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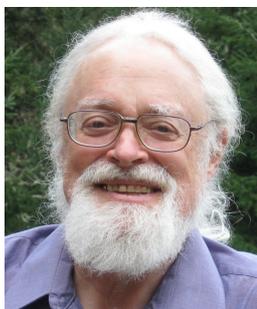
12/21 – Polarization, Conversation, and Collective Intelligence

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Polarization is rooted in dichotomous thinking – binary, oppositional, polarized perspectives that have been with us for thousands of years. The problems and insights presented by dichotomous thinking have been long recognized, along with transpolarizing perspectives that provide us with positive ways to appreciate dichotomy and deal with it and the false choices it often seems to present.

To demonstrate what I mean, here are a half-dozen examples I've encountered in my own work:

- Taoism's Taijitu (yin-yang) symbol reminds us that seeming opposites depend on and dance with each other – indeed, that they require each other even to be defined and recognized.
- Buddhism's principle of "dependent co-arising" generalizes and deepens the Taijitu insight to embrace everything even beyond polarities. It invites us to let go of our attachments so we can, with clarity, simultaneously witness and participate in what David Spangler calls "the co-incarnational universe". http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-Spangler.html
- Hegel's dialectic notes that this dance is often generative – that the struggle between thesis and antithesis births a synthesis that includes and transcends prior perspectives that once seemed incompatible – at which point the creative struggle begins again at the new level of integration, with the new (syn)thesis calling forth a more evolved antithesis.
- Polarity Management notes that some problems persist because their dichotomous nature involves a dynamic tension that prevents both sides of the dichotomy from being maximized at the same time. For example, the more freedom people have, the more some people rise above others, undermining a society's equality – especially when some people accumulate power to control or manipulate the others, thus intentionally reducing their freedom. On the other hand, the more we educate and legislate for equality, the more we end up constraining freedom. Polarity Management suggests that although we can't MAXIMIZE both of the polarities at the same time, we can OPTIMIZE both by recognizing that each has an upside (that advocates rightly value) and a downside (that opponents rightly fear). Both change initiatives and resistance to those initiatives should be welcomed for the insights they provide into a bigger picture that includes and transcends the two poles, and empowers us to manage a dynamic, life-serving balancing dance between the poles. http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/14-06-19.Barry_Johnson.Polarity_Management.pdf
- Rumi's most famous poetic invitation – "Out beyond right-thinking and

wrong-thinking there is a field; I'll meet you there" – conjures up a space of non-judgment where we can directly encounter the wholeness of each other and the world beyond divisive categories.

- Nonviolent Communication provides a method for meeting in Rumi's field when we find ourselves at odds with ourselves or each other. NVC grounds us in universal needs that can be satisfied in multiple ways and in empathic inquiry that helps us identify the special satisfiers that can meet the needs of all involved. Often our need for connection is so intense that our initial conflict simply dissolves (without being "solved") as one of us helps the other(s) join them in Rumi's field.

Many of these approaches to polarity note how, when one pole is enhanced, its opposite tends to manifest in even more powerful, problematic, and/or transformative ways. Part of the wisdom of these perspectives is helping us come to accept that inescapable fact of life. The other part of their wisdom is helping us engage creatively with it.

A third part of their wisdom can provide us with paths leading outside the constraints of polarization altogether, to see more clearly that the options it presents are basically false. After all, reducing reality – or any ecosystem or spectrum of perspectives – to two alternatives is drastically reductionist. There are almost always more than two kinds, energies, realities, perspectives, or options present. If we reify polarities too much, they become a consciousness-constricting, life-degrading mirage.

However, there are limits – naturally different and evolving for each person and group – as to how far we can expand our perspective before we become overwhelmed or dysfunctional. It is no surprise, then, that most of us look for easy ways out. Our minds have a tendency to oversimplify in order to navigate the complexity of life, to find factors or ways of knowing that are more relevant or productive than others. Furthermore, having two options gives us things to not only be clearly FOR but also to be clearly AGAINST, supporting the kind of conflict-centered life dramas that engage our attention – us against them, my way or the highway, pro-and-con. Two are better than one, and simpler than three, and so much more comprehensible than eighty-seven – or infinite – interconnections and possibilities!

Some people, realizing the futility of dichotomous reductionism, but unable to see a way out of it, throw up their hands in disgust or cognitive surrender, or transfer their allegiance to some particular theological narrative, Venn diagram, quadrant model, or spectrum of realities that seems to explain it all in more flexible or expansive terms. This last is SUCH an advance over dichotomous black-and-white thinking and almost always makes a significant contribution to nuancing and stretching our understanding. But, as the saying goes, the map is not the territory, and the territory has a disturbing habit of rubbing up against the geography of whatever maps we love, seeking to alter their shape.

Here and there we find courageous folks who seek to actually confront the true complexity of reality. They end up "knowing that they don't know". They become humble, nuanced, detached from any one perspective or map but interested in many, curious in their thinking and aware that "there is always more to it" than whatever is asserted or seems obvious. Their sense of knowing becomes a journey more than a destination, as their certainty finds itself in a companionable dance with uncertainty in the yin-yang of ever-evolving understanding. They see the world in more dialogic terms, as an endless conversation, and thus attend to what makes that conversation more or less enjoyable, productive, enlightening, transformational, or otherwise to their liking and to the benefit of all involved. And in their search for solutions, they look for the elusive "third way" or "the emergent possibilities" that haven't yet shown up in the collective radar, more often than not through the co-creative engagement of diverse – even conflicting – perspectives.

I have written this as if I'm describing three distinct kinds of people – or, if you will, three different kinds of leader – The Dichotomist, The Mapper, and

The Dialogician. This assertion is, of course, reductionist in its own right, in addition to being judgmental, especially regarding the dichotomizers. And what I've said so far is just one model or spectrum of different kinds of thinking, one map whose territory is far more complex than what I offer here.

Furthermore, these three thinking types are, in fact, dimensions of us all, modes of dealing with reality as we find it – and as we find ourselves and others with whom we live and work at any particular time. Truly, I find myself continuously occupying and moving among these cognitive modes, often holding all three simultaneously in different aspects of my consciousness.

And, of course, there is the additional awareness that all such engagement in distinctions unfolds within a more fundamental Oneness – or unitary aspect of Wholeness – which itself has many aspects and dimensions which dance together in vibrant ways that so engage our co-incarnational attention…

SOCIAL FACTORS

Having reviewed some general observations and theory about dichotomous thinking and polarization, let's get more specific. I suspect most readers of this journal will be especially concerned with social and political polarization that arises out of the basic factors described above, but which have their own manifestations and magnifying dynamics in our particular era. In the social manifestation of polarization we find a significant factor in the fragmentation – and resurfacing – of cultural sources of unity and coherence, including traditional institutions of shared meaning-making like religions and clubs which are now showing up more as networks and movements.

Way back in prehistoric times – and in isolated places even today – more or less coherent tribes occupied specific territories separated by distances and geographic obstacles like oceans, rivers and mountains. Traditional cultures evolved into relative homogeneity around cultural narratives and practices shaped by their unique environmental conditions. People's relative lack of mobility kept them isolated from other cultures and perspectives. These factors gave cultures a certain solidity and persistence, a dynamic analogous to the processes of biological speciation in geographic isolation.

But as new forms of mobility were developed, contacts between tribes became more frequent and their cultures began to evolve more quickly. And with agricultural settlements and empires came increased cultural mixing propelled by trade, warfare, and slavery. The industrial revolution – with its mass production and rapidly evolving communications and transportation technologies – magnified the imperial culture-blender even further. Unprecedented elite power, capitalist marketing, and manipulated individualist culture (ref: *The Century of the Self* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Century_of_the_Self) introduced new and powerful forms of cultural co-optation that transformed both the extent and the content of cultural diversity, bringing Thai burritos to Oakland, CA, and McDonalds and Toyota to virtually every major city in the world while undermining the ethical, philosophical, and place-based dimensions of earlier cultures. As coherent traditional cultures fragmented, diluted and mixed, nationalism and the state became the dominant unifying forces. With increasing state power, leaders in the battle for state influence and resources increasingly tapped into the unifying dynamics of endangered traditional cultures (ethnicities), beliefs (religious and political ideologies), and class interests to unify and control their partisan followers, aided by increasing understanding of the dynamics of people's minds and passions (thanks to psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and marketing research).

In the modern era we find, as well, a counter-flow – a reaction to both the old traditions and the ubiquitous modern monoculturalism – the rise of the "cultural creatives" who mix and match new and old cultural forms into "new tribalisms" of beliefs, lifestyles and internet-based (and other virtual) networks and communities. In an unexpected twist, these communities also have a growing geographic dimension, as location becomes less of a given

and more of a choice – and as those choices stick.

Since it is more comfortable living with like-minded others, as mobility has increased, more Americans have moved into neighborhoods and relationships that supply that kind of comfort. We are clustering geographically in networks and information ecosystems, in relationships, etc., where we share worldviews and self-reinforcing information with like-minded others, reifying those worldviews into real-world silos of thought and action. Numerous books and articles have been written on this – from *The Big Sort* http://www.thebigsort.com/home.php to studies of dating http://journalistsresource.org/studies/politics/polarization/political-polarization-american-public-geography-dating#. This balkanization of America (and the world) is enhanced by the information balkanization of the Internet, especially the tendency of major search functions – from Google to Netflix to Amazon – to channel viewers according to their demonstrated interests and towards the choices of like-minded others. As all this unfolds, our exposure to different people and perspectives is shrinking, driven by the attractor of our own preferences and the discomfort of dealing with differences. The easier it is to pursue and satisfy our own preferences, the less we need or want to deal with uncomfortable differences. With each passing year these virtual and physical feedback loops become more dense and mutually reinforcing, solidifying our polarizing sense of Us and Them.

So we find such dynamics have fragmented the relatively coherent and conformist character of traditional societies, generating an unprecedented level of diversity in perspectives, choices in behavior and location, and speed of change. Our natural response to the resulting complexity and stress is to "circle the wagons" with likeminded others. So we cluster both geographically and virtually. Our islands of shared belief, ethnicity, and interest resist the dynamics of change and ameliorate the stresses of diversity and choice. Both individually and communally, they provide psychological refuge from these fragmenting forces, creating pockets of unity especially when under attack or when manipulated by public relations experts and demagogues. So the old tribal dynamics have been resurfacing in both old and new forms and now coexist – and, in fact, are coevolving – with more modern interactive, disruptive, novelty-generating, and recombinant dynamics.

Political Polarization

All this is, of course, reflected in and magnified by the dynamics of political power-seeking. The kind of political polarization we see today – usually framed as liberal versus conservative, left versus right, or (in the U.S.) Democrat versus Republican – is grounded in the ancient dichotomous thinking described at the beginning of this article. But that natural dichotomizing impulse is helped along by a number of additional factors indigenous to political culture, especially in the U.S.:

1. The majoritarian system itself.

It is *much* easier to get more than 50% when we are dealing with two options than when we are dealing with three or more. In majoritarian cultures with a winner-take-all voting process (as in the U.S.), these tendencies tend to whittle the partisan field down to two dominant parties or ideologies with other tiny parties relegated to the fringes. (In majoritarian cultures with proportional representation, as in most parliamentary systems, majorities are reached by alliances between parties, which ameliorates the polarization dynamic but sometimes makes very small parties into "king makers" who provide the swing votes in a close call.)

Thus winner-take-all majoritarian cultures encourage people to align into bipartisan polarities or polarized framings like "pro-life" versus "pro-choice". This framing of the abortion issue provides a great example of the polarizing dynamics and demonstrates vividly how both ridiculously reductionist and thoroughly misleading polarized framings can be. Pro-life versus pro-choice is ridiculously reductionist because it obscures the actual complex landscape of

feelings and opinions about abortion, forcing people into these two opposing camps where they may not feel totally comfortable, but which they adopt in order to have companionship and political impact in their majoritarian adversarial culture. http://co-intelligence.org/S-beyondabortiondebate.html

The pro-life/pro-choice dichotomy is thoroughly misleading because its category labels are inevitably presumptuous and exclusionary, claiming conceptual higher ground to which they are not entitled. Again, the real world is more complicated than our labels assert. After all, many people on the pro-life side are in favor of many death-dealing policies – like capital punishment and wars – and want certain choices – like where to send their kids to school. Similarly, many on the pro-choice side are often against certain choices – like parents being free to genetically design their babies or any citizen being able to own any gun – and they are for many life-affirming things – like every child being wanted, equal pay for equal work, and sustaining planetary life for future generations. The closer you look at labels like pro-choice and pro-life, the fuzzier and more outrageous – even insane – they become.

When presented with having to choose between only two options in the political field – like pro-life or pro-choice – people either take sides or "waste their vote" (by supporting some fringe third perspective that doesn't stand a chance in the majoritarian battle) and seem wishy-washy to their more ideological peers. But the psychodynamics of taking or not taking sides can be both compelling and confusing: People find they have to compromise their values in order to commit to one party or one position on an issue, because their opinions and preferences are problematically complex. That complexity muddies the majoritarian hunger for polarizing clarity, so it must be suppressed by squeezing it into the binary choice, which leaves the more consciously complex citizen on the sidelines.

2. The culture and techniques of debate.

The "debate" narrative draws us into being for or against a proposition rather than engaging us in a shared search for optimum solutions. It also subjects us to – and tempts us into mastering – sophisticated tricks of logic and illogic so that we can win the debate battle rather than helping us understand the essential facts, stories, and values involved in our shared situation so that we can wisely resolve our conflict or co-design a well-considered shared course of action. Debate, like war, is a dichotomous manifestation of a culture of competition and contest which itself usually involves more than two parties but often degenerates into oversimplified "sides" and coalitions in the pursuit of the power needed to dominate challengers.

3. The use of expert – especially scientific – public manipulation.

As a modern manifestation and intensification of the culture of debate, we see massive and increasing funding being loosed into the field of political PR and electioneering. Scientific PR researches how people respond to different messages and images so political campaigns and their allies can craft their communications to shape public opinion in their favor. Using methods from surveys and focus groups to brain scans and eye-motion detectors, researchers work out how to undercut citizens' rationality at unconscious levels, colonizing their reason to create rationalizations for unconsciously motivated behaviors that the PR masters are puppeteering. PR experts also know how to sideline, cover up, or distract us from substantive issues, using partial or irrelevant facts, dramas, and images to direct our attention where they want us to put it, not unlike the techniques of a magician or hypnotist. And empowered by computerized demographic and geographic data, they also know who among us to target with which message in what location through what media. Smart PR and abundant advertising resources can even make lies and distortions pay off with few consequences for the misinformation masters.

Successful political PR is usually based on emotion-laden, over-simplified framings, arguments, stories and images that unduly glorify one side while demonizing the other. Playing on our longings (which PR attaches to US) and

especially our fears (which PR attaches to THEM), this polarizing strategy – common in any hot debate – has a toxic power that undermines our ability to think clearly and feel deeply into the many-faceted complexity of issues and political personalities – to say nothing of talking with fellow citizens whom we are inclined to dismiss as ignorant enemies.

In tandem with that message manipulation are partisan electioneering manipulations ranging from the respectable (like get-out-the-vote efforts, which are irrelevant in countries like Australia where voting is mandatory) to the criminal (like stuffing imaginary ballots and hacking voting machines). Laws are passed or voting venues or arrangements are altered to make the very act of voting difficult or impossible for your opponent's constituents – like poor people or students. Or negative campaigns are undertaken that so disgust voters that fewer of them vote; the less popular side can then take advantage the resulting suppressed turnout by financing their own side's get-out-the-vote efforts (usually staffed by the party's passionate hyper-partisan "base"). Finally, the practice called gerrymandering – through which the boundaries of electoral districts are manipulated to the advantage of whatever party controls the legislature doing the redistricting process – can almost guarantee the re-election of existing officeholders or their fellow partisans.

All this manipulative know-how – empowered by science, technology, internet tracking, and unanswerable floods of campaign contributions – undermines the whole logic of elections as providing answerability and the leverage voters need to shape their representative government to serve their public interests. The magnified toxic power of PR and election manipulation by partisan interests colonizes the potentially enlightening power of people's thinking, feeling, stories, and participation in shaping their political world, channeling it to benefit those special interests. The whole bizarre dynamic gives us good reason to wonder how much democracy we actually have while supporting a level of partisanship that makes it hard for democratic institutions to even govern effectively.

4. The feedback dynamics of schismogenesis

Initially the dynamics in 1-3 above increase only the APPARENT (though not real) homogeneity of each side. But this APPARENT uniformity soon evolves into ACTUAL uniformity by decreasing the exposure of each side to the arguments and people on the other side. That decreases the ACTUAL diversity of opinion on each side, since each is becoming more righteously closed-minded and conformist about their own perspective and ignorant of the other's. Gregory Bateson calls this "schismogenesis" – the systemic co-creation of division (schism). This has been demonstrated in research – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_polarization, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schismogenesis, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groupthink, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extremism.

As the apparent extremism of each side increases, the other side is able to paint itself as moderate in the face of the other's extremism even as it tightens up its own worldview in reaction.

The more extreme each side's views get, the more they think that the media, government, academia, etc., are controlled by the other side – which, in turn, feeds even more extreme views and actions, in an effort to have some impact on the monolithic Bad Guys. (In many cases we might more accurately view these institutions as controlled by interests that aren't on the political spectrum, per se, but who use ideological conflict to manipulate populations or the policy apparatus for non-ideological power and profit.)

As special interests increase in wealth and manipulative power, they increasingly use culture, religion, and political ideology to demonize the 'Other' as a mobilizing device, especially to "mobilize their base", that is, those most extreme ideological elements on their side whose ideological energies make them the most dedicated workers for their partisan cause. Ironically, the

power holders in a partisan camp do not need to appeal so much to the more moderate majority of their followers, if they can fire up their extremists to do the hard work of financing and winning a political campaign, sometimes resulting in both the private and public voices of that campaign being more extreme than that majority, a group who goes along anyway out of fear of the other side and in order to not "waste their vote".

5. The divisive impact of injustice, inequity, and insecurity

Increasingly real and visible economic, social, and situational injustice, inequity, and insecurity drive people into estranged camps rife with envy, resentment, anger, and paranoia. The greater the observable differentials between the haves and the have-nots, for example, the more oppositional and conflicted class-sensitive energy is generated in the system as a whole. Some of this energy is dissipated by promoting the misleading partial truth that "we are all responsible for our own life conditions, for our own success or failure in life" – often to the collective, systemic benefit of more privileged camps. On the other hand this polarizing energy is often intensified and cynically used by people who gain power by demonizing an enemy or some scapegoat caught in the dark, sparking dance of shame, ego, tribe, hatred and revenge. Both scapegoating unpopular groups and blaming individual shortcomings bolster negative polarizing energy rather than addressing its systemic sources. In current U.S. political discourse, much of the talk against immigration focuses on immigrants taking away jobs that would otherwise go to Americans (a questionable assumption) rather than on the radical concentration of wealth at the top of American society http://www.tomatleeblog.com/?p=175326345 which in a healthier economy could be used creating jobs in repairing America's infrastructure and transitioning it to a post-carbon economy. Equitable social arrangements tend to foster moderate political dynamics and better measures of social welfare. http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/

6. Scarcity

Intimately connected to the preceding dynamic of inequity, scarcity (of resources, attention, time, caring) can generate cooperation, sharing, and mutual aid or competition and battles to see whose needs get met. (ref Solnit, Rebecca, A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster (Penguin, 2010)) Much scarcity is an illusion generated by the ways we organize our social relations and our economic systems. For example, when people share goods and services that once were individually owned or accessed, they discover a sudden abundance that has existed all along, hidden in closets and garages. However, some scarcity is very real and becoming more so as excessive consumption, waste, pollution, and climate disruption degrade available resources and our global life-support systems. So if we don't want society to split apart into increasingly polarized factions, we need to foster cooperative ways of meeting the challenges of increasing material scarcity by creating a sense of material enoughness combined with abundant meaning and delight not so dependent on material goods and services provided by centralized and monetized economic systems. http://www.shareable.net/

ON THE OTHER HAND….

Polarization in American society, while obviously politically and socially unhealthy, may not be as extreme as it seems from the media battles of punditry and the dysfunctions of Congress. Apparently the media face of political discord derives partly from the media's love of conflict and partly from the odd nature of political districting – and redistricting – in the U.S.

A 2014 study entitled "A Not So Divided America" http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Red-Blue-Report.pdf did a meta-analysis of public polling questions that reached beyond people's general responses to issues into their support for specific public policy proposals. The researchers delved into 388 questions from 24 major surveys done between 2008-2013. These

particular polls were chosen for the study because they included data about the state or district where each respondent lived, which could then be identified as primarily liberal or conservative. The researchers found "remarkably little difference between the views of people who live in red (Republican) districts or states, and those who live in blue (Democratic) districts or states... Most people living in red districts/states disagreed with most people in blue districts/states on only four percent of the questions... For a large majority of questions – 69 percent – there were no statistically significant differences between the views in the red districts/states and the blue districts/states." (Note that this review did not include people identifying as independents, which would change the level of support for various specific policies in unpredictable ways. But the point of the review was to examine the views of the supposedly polarized Democrats and Republicans.)

This seemingly non-polarized aspect of the U.S. population is also reflected in certain maps of electoral results. The American version of winner-take-all majoritarianism tends to produce different maps of our electoral diversity, depending on one's scale of observation and whether one is mapping the winners or the percentage of voters who voted for the various candidates. This remarkable page explores these different factors in vivid detail. http://www.graphgraph.com/2012/11/maps-of-the-2012-presidential-election/ The most important graph for our purposes is the one that shows what has come to be called The Purple America map http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purple_America , meaning that the vast majority of us live in counties that contain substantial percentages of voters for both Republican and Democratic candidates.

These maps compile data on people's votes for president, by county and state. I haven't seen voting maps for Representatives and Senators, but we could assume at least some similarity. Legislative districts are different from the counties used as the basis for the purple maps above. Sometimes they are more homogeneous because their boundaries have been manipulated to concentrate a minority population, either to get that minority representation or to remove their influence from adjacent districts. Other times districts boundaries are redrawn to distribute a particular population more thinly to deny them representation. One of the results of all that is that voting districts can have a different proportion of partisan voters than counties – which include the same people but in different configurations. Furthermore, thanks to winner-take-all majoritarian electoral results, the partisan makeup of the elected Congress people will not only NOT reflect the partisan distribution of the population of the counties and states, but will tend to be more polarized – and that polarization will be embedded in the district structure. These seemingly solid ideological groupings seem at odds with the apparently greater political diversity reflected in the counties and states.

In his discussion of The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart by Bill Bishop http://amazon.com/gp/product/0547237723, Amazon reviewer Gaetan Lion – with reference to Morris Fiorina's Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America – notes the "paradox between fractured polarized communities vs. moderate States and rising percentage of independents." He points out that "you have polarized communities but overall moderate electorate and extremely polarized politicians representing the electorate." Lion calls for "a unifying theory resolving those divergences depending on what political scale you focus on." http://amzn.to/1p6bkaW

For an excellent description of gerrymandering, see Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerrymandering, especially the abc chart under "Effects of Gerrymandering".

But none of this negates the existence of polarized energies in the U.S. and elsewhere, and the detrimental effects these energies have on their societies. So I'll now turn to exploring ways to address these energies to the benefit of the common good.

LEARNING, CONVERSING AND COLLABORATING OUR WAY BACK

INTO SOCIAL WHOLENESS

To move beyond polarization, we need leadership to help us transcend partisanship, to develop our social capital, to generate collective intelligence and wisdom, and to see life from more holistic perspectives. I explore each of these more in the sections that follow.

These four domains are intimately interdependent. Enhancing any one of them enhances our prospects for developing the others. In developing each of them, we need leaders who can lead us into collectively leading ourselves, because top-down approaches are ultimately not going to work to overcome polarization. This is because overcoming polarization requires, most importantly, recognizing and empowering diversity in our social lives and, secondly, because it's just too easy for polarizers to knock the top off of movements for wholeness. The transformation needs to be thorough. We need a cultural revolution at every level and in every sector of society, a deep shift whose many facets are woven together by – and drive forward with – creative conversation.

1. Nonpartisanship – reducing slavish identification with reductionist "sides"

Polarization, being an extreme, is unstable. Even though it gets much help from our psychology and our political systems (as noted above), it requires a lot of energy inputs to keep it going. Its recent manifestation as "Congressional gridlock" doesn't help its PR: For the last four years Congress has been viewed unfavorably by more than 80% of Americans of all parties http://www.gallup.com/poll/166196/congress-job-approval-drops-time-low-2013.aspx So as political polarization and its false choices increase, we find a growing backlash against it. Three of the major components of this transformational backlash – the rise of "independents", the rise of "transpartisans", and the rise of "deliberative post-partisans" – are described below:

- "Independents" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_(voter) refuse to identify with any one political party. They often have open-minded or pluralistic attitudes and make their choices based on the merits of specific proposals or candidates rather than on party affiliations. This doesn't mean that many independents aren't ideological – they are! – but it means they are at least less influenced by the polarizing dynamics of major partisan politics.

In January 2014, Gallup estimated that 42% of Americans now identify as independents, compared with 25% as Republicans and 31% as Democrats. http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx Even though a slight majority of Americans still identify with one of the two major parties, the majority of Americans have a negative view of both parties http://www.gallup.com/poll/166202/democratic-party-maintains-favorability-edge-gop.aspx. The more citizens abandon partisan affiliations, the more political space is created for initiatives and perspectives that don't reinforce the party lines and major party dynamics.

Note also that independents are the swing voters who can make or break either party's successes. That power could be organized to force the major parties to make better choices of candidates and policies. Several organizations attempting to do this include:

Independent Voters of America
http://independentvotersofamerica.org/manifesto/

Independent Voice http://www.independentvoice.org/about.html

- Independent Voting http://www.independentvoting.org/People who identify as "transpartisans retain their partisan views – including many partisan views outside the two-party duopoly, such as Libertarians, Constitutionalists and Greens – but they advocate and practice respectful conversations among partisans and foster cross-partisan

collaborations on policies on which they all agree, often including issues ranging from war and the military budget to corporate power and the surveillance state. Husseini, Sam "The Perennially 'Unusual' Yet Somehow Ubiquitous Left-Right Alliance: Towards Acknowledging an Anti-Establishment Center". http://husseini.posthaven.com/the-perennially-unusual-yet-somehow-ubiquitous-left-right-alliance-towards-acknowledging-an-anti-establishment-center

Transpartisan literature dates from A. Lawrence Chickering's 1993 "Beyond Left and Right: Breaking the Political Stalemate" http://www.amazon.com/Beyond-Left-Right-Political-Stalemate/dp/1558152091 to Phil Neisser and Jacob Hess's 2012 "You're Not as Crazy as I Thought (But You're Still Wrong)". http://www.amazon.com/Youre-Crazy-Thought-Still-Wrong/dp/1612344615

Among the many organizations that see themselves as transpartisan or function on transpartisan principles are these:

> The Transpartisan Center http://www.transpartisancenter.org/
>
> The Liberty Coalition http://www.libertycoalition.net/partners
>
> Living Room Conversations http://www.livingroomconversations.org/
>
> NoLabels http://www.nolabels.org/
>
> Public Conversations Project http://www.publicconversations.org/
>
> Mediators Foundation http://mediatorsfoundation.org/
>
> A Greater US http://agreater.us/
>
> Reuniting America http://reunitingamerica.org.
>
> Campaign for A New Policy with Iran. http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/printgroupProfile.asp?grpid=7436

- "Deliberative post-partisans" try to get beyond partisanship altogether, often believing that political parties and partisanship are themselves major defects in our practice of democracy. http://www.co-intelligence.org/polarization-Fetzer.html Instead, they advocate wiser, more productive forms of collaborative public problem solving among citizens as peer members of their community or society, either regardless of their political views or with serious attention given to including the full spectrum of political views in their locale. These processes tend to involve cross-sections of the population (often randomly selected) in providing fresh input to the public and/or to official decision-makers. They make use of information-intensive deliberative activities that produce well-considered advice and/or choice-creating conversations that generate new perspectives and creative options about how to deal with specific public issues. The following are some of the leading approaches in this post-partisan movement:

  > Citizen Deliberative Councils http://co-intelligence.org/P-CDCs.html
  >
  > Citizens Juries / The Jefferson Center http://jefferson-center.org/how-we-work/citizen-juries/
  >
  > Wisdom Councils / The Center for Wise Democracy http://wisedemocracy.org/page11/page18/page18.html
  >
  > Planning cells http://planet-thanet.fsnet.co.uk/groups/wdd/99_planning_cells.htm

Deliberative Polling   http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/docs/summary

Public Agenda's "Framing for Deliberation"
 http://www.publicagenda.org/files/CAPE%20Working%20Paper%20Framing%20for%20Deliberation.pdf

These nonpartisan political stances – independence, transpartisanship, and deliberative post-partisanship – set the stage for the development of social capital (and vice versa).

2. Social capital

Social capital is the amount and quality of relationships in a community that provide the basis for collaborative action on communal affairs. Theoreticians have proposed that there are two kinds of social capital – bonding capital among similar people and organizations and bridging capital among people or organizations with significant differences. These relationships constitute a primary resource and form of wealth in any community or society – together weaving what has been poetically called "the fabric of society". Where both of these relationships are strong, we find a strong social fabric.

Social capital can be built by investing in it, and it itself can be invested in projects to produce goods and services or to pursue shared goals. In this sense, it is like other forms of capital – financial, material, built, intellectual, natural, etc. – that can be invested, fostered, and accumulated.

A healthy society has a balance of both forms of social capital – bonding AND bridging. That balance is undermined by polarization – which is a manifestation of extreme bonding achieved by undermining the bridges between different kinds of people. That lopsided bonding capital is invested by political manipulators to further their narrow agendas. In the face of this, parts of the community or society will find themselves longing for more bridging capital to invest in the common good. Below are some strategies leaders can use to achieve that – or that communities can use to better lead themselves.

Keys for leadership here are active, respectful, empathic listening and creating interactive contexts where people can enjoy each other's company and, ultimately, truly hear each other's diverse perspectives and stories to discover their common humanity and their common needs, interests, and aspirations – leading to collaborative action. These show up strongly in the following approaches:

- Bridging social activities. In the face of polarization, it is almost always productive to convene events that encourage people with different beliefs, ethnicities, social status and/or other "hot" differences to interact in fruitful ways. Community potlucks, block parties, celebrations, farmers markets, and other informal mixers – almost always involving food and entertainment – create relatively safe contexts for different people to stumble into each other and discover they are all human. An abundance of such social activities in a community tends to support a humanized culture within which all other sorts of community engagement can flourish.
- Bridging conversations. Often in an effort to make social activities broadly appealing, they will be kept shallow. When they neglect rather than truly transcend differences, people usually return to their segregated lifeworlds afterwards and the community loses the benefits of bridging. People tend to get to know each other through conversation and certain kinds of conversation can help them move more productively through the discomforts of diversity into real connection. Light-touch facilitators adept at helping people safely speak, hear each other, and interact respectfully are a precious resource for this.

Some of the most powerful community conversations to counter polarization feature a rhythm that involves like-minded people caucusing and then breaking up and mixing into diverse dialogue groups and then returning to their

like-minded groups to share what they learned, and then moving back into the diverse groups again, and so on. Two simple modes that lend themselves to this kind of rhythm are The World Cafe http://www.theworldcafe.com – which involves participants mixing and remixing in small group dialogues – and Fishbowl http://www.kstoolkit.org/Fish+Bowl in which a circle of Group A people talk while Group B watches, and then Group B talks in the central circle while Group A watches, back and forth. The Swedish Almaden Week http://www.tomatleeblog.com/?p=175327112 offers an inspiring example of a multi-day event that combines these kinds of conversation with community celebration and socializing in a festival of political diversity.

But bridging conversations don't have to be such a big deal. All conversations that welcome all types of people and treat them respectfully can help build bridging capital. Two other very simple cafe-style formats that serve this purpose well are Conversation Cafés http://www.conversationcafe.org (often held in an actual cafe) and Commons Cafés http://commonway.org/node/62 which explicitly mix four very different kinds of pre-selected people sharing answers to questions about their personal lives.

Intergroup Dialogue http://campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportResources/Edition2_2/Intergroup2_2.html is an example of a more formal multi-meeting conversation to help people from different social identity groups gain a deeper understanding of diversity and justice issues.

- Conflict resolution and transformation. Differences all too often generate conflict, and this is of course true in the case of polarization. Luckily extensive know-how exists on handling conflict, ranging from approaches that treat conflict as a problem to be solved to very different approaches that use a conflict to transform the situation and the people in it, often generating major breakthroughs in understanding, relationships, identify, and/or possibilities. This work usually requires more trained and experienced practitioners and facilitators than most of the bridging conversations described above. So having and using those skills constitutes a significant gift of integral leadership in the conflicts generated by polarization. Some notable approaches to conflict which can serve integral leaders well are these:

  Nonviolent Communication empathically taps into the deep shared needs of conflicted people. http://co-intelligence.org/P-nonviolentcomm.html

  Dynamic Facilitation uses deep listening to diverse perspectives to open participants into the collaborative creation of breakthrough choices. http://co-intelligence.org/P-dynamicfacilitation.html and http://tobe.net

  Principled Negotiation recruits adversaries into collaboratively addressing every party's legitimate interests. http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/pricneg.htm

  Search for Common Ground uses personal stories and active listening to generate authentic connection to each other's aspirations, inspiring shared action. https://www.sfcg.org/what-we-do/

  Natural Resource Leadership Institutes help long-time opponents shift out of gridlocked conflicts over natural resource use. http://www.ncsu.edu/nrli

  Consensus Councils bring together the full diversity of stakeholders to agree on recommendations to policy-makers. http://agree.org/

- Community organizing approaches that use and enhance social capital. A community as a whole can be trapped by its inability to deal with its

internal differences. While most community organizing strategies involve mobilizing residents to put pressure on officials, some approaches involve nurturing connectivity among diverse people – engaging residents in more listening, witnessing, and bottom-up transformation. Here are some innovative variations on this theme:

Listening Projects http://co-intelligence.org/P-listeningpjts.html use listening to discharge antagonism and dispel ignorance while actively engaging people in social issues, often across significant differences.

Multiple-viewpoint drama http://co-intelligence.org/S-multipleviewptdrama.html dramatizes the actual statements of diverse people involved in an issue, conflict, or disturbance, so audiences gain an empathic understanding of all sides and the complex humanity they generate together.

Participatory Narrative
Inquiry http://www.storycoloredglasses.com/p/participatory-narrative-inquiry.html evokes stories of diverse individual experience related to an issue, explores patterns within and among those stories, and reflects the stories and learnings back to the larger community.

Positive Deviance http://positivedeviance.org helps communities with shared problems discover successful solutions being practiced by certain unrecognized community members, whose approaches are more acceptable to the community because the innovator is already one of them rather than an outsider.

The ultimate in community organizing, of course, entails creating conditions and contexts wherein communities can and do organize themselves. Powerful approaches exist for catalyzing community self-organization, including the following:

Future Search conferences http://co-intelligence.org/P-futuresearch.html bring together stakeholders from across an issue or conflict to explore incidents in their shared past, the dynamics of their shared present, and their expectations and hopes for their shared future, generating projects for shared action.

Open Space Technology http://co-intelligence.org/P-Openspace.html creates opportunities for people with diverse passions about an issue or topic to engage with others who share such passion for collaborative discovery and action.

Study Circles http://everyday-democracy.org involve many small grassroots educational forums on a topic using simple study packs and living room conversations, culminating in networking into ongoing action groups.

The World Café http://www.theworldcafe.com engages people in small group dialogues about a topic of shared concern or interest, with participants shifting between groups as the conversation proceeds and coming together at the end to harvest insights useful to the whole group.

Appreciative Inquiry http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/ engages everyone or a broad sample of people in an organization or community to inquire together into the best of what is, in order to study and build upon what already works and serves life.

Participatory Budgeting http://participatorybudgeting.org involves the whole community in deciding on how to use certain discretionary funds in the municipal or state budget.

Scenario and Visioning Work http://co-intelligence.org/P-scenario-visioning.html helps a community explore possible futures and choose a collective vision they all have passion about achieving and can work together on.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) http://www.abcdinstitute.org

discovers, maps, and mobilizes the often hidden assets and resources in a community.

3. The generation of collective intelligence and wisdom

The community self-organizing catalysts described above can serve here as a bridge into considering capacity-building for collective intelligence and wisdom.

Intelligence can be defined as the ability of an entity to learn, solve problems, and generally engage successfully with its changing environment. Collective intelligence, then, is the capacity of a group, organization, community, country or other collective entity to engage successfully with what's happening in and around it – especially in the presence of challenge and change. Collective wisdom involves expanding our collective intelligence to embrace more of the big picture – more of reality, more stakeholders, more nuance, more of the past, present, and future – as well as the ability to be creatively humble – for example, appreciative and curious – in the face of the intrinsic uncertainty and Mystery of life. The more we can take into account and the greater the benefits we can compassionately produce over the long haul, the wiser we can be.

Clearly, there are such things as wise leaders. But integral leadership would involve both individuals and collectives manifesting leadership, as well as both their internal awareness and qualities and their external behaviors, policies, systems, etc. So integral leadership is intimately concerned with building capacity for communities as a whole to collectively deal with their affairs with intelligence and wisdom.

Obviously the self-organizing tools described above are fundamental to that capacity, promoting collective reflection and the co-creation of solutions to shared problems and the collective pursuit of shared aspirations. Part of this would be the capacity to catch problems early rather than when they seem unsolvable except from extremist partisan positions. Part of it would also be the capacity to use the energies of division and crisis to create a more intelligent and wise society. After all, evolution uses stress and destruction to transform contexts and generate its innovations, so conscious evolution would involve our ability to do the same. The use of self-organizing processes in the face of such extreme challenges constitutes an example of that kind of conscious evolutionary leadership. The stress of the crisis motivates people to come together and the structure and process of their well-designed engagement makes creative use of their many perspectives and intensified passions. The obvious role of leadership here is the creation of the contexts within which all this can happen, including embedding such contexts into the culture and its institutions.

Also vital to collective intelligence (and wisdom) are information and its temporal manifestation – feedback dynamics – which enable collective learning. Here we need to shift our attention from individual approaches to the institutions, technologies, and systems that provide information to our collective intelligence. This involves everything from statistics and scientific research to journalism and the crowdsourced intelligence represented by blogs and Wikipedia. Some institutions on the leading edge of this include these:

Community Quality of Life Indicators. http://rprogress.org/sustainability_indicators/community_indicators.htm Communities develop their own local statistics to measure their collective well-being, providing them with feedback about how they're doing.

Civic Journalism. Civic Journalism attempts to engage people in public life by finding out what they are concerned about, providing them with balanced information about the issues involved, getting them talking about those issues, and reflecting what they say back to the larger community in broadcast, print, and online media. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_journalism and http://journalismthatmatters.net. An exemplary experiment in civic

journalism – "The People's Verdict" – was done in 1991 by Canada's Maclean's magazine. They convened a masterfully facilitated conversation among a dozen Canadians chosen for their differences and then brilliantly publicized the people, the process, and the outcomes in both print and on TV. http://co-intelligence.org/Macleans1991Experiment.html

The Wisdom Council. http://wisedemocracy.org/page11/page18/page18.html This convenes an iterative (usually annual) citizens "state of the union" exercise in which randomly selected citizens reflect on the state of their community and report what they found to the larger community from which they were selected – with a new Wisdom Council being convened for the same purpose every year (or quarter, or whatever periodicity has been established).

As a vital footnote, I want to point out that random selection generates a microcosm of the collective into which special informational and process resources can be invested to generate particularly high quality collective intelligence and wisdom. The drama and outcomes can then be fed back into the larger collective for reflective conversations that do not require so much investment. Random selection also provides a safeguard against manipulation to prevent special interests from perverting the process in their favor at the expense of the common good. http://www.tomatleeblog.com/?p=175327045

For more on collective intelligence see http://co-intelligence.org/Collective_Intelligence.html

The extent to which such efforts at collective intelligence are done with the big picture, broad benefits, and a long term view in mind and heart largely determines how wise that collective intelligence can be. This leads us naturally to the integral, holistic, systemic, and spiritual dimensions of the antidote to polarization.

4. Developing and promoting integral/holistic worldviews

Polarization is grounded in a worldview of separateness, disconnection, and conflict. It has a hard time flourishing in a consciousness or culture that recognizes something fundamentally whole about reality and life and that we are all part of, expressions of, and/or intimately connected to that wholeness and each other. Furthermore, polarization is fed by assumptions that people and things belong to solid categories, rather than that they are unique and evolving wholes in their own right, as well as aspects of the larger unfolding realities and processes that make up our world.

The fragmented assumptions underlying polarization are contradicted by holistic, integral, evolutionary, developmental, systemic, co-creative, sacred, compassionate, and other ways of viewing and engaging with the world which derive from realizations about the dynamic wholeness of life in all its dimensions. These perspectives, expressed as worldviews, form the intellectual, spiritual, and experiential foundation for all the approaches mentioned above.

These perspectives help us to honor uniqueness and to work creatively with diversity from an awareness of unity, interdependence, and common ground – all of which have intrinsic, functional, and potential manifestations. In practice, we can ask of each person, perspective, situation, or thing with which we are involved, not whether it is right or wrong, but what are its gifts, what are its limitations, and where does it fit in the larger evolving whole we are dealing with. Every piece of the puzzle is needed and valued; it is up to us to use it wisely for the benefit of the whole. That is the promise of truly integral leadership.

Guided by such worldviews, the development and promotion of theories, the collection and sharing of stories, the analysis, redesign and transformation of systems, the stimulation and development of consciousness and awareness, and the asking of powerful questions and convening of powerful

conversations are all forms of integral leadership that can make polarization a rare relic of our dysfunctional past.

For more of my perspectives on wholeness see http://co-intelligence.org/I-wholeness.

CONCLUSION

Polarization is a dark side of our natural tendency to simplify complexity in order to manage life more efficiently. However as our growing power – especially the power of money and PR in the hands of partisan political forces – magnifies the impacts of our oversimplifications, we are generating disastrous side-effects, including serious erosion of our social fabric and of our capacity to govern ourselves. We are not only undermining the sustainability of human civilization, we are tragically wasting the rich diversity of who we have become over the centuries of social evolution and human development.

Integral leaders who wish to counter the incapacitating spread of polarization have ample tools available to shift people's awareness and behaviors, to shift our cultures' assumptions and stories, and to transform the structures and processes that our social systems use to shape our lives.

In particular we have powerful conversational technologies to help diverse and conflicted people use their differences creatively to realize more of what's going on and come to useful conclusions and policies together that include and transcend their previously discordant views. Practicing and institutionalizing these conversational approaches greatly enhance our capacity to be not only collectively intelligent, but collectively wise.

About the Author

Tom Atlee is founder of the nonprofit Co-Intelligence Institute, author of three books on democracy and evolutionary activism – most recently EMPOWERING PUBLIC WISDOM – and a contributor to two basic reference works on collective intelligence. He researches, writes, and networks about approaches to making communities and societies more wisely responsive to changing conditions, taking wholeness, interconnectedness and co-creativity into account. He lives in a co-op household in Eugene, OR.

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