call for our commitment.

In the physical dimension, quantity and to a lesser extent quality, are sought-after characteristics. We're driven to possess increasing amounts of physical stuff and things, and commerce has learned not simply to meet our physical needs but also to create "needs" for superfluous things that we find ways to acquire. Materialism has always been a drive for mankind, but these days it seems to have reached a new level. We once spent 45 minutes searching a store for a suitable toothbrush holder. An entire floor of the store was filled with alternative versions, each vying for attention. In capitalist societies, people work to produce things and are paid so that they can purchase them. The rationale seems to be to keep pay as low as possible (to keep expenses down) and to keep prices as high as possible (to keep profits up). But from the buyer's point of view, the values are exactly opposite. Such is the ongoing tension in the economic sector.

It is only disruptive when we begin to assess our worth by the quantity and quality of physical resources we possess. And when we exercise our worship in shopping malls[6] – the temples of the physical – we genuinely distort the function of this dimension and accord it a significating role which it is singularly unfit to play. Physical things (including bodies) do not provide the lasting meaning and purpose for which we long. They may, for awhile, produce a sense of satisfaction and gratification; but then new things appear, what we have seems obsolete, someone else has something better or newer or prettier and we're thrown back into the quest. A substantial industry in repair has developed to attempt to manage breakdowns in physical things.

---

[6] It's no exaggeration to say that in malls we practice confession, praise, and dedication. Who's not passed a display and become aware of our personal inadequacy? Or found some object that we regard as wonderfully extraordinary? Or made a resolution to acquire THAT particular item, however long it takes? There is an extensive and pervasive material religion present in society today, and throngs worship at its temples daily.

We obviously require physical things for existence, though we probably require far fewer than we consume. And this is becoming an increasingly large issue related to ecological depletion[7]. Investing our sense of worth in the physical dimension, particularly in controlling it, guarantees unending frustration. Physical things invariably break down, wear out, or become obsolete – often by design. Antiques, while surviving over long periods of time, make the point: their uniqueness is proof of the temporal (read temporary) character of all things physical.

But the factor that has recently surfaced regarding the physical dimension is its limited quantity. There is simply not enough for us to survive at the current rate of consumption. The ecology movement has taken this awareness to heart and pointed out the multiple impacts of current practices. Apparently the limited nature of the physical is making itself known and influential. The medium that addresses the passing-ness of all things physical is architecture, and I use that term broadly to include sculpture and fashion. This medium aims at bringing to light beauty and meaning from the tangible features of the environment.

D. TECHNOLOGY

"For a list of all the ways technology has failed to improve the quality of life, please press three." – Alice Kahn

The fourth dimension of reality is **technology**. This dimension provides the answer to the question "How?" and it has usually not been included in the ontological descriptions of reality. It is often assumed to be a subset of something else. But it has been part of reality since primordial times when basic tools were invented. Not only people, but some animals also engage in the practice of using tools. Technology affects virtually every dimension of our life. Two disciplines that explore and shape this dimension are electronics and engineering. Clearly everyone in developed societies uses various technologies from automobiles to I-Pads. But so

---

[7] Excess consumption may support growth in the economy, but the degree of profligacy apparent in "modern" culture is destructive in many ways carefully catalogued by Andrew Bachevich in ***The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*** (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

also do people in undeveloped societies: tools, however primitive, form an integral part of our operating context. Technology manipulates the physical environment to enhance human capabilities.

More importantly, technology becomes part of our mindset so that we assume possibilities that would have been unimaginable prior to its development. Its impact on space and time are significant: distance has been bridged by communication and transportation technologies. And time is compressed by the possibility of interacting simultaneously in multiple contexts. Computers obviously form a major feature of the modern technological framework, but are not the sole or possibly not the most important. The whole range of electrical technologies has become an integral part of life. Today technology has become an aspect of the environment that, like space and time, is unavoidable

Its fragility frequently causes crises. If you've ever experienced a computer crash or an electric outage or an auto theft, you will recognize the sense of helplessness that quickly emerges. Our dependence on technology becomes manifest, and we are shocked at our own weakness. We quickly turn to "experts" who can "fix it" and restore our capacities that have been cut off.

But the dis-relation to this dimension is not our dependence on technology; it's our unwillingness or inability to "keep up" with the innovations that are continually occurring. Rather than seeing them as increasing our potential, we find them frustrating, time-consuming, complicated, and still unreliable. We'd rather be satisfied with a familiar product that functions in a predictable fashion and produces acceptable results. New technology has the function of expanding horizons of human potential, and that's not usually a welcome process. Change is the operative mode in this dimension, and no one likes change but a wet baby.

New technology requires new skills and, more important, new imagining of un-dreamed-of possibilities. It drops an element of chaos into society and often occasions a substantial re-organization. The development of the airplane, for example, occasioned a massive re-organization of the transportation industry spinning off multiple service industries and re-arrangement of spaces to provide for airports and restructuring of time to make use of the new options for travel. Regulatory and enforcement agencies and policies had to be developed, and the list could go on.

So what is the medium that restores our relation to the ever-changing dimension of technology? What allows us to BE our dependence on these temporal and changing "machines" that are so unworthy of that dependence? It would need to be something that highlights some features of technology that can be celebrated. Formula One auto racing, for example, highlights the cutting-edge technologies of ground transportation, and the infinitesimally fine tuning required to make the cars perform well. A race constitutes a ritual filled with ceremonies, vestments, processions, and adoring masses intent on absorbing the benefits that are on display.

Perhaps the various fields of technology each have their own festivals highlighting and promoting the innovations achieved. Certainly the computer industry has such events, and one need not look too far to find similar events for most industries. The point of these events is to highlight changes in the industry and new possibilities now able to be realized. They are celebrations of change.

E. SOCIO-CULTURE

"It is better for civilization to be going down the drain than to be coming up it." *– Henry Allen*

The fifth dimension of reality is **socio-culture**. This is the dimension that addresses the question of "Why?" and provides language and values to people. The scope of this dimension ranges from the family to the globe and is invariably corporate. It has to do with relationships: what they are and how they operate. Disciplines that explore various aspects of this dimension are Anthropology, Sociology, Politics, Economics, and Culture Studies.

With this dimension we move back into the less visible; values and relationships are universally present, but identified by extrapolating from observable behavior. This dimension, too, is universal. Everyone lives within some socio-cultural context. Though these contexts may differ significantly, there is always some evidence of this dimension present, and it's the diversity of the contexts that people inhabit that accounts for many of the tensions and conflicts in life. There is a certain amount of choice in

this dimension: though we cannot select our biological family, we are able to determine what community we participate in.

In the current emphasis on globality, some would say that our particular network of relationships literally extends to the ends of the earth. That may be true theoretically, but practically our socio-cultural contexts are considerably narrower. They extend outward from family to community and include institutions of education, religion, and style.

The socio-cultural dimension receives a great deal of attention today since spatial borders separating us from those unlike ourselves have largely vanished. We've been forced to encounter people different from ourselves and to realize that our way is not the only or best way. There are those whose dearest values I find contemptible – and they return the favor. Whatever our regard for individuals, large groups have differing values and basic assumptions about reality. Hofstede[8] and Trompenaars[9] are two leading scholars who have identified the categories of differences that distinguish various societies, and their insights have been welcomed by the business community in its global expansions.

Our social environment exerts a strong influence on us, whether we choose to accept it or to reject it. But however we react to our own socio-cultural framework, a crisis point comes when we encounter one that is dramatically different. Then we're thrown back to examine our assumptions and values. When that becomes too painful, we adopt either a "When in Rome…" socio-cultural relativism in which anything is acceptable or we hunker down inside our own and defend it fanatically. The current rise of fundamentalism in various religions marks the tendency of people to deny the validity of alternative cultures and values.

It sometimes leads to hostility and violence as we try to get rid of the "other." ***The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart***[10] is a recent book that chronicles the division in

---

[8] See Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, ***Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*** (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2005)

[9] Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, ***Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business***, 2d edition (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1997)

[10] Bill Bishop (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2008)

America of those of like minds into "closed" communities with a hostile relationship to those with alternative viewpoints. It's an attempt to escape from diversity. In fact so volatile is the confrontation of cultural differences that some speak of "The Clash of Civilizations" as a major hazard for the future[11]. Of course neither relativism nor fanaticism works in a world that is inescapably pluralistic. We're driven to search for our "place" in the wider world.

One way of transformation is through myth, ritual, and drama in which ultimate origins and relations are portrayed, and the story of our culture is highlighted. The key is to highlight one's own socio-culture while not denying alternatives. On Bali, for example, virtually every night has at least one dance-drama that re-enacts some feature of the local culture in relation to the gods. And Bali survives as a Hindu community in the midst of an intensely Muslim nation.

F. IDENTITY

"To be idle requires a strong sense of personal identity." – Robert Louis Stevenson

The sixth dimension of reality is **identity**. While personal identity is composed of aspects of many dimensions, it has integrity in its own right. Its scope ranges from bodily appearance to personality (including emotions and style). This dimension addresses the question of "Who?" and disciplines that address it include Biology and Psychology. Whereas those are sometimes linked with medicine as if they addressed only the physical dimension, in fact their object of concern is life (that certainly has physical aspects as well as socio-cultural, temporal, technological, and spatial aspects). Each living individual (human, animal or vegetable) has identity, so as a dimension, it too is universal.

Martin Buber's work on I-Thou[12] emphasizes the unique and profound identity of every one/thing which, in most cases is ignored or

---

[11] See Samuel P. Huntington, ***The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*** (New York, Touchstone, 1996)

[12] Martin Buber, ***I and Thou*** (second edition) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958)

made superficial, but which nevertheless resides as an inescapable component of reality. Identity is also one of the invisible dimensions that is surmised from observable characteristics, but is not limited to them. There is also some choice present in this dimension in that people can change their identity, sometimes dramatically, through extensive effort. The current recognition of diversity as an important feature of society is a tribute to identity as an unavoidable dimension of reality.

Regarding identity, "Who am I?" is a perpetual question the pursuit of which yields never-ending levels of consciousness and consciousness of consciousness. Persistent pursuit of this dimension sometimes generates exceptional capabilities such as the capacity to stop ones breath for an extended time or to control pain or to contort oneself into bizarre postures. But the point of this pursuit is not to achieve extraordinary abilities but rather, to recognize and accept the one we are. There seem to be innumerable levels at which self-acceptance poses challenges: the physical in which we have to come to terms with our body; the mental in which we have to deal with our limited intelligence; the emotional in which we have to manage our (in)sensitivity; and the spiritual in which we have to address our personal level of depth. In each case, the reality poses us with a built-in tension that on the one hand attracts us and on the other hand repels us.

But the self-acceptance to which I refer is not the same as the pop-psychology "I'm OK, You're OK" trivia. By any objective standards of measurement, you're NOT OK, and neither am I! The popular mantra has no doubt generated some good relations: illusions occasionally yield a positive result. The self-acceptance to which I refer is different. It is NOT satisfaction, but the affirmation of perpetual dissatisfaction. It is NOT complacency, but the affirmation of continual striving. It is NOT peace, but affirmation of perpetual conflict. It is NOT security but affirmation of endless insecurity; NOT success but affirmation of perpetual search for elusive goals; NOT comfort, but affirmation of endless discomfort. The self acceptance to which I refer means adopting a positive relationship to life's endless driven-ness into tension-filled situations. No wonder it's elusive!

Acceptance is the quest in this dimension. Its absence shows up in various destructive behaviors and may be occasioned by lofty ideals that go beyond our capacities. There seems to be an ongoing quest to "improve

ourselves" as if our identity is somehow deficient and needs to be filled out. Programs of physical, cosmetic, psychological, economic, and intellectual improvements to our identity abound, and their proponents are quick to witness to the improvements they have made in their identity. An underlying ideology seems to be that one must undergo "improvements" throughout life, that without constant upgrading, one's identity goes stale.

While honoring the benefits of these self-improvement efforts, I wonder what it would mean to undertake them from the point of view of strength rather than weakness. They tend to be driven by a lack of self-acceptance. But being accepted finally has nothing to do with appearance, knowledge, health, wealth, or intelligence. One might still undertake these programs even if relying on one's acceptance; in fact that might provide a stronger starting point for the exercises.

The difficulty in this dimension also involves recognition of the profound uniqueness of each identity: the "I"-ness and the "Thou"-ness of each one. As H. Richard Niebuhr put it, "'I' and 'Thou' are doubtless always foreigners in the world of things. But it seems to us that they are ignored, passed by, treated as unwelcome intruders more in our twentieth century than has been the case in most other times in human history."[13]

Of course the most obvious crisis in this dimension, and the one we have most immediate dis-relation to, is death, the apparent end of our identity. However much we may improve ourselves, and recognize the profound uniqueness of each individual entity, still there is a terminus to the active agent in the situation. Our awareness of approaching death generates a number of possible responses, many of which exhibit a dis-relation to that reality; we deny it, we fear it, we generate ways to make it simply a transition to another mode of life, we dress it up to appear not to have happened – our creativity has been profound in accommodating death.

The medium through which this crisis is addressed is often religion, reliance on the ultimate source of being for significance. "God loves you" or its equivalent becomes an identity-affirming mantra that

---

[13] H. Richard Niebuhr, *"Address on Martin Buber's Eightieth Birthday"* ed. William Stacy Johnson, **_H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, And Culture_** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) p. 135

allows one to persist despite one's continued brokenness. It becomes perverted when an added touch "…better than the other guys" implies a divine favoritism that promotes arrogance. An ongoing struggle in religions of the world has to do with maintaining a balance between self-depreciation and arrogance while promoting acceptance of the unique identities that constitute being.

G. ENERGY

"I merely took the energy it takes to pout and wrote some blues." – Duke Ellington

The seventh dimension of reality is **energy**. This term refers to the animating force(s) that generate movement: without it reality would be a static, immobile entity. There are many types of energy, from electrical to motivational, but in every case energy is the reality that occasions motion – or in some cases prevents it, as in friction or inertia or magnetism. Energies generally exist in "fields" of influence so that their impact is spatially defined. The various sources of energy are subjects of fascination to scientists who continue to probe the nature of gravitational attraction, the subatomic strong force and weak force, the ways of producing electricity, and alternative means of producing energy beyond burning refined fossils. Since energy appears in numerous forms, there seems to be no singular discipline devoted to it. But ergonomics addresses it as does physical science (sports), electrical engineering, petroleum sciences, and psychology. One suspects that a new science devoted to the study of energy itself may someday arise, given the presence of movement and therefore energy throughout reality. But that day has not yet arrived.

The crisis regarding energy has to do with its depletion. On the personal level, as we age our level of energy declines. But perhaps more important is the increasing use of energy to power an increasing number and variety of technological instruments (including transportation and communications tools). According to projections, this increase is

unsustainable[14]. The current sources of our supply of energy are running out, and new sources are not yet developed. There seem to be numerous potential sources of energy (sun, waves, wind, nuclear, etc), but converting those into usable sources to support our habits has not yet been accomplished. We face a situation of decreasing supplies.

H. MEANING

"How is it possible to find meaning in a finite world, given my waist and shirt size?" — Woody Allen

The eighth dimension of reality is **meaning**. This is the least recognized of the lot because it appears only in relationship to the other seven, transforming each of them into an arena of significance. This is the arena that addresses the question of "So what?" and has to do with quality, not substance. Sometimes referred to as the dimension of Spirit, I've avoided that word because of its supernatural associations. Disciplines that address this dimension are Ethics, Philosophy and Theology. If space, time, energy, identity and socio-cultural are invisible dimensions, then meaning is doubly so: one does not experience it save in relation to the other dimensions. And what one experiences is the quality of those other dimensions. While there are many "spiritual exercises" designed to isolate this dimension and experience it directly, they invariably fall short since meaning is about adjectives, not nouns. Obviously every dimension of reality has an attribute of quality, so meaning is universal.

The language of this dimension is ascriptive, not descriptive; when using language of meaning, one is ascribing qualities to reality, not describing its physical characteristics. The whole argument between science and religion basically misunderstands this distinction. Meaning is always determined in relation to a larger context of the reality under consideration. Taken to its maximum, this is the dimension of reality that indicates that particular reality's ultimate relationship, its connection to Ultimate Mystery. When regarded in this relationship, other dimensions

---

[14] For a good exploration of this topic, see Thomas L. Friedman, ***Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution and How It Can Renew America*** (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

undergo transformation: an aura of mystery pervades them, providing a unique significance that might not appear in lesser relationships. Most often meaning appears in ordinary life as a quest. The search for meaning is a well-known theme, and those who seem to have "found meaning" are regarded as extraordinary, indeed.

The crisis of meaning today shows up most clearly in regard to work: people generally find their work to be "meaningless." This is a source of considerable frustration and longing for a more "meaningful" position or task or responsibility. When the level of meaning of a position is not recognized, then those in that position lack motivation and commitment. If my work does not make a difference, why should I care how well it gets done?

When meaning attaches to each of the preceding seven dimensions of reality, a transformation occurs. In the following paragraphs I'll try to sketch out what some of those transformations look like.

When meaning attaches to **space** – when we find or create meaningful space – it affects us powerfully. There is an Islamic museum in Kuala Lumpur that is impossible to enter without experiencing awe. The arrangement of natural lighting and water and stone combine to create a deeply personal impact on visitors. Visits to places known as sacred spaces seem all to have a similar affect. There seems to be a combination of things that generate the impact, but art is certainly one of them. If sacred sites are paradigms of the possible, what would it take to invest every space we occupy with something of that quality? I think one would have to find a way to highlight the larger relationship of that space – to the community, the nation, the earth, the cosmos, the ultimate. When a bit of space is experienced in its wider relationship, then meaning breaks through.

When meaning attaches to **time** – when we experience meaningful time – then it shows up in all three dimensions. The past is seen as significant; the present is enacted with artistry; and the future is aimed at a definite purpose. There is also variety in the activities. Whatever you're doing is done with intensity and focus. It's rather like playing in an orchestra: you have a small part in something important that is being created. Subjectively, time seems to pass quickly and you're intensely alert to all the nuances that are taking place in the surroundings. Tradition has

identified time of this sort as "chairos," as opposed to "chronos" which amounts to "business as usual."

When meaning is attached to **physical matter**, then a curious paradox occurs: you become aware of the utter delicacy of the object(s) at hand (both in terms of its fragility and of its temporality) and at the same time, of its importance in a greater scheme of things. Your attitude towards it is one of appreciative detachment. You can easily do without it, yet its presence brings joy. This attitude was cultivated actively in the monastic discipline of poverty. Poverty in this sense has nothing to do with amount of money one possesses. It has to do with one's relation to all of one's possessions. That relation is one of active detachment alongside great appreciation.

When meaning attaches to **technology**, one begins to imagine new possibilities. Learning to operate it, while essential, is secondary to visualizing the accomplishments that now are available[15]. The temptation is to use the new technology for doing better what we now do already; the challenge is to do something different that has not been previously possible. In the business sector, this approach has recently been termed a "blue ocean strategy," that is, creating a new market rather than competing in an old one[16]. The team from Apple Computers that invented and marketed the Macintosh saw themselves not as clever machine-makers, but as changing the way people used computers.

When meaning attaches to the **socio-cultural**, then mythology surfaces. The story and drama of the community becomes widely known and re-enacted. In Cherokee, North Carolina, the tribal people regularly enact the drama of their community's life in a play entitled "Unto These Hills." It powerfully re-enacts the hardships and struggles of the tribe. In addition to attracting tourists and their money, the play also communicates to community members the values and practices that define them. While that and many community dramas are directed towards the past, finding a

---

[15] Cf. Rolf Jensen, _The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift From Information to Imagination will Transform your Business_ (New York: McGraw-Hill 1999)

[16] W. Chan Kim & Renee Mauborgne, _Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant_ (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005)

way to dramatize the future may be an important addition to meaning for a socio-cultural unit.

When meaning attaches to **identity**, you get something like the paradox of the physical: both the temporality and the value of the one is acknowledged and affirmed. That value is not attached to longevity but to relationship with the ultimate mystery of being. Seen in that light, it is utterly dispensable, but also infinitely valuable. Jim Collins has approached this posture in describing what he calls "level five leadership." Leaders of this quality have two contrasting characteristics: personal humility and fierce resolve[17]. Once you find yourself accepted, you're very clear about your defects, but have a purpose to which you're devoted. One weakness of many attempts to address the identity malaise is ignoring the purpose and concentrating exclusively on the acceptance. But that addresses only half the issue of meaning.

When meaning attaches to **energy**, you get a focus on constructive use. This often happens as an after effect of war. Weapons and medications developed for use in destructive situations provide breakthroughs for creative employment in civilian situations. The transformation of nuclear power from bombs to sources of electricity brought meaning to the massive production of energy from fission and fusion. But the current issue with our relation to energy is that we squander it. Using petroleum resources to power gas-guzzling Hummers does not appropriately honor the scarcity we've come to know. Meaning in this arena is still being actively sought.

So meaning brings a particular quality to each of the elements of reality.

Meaning itself (the worth-while-ness of something) has three primary approaches: significance (relative to the past), professionalism or artistry (relative to the present) and purpose (relative to the future). Each of these approaches can be applied to the seven dimensions of reality, but the search for meaning is a journey of considerable complexity not to be pursued naively. There are three phases, regardless of the path one

---

[17] Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) pp. 17-40

undertakes: 1) the phase of enthusiasm, 2) the phase of disillusionment, and 3) the phase of perseverance[18].

II. ESTABLISHING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

*"I believe in looking reality straight in the eye and denying it."-*Garrison Keillor

What might it mean to surmount the current crises and relate authentically to the various dimensions of reality? The previous pages have described eight dimensions of reality and the ways we struggle with them. We have also hinted at tools for their transformation into meaningful experiences. We even provided some clues into what those meaningful realities might look like. It's now time to pay more attention to actually making the transformation.

One qualification needs to preface this essay: it's highly unlikely that we can, through our own efforts, create a situation of authentic relation to the various dimensions of reality. When those situations occur, it's always an unanticipated gift of grace. We do not manufacture our own authentic relations; they are beyond our capacity. Nevertheless, they most often occur when we are engaged in actively seeking them. So what I will describe is the path along which meaningful relation to the dimensions of reality may occur.

Let's begin with the two that are currently "hot" in the sense of critically important: **Space** and **Socio-Cultural**.

A. TRANSFORMING SPACE

"It's very hard to take yourself too seriously when you look at the world from outer space." *– Thomas L. Mattingly II*

---

[18] See my "The Journey of Meaning at Work" in ***The Facilitator: Journal of the International Association of Facilitators***, Spring 2003.

As you will recall, the issue with **space** has to do with its fragility: no longer can we trust space to provide us a measure of security. To become rightly related to that reality requires a dual movement. On the one hand we need to be reconciled to the fact of fragility and insecurity: no conceivable efforts will nullify threats to our spatial environment. Global warming may be diminished, nuclear intimidation may be contained, and excess consumption may be controlled, but there are numerous potential disasters, from comets[19] to plagues, which cannot be mitigated[20]. Not only is the space itself fragile in the sense of being vulnerable to destruction, it is also incapable of being possessed. However attached we may be to particular spaces, we cannot "own" them. As Tillich says, "To have no definite and no final space means ultimate insecurity."[21] Once you grind into your consciousness the irrefutable fragility of space, then you begin to appreciate its present reality and the "givenness" of the space we currently occupy. Given the threats, it's nothing less than a wonder that space continues to support life at all. It may be this sense of appreciation that is fundamental to achieving an authentic relation to space.

On the other hand we need to care responsibly for the space we occupy. The "green" revolution has developed countless practical methods of reducing our footprints on the environment, from recycling to no-till farming. "Natural Capitalism" has emerged as an approach to commercial environmental responsibility that turns out to be more profitable than most current practices.[22] It is arguable whether or not the various individual practices that environmentalists promote are effective in "saving the earth," but thanks in part to the efforts of Al Gore[23], increasing numbers of people are making serious efforts to live a style of voluntary simplicity.

---

[19] Cf. Gregg Easterbrook "The Sky is Falling" **The Atlantic**, June 2008 pp. 74-84

[20] E.g. volcanoes. Cf. Simon Winchester, *__Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded:__* *__August 27, 1883__* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003)

[21] Paul Tillich, *__Systematic Theology, Vol. I__* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1951) p. 195

[22] P. Hawkins, A. B. Lovins, L. H. Lovins, *__Natural Capitalism: The Next Industrial__* *__Revolution__* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1999)

[23] See Al Gore, *"An Inconvenient Truth."*

The important fact here is that people are beginning to take responsibility for the space we occupy, and that's a step towards a right relationship with space[24].

Of course, the ultimate in spatial transformation consists in achieving "sacred space," that is, space which points beyond itself to ultimate mystery. Whereas we cannot guarantee any manipulation of space will have the desired effect, there are some practices that seem to help. A dominant one is the use of art, visual representations that point to or imply a relation to a more inclusive reality. Transformation of space requires art, the deliberate arrangement of shapes and colors that subtly and unconsciously communicates a message of meaning by displaying spatial relationships that are not immediately obvious. Space that we occupy for working, playing, worshipping, and living can be enhanced by the placement of art that adds another dimension to our experience. It enhances our consciousness both of space's fragility and of our appreciation for it. As Leonard Bernstein said, "Any great work of art revives and readapts time and space, and the measure of its success is the extent to which it makes you an inhabitant of that world – the extent to which it invites you in and lets you breathe its strange, special air."

While most of us enjoy periodic visits to sacred space, an authentic relationship to space would involve making sacred whatever space we occupy. Sometimes that happens; often it does not.

B. TRANSFORMING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION

"Home is less where your heart is than where you understand the sons-of-bitches." – Dave Hickey, The Texas Observer, quoted in Joel Garreau, __The Nine Nations of North America__ *(New York: Avon Books 1982)*

Encountering people from different **socio-cultural** environments is both inevitable and traumatic, especially when their assumptions and values differ markedly from our own. The trauma derives from our

---

[24] See Thomas Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need A Green Revolution and How It Can Renew America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008)

insistence on the old maxim "People are basically the same down underneath." While that adage may have some biological validity, when it comes to assumptions and values, it is certainly not the case. Our first effort when confronted with substantial difference is to search for some common ground on which to build a relationship. Sooner or later that "ground" proves to be shifting sand and we're thrown back up against sheer opposition.

In that situation three responses typically occur: ethical imperialism, ethical relativism, and, hopefully, a transnational approach.[25] Our first response to different values, after finding no common ground, is to attempt first to clarify and then to enforce our own position. "The opposing value must be a misunderstanding since mine is certainly right and universal." When that approach proves counterproductive, our next response is often relativism: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." There are both philosophical and practical refutations of that principle, and its sociological consequences are well documented in Alan Bloom's ***The Closing of the American Mind***[26].

Transforming the socio-cultural dimension means coming to terms with diversity and avoiding the temptation of polarization. It means being willing to live in a pluralistic world without sacrificing your own values. It means developing personal integrity while attempting to understand and appreciate alternative world-views. What Wartick and Wood call the transnational approach means consciously and critically developing your own set of standards with input from alternative approaches. It does not mean accommodating opposing values, but it means recognizing that they exist and work for those from different socio-cultural backgrounds. It means developing and steadfastly holding to your values as particular rather than universal and as chosen rather than imposed.

I've found two routes to that stance helpful: experience and study. The former includes travel and, if possible, living in a different culture. That travel does not have to be international: North America itself

---

[25] Cf. Steven L. Wartick & Donna J. Wood, ***International Business & Society*** (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishes Inc., 2001) pp. 147-152

[26] Alan Bloom, ***The Closing of the American Mind*** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)

contains a wealth of cultural differences.[27] But it has to get beyond the "tourist" sites and provide access to daily life of locals. And interaction with locals will be very important. Experience, however, just raises the question, often in very personal and sometimes traumatic ways. Experience alone rarely produces the desired understanding and appreciation.

For that you need study. Fortunately numerous books are available to provide a guide to grasping the essences of cultural differences. They highlight distinctive characteristics that differentiate cultures, such as individual-communal, power distance, relationships-rules, status as ascribed vs. achieved, etc.[28] Once you've had the experience, categories that make sense of it are welcome, indeed. They provide enough distance from the experience to allow understanding and appreciation to develop. This does not mean "going native." But it means grasping something of the incredible diversity of civilization as a gift rather than as an aberration.

These two "routes" provide the setting in which transformation may occur, but the actual transformation involves mythology. Every set of values has ideological roots, and these are expressed in and communicated by myths. Recovering and activating myths of one's socio-cultural context allows one to appreciate their significance even while acknowledging their non-universality.

Dramas are especially useful in performing this function, and developing countries are often quite adept at using this mode for communicating socio-cultural roots. Villages in India and Bali abound with performances of the Ramayana; American Indians conduct periodic Pow-Wows; during the festival of Thaipusan in Malaysia, local Indians often carry body-piercing weights to dramatize their devotion to the gods; the Thai people publicly enact "Loi Katong" ceremonies in which lighted candles are set afloat on a river. In more developed nations, parades and fireworks displays often mark events of moment, even if the dramatic element is less pronounced. The success of these dramas may be determined by the extent to which they enact and communicate the

---

[27] Cf. Joel Garreau, ***The Nine Nations of North America*** (New York: Avon Books, 1982)

[28] Cf. Trompenaars, op.cit.

fundamental values of the culture. Ideally they will portray those values as based in the transcendent realm, and so ascribe to them some degree of ultimacy.

These days media coverage makes many socio-cultural dramas accessible to a wider audience than devotees of those myths. We can participate in the dramas of other cultures, and so become appreciative of their validity, even without adopting them as our own. In fact "going native" in the sense of trying to adopt the myths and culture of others is quite the opposite of attaining an authentic relationship with the socio-cultural dimension.

Now let's turn to another complementary pair: Time and Identity.

C. TRANSFORMING TIME

"Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save." – *Will Rogers*

The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past.–*William Faulkner*

The issue with time for us has two parts: on the one hand, our time of living is limited. On the other hand, it often seems "empty." What does it take to achieve an appropriate relationship to time, to appropriate the time we have as meaningful?

Traditionally meaningful time has been described as "chairotic." The term has been used to characterize the sense of time portrayed in the Scriptures. Scriptures are historical documents, but the history they present is time-infused-with-meaning. That is quite different from events recorded by "objective" historians who attempt to present the events accurately without value-laden judgments. Histories of chairotic time have been characterized as myth – not in the sense of falsehood, but in the sense

of recording a story that discloses a dimension of meaning.[29] Their concern with "historical accuracy" is secondary.

How do we convert our normal "business as usual" time ("chronos") into meaningful time ("chairos")?

The answer is twofold: 1. We can't; and 2. We don't have to.

Time already has a dimension of meaning; our issue has to do with perceiving the meaning that is already present, not in manufacturing something "foreign" to the moment. Every attempt to impose an alien meaning on time is at best short-lived and at worse, terribly destructive. Let me elaborate.

Meaningful time is purposeful time, that is, it is moving with some long-term direction. But when that direction is defined narrowly, the steps taken towards it disrupt the on-going civilizing process. For example, Hitler's purpose of achieving a master race was exclusively geared towards Aryans. The destruction on the world brought about by following that narrow purpose was massive.

The purpose towards which chairotic time moves is inclusive and profound. It includes the past, the present, and the future – the dead and the unborn and all the living. Our role in it is temporary, a privilege we've been granted. Our role is to play a part in a drama that begins and ends in ultimate mystery.

Whereas science may describe the mechanism of our ultimate origins – currently the "big bang" theory is in fashion – scientists rightly leave the "why" question open. Advocates of "Intelligent Design" attempt to jump in and posit a benevolent being as the source of our origins as if that would answer the "how" question. This is a confusion of myth and science.

---

[29] Cf. Schubert M. Ogden, ***Christ Without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolph Bultmann*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) for a discussion of truth and myth.

Attempts to identify the final outcome of the drama, its ultimate result, invariably fall short of the inclusiveness and profundity required. Our perspective is limited, in part by our particular socio-cultural environment.

Our task in discerning the meaningful time we participate in, then, has less to do with naming the ultimate result of history than with identifying our particular role in the drama. It's an issue of vocation. As one put it, it's like holding a lighted roman candle and deciding which way to point it while the shots are emerging. Once we decide our direction, then the contribution of that direction to the drama of history is our meaning. Whatever we do contributes to or detracts from that drama. There is no "time off" from a purposeful life,[30] but there is rest and variety and discontinuity that restores energy and brings rhythm to our engagement.

This approach provides everyone the possibility of meaningful time. It does not restrict authenticity in relation to time to those who select a vocation of service or whose lives are paradigms of virtue. Everyone faces the continual choice of contributing consciously or unconsciously to the drama of history. We DO contribute, and that's the meaning of our time.

D. TRANSFORMING IDENTITY

"Maybe the unexamined life is not worth living – but is the examined life one worth loving?"   -John Epps

As the crisis in the socio-cultural dimension has been heightened by alterations in our sense of space, so also the crisis in identity has been occasioned by our awareness of time. As has been said many times, it's not really until we become aware of our approaching death (the limits of our time) that we raise the question of identity seriously.

---

[30] Cf. Joseph W. Mathews, "The Church Lecture: A Dynamical Understanding of the People of God" in John L. Epps, general editor, **Bending History: Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews** (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005) pp.83ff.

But the question of identity is less one of longevity than one of acceptance. The question "Who am I?" may express less a question of uncertainty over identity than uncertainty over whether or not this one I am is worthy of acceptance in the scheme of things. Since it is abundantly clear that "I" do not meet my own quality standards in the realms of beauty, health, morality, intelligence, strength, judgment, humor, sociality, talent, etc. etc. etc., then how could "I" possibly find acceptance in a competitive world? "I" constantly assess others by those standards and find them wanting, and when "I" look in the mirror, the same judgments apply to "me." It's not that "I" don't know who "I" am but rather that "I" know all too well. And since "I" find myself unacceptable, "I" also find that to be the case with others. That makes it particularly difficult to establish and maintain "I-Thou" relations.

How does one get beyond this conundrum to a state in which the search for acceptance of oneself is not one's consuming activity?

First one has to acknowledge that this issue is particularly intense in Western cultures where individualism rather than communalism is the mode of operating. In the East, people are less concerned with themselves as individuals than as participants in a wider group (family or community or nation or race). The way to achieve acceptance is to measure up to the group standards and avoid causing a loss of face. One need not stand out to be accepted. In fact standing out is less important than fitting in.

Back to the West and our individualism, we could definitely do with a substantial dose of community. In fact many forms of individual therapy include group work. One knows oneself best through the eyes of another. In groups it sometimes happens that one experiences acceptance in a transformative way. When that occurs, it is first experienced as an unwelcome intrusion of reality. Our common way of protecting ourselves from our own unacceptability is to create and sustain a web of illusions about reality and about ourselves. When those illusions are punctured and we see a clear view of reality and ourselves, it comes as a very personal crisis. We lash out at the occasion of our view and we try desperately to patch up our illusions. It doesn't work and we approach despair. But then sometimes one experiences in those moments an acceptance – that one is accepted in spite of oneself (not because of one's virtues or talents or

contributions, etc.). Then it's as if "I" suddenly become free to pay attention to others[31]. The vicious cycle of self-rejection – rejection of others – rejection of self – etc. becomes broken and a virtuous cycle takes its place wherein my experience of acceptance leads to acceptance of others which leads back to acceptance of me which…

Attaining this experience of acceptance is not limited to times of group therapy or interaction. As Tillich says, "Sometimes it happens" and other times it does not. It seems to be a matter over which we have no control.

Now let's move to a third couple of the dimensions of ontology: technology and energy.

E. TRANSFORMING TECHNOLOGY

"My definition of an expert in any field is a person who knows enough about what's really going on to be scared." -- *P. J. Plauger*

We have now examined two pairs of dimensions that seem related, and now we move to the third: Technology and Energy. Technology is driven by energy, and the current crisis in finding sustainable energy resources is finding its answers by using technology. The energy shortage renders some technology obsolete, and the lack of appropriate technology renders some energy resources inaccessible. The two are intimately related.

We have identified the function of technology as the expansion of human potential in dealing with the physical realm, and its crisis as our limited imagination and willingness to adapt to new possibilities. To elaborate:

---

[31] Cf. Joseph W. Mathews, "The Christ of History" and "The Christ Lecture" in John L. Epps, general editor, ***Bending History: Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews*** (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005) pp. 43-53, 55-64

There are two issues we have with technology:

> 1. It never works quite as expected, and then it wears out. It promises labor-saving and yet requires much labor to make it work.

> 2. It challenges our assumptions about what is and is not possible. In generating new possibilities, it violates our world-view and requires major change. The first response to new technology is "paving the cow paths" when completely new ways of travel are possible.

> **Authentic relation to technology involves accepting both its finitude and its potential**. That involves jumping in to the new forms (e.g., second life, twitter, blackberry, HDTV, blue-ray, hybrid autos, etc., etc.) while at the same time maintaining some nonchalance over their potential. **It also involves exploring new potentials** opened up by the new technology.

> Achieving an authentic relation to technology involves five phases:

>> **1. Skepticism**. "This can't really work. I've got to see it to believe it." (Ex: seeing a demo of a fax machine operate before considering purchase of one.)

>> **2. Fascination.** "I want to try it." (Ex: getting a Palm Pilot – that we've never used!)

>> **3. Dependence**. "I can't operate without it." (Ex: communicating by email.)

>> **4. Disillusion.** "The damn thing doesn't work correctly!" (Ex: Eudora deleting past emails I thought were filed.) OR "This is too much trouble." (Ex. Digital camera – it works fine but requires substantial effort to re-charge, download, delete, carry, etc.)

>> **5. Creative Acceptance.** "Let's see what else we can do with this." (Ex: amending ToP procedures to work with virtual meeting software.)

A social ritual for recognizing new technology comes in the form of festivals. A Grand Prix auto race is a dramatic festival for recognizing new automobile technology. The famous Apple Computer festival introduces new computer technology (as do many other computer fests).

F. TRANSFORMING ENERGY

"The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one." -- Albert Einstein

The crisis of energy has to do with its depletion. When in its authentic role, it is constructively used. But using energy constructively without depleting the supply seems to be a pervasive issue. According to Friedman, the answer is not simple, and simplistic answers only exacerbate the issue[32]. Clearly the sun provides ample energy to supply all we need, but harnessing it is an expensive and energy-using technology. Not only is the supply of efficient energy-producing fuels diminishing, the energy produced is distributed in a terribly unbalanced fashion. The West is a massive consumer of energy resources, while the South has access to miniscule amounts in comparison. But to distribute energy world-wide at the level of the West would require the resources of several additional planets.

> "Energy is not only the key driver of the industrial revolution; it is also the best indicator of human development. More importantly, energy has been used as a substitute for other scarce resources. Given that because of climate change, modern energy services have themselves become problematic, it is critical that the transition to renewable energy be undertaken through a cooperative global programme of investment and technological diffusion."[33]

[32] Cf. Friedman, *op cit*. pp. 203-217.

[33] Tariq Bauri & David LeBlanc, "Is Green Growth Really Possible?" <Prosperitywithoutgrowth.UN.debate.pdf>

A systemic response to energy depletion is necessary, and that requires more than good will. We tend to look to technology for a suitable response to energy depletion, but encounter the paradox that technology to develop new energy itself requires energy to operate. The net gain of the transaction is dubious; for example, the production of ethanol to lessen the use of petroleum is said to use more energy than it produces. Furthermore, increased use of energy tends to produce more CO_2 and therefore to enhance global climate change.

The **first law of thermodynamics**, an expression of the principle of <u>conservation of energy</u>, states that energy can be transformed (changed from one form to another), but cannot be created or destroyed.[34]

Apparently physical matter and energy are convertible, and, as the atomic bomb demonstrated, an enormous amount of energy can be released by conversion of a relatively minor amount of physical matter (though matter of a very specialized sort). But the use of atomic energy is fraught with dangers, both physical and political, and its potential for addressing the depeltion of energy has not yet been realized. As the above quote from the United Nations discussion states, the requirement for realizing that potential will require enormous amounts of cooperation and investment. Perhaps the energy crisis is driving us to a state of global collaboration for survival, the first stage of which will be to recognize the issue as real and pressing.

Jeremy Rifkin highlights this possibility in The Third Industrial Revolution[35]. His thesis is that we have moved beyond the oil-based energy generation to sustainable energy production on a local basis. This in principle can be ramped up and shared so that organizations can be more locally based.

Now for some comments about our final pair of ontological dimensions: Physical Matter and Meaning.

---

[34] Wikipedia

[35] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, The Economy, and the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

G. TANSFORMING PHYSICAL MATTER

"He who builds a better mousetrap these days runs into material shortages, patent-infringement suits, work stoppages, collusive bidding, discount discrimination-- and taxes." -H. E. Martz

"Life is spontaneous and it is unpredictable, it is magical. I think that we have struggled so hard with the tangible that we have forgotten the intangible." -Diane Frolov and Andrew Schneider

Physical matter is necessary for life, but its distribution among the living is terribly unbalanced. "Developed" societies possess and consume a disproportionate amount of the world's physical resources. While some imbalance may have always been the case, it has curently reached unsustainable proportions. It has been said that if the entire population were to consume at the rate of Western society, it would require the resources of seven planets to support[36]. Clearly some measures of mitigation are necessary.

Anti-poverty movements have been undeway for decades by both government and non-profit groups, and the improvements made have been substantial, if incidental. Current hopes that private sector intervention may contribute substantially to the cause offer some optimism to a grim situation. But the private sector is attempting to expand its markets, and should not be tasked with so universal an undertaking, though its contribution can and may be substantial.

But poverty relief is only one part of the solution. The other has to do with us who over-consume the world's physical resources. Currently

---

[36] Talk made at the conference of the International Association of Facilitators in Oxford, UK in October, 2009 by _____.

the "Green" movement moves in this direction, as does the movement towards moderation.

The current plight of the unemployed provides an example. Many people in the USA are out of work, and in despair as the prospects of jobs seem remote. And, since our culture has defined selfhood in materialistic terms, the prospect of being unable to achieve (or sustain) a desirable materialistic lifestyle seems to threaten one's worth as a human being.

That need not be the case. Being unemployed is different from being unengaged, and it's the latter that is a threat to one's dignity. As many retired persons can attest, being "out of work" can be a very busy and personally rewarding time. So long as our definitions of human authenticity revolve around the capacity to acquire material benefits, then the unemployment crisis is serious indeed. But if we were to devise other standards, like contributing to society, then perhaps the situation would be less urgent. Of course for this to happen, a means of providing basic living standards would have to be developed.

Obviously making this change is no simple matter – but it may well be an urgent one.

What if we developed a system in which youth filled all the necessary jobs for society – enough to provide for economic growth of the nation and to sustain a secure position in the global competitive environment. And what if much of the income from those jobs went into a fund from which comfortable sustenance were provided to everyone (including the workers). And what if, at the age of 40 (perhaps with a few exceptions to ensure expertise and values were transferred to the next generation) people left the "workforce" and entered into the "service force" that undertook projects for social betterment – things like infrastructure maintenance, neighborhood watch, child care, the arts, and other projects often left to the NGO industry. The sense of worth might well be sustained, perhaps better than through competing with a colleague for a higher bonus! There are numerous roadblocks to this sort of system, not the least of which are the failed attempts to achieve some more equitable distribution of goods in the past. This is not about equity: it's about engagement in worthwhile work.

Of course this would depend on a massive cultural de-valuation of material wealth. But so long as personal aspirations lean towards acquisition of more and more of less and less necessary material goods, then the plight of unemployment will continue to be devastating.

The basic issue, then, has to do with our final dimension, Meaning.

H. TRANSFORMING MEANING

"This is our purpose: to make as meaningful as possible this life that has been bestowed upon us…." - Oswald Spengler

"Dedicate some of your life to others. Your dedication will not be a sacrifice. It will be an exhilarating experience because it is an intense effort applied toward a meaningful end." - Dr. Thomas Dooley

"Wonder is what sets us apart from other life forms. No other species wonders about the meaning of existence or the complexity of the universe or themselves." - Herbert W. Boyer,

"Don't aim at success - the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue... as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself." - Viktor Frankl

"I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love." - Viktor Frankl

"Meaning," as the word is being used here, has to do with the worth-while-ness of something. As mentioned above, it only appears in

relation to some other facet of reality, and its realization is a journey of considerable complexity. It does not happen all at once.

In a sense, the phrase "transforming meaning" makes little sense, since meaning is that which transforms everything else. The better phrase would be "making meaning a part of one's life." Since meaning is a relational term expressed in ascriptive terms, the question is more like, "In relation to what do all other relations achieve a quality of meaning?"

The only possible answer is "the Whole," "The Mystery," "Being-Itself," "God," "Inclusive Reality." In relation to that, everything else becomes demonstrably finite, flawed, and unworthy of ultimate affection. At the same time, paradoxically, just because of its relation to the Whole, it becomes a valuable part of creation worthy of honor. It's the paradox of radical monotheism well defined by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.[37]

Still, that relationship is universal and omnipresent. So the question becomes, "How do we access it?"

---

[37] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* {New York: Harper and Row, 1960)