

FROM THE UNIT TO THE SYSTEM:
THE NEW VIEW OF REALITY
Denver, March, 1985

Train your heart to govern as spacious an arena as it can; and to encompass, through as many centuries as possible, the onward march of humankind.

--The Journal, January

It is our duty, therefore, to grasp that vision which can embrace and harmonize these two enormous, timeless and indestructible forces, and with this vision to modulate our thinking and our action.

--Kazantzakis, Saviours of God

The ancient sailors of the Pacific were skilled navigators, able to transverse thousands of miles of open ocean to a pre-determined landfall without the benefit of map, compass or sextant. For them, the sea was its own map providing the discerning sailor with ample directional signals to guide his way. The stalwart European seamen of the time of exploration armed themselves with compass, sextant, charts and maps, and bravely battled currents, winds and waves to sail into every nook and cranny of the globe. The astronaut of today slips noiselessly through hostile space alone yet invisibly tied to networks of tracking stations, controls and communications systems that finally tie him to every TV set that cares to watch. These three images represent major epochs of style, each reflecting a view of reality.

-- ICA Research Centrum, 1975

In the twentieth century of upheavals and crises, a new style of response to life is emerging. It is the manifestation of a myth that remains as yet unseen, but that is even now shaping human consciousness around the globe. One does not know this myth. Artists try to give it shape; philosophers try to delineate its parameters; scientists try to induce its content; and revolutionaries try to speed its social embodiment. But the emerging myth is elusive. It moves softly through the human consciousness leaving only a distinctive, if unobtrusive, imprint on the style of an age. Sooner or later it discloses itself to some discerning spirit who gives it expression, and who more often than not is startled at the reception given "his" creation. At such times it becomes the self-conscious paradigm of reality. Art, science and philosophy come into sharp focus, each one disclosing an interrelated facet of the many-sided myth. Before its time has come, the myth remains far below the surface as a great swell in the sea of history, rushing towards a distant shore. After its time has past, it solidifies as the glue of society, holding together organizations and institutions even while a new myth is subtly and imperceptibly shaping yet another transformation of consciousness and stamping out yet another style.

-- ICA Research Centrum, 1975

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW MYTH'S APPEARANCE

The new myth, alluded to a decade ago, is coming into its own, disclosing itself to an increasing number of writers, whether they be scientists, futurists, sociologists, mystics or journalists. Whereas its scientific content is commonplace, its emphasis has shifted dramatically from what we have assumed.

By "myth", I mean to refer to a picture of the world ("weltbild") that includes scientific findings, but also includes a complexity of values, methods and assumptions that more or less cohere with each other. It is not simply a story, though often in history a story has served as the paradigm and the vehicle of communication for the myth. The Christian story, for example, during the Middle Ages in Europe served as a vehicle that held together science, ethics, philosophy, and politics in a more or less harmonious whole. These other fields were all judged by the parameters held in the story, and to go beyond those bounds was anathema.

Today observers of and activists in the social scene are increasingly giving vent to insights that seem to come from the same source. In her catalogue of movements from some years ago, Marilyn Ferguson referred to this phenomenon as the "Aquarian Conspiracy." It is the content, not the fact, of that phenomenon that warrants attention.

Frijof Capra's highly insightful tape on "The New View of the World" points out that the findings of science have disclosed the systems-nature of things and the futurity of regarding anything in isolation. He finds this highly compatible with the practices of Eastern Religions, especially those centering on Mysticism. He points out rightly that the Newtonian-Cartesian world-picture of cause and effect is no longer useful, that linear progression has been replaced by episodic and spontaneous movement, that mechanical causation is out and statistical probability is in. The holographic view of reality in which each part contains the whole and each element gains its significance from its relationship to the whole, is now the norm in science. From his perspective, this view needs to inform our thinking and action in other arenas as well.

I. THE PROCESS/EXISTENTIALISM MYTH

For many years people have attempted to come to terms with the demolition of the Newtonian-Cartesian synthesis and to articulate the myth appropriate for a time in which its assumptions no longer work. Two of the most creative have been Process Philosophy and Existentialism: there are no longer isolated things, but events-in-time, each related to the other and each exerting an impact on the whole process. Creation is continuing; trends are being shaped by seemingly isolated incidents. Every life is utterly significant because of its unique and unrepeatable contribution to the historical process. It matters what I do because I am effecting the whole universe and the whole course of history. In this view of things, the PARTICULAR is of primary importance. Systems, trends, and wholes are ABSTRACTIONS from and shaped by the particular decisions and actions of units. This is true whether speaking of individuals or of societies. The PERSON is a society composed of many organs and cells, each responding with an element of unpredictable freedom so that it's never 100% certain what any single cell will do with its life. The person is somewhat at the mercy of its cells, and though it exerts an influence on them, it is never able fully to control their somewhat random responses to their environment. The SOCIETY is composed of units of people-- local communities, each of which functions uniquely to the health or the harm of society as a whole. The collapse of local communities is prelude to social disaster, for no amount of aid or expertise "from the outside" is able to control or to heal the self-dependent life of the community.

Whereas Process Philosophy and Existentialism have much more to say than that,

the important thing to notice is their elevation of the PARTICULAR, and their consequent emphasis on freedom of choice, the value of the individual, and human rights. During the ascendancy of this version of the contemporary myth, local community development emerged as an effective mode of dealing with the age-old discrepancy between the rich and the poor. The primal community was being rebuilt from within as the principal way to address social ills. As communities experienced their self-sufficiency, they became productive and creative elements in society. The PARTICULAR is the primary basis of science and society; the WHOLE is an abstraction consisting of numerous units freely acting in similar enough ways to develop trends and parameters that direct and bind the units in mutually-beneficial relationships.

Within this view, the principal value is freedom and self-realization, and the primary mode of effective action, episodic. The primary evils are TYRANNY in which one particular arbitrarily imposes its will on another, and ROUTINE in which regular patterns of action stifle individual creativity. The anomaly (no world-view is without them) is MOVEMENTS in which sacred individuals freely bind themselves into disciplined groups for common goals. This literally made no sense to those for whom the particular was paramount. In this time covenants suffered: families broke up in astounding numbers; social mores were flagrantly violated; revolutions and terrorists aimed directly at social structures; and vocational struggles became justification for a wide variety of experimentation with alternative lifestyles. "Commitment" of one's unique creativity seemed an absurdly wasteful expenditure of a sacred trust. Individualism was the mode.

The effective movements for social change capitalized on the new world view and concentrated on empowering the particular (community), eliciting the free decision (individuals), and creating the change-events (episodes). Local development became the watchword for those concerned with community; self-realization became the mode of those concerned with people; and catalytic events became the mode of action, whether by the radical right staging group rallies, or the radical left staging protest demonstrations. It was all geared towards allowing the particular to come into its own.

Spirituality in this era was similarly specific, concrete, and particular. The primary aim was to promote AUTHENTICITY as a style of life. And the depths of that style became evident over against the major problem of Death. When the individual/particular is the major value, its obvious temporality occasions a major crisis in faith. So theology and morality went to work describing the depths of living authentically before the fact of one's impending doom. The aim was to disclose the meaning of life in the situation of mortality; the major question was what to do with one's "one time around the clock." What was required was a new religious mode in which one fully appropriated the tenants of one's historical tradition, to the point of actually identifying with the eschatological hero of that tradition in one's personal style and task. During the "demythologizing" that occurred in this era, major breakthroughs occurred in describing the phenomenology of the Other World, and in recovering the meaning of meditation, contemplation, and prayer. Both, of course, were described in relationship to their experiential nature--as phenomena experienced, at least potentially, by individuals. They were presented as ways of describing the authentic life--of the free/responsible self.

The participation of the Institute of Cultural Affairs in this mode should be self-evident. The consensus-mode of corporate planning and action is a prime example of empowering the individual for the sake of the whole. But the role of

ICA in this era was not riding the wave; its task was to disclose the depths. For example, calling an individual to 100% freedom was identical to calling that individual to lay down his or her life for nothing less than the whole of civilization. Freedom, rightly and profoundly grasped, IS obligation to the widest possible context. Likewise, the community that developed itself simply had to do it on behalf of the whole society or it would fail. Likewise, the eventfulness on which we operate cannot simply be "good times," but must include profound orchestration of details into occasions for dramatizing the glory of effective corporate expenditure.

II. THE TIME OF TRANSITION

It's not as though the emphasis on the particular went away. It's more that another emphasis emerged as a result of pushing the particular to its intensification. Just as in poetry, so also in reality: the more particular the descriptions, the more universal their implications. The more science and society probed the particular, the more apparent was its relational character. Historically, the Viet Nam War marked the end of individualism, for it dramatized for the world the FACT of relationship. Whether warrior or protestor or observer, all were effected by forces beyond our individual, particular selves; all of us found ourselves in relationships that were unavoidable, however onerous they seemed. RELATIONSHIPS surfaced as the dominant reality and the major focus of concern.

No major philosophical upheaval accompanied this transition. From time to time one heard appeals to the Heisenberg Principle (wherein the experiment is influenced by its observer) or the theory of relativity or some other application of the "No man is an island..." perspective of Donne. But this transition was far more practical than theoretical: people learned the truth of relativity by running into it. Individuals seeking self-realization found, often in endless therapy sessions, that their "self" was intractably bound with other selves who simply would not go away. Science found its "units" to be bound to other units in relationships of mutual influence. Renewed communities found themselves unavoidably related to cultural, political and economic systems that went far beyond their boundaries. Developers found themselves pushed and pulled into dealing with the regional dynamics. And all of us had to contend with "the organization."

Networks and movements proliferated in this fertile atmosphere. Aware that one is not alone, people linked arms in groupings that ranged from matters of the heart to issues of the pocketbook. People learned the essentially political lesson that individuals exert less influence than groups; the implication seemed to be, therefore, to join or form groups that would make their presence felt. Networks formed, and communication and consensus became issues of concern. The heroic figure in this era was the manager--one who could form consensus and motivate groups and catalyze effective action.

The study of relationships became the focus of attention, particularly in the private sector. Quality Circles undertook to establish what unions earlier had intended--humanized, yet quality working relationships. Volumes appeared on such social graces as body language, winning through intimidation, succeeding in marriage, dressing for success, shaping consensus...the organization was the primary unit, and one's issues related to both WHICH organization to "join" and HOW to participate effectively in its functioning. The study of management became a major topic of academia, and institutes of management training abounded throughout the developed world. People were determined to be able to understand and to deal with their relationships creatively.

In this era, the adversary mode of relationships was finally de-throned from its position of dominance. Whereas social relations had relied on a certain me-against-you style (whether in debates or competition or contests) from the earliest remembered times, now that mode became one among several other possible alternatives.

The perplexity of this era appeared in the political sector, particularly in the developing nations. For here were cultures and peoples, recently made independent, discovering their identity AND their global relationships simultaneously. The identity-participation dilemma took many forms, but consider the Philippines--attempting to retain the identity of a specific culture, and yet having to forge a single nation strong and unified enough to participate in the global economy. Perhaps Marcos' solution to the situation of a nation of 7000 islands, most of which had their own language and military, was not ideal. Certainly not in terms of individual rights. But another value--that of the corporate--had emerged with a whole new set of perplexities.

The relational focus of reality showed up in the spiritual motifs of the time--VOCATION and RECONCILIATION. One had to do with the person's relation to society, and the other with groups relations with each other. The former was manifest in the phenomenon of "burn out" in which people lost the sense of significance in their work; the relationship of this one singular person to the group task in which it was engaged went awry. People asked, with astounding frequency and power, WHICH organization or group warranted (and permitted) their participation. The latter came to serious fruition once it became clear that differences were here to stay AND that relationships were unavoidable. The search for modes of being together un-destructively came to the fore.

The radical manifestation of reconciliation as a search and as a struggle was the confrontation of global cultures and religions. Once ecumenism was deemed radical when Methodists and Presbyterians could talk together. With the onslaught of a global economy and interdependent polity, people came face to face with cultural plurality. Christians and Moslems and Hindus and Buddhists and Jews and Animists all knew each other as persons and, with some notable retrograde exceptions, tolerated each other with respect. But the trick was to retain one's own culture and let it be transformed, even while appreciating one's neighbor's culture to which one is forever an outsider. It was the issue of reconciliation, and both its interior journey and its external manifestations were matters of major concern.

In this time of transition, the Institute of Cultural Affairs underwent a corresponding shift of emphasis. Individual Human Development Demonstration Projects diminished in numbers, but replication projects and clusters proliferated. One very quickly lost count of the number of villages being renewed through ICA in Indonesia and Korea and the Philippines, not to mention the designated replication projects of India and Kenya. The dynamics of the DISTRICT and the REGION were matters of concern and forms of coalitions were emerging. People were flocking to the ranks as volunteers, most without any of the "profound" background of individual struggles and wrenchings of the age of particularism. They seemed shallow--but willing hands able to give their lives in effective service to global renewal. Who dared raise questions? Training was the answer to matters of context and method. And these seemed sufficient to care for the spirit. The intent was to put effective corporate methods into history--to invent them in our own life struggles, to demonstrate them in projects and consultations, and to proliferate them through schools and publications. In the vocational arena, we discerned an ironic twist: the participation for which people longed, involved nothing less than total responsibility for the situation or organization in which one participated. In the arena of reconciliation, we discerned the inevitability and creativity of struggle.

The greatest breakthrough in this era, and one that catapulted us into the new era, was the discovery of the power and promise of INTERCHANGE. It is as though the dynamics of relationships suddenly went transparent when local practitioners began to talk with each other about what works. We who assumed lives were changed and society altered only through violent wrenchings of the self or society were suddenly confronted with the phenomenon of people telling each other what they were doing---and listening to each other---and hearing themselves come off as experts---and finding a new world in the experience of the other---and finding themselves changed. People were empowered by the opportunity to tell their story; and by seeing that their story empowered other people. The simple motif of "Sharing Approaches that Work" may prove to be one of the more powerful themes of the century in its capacity to provide a human alternative to the endless muddling of good-hearted people or to the destructive confrontations of the determined. It made for the creation of a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. For within the interchange events, something more is created than is apparent; it's as though an underlying unity has been disclosed.

III. THE NEW MYTH

The intriguing part of Frijof Capra's analysis is his paralleling of the "new" scientific discoveries with the philosophy of Eastern religions and Mystical writings. It's interesting because it is a catching juxtaposition of opposites that yields insights AND because it functions to dramatize a point rather than to make one. The value of Eastern religions and Mysticism to Capra's analysis is not that they adequately describe or philosophically account for the new world-picture. Rather, they are examples--perhaps history's best--of instances wherein people took a wholistic perspective.

It is the elevation of the whole system to the position of pre-eminence that marks the shift in the new age.

First it was the particular; then the relationship; now the SYSTEM is the predominant reality.

The new myth has not yet found its philosophical expression. But several events have occurred which insure its credibility. Without seriously questioning the tenants of Existentialism or Process Philosophy, the new myth crept in on historical-event feet, more seriously noted by the journalists than the philosophers, by the bankers than the theologians. Sometimes history seems to be made by the masses, not in their great deeds, but in their unquestioned assumptions.

When the OPEC nations shut off the flow of petroleum in 1974, the extensive reach of the economic system became conscious to the masses. What was heralded in the earthrise photo of 1969 to the intellect became a reality to the pocketbook five years later: the globe is an interrelated, interdependent system, the relationships within which are immensely complex, but in some sense unified. Then the environmental issues surfaced, and humanity's link to the ecosphere surfaced. In medicine, specializations waned, and increasing attention was devoted to the wholistic view wherein the whole person was treated, not simply a defective part. And one suddenly discovered environmental and

psychological and nutritional and chemical and biological factors all swirling in relationships that were indecipherable but determinative to the health of the person.

One simply found oneself part of a whole that exceeded one's capacity to imagine. New dimensions kept cropping up altering one's sense of reality. Future Shock gave way to The Third Wave, and Megatrends and The New Paradigm attempted to chart the course on which we were heading. A useful metaphor was the hologram--the phenomenon in which light directed onto sensitized film can produce a three-dimensional image of an object not present. "The part contains the whole" became a watchword. One is no longer an isolated individual--nor even a related individual; one is part of a system. Many systems, really; but it is not the particulars that concern us now; the systems-nature of things became the operating assumption.

The greatest fear was to be cut off from the system. A cartoon of the clock which was taken apart and put back together and operated perfectly with half the parts left out--that cartoon expressed our fears. Being part of the system meant having a vehicle through which to address one's concerns. And pictures of systems abounded. Religious fundamentalism with its closed cosmic system flourished; eastern mystic systems with their poetic and enigmatic portrayals of the unified cosmos gained prominence even in some scientific circles. Meditation gained respect for its purported capacity to bring one into consciousness of unity with the cosmos.

The whole system has become the dominant concern of our era, and this, more than any scientific findings, is the new view of reality.

The spirituality of this era has also shifted. Morality and ethics have taken on a prominence. The way one performs within a system is of consequence, not simply to one's own reputation; it also effects the whole. So the question of abortion becomes linked to global overpopulation; the question of pollution becomes linked to ecological survival; the question of war to that of nuclear annihilation; the question of drugs to that of third world economics. And then the spectre of starvation on a massive scale in Africa, despite the technology and prosperity and good will threw the world into a subtle systems-crisis.

People have come to care so deeply and perceive so urgently that we take stands. We declare our integrity. We do not deny other valid, even urgent, claims on us, but we declare where we stand. It's as if the weight of the world's issues is so pressing that one cannot wait to sort through the complexity that surrounds each life. One finds the system most compatible, and one jumps in. And herein lies the danger of fanaticism: ingoring the other valid and pressing concerns that are not part of the particular system in which I am involved. Paradoxically, the perception of the whole and my relationships within it forces me to focus my attention on the particular cause worth my life. But the integrity that is valid today is one which acknowledges not simply MY system, but the WHOLE system in which mine is but a particular part. Significance comes in being part of an integrated system that is effectively addressing global issues. But even my system is subordinate to the whole.

On the other hand, there is present the temptation to resist declaration and to soar above the system in search of its perfect integration. Instead of inclusive integrity, some go for absolute unity. Instead of relying on temporal models, they search for the ideal solution. The mystic withdrawal into inner reality and insight can become a trap preventing effective engagement. In the longing for a structure and story for seeing one's life linked to major social issues, some declare where they stand and find a company of colleagues. Others go into themselves and find an inner reality, Zen and motorcycles, inner tennis or golf or management. Recognition and acknowledgement and submission to the Whole is part of the new integrity; but so also is immersion and action and responsibility in the particular system I have chosen. Even in the new view of reality, human integrity is a tensional process, not a static goal.

As always, the task of the Institute of Cultural Affairs is to promote the relationship to the relationships that make up the current view of reality. As we promoted freedom as universal obligation in the time of the individual, and we promoted participation as total responsibility in the time of relationships, so shall we promote integrity as radical commitment in the time of systems. The issue of covenant and assignment within one's declared role is once more real. Managing systems requires respect and friendly persuasion and all cards on the table; this is the prelude. Finally it relies on the "til death do us part" commitment of a core of people to operate a system--any system. "All it takes is your life," is true for hosting a meal or for renewing a community. Without that commitment, nothing of value will finally come of our efforts, and no group will be effective. And yet the commitment that is integrity takes itself with a grain of salt--it does not equate itself with the whole or reality, but rather strives to be, within its system, working on behalf of the well-being of the whole.

Commitment to active engagement in the world's major issues on behalf of the whole earth and the whole future is the integrity being called for today. Ours is the unique opportunity to embody it in our total thinking and action and presence. Of such is history shaped.

--John Epps