

Taking it personally

- leadership in our time

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Science is agreed on three things. One, the climate crisis is worse than they thought. Two, the changes are coming faster than predicted. And three, we need to act now. The missing link is leadership. At a time when the world needs guidance and direction like never before, real courage and vision is thin on the ground. What would it take for leaders to take the challenge personally?

This is a context paper setting the scene for a conversation about leadership in our time. October 2007.

prologue

When I began to think about writing an introduction to the conversation I'd like to engage in with business and other influential institutions, I went for a walk in St Stephen's Green which we are fortunate to have within five minutes of the office here in the heart of Dublin. 'The Green', with its manicured lawns and flowerbeds lovingly cared for by the City gardeners, is an oasis in the midst of downtown chaos and a good place to free the mind.

I was drawn to a display of large photographs mounted on ten-foot high double-sided stands along one of the main walkways. More than fifty extraordinary images captured by the celebrated wildlife photographer Steve Bloom, documented various creatures of land, sea and air whose

survival on planet Earth is threatened.

The great Siberian tiger. Japan's rare Macaque monkey. The red-crowned crane. The orang-utan, our closest relative in the animal kingdom. The bald eagle, adopted by the United States as its national emblem. The Great White shark. Dolphins. Elephants. Giraffes. Pandas. And the polar bear, iconic resident of the Arctic for 10,000 years whose frozen landscape is suddenly in accelerated meltdown.

They all face a common predator: us. Humans ruthlessly pursue these creatures for their skin, their tusks and their feathers, and increasingly we're encroaching on their habitat, and in the process, diversity and beauty are diminished and the delicate tapestry of life sustains irreparable damage.

Life in the jungles, the oceans, the deserts, the polar ice-caps and the arctic tundra, is under great pressure from human activities all over the globe. Over-exploitation of the land and water systems, deforestation, chemical over-use, pollution of every imaginable kind, are all contributing to the heating of the planet and

climate change with catastrophic down-the-line consequences for thousands of species. Science tells us that the massive biological extinction currently under way is as extensive as anything Earth has experienced before, only this time it's happening much faster.

Compressing planetary history into a single year, a footnote under one photograph vividly captured the scale of what's happening:

"If the Earth had formed on January 1st, life would have appeared on February 26th, dinosaurs would have arrived on December 10th and vanished sixteen days later, and Man would have shown up late on December 31st. A few minutes later, and in less than a minute, this one creature would have drastically upset the fragile balance between land, seas and atmosphere."

I seemed to be the only one reading the texts at the time and I suddenly felt suspended between two parallel realities. On one hand, hard evidence of ecological destruction unprecedented in scale and speed, presenting a challenge to life on Earth such as humans have never before experienced. And all around me, business as usual.

The evening exodus from the city was in full swing and a constant flow of people with briefcases and shopping bags passed by, choosing to walk through the park on their way to their trains and buses on this summer evening. Most however, seemed quite unaware of the huge photo-boards. A few glanced at them from a distance without slowing, and just one or two stopped for a cursory look and moved on.

What was happening here, it seems to me, is a microcosm of what is happening in the wider world and it provides an apt metaphor for life in the fast-lane of our developed society today. Here was the World Wildlife Fund doing its best to draw attention to what is without doubt the most urgent crisis that has ever faced humanity, and most people appear too wrapped up in their own inner world to notice. The connection between the natural world 'out there' and my world 'in here', just isn't made, but it's the same world, and any threat to the natural world is a threat to humans.

A small child pulled her mother over to the picture of the orang-utan near me. "What's that, Mammy?" she asked. "It's your Auntie Rosaleen," she was informed with great hilarity. So much for teaching our children about their world!

one side of the story

Pressure from a warming planet is evident in many ways. For some animals it's food shortage as plants which have had the same growth pattern for hundreds of years mature earlier and aren't available to feed the newborn. For others it's the sudden disappearance of the water table or the non-appearance of a particular insect pollinator, displaced by logging or industrial scale farming.

Disruption to life patterns is widespread in rivers and lakes and oceans too. The combination of an alarming rise in CO² levels in the oceans and the melting icecaps is disturbing vital ocean currents that regulate the conditions that make life possible on land as well as in the seas. Indeed, if the gulf stream shifts even minimally, for much of Europe 'global warming' will mean a big freeze.

Climate change is already closing in on humans. Recorded floods, hurricanes, severe storms, fires, droughts, heatwaves and other natural disasters have nearly doubled in the past twenty years, affecting more than three billion people - nearly half the planet's human population - and with the vast glaciers of the Arctic and Antarctic melting and on the move, rising sea levels are already threatening millions of humans living in coastal regions.

Lisa, the little girl who asked about the orang-utan, is about seven. By the time she is attending secondary school an emerging classification of human being will be well-established: the environmental refugee. We are running out of places to run to.

None of this is new news. Climate change has been monitored and reported in scientific journals for many years, but it is reaching mainstream consciousness of late with the publication of various key reports in the popular media.

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its fourth report in twenty years this year, hot on the heels of the UK's Stern Report which caused a major stir for a while, and there have been several others. All confirm that we are on a collision course with nature, that abrupt climate change is now more a probability than a possibility, and that we have two decades - three at most - to take the radical steps needed to stabilise and hopefully begin to reverse the fateful trends.

Martin Parry, co-chair of the IPCC told reporters recently: "We are used to hearing about these changes coming in the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren - now we know it's us."

This then, is the paradox of the 21st century: rapid progress alongside rapid decline. As economic and social conditions improve for a minority of the human population, the natural systems upon which everything depends are showing signs of great stress and in some cases collapsing.

Climate change is the high profile issue now. However, the biosphere is full of trigger mechanisms we know very little about and as long as human activity continues to ignore the natural systems we are embedded in, we must live with an increasing possibility of an unforeseen combination of imbalances sparking off some dramatic and deep irreversible system change.

Paul Hawken, author of *Natural Capitalism* sums it up thus: "The climate debate is a public issue in which the assets at risk are not specific resources like oil or fish or timber, but the whole life-support system. What price do you put on something we can't live without and can't replace at any price?"

At one level the problem can be simply stated: How we choose to respond to the signals coming from the natural world today, will determine the

quality of life Lisa and every generation of humans after her, will experience. Whatever choice we make.

In the closing lines of his extraordinary history of the natural world *Life on Earth*, David Attenborough comments: "No species has ever had such wholesale control over everything on earth, living or dead, as we now have. That lays upon us, whether we like it or not, an awesome responsibility. For in our hands now lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth."

We are truly living at a momentous time.

another side of the story

Given the potential for the complete disruption of life as we know it, our response to the looming crisis is astonishingly sluggish. It's true that words such as 'sustainability' and 'recycling' have entered the public consciousness and there are many good people and organisations doing good work.

In business, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become common currency and there is a general move towards greater efficiency in the use of fossil fuels for heat and energy. But going green is not enough, and CSR programmes in many respects are little more than a cover for business as usual.

The reality is that despite the alarm bells warning us that we are bumping up against the planet's natural limits, there's no discernible urgency to act, no conspicuous desire for deep change, and no evidence of an appreciation of the roots of the problem - especially in the institutions and organisations that shape our world. Something within us is surely dead.

In the quest for 'sustainability' the focus seems to be on new technology and minor process changes that will basically allow us to keep on

doing what we're doing.

But 'sustainability' as it pertains to our stewardship of the planet, is not about sustainable doing, it's about sustainable *being*. It's a *relationship* issue concerning how we, as individuals or institutions, perceive the nature of our relationship with each other and with the wider world around us.

We're not accustomed to seeing it in these terms because we don't recognise the fundamental *connectedness* of life; that everything is a system nested within a wider system and that the quality of the relationships between them forms the basis for everything. And we don't see this primarily because the 'story' driving our human system - the core beliefs and assumptions and *values* that frame our behaviours - is a story of separateness. An anthropocentric or human-centred view of the world.

The roots of this story reach back to the days of early science when people such as Descartes and Newton began to break things up from their wholeness in order to better understand them. This mindset was the foundation for what became the industrial revolution and it pervades our culture to this day.

In the past three hundred years, science has made possible extraordinary material progress that has transformed society in many positive ways, but this broken up or mechanistic way of thinking is no longer appropriate for the world we have created and is threatening our survival, because separateness is an illusion. We are not separate from each other or from the world around us. *Everything is connected.*

This I believe to be the real crisis facing humanity: a crisis of perception and values. The perception that we are separate from the natural world drives the economic and business system, and the institutions that support it. And the dominant values of that ideology are the values of separateness and individualism.

The education system will condition Lisa and millions of children like her, for life in a social

order that subscribes to, and promotes these values. She will go to work in a commercial system that champions these values and she'll be rewarded if she falls into line, though considered slightly 'odd' should she try to aim higher or question the basis of the common consciousness. And one day, unless something changes deep down, she'll enrol her own children in the system dedicated to the survival of these values, and the cycle continues.

The illusion of separateness at the heart of our culture enables us to support as a primary objective, the needs of an economic-business model based on continuous growth, driven by mass production, fuelled by continuous consumption, dependent for the foreseeable future on the burning of fossil energy. All sitting on a foundation of debt.

The illusion of separateness allows business - the engine of the economic machine - also to see itself as self-contained, having at best a tangential relationship with society, with nature and the ecosystems that sustain life. Business over here, everything else over there.

It's a convenient perception that makes it seem perfectly acceptable for business to 'externalise' as much of its costs as possible, passing on to society and the natural environment the costs of waste, pollution, resource depletion, stress and so on, in the interest of maximising returns to shareholders.

You can see it at work everywhere. Just one example is the \$50 billion a year bottled water industry. Only the illusion of separateness could explain how such an industry can exist in a world in which one in six human beings don't have access to clean water, and water tables everywhere are falling.

(And the waste is astonishing: in America alone, 38 *billion* water bottles are dumped in landfill each year - more than a \$1 billion worth of oil-based-plastic!)

The illusion of separateness is necessary to believe that growth can be continuous, that it is

cost-free, and that waste - the ultimate output of production as it is currently designed - can be thrown 'away' for ever.

And when we use this model to measure the well-being of our nation, the illusion of separateness enables us to see all growth as positive, including growth that is destructive to people, to society and the environment. GDP has no minus sign. There are only 'goods' and 'services', no bads or dis-services in economics - so long as someone pays, it's good. Economy over here, society over there.

Occasionally it is acknowledged that the economy *affects* society, but it is usually at a primitive 'we-need-taxes-to-provide-services' level. There is never any conversation about what kind of society we want to create.

The illusion of separateness allows the finance industry to see its business only as finance - not as the enabler of almost everything else. Currently, two of the world's largest banks (both of which claim to be environmentally responsible) are financing the building of 150 new coal-fired power stations when we are already well over the limit of what the carbon sinks can handle.

When Dubai opened its gigantic indoor ski resort in the desert complete with real snow and ski slopes, fake sky with fake stars, fake fir trees and fake everything else, all powered by fossil fuel and targeted to pull in half a million visitors each year from all around the world, the same mindset is at work.

Only such an illusion of separateness could permit engineers, business and enterprise people and the travel industry collectively to hail this ecological folly as an engineering miracle!

The same illusion allows manufacturers of motorcars and aircraft for example, to acclaim engineering improvements that reduce the carbon emissions of new models as positive progress while ignoring the extraordinary growth in both markets.

(2006 saw an all-time record of sixty-seven

million new vehicles added to the world's roads. China's motorcar production has quintupled in the last decade and the number of aircraft in the skies is expected to treble in the next few years.)

The same illusion drives the feverish expansion of roads and airports and other infrastructure to support this growth when all the signs are that we should at least be pausing to reflect on the wisdom of such activity as an oil-starved, carbon restricted world takes shape on the horizon.

The illusion of separateness liberates us from the truth: Nothing grows for ever. Growth is not without cost. Waste is never thrown 'away' - just transformed. And nothing is separate. The problem is that this worldview now seems so sturdily rational, legally sound and utterly inevitable, that it is never questioned within our culture. It is deemed to be beyond question. But it *is* a systemic illusion.

In *The Sane Society*, psychologist Eric Fromm proposed that not only individuals but whole societies may be lacking in sanity. The fact that a majority of people share certain ideas or feelings doesn't prove the validity of these ideas and feelings, he argues. Because millions share the same vices doesn't make them virtues; or because they share many errors doesn't make them truths; equally, just because they share the same form of mental pathology doesn't make them sane.

Describing what he defines as 'consensual validation' as one of the most deceptive features of social life, Fromm concluded that modern Western society was indeed insane and that this insanity is threatening the very survival of the human species.

Fast forward fifty years and we find ourselves living in a world driven by an economic model that has put our planet home under enormous strain ecologically, socially and environmentally. We are literally sawing off the branch we're sitting on, and *economically* that's an entirely good thing.

Is this insane, or am I missing something?



I feel it's important to say that these examples are not intended as a criticism of business. Human beings have always carried on business of one kind or another, and it is a valuable and vital part of our communities. They are intended however, to be a radical critique of the business *model* and the *mindset* that makes such insanity seem normal, and even respectable.

The way we approach societal problems, is open to exactly the same challenge - expecting a healthy population to exist in an unhealthy environment for example, responding to road congestion by constructing more roads, or thinking that education is about delivering facts and figures in neat packages labelled maths, history, geography and so on - all comes out of the same 'separateness' mindset but that's not the focus of this paper.

The current business model has served humanity well for several centuries. Now that we can see what is happening to our natural environment we must ask: how well will it serve a greatly enlarged human population, currently growing at the rate of 10,000 souls per hour, in a hotter world in which oil and fresh water are equally scarce, most of the arable land has been concreted over or lost to desert, and the climate has become unstable and less hospitable to humans?

courageous leadership

There are three things climate scientists are agreed on: One, the crisis is worse than they thought, two, the changes are coming faster than predicted, and three, we need to act *now*.

We shouldn't expect much of government. Governments follow the people. And most ordinary people feel powerless in the face of such enormity. But we should expect a lot from the business world, now the dominant shaping influence on the planet.

Business has the power, it has the brains, it has the money, it has the global networks, it does creativity and innovation better than anyone, it's used to taking on big challenges - and it's used to winning.

Business is by far the best placed institution in the world to make a deep and lasting difference, if it can find the will.

In the past year I have spoken with senior people in business about the issues, and these are some typical responses:

"Yes I know, David. I agree with you - you're perfectly correct. But I have shareholders to think about and they'd think I'm crazy if I started to talk about these things."

"Personally, I know something has to change. If it was up to me.... but I'm stuck. That isn't and can't be the focus of business. Investors would walk away."

"Airlines don't operate aircraft for the joy of seeing them fly. They do so because more and more people want to fly. Airlines are just supplying demand."

[Exxon CEO similarly blamed the consumer when he recently stated that increased use of oil was nothing to do with Exxon. People just want to drive their cars more, he said.]

"What do you expect me to do, David? I'm paid to run this business, and that's what I have to concentrate on. Technology will find answers... to the climate thing..."

And an insurance executive to whom I put the CGNU Insurance Group forecast that weather-related claims will bankrupt the world by 2050: "Actually I think it's worse than you say, and I think it could happen sooner. But listen, I can't stand apart from my peers in the industry."

Shareholders would think I'm crazy... If it was up to me... Investors would walk away... We're only supplying demand... People want to fly more... People want to drive more... Technology will find answers... I can't stand apart ... These

responses and the human condition they point to, have prompted me to take my enquiry further, and that's the reason for my conversation with you.

In the midst of all of this, there *is* a hopeful perspective. People know there is a global problem. Those who support organisations with their custom or their labour, increasingly want to support organisations that stand for something more than business as usual. They want to feel that something is being done about the crisis beyond changing light bulbs and recycling bottles. The opportunity for constructive and meaningful change is growing, and it's exciting!

What is missing is leadership. We are starved of leadership at a time when the world needs guidance and direction like never before. There are any number of people sitting atop any number of hierarchical boxes, but evidence of leaders with real courage and *vision* is thin on the ground.

This is true in all walks of life but it's particularly relevant to business because of the privileged position this institution holds in the world. Now the dominant shaping influence across the planet business has a responsibility and I believe, a duty, to engage fully with the complex issues which threaten not just our way of life, but all forms of life.

It may have been astute to sit it out and wait for others to move first, but that hour has passed. The end of the window of opportunity that exists to tackle the issues is in sight and a focus on something greater than the needs of business and economics is called for now.

There is an urgent need for the most powerful and influential institution on the planet to demonstrate courageous leadership.

So, where are the leaders? Where are the people who are standing for something different, whose organisation others will want to emulate? Business leaders and their corporations taking a stand for the long term and collective good? If they are there, they are not visible. Who can point to *any* organisation in the land at this time that

stands for something more edifying than 'growth' and the singular pursuit of the narrow interests of owners and shareholders?

Globally, people and organisations standing out from the crowd are emerging, though they are still too few in number. Some are completely changing their business model, others are challenging the system, some are challenging corporate law.

Together they are redefining the rules, aligning their business activities with the patterns and the values of life, and positioning their organisations for the radical changes which must inevitably come. All of them are demonstrating great courage, and powerful leadership.

We exist in a tiny space on the surface of planet Earth, not unlike dew on an apple. It's a fragile environment in which the elements are finely balanced, and it's the only place in the universe we can live at present.

If humans were to disappear it would scarcely affect life on Earth, scientist E.O. Wilson famously said. But if the insects were to go, within a few short months all of life would be lost.

And therein lies the real challenge for leadership: to recognise that at the end of the day it won't be the Dow Jones Industrial Average or the GDP figures or any other *economic* indicator that will determine the quality of life, or indeed if it will continue, but the natural systems of the planet that make everything possible.

epilogue

For anything to happen, there must be a dream. For anything great to happen, there must be a great dream.

Those who have begun the task of reconnecting the mission of their enterprises with the natural systems we depend on, and whose strategies

and behaviours embody even in the smallest way, the quality of the solution rather than the problem, are dreaming the great dream.

They know that it's not necessary to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. They understand that small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world - indeed that only small acts, driven by a small group of people have ever changed the world.

These pioneers have discovered a fundamental truth: that the collective good and their own longterm self-interest are inextricably linked, and only by serving the collective good, can they truly serve their own long term self-interest.

When Lisa's children learn that our generation knew all about the problems we've created and ask what did we do about it, what will she tell them? Who will be the leaders of the transformation she will point to? The people who painted the new dream. The people who fearlessly did what instinctively they knew was the *right* thing to do. The people who had the courage to stand apart and challenge the *mindset* at the heart of the crisis and lead what author David Korten has called The Great Turning.

Will you be one of them? ||| **dya**

“Courage comes from the French word for heart. You don't think yourself into courageous action. You can only feel the necessity to act, and out of that comes courage. Courage is linked to our hearts, not our heads.”

Margaret Wheatley - author Leadership and the New Science

About the author

David Youell is a partner at **downey youell associates** and works with individuals and organisations to address issues of culture and change in the workplace and the community.

He is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner and co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic - 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*, a desktop companion of practical communication tips and inspirational wisdom. [Oak Tree Press, 1998]

He helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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