

WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE?

FACING REALITY
CLAIMING LEADERSHIP
RESTORING SANITY



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2. IDENTITY

Living Systems Change in Order
to Preserve Themselves

**The first act of life
is to create a boundary,
a membrane that is
the cell's identity.
It defines an inside and
an outside, what it is,
what it is not.**

— Margaret Wheatley

What Science Teaches

Living systems create themselves. They (we) are all self-authoring. We always and only organize around an identity, a membrane or boundary that distinguishes us from everything else. Without identity, there would be no means to differentiate one thing from another. There would be no possibility to organize into greater complexity and order. Without identity, it would be a never-ending mess of primordial soup devoid of form and possibility.

There are alternate theories for how life began about four billion years ago, how the first chemical reactions occurred to create the first cells. Where did the energy for those first chemical reactions come from? Was it in the primordial soup of ocean struck by lightning, or in heat vents deep on the ocean floor, or on the new planet's fiery surface? What we do know is that life began with membranes, with boundaries that created cells by separating them from everything else.

Inside that container, possibilities arise—complex interactions that create different and sophisticated functions.¹ The membrane is semipermeable, letting in energy and matter in continual exchanges with its environment. Without that permeability, nothing new could be created, and, like all closed systems, the young life form would quickly wear down and die.

Life cannot be sustained when the boundary becomes rigid. Nor can it generate new capacities and adapt to its environment if the boundary is too open. Too much permeability is as dangerous to the continuation of a living system as is too much rigidity. Maintaining the sensitive balance between open and closed is the ever-present challenge for a living system.

Whenever a living system changes, it is attempting to save itself, to preserve its identity. Every living being has the freedom to use cognition to notice changes in its environment, interpret them, and decide how to respond. Nothing is predetermined—if a change happens, it is the result of the organism's decision to change based on a perceived threat to itself. This is the intriguing paradox of identity: it can be greatly changed as the means to protect its existing self.

Without identity there is no life, no creation, no responsiveness, no continuation, no possibility for evolutionary change. Yet every change is motivated by an attempt to preserve a self.

You can prove this to yourself. Whenever you detect a change in a person, community, organization, or nation, observe how their old identity is referred to, sometimes many times over, even though they now appear quite changed. (You can also try this at home.) You will always find identity as the reference for change. It cannot be otherwise.

Identity Then and Now

The importance of identity as an organizing dynamic for people and all living beings cannot be overemphasized. It always has and forever will be the basis for how we define ourselves as individuals and societies, the choices we make, the things we attend to, the behaviors we manifest. So it's important to look at how identity has functioned over time into our present day.

Traditionally, cultures defined identity. Who you were, what you thought, what you did were predetermined by where you were born. Identity was never a personal choice. The community raised you with a clear moral sense of right and wrong and gave you a set of beliefs, expectations, and ways of living that bound you to the group with a strong sense of belonging. At some point you may have rebelled, left the community, and sought your freedom to express yourself. But when it came time to raise your children, chances are you were drawn back to your culture whose value now seemed obvious.

Cultural identity can continue for centuries, even millennia, providing ground and continuity. But as is happening now, wars and famine force people to relocate. This has been going on since the beginning of human history, but the scale of this in modern times is one of the most challenging problems for the nations of the affluent world. And one they are retreating from in self-protection. There are more than 65 million refugees; even if wars miraculously were to cease, their numbers will keep growing because of climate change.²

Global Culture

In Minneapolis airport
the Somalis serve us
hungry weary travelers with
innocent true smiles

when they began
their long march westward
fleeing violence
terrors on their path
hunger in their bones
only hope and fear
to prod them on

did they ever dream
of this day when
they would smile again
as they serve me a latte
tall dark skinny.

Margaret Wheatley

Most indigenous cultures, their traditions and languages, are being lost to the pressures of global culture at rates even greater than that for the extinction of biological species.³

People who are dislocated from their homelands and their traditions experience profound loss and disorientation. Their pain is far more than physical; it is also deeply emotional and spiritual as they are uprooted from all that has anchored them.

Global culture has taken hold, a new reality easy to identify in the things we share at the consumer level in music, movies, fashion, food, products, technology. And at the personal level in alienation, addiction, violence, and suicide. The premise of this culture is personal freedom, the right to create yourself in any way you want, unhampered by the past, free to fly without any need for ground. If you are born in the right place, you are free to dream, to follow your passion, to redefine yourself whenever and however you choose. If you are born anywhere else, you watch this display of freedom with envy and resentment that can erupt in fury. Those who fly free in self-absorption fail to see those taking aim at them from below.

A culture focused on individual freedom can only result in narcissism, polarization, conflict, estrangement, and loneliness. What is the meaning of life when it's all about me?

In the Age of Decadence that Glubb describes, everyone is focused on their self-interest. Elites protect their wealth, leaders protect their power, and the masses clamor for entertainment. We worship actors, musicians, and athletes. We are bought off with food and grand spectacles; we become obsessed with sports. And we grow more and more demanding; we feel entitled not because we've earned it, but just because we can demand it. And leaders respond because they want to keep us quiet.

I know this sounds depressingly familiar, so let me remind you that this is how humans always behave during the decline of their civilization. Always.

But let me get more precise (and depressing) in describing the particular forces in our civilization that are driving us deeper into the dark morass of individual identity. Understanding these forces also offers us clarity as leaders about how to avoid this descent as we endeavor to create islands of sanity. So do not despair—this analysis can prove beneficial because we need to know how to work well with this primary organizing dynamic of identity. (Was that a spoiler alert?)

IDENTITY: FACING REALITY

In global culture, identity not only is self-created—it is manufactured to be self-promoting. Popularity now is the measure of success personally and politically. It's not what you stand for, but whether your most recent persona creates followers, fans, and votes. The tools for identity manufacture are right at our fingertips, in social media, where we can build our image by posting pictures, videos, blogs, links, comments. Instantly we know what others think about us, what they liked or disliked. Online we can find those with seemingly identical beliefs and together certify that our beliefs and prejudices are the truth. As online consumers, marketers know us all too well through algorithms that identify and predict our buying preferences; those preferences are then manipulated into purchases to satisfy needs we didn't know we had (because we didn't).⁴

This maelstrom of fake and manipulated identities is only possible because we seem unable to find any other basis for self-identification. Exhausted by the consumption and entertainment, or because of it, we grow talented at sarcasm. Cynicism takes over and with it the descent into meaninglessness. We don't know who we are or why anything is important.

We could have been anything we wanted, yet our free-floating individualism has taken us far from community, contribution or connection, the very things that truly give life meaning and purpose.



The Rise of Celebrity Culture

A celebrity culture always arises in the Age of Decadence. We become obsessed with the lives of particular individuals, their talents and achievements. We may find them brilliant or despicable. Whether we are inspired, jealous, critical, or turned off, the focus is on individuals, what they are doing moment by moment and whether they please us. Popularity becomes the measure of success. These distractions grow ever more enticing as things worsen.

Cultures focused on popularity have no depth or resilience. They are superficial and ephemeral: tastes change; fashions come and go; fads rise and fall. Always changing, such a culture increases our sense of uncertainty and vulnerability. We may be popular now, but beneath the surface our anxiety and stress keep growing. Will you still love me tomorrow?

Think about how technology has exacerbated celebrity culture and raised popularity to the equivalent of the meaning of life. Social media and online selling have pushed popularity to new heights, using it to motivate our behavior—buy this because it's a trend; buy this because your friends have; check out how many "likes" you got on your last post or photo; like this restaurant or website and earn a prize. I won't go on—it's pervasive everywhere online. But here's a headline from my local paper that caught my attention: "Utah County Jail Receives High Rating, Positive Feedback on Google Reviews."

Noting how our technology has enabled the cult of popularity is a good example of the progress trap. Online communications appeared to be wonderful progress—we could exchange photos, shop with ease, stay connected to family, get instant answers to questions, talk to people anywhere on the planet. But now it's obvious how online capacities have, as unintended consequences, morphed into destructive cultural impacts. Narcissism has intensified; hate and "haters" now plague social media, public rallies, and communities; addictive online behaviors waste both time and lives; social skills deteriorate in those living online; patience is obsolete; reflective thinking is antiquated; boredom no longer exists; distractions proliferate and endanger. (Another headline from the *New York Times*: "General: Marines, Put Down Those Cell Phones!")

Communication on social media moves in one direction, toward increased emotionality and distortion of message. If you engage in rapid message exchanges via Facebook or texting, notice what happens to the "conversation" as you go back and forth. The speed of response predicts that communications will become more intense: emotions will rise, miscommunication develop. If things become uncomfortable, people either disappear or offer a superficial ending, usually a series of emojis. How often do such exchanges move into real conversations?

We may be in contact, but we're not connecting. We whiz by each other at cyberspace speed. No dwelling mind here! The Internet rewards speed over all else, and some of the statistics about our craving for speed are mind-boggling. In 2006, Forrester Research found that online shoppers expected web pages to load in under four seconds. Three years later in 2009, the number was shaved to two seconds; slower web pages led many shoppers to look elsewhere. By 2012, Google engineers had discovered

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that when results take longer than two-fifths of a second to appear, people search less, and *lagging just one-quarter of a second* behind a rival site can drive users away.⁵

Because of all the good things the Internet gave us, until recently we failed to notice that we're entrapped. It's not a question of a cost/benefit analysis, although many people are still stuck there, wanting to acknowledge and hold onto all the benefits to our lives brought by social media even as we face its destructive impacts.

It doesn't balance out. We have to recognize that this wondrous technology has distorted and corrupted the capacities and needs that human beings require to live: intimacy, thinking, listening, meaning making, being present. We need to come face-to-face with the destruction that social media has reaped to our ability to live well together.

More speed, new apps, artificial intelligence, more connectivity through technology is not the answer. Sane leadership is.



The Compelling Call of Identity

We humans use identity to organize our actions and beliefs to give meaning to our lives. We, like all living beings, live in networks of relationship. And like all living beings, we need to stay alert to what's going on in our environment, what might require us to adapt and change.

Amid all the information available in our environment, which identity filter(s) do you use? Are you dedicated to popularity, to a role, to a cause, an ethic, a nation, an ethnicity? What identity gives meaning to your life?

While celebrity culture offers an escape from reality, there are two potent examples today of how identity can be a compelling dynamic for sacrifice and service. This dynamic appears in the early stages of a new civilization when invaders band together to subvert and conquer a decadent culture. Today we see this in the rise of terrorist groups around the world. And it is also true of those who, living inside the decadence of this culture, are willing to sacrifice and work to restore moral virtues such as justice, equality, and compassion. Today we call this form of activism "identity politics."⁶

In putting these two examples of social activists and terrorists in the same paragraph, please note that I am *not* saying they are at all similar in their intentions or methods. What they illustrate, in very different ways, is the power of identity to mobilize people into purposeful actions, foregoing self-promotion and self-protection. As leaders, it is important for us to take note of the incredible power of identity.

Even knowing the power of this dynamic, I keep asking how is it possible for terrorists to lose all sense of personal identity, strap a suicide belt on themselves, spend weeks building bombs to kill and maim, and then go kill themselves?

How is it possible for a person to kill colleagues at an office Christmas party? How is it possible to deliberately target children or to be a child who commits these actions?

There is so much to understand in these continuing horrific examples, but at their core is an individual or a group that has been influenced to believe that what gives meaning to their lives is killing themselves and murdering people on behalf of a cause. (It is the premeditated suicide that distinguishes their behavior from soldiers who go to war. Soldiers are willing to sacrifice their lives for their nation or cause, and they may kill many people in military operations, but they want to return home alive.)

We know that these young men and women feel hopeless about their own future, that they feel excluded and invisible, that a few of them are mentally ill.⁷ We know that drugs, brainwashing, and the availability of thousands of online videos turn them into suicide bombers. Suicide is on the rise globally, especially among youth.⁸ These young people have been conditioned to eagerly accept an ideology that gives meaning to their desire to die and erase the pain of life.

The very function of identity—to respond and change in order to survive—has been inverted. It is hard to identify with this upside-down world. No wonder we can't understand it.

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What is much easier to understand is the rise of identity politics, people organizing on the basis of their marginalization from the rest of society. They unite in their demands for fair treatment, justice, equal rights, access. It can be race, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, nationality, age—any of the “isms” that flood public discourse these days. They stand in solidarity and gain visibility through many forms of protest. This is happening in many different countries on all continents. Because of their experiences of oppression, neglect, violence, they demand their country pay attention to the values, laws, and practices that, at an earlier time, were recognized as important to that national identity or were pledged in UN resolutions. In the United States, we may never have achieved the goals we set for ourselves as a nation, but they were important enough to struggle for in many wars and social movements.

**If you're not at the table,
you're probably on the menu.**

Elizabeth Warren, U.S. Senator

These values and practices constituted our national identity before we became so distressingly decadent. Is it possible to reclaim them? Are we even interested?

There is an unavoidable consequence when people from the margins organize.⁹ The burden of change and the restoration of national values get placed on them. If you want equal rights, it's your job to fight for them. If you demand equal pay, convince us. If you want to be included at the table, prove yourself. The very values that defined who we wanted to be as a nation are no longer defended by the nation. Instead, those who are marginalized must speak loud enough to get our attention. It's no wonder that they end up screaming. And when they finally do get our attention, more often than not we blame them for raising the issue. Either we're doing fine, or it's their fault that we failed. Anger intensifies on both sides, polarization increases, and any ideal of national identity is trampled beyond recognition.

Such civil divisions are predictable in a declining civilization. Instead of uniting in common cause to protect the nation from real threats, we take ourselves down by ever more hateful exchanges.

**We are not protesting.
We are protecting.**

Native Water Protectors at Standing Rock, 2016