

Crisis as Opportunity: Creating Evolutionary Thinking

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Several months ago I was hired by a 40 year old engineering firm to redesign the company's corporate collateral materials. They wanted a "fresh look" but were resistant to the idea of creating a totally new identity. So their old (and, in my opinion, staid and non-descript) logo remained. Still, I pushed myself to think divergently and was pleased with the stationery applications I presented; all of which were received favorably, one of which was selected. I was feeling secure in my success when the designer's ultimate dread surfaced...the client wanted to help direct the design process. "Let's put the logo in multiple sizes across the front of our presentation folders!" offered one of the engineers.

"No. That won't work," I responded flatly.

This exchange is not uncommon between designers and clients. Many clients perceive cutting-edge design as being out of control. To designers, this reluctance to accept cutting-edge design seems stodgy. But as in all yin yang scenarios, we need each other to exist: clients need the edge that makes them appear different and better than their competition, we need our design work to be recognized for its creative value. It keeps us both in business.

The silence and sharp eyes in the room forecast the reaction I'd get to any future suggestions. I spent a good deal of time over the following days considering our exchange, very aware that my knee-jerk response didn't get me what I wanted—creative license—and it also endangered the future designer/client relationship. Then I took a true creative leap, and considered that perhaps I was the one unwilling to take a risk by responding in a rigid way. What if what they suggested was valid? Not perhaps verbatim, but in the meaning of what they were saying?

The following week we met again. I began like this: "Before we proceed today, I'd like to apologize to the group for not hearing what you were saying. I responded defensively to your suggestion because I was so wrapped up in being the expert. If I had been listening I would have heard you emphasizing what you've become known for—your commitment to precision and quality—and that the priority was to demonstrate that hadn't changed. You are also concerned that your image look up-to-date. My job is to define and relate both these messages graphically, satisfying every criteria, from the practical to the aesthetic. So, I want you to know I'm here to do what you've

hired me for—to listen to your needs and concerns, and combine that information with my skills to communicate your company's image effectively." Please note that I said nothing about using their concept in a literal sense. But by altering my own perception there was a real shift of attitude in the room. The struggle of who got to be on top was transformed, we were now pulling together for a common cause.

I bring this up because it's a recurring situation—not exclusively between clients and designers, but in almost all human relationships. Only when a shift occurs in relationship to the self can there be a shift in how we deal with others. But who wants to change? If we were asked to leap into a net that might not exist, we'd be, at best, hesitant. Consider that we ask

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our clients to do this each time we present a creative idea, pushing them ever closer to the edge. And they pay us for it! We human beings want assurances that our tangible investment will reap a tangible, positive result and no amount of cajoling, convincing or award-winning can create that comfort zone in our clients or in ourselves. Maybe the point isn't to accommodate another's comfort level. Maybe the point is to learn how to push our own comfort zone, first in relationship to ourselves, and then in relationship to others. And here is where the human creative process comes in.

Unconscious Evolution

One of the theories of human evolution holds that around 40,000 years ago, give or take a few, our species had a global explosion of creativity that jump-started innovation. This theory proposes that more happened in the first five minutes of that period than in all of the millions of years of human existence preceding it. New tools were not only created they were decorated as well, in what appeared to be the sheer pleasure of it. An abundance of other forms of artwork evolved—clothing

decoration, jewelry, cave paintings, sculpture, pictographs, hieroglyphics—an endless variety of symbolic representations of style conveying everything from social stature to interpretations of nature and how we fit into the universe.¹

But this is only one theory. While many psychologists believe this evolutionary step was abrupt, most anthropologists believe our innovative process was more gradual. Dr. Jane Christian, Professor Emerita of Anthropological Linguistics from the University of Alabama said in our recent interview, "Complicated and extensive creative thinking in social interaction, language development, and the invention of tools has been going on throughout human history. The Australian Aborigines evidently created their myths around 40-60,000 years ago. You can look at the beauty and organization of Mousterian tools, from our Neanderthal cousins, which are not only suited perfectly for the jobs for which they were created, but are very aesthetically pleasing. They also buried their dead in fetal positions covered with flowers. Just because we haven't found as much fossil evidence predating an approximate 40,000 year mark doesn't make the timeframe conclusive...it's quite likely nearly all of it disintegrated."

Christian acknowledges the human brain as "the most complex structure found in the universe", but also believes our creativity is much like that of other higher mammals, the difference being a matter of degrees. In her studies of human babies and language acquisition, she found the beginning steps to complex linguistic systems to be quite similar to that of chimpanzees, starting with gestures and closed call systems (a limited vocabulary of sounds associated with actions), but then finally diverging in a most human fashion to an open and arbitrary communication system that connects symbol with meaning. Even chimps trained in signing, when given a fruit never seen before, come up with new phrases to describe it, for example, "hurt fruit" for lemon. Wild and domestic elephants have been observed drawing, dancing and weeping. And over the last 30 years of studying dolphins, we have discovered a very complex communication system.

For the human species, a creative system of communication has a critical survival value. There is much more survival potential in "A herd of eland over the next ridge!", than in "Hoot, hoot!" (or "Good eat!"). Evolution echoes existence by creating intricate and complex changes when the circumstances deem it worth the effort. Our ability to perceive and emulate our world in detail has provided humans with an unprecedented edge—if we pay attention long enough something new always emerges from the mundane. We possess the uncanny ability to translate that new information into understandable patterns that further our evolution. Life itself is revealed in a way that scientists call "self-similar". In other words, our DNA is programmed with an inherent design that unfolds in a fairly predictable linear pattern, but responds to environmental randomness which stimulates unpredictable results.

Whatever the theory du jour, most everyone agrees that the crucial aspect of our creative evolution was the transformation of the very matrix in how we relate to one another. Our increasingly complex social structure produced civilization, providing us with such benefits as intricate spoken and recorded language (cross-generational communication), agriculture, invention of new tools that aid in both adaptation and alteration of our environmental circumstance, and art, through which we experiment with new and futuristic concepts that

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create a bridge to allow cultural evolution to occur. David Lance Goines states in his article, "Why Art? Solving the Big Head Problem" (*Communication Arts, Jan-Feb Issue, 1996*), "The creation and savoring of art is a cultural preparation for the future by enabling people both individually and collectively to test many possible alternate realities. Through art, we look at the unimaginably complex future, and try to find a path, so that

we may create order from the bewildering disorder that confronts us. It is a collective dreaming, wherein specialized members of the human organism dream for the entire organism. The translation of ideas into graphic language is the translation of an individual dream into a collective dream."

Unlike in modern times where we live with the prejudiced notion that only the gifted can create, in ancient times everyone was an artist. To create something unlike anything else is intimately tied to our survival and our need to push the species ahead. But the underlying duality of change and the individuals who represent it has historically—at least in Western culture—been met with strong, and sometimes brutal disapproval. It doesn't take a university study to know how difficult it is to challenge the status quo with a new idea. Group approval is essential to our survival, just as is evolving to a new level of consciousness. We bump up against this regularly in business—a microcosm of a world controlled by linear thought. Modern culture has used this successive thought process as a way to simplify complex ideas. A set of sequential events assigned to predict the outcome allows for organization and planning by narrowing the options, whether or not you are in truth predicting the future. It's just easier to keep a group going in the same direction when there's overall agreement of what that direction is. The very nature of being human is change. When differences begin to override the established direction by creating new options, we have to feel our way towards a new balance. It's chaotic, and that has a tendency to frighten us.

Circumventing natural evolution has a cost to ourselves and our communities that is becoming too high to overlook any longer. We have invented large and highly detailed structures, such as our current political systems, originally in an attempt to simplify the decision-making process. Unfortunately, this simplification appears to render us impotent in some crucial areas as well. Situations such as the welfare state and a consistently lethargic voter turn-out seem to indicate what worked well for a while no longer does the job. Although Dr. Christian will tell you that she believes unnecessary centralization is our downfall, perhaps even our primary defect, it is exactly the difficulties encountered by today's complexities that are presenting us with our most significant possibility yet: the next transformation of our species which resides in accommodating the new challenges our world presents. New challenges are not the enemy, the rigor mortis that sets in from resisting them is. As designers, by the very nature of needing to think creatively to survive, we can take steps towards a new relating.



Wei ji:
The Chinese word for "crisis" is made up of two parts: "danger" and "opportunity".



"Danger", originally pictured as a man on the edge of a precipice.



"Opportunity", a reminder of the seemingly small, but important opportunity that can arise from danger.

Conscious Evolution

*"Everything has now changed except for our way of thinking."
—Albert Einstein*

I had a very interesting experience recently. I went to a fairly intensive seminar that asked the elemental questions: "What is it to be human?", and "What is reality?" I went with the goals to learn to 1) trust myself more, and, 2) trust other people at least somewhat. We did an exercise I knew I wouldn't like: we had to be with other people. One exercise involved looking fully in the face of the person seated next to me for several minutes, not talking, not smiling, not averting eyes, just being. The second, standing in front of a room of nearly 100 people doing that exact same thing. This lasted nothing short of an eternity, but the results astonished me. I discovered I like people. I want to know people. I want them to know me. Beyond our unique qualities is a common longing: we need connection as much as we do autonomy.

Thinking about this later, I realized my overall experience of this culture is the avoidance of true relating, in both intimate and community interactions. Intimacy with others means exposure, vulnerability, the possibility of rejection. In my childhood I experienced vulnerability as pain. Without going into detail about my personal emotional traumas, I'll bet almost anyone can identify with what I'm talking about. In those early formative years, I equated events that hurt with having no control over the situation and therefore being unable to alter it. Because children's emotional skills are undeveloped, the response is often reactionary. Being young and impressionable, the response to strong experience becomes a permanent part of our survival kit, whether or not it serves us later. My response to crisis in those early years led to hiding my vulnerability behind a tough and competent appearance. Certainly being competent is a good thing, even toughness has its place at times, but dependence on old patterns as the only option prevents us from addressing new situations creatively. Simply put, we don't learn and that is contrary to our nature. It's almost impossible to relate to others with a defensive attitude, as I described in the instance with my clients. I discovered that by consciously shifting my concept of vulnerability—that it might possibly be a good and valuable thing—I created a new perspective on who I am and how I relate with others. Oddly enough, when I changed, the people around me changed.

It is remarkable to consider that the entire population of our species has doubled on this earth since the 1940's. Due to our increasing "togetherness" over the last century, finding new ways of relating with one another has been inevitable. One of the psychologies that has emerged out of this need is called Gestalt, an integrative therapy that takes into account the entire context of a person's life, not just the separate issues of events past. Its founder, Fritz Perls, interpreted the word responsibility as "response-ability", or developing the skills necessary to

get the job done. In this context the phrase, "There is no freedom without responsibility", means freedom involves making choices. "Response-ability" requires matching skills to the task at hand. A shift in relationship with others can only happen on an individual basis, with each of us committing to individual responsibility. Implementation of that responsibility could create a very valuable new tool: a level of communication that could potentially transform our entire species. If we are able to consciously respond to the issue at hand rather than resort to an automatic response that stems from an event 30 years ago, we might actually move forward in relationships instead of remaining stuck. Most of us in the creative professions already appreciate the value of being able to use this more spontaneous, "adaptable" style of thinking. This appropriate response to circumstance is known as "flow" in studies of creativity, the "white moment" for athletes and performers, and "no-mindedness", a Zen concept in which self consciousness and time disappear allowing access to a universal creativity. If you have ever lost yourself in creating something that felt as though it was "through you" rather than "of you", you have experienced flow. Another clue is that your energy feels renewed rather than depleted. By only engaging the areas of the brain necessary, the rest is reserved for problem solving or other tasks.² Pushing ourselves to venture into new realms of ourselves is the true work of being human, and it is at once our difficulty and our grace. When we open to the possibilities within ourselves we reveal a universe of possibility outside of ourselves.

We are all "men on the precipice" at this crucial point in time and we have some choices to make. Not only where do we go next, but on which path and for how long? As visual designers of information we have the advantage of placing one foot in both realms...information and invention, doing and being. It is our task to demonstrate creativity and intuition in the context of the logical and pragmatic business world. Our daily environment challenges us to be aware and awake human beings in order to accomplish this in a harmonious fashion. Expressing a broadened tolerance and becoming skillful in unexplored levels of communication is a tall order. We have been taught to discount some of our latent talents such as intuitive interconnectedness: we're going to be needing all of our faculties for what's ahead. It is simply common sense to acknowledge and develop any and all of our innate interpretation and communication skills. To create a coexistence of cooperation through active participation in the world isn't a touchy-feely new age thing. It's age-old survival.

I realize this is asking a lot. There is no doubt it is a lot easier to remain resigned. But, I, for one, like the cosmologists' idea which has persisted for at least 2,000 years that says our existence is a way for the universe to reflect upon itself. I like the job of translating the information that comes my way, adding my spin to the curve ball and tossing it back out again.

It was—and remains—no easy feat to admit shortcomings. The engineers' resistance to doing the job my way provided a communication opportunity that took me beyond where I'd traditionally gone with clients. They also made a leap—not only by describing themselves graphically—but in their flexibility to convey who they were. It wasn't easy for them to incorporate my suggestions, some of which have required significant effort at the grassroots level of implementation. Their willingness to try out some things with which they were not totally comfortable, and my ownership of the discord in the relationship, allowed for a much better result. Though no client/designer relationship is perfect, the point is to make the effort to communicate, realizing and accepting that something is often given up on a personal level for the gain of the greater good. Perhaps the distinction is what one gives up: A little piece of soul? I don't think anyone should be asked to do that. A little piece of ego? That's something we could all live with.

Carl Jung's idea of a "collective unconscious" says that we already have experience of one another, and always have. I recently spoke about human connectedness with David Ulansey, Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, and Research Associate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He said, "The most apparent clues to our transformation are the cracks in the edifice of our reality. Life changed for all of us in the 60's when we saw ourselves from outer space. That image of a small blue planet in the infinite expanse of space showed without question how connected we truly are. It has forever affected our "civilized" perception of the separation between cultures and peoples. The most ancient concepts of our interconnectedness to each other and the universe have lain dormant for millennia, like seeds stored in our unconscious waiting for the human climate to change, and now they are beginning to grow again."

"Because of the interconnectedness of all minds, affirming a positive vision may be the most sophisticated action any one of us can take." –Willis Harman, President of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1977-97

Mathematics, chemistry, computer science, philosophy, physics, psychology, biology, the arts—all traditionally exclusive disciplines—now interweave to create information that holistically fills in more of our existential picture. Ilya Prigogine won the 1977 Nobel Prize in chemistry for his model of dissipative structures (a term he coined which means "self-organizing patterns") which demonstrates large perturbations of energy that cause living systems to fall apart, and then to fall together again in a more elegant order. Perhaps our fear of chaos is exaggerated. He writes, "Creativity becomes the ever urging drive that pushes reality forward...Giving up the ideal of certainty may appear to some a defeat of human reason; I don't believe so. We begin to be able to describe an

evolutionary universe, in agreement with our present picture where evolution plays an essential role on all levels of description from cosmology to human history. Far from coming to the end of science, we are only at the very start...of being able to produce a coherent view of the universe. (We are) overcoming a type of rationality that is no longer appropriate to our time."³ We will need pattern-seers from all walks of life in order to decipher the complexities that face us and integrate them into the whole. We are all needed to interpret the puzzle because it is within the collective experience that we will begin to uncover the next solution. Suddenly, "we the people" is who we are once again.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so other people won't feel insecure around you. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." –Nelson Mandela in his 1994 Inaugural Speech, written by Marianne Williamson

As our next—and perhaps our last—significant evolution, this time is fraught with danger and opportunity. The potential in what we have created is incredibly dangerous because it is so powerful. Technology threatens our existence with nuclear and biological weapons, poisons haphazardly released into our life support systems, a shocking extinction rate of plant and animal life. But it also reveals previously invisible worlds of intricate beauty and is beginning to unveil the inherent inter-relatedness of existence at the most fundamental levels. The societal changes happening through human connection are turning the traditional hierarchical pyramid upside down. None of us have any idea what might replace it. But we are also evolving our communication skills exponentially via the Internet. We now have the ability to access others almost anywhere in the world to provide a tangible modern day experience of our web of connection. Now we can actually transcend so many of our traditional cultural, political and economic boundaries.

In our brief period here, we have exclaimed ourselves in a

most obtrusive way. Our in-your-face attitude has done exactly that—put us face to face, surrounded by a bewildering world we played a large part in creating. We can hold ourselves hostage, baffled by an overload of information and tormented by our ineffective response to it, or we can choose to fully take on our individual response-ability, making personal leaps that creatively address our predicament. At this juncture, the discomfort of risk is irrelevant. With so much possibility contained within each of us, reinventing ourselves into a new reality is our first order of business.

Editor's Note: *Crisis as opportunity: Maggie Macnab wasn't at ease with the written word when she approached me to write this article, yet she was determined to communicate this message to her colleagues. It's a great testimony to Maggie's evolution that she persevered and this stunning article is the result. –DK Holland*

Notes

1. *The Stone Age Present*, by William Allman, pp. 186-219. ©1994 Simon and Schuster
2. *The Creative Spirit*, by Daniel Goleman, Paul Kaufman and Michael Ray, page 47. © 1992 Dutton.
3. *The Creative Process*, edited by Lars Gustafsson, Susan Howard and Lars Niklasson. See Ilya Prigogine: Creativity in the Sciences and the Humanities. A Study in the Relation Between the Two Cultures. © 1993 Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, Stockholm.

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