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Don't Be Discouraged

Many people get discouraged and frustrated when they come to believe that they can't change the world in any meaningful way, that their efforts are too feeble and small to make much difference. But that's not true at all! Such discouragement is simply the result of living within the culturally-defined Thought System that is dominant in the modern USA.

Elsewhere in this issue of the Notes I challenge the Dominant Thought System and suggest that we can begin to use a different system to guide our thinking, a system that I refer to as a Systalectics Orientation, which is based on systems thinking and dialectics. When we think "Systalectically," we see that there is no single "cause" of the things we see; instead we talk about "triggers" or "catalysts," which can look like they are "causing" things to change, but in reality are just those things that add to existing, ready-to-change mixes of things and tip them over into transformation. The killing of George Floyd is a perfect illustration of such a trigger, igniting as it did a truly global response that no one could have predicted.

Untold numbers of people today are working on each of the eight crises that I have been discussing in this series. When we think of these efforts individually it prevents us from seeing the size and scope of the growing resistance. That's why we need to start thinking in terms of a Movement.

There is no telling whose actions have been, or will be, a trigger, or catalyst, for transformative changes in our current way of doing things. But what Systalectics tells us is that the conditions that lead to transformation are the result of innumerable efforts by innumerable people who are in some way inspired by a similar dream, a similar vision. When a critical mass of people come to see the dream, and come to share the vision, conditions are right for the birth of a Movement.

In building a Movement, it's crucial to see not only that these crises are connected, but *how* they are connected. A Movement of the type which I am discussing needs a unifying vision that takes under its wing all of the organizing, all of the resistance, all of the hard work being done to undermine the oppressive institutions that have brought us to where we are today.

It's a Movement *consciousness* that ties together my (arbitrarily-selected) eight crises. When we think in terms of a Movement, it becomes clear that working to strengthen multinational cooperative organizations is ANTI-IMPERIALIST WORK. And we can see that this work will help with the project of strengthening our capacity to address GLOBAL CLIMATE DISRUPTION. ANTIRACIST WORK, by amplifying the voices of historically marginalized communities, strengthens THE DEMOCRATIC PROJECT. Working to address INEQUALITY draws on – in fact, relies on – ANTICAPITALIST WORK going on around the world. THE PANDEMIC is bringing into view the structures and systems that have long degraded the SOCIAL HEALTH of people around the world.

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Greetings,

For several issues now, I've been talking about some big crises. Things like capitalism, empire, social health, climate, democracy, inequality - stuff like that.

Dealing with issues of this magnitude can only be done if we think systems. Or, better yet, if we think Systalectics. And when we think Systalectics we see that the issues are all connected and that the creation of alternative systems, visionary systems, revolutionary systems can only be brought about by building a grassroots movement that sees all of our struggles as being connected.

Making these connections is what Nygaard Notes is all about. These are exciting times, to say the least! Thanks for coming along on the ride.

Systalectically yours,
Nygaard

Chin Up 1 *from page 1*

I characterize the currently-dominant world order – which plays out on the national, state, and community levels – as being organized in accordance with a philosophy that I call Individualist and Competitive. The alternative philosophy that I think unifies the many many efforts to build an alternative to the existing world order I call Social and Cooperative. I'm not suggesting that Nygaard Notes gets to identify the principles around which we organize a transformative Movement for change. Heavens, no! What I am suggesting is that we start thinking big, bigger than most of us have thought up to now. Big enough to pull in many strands of resistance to weave a visionary fabric of a possible future. This Big Crisis Series, which ties together eight “lesser crises” into a more-unified picture of The Big Crisis, is my attempt to illustrate the kind of weaving that needs to be done.

If we truly want to build a revolutionary consciousness, then each of us needs to do some weaving. Weave this. Weave that. Do whatever you do to help make this moment into a Movement. Your actions and my actions – no matter how big or how small – do make a difference. Don't be discouraged! The Big Crisis offers great opportunities, if we each do our part. ♦

Thinking Big, Building a Movement

The series that I am concluding today I am calling The Big Crisis Series. I have spent my time so far discussing eight lesser crises that I argue are manifestations of The Big Crisis. The eight crises that I chose to highlight are:

1. The Crisis of Social Health
2. The Crisis of Declining Empire
3. The Crisis of Capitalism
4. The Crisis of Global Climate Disruption
5. The Crisis of US Democracy
6. The Crisis of Inequality And Resource Allocation
7. The Crisis of Our Racial Reckoning
8. The Crisis of the Pandemic



→→ Those “lesser crises” are hardly small (!), and the fact that they are coming to a boil more or less at the same time – some of them have been boiling for decades – opens a door that is rarely opened. It opens the door to discussing the basic philosophy, the basic ideology, the deep mythology upon which the United States was founded, and indeed upon which the entire European project of world domination was founded.

When I refer to the “European project of world domination,” it is not hyperbole. Recall the words of Philip T. Hoffman that I quoted back in 2016 (shortly before the last presidential election). Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in an article entitled “How Europe Conquered the World”, Hoffman pointed out that “Between 1492 and 1914, Europeans conquered 84 percent of the globe, establishing colonies and spreading their influence across every inhabited continent.”

This massive, multi-century process of conquest led to a world order based on the core values of Individualism and Competitiveness, a world of “Everyone for Themselves.” It’s a globe-spanning system that was set up to justify and assure the supremacy of white Europeans. And over more than 500 years it has evolved to perform this function around the globe, perhaps reaching its apotheosis in the 20th-Century United States of America.

There have always been people, groups, even whole nations that choose to organize themselves based on different values, upon Social and Cooperative values, values which are aimed at creating a world of “Working Together for the Common Good.” But their success has been limited due to the power and reach of the Individualistic and Competitive world order that has become so dominant.

What I am suggesting in the Big Crisis Series – of which this short essay is the final piece – is that the pillars that form the foundation of the Individualistic and Competitive world order are showing cracks and fissures, ones that now are visible to anyone with eyes to see. This historically unusual synergy opens the door to a rethinking of the entire European colonial project.

This is what we are fighting about in the United States in the year 2020. This is what is bringing people to the streets, this is the source of the “polarization” about which we hear so much. It’s a time of fear, a time of hope. Some of us *do* want to rethink the entire colonial project. Hope. Some of us do not. Fear.

This time of crisis is a time of transformation. It’s a time when doors are opening, when opportunities that were previously hidden from view are being revealed. That’s why I call it The Big Crisis. Look for big changes ahead. And know that we all have a role to play in the coming transformation. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: “*Focus On Moving The Rock*”

Daniel Hunter, writing in *Waging Nonviolence*, in an article entitled “5 Pitfalls Black Lives Matter Must Avoid To Maintain Momentum And Achieve Meaningful Change,” wrote this:

Those in social movements should see politicians as balloons. A balloon follows the wind. If you blow on it, it can be pushed one way or the other. Politicians follow the wind as well, readily changing their opinions and stances. But politicians are balloons tied to a rock. If we swat at them, they may sway to the left or the right. But, tied down, they can only go so far. Instead of simply batting at them, we should focus on moving the rock, which is people’s activated social values. Depending on the makeup of our government, the string on the balloon might be longer or shorter. But politicians know they can only be pushed so far one way or the other. If they absolutely violate the activated social norms of their constituents, they are in trouble. Politically speaking, our job is to activate those values — and showing up on the streets Nov. 4 is a good way to start.

George Floyd and the Dominant Thought System

Back in the year 2014 I introduced to Nygaard Notes readers the idea of “Thought Systems.” To make a long story short, a Thought System is a socially-created set of rules that operates unconsciously in our minds to shape the way we think. It’s nothing to be alarmed about, anyone who lives in a society – that is, all of us – has been socialized to think in certain ways. (For more on this, go back and read Nygaard Notes #560, “The Creation of a Thought System.”)

The United States has a Thought System that is based on the ideology of Individualism. Despite the dominance of this Thought System, I suggested that one could train oneself to think in a different way, following the rules of a different Thought System. I offered a tool to help in this “retraining,” a tool that I called Systalectics. Systalectics is my word for a Thought System – perhaps a better word is “Orientation” – that draws on Systems Thinking and Dialectics.

It’s pretty hard to define Systalectics, so I didn’t try. Rather than attempting to define Systalectics, I offered a short “compare and contrast” exercise that attempted to illustrate how one could draw different conclusions based on the same story, or even the same fact, depending on the thought system that one used in thinking about that story or fact.

Now it’s 2020, and so much has changed since 2014 that I think it is time to update the exercise.

What follows is a list of seven “rules” imposed on our thinking by the Dominant Thought System, or DTS. For each of these seven DTS rules, I offer an alternative rule that is derived from a Systalectics Orientation (SO). Then, since so many people in the past few months have been thinking about George Floyd and his murder at the hands of police, for each rule I make a suggestion of how we can, right now, try to think about this very emotional subject using SO rules rather than the reflexive DTS rules.

If this exercise works the way I hope it will, I think it will offer a hint of the profound effect that the Black Lives Matter movement is having on the Dominant Thought System in the United States.

OK, that’s enough of an introduction. Let’s go ahead and compare and contrast two distinct Thought Systems: The Dominant Thought System, or DTS, and a Systalectic Orientation, or SO.

Thinking Outside the Box. An Exercise.

#1: The DTS tells us that we understand things by getting up close and examining the details.
SO says that understanding is only possible by viewing the whole.

Right now... Avert your gaze from the legal and political happenings in Minneapolis in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd and start thinking about what is going on at the state, national, and international levels that makes this such a big deal.

#2: The DTS leads us to take things apart to see how the pieces work.
SO says that things are defined by their behavior in relation to other things, so we shouldn’t take them apart.
We have to look at as many pieces as we can. AND we have to look at them for a while to see *how* they work.

Right now... Looking more closely at the behavior of four specific Minneapolis police officers



→→ on May 25 2020 will not give us insight into what is happening. We need to look at the behavior of the whole department over time. AND we need to tune in to the voices of people of color as those voices, collectively, educate the white majority on the realities of living in a white supremacist culture.

#3: The DTS relies on something that academics call “Methodological Individualism,” which is the idea that “social phenomena must be explained by showing how they result from individual actions, which in turn must be explained through reference to the intentional states that motivate the individual actors.” (That’s from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.) The belief here is that things happen because individuals *make* them happen, and they make them happen because they *want* them to happen.

SO puts the focus on outcomes rather than motivations or intentions. Rather than ask “Who?” and “Why?,” SO looks for PATTERNS that produce OUTCOMES.

Right now... We cannot know what is in the hearts of the individuals whose decisions killed George Floyd. What we know—and what we need to know—is that there is a pattern of police interactions with people of color that produces murderous outcomes.

#4: The DTS holds that things happen because someone or something made them happen. So we are encouraged to assign blame, or evidence of intentional malice, or something that will tell us what caused a certain thing to happen.

SO says that systems produce outcomes for a variety of complex reasons. There is no “cause” of the things we see; instead we talk about “triggers” or “catalysts,” which can look like they are “causing” things to change, but really are just those things that add to existing, ready-to-change mixes of things and tip them over into transformation.

Right now, two things... First of all, here is where we talk about the “culture” of policing, as well as the larger culture in which it exists. As important as it is to prosecute and convict George Floyd’s killers, more important in the quest for “Justice for George” is to transform the culture that produces such killers into a culture that values black lives.

The second thing: Whatever short- or long-term changes in systems that occur in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, his death will not have *caused* those changes. Rather, that murder will hopefully be the catalyst that will produce new structures that will be built on the foundations laid over many years by activists and organizers whose work never stops. (For white people wondering in this moment “What can I do?”, my suggestion is to start studying up on how structural change happens, which should lead us, over time, to understand the various ways that our behavior in the world is supporting racism or supporting liberation. This process should reveal what we can do.)

#5: The DTS believes in one-way Causation. That is: A makes B happen. One corollary of this is that, if we take away “A,” then “B” won’t happen. Another corollary is that “It’s as simple as that.”

SO says that it’s never a one-way thing, and it’s never “As simple as that.” Rather, we shape our environment, and our environment shapes us, which is sometimes referred to as the “mutuality of interaction.”

Right now... This principle must lead us to reject the “Bad Apple Theory,” which says that a few “bad cops” are the problem, and simply weeding them out will stop police brutality. We should be far beyond that by now. More than 1,300 people in the U.S. died in police custody in the first six months of 2020.

#6: The DTS states what seems to be obvious: Things are what they are; what you see is what you get. The corollary is that there is no sense trying to change things, since things are what they are.

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Floyd *from page 5*

SO says that things are always changing, even if we can't always see the changes happening. And we all play a part in HOW things change, whether we want to or not.

Right now... Before the recent (and ongoing) uprising against police brutality, the idea of heavily-armed police in every city and town was rarely questioned outside of activist circles; now we see that what appeared to be near-universal support for this type of policing is far less broad and deep than it appeared.

#7: The DTS is based largely on description: Where is it? How big is it? What color is it? Et cetera. SO is based on function: What does it do? What is it supposed to do? How does it interact with and affect its surroundings? How do its surroundings affect it?

Right now... Calls for police "reform" focus on changing the size, the training, the racial composition, or the dwelling-places of police forces. Systalectics tells us that a system is the unavoidable outcome of organized intentions. The system of policing to which we are accustomed was created based on the "organized intentions" of certain people who lived a long time ago. Today, system change requires us to imagine the creation of a public safety system that reflects the organized intentions of the actual people who live here today, people who have until now been marginalized.

The Road To Transformative Change

If this exercise was difficult for you, that illustrates how powerful is the Dominant Thought System.

If this exercise was easy for you, thanks go to the activists and intellectual leadership of the Black Lives Matter movement and their allies, who have – somewhat miraculously, in my mind – succeeded in getting mainstream commentators and media to talk about "structural racism" and "systemic change," using an alternative Thought System based on the principles of Systems Thinking and Dialectics.

Cracks and fissures in some of our major institutions? Thinking and talking about these changes using an entirely different Thought System? This is the road to transformative change. ♦

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