WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

FACING REALITY
CLAIMING LEADERSHIP
RESTORING SANITY

MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

Bestselling author of *Leadership and the New Science*

If you enjoy this excerpt…

consider becoming a member of the reader community on our website!

[Click here for sign-up form](#). Members automatically get 10% off print, 30% off digital books.

WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

Other Books by Margaret J. Wheatley

So Far from Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World

Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now, coauthored with Deborah Frieze

Perseverance

Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time

Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future

A Simpler Way, coauthored with Myron Kellner-Rogers

Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World

How Does Raven Know? Entering Sacred World: A Meditative Memoir

WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

FACING REALITY
CLAIMING LEADERSHIP
RESTORING SANITY

MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

Who Do We Choose to Be?

Dedication

For Pema Chödrön who, with pure insight and compassion, led me onto the path of warriorship and continues to guide me ever deeper

and

For the Warriors for the Human Spirit who have joined me in training so we might learn how best to serve this time

The Warriors arise
when the people need protection

We don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

— Howard Zinn, historian

What This World Needs

This world does not need more entrepreneurs.
This world does not need more technology breakthroughs.
This world needs leaders.

We need leaders who put service over self, who can be
steadfast through crises and failures, who want to stay
present and make a difference to the people, situations, and
causes they care about.

We need leaders who are committed to serving people, who
recognize what is being lost in the haste to dominate, ignore,
and abuse the human spirit.

We need leaders because leadership has been debased
as those who take things to scale or are first to market or
dominate the competition or develop killer apps. Or hold onto
power by constantly tightening their stranglehold of fear until
people are left lifeless and cowering.

We need leaders now because we have failed to implement
what was known to work, what would have prevented or
mitigated the rise of hatred, violence, poverty, and ecological

destruction. We have not failed from a lack of ideas and technologies. We have failed from a lack of will. The solutions we needed were already here.

Now it is too late. We cannot solve these global issues globally. We can see them clearly. We can understand their root causes. We have evidence of solutions that would have solved them. But we refused to compromise, to collaborate, to persevere in resolving them as an intelligent, creative species living on one precious planet.

Now it's up to us, not as global leaders but as local leaders. We can lead people to create positive changes locally that make life easier and more sustainable, that create possibility in the midst of global decline.

Let us use whatever power and influence we have, working with whatever resources are already available, mobilizing the people who are with us to work for what they care about.

As President Teddy Roosevelt enjoined us:

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

OPENING

Let your wisdom as a human being connect with the power of things as they are.

— Chögyam Trungpa, Buddhist teacher

An Invitation to the Nobility of Leadership

It is possible, in this time of profound disruption, for leadership to be a noble profession that contributes to the common good. It is possible, as we face the fearful complexity of life-destroying problems, to experience recurring moments of grace and joy. It is possible, as leaders of organizations, communities, and families, to discover deep and abiding satisfaction in our work if we choose not to flee or withdraw from reality. It is possible to find a path of contribution and meaning if we turn our attention away from issues beyond our control and focus on the people around us who are yearning for good leadership and engage them in work that is within reach. It is possible to use our influence and power to create *islands of sanity* in the midst of a raging destructive sea.

—

So much is possible if we consciously and wisely choose how best to step forward as leaders for this time.

—

This is a book that offers a path for leaders to engage well and sanely with the destructive dynamics of this time that now manifest at every level, from individual to organizational to global. We enter the path by bravely facing reality, willing to see with clarity and discernment where we are and how we got here. We seek to understand the forces at work that created this present world, not the one we have spent long years laboring to create, but a world that increasingly harms most and benefits scant few, a world stubbornly spiraling toward self-destruction.

Many of us feel that we have no choice but to protect ourselves from the increasing harshness and horrors of this world by withdrawing, staying busy with minor tasks, suppressing emotions of despair, grief, powerlessness. Some seek comfort by denial, creating personal bubbles to shut the world out. But the desperate effort that goes into withdrawal, suppression, and denial robs us of the very energy we need to be good leaders. The energy now spent on self-protection can be converted into positive energy if we're willing to encounter reality and see it clearly. Facing reality is an empowering act—it can liberate our mind and heart to discern how best to use our power and influence in service for this time.

We cannot change the way the world is, but by opening to the world as it is we may discover that gentleness, decency and bravery are available, not only to us, but to all human beings.

Chögyam Trungpa, Buddhist teacher

What Time Is It
on the Clock of the World?[1]

It is accurate to label this time as uncertain and chaotic, spinning wildly
out of control.[2] Every day we experience disruption, swerves in direction,
short-term decisions that undo the future, propaganda, slander, lies,
blame, denial, violence. Communities and nations are disrupted by
terrorist acts, cumbersome bureaucracies block services, people retreat
in self-protection and lash out in fear, angry people strike back at their
governments, leaders stridently promise security and outcomes that we
know can't be true, tensions between people reach hateful proportions,
and confusion and exhaustion sink us into despair and cynicism. This is
the age of retreat: from one another, from values that held us together,
from ideas and practices that encouraged inclusion, from faith in leaders,
from belief in basic human goodness.

There are some who define this chaotic time as filled with potential,
basing their hopefulness on the workings of chaos described in new
science. They want to "blow up" the current system or contribute
to its quick demise and use the ensuing chaos as the opportunity
to create healthy new systems. Their hope is based on an innocent
misunderstanding of the chaos cycle. Chaos can be a generative force for
change, or a cause for disintegration and death. Either way, it requires a
descent into chaos, when everything falls apart. It is this part of the cycle
that we need to prepare for.

The chaos cycle is triggered by changes in the environment; these
external changes force the system to abandon its old ways and respond
to the new. Everything that held it together—its beliefs, meanings, and

structures—no longer work now that the environment has changed. And so the system falls apart. It descends into chaos and finally reaches a bifurcation point, where it has two choices: Either it can reorganize using new beliefs and structures that work well in the changed environment. Or it can insist on the old ways, fail to reorganize itself, and die. Both rebirth and death are possible as an outcome of the passage through chaos.

So there is a slight basis for those who welcome in this time of disruption and chaos as the means to create healthier, more humane and life-affirming ways of living on this planet, for as long as the planet will have us. But we can't get there from here without traversing through the falling apart stage. We cannot simply leap to new ways of being; first we must prepare for disintegration and collapse.

The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.

W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Systems that are failing now will continue to deteriorate. Uncertainty, confusion, and fear will continue to predominate. People will withdraw further into self-protection and strike out at those different from themselves. Corrupt leaders will intensify their false promises, and people will subjugate themselves to their control. The chaos cycle predicts this has to happen, that things must fall apart. And human history documents in astonishingly clear detail the pattern of collapse that all civilizations go through.

———

This book is born of my desire to summon us to be leaders for this time as things fall apart, to reclaim leadership as a noble profession that creates possibility and humaneness in the midst of increasing fear and turmoil.

———

I know it is possible for leaders to use their power and influence, their insight and compassion, to lead people back to an understanding of who we are as human beings, to create the conditions for our basic human qualities of generosity, contribution, community, and love to be evoked no matter what. I know it is possible to experience grace and joy in the midst of tragedy and loss. I know it is possible to create islands of sanity in the midst of wildly disruptive seas. I know it is possible because I have worked with leaders over many years in places that knew chaos and breakdown long before this moment. And I have studied enough history to know that such leaders always arise when they are most needed.

Now it's our turn.

Who Do We Choose to Be?

This needs to be stated clearly at the outset: we can no longer solve the global problems of this time at large-scale levels: poverty, economics, climate change, violence, dehumanization.[3] Even though the solutions have been available for a very long time, they require conditions to implement them that are not available: political courage, collaboration across national boundaries, compassion that supersedes self-interest and greed. These are not only the failings of our specific time in history; they occur in all civilizations at the end of their life cycle.

This is a bitter pill for activists and all people with discerning, open hearts. We understand the complexity of global problems, we have thought systemically to define root causes, we have proposed meaningful solutions, but we are impotent to influence those in power who ignore our efforts.[4]

——

The powerful always defend the status quo because it is the source of their power and privilege. Any change that benefits others would destroy their position. And their position is all they care about defending.

——

As a lifelong activist focused on changing leadership in large systems, as one still inside those large systems as a consultant, advisor, and friend, I realized years ago that large-scale change was not possible. Leaders were grasping for control, overreacting to crises rather than thinking systemically, treating people as "units" rather than as humans. Yet I also

met and worked with extraordinary leaders who were creating islands of sanity where good work still got done and where people enjoyed healthy relationships in the midst of chaotic conditions, fierce opposition, heart-breaking defeats, lack of support, isolation, loneliness, and slander. I have been with them in circumstances that caused most other leaders to give up and walk away yet still they kept going. You will learn about a few of them in these pages.

Several years ago, in the face of irreversible global problems and the devolution of leadership, I began to challenge every leader I met with these questions: Who do you choose to be for this time? Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create islands of sanity that evoke and rely on our best human qualities to create, produce, and persevere?

Now I'm asking you.

Two Lenses

Many lenses can be used to bring our current time into focus. Clear seeing is available by studying history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, theology. Each of these disciplines provides concepts and beliefs that explain human behavior both individually and collectively. In this book, I use two lenses: the new science of living systems, and the pattern of collapse in complex civilizations. Each of them is a powerful lens on its own; I have found that together they offer tremendous explanatory power for where we are, how we got here, and the choices we must make as leaders.

Science of Living Systems

The science of living systems is a powerful explanator of human behavior and the world we inhabit. We are alive, we inhabit a living planet, and we are subject to the dynamics of living systems whether we acknowledge them or not. These dynamics are "scale-independent" and can be used to explain what's going on—cause and effect—from single individuals to the entire planet. Why are we witnessing exponential increases in narcissism, polarization, conflict, aggression, dictatorships, climate change, species loss? Each of these terrible realities can be understood using the lens of living systems.

New science revealed, through decades of experimentation and evidence, that living systems organize using dynamics that include self-organizing based on identity, relationships woven together in complex networks, an inherent order displayed in chaos and complexity, the role of shared meaning to create coherent yet nonpoliced actions among individuals.

Globally, a noteworthy minority of leaders in all types of organizations and professions were inspired by these images of creativity and chaos, order without control, interdependent systems growing in capacity and complexity, the primacy of relationships. Such promises motivated many to work to create healthy communities, organizations, and societies. Now, in spite of our years of dedicated efforts, we are greatly fatigued and in deep inquiry as how we might best contribute. And no wonder. Our work, as good and wise as it was, has not born fruit at large levels of scale, even though we have shining examples of what's possible at local levels.[5]

Life's dynamics do not change. They are reliable ways of understanding how life organizes, functions, and responds. This is my intention, to bring a level of understanding to what has happened in the past decades, not so that we can fix the large systems that now dominate and destroy, but so that we can do our work wherever we are, whatever it is, refusing to comply or participate with dominant culture and instead, as leaders, continue to work in partnership with life, restoring sanity wherever we can.

The Pattern of Collapse of Complex Civilizations

As many have commented, the only thing evident from the study of history is that we humans fail to learn from history. Yet those who do study the history of civilizations have illuminated the pattern of the rise and fall of complex human societies. The pattern of collapse is remarkably consistent, describing how humans always behave, even down to specific behaviors. To learn about this pattern is at once very troubling and very relieving: it's good to understand where we are so we don't keep struggling against inevitable behaviors and grievous to see where we are because of what can't be changed. I have delved into the excellent body

of literature on the collapse of civilizations for several years now; for this book, I'm primarily working with two: *The Collapse of Complex Societies* by Joseph Tainter and *The Fate of Empires and the Search for Survival* by Sir John Glubb.

Both Glubb and Tainter have derived the pattern of collapse from studying complex human civilizations since Sumer, 3000 BCE. (I have also brought in anthropological research that reveals patterns of behavior going back more than 300,000 years, before hominids were *sapiens*.) Tainter's work, first published in 1987, is acknowledged as the seminal work in establishing the pattern of collapse. He is a superb and dedicated scholar, both humble and clear. Over several years, he studied in depth many different societies; as he did so, the pattern became so clear that he felt no need to continue to study others in detail. "Collapse is a recurrent feature of human societies, and indeed it is this fact that makes it worthwhile to explore a general explanation.... The picture that emerges is of a process recurrent in history and prehistory, and global in its distribution."[6] (See the appendix for Tainter's descriptors of collapse.)

Tainter's analysis of collapse included civilizations on all continents and focuses on the sociopolitical aspects. Sir John Glubb studied thirteen civilizations in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, observing the process of moral decay from generation to generation that ends in collapse after ten generations. "The life-expectation of a great nation, it appears, commences with a violent, and usually unforeseen, outburst of energy, and ends in a lowering of moral standards, cynicism, pessimism and frivolity."[7] As you will learn here, he describes specific behaviors and attitudes of each age that read like news stories of our current time, but that are characteristic of all civilizations in their final days.

While each scholar highlights different aspects, the pattern is the same: No matter the geography, ethnicity, or spiritual traditions, humans always develop high culture, hierarchy, civic institutions, religion and the arts, and then, when in decline, our negative behaviors are also identical. I feel confident in labeling this the true DNA of our species, how we organize and behave through generations of creation and decline, no matter who we are culturally, where we are geographically, or when we lived in human history.

As I worked with both of these lenses—the science of living systems and the pattern of collapse—I found they were an excellent pair. They could explain how our unique digital culture has intensified our civilization's movement through the last stages of collapse, yet also how the behaviors of each stage are predictable and inevitable.

The reason why complex societies disintegrate is of vital importance to every member of one, and today that includes nearly the entire world population.

Joseph Tainter

The DNA of Human Civilizations:
What We Always Create

When the Spaniards reached the American mainland
in the early sixteenth century … what took place was
truly exceptional, something that had never happened
before and never will again.

Two cultural experiments running in isolation came face
to face and each could recognize the other's institutions.
When Cortes landed in Mexico he found roads, canals, cities,
palaces, schools, law courts, markets, irrigation works, kings,
priests, temples, peasants, artisans, armies, astronomers,
merchants, sports, theater, art, music, and books.

High civilization, differing in the details but alike in essentials,
had evolved independently on both sides of the earth.

Ronald Wright

Form Follows Function:
The Design of This Book

For many years, I have needed to know what to do, how best to use my heart and mind and energy to meaningfully serve as things fall apart. This book mirrors my own process: using the lens of new science to understand where we are and how we got here, using the patterns of complex civilizations to deepen my historical awareness and then reflecting on what I've learned from working with leaders who did not lose their way but persevered in doing the best that was possible in difficult, even dire circumstances.

Here is a guide to the design of this book, how I've chosen to organize its many different elements. This is a complex work because it needs to be, and in the next essay I describe "Dwelling Mind" as the way to work with this material slowly and thoughtfully.

I set out to answer three questions, each of which embodies one of the subtitles:

1. *Facing Reality:* Where are we and how did we get here?
2. *Claiming Leadership*: What is the role of leaders now?
3. *Restoring Sanity*: How do we create islands of sanity that sustain our best human qualities?

In every section, these questions are explored in detail in short essays, grouped under these three headings.

I begin each section with *What Science Teaches*—explaining a specific dynamic common to all living systems. I describe how this dynamic is defined and used by scientists to explain observable phenomena in the known Universe. The six dynamics featured are The Arrow of Time; Identity; Information; Self-Organization; Perception; Interconnectedness. (These are very similar to the science I used in *Leadership and the New Science*. This is deliberate.)

Following the science are several essays under the heading *Facing Reality*. In these essays, I use the lens of science to describe the causes of many of our most troubling and disturbing personal and social behaviors, especially those of importance to leaders. These dynamics of living systems work powerfully and irrevocably in us; even if we ignore them, they are always operating. Adding to the lens of science, I use the pattern of collapse of complex civilizations to further understand where we are. Where do our behaviors and cultural phenomena place us on the timeline of collapse?

Here's an example of how these two lenses weave together:

The most powerful organizing dynamic in life is identity. The first act of life is to define a self, whether a micro-organism or a human being. In humans, how we define ourselves determines our perceptions, beliefs, behaviors, values. Today, it is this primary dynamic of identity that drives social media and has led to its overbearing, distorting presence in our lives. Social media enables a culture of manufactured identities, where people create any self that ensures their popularity. In the Digital Age, identity has changed from a culturally transmitted sense of self within a group to an individual one, where you can be anything you want.

In this maelstrom of constantly changing selves, Ideas of objective truth and integrity disappear. Ethics and taking a stand don't matter; popularity does.

This understanding of how identity has created our present-day culture can be easily plotted against Glubb's Six Ages of Collapse. At first, in the Pioneer Age, identities form from a sense of honor and commitment to a cause. Sacrifice and service are the guiding values. Midway, all civilizations evolve into the Age of Commerce, where money and wealth become the organizing identities. Service gives way to getting rich. In the final stage, the Age of Decadence, celebrities—athletes, musicians, and actors—are revered and people lose themselves in wanton pleasures. (In November 2016, President Obama awarded Presidential Medals of Freedom primarily to athletes, musicians, and actors.)

This is one example of how the two lenses combine to sharpen our understanding of where we are, how we got to here, and how best to serve as we journey the well-trodden path of collapse.

Subsequent essays are organized under *Claiming Leadership* and *Restoring Sanity*. In these, I answer the questions, What are we to do as leaders, given this reality? What is sane leadership? I use a combination of commentary, actual practices, quotes, and story to bring into focus the qualities and actions that support good leadership on an island of sanity. The stories I tell are of leaders I worked with closely, who used living systems dynamics in healthy and life-affirming ways. These leaders are exceptionally diverse in who they led (from nuns to military commanders), but deeply unified in how they work with people and partner with life. They are all leaders that people admire for their achievements; I admire

them for the depth of their intelligence, integrity, and great hearts and minds. It is an honor to bring them into these pages and into your awareness.

Each of these leaders is a Warrior for the Human Spirit and, in the concluding chapters, I bring in my current work, to train leaders to develop the qualities of compassion, discernment, and presence that are essential leadership skills these days. Starting in the late '90s, I began teaching about spiritual warriorship, how to lead without using aggression or fear to accomplish our goals. I described them in a preliminary way in *So Far from Home* (2012). Since then, I have been actively training leaders globally in the skills of Warriors for the Human Spirit, work that I expect to continue for as long as I am able. Clearly the need for such leaders now grows exponentially.

Dwelling Mind

I have intentionally designed this book for you to read slowly and contemplatively. Curiosity and openness are important generally, but I'm sensitive to the emotional impact of reading this material, absorbing where we are as a civilization. I expect you will be both inspired and overwhelmed, depressed and committed. I had all these experiences as I was writing this. The openness of the pages and the photos are there to encourage you to rest and absorb the material. It's tough to take this in and strong emotions will arise.

I also don't want us to get caught in the ambush of hope. I've read too many authors who lay out the reality of our situation in stark detail, but then in the last pages feel the need to say something hopeful even though it contradicts their own argument. I have no interest in grasping after or reviving possibilities that have already passed. I have an intense desire for us to step forward as leaders for this time, hearts and minds fully open and wise, in service to whomever needs us.

Please don't go through this material quickly. You do a disservice to yourself and to your potential offerings as a leader if you do. I have put in a great deal of information and included many footnotes; I felt these were necessary to develop a depth of understanding. As I was writing, I kept wondering if anybody reads footnotes any more—my publisher tells me that people read the back cover, the front cover, and perhaps the introduction. If you've read this far, it seems you're not that sort of person.

I can't imagine a more important task than to consciously choose who we want to be as a leader for this time. We must understand the time we're in,

focus our energy on what's possible, and willingly step forward to serve the human spirit.

This book is designed to invite you into *dwelling mind*.[8] Most of us have the tendency to read something quickly and then rush into action, to quickly figure out a response. As leaders and consultants, this is what we get paid for! It's also a very human approach for dealing with uncertainty and strong emotions—we rush to fix rather than allow the profound discomfort that arises from difficult information. Yet if we dwell with the increasing uncertainty of this time and not rush to that comfortable place of action, dwelling mind supports the emergence of clarity for our chosen role as leaders. This is my frequent personal experience. As I tune into what's going on and allow my grief and outrage to be present, they quietly transform into ever-deepening motivation to offer my best service wherever opportunities present themselves.

I urge you to let go of the comfort of a quick response and instead, in the spaciousness of your mind, welcome in everything: thoughts, feelings, sensations. Allow them to just be there, meeting up with one another, combining and recombining. Nothing is immediately clear, but given time and the workings of nonlinearity, your ideas and feelings may self-organize into insights. Many scientific breakthroughs were the result of this process of relaxing the mind, allowing things to dwell without any need for resolution, and then the a-ha moment. Sometimes scientists were so fatigued or frustrated that they walked away from the problem. They took a stroll or a nap and then were surprised by a clear insight, image, or solution.[9]

If we are to step forward with true confidence as leaders for this time, if this is the role you choose for yourself, then please give your mind and heart time to dwell in the difficulties that lie ahead, and the frequent opportunities we will have to serve the human spirit. In a memorable scene in *Lord of the Rings,* Gandalf counsels Frodo who, in grief and fear, is protesting against his assignment that he must destroy the ring of power, wanting to refuse his destiny.

So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

J. R. R. Tolkien

OPENING: NOTES

[1] This is a question posed by Grace Lee Boggs, the great activist, revolutionary, and community organizer who participated in many of the major social movements in America beginning in the early 1950s. Grace died in Detroit at age 100 in 2015. You'll meet her in Section 4: Self-Organization.

[2] The acronym, coined by the U.S. military, is VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

[3] See my book *So Far from Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2012).

[4] Pope Francis's encyclical in the spring of 2015, "On Care for Our Common Home" (*Laudato Si*), was a brilliant systemic analysis of causes and solutions to climate change. But these solutions require a level of cooperation between nation-states, dissolution of the huge egos of those in power, and sacrifice from developed nations that will not happen even though the consequences of self-protection rather than intense cooperation are terrifyingly clear.

[5] I'm sure you know of many local efforts that have produced great results. My coauthor Deborah Frieze and I wrote about seven such communities in *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2011).

[6] Tainter states the objective of his work is to develop a general explanation of collapse, applicable in a variety of contexts, and with implications for current conditions. This is a work of archaeology and history, but more basically of social theory. Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (New Studies in Archaeology) (Kindle Location 124).

[7] Sir John Glubb. *The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival* (1976), http://people.uncw.edu/kozloffm/glubb.pdf. Also see the appendix.

[8] The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) introduced the term *dwelling mind* in contrast with *rational mind.*

[9] One of the most well-known examples of this is the story August Kerkulé told of how he discovered the ring shape of the benzene molecule in the 1860s. In a reverie or daydream, he saw a snake seizing its own tail (the ancient symbol of the Ouroboros). This vision, he said, came to him after years of studying the nature of carbon-carbon bonds.

1. THE ARROW OF TIME

Everything Has a Beginning,
a Middle, and an End

Machines wear down and die. Living systems, if they learn and adapt, do not.

— Margaret Wheatley

What Science Teaches

The observable Universe and everything in it moves in one direction: from birth to death, from hot to cold, from creative energy to useless energy, from order to disorder. Everything comes from what preceded it. Nothing is reversible. This is the Arrow of Time.

The arrow of time applies to all closed systems in the known Universe, but the new sciences revealed that it is not the predetermined fate of living systems. A living system has permeable boundaries and sense-making capacities. It is an open system, capable of exchanging energy with its environment rather than using up a finite amount. If it opens to its environment, it takes in information, a form of energy. It notices changes and disturbances that it then processes, free to choose its response.

This is life's essential process—using cognition and self-organization to adapt and change. A living system can reorganize itself to become more fit, in the evolutionary sense, to survive. Through its exchanges of information, it creates newness and diversity, sustaining itself through shifts, crises, and catastrophes. All of this is possible and commonplace as long as the system remains open, willing to learn and adapt.

However, if a living system closes itself off, there is no possibility for change and growth. Closed systems have no potential for life's adaptive capacity. They work like machines, passive travelers on the arrow of time, deteriorating and losing capacity, predetermined to waste away because of the Second Law of Thermodynamics—the trajectory of heat energy from useful to useless. (The First Law of Thermodynamics states that the *quantity* of energy is always conserved, neither created nor destroyed as it changes form. The Second Law describes how the *quality* of energy

deteriorates in a closed system.) In a closed system, every interaction has an energy cost; some amount of its energy becomes useless through its activities. This is entropy, the measure of disordered energy. More entropy describes greater levels of disorder.

What distinguishes living systems from machines is their ability to learn. They resist the arrow of time and the Universe's movement to increasing disorder by using their cognition to adapt. They stay alert to what's going on in their internal and external environments and respond intelligently. A healthy living system is a good learner and can thrive even though its environment is moving toward increasing disorder. But to do so it must be actively engaged and aware.

If living systems close down, they wear down and death is assured.

**A civilization is a large, complex society based on the domestication of plants, animals and human beings.
They vary in their makeup but typically have towns, cities, governments, social classes and specialized roles and professions.**

Ronald Wright

The Rise and Fall of Civilizations

The movement of civilizations along the arrow of time has been a mesmerizing field of study from the time of classical Greek scholars such as Plato up to our present. Historians want to know what has gone before, not from intellectual curiosity, but from a desire that their current civilization avoid a similar fate. And there is a plethora of examples for study: Globally there have been dozens of complex civilizations during the last 5,000 years of recorded human history (by 3000 BCE there were already seven known to Western scholars). Every one of them illustrates the same pattern of ascendancy and collapse. In addition, excellent archeological research on the causes of decline removes any doubt about the strong commonalities among these civilizations and the descriptive accuracy of the pattern of collapse.

Still, it was astonishing to read of a ninth-century Arab moralist's lament about the celebrity pop singers who flooded the capital city in great numbers singing erotic songs, using obscene language, whose influence on young people degraded their morality and normalized vulgar. Or to read that in the eleventh century, education in the Arab empire changed from learning to technical training for high-paying jobs.

There is nothing new under the sun.

The pattern is crystal-clear. We humans, no matter where we are or what our cultural belief system is, always organize in the same way. We create glorious buildings, cities, transportation and trade routes, music, aqueducts, dance, poetry, theater, sewage systems, canals, pottery, fabrics, farms, statues, monuments. And yet, these magnificent cultural manifestations are guaranteed to disappear, destroyed at the end by disease, famine,

or invaders that attack a society already weakened by moral decay and internal warring. We are incredible organizers and creators, and then are brought down by our arrogance, pettiness, and greed. Always.

But in our bright, shiny, techno-optimistic twenty-first-century global culture, we believe we have stepped off the arrow of time. Our technological and scientific genius gives us the capacity to bypass the fate that has overtaken all other complex civilizations. In our arrogance, we believe that we can use our superior intelligence as never before, changing history, bounding forward in great leaps, no longer subject to the arrow of time. We believe we are the height of human evolution rather than just its most recent, predictably problematic manifestation.[1]

The belief in never-ending progress is fueled by our inexplicable arrogance that we can supersede the laws of the Universe. Our constantly expanding technologies and innovations may appear to be adaptive responses to the environment. But this is not true. Quite the opposite: for the first time in history, humans are changing the global environment rather than adapting to it.

———

We are ignoring scientific laws, acting as Masters of the Universe, asserting we can invent anything we want to suit ourselves, including artificial life. This is not the behavior of a living system interacting skillfully with its environment. This is hubris of ahistorical proportions and we are failing miserably, as you may have noted.

For those of us not blinded by the false promise of progress, we may understand the dire state of this civilization. If you're paying any attention to the news from everywhere, it's hard to avoid the specter of collapse. But then what happens? Do we, as most do, fall into private collapse consumed by fear and despair? Do we become one who does nothing but complain for what's been lost? Do we succumb to grief for the suffering of so many? Do we give up and spend whatever time is left in hedonistic pursuits? Do we cocoon in self-protective bubbles with a nine-foot TV screen and SurroundSound?

Or do we acknowledge where we are and step forward to serve? Those who have studied the pattern of collapse always conclude their analyses with an urgent plea that we take notice, that we wake up to where we are in order to positively change where we are. The natural march of time toward disorder can be counteracted and even reversed by awareness and learning. Blind reactivity and fear are not the answer. Self-protection is not the answer. Denial is not the answer. Sane leadership is.

—

What is sane leadership? It is the unshakable faith in people's capacity to be generous, creative and kind.

—

It is the commitment to create the conditions for these capacities to blossom, protected from the external environment. It is the deep knowing that, even in the most dire circumstances, more becomes possible as people engage together with compassion and discernment, self-determining their best way forward.

This leadership is no longer available at the global level. There, the pattern of collapse is manifesting with astonishing speed and accuracy. But within our sphere of influence, there is so much we can do. We can train ourselves to see clearly, to fully acknowledge this time in all its painful details; and then, wherever we are, whoever we're with, we can choose actions based on insight, compassion, and wisdom.

If we choose this role for ourselves, we are joining those few who, throughout history, always step forward to serve in a time of collapse.

While despair might permeate the greater part of the nation, others achieved a new realization of the fact that only readiness for self-sacrifice could enable a community to survive. Some of the greatest saints in history lived in times of national decadence, raising the banner of duty and service against the flood of depravity and despair.

Sir John Glubb

The Decline of Civilizations in Ten Generations

There are many great texts on the pattern of collapse. I chose to feature the work of Sir John Glubb because, in reading his work, I was continually stunned with his descriptions of the specific human behaviors our species always exhibits through the rise and fall of civilizations. I still am likely to gasp as I read his descriptions and share them with others.

Glubb studied thirteen empires in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe (where he had served as a military commander), from Assyria in 859 BCE to modern Britain in 1950. The pattern of the decline and fall of these superpowers was startlingly clear. It didn't matter where they were or what technology they had or how they exercised power. They all declined in the same stages and it always took ten generations, about 250 years. The logic of this is very clear: Each generation matures in better socioeconomic circumstances created by the preceding generation; thus, there is always a march to increasing materialism. In every generation, youth will have higher expectations for comfort than their parents. Improved material conditions create attitudinal changes that insist on still more material changes; and, predictably, because of its wealth and erosion of morality, the civilization declines into decadence.

Here are Glubb's six ages as delineated in *The Fate of Empires*. For more detail, see the appendix. I hope you'll explore them—they are fascinating, troubling, and convincing. As you read these brief descriptions, keep in mind that they describe *all* human civilizations, even though they read like an accurate tale of our time. This was published in 1976.

1. *The Age of Pioneers.* Fearless, courageous, and without constraint, invaders surprise the dominant civilization with their attacks. Strong virtues of shared purpose, honor, and a strict moral code bind them.

2. *The Age of Conquest.* Using more sophisticated and disciplined military actions (learned from the civilization they are conquering), they take control. Often there is a strong religious imperative to their conquest—they are doing their God's work.

3. *The Age of Commerce.* With a strong military to protect the frontiers, explorers embark on a search for wealth creation, seeking new enterprises as far as they can reach. Values of glory and honor give way to values of profit and personal wealth. The rich build palaces, railroads, hotels, communications networks, depending on the cultural context.

4. *The Age of Affluence.* Service ethics disappear and selfishness takes over. Education shifts from learning to obtaining qualifications for high-paying jobs. The young and ambitious seek wealth, not honor or service.

5. *The Age of Intellect.* The arts and knowledge flourish in the midst of decline. Intellectuals are prevalent and engage in incessant talking as a substitute for action. The belief takes hold that problems can be solved by mental cleverness rather than selfless service and courage. Natural sciences advance but do not prevent decline. Civil conflict increases even as the empire is under dire threat. Instead of banding together to preserve the nation, internal political factions seek to destroy one another.

6. *The Age of Decadence.* Wealth and power have led to petty and negative behaviors, including narcissism, consumerism, materialism, nihilism, fanaticism, and high levels of frivolity. A celebrity culture worships athletes, actors, and singers. The masses are distracted by entertainment and sporting events, abandon moral restraint, shirk duties, and insist on entitlements. The leaders believe they are impervious and will govern forever. This age also develops the welfare state as imperial leaders generously build universities and hospitals, give grants to university students, support the young and the poor, and extend citizenship to everyone. When they run out of money, all this benevolence disappears and these institutions shut their doors.

The Myth of Progress

The idea of progress is so ingrained in us high achievers and committed activists that you may be surprised by the word *myth*. Or perhaps you just ignored it. So many of us are motivated to do our best as leaders and good people because we assume that human societies and our species are on an upward evolutionary path, always improving. What would motivate our long hours of dedicated work and our deep longing to create positive change if it isn't true, as Martin Luther King said, quoting others before him: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."[2]

Yet the idea of progress is a very recent addition to human thought, appearing in the seventeenth century, reaching full bloom in the nineteenth century, and then severely challenged by the twentieth century's wars that killed more than 100 million people. Progress as a concept or direction does not appear in other cultures, or even in Western thought, until 300 years ago.

It gained ground in the West because of the advent of spectacular machines and great advances in science. It was also supported by Christianity's orientation to an end to time, and a misperception of the theory of evolution that confused evolution with progress.[3] But every other culture has the perspective of cycles throughout time and history: There are good times then bad times. There was a Golden Age and now there is the Dark Age. Humans cannot alter the seasons—or rush past them with optimistic thinking and hard work.

In spite of its anomalous appearance in human history, progress is the water in which we activist, dedicated fish are swimming ever more frantically, gasping for hopeful air. We want to contribute and the nature

of that contribution is toward creating a better life, a better world for our children and perhaps even for seven generations, as indigenous people have taught us. Our work is meaningful because it contributes to this arc of history. We depend on being future focused and take pride in this orientation, rightly critical of those who ignore the future—"future eaters," as scientist and historian Tim Flannery named them.[4]

——

The deceit we are engaged in is that we think we are special, that we can transcend history, alter the seasons, and ignore the arrow of time.

——

Surrounded by technology that dazzles us with its capabilities and tech optimists who confidently promise more and more wonders, we have come to believe that even if other civilizations failed, ours will not. It cannot because we are so talented and creative and concerned. Look at all these *amazing* technologies that will soon solve all our problems. Artificial Intelligence (AI); privately funded space travel; artificial foods; farmed fish; pills to make us smart, prevent aging, and prolong sex; medical breakthroughs to grow human organs in animals; neuroscience to fix every problematic behavior—how could anyone deny we're making progress? Some tech leaders are even promising us the prospect of colonizing Mars and beyond. No matter what happens on Earth, we get a second chance. (Well, only a few of us do.)

This belief in technology to fix the messes we've made and to save us from decline has been labeled by Ronald Wright, "The Progress Trap." It appears in every civilization and is a major accelerator of their demise.[5]

The very innovations that gave capacity end up destroying the civilization. People fail to notice or blindly ignore what these technologies are destroying and persist in relying on them until it's too late.

———

This has been true throughout human history. Animal herds were depleted when early humans discovered they could kill thousands of animals by running them off cliffs (one prehistoric site has the remains of over 100,000 horses killed).[6] We continue to pursue industrial production using fossil fuels to give us a higher standard of living, while polluting the air and water that impacts our health and the health of a rapidly heating planet. Artificial fertilizers and seeds were introduced in the Green Revolution to eliminate hunger; as a consequence, we've destroyed soil's regenerative capacities, killed many species, polluted waterways, and caused hundreds of thousands of farmers to commit suicide. And now, who knows what we're destroying with the ecstatic rush to automation, including self-driving cars, robots, AI in everything, and package delivery by drones.

Technology doesn't save us. It promises a Utopian future, but, in the record of history, it eventually destroys with its unintended consequences. This is the true arc of history, not upward toward some halcyon future but as dissipative movement along the arrow of time. We believe we can push aside input from the environment and, with intense creativity and innovation, soar off the arrow of time. Meanwhile, the environment we've refused to interact with continues its relentless march to greater disorder.

But isn't all this fabulous, *amazing* growth in new technologies an example of the fiery creative energy at the start of a new civilization? Aren't we as innovators and entrepreneurs starting a new world that counteracts the forces of entropy? Aren't we in the Golden Age, Masters of the Universe, setting a new direction toward evolutionary progress and bright futures?

No.

Lost in the seduction of technical creativity, we fail to see what else is going on. What's happening in society to relationships, to poverty, to violence, to alienation? What's happening to our land, our traditions, our people? Why have more than 65 million people fled their home countries and now live as refugees? What's being done to address our enduring human needs for home, for community, for contribution, for good work, for safe children?

And what about our planet?

Wise leaders are willing to give up the delusion that technology can save us, or that we can master the Universe. We must face the reality of decline and choose actions that support people, not technology. The choice couldn't be more clear. Or consequential.

Digital technologies, rather than inviting us into the world

and encouraging us to develop new talents that enlarge our

perceptions and expand our possibilities,

often have the opposite effect.

They're designed to be disinviting.

They pull us away from the world. . . .

The computer screen is intensely compelling,

not only for the conveniences it offers

but also for the many diversions it provides. . . .

Yet the screen, for all its enticements and stimulations,

is an environment of sparseness—

fast-moving, efficient, clean,

but revealing only a shadow of the world.

Nicholas Carr, *The Glass Cage*

The Religion of "Technological Majesty"

1833   By fulfilling its mechanical purposes, the US would turn itself into a new Eden, a state of superabundance where there will be a continual feast, parties of pleasures, novelties, delights and instructive occupations, not to mention vegetables of infinite variety and appearance.

   — *John Adolphus Etzler*,
      The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men (1833)

1991   What better way to emulate God's knowledge than to generate a virtual world constituted by bits of information?

   — *Michael Heim*, philosopher

2005   Behold, we are entering a new world, powered not by God's grace but by the web's electricity of participation. It will be a paradise of our own making, manufactured by users. History's databases will be erased, humankind rebooted. You and I are alive at this moment.

   — *Wired*, August 2005 cover article on Web 2.0

2014   For the first time in history, humankind, liberated by computers and robots from physical constraints, will be able to express its full and true nature. We will be whoever we want to be.... The main fields of human endeavor will be culture, arts, sciences, creativity, philosophy, experimentation, exploration, adventure.

— *Marc Andreessen*, venture capitalist

2016   Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX and Tesla, speaking at an event for tech industry leaders, offers a mind-blowing future of neural lace implanted in the human jugular, a representative democracy on Mars, and the real possibility that we're living in a video game simulation.

— All quotes in Carr, *Utopia Is Scary* except Elon Musk speaking at CODE, June 2, 2016

Tipping Points

Our bias toward progress is easily seen in how we view "tipping points," a bona fide scientific principle in physics, now adopted by social change activists. The original term means turning points or phase transitions, the last straw that breaks the camel's back when the system suddenly shifts into a new state. Yet in popular lingo, the concept has been adopted as the way to create positive social change in the future. People I know have been working to create a percentage of people so that the scales will tip and suddenly we'll find ourselves in a bright new future. How many people does it take to create the tip? Estimates have varied widely but start with speculation that as few as 10 percent of a population can create the sudden shift. Yet none of these estimates have been validated in experience.

The existence of tipping points is beyond dispute; at a certain point, criticality is reached and the system changes rapidly into a new state. But rather than remaining blindly optimistic about the statistical chances of positive future change, let's notice what's already tipped, those points of no return already passed, where the task now is to deal with the frightening consequences. What tipping points have already occurred?

- CO_2 emissions, parts per million above 400
- Warming oceans—Great Barrier Reef bleaching, ice-free Arctic
- Glaciers melting far faster than projected
- Rising sea levels—threat of melting Greenland ice sheet
- Atmospheric temperatures climbing steadily
- Clean water
- Population
- Sixth global mass extinction
- People's anger and frustration

Choosing to Lead Well in Collapse

What does it mean to be a leader in a time of collapse?

While there are very destructive dynamics at play as our civilization travels down the arrow of time, these dynamics do not have to wield influence on anyone or any group that is willing to open to its environment, use its intelligence, and bravely face reality. Whenever we open rather than close we become alive, a living system capable of self-organizing into new order rather than succumbing to disorder. The good news is that this is happening in many places, enlivened places resisting disorder by using their hearts and minds well. And every one of them is grounded in an ethic that places people at the center of all decisions and actions. Sanity in action.

In the tragedies of the refugee crisis, in the complexities of a broken healthcare system, in communities torn apart by fear and hatred, in exhausted professionals who find a new way to serve—everywhere there are communities, programs, and organizations that are learning, adapting, and creating effective responses that are making a true and positive contribution. But we need to keep this in perspective.

——

These leaders cannot prevent the unraveling of our global civilization and that is not their ambition. They aspire to make a profound difference locally, in the lives of people in their communities and organizations.

They also know that their successful initiatives that took such dedication and endurance to create are vulnerable to the destructive politics and behaviors inherent in a dying culture. At any moment, they or their programs may be swept away or severely hampered by thoughtless or venal political decisions. There are no assurances they will achieve long-term impact or be rewarded for success from the leaders above them who are possessed by fear and panic.

And yet they persevere because they are committed to doing the best they can for people. They have learned that nearly all people desire to do good work in good relationships with their colleagues. In full awareness of the trials and tribulations that will not cease, they offer their leadership skills to create islands of sanity, places of possibility and sanctuary where the destructive dynamics of collapse are kept at bay.

For as long as they can.

We do good work because we do good work.

Angela Blanchard, CEO

Dancing in the Space of Sanity

Chögyam Trungpa had the ability to draw forth
from those he worked with the very best they had to offer—
sometimes better than they had to offer.
He gave them a glimpse of just how glorious they could be.
Then, he left it up to all of us to work out
how to actually become those great human beings
we keep buried inside us most of the time.
He created a space of absolute sanity in which we all danced.

Carolyn Gimian[7]

Leading an Island of Sanity

What does it take to lead an island of sanity? What does the practice of sane leadership look like? Is it possible to create protection from the wild irrationality raging about us?

This is where it gets simple.

Even though there is now a vast body of work on leadership, I find it far more enlightening to consult our personal histories. All of us have had multiple experiences with good and bad leaders, from kids working in fast-food franchises to retirees with more than forty years of work history. When asked (which I've done thousands of times), "What is good leadership?" people in all places, of all ages, come up with the same descriptors. I feel confident that there is only one style, type, form of leadership that people respond well to. And they respond because it honors and supports them to be fully human. Just like we respond.

To determine your own definition of good leadership, think about your history:

1. Recall those leaders you've most admired, those you were happy to serve under. What were their behaviors? How did you feel working for them? What kind of worker were you, including the quality of what you produced? How do you feel about them now?
2. Recall your own moments when you were proud of the leadership (either formal or informal) you provided to your organization, family, friends, community. What did you do? How did you behave toward others? What were the results of your leadership? Are you still in a relationship with any of these people?

Answer these questions and you'll know how to be a good leader on your island. (Please don't bring in images of reality TV shows when I use this term.) And if you're frustrated that I haven't specified the traits of good leaders that I find common among all human beings, may I refer you to my other books?

I'm approaching this lightheartedly because a core survival skill in difficult situations is to maintain a sense of humor. Even with the intensity of feelings that flood over us as we contemplate collapse, it's essential that we not take everything so seriously.

—

The Hopi prophecy for these times teaches, "At this time in history we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves, for the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt."[8]

—

Yes, these are terrifying times if we open our eyes. Yes, our heart aches for all the needless suffering and destruction. And yes, maintaining a sense of humor gives us the capacity to observe the suffering and failures with enough distance that we can see it all more clearly. Irony and humor (not sarcasm) are critical skills to wise discernment. In order to laugh, we have

to take in a lot of information and see things from a different perspective. Sarcasm, on the other hand, is just observing from a distance through the eyes of cynicism. It does not connect us in any way. It does not enable action or relationship. And it is growing exponentially in this culture. Even my very young grandchildren are skilled at sarcasm.

I should like to think that prehistoric man's first invention, the first condition for his survival, was a sense of humor.

Andre Leroi-Gourhan, paleoanthropologist

Where Is Your Organization on the Arrow of Time?

It is easy, although painful, to observe the decay and degradation of the human spirit and of our planet at the global, national, and local levels. But what's going on in our own organizations? How can we assess our health versus our decay? As we attempt to fortify ourselves with sanity rather than fear, to open rather than close, what requires our attention?

Here are some of the characteristics of systems in decline. In all the descriptions of the pattern of collapse, there is both the human element of moral decay and the systemic element of institutional rot. Increasing disorder is fueled by money replacing service as the core motivator, hierarchical leaders focused on maintaining power at all costs, the disappearance of the future from decision making, the preservation of the status quo by the few elites who prosper from it. As things deteriorate, relationships disintegrate into distrust, self-protection, and opposition. Internal conflicts increase and no one even notices threats to the whole as they fight for their tiny piece of the pie. Leaders use fear to control and manipulate people and everyone moves into self-protection. Distractions, entertainments, and entitlements become primary instruments of allaying people's fears and for controlling them.

Translating these predictable behaviors into assessments of an organization seems quite straightforward. Please develop your own; here are some that have proven useful in my work. It's more helpful to answer these in terms of trends rather than snapshots. The real learning comes from noticing what's changing, and in which direction, as you explore each topic.

Each of these explorations demonstrates your commitment to opening to what is. This in itself is important. It gives you a start to interrupting the destructive trends of our culture and offers possibilities for engaging people to join you in developing an island of sanity.

———

Quality of relationships: If you were to create a trend line from a few years ago to now and a few years ahead, how are people relating to each other? Has trust increased or declined? Are people more self-protective or less so? Are they more willing to be there for one another, to go the extra mile, or not? What's your evidence for any of your conclusions?

Fear versus love: If these are the two ends of the spectrum of human emotions, which I believe they are, consider where you see examples of each. Also look for tendencies: which reaction, fear or love, is more likely in specific situations or with specific issues? Are either of these emotions coming to dominate as time goes on? In your leadership, what role does fear play: Are you more fearful? Are you using fear to motivate people?

Quality of thinking: When a crisis happens, how do you respond? Are your values used to resolve the crisis? Do you consider the future? Is long-term thinking still happening (in conversations, decision making, planning)? Has it made an impact? If so, is this visible to people? How difficult is it to find time to think, both for yourself and others?

Willingness to contribute: What invitations to contribute have you extended and why? How have people responded? Ongoing, what are your expectations for people being willing to step forward? Are those higher or lower than a few years ago?

The role of money: How big an influence, as a percentage of other criteria, do financial issues have on decisions? Has money become a motivator for you? For staff? Has selfishness replaced service? How do you know?

Other indicators, especially around learning from experience, are described in later chapters. For now, any of these topics answered with curiosity and concern can yield enormous benefit to your aspiration to be a good leader for this time. And they are questions that yield critical information for any attempt to bring greater sanity into the organization and among us as colleagues.

Leading from the Future

In 1993, I was invited by the Army Chief of Staff, General Gordon R. Sullivan, to be his "scout." The Army, under his leadership, was focused on bringing the force out of its worst period of decline, the Vietnam War era, and preparing it for the twenty-first century. For the next two years, and many times thereafter, I got to know the military. It was where I learned about dedication, service, and warriorship. It was my introduction to a rare form of leadership, vigilantly focused on the future, rapidly absorbing and making sense of information, with no room for failure.

General Sullivan remains one of the most extraordinary leaders I've known. When he asked me to be his scout, at first I thought this was a cute metaphor, the kind we consultants might use. I quickly realized this was a specific role, familiar in the military, to be taken very seriously. I was sent out to many places where innovations were taking place, met with all ranks of soldiers, and generally became familiar with the Army's change initiatives. Then I reported back to General Sullivan and we delved deeply into what I had seen and the potential meaning of my observations.

To this day, my respect for soldiers has never waivered. Their leadership training is far superior to anything I've encountered elsewhere: They are taught how to process large amounts of information, to think systemically, to develop situational awareness, to lead in chaotic situations, to lead from behind as well as out front, to use their intuition. And everything depends on teamwork. Soldiers know their lives depend on being there for each other. I've relished every chance I've had to teach military officers. Their intelligence, curiosity, and esprit de corps are palpable; it's easy to engage them in vibrant and complex learning.

General Sullivan had invited me because of my work with self-organization and the role of information. In working with the Army, I learned more than I could have imagined about the power of self-organization to bring order out of chaos. At the time I came in, soldiers had just been armed with new technologies that gave them real-time information about the battle. Once they could see what was going on, they demanded to be involved in decisions. Unlike most organizations, the Army quickly realized that, with such information, soldiers could self-organize their responses and make better decisions in the chaos of battle than any command and control system. Later, in Iraq, the quick exchange of electronic information from soldier to soldier saved lives—moment by moment they could relay where the explosives were hidden, what new traps to watch out for. A now-famous self-organized community of practice emerged among captains, Company Command.[9] They became adept at rapidly communicating tactics and strategies faster than the established protocol of Army Lessons Learned. Company Command is credited with saving thousands of lives.

—

Senior commanders learned that well-trained soldiers could be trusted to process information in real time; the soldiers would make better decisions about the battle than if they had to wait for a command from above. Rapidly exchanged information became the critical factor, rather than rank or procedures, to reduce the chaos of conflict.

—

General Sullivan once told me that he spent 50 percent of his time focused on the future. In one conversation I will never forget, he said, "Sometimes I get afraid. What if there's another war and we're not

prepared?" In that moment, I had a brief, frightening glimpse of what it means to carry the defense of the free world on your shoulders. We had just been in an inquiry, which included the Army historian and a few four-star generals, as to whether the Army should keep investing in tank training. What would warfare look like over the next decades? (This was in 1994; by 2005, the Army had prioritized resources for Special Operations, small cadres of brilliantly trained soldiers to operate in war zones and undercover against insurgent groups.)

When he voiced his deepest concern about being prepared for an unknown future, our inquiry about future battlefields became deadly serious. Perhaps the generals had been viewing it that way all along, but for me it was a dramatic wake-up call to be in this deliberation with the greatest intelligence and insight I could muster. It stands out for me as memorable because of the thousands of conversations I've been in with leaders since then that lacked this sense of consequence.

I believe that General Sullivan was unique in focusing 50 percent of his time and efforts on the future. Sometimes he spoke about the challenge of not getting too far ahead of the troops, of having to bring them along—and how difficult that was. The more clearly he saw the imperatives of the future, the greater his frustration with the ponderously slow movement of the Army so laden down with tradition and bureaucracy.

How many leaders spend time in the future? How many decisions are made using information from both present realities and future scenarios? How many organizations are willing to open their boundaries and absorb as much information as they can, knowing that it is only these exchanges that prevent deterioration and death?

How many leaders understand how to step off the arrow of time and consciously engage with the future so as to influence its direction, not with complex strategies but by using information well? General Sullivan's leadership was rare then. Now it is an endangered species.

—

The last time I was with General Sullivan was at a scenario planning session hosted by Shell Oil Company at Windows on the World atop the World Trade Center, just a few years before the attacks of 9/11. He voiced his frustration to me about the behavior he was encountering on the corporate boards where he now served. "We spend hours debating how to get the stock price up a penny. Nobody is thinking about development of leaders or the future."

THE ARROW OF TIME: NOTES

[1] For a brilliant brief history of how our economics is tied to the belief in progress, read Pankaj Mishra, "Welcome to the Age of Anger," theguardian.com, December 18, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/08/welcome-age-anger-brexit-trump

[2] I've been puzzled by this assertion of the arc of justice growing stronger over long periods of time because it cannot be verified historically. But within the last stage of collapse, the Age of Decadence, human rights, social justice, gender equality, education, and healthcare benefits all surge ahead as leaders create the welfare state. The leaders, acting as if they'll always be in power with unlimited resources, are hugely beneficent in offering a progressive society to all. So it appears that justice and the social good are moving forward, which they are in the context of the moment and the past few years of the civilization. However, the tragic irony is that all this progress in human rights occurs at the end of the civilization and cannot be sustained because of all the other forces at play. The arc of justice seems to surge, but it is actually a sign of imminent collapse. Such a harsh truth to contemplate.

[3] Evolution has become a synonym for progress, but this is not the science. Evolution describes adaptations that make the organism more fit for its current environment. That environment can be improving or deteriorating. The survival of any species depends on its recognition of how the environment has changed and what it demands if the species is to survive. Adaptations are not necessarily improvements or progress; they are intelligent responses to what has changed.

[4] Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People* (Grove Press, 1994).

[5] *A Short History of Progress.*

[6] Ibid., p. 50.

[7] *True Command: The Teachings of the Dorje Kasung* Vol I, "The Town Talks," ed. Chögyam Trungpa and Carolyn Gimian (Halifax: Trident, 2005; out of print).

[8] See my book *Perseverance* (2010), a day-to-day guide that draws on this Hopi prophecy.

[9] *Company Command: Unleashing the Power of the Army Profession* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy, 2005) tells the history of this powerful community of practice, written by its founders.

If you enjoy this excerpt…

consider becoming a member of the reader community on our website!

[Click here for sign-up form](#). Members automatically get 10% off print, 30% off digital books.