

The battle of the century: Catastrophe versus evolutionary nirvana

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I am certainly going to take liberties with the concept of “learning spaces” in this article because the universe or galaxy is the broader context I shall use. And, would you believe that this is a practical matter for me. We certainly operate at the micro level. In my current system work since 2003, and its deep learning variation since 2015, our team has been focussing simultaneously on the macro and micro levels. We find that 80% of our best ideas come from leading practitioners. We find that bottom-up and middle outward forces are more powerful and quicker than top-down changes.

2020 is a marker year. Not just because it has a good ring to it, but mostly because the factors that I am going to take up are reaching a crescendo for worse, and just maybe for the better. They represent an immediate threat and opportunity and will play themselves out in the next 80 years – not a long time when one of the very possible outcomes is human extinction. The outline of this article is laid out in three sections:

- A. The danger – climate collapse and extreme inequality.
- B. The sources of solution – evolution and the young.
- C. The nature of the solution – the 6Cs and the framework for mobilisation.

A. The danger – climate collapse and extreme inequality

The present in-your-face destruction for humankind combines climate collapse and the social fissure of ever-increasing inequality. Climate destruction includes: heat death, hunger, drowning, wildfire, freshwater drain, dying oceans, unbreathable air, global warming, and climate conflict. It is estimated that humans have roamed the earth for some 200,000 years. It is only in the last 50 years (1/4000 of that time) that we have been voluminous enough, and careless enough, to threaten the survival of earth. As put by Wallace-Wells, “global warming has improbably compressed into two generations the entire story of civilisation” (2019, p. 29). We have done this in *our lifetime!*

The other super-negative force since 1980 – again, in our lifetime – is

galloping, towering extreme inequality. You know the figures – the top 10% hold 90% of the world’s wealth, and so on – and the trend is increasing exponentially. Moreover, those working on solutions are outside the political process – what Giridharadas (2018) calls “the elite charade to changing the world” where “do-gooders” who made their money on the backs of workers only help after they have made obscene amounts of money. And, using strategies that are at best band-aids in a “winner takes all” syndrome. Giridharadas concludes that the “do good to feel good solutions” outside the system serve to make it less likely that the focus will be on improving systems *per se*. I agree.

These two forces self-propel, feeding internally on themselves, and interact to produce multiple downward forces of physical and social destruction. The worst part is that the current system *runs itself!* Collective problem solving and system solutions stand no chance in the current panoply of disguised perversity. It is a dead certainty that if these trends continue for another 20, 30, or even 80, years, the outcome will be destruction of humankind as we know it. The earth and the people on it will not be able to withstand the deep physical and social fissures that accompany the two forces that I have cited in this section.

B. The sources of solution – evolution and the young

For me there are two possible interactive sources of solution: evolution and mobilising the young. Evolution is a strange bird. Genes, culture and consciousness interact in unpredictable ways. You might say it is the luck of the draw. Or you could say that it is influenceable (or, more accurately, can you leverage its hidden trends?). Damasio (2018) observes that over the past 200,000 years (pick a number) humankind has lucked out:

[Evolution] has guided non-consciously and non-deliberately, without prior design, the selection of biological structures and mechanisms capable of not only maintaining life, but also advancing the evolution of species. (p. 26)

Then Damasio warns that our evolutionary luck may be running out. In his words: “To expect *spontaneous* [emphasis added] homeostatic harmony from large and cacophonous human collectives is to expect the unlikely” (2018, p. 219). Given section A, this seems like an eminently likely outcome. What could stave it off? Again, two

powerful and interacting forces: evolution and the young. The first question is: can you alter evolution? On the surface the answer is “no”. But not so fast: can you influence evolution? Here, I find a more promising line of thought. Pulitzer Prize-winning evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson (2014) observes that “evolution is relentlessly bottom-up as opposed to top-down”. He further notes that if we do not intervene we may end up with evolutionary outcomes that no one wants (not hard to imagine given section A above). It may be that if we set our minds to it we can leverage some favourable natural trends. Think of it this way: trying to influence evolution is like holding hands with someone who is smarter than you.

I see such an opportunity to leverage natural trends in the nature of the young as we compare “Millennials” (birth years approximately early 1980s to 1995), and “Generation Z” (birth years from 1995 to 2009). Generalisations about whole generations are dangerous, but there are definite central tendencies. Millennials, as many have observed including Giridharadas (2018, p. 42), “the majority ... want to have a job with meaning, but they are not willing to sacrifice to do good on large scale. Gen Z youth seem different; they want to ‘Engage the world Change the world’” (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018).

In the introduction to my after-dinner presentation in Marrakech, I quoted the lyrics of Canadian singer K. D. Lang’s song “Constant Craving”:

Maybe a great magnet pulls
All souls towards truth
Or maybe it is life itself
That feeds wisdom
To its youth.
(Lang & Mink, 1992, track 10)

As strange as it sounds, maybe it is no coincidence the Generation Z youth are coming along precisely when evolution needs them! Generation Z and Millennials together may represent the force of youth to combat the deadly trends described in section A. Evolution’s relentlessly bottom-up bias, combined with the potential of mobilising youth, may offer the line of development required to reverse the dance of denouement that currently sucks the life out of humankind.

C. The nature of the solution – the 6Cs and the framework for mobilisation

To move towards a solution we need a framework and organiser to guide (not detail) the directional solution. I can tell you it is not Artificial Intelligence – the machine version of deep learning – which is often devoid of humans. There are also other components of the solution pertaining to social and economic policies (such as distribution of wealth, health care, and job development) that are beyond the scope of this paper. I focus, in this paper, on issues related to learning.

The solution is to revamp and redirect learning and schooling towards the dual agenda of combating the two negative forces (winning the battle of the century) and creating a new era of flourishing that I have called “evolutionary nirvana”. Humans are capable of fantastic creativity and achievements. As well as unlimited capacity for leveraging each other’s collective achievement and wellbeing. Our team has been developing one such solution (we do not claim to have the only one), with a framework consisting of the 6Cs (character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking); four learning design elements (pedagogy, partnerships, learning environment, leveraging digital); and three actively supportive system elements (school, region, and policy levels) (see, Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018; Quinn, McEachen, Fullan,



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Gardner, & Drummy, 2020). We are also fleshing out system elements for equity, excellence and wellbeing for all (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020).

Within these developments there must be a radically different approach to learning and system change, including drawing on the knowledge of successful social movements in poor countries. It must include a central tendency to “engage the world, change the world”. It must be based on an entirely new approach to system change where joint determination of strategies and solutions dominate the change process. It must contain a pre-occupation for achieving uplifting (for all) equity and wellbeing. It must leverage the energy and innovation of youth for collective solutions. It must demonstrate that young and old, rich and poor, diverse ethnicities are equally and interactively important. It must encompass nuanced and direct leadership from many sources (Fullan, 2019, 2020).

Above all, it must know that the fate of humans and the thriving of all living things, including nature, are intertwined. It must know that evolution could have wonderful things in store for us - but only if we do our part to shape it.

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