

What's Needed

What we need to know and do to be effective cultural midwives

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WHAT ARE THE BEST STRATEGIES for positive and graceful cultural change? In detail, there will be many answers, but in broad outline I have come to feel that the choices are remarkably clear. To explain this, let me begin with a very general "answer." Drawing on the analysis and images in James and Marguerite Craig's *Synergic Power*, it seems to me that there are three key things needed as the basis of an effective strategy:

- Knowledge of the way things are
- A vision of what could be
- An understanding of the general process of cultural change

Out of these can come a sense of the missing "bridge" that leads from "what is" to "what could be." The challenge for the cultural midwife is to create (and use) such a bridge.

Even at this very general level, this "answer" makes some important choices. It claims that the best strategy 1) begins with knowledge, 2) works *with* the underlying system, 3) has a vision, and 4) is fundamentally creative. Still, this is only a beginning. To give this model more substance, let's apply it to our present situation.

Understanding Our Situation

There are many levels from which we can view the state of the world in the late 20th century. Lester Brown's article earlier in this issue provides a good immediate global perspective. Looking at slightly longer trends, *At The Crossroads* began by identifying a number of key forces converging on the late 20th century:

- The explosion of electronic communications and rapid travel
- The biotechnological revolution and the creation of new life forms
- The rapid development of microelectronics, computers, and robotics
- Encountering the physical and ecological limits of the earth through both exploding population and rapidly expanding technological impact
- The development of nuclear and other weapons of global suicide
- The widening gap between rich and poor
- The changing roles of women and the family
- The move into outer space

From these and similar familiar features of our times, it is clear that we are going through a process of rapid cultural change. Indeed, many of these items are qualitatively unlike anything in past history.

Yet even this larger perspective doesn't really clarify our situation. The magnitude of the changes are impressive, even overwhelming, but they don't fit into a meaningful pattern. To get to a really useful perspective, I have found that I need to take a much longer historical view.

The Roads and Crossroads Of History The outline of history that I have found more useful is sketched in the accompanying diagram, and can be described as follows.



History (so far) has two major cultural epochs, the tribal hunting and gathering period and the age of empire and conquest. Each of these is characterized by a relatively stable set of mutually supporting cultural institutions.

Between these two epochs is the transition period of the agricultural/urban revolution. It began with a technical change (farming) that was at first incorporated into the old social structures of the tribe. But between the pressures of intergroup conflict and the opportunities provided by the new storable/stealable wealth, the old tribal structures couldn't contain the new cultural energy. The time was ripe for a new social paradigm, which came in the form of the hierarchical society, with warriors and priest/scholars on the top and farmers (in various layers) underneath. This allowed the formation of much larger social units, which led in turn to cities and all that we know as civilization.

As we look at more recent history, all the indications are that we have entered a second transition period, beginning somewhere in the last 500 years. Looked at in this way, the industrial revolution has many similarities to the agricultural revolution. It is a technical shift that has been, at first, assimilated into the old social patterns of hierarchy (in both the corporate West and the bureaucratic East), but is providing more cultural energy (e.g. nuclear weapons) than these old patterns can handle. What we speak of as the industrial era is thus a hybrid, blending 1) capabilities on which a positive future could be based with 2) values and institutions that belong to the past. What we are still searching for are the new cultural patterns that could replace the inadequate forms from the age of empire.

To get a sense of what these new patterns might be, it will be helpful to look at the basic characteristics of the two previous epochs. During the hunting and gathering time, the most important aspects of your world - what you really had to pay attention to - were your natural environment and your peers in your tribe. Stable conditions where survival depended on extensive ecological knowledge placed a high value on the wisdom of the elders and the ancestors. People of other tribes were generally a minor feature in your life, as were possessions. Significant conflicts were essentially within the tribe and were resolved with an aim towards healing the family.

The age of empire turned this all upside down. The most important aspect of your world became the pressure from other groups - either other nations or other classes. Possessions, especially control of land and natural resources, became vitally important as the source of power. The new strategy for resolving conflict was to win - to totally destroy or subjugate your enemy - giving you complete control over the possessions of the loser. These cultural patterns permitted rapid change, the organization of large numbers of people, and massive concentrations of wealth. On the other hand, they made rather inefficient use of both human and natural resources.

For thousands of years the world was big enough that empires could ride roughshod over it without causing more than local damage, but today all those forces listed earlier in this article are pushing us to the point where we must again pay attention to the natural environment and make better use of our human resources. Current events even suggest that we are already a few years into a reactionary revitalization movement (in the form of Reagan, Thatcher, etc.). If this fails in a few more years (as I suspect it will), we will be faced with a major cultural decision-point.

So our situation is that we are approaching a climax within a 500-year-old transition out of a 5000-year-old epoch.

Understanding The Vision

Where does this lead us? Studies by various futurists suggest that we have only four main roads leading forward:

- Continued industrial expansion based on technological breakthroughs that somehow allow us to circumvent what we now see as ecological limits.

- A massive collapse, whether through nuclear war or continuing ecological mismanagement.
- A period of stagnation, with elites maintaining their position through increasing repression of the masses.
- A fundamental cultural shift that makes significantly better use of our human capabilities and brings us into harmony with the needs of the environment.

To some extent, all of these futures are now being experienced somewhere on the globe. Of the four, only the last option represents a true solution to our present problems. The others either postpone a resolution or destroy the whole game.

What might this fourth option be like? Like hunters and gatherers, the natural environment and our peers would again become the most important aspects of our world. But now our "peers" would encompass the whole globe, and we would have to find ways of resolving conflict that were more healing and less wasteful than the win-lose patterns of empire. This would involve a fundamental shift in values, the essence of which I would express as: *Love the totality, and the mystery that is more than the totality, with your whole being; and love each part of the whole, every bush and star and brother, as you love yourself.*

Acting Effectively

How can we do this? From the perspective of my earlier article, the answer is clear: *Build new cultural pathways.* In particular, we need to be creating all kinds of new institutions (in business, government, education, finance, etc.) that could become the practical components of a new cultural synthesis. Examples (as described in other issues of *IN CONTEXT*) are provided by the Mondragon Cooperatives in northern Spain, community land trusts, various programs of learner-centered education, citizen diplomacy and transnational non-governmental organizations, etc. These provide a start, but there is much more that needs to be done.

But even more fundamentally, we need to be creating and sharing with each other new cultural "ground rules" for how to act with each other, especially in groups. The age of empire depends on keeping most people isolated and thereby conquered. It has trained us to be awful at group process. But we don't have to accept this incompetence. Building on lessons learned through "personal" growth, we are ripe for the joys of learning really effective, mutually empowering group process.

The strategy is thus simply this: Be aware of our historical situation, become completely at home with the skills and spirit of win-win group process, and then apply these skills to building new model institutions, seeds for the future. Within this frame of reference it may be appropriate to work against the many damaging activities of the dying age of empire, but the major thrust can remain positive. Educate yourself about the parallel work of others, and support them as best you can. Our successes will gather energy, and as the old institutions become increasingly dysfunctional, our seeds will give people a place to turn. If we do our preparation well now, the new synthesis will emerge with strength and a solid foundation when the time is ripe.

As a contribution to this strategy, the rest of this section focuses on the skills and ideas needed for win-win group process. To put these articles to best use, share them with friends and co-workers. Use them as the basis for creating new ground rules. Remember, culture is a *shared* process.

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