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GROUND RULES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
Chapter 25

THE STORY OF MANKIND AS A COMMUNITY

It is often said that the winners of war write the history. In the case of the challenge currently facing mankind perhaps we should rather say that the winners will be those who manage to write the story in advance. It is essential to define what the story of our future is about. It is a struggle to conquer territory in our collective imagination - to define what is possible.

It's hard to imagine other models than the one you know already, and these days it's especially hard to imagine how change and transformation can happen in a good way, so we can continue our quest for pleasure, convenience and knowledge. We want to do something, but we need a vision to act. You can hardly work hard at a goal, or design something you can't imagine.

A story makes that goal clear. It tells what's good and bad, and it shows the challenges and the logic of the actions that are necessary.

A good story can mobilize a lot of effort towards the same goal. If the story is well told, anyone can find his or her own role in it and each can understand how to contribute to make it happen.

We sorely lack a story today. Many, myself included, feel politically homeless. There is no clear, comprehensive vision on which to act and fight for. The logic of society is confusing, paradoxical and splintered, and it is hard to see anyone - politicians, philosophers, business people - who have a credible, coherent and realistic vision for a path toward a better future. The old story has come to an end and now we are looking around for a new narrative about the earth and ourselves in the 21st century.

We Will Send A Man To The Moon ...

It has become almost cliché, but in recent times, there is no better example of how it is possible to mobilize enormous powers by presenting a strong vision: On 25th May 1961 John F. Kennedy held a speech to the U.S. Congress in which he asked for support to send a manned rocket to the moon. It was at the height of the Cold War and the Americans were deeply concerned about the Soviet lead in aerospace. Not only were the USSR first to send a satellite up in 1957, but a few months before Kennedy's speech, on 16 April 1961, the Soviet Union had also sent the world's first cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, into orbit. Furthermore, the Soviet success coincided with CIA's failed and disgraceful attempt to overthrow Castro's government in the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba. Kennedy had only been president for four months, and he desperately needed to restore the nation's confidence.

It worked. Just eight years later, on 20 July 1969, Neil Armstrong took the big step onto the lunar surface, while we all watched the grainy, black and white television footage. It was an unbelievable technological achievement, and by achieving the goal, the U.S. proved to themselves and the world that they were the planet's leading nation.

John F. Kennedy was concise and clear when he presented his vision back in 1961: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth. No

single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish... In a very real sense, it will not be one man going to the moon--if we make this judgment affirmatively, it will be an entire nation. For all of us must work to put him there."

Eighteen months later Kennedy elaborated on his vision in another magnificent speech. He declared "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills".

Obviously Kennedy had a clear understanding from the beginning that the real purpose of the Man on the Moon project was not the walk in the lunar dust, but to mobilize the best and brightest to work together and identify a goal that the entire nation could feel committed to achieve together.

A magic spell, uniting all forces

That the Man on the Moon vision to such a degree managed to engage the American nation, was probably because the vision contained several powerful elements:

- It was launched at a time when America felt threatened by a outside enemy.
- It was concrete, easy to understand, visible and easy to measure. There is no doubt: either you have accomplished to place a man on the Moon, or you haven't.
- The time frame was long enough to plan and work carefully, but short enough that people could maintain the commitment. The deadline was so close, that everyone understood that they had to act now.
- The project was inspiring, courageous and challenging. It was extremely difficult, but not more than that you could *just* imagine that it was possible to accomplish if everyone did his or her utmost.
- The goal was concrete, but the way to achieve it was by no means given. Experts from a very wide field of sciences and industries could contribute ideas and details to the overall solution.
- Even for people not directly involved in the mission, it was possible to take part in the story. Students, newspaper readers and television viewers learned about rockets, gravity and planets. And as the first missions returned with amazing images of earth, we had a shared experienced of all being part of the same system – there was a change in the shared mindset.
- The vision catalyzed a wide range of other activities. The space program provided a boost for research into a number of sciences and led to discoveries that are still under development. Consumers could buy goods and technologies that were born of the space program: Teflon, computers, solar cells, fuel cells, battery-powered drills, etc.

Kennedy used a few sentences at the right time and place - almost like a magic spell. It is reminiscent of the old folk tale about the magical soup stone, where two vagabonds arrive in a village and ask to borrow a pot and some water, so they can boil soup on the old stone, which they claim can give the most wonderful soup. The villagers are so fascinated by the soup stone that they want to contribute to the wonderful soup. So some bring some vegetables, some bring a little meat, others come with herbs - and voila: The result is a soup like no one has tasted before. Likewise, Kennedy's vision managed to unify, inspire and mobilize - and therefore the vision was realized.

Man on the Moon meets Climate Change

If you attempt to draw parallels to today's big challenge of mobilizing global support for changes that can avert the impending environmental disaster; it becomes clear that we face a far more difficult task:

- The threat is abstract, especially for us, the affluent who actually have the means to act. The enemy is largely our lifestyles and ourselves.
- The story must be positive. It should not hurt, no blood can get spilled, and it shouldn't cost anything. Otherwise we won't even bother to participate.
- There is no simple solution. The energy crisis and climate change must be solved by using all available - and very different - solutions. Some of them - nuclear power, genetic engineering, detailed surveillance, binding international commitments - are highly controversial and contain potential problems of their own.
- It is unclear what is necessary or even realistic to achieve. Depending on which reports you believe, the changes that are necessary to avert climate disaster, will need to be so radical and introduced so quickly that it's very hard to imagine them taking place within the usual everyday logic of society.
- The political treaties have a tendency to aim at targets which are so far away that no one feels obliged to do anything drastic right now. It's excellent to have ambitious targets for reducing CO2 emissions in 2050, but it would probably mobilize more concrete action if the first target was within a period in which most of the current politicians, businesses and consumers would have to do something.
- The real significance and benefit of the space program was not the trip to the moon, but the colossal effort to create the technological preconditions here on earth that made the trip possible. So far we don't have a strong symbol that can unify the efforts against climate change. You could choose to make the conservation of polar bears or rescuing the Maldives to be the specific objectives that we all got together to achieve. In principle it's not so important what the specific symbolic goal is. What matters is that it is a symbol, which, like the lunar landing, can catalyze a vast number of activities. If polar bears for instance should have a natural habitat in the future it would require that the Arctic ecosystem be generally preserved in a form that can support the bears - and this in turn would require a general stabilizing of the entire global climate.

The awareness that climate change is a real and serious problem has greatly increased in recent years, but the crucial question is when that consciousness reaches the point where knowledge translates into action? As the English professor in Complexity science and design Jeff Johnson points out, it seems as though we are heading towards a tipping point where suddenly there's a substantial shift in public attitudes to climate change - from "I do not understand it, and it doesn't mean much to me" to "I understand it, and it is extremely important to me."

So far it remains a long haul uphill to reach the point where the logic switches. Basically, you need people to make choices that imply that they have a few less resources to consume, in order to leave more for the common good. As the prisoners in the prisoner's dilemma, we must take the first step by giving up something to others without certainty that the counterpart will give back. We must delay our gratification a little to ensure that there will also be resources available tomorrow - but that is exactly what's so extremely difficult for the restless surfing, over-stimulated consumer in each of us. Indeed, it may seem as though the public debate suffers from ADD - Attention Deficit Disorder. We find it difficult to maintain concentration.

Stories can be very important, but long before a problem has been solved, the whole pack of media, politicians and consumers move on to the next exciting topic. There is always something else going on and, as we know, it's not always the most important issues that manage to set the agenda.

There are so many stories to choose from. We can just flick onwards to something else that is more interesting and entertaining. This underscores a basic rule in the struggle to define the narrative of the future: If you are to mobilize masses of people around a vision, it must be clear and positive, and its starting point must be that people participate because they *want* to.

Creating that narrative is a challenge to our innovation capabilities. We can invent new technologies, we can devise green tax schemes and plans for super-efficient mega cities - but unless we find ways to get political backing and to convince consumers to pay for the great projects and plans, it simply doesn't matter.

The vision that society chooses to follow is not necessarily one that is sustainable or desirable. It really is a battle to define the future, and the media is where the battle for the fought. We are exposed to an intensifying barrage of messages, news, dramas, commercials, spin ... All of which contribute to shape our notions of what is desirable and what is acceptable behavior.

The struggle to save the world is not just about inventing technological solutions, but very much about developing stories and visions that can capture the hearts and minds. Propaganda, persuasion and motivation are indispensable weapons in the battle to define the future.

It is not certain that it will be a politician or leader who comes up with the catalyzing and unifying words - and perhaps it won't be a text but instead an image or symbol that becomes the beacon for change. In many cases it has been artists who create the vision that we pursue. Fritz Lang's silent movie Metropolis from 1928 showed futuristic cityscapes, which we now start to recognize in real cities. Along with other science fiction films such as Ridley Scott's Blade Runner or the Star Trek and Star Wars series, Metropolis has influenced architects and city planners, by virtue of showing an image of the future, which one could begin to relate to. In the future our ideas and images of the future may instead come from computer games or online worlds.

Our concept of pleasure can be changed

There are plenty of examples that it is possible to change public attitudes about what is considered a pleasure. Once it was smart to smoke cigarettes. In Hollywood movies the ways in which the star of the movie lit a cigarette and let it hang between his or her lips, was a substantial part of the actor's star power. It was natural that the hero would smoke a cigarette in trying moments. Today the roles are reversed. If someone in a movie is smoking, perhaps even indoors or in children's sight, it is a highly ominous signal. You can be sure that the character has serious psychological flaws and will soon be the victim of - or commit - something terrible.

If there can be such a strong and rapid shift in attitudes towards smoking, one could imagine a similar shift in attitudes to emitting CO₂. If a person today lights a cigarette in a train or a restaurant, everybody else will likely notice it and some will probably react by demanding that the smoker immediately stops. It doesn't seem unrealistic

that in ten years we will react in the same if we notice someone who openly emits excessive amounts of CO2. We will know all too well about the climate problems, so it will seem as a provocation to drive alone in a large petrol-driven car. Flying off for an extended weekend in Rome or Barcelona will be considered irresponsible - as an inappropriate and selfish behavior at the expense of others. Companies, whose products and factories are not energy optimized, will be subject to the same sort of condemnation, as if they had employed child labor.

In the battle for attention and support it is not enough to speak to reason and logic. The role that our immediate feelings play has been a very active field of research in recent years, especially in *behavioral economics*. Economic theory has traditionally been based on an assumption that people make rational decisions after a serious consideration of which choice offers the greatest benefits. But a new generation of economists has teamed up with psychologists and sociologists and they have even started to use brain scans to examine whether there is anything other than strictly rational factors behind our decisions. The result has been a string of highly instructive and entertaining books. Generally, the research clearly shows that decision makers - whether it is an ordinary consumer, a professional investor or politicians - are heavily influenced by considerations of status, by compassion, charity, justice, sense of tradition, habit, and by the context and environment which a decision is made in. For example, fashion plays a major role - as we saw in the change of attitude towards smoking. We imitate the people we look up to, and we adjust to what we see our surroundings doing. Status is very significant consideration, and a factor you need to acknowledge, even when presenting an ideological message.

Toyota's hybrid car Prius, which has become the vehicle of choice for any motorist who wishes to demonstrate his ecological inclination, is an example that the desire to change the world is not the only factor that drives the political consumer. The Prius' claim to fame is its great mileage - about 26 km pr. liter. Even in the U.S., however, the Prius is considerably more expensive than conventional cars of similar size. If you really wanted to reduce your CO2 emissions, for most people it would be far more efficient to use the money to insulate their house than to buy a Prius. But you can't show off isolation to friends and neighbors.

Bright green

Many people feel a bit like parasites and vandals toward the rest of the ecosystem. It probably affects us psychologically. It is frustrating constantly to be confronted with the incessant warnings and alarms in the media that our lifestyle is damaging the nature we depend upon.

Fear and shock are good at drawing attention to a specific and acute problem. But fear is a bad motivation for making long-term efforts. To this end, desires and aspirations are better suited. If we are to mobilize and combine our efforts and maintain the push towards a shared vision of the future, we must insist that the story we are part of is good, fun, exciting, and so appealing that you are willing to work hard to make it happen. It should be a future we want!

Bright Green is the best expression of the vision I have heard - coined by Alex Steffen, the editor of the American NGO Worldchanging.

The idea of *bright green* is to describe a future in which prosperity and sustainability are not opposites.

In the bright green scenario there is convergence between what is good for the environment and what is good for the economy and society in general.

There are two elements of the vision:

- It is about developing technologies that are elegant, efficient, easy to operate - and green, of course. It may be based hi-tech and science or just common sense and experience. The main thing is that it is not only sustainable, but also effectively solves everyday tasks better than current solutions.

- It is also about defining a second form of growth and welfare by rediscovering some essential qualities that have been rather neglected in our pursuit of material wealth. There are basically no problems associated with having growth in values like health, trust, intimacy, wisdom, education, taste and beauty. These are values that are associated with real joy and wellbeing, and they don't necessarily imply an increased consumption of resources.

As Geoff Mulgan, head of the English *Young Foundation*, has said:

"One of the things that politics must do now is to redefine what the common good is. Everyone's life depends on public goods such as clean air, clean environment, safe streets, good healthcare, infrastructure ... these things are as important as foundations for the good life as ever".

More good, not less bad

The vision of sustainability, in which people are assigned the role as the villain, and where the best ecologist is a dead – and thus non-consuming – ecologist, is not a very attractive vision of the future.

In the narrative of the future, there must still be room for humans and the things we like. We affect the ecosystem, we take part in it and we change it as everyone else, and there is no point in living as an excuse for your own existence.

The so-called *Cradle to Cradle* thinking has been spreading among designers and engineers around the world, and a number of large companies - Philips, Ford, Steelcase, Nike - have developed products based on the C2C principles.

The idea is to think about our consumption and production as a circular flow, so from the outset, products should be designed in a way in which the materials you use, can be composted, incinerated without any problems or reused as raw material for new products. In this way, the cradle-to-cradle type of manufacturing eliminates waste and pollution, because all materials can proceed directly into other processes. If you use products that meet the cradle-to-cradle principles, you don't have to be frugal and modest. There is no reason to have a bad conscience about consuming, because the waste from your consumption is not piling up and doing damage.

The German chemist Michael Braungart, who co-developed the cradle to cradle concept, uses the cherry tree as a metaphor to illustrate that you don't need to restrain yourself as long as what you are doing benefits others as well. Cherry trees bloom in a profusion of flowers and fruits, just to get a few seeds planted. It could probably be done more lean and efficient - but it doesn't matter that lots of flowers and fruits are wasted, because it pleases everyone else around the tree.

As Michael Braungart says, it's not about doing as little damage as possible, but about doing as much good as possible.

In a good story about the future, we change our activities so that they do not degrade, but strengthen and develop the resource cycles which we are part of - like a skilled organic farmer whose land becomes more fertile and healthy over the years.

The actantial model as a strategic tool

A very common way to analyze narratives is the so-called "actantial model" which was created by the Lithuanian scholar AJ Greimas. In the 1960s he studied a series of old folktales, and noted that the underlying structure was essentially the same in all stories. Very roughly speaking, the typical adventure has a protagonist, who struggles through the story to achieve a particular goal. To get there, the protagonist can draw upon friends, allies and the forces of good in the fight against enemies and evil forces. Often it is crucial to the happy conclusion that an external agent steps in to help with particular tools or powers, which the protagonist can use in the struggle.

The actantial model is used by writers, journalists, spin-doctors and advertising directors because it gives a quick overview of the driving forces that are at play in a case.

Analyzing a strategy by using the elements of the actantial model makes it clearer what the direction and goal is, what's good and bad, and how the interaction between the various participants unfolds.

The danger of using the model is that you can easily end up in a simplistic, cliché-like world, but in many situations it has its merits to draw up the lines clearly when you try to get an overview.

Looking at the global financial crisis, which erupted in 2008, it can be described as two very different stories:

- One is the story of the Great Crisis. It is about surviving by cutting to the bone, focusing on short-term profitability and maintaining only core competencies and capabilities, so you're ready to move again, once growth returns.
- The second story is the story of the Great Transition. It's about realizing that the world will not be the same again, and to understand how it is fundamentally changing. The projects, which close down, and the jobs that are eliminated, will not come back. It will be something else that will drive the next round of growth.

In the two narratives, the protagonist has very different objectives.

- In the story of the Great Crisis the goal is to maximize the material wealth, and this is achieved through continued economic growth. Rising prices for raw materials, stricter legislation and taxation are opponents that must be overcome.
- In the story of The Great Transition, the target is sustainability and to save us all from climate change and environmental disasters. Changing lifestyles and rebuilding the infrastructure to become more effective and based on resources that are renewable can help to achieve this goal. Higher commodity prices, stricter environmental requirements and taxes on CO2 are preconditions to achieve the goal.

By analyzing the details and consequences of the two different ways of seeing the same reality you can try to get a better understanding of your goals and opportunities.

The point here is that a company or a politician who tries to think strategically about the financial crisis, will have to decide which story they are playing in, because it leads to important differences in who to team up with, how to prioritize investments, and what type of skills you need.

The little analytical exercise also shows how much power lies in being able to define the history of public debate and understanding. When politicians and business people are talking about the situation, most often it will be in the terms of the first story: That we need to get over the crisis and back on track.

It is an important element in the fight for the future to change the context, so that the public debate and political work is about how we can best convert the old system, which currently threatens to lead us into the abyss.

The story of the global organism of humanity

Now, if we had to come up with a really positive narrative about the future, what would it be?

It's certainly a story of epic proportions, a tale about how mankind overcomes deep internal contradictions and major external threats and manages to emerge stronger and happier from an extremely critical period. It is a story of a humanity, which is growing in unity, and awareness of its shared interests and fate. It is a great superhero story; the kind where nothing less than the future of the global civilization is at stake. Exciting - and the story is even real, and yes, you are part of it yourself.

We could call the narrative *the story of humanity as a community*. In brief, it sounds something like this:

Humanity has reached a phase shift. We are so many, we are so closely intertwined, and in order to solve the problems we face, we need to find common solutions. Through the close interaction, the massive exchange of information and the strong interdependence a sort of collective consciousness emerges, a logic that pervades the system. For the individual, this consciousness manifests itself as an ability to better understand how to act in a way that serves one's own interests, but which also strengthens the common good. It is an almost intuitive understanding and awareness of the global system - similar to the way each cell in our body is constantly influenced and itself influences the whole body's well being.

The tale of the 21st century is about going from a zero sum game to a plus-sum game. About how people rise above the local, short-sighted and selfish perspective, and instead manage to reap the fruits of collaboration - long term and with a global consciousness.

In this narrative, the resistance to be overcome is isolation and narrow self-interest. What will bring us forward towards the target are trust, participation, openness and diversity.

And a good portion of courage – courage of a somewhat paradoxical kind: the courage to take initiative and act, the will to insist on what you believe in, combined with the courage to letting go of your own narrow interests in the hope of getting it - and even a little more - back from the community.