

Time for Reflection

Volker Brendel: It is time for reflection. It is good to make time for this, in fact necessary. However, reflection is an activity that is largely being ignored these days by most people. We might ask when we should engage in reflection, upon life in general or our own lives. Maybe when we approach the end of our lives? I think most people would do that if they had a chance to do a retrospective, putting their life experiences into a larger context.

There are other occasions when temporarily we are encouraged to reflect upon large affairs. Included in these are annual religious holidays; maybe your personal anniversaries; or maybe every other Sunday; or every Sunday; or maybe in the morning and evening of every day. Many possibilities, but for our society as a whole, the art and practice of reflection is not emphasized these days. We recall the experience Larry Krantz had with young people coming to his house, wishing to convey material of their church doctrine. Upon Larry's inquiry into their own experience, the answer was along the lines of: "That is not in our books. Sorry, but we have to go back and find out what the company instructions are on how to deal with such questions."

Unfortunately, this is not really unique to the religious approach to life nor to a particular church, but almost everyone is implicitly or even explicitly encouraged to live a thoughtless life. If that sounds like a pretty severe indictment, that's good! It is meant to be that.

There are these fanciful allegorical stories of a frog sitting in a pot of water, with the water temperature being slowly raised. The point of the stories is that in view of the rather miniscule incremental changes, when and why would the frog notice at all that something bad was happening? Well, in reality the frog would jump, because small perturbations (some small movement by the frog) will trigger a cascade of perceptions that something has dramatically changed and that it is time to get out of the present conditions.

These days we read about climate change and the average temperature of the earth increasing. I would not be the first to suggest that maybe as fellow human beings we are in a situation that is equivalent to the frog in a pot of water on a stove. There is incremental change which is almost imperceptible. And even if we perceive some change, it seems so minuscule from one year to the next that we conclude that maybe no action is needed. But if the analogy holds, a similar fate awaits us. At some point, a slightly larger perturbation is inevitable, and

then suddenly the ill effects that have accumulated come upon us as a tidal wave. There is a difference of course: the frog sitting in the pot on the stove has a place to jump to; we don't.

So, if there is a general tendency to just get on with the program, do things that we have always done, without much thought, how should we change that? Well, one answer is that it is being changed for us, because the ill effects have been accumulating, and there will come a point when recognition of what has been done will be universal. We are already aware of a lot of environmental calamities. Rising oceans will flood some of our well-known coastal cities before long, akin to what has been the experience in Venice, Italy, in the last couple of years.

We have moved very rapidly into what is called the digital age. We live now in a digital society. Relatively very little reflection has been devoted to this theme, in the sense of being pro-active. What has driven our lives is not what should be done, but what can be done. There currently is a renewed great obsession with measurements, data, and numbers. Well, what's bad about that, what's bad about data? After all, I work as a scientist, so I love data, and I love analyzing data. The data-driven approach to life obviously has many benefits, encouraging less speculation in favor of looking at facts. This data-driven approach is increasingly pervading every aspect of our living. Many people look at their smart phones first thing in the morning to get data on the current temperature outside, on the weather forecast; what's on our schedules for the day (nicely displayed in our apps); how are the financial markets doing, as measured by the various stock market indices; how are our favorite sports teams, etc..

The data-driven approach is now pervading everything. Take two examples: finance and health. The health of our economy, how well different companies are doing, the financial health of individuals and families, all that is measured in numbers. We are used to evaluating a publicly traded company by its stock price. Now, it is true, the stock price should relate to the company's bottom line and how well the company is doing in the marketplace, where it is selling goods or services. But more often than not, these indicators are manipulated by many different factors. Recently, a young man was convicted in the UK for fraudulent trading practices some years back. He brought down the Dow Jones industrial average some six hundred points in a few minutes. Presumably, this gentleman was one of the first to recognize the power of computer-assisted trading to make split-second decisions on rising or falling prices. It turns out that this fellow is autistic and had no criminal intent. For him, the stock market was yet another computer game that people were terribly interested in, and he thought he saw a way to play it better than others.

A company's value may erode very quickly by such manipulations and other ephemeral factors. Stockholders want quick returns, measured in dollars and cents, every day, or at least every three months. Such constraints may be detrimental to other values a company might pursue, for example long-term investments or concerns of other stakeholders, including the employees and their communities.

The field of medicine is another field that has been dramatically changed by the modern data-driven approach. The current medical science frontier is what is called personalized medicine whereby very large numbers of data points are accumulated on you with the premise that this will enable precise diagnoses and treatment plans individualized to each patient.

What about a different way of thinking that cannot be digitized? If you go to the emergency room for anything, one of the first questions you will be asked is: "What is your pain level on a scale of one to ten?" "Ten" indicates unbearable pain, too much to fill out the questionnaire, I presume, and "one" is on the level of discomfort about having to sit on a lousy chair and having to wait. But really, how do you digitize the experience of pain? How do you digitize a feeling?

With young children you often play a game of, "I love you very much. How much? Really very much? No, how much? Well, from here to the moon. Oh, but I love you from here to the sun!" Children are enamored with this sort of play acting. Our question here is: How do you digitize a feeling of affection? Of love?

There is a different approach in all of these circumstances, a different way of thinking that is not digital. I'm not sure what to best call it, maybe "analog thinking," or "categorical thinking," or maybe best, "holistic thinking." It is an approach that takes into account a different way of sensing and of perceiving the infinite factors that have a bearing on the current situation.

Now, this description may seem merely philosophical. "Infinite factors" reminds us of the "butterfly effect," including the idea that everyone on the planet has a relationship with me and impacts my perception. And not only everyone, but the whole universe at work! Well, maybe so. Obviously, we are impacted by solar radiation coming from very far away. It's not philosophical in this case: without that radiation, there would be no life on earth. If we make a medical assessment, to be very practical, our exposure to sunlight, to clean air, to clean water, to a loving environment—all these factors have a bearing on our disease condition or overall health. Now, there are some cases when we need to isolate some quantitative factors that must be taken into account. We can be grateful for medical research and treatment. But experience

shows that even in some supposedly clear-cut cases, all these other factors we have mentioned impinge upon the success of the treatment and our overall experience of health.

So, if this is true for our individual health, what else should we take into account? Is the number-driven approach to our economy the only approach accessible to us? Or are there other approaches that offer something that the digital approach misses?

These are questions that have been reflected upon, and there are certainly those who still ponder the subject. It behooves us to be counted amongst those, because there is also a tendency, quite possibly outright manipulation, to get almost everyone to behave by rote, to unquestioningly follow the party line, to follow the cultural norm, or the church doctrine, or your own established routines; to trudge along. It is absolutely vital that we break out of that, if we want to change the sorry picture in which mankind finds itself, and the gloomy predictions of where this all leads.

I have come across an excellent essay by Lloyd Alter, which appeared on the TreeHugger sustainability blog (<https://www.treehugger.com/culture/our-lives-have-been-co-opted-convenience-industrial-complex.html>). I encourage everyone to read the entire article, but for now I'll read excerpts:

Nobody ever lost money making things easier or more convenient, and our planet is paying the price.

After the Second World War, the aluminum industry had a problem; there were all these dams built to make electricity and all these aluminum refineries that used the electricity, but it all went into airplanes and there was no demand for the stuff. So, [as we learned from Carl A. Zimrig](#), the industry started inventing uses. They even held competitions for inventors to come up with ideas; that's how we got the aluminum pie plate and other disposable aluminum packages. Zimrig quotes an Alcoa exec: "The day was at hand when packages would replace pots and pans in the preparation of meals."

This was the start of what we will call the **Convenience Industrial Complex**, in honour of President Dwight Eisenhower, who in his 1961 farewell address warned of the dangers of the Military Industrial Complex, speaking to a nation that was "giddy with prosperity, infatuated with youth and glamour, and aiming increasingly for the easy life":

As we peer into society's future, we—you and I, and our government—must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own ease and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage.

This is all one big connected story. Along with Eisenhower's Interstate and Defense Highway system, we got the [National Industrial Dispersion Policy](#) to make America bomb-proof by de-densification, which led to driving everywhere, which led to the explosion of the fast food industry which couldn't exist without disposables. As [Emelyn Rude writes in Time](#): "By the 1960s, private automobiles had taken over American roads and fast-food joints catering almost exclusively in food to-go became the fastest growing facet of the restaurant industry." Now we were all eating out of paper, using foam or paper cups, straws, forks, everything was disposable. But while there may have been waste bins at the McDonalds' parking lots, there weren't any on the roads or in the cities; this was all a new phenomenon.

The bottling industry also came up with disposable glass bottles. Nobody had ever done this before, and customers didn't know what to do with the paper and glass, so they just threw it out the window, or, as Susan Spotless complains, just dropped it.

So, [as we have been noting for years](#), the industry invented the Keep America Beautiful (KAB) campaign to deliver the message, "Don't be a litterbug." Where cleaning the table and washing the dishes used to be the responsibility of the restaurant, it became ours. Heather Rogers wrote in [Message in a bottle](#):

KAB downplayed industry's role in despoiling the earth, while relentlessly hammering home the message of each person's responsibility for the destruction of nature, one wrapper at a time... KAB was a pioneer in sowing confusion about the environmental impact of mass production and consumption.

The author goes on to comment on the invention of recycling and making every individual responsible for being a good recycler, while it is our society and industries at large that are producing these wasteful packaging materials in the first place. These days almost nothing can actually be recycled for real profit as countries like China and other South East Asian countries don't take our waste anymore. Thus, we need to re-think this whole business.

But there is a beautiful lesson here about the incessant drive to increase the bottom line, be it by the aluminum industry or the petroleum industry. For the latter, as electric cars become more available, there is an urgent search underway by the petroleum industry to find other uses for their raw material.

I should mention another book that has been reprinted in recent years: *The Unsettling of America*, by Wendell Berry, first published in 1988. The author takes a look at the agricultural industrial complex and how the division between food production and working the land has profoundly changed our acknowledged and implied philosophy of life. Large-scale

farming has replaced family farming, people are less and less knowledgeable about food, where the food comes from, the cycles of seeding and harvesting and working the land; and there is an enormous price that society actually pays for this. Examination shows that most of these costs are externalized: we are eating poor food, we keep an unhealthy lifestyle, but can we rectify everything by personalized medicine?

It takes global and individual reflection to connect all the dots, to see how our spiritual approach to life needs to become earthly, practical, to result in a living experience that informs everything we're doing. Without that we are a collective "frog" being boiled by our own doing, being ejected from the only planet we know.

How do you measure your own sense of divine identity? Should I ask you to answer this on a scale of one to ten? One being, "No, no, there is nothing divine in me," and ten being, "I know I'm an angel;" six and seven somewhere in between. Shall we count the number of people who will find the consideration this morning valuable? Is that a measure of our own clarity and of our approach? No, there is no number to be put on a clear understanding of who we are.

If in fact you have the experience of your divine and cosmic identity, as it has been called, then this is a "categorical" experience. You have the experience. There is no need to put a number on it. In fact, it is not possible to do it. On this premise, how do we approach life and the questions of life in any given situation? The data-driven approach is one approach that we have in our toolkit. It is a tool, but there needs to be a holistic sensing of everything else around. A word of wisdom, a touch, a smile offered, some loving expression. That may be, and often is, the healing current in a given situation. So, let's make time for this, let's recognize this. There are infinitely many factors impinging upon our daily situations, moment by moment. It is beyond measurement, it is beyond the mental approach, to figure all this out. But we can have wisdom, we can express love, and we can do this with assurance, leading to an increased recognition of who we are and what we are here to offer.

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Pre-Service Music

Requiem pour soli, choeurs et orgue, Op. 9: I. Introit & II. Kyrie

Composed by Maurice Duruflé and performed by the Houston Chamber Choir