Thrivability

Breaking through to a world that works

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Introduction

Thrivability. I first heard the word at a wiki conference in February 2007. I'd like to be able to say the effect was like lightning, but it was more like a pot slowly filling – one drop of curiosity joining another, day after day. Over time, questions began to cascade. What is this word? What does it mean? How would it be possible? Why does it feel so deeply compelling to me and others? It has taken me over like a full-blown infection of possibility. And I delight in seeing others catch the 'possibility virus' too.

Something about thriving speaks to our inner sense of harmony, abundance, greatness, generativity, aliveness, vitality, wellbeing, and right-placement. What would our lives and our society be like if we were able to say they were thriving? I want to be able to say that we are thriving. Intensely. Coming across this word was like finding the name of my homeland. The word captures all the things I want for myself, my family, my community, the organizations I work with, and the world as a whole.

People often ask me to define thrivability. Beyond defining it as 'the ability to thrive,' I struggle, as the word captures and conveys so much. Each definition seems an oversimplification. But here, in this book, I have attempted to distill the 20 years of exploration and passionate curiosity that led me first to see and then champion the idea and the reality of thrivability. Along the way, I shall describe many, major and converging shifts in many different fields – shifts that combine to make a thriving world a practical possibility. Taken together, these shifts weave a larger story of our passage from one era to another – an evolutionary phase change that we are in the midst of.

‘Thrive’ is rooted in the word ‘thrift’ but loosens it, letting go of the tightness and withholding, keeping prudence, and bursting forth with added abundance and generosity. It is that shift from the austere world of thrift to one of thriving that I am going to explore in this book.

Thrivability is not static. It is dynamic and in motion.
Thrivability is the ability for you and me to thrive, for what is around us to thrive, and for thriving to be the sum of all we do. Thrivability emerges from each of us holding the persistent intention to be generative; that is to say, to create more value than we consume. When practiced over time, this builds a world of ever-increasing possibilities.

The more I have explored, the more I believe we all want that — for ourselves and, more and more, for the world around us.

I hope you will come to see, with me, that this is neither a utopian dream nor the latest branding message from the green/sustainability movement. Instead, it is a deep call for us to shift up a level — to ‘level up’ — in our understanding of life in all its complexity, to be generative in a broader context than ever before.

**We strive toward the greatness implicit in thriving, flourishing, plentitude.**

We are in the midst of a great breakdown. In the midst of many convergent crises. And nature is always in the process of breakdown. Always in crisis.

We are also in the midst of great breakthroughs. And nature is always also in the process of breakthrough. So I see this current phase change as a great unfolding: the old order is breaking down and we are breaking through to a new order.

As part of the breakdown we are coming to recognize that the way things have been cannot continue. At the same time, ‘edge-riders’ are beginning to see the breakthroughs that are happening: breakthroughs to a human culture that won’t just sustain life but will give rise to more abundant life — as well as recognizing those things we already do that enable more life to arise.

In these pages, I invite you to explore the concepts and breakthroughs that make it possible to realistically envision and co-create a world of wellbeing and health — a world that works better. One that works for many, many more people than the world we currently inhabit, and one that works for the ecosystems we depend on. I will also describe some of the new ways of seeing and perceiving, ways of knowing and understanding, and ways of acting and doing in the world that have transformed and inspired me while I have been exploring different emerging ideas and paradigm shifts across many disciplines. Taken together, these ways of perceiving, understanding, and doing offer us practical hope and clear paths forward.

This is not a vision of a world without death, decay, or destruction. I am not suggesting an end to suffering and loss. Loss is part of the natural
cycle. And grief is a healthy response to loss. Nor am I suggesting that we can control what happens next. We can't. But we do have agency. Together, we can take actions that will make a significant difference. We don't have to stand by and passively, tragically suffer losses without purpose. Instead, let us learn to honor and grieve loss, crafting a story that honors what has been and gives courage to our next steps. This is a vision of a world where everything that decays becomes fodder for new life. Nature is our model. Life thrives. Pieces and parts may wither, be destroyed, or die, but the sum of the system can still expand. Life creates more life.

This book is about opening the space for a new story to unfold. Everyone can contribute. You already are. I invite you to rewrite the story that you tell about your own life. And from there, consider how we can together re-write a new collective story that each of us can contribute to.

So let me map out the book a little. After an overview of thrivability, I invite you to look first at our ways of Perceiving (Part I of the book). Consider how you see the world, where you're looking from and what lenses you're looking through. In Chapter 1, I explore the ‘Great Unfolding’ and face the gritty reality of what is. I name some of the problems and transformations we are engaging in. In Chapter 2, I look at the stories we tell about ourselves and the world we live in – and the difference those stories can make. To help make sense of the changes we are experiencing, I zoom out in Chapter 3 to look at the very big picture and to explore some ways of perceiving and changing our perspective. Chapter 4 has a brief primer on systems, where we clarify the difference between causality and correlation. Understanding this crucial distinction is the key to adjusting our course of action and expectations. It's the key to effective navigation.

In Part II, Understanding, I describe the tools and insights that are combining to make the possibility of thriving a more practical reality. In Chapter 5 I explore how brain science has shown us to be quite different human beings than those we thought we were and, in Chapter 6, I look at how the social revolution is shaping the emerging world today. Chapter 7 shows why information and data visualization allow us to see ourselves better – making what was once invisible now visible.

In Part III, Doing, I look at ways we can take action together for a more thrivable world. With Chapter 8, I explore some of the keys to creativity.
From there, Chapter 9 looks at how games can pull all of that together to enable us to collaborate and co-create our world in powerful ways. In Chapter 10 I explain the ‘Action Spectrum Framework’ which shows how actions that we can all take now to control, guide, and nurture have different opportunities, rewards and attribution.

The entire book is peppered with practical questions, and exercises (see the ‘Try it’ sections) to help bring thrivability to you, your community, your organization and our world. My goal is to help you move from insight into practice. The book is also full of references to people, other books, ideas and work that I have drawn on extensively. In place of footnotes and endnotes I have simply added everything to the resources section of the book’s webpage triarchypress.net/thrivability

Feel free to skip sections you feel you know already, skim to the takeaways, or play in the ‘Try It’ sections. Note that most of the ‘Try It’ questions focus on the individual – you. Transformation of organizations and systems starts with individuals who are willing to ask questions and consider things from a different point of view. I am offering questions for you that can spiral out from you to your connections, organization, and indeed to society at large.

My goal is to equip you with tools to see and act in ways that enrich your life, your community, your business, and our world.

My goal is selfish really... since I believe that enriching our world will create the world I want my children to grow up in and interact with. Maybe you want that for future generations too?

Throughout the book I will be giving attention – not to our old models of the world which are failing us now – but to the pilots and forerunners of new models that are already running and working. Old paradigms no longer make sense of everything we can perceive in the world around us. We can wring our hands with worry about that, or we can look for new models that better describe the world we find ourselves in. I invite you to look forward to the next era for humanity. Welcome to Thrivability.
PART I: PERCEIVING

Nearly hit by a bus? Get results back from the doctor letting you know that you are in the clear – a near miss? Hear a tragic story that made you think, if not for some small decision your fate would have been the same as theirs?

When I was working with a philanthropic advisor, Drake, we talked about these moments that open people up to generous giving and purposeful living. They are powerful moments where suddenly we see the world from a different view and make massive changes to re-orient to a new true north in ourselves. Inspirational stories often have this insight moment in them. And you can’t really trick people into them very easily, even though we love hearing them.

Through numerous conversations with Drake, I started to see that our way of perceiving things is like a program we are running. Disruptive events can trigger shifts in that unconscious programming. But also hearing of someone else having such a moment can be potent too. It was certainly challenging for me because I had to acknowledge with each of the stories we looked at that I wasn’t aware of this programming in my life. I had to start critically examining the lenses I was viewing my own life through and I had to make adjustments. Did it really take a bus or medical tests for me to realize that I should say a heartfelt “I love you” to the people who mattered to me? Or make right my arguments quickly lest someone die, leaving that wound to haunt me?

Probably the biggest moment for me in this period changed my life dramatically. I had been struggling in my marriage. I had chosen to stay for the sake of our kids. My programming said: their happiness has to come before everything. Things shifted when I realized I needed to really live the life I wanted – if I was going to champion my kids to choose and live the lives they wanted. I needed to do it, not just tell them or read them stories about it. I couldn’t ask them to live boldly if I wasn’t. After that perspective shift, I radically altered my life and my parenting.

Although I was working with Drake to help more people lead purposeful lives, in the process I had to fix a lot of things in my own life. And it didn’t make my life any easier for quite some time. Proceed with caution. You might end up feeling you need to change your own life, your work, and
the way you engage with the world. At the same time, learning how to be in charge of your own perceptions can be really thrilling, opening up possibilities and deepening connections that matter.

Can you see the story of thriving unfolding? If you don't already see it all around you, then our first step together is to become aware of the different viewpoints from which each of us looks at the world, and the different lenses we look through – and to see how we might change them.

Are we being too myopic as a society in the view we have of the future (and the present)? In this section on perceiving, I want to equip you with doubts, so you can challenge things that you've been certain of until now. And I want to equip you with new possibilities and ways of seeing, so you can decide for yourself what story you want to tell about the world you're living in.
CHAPTER 1

The Great Unfolding: Crisis and Opportunities

A number of recent books by experts in the field confirm what many of us already suspect— that there is a financial and economic crisis at hand (although it seems to me that something remains unsaid or unnoticed about what is unfolding before us).

_The Great Disruption_ by Paul Gilding tells of the impending and unavoidable financial and environmental crisis and offers a grand plan to change course. But the author insists that we will avoid acknowledging these problems or taking significant action until we can't ignore them any more. Only then will we act. Jared Diamond offers dire warnings in _Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed_, showing how the concerns that face us are similar to the concerns of other societies that have collapsed in the past. Joshua Cooper Ramo’s _The Age of the Unthinkable: Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us And What We Can Do About It_ acknowledges that we are participants in complex adaptive systems (more about these later) that require radically new approaches.

No matter what we call it, there is a convergence of crises at hand that involves a breakdown in the growth-focused form of capitalism.

You don't have to be a Marxist to see this; just look around and see the infectious movement of people across the political spectrum who are saying, “we’ve had enough.” Physical infrastructure is crumbling. According to Jo Guldi of the Harvard Society of Fellows:

“As anti-government politics choked infrastructure spending, they not only halted development but also seriously damaged the nation’s skeleton. Eighty percent of the nation’s dams are more than 50 years old. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that some 41 of these dams are at risk of causing imminent destruction of life and property. Infrastructure maintenance in the United States as a whole is behind to the degree of $1.6 trillion.
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America’s magnificent cage of infrastructure is like a dying coral reef, poisoned by a facile form of fiscal conservatism.”

And it isn’t just the tremendous infrastructure of a modernist era that has aged and crumbled. It’s the systemic infrastructures our society lives upon that are disintegrating under their own weight and internal contradictions—financial, political, and social. The entire process of elections in the US became questionable in 2000 with the Bush/Kerry election. US citizens, by and large, simply don’t trust the election process anymore. The education system is widely perceived to need a major overhaul. And five years of the Great Recession doesn’t bode well for the current financial system, which—according to the International Monetary Fund—has seen 425 systemic financial and monetary crises around the world in the last 40 years.

As these infrastructure systems collapse, breakdown, or transform, they pull on the warp and weft of our world, opening up a new dimension that can help to extract us from the rigidity of our dualisms: capitalism/communism, dictator/democracy, left/right, male/female. I call what’s happening the ‘Great Unfolding’ and I believe it reveals new and greater possibilities.

We have before us the perfect storm for triggering a sense of purpose: convergent catastrophes across numerous domains: economic, political, social, and environmental.

The Economic Reality

The polarizing marketplace tensions of the twentieth century—capitalism and communism, and their drivers: the political left and the political right—are coming to be recognized as useful, but only limited, improvements on what came before: feudalism. Communism may have fallen first from its inconsistencies and poorly designed incentives, but capitalism—as we have known it—teeters precariously too.

We have learned much from both approaches as we evolve through systems that better enable autonomy, mastery, and purpose—which Daniel Pink claims are the three keys to human motivation. Capitalism made more room for these three keys than communism. It enabled much more autonomy than feudalism as well as deeper specialization (which brings with it a sense of mastery). However, it is time to accommodate the human drive for a purpose that goes beyond the individual and senses something greater than ourselves.
The big idea that has been touted about capitalism, markets, and endless growth – that an abundance of things for consumers to consume leads to human progress and betterment – turns out to be a myth. The same is true of trickle-down economics – the myth that when the rich do well, they will pay for goods and services that employ the lower classes, thus cascading wealth down the financial prosperity ladder. There are numerous ways of arguing that the environment cannot continue to support economic systems based on infinite growth. These arguments use evidence based on population growth, food and water supply, money systems, health and many other issues. But I shall use one, concise, non-environmental argument to make the point. It proves the faulty logic at the heart of endless-growth capitalism. The argument is central to Tom Osenton’s book *The Death of Demand*, which has solid, long-term data revealing that all companies and all products experience two growth trends during their life cycle – an uptrend and a downtrend.

When Osenton released his book in 2004, it was largely ignored. Who would want to hear the news about ‘innovation saturation’? And what were investors supposed to do with this knowledge? Today, more and more people are recognizing the validity of his argument.

Osenton looks the part of a researcher focused on finding the truth rather than a troublemaker intent on proving a point or stirring anxiety. When I spoke with him in late 2009, he was all numbers, patterns, and seriousness. The first time we met, we drew furiously on the 3x5 cards I had with me that night. He would explain, then I would draw while he clarified. In 2005 his research had been validated in a study that took the revenue growth rates of the top S&P 500 corporations. He talked about having found the pattern by covering his walls with the graphs of company after company – looking not just at revenue growth, but the rate of growth. And he looked at 10-year lumps instead of quarterly fluctuations, zooming out to see a larger historic pattern. He must have seemed like a madman with his walls covered like that, but how else could he have seen in one view so much information and the pattern it contained? The scale of the project and the quiet diligence of this man impressed me.

“After experiencing a period of ever-increasing growth rates, a company hits a wall, at which time growth rates turn south at ever-decreasing rates,” he says. “At this point, revenue as a profit driver loses steam and in its place cost-cutting grows in importance in order to deliver what Wall
Street demands – ever-increasing earnings. However, just as revenue as an earnings driver has its limits, so too does cost-cutting. This illusory dance can continue for many years – but make no mistake about where it’s headed. And it’s very important to remember that cost-cutting and job-creation are enemies that cannot possibly co-exist – especially at a maturing organization.” So growth-decay companies are effectively starving themselves of resources to give the appearance of continually expanding margins. Who is in growth decay? The majority of companies listed on Wall Street.

Increasing rates of growth are a thing of the past for too much of Wall Street. The collective peak (see chart) was in the 1980s. Too many of the companies traded there have passed their growth peak – the result of innovation saturation. The Wall Street stock market was designed to generate investment in businesses that were growing, but now it contains too many companies that are no longer increasing their rates of growth. We have become so effective at growth that the time from ‘start-up’ to ‘growth peak’ is getting significantly shorter. Instead of the long slopes of growth we saw with companies like Procter and Gamble over 100 years, we have Microsoft in 20 years, and Groupon in a couple years. The time to peak is so short in fact that even products or companies a decade old can be past their growth peak.

Another way of looking at this change is to compare the rate at which companies get bumped off the S&P 500 – the index of the 500 most valuable companies traded on the US stock market. Richard Foster has done this and, as reported in Technology Review:

“What Foster found is that... Back in 1958, a company could expect to stay on the list for 61 years. These days, the average is just 18 years.”
And this growth-to-decay cycle is getting faster. Infinite growth, like the ‘Emperor’s New Clothes,’ has been shown to be an illusion. The housing crisis and the dot-com boom/bust have revealed the Wall Street Empire to be as naked as the emperor in the fairy tale. The Occupy movement has already succeeded by one measure: it broke the shared fiction about Wall Street for all of us.

Much of the problem lies with the incentive system of Wall Street – financial rewards in return for growth. The system demands what too many companies can’t provide.

**Thriving is different than growing.**

In this way, the whole system becomes untenable. Unless a new sector kicks off, there isn’t enough mass in the early growth stages to counter the tremendous size and scale of those entering the late stages of growth decay.

And innovation can’t save us, if it is innovation that simply replaces existing technology. To really grow the economy overall, we need what is called accretive innovation – new products and services in addition to those we have already – not just incremental innovation – replacements or improvements on what is there now.

**We should not be surprised that business ethics are in decline when the ‘valuation’ beast has to be fed.**

Alongside all this come the regular revelations about poor, unethical and corrupt business practice. It isn’t as simple as a few bad actors; rather, it’s the system that places such high demands on post-growth companies that bad acts become the only means to satisfy traders. Deceit becomes a desperate act for survival. As a result, bad becomes good when seen through the lens of efficiency as measured by survival and marketplace robustness. Desperately seeking to meet the expectations of stockholders and shareholders with growth by any means, corporations use ever more drastic, illusory measures to hide declining rates of growth. In the process they focus on ever more short-term thinking and short-term profits.

**Trustworthiness is the very core of an economy.**

The end result? Trust in the system itself collapses and decays as people realize how badly the system functions. This then undermines the wider social and political system as trust is at the root of effective financial
and political action and transaction. This is a crucial lesson for the Great Unfolding – one we seem to have to learn again and again.

**If you want an economy to thrive, build for trust. Make it worthy of trust. Reinforce the infrastructure to ensure good faith.**

As the business universe seems set to implode, we face some catastrophic cascading impacts for a large number of people in the US and in the rest of the world. Are there options? Where is stability to be found in these changing times?

First of all, off Wall Street, small and medium size businesses don’t necessarily face these issues. Many of them don’t focus on infinite growth. For these companies, what matters is staying trim enough to be agile and robust enough to stay alive in lean times. While companies that are not publicly traded still focus on providing goods and services in profitable ways, the local mom-and-pop restaurant isn’t trying to squeeze ever more tables into the room, ever more seats at every table, or ever more meals into every day (or whatever scaling innovations corporations create to prop up their rates of growth). They understand that there are natural limits – what Osenton calls the ‘Theory of Natural Limits’. These companies suffer no illusions about infinitely increasing their sales. Small business isn’t serving Wall Street stockholders and shareholders.

For the stockholder world to survive, companies past their growth peak will have to buy back their shares. Shares were designed to help emerging companies gather the investment they needed to grow. A useful mechanism. But if companies are not going to grow forever, we need processes and practices for shifting companies from the investment phase to the maturation phase. Or even into the hospice, if necessary. Right now the only acceptable way out for a business (or a nonprofit) is to be consumed by another as a prize catch. We need other options that can foster trust in the system as a whole.

**An increasing demand for transparency, even in non-publicly traded companies, can ensure the work of the ‘invisible hand.’**

Non-publicly traded companies still account for a significant portion of the economy. These companies are primed to adapt to the changing business environment. Their profit margins may not allow their executives or owners to take multi-million dollar bonuses. But such bonuses only serve to magnify the extreme and increasing disparities between rich and poor. If you don’t
think income ‘diversity’ is an issue for you, check the data from Richard Wilkinson and if you want a glimpse into what emerging solutions to this disparity might look like, explore the Slow Money movement, BALLE, and all the Go-Local endeavors.

More than this, a new sector is coming to life that makes more explicit a method and measure for trustworthiness. B corporations, L3Cs, and other For-Benefit Corporations, Social Enterprises, and blended models open the way for a hybrid of business and social benefit. While this movement has roots that are decades old, the scale and scope of the market is rapidly expanding and offers an opportunity for our current form of capitalism to evolve into one that pays more attention to the community it is part of, the people it serves and employs, and the effects of all its actions and activities. All this can help make it more trustworthy. Marketplaces for social business expand daily, driven by companies that are still young enough to be in their upward growth cycle and primed for investment. The returns are financial as well as social/environmental.

The Political Reality

There is, of course, another disturbance beside the economic one – it is the political disturbance described by Jane Mayer and others. It has been brought about mostly because politics has morphed from being an ideological to a corporate battleground as a result of campaign finance ‘reform’.

Especially in the United States, what was once a useful distinction between the left and the right has become the artificially crafted polarity of two sides to the same position. As both the left and right have tried to sway the margins of the opposing group, they have moved closer and closer to the center. The political center becomes a gnarly knot. This is the entanglement of the current political scene that serves funders (that is, corporations) but means the left and right have come so close to the center that they have collapsed into each other in a meaningless ‘neo’ muddle where the seeming differences entrance voters while serving corporations from both sides.

The interesting question becomes: Is there something else emerging? Yes. And it isn’t just the Tea Party. (Because parties that fight AGAINST things rather than FOR things are not creative. They have no core once their demands are met or become irrelevant – they implode without something
to fight against. This is yet another reason why the fear-mongering of the current Republican and Democratic parties is killing both sides.

One way this emerging political movement is manifesting itself is as follows. On the left are Pragmatic Progressives focused on social justice, social change, and driven by a moral code based on equality. The Pragmatic Progressives may value justice over business, but they know business can be more just. They hope that their causes can become more resilient and financially self-stabilizing (rather than grant-dependent) by adding for-profit strategies. On the right, we find Libertarians emerging in place of Liberals. The Libertarians, valuing freedom, small government, and free markets want to show that we can ‘bootstrap’ ourselves and make it on our own – theirs is a vision of the rugged, autonomous individual. They feel that business – not government or philanthropy – is the solution to social ills.

Both sides show up together in a place called social enterprise. Attend events for social entrepreneurs, and you will see these people who, under the old model of politics, are at opposite ends of the spectrum, now rub shoulders, make deals, and agree vigorously on a path forward. What brings them together is the flag of individual agency – the idea that each of us has the right to act with agency in our lives.

Take a walk around Silicon Valley or across much of San Francisco. Peruse the funding models of Skoll, Omidyar, and other dot.com millionaires like Tim O’Reilly — a big advocate of Open Government. They are a strange blend of Stewart Brand’s Whole Earth Catalog and self-made millionaire geeks. This is not a small group, and those in it wield significant financial and, more importantly, cultural influence.

Weave together the Pragmatic Progressives and the Libertarians (these outdated terms may soon be replaced). The old political poles of left and right disappear, and new poles of tension emerge. You will find a similar political ‘crossover’ or alignment at Slow Money and BALLE, for example.

Even more than that, this group — the Social Entrepreneur party, you might say — often closely aligns itself to another group — the Pirate Party or the Open Government/Transparency Party — which is emerging now in many parts of the world. Pirates are interested in shifting the way we handle intellectual property, strengthening individual privacy, and also increasing government transparency.
Identity was once constructed by what we bought or what party we belonged to. In the Great Unfolding, identity will be decided by what we make and whether others can share and build on that.

In the Great Unfolding, politics will continue to drive toward greater transparency. As people move away from the collapsed political center, it may be that the Unfolding brings with it a party focused on enabling agency at the individual and community level.

For now, the Great Unfolding is about the promise of the new systems we can step into as we move beyond the old polarized approach. The future is already here, it simply hasn’t scaled nor been mapped yet. The edges move toward each other as the center collapses. It folds in upon itself. It unfolds a new era. The choice is between embracing this new era or trying to salvage a broken, limited past.

The Social Reality
Concurrent with the breakdowns in the financial and political space is a breakdown in the social space. A gap is emerging between two paradigms of social reality, which is mostly rooted in generational difference and the digital divide. Much has been said of the digital native. And we begin to see just how vast the breakdown is as people locked in the old era of social engagement fail to grasp – or even detect – the social aliveness of a new space. Twentieth century media companies survive on coach potatoes. Millions of them. When those people shift from passive participation to active creation and sharing, a different social reality emerges. Clay Shirky describes this in *Here Comes Everybody* and Don Tapscott covers it in *Wikinomics*.

This is not the surface froth of social media where everyone shares what they had for lunch. This is how Wikipedia got made, this is how news spreads faster on Twitter than on television, and this is how swarming hashtags tell us what is crystallizing in the collective mind of millions. The older generations bemoan the lack of leadership in the upcoming generations, blind to the consequences of a postmodern outlook that has toppled the image of the hero or leader.

New forms of social organization emerge with very different models of leadership and technology is piloting a new social order. Even now the meme is spreading to other industries where talk of “open sourcing this” and “open sourcing that” percolates through conversations where it was previously unheard.
The wiki-way of ‘doing what you see needing to be done’ instead of waiting for someone to tell you to do it means that anyone can be a leader.

Identity that was once based on status and wealth is increasingly based on merit – actions are more valuable than money. We shift from a world where what we each have announces our social position to one where what we have is shared – where relationship with others is what defines us. It matters less if I own it and more if I can have access when I need it through those I know and trust. I am what I share and who I share it with. I am not what I hoard to myself. I am what I do, right now and with others, not what I did in the past. As our society unfolds into a whole set of new values, priorities, and ways of being, those who can’t see it are left behind wondering where everyone went.

The Social Unfolding is the most revolutionary of the four aspects we are looking at, as those who have stepped into the new era may hardly understand or recognize the older social order or its expectations. It is inherent in the wiki way and Buckminster Fuller’s adage has never been truer: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

The Environmental Reality

Finally, the Environmental Unfolding, while perhaps less noticeable in some regards, forms the fourth aspect of the Great Unfolding. At first you may take me to mean that the environmental movement is gaining ground and that more people are aware of climate change. Sure, that unfolding seems obvious to most of us. But I mean something else.

Activists who have been fighting for sustainability and environmentalism since the 1970s and 80s have paved the way for some remarkable actions and progress toward greater awareness and engagement with the environment. Without them, we wouldn’t talk about sustainability in any context, nor would we have so many of the current environmental regulations in place or wild places to enjoy. In some ways though it also feels like this movement has hit the limits to growth. What is happening?

A shift in awareness reveals an unfolding within the environmental movement too. People like me grew up recycling, growing our own food, being mindful of the environment. We were early to hear about – and respond to – the panic over climate change. Our childhood anxiety focused
on the hole in the ozone layer. A few years – and in some cases decades – of panic about our environment has run us to an edge. We have had it. Enough. We can’t get more people to sign a petition or change their business practices or eat more mindfully. So we have been doing some work on consciousness. Our own consciousness.

From that work, we become more free of judgments about others and find greater acceptance of ourselves and the world. The new unfolding story about the environmental movement is that mother nature isn’t a weak and fragile baby we need to take care of. It is a powerful force to be worked with. Even established environmental nonprofits such as the Nature Conservancy have taken up the ‘with’ mode. It isn’t about saving nature from us or saving nature for us, it is about working with our ecosystems to maintain them and improve quality of life for people too.

The shift is deep. It moves away from a self-righteousness that tended to offend those outside the movement. To make moral arguments about the environment only works for those who share those morals. Personal experience and clear incentives lay the groundwork for real transformation, regardless of moral philosophy.

Shaking fists doesn’t win hearts for a long journey, but an inspiring and visionary story might. A story that is practical, grounded, and experience-based has a better chance than most of getting people to cross cultural and moral divides.

We need to shift from ‘right vs wrong’ action which creates ‘us vs them’ dynamics to pragmatic action with a ‘what works here?’ focus.

Because this evolution or unfolding in the environmental movement drops the antagonism generated by past activism, it becomes harder to see the size and shape of this collective. The people taking part in this unfolding don’t necessarily resist capitalism or business. Their voices are not strident and antagonistic or media spectacular. It isn’t about speeches and rallies. It is about being a work horse for purpose and vision. Being action-focused, these people, and I hope I am one of them, look at what is useful, what makes sense, and then whether it will make sense to others and be relevant to them.

**Takeaway**

What if this is the perfect storm? What if all the looming catastrophes turn out to be the ‘near miss’ that it takes to push humans to take a
different view of each other and the world? What if a different world is unfolding right now. Different from the stories the media, our friends, our causes, our religions tell us.

It is not my intent to convince you that a different world is arriving. It is my intent to cast doubt on the current story, ripping an opening in it big enough to wonder what else might be possible. What adjacent possibility can we step into? If the dualist story that we have been living in turns out to be wrong — if there are many more options besides the simplistic left/right, good/bad choices we are offered — then what other strange attractors might be pulling on the fabric of our world?

While economic catastrophe and business failures hit the news and extend our sense of discomfort, there are also good businesses that can continue to be the backbone of our economy. They just aren’t the media darlings on Wall Street. Trustworthiness is the core of exchange, which is, in turn, the basis of economic life. Where are we building more trust?

Politics is also imploding from a lack of trust, so the unfolding will champion transparency and bring together strange playmates who share goals around individual agency and the freedom to share information and ideas.

Our social reality is transforming too. The new form is imperceptible to those rooted in the old social order. “Do what you see needs doing!” might be the new motto. Power in this new social reality can be diffuse when it is attacked and can aggregate when it converges on a goal. If you haven’t caught this cultural virus, then everything about it will probably confuse you.

Finally, the environmental reality unfolding has lost its self-righteous moral edge. This is giving it a new stealth, where environmentalists can be anywhere, calmly working to transform from where they are without raising fists or canvassing.

The ‘us vs them’ dynamic is faltering. There isn’t a clear story of some ‘other’ that has been doing this to our world. We are the ones. The ‘them’ is simply all of ‘us’ together. So what are we going to do about ourselves? Can we show compassion for ourselves for our journey thus far and challenge ourselves to generate something more useful? What story can you imagine is unfolding? Welcome to thrivability and…

Level up!