

What is a system? | Recognizing yourself in the system

That's a Greenpeace ad that was on for a while and it's certainly a complex problem. It's a problem with climate change and what's happening to our environment. I showed this film to a group of scholars who were very bright young people just graduating from high school about to go off to university and they had these big scholarships, and I said to them: what did they think of it? There was a split in the room. It was interestingly a gender split. They all said that they resonated with what he was feeling. For many of the males, young men in the class, it was that this really an appropriate anger and the way he expressed it was something that they really resonated with.

Many of the women, on the other hand, felt that this wasn't very politic. It wasn't necessarily going to get what they wanted. They all felt that they could understand. They could identify with it and it was really a question of tactics. We had a very, very interesting conversation. I really didn't know the answers to this before I asked these questions, so I wasn't doing it in a Machiavellian way, but I said to them:

Okay, you understand his point of view; you share his point of view. How much is that part of the way you're living? How many of you recycle carefully and try to reuse? Most of them did. It was something that was important to them.

How many of you bicycle as opposed to taking public transit? Well, a lot of them did. How many of you have a car? Not very many. They were young. How many of you think at some point in your life you'll own a car? Over 50%. How many of you want to own a house? Maybe 80%. How many of you think it also might be nice to have a cottage and a boat at some point? It was still up there, but it went down; about 50%. How many of you want to travel internationally and see the world? Almost 100%.

In that sense, they could resonate with his view that this is something that has been done to us and yet, inside them, they contained exactly the same ideas. If they were to do, and to have all those things that they wanted in the course of their lives, they would continue a pattern, which is the very pattern that they were complaining about.

That's not to say they were good or bad or the people good or bad, it's just to point out—for me what's interesting about this is that it displays this absence of complexity thinking and complex system thinking. It imagines a world that is merely complicated, where all you need to do is to take a stand *against* and assume that you have the answers and it's their fault. A lot of the old approaches to social movements was very close to this and social innovation does take quite a different tactic.

Peter Senge, who has written a lot of very practical stuff about social innovation—this comes from *the Fifth Discipline Handbook*, which is really worth a look—Senge said that there are learning disabilities which are associated with failing to think systemically.

The first of them is that, "*I am my position*," the illusion of fixed roles. I am the young rebel. You are the bad adult. We have fixed roles in this conflict.

The second one is that "*the enemy is out there*," that illusion of objectivity. I am outside the system. You come back from Bangladesh and I've traveled in those places and had exactly that same feeling. Look what's going on there

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and it seems like something that's happening out there. That is not an uncommon and it's not a bad response. Our studies, though, of people who have been able to actually effect a change, suggest that somewhere in there before that happens, they have to find a way of owning that those same things are inside them, that they're not so different from the people who were generating that kind of difficulty, that kind of inequality, and we're not so different than the people who are suffering from it.

We share parts of all of that. We are in the same thing. Interestingly, people like Gandhi recognized that truth absolutely. What made his response different was that even though he was fiercely opposed to the British Empire and what it was doing, he never failed to treat the people who were in charge as fellow human beings who he identified with as well. He didn't see it as an us/them thing. He saw it as something that needs to be changed, but it's not *you* doing it to *me*. When you fail to think systemically, then the enemy is out there. I find with many young system entrepreneurs, activists, people trying to change the system, that anger translates into exactly that.

Anger at what is wrong needs to be turned into anger at *someone* or some group who have the power and the resources; and that lens shows a certain kind of truth. You may not have it. They do. However, it won't change the system because, in fact, it's a failure to recognize the similarity between you and the way in which you're both part of the same system. You would not even be able to see it or define it if it was not in you as well.

The third one is again you see, the belief that, "*I can take charge*". There's illusion of some control. This is the last time we'll be talking to you adults. We won't be pretty. We won't be patronized. This is it. I'm in control here, whereas, in fact, that is an illusion of control.

In a complex system, so many things can change, that the notion that you can charge in and make something turn out the way you think it's going to turn out by a particular strategy is just that: it's an illusion.

Then there's a fixation on events. It's like you're in a game. "*I make my move. You make your move.*" Again, we're in opposition. That tells us that we're somehow making progress. However, change is very unlikely to

happen. As you see in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, lots of moves happening, lots of believing that you can take charge, a lot of feeling that the enemy is out there, but year after year after year, there isn't any solution.

There's also the notion that, "*things will get steadily worse*" unless you do this or you do that or do the other thing. There's an illusion of continuity that we're on a path and unless I seize control, assume my position, fight the enemy, it's just going to get worse. You can't assume that in complex systems because there is a phenomena which is called **discontinuity**, that when we look at complex patterns, what we see is that they take a certain form and then very abruptly, they will change form and become a different form. There's still some similarities between the forms, but the oscillation, the possibility of taking on multiple forms and of that change being very sudden and abrupt is one important aspect of systems.

When you're developing a strategy, you're taking control and believing the enemy is out there. What good is that if the whole pattern is going to change tomorrow? There's a very interesting study years ago done by Fortune

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Magazine. That was the year of strategic planning corporations. Unfortunately there's still too much strategic planning of this nature that goes on and the idea was that everybody is supposed to have a five-year plan. Big corporations all had a five-year plan. This particular study, what they revealed was that they looked at five-year plans and five years later, they went back to evaluate how much of the five-year plan had actually happened, *Five percent*. 95% of those plans never materialized at all. Why?

Because they're living in a complex world

and things happen; things come up. Direction has to be shifted. It really is like that boat in the stormy ocean. It isn't that they didn't get somewhere in those five years, but it wasn't really where they'd planned to get.

The notion of the control and continuity and planning is a Newtonian idea. In these complex situations, it doesn't get you anywhere. It possibly makes the situation much worse, but it certainly isn't going to contribute to trying to change it.