

The State of the World Forum

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In November the Network was invited to convene and conduct a series of round-tables on New Visions in Science as part of this annual Forum held in San Francisco. As one of the speakers on Science, I agreed to write this summary: but how does one summarize 5 days, from 8.45 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. (not counting a prior meditation and a later cultural event) sometimes in 24 parallel sessions, with talks and discussions during lunch, covering science, the environment, leadership, social change, arms control and much more? This can only be a personal impression, to which other members who were there can add.

Three features stood out in these impressions. The first was the role of women. If asked to nominate the two most significant cultural changes of the past millennium, I would place alongside the development of Western science the way in which women, in a global movement, have reclaimed from the patriarchy their own cultural strength. The organizers of the Forum had ensured that half of the delegates were women, and their contributions vividly demonstrated the importance of this movement for the survival of humanity. We saw it in the passion of the engineering executive LESLIE DANZINGER who was overthrowing a pattern of work that expected her to leave outside the office door almost everything that was truly herself. We saw it as the poet MARIANNE WILLIAMSON pointed to the factor stopping the expression of people's will for change: the need for our fears for ourselves, and our sorrows for others, to be named and embraced in a community whose members hold each other in love. And it emerged in many of the more detailed discussions, such as the report by AMRITA DASS on the consequences of the Beijing Women's Conference, where, unlike most such high profile jamborees, a record number of its resolutions have been transformed into legislation in individual participating states as a result of the work of women's action groups linked into an international network.

The second feature was the role of complex self-organizing systems. For over two millennia the dominant model in the West, for both explanation and organization, has been that of hierarchy. In Aristotelian cosmology, action flows down through the heavenly spheres, an image taken up by Dionysius in his Angelic Hierarchy. Inspired by this, the Church is accordingly ordered into pope, bishops, priests, deacons and laity, following which Sears retail stores is organized into managing director, sub-managers, foremen and workers. Newtonian cosmology is founded on the same pyramidal structure, this time with atoms at the base, molecules at the second layer and so on up to the entire cosmic order at the top. But it ain't necessarily so. REBECCA ADAMSON (founder of a development institute working with indigenous peoples) described the totally different organization models of the Kalahari bushmen, based on a web of interactions. We also heard how the aforementioned Sears, threatened with imminent bankruptcy, had replaced its hierarchical command chain by a system in which responsibility was devolved. The biological systems discussed by BRIAN GOODWIN and MAE WAN HO as part of the Network's contribution, whether cells in a developing embryo or plankton co-ordinating their actions through light emission, functioned not through a central command structure, but by the complex interactions of autonomous units. There was an implicit suggestion from many of the speakers from business that this model could fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of state-centralized socialism, on the one hand, and the obscene ruthlessness of multinational capitalism on the other hand.

To interject a personal comment, it seems to me that this concept of self-organizing systems has so far given us a language, but still needs a lot of development before it gives us results. We can now characterize the different levels of stability that occur in systems, whether simple or complex; and there are suggestive indications that successful living systems maintain themselves in the less stable regions (technically, between Lyapunov stability and ergodicity). But when it comes to complex systems, it is only in very simple examples such as neural networks that there are any clear results about what sort of interconnections and types of individual behaviour lead to what sorts of stability and non-stability. Generalizations from such results to the handling of human societies should clearly be carried out with extreme caution.

The third feature was the role of youth. I and other middle-aged-and-beyond stalwarts of the Network are currently trying to prepare the ground; but (judging by the current rate of progress) we will be in our dotage, if not our graves, when the really tough political decisions are being made on which the long term sustainability of humanity will depend. Mindful of such things, the Forum organizers had established an Emerging Leaders Project which had brought a large group of young people to be full participants in the Forum. In addition, many of the main speakers were young, making their wisdom all the more impressive. For example, the Nigerian HAFSAT ABIOLA, movingly described how, when her father had been imprisoned for winning the Nigerian election and her mother had been gunned down by six government henchmen, she had continued to support the main opposition party in Nigeria. Her indomitable spirit was born of the outpouring love of her parents to her, kindling her own pride in her worth, and her own love for her land and people.

There is much, I think, that the Network can learn from these three roles, about the way we operate and the focus of our deliberations. I would like to finish, however, by adding to them some of the opening words of the Forum which established the tone of our discussions at a level deeper than the analytical. Its President, JAMES GARRISON, spoke of the need 'in unknowingness ... to carve out within ourselves a deeper sense of reverence for the sacredness which surrounds us and a deeper sense of humility in the face of the life process itself which sustains our very beings', and this was later echoed by MARC LUCYKX, from the European Commission, as 'Modernity has faded out: what is waiting for us is re-enchantment'. And, to set in context the many words that were about to be spoken over the next four days, the poet DAVID WHITE offered us

Loaves and Fishes

This is not the Age of Information.

This is not the Age of Information.

Forget the news

and the radio

and the blurred screen.

This is the time of loaves and fishes:

people are hungry

and one good word is food for a thousand.