THE WISDOM OF HOLDING OUR OLD STORIES IN NEW WAYS

Intentionally evolving ourselves toward a more inclusive and creative future

Jennifer Garvey Berger and Zafer Achi

Windows out

First let's start with the window out. You'll recognize this landscape, so we'll just sketch it quickly here. The scientific revolution gave humans the sense that we could understand nature and later, human nature. The Industrial Revolution gave us the capacity to act on this understanding. Now we could tame unpredictability in ever-increasing pockets; we could exploit nature to our benefit. For a while, it looked like we humans could be the masters of the universe—or at least the planet. We drilled into the ground to find gold, gems, and the lifeblood of our developing societies: oil and coal. We dammed rivers to get energy while protecting our cities and farmland. We built buildings so tall we called them “skyscrapers.” We put verdant golf courses in Dubai and toasty underground tunnels in Montreal. The Information Revolution connected us increasingly tightly. We created economic systems of ever-faster trading, social systems that network us in real time across the planet, and environmental systems that pump oil through venous pipelines to serve the needs of the energy-hungry on the other side of the planet.

These days, as we sketch the view through the window, the lines are jagged on the page. It seems we have overreached. We have tried to control the uncertainty of the world and, in so doing, we have added vast amounts of complexity—many more interacting parts moving more quickly than any human has ever had to deal with before. We are so productive that we have swollen to 7 billion on our way to 11 billion. We are so interconnected that dubious behavior in one financial system in one country can lead to a Global Financial Crisis. We are so digital that massive numbers of jobs will be lost over the next 20 years. And we are so energy hungry that we are burning our natural resources and raising the temperature of the planet, creating a problem with so many intersecting social, political, and environmental elements that there is no telling how to address it effectively.

On the one hand, we have become more prone to meltdowns as the impact of human civilization changes our climate and as our tight coupling enables accidents to ripple across faster and broader. On the other hand, it somehow seems that if we only tried hard enough, we could ultimately get rid of all residual uncertainty. Therein lies the fundamental paradox that
humankind is facing today: the more we dig in our heels and stand in our agency or attempt to heroically engineer our way out of uncertainty and into control, the more we amplify our exposure to volatility. The more we try to power through to a happy story, the more tragic the future we will inhabit.

Other chapters in this book will take you out through the window and into the landscape. In this essay, we will instead look in. This is because the challenge of creating a brighter future for all interconnected life on the planet isn't just about what happens outside the window but what happens inside us. We believe that it's not just action but also the meaning we make of action that creates these external circumstances. In this essay, we explore the possibility that by embracing a different way of making sense of ourselves and our lives, we might be able to bridge across and harvest competing worldviews in order to create a better future that restores health and balance in ourselves, our organizations, our societies, our civilization, and our planet.

Competing stories

As we huddle and talk about our world—be it among friends sharing dinner in Delhi, or family debating a TV show in Lagos, or in a crowd attending a TEDx talk in Vancouver—we tend to quickly agree that the world is being severely strained. Our conversations move to how we will find our way into the future, and then we will probably coalesce around one of three broad collective narratives, three epic stories vying for our attention.1

There is a narrative of Progress. This has been the dominant worldview of the last 200 years or so. At its core, it says that we humans stand at the apex of evolution; that our destiny is to shape the world; that we possess the agency, the knowledge, and the technology needed to drive a spiraling movement of improvement. In this narrative, we move from unknowns to knowns, we pile one certainty on a mounting heap of certainties, we lurch forward from one equilibrium to the next. We iron out quirks and glitches in ourselves and in the world in a continual quest for perfection. The individual human is the primary locus of control, a hero who can conquer any obstacle and achieve any goal they set their sight onto.

There is a narrative of Tradition which—like the ideas it expresses—is an ancient and lasting human narrative. While it has lost its pre-eminence in the last century or so, it continues to be widely held. At its core, it argues that order—determined by the pathways of the past—is essential for society to flourish. Acceptable roles are clearly defined and carry well-understood expectations. Honoring traditional belief systems and embracing rituals are central practices that reinforce a path that has brought us safely to this point and will bring us safely into the future. Belonging—and ensuring that you continue to belong—is imperative because exclusion is a death sentence (which was literally true hundreds or thousands of years ago and is figuratively true now).

The modernist narrative of Interdependence has taken shape in the last few decades and is captivating a growing share of minds. It argues that the planet and all life forms are entwined in a myriad of nested ecosystems. We humans cannot thrive if we disregard the health and exploit the resources of the planet; nor can we thrive as humans without inclusion, social justice, and equality. We cannot rely on the traditions of the past to hold us in a more difficult and interconnected future. Similarly, the single-minded pursuit of progress casts a long shadow of degradation that will unravel us. Our sense of control is an illusion. We must work together, discard those pieces of the past that have brought us to this unequal and unsustainable present, and forge ahead in a brand new way.2

Each of these stories is compelling. Each makes sense of the world in a coherent way. Every story offers solid ground for formulating predictions under multiple scenarios. And it's our experience that people tend to be naturally drawn to one and often repelled by another.
We also see these stories and the repulsion between them at play in various ways all around the world. We see people who love one narrative and despise the others enough to argue, to protest, even to be violent with one another. This is not the first time that various narratives have caused violence (in fact, violence has often been caused by the narratives humans hold). But as our fragile planet heats up, it might be that the need for progress, for tradition, and for interdependence will require not only new stories, but new minds.

The mind of the storyteller

So we've looked at the terrain, we've looked at the stories. Now it's time to check out the storytellers. Let's turn inward and look back at us, the ones looking through the window, the ones who have created the world out there, and the ones telling stories about the best way to travel forward.

We all know that different people think about the world in different ways. We know that there are cultural differences, style differences, gender, class, and age differences. There are dozens of theories that help us parse and make sense of all of this. Adult development theory is one of the ways to understand the way we see the world. Researchers like William Perry (1968), Robert Kegan (1982, 1994), William Torbert (2004), and Mary Belenky and her colleagues (Belenky et al., 1986) found that adult growth is ongoing and—while experienced uniquely by each individual—has some discernible rhythms, not just in the way individuals think about problems, but in their thinking about themselves, their own thinking, their emotional responses, and their relationships to others.

Let us describe the three main sense-making systems that shape how adults peer out at the world through the window of our eyes.

First, we become socialized. As we leave behind our teenage years and find our way in the world, the complexity around us pushes us to find our community, to breathe in the rules and standards of a collective bigger than our individual view. Hundreds of years ago, as we lived in smaller, more homogeneous societies, life was full of rules and societal limitations, but it would also have been filled with straightforward feedback about who we were supposed to be and how to correctly play that role. The ability to take the perspectives of other people (or theories, societies, religions, etc.) inside us and use them to guide our lives is the hallmark of the transition to adult life and allows us to subordinate our own interests for the good of our collective. The shadow of this form of mind is that it is subject to a right and wrong reflex: it embraces the worldview of its community wholesale while polarizing against competing worldviews. We know who is “us” and “not us” by the narratives they hold, so the narrative is a matter of deep identity.

Then, some of us grow. For many of us, this growth is probably brought on by the waves of complexity and uncertainty that wash over us. In this modern world, seeking to do it “right” and follow a clear path forged by those before you, simply becomes untenable. Many people stop looking around outside themselves and begin to turn inside. They begin to pick up the pen to write their own scripts. Kegan called this phase the self-authored mind, and you see this form of mind show up everywhere from self-help books to novels to poetry. The goal of the self-authored mind is to write the most perfect story—the most perfect self—imaginable. It is to tinker and edit and work on the self until it is able to handle the biggest range of situations and conflicts. For most adults, this self-authored mind is the pinnacle of their developmental journey. But there are shadows here too. The self-authored mind is subject to its own sense of agency and often believes it can (or should) strong-arm the world into the future it wants. As such, it props up one side of the paradox that we held up earlier—the belief that we can heroically engineer our way out of uncertainty and into control.
While the self-authored mind is often held up as the ultimate way of seeing the world, our ancient texts show us that humans have found ways beyond the boundaries of self-authorship; we have often called this growth “wisdom.” Modern developmentalists point to the specifics of this: the move beyond a sense of yourself as the master of your fate and into a sense that we cocreate our lives with one another and with the contexts around us. Kegan wrote about this as the self-transforming mind. This mind can see the inherent paradoxes of the world, can make sense of the interweaving complexity, and can adapt in agile ways to the new demands of a changing context. It does not deny that control is occasionally the right way to go, but it leans harder into surrendering to, and gently shaping the bigger forces that operate beyond its own agency. It watches for happenstance, it notices outlying events, it listens to weak signals, and it nudges the system to amplify or dampen this or that pattern. It rides the wave instead of fighting it or damming the shore.

With this way of seeing the world, we cultivate the possibility that there might not be any best way and that the path forward will emerge out of curiosity, out of deeply listening to others’ perspectives as we learn and grow and imagine and try out new possibilities together. The self-transforming mind is rare in the population today (less than 10% of the adult population in most research) but it is growing. Research into the way adult development shapes leadership suggests that leaders with this form of mind are qualitatively different in the way they enact leadership, enabling more transformational change (e.g., Berger, 2013; Joiner & Josephs, 2006; Kegan, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2016; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Torbert & Associates, 2004).

Why the way we hold these stories matter most

Ok, ok, we know that you have some guesses about what we’re up to as we lay out these ideas. Perhaps you’re guessing that we are unfolding an argument that the various narratives we’ve offered—the narrative of progress, of tradition, of interdependence—also map clearly onto the three forms of mind we’ve offered. Perhaps it looks like we’re arguing that if you know about the form of mind of the storyteller, you can know which story she’ll tell. You might imagine that it is more likely for the self-authored mind to advocate a narrative of progress, for the socialized mind to stand for a narrative of tradition, and for the self-transforming mind to lean into a story of interdependence. That’s not where we’re going here. See, it is pretty easy to imagine embracing the narrative of interdependence from a socialized mind (e.g., affiliating reflexively with the environmental movement) or from a self-authored mind (e.g., questing for a perfect roadmap toward sustainability). And we can do this with each of the narratives: you can imagine the socialized mind telling the story of progress or the self-authored mind telling the story of traditionalism.

So, we are not claiming that the form of mind gives evidence for the particulars of the narrative. Nor, as we’ve tried to be clear, are we claiming that one of the narratives is itself preferable to the others. As we see it, the modernist story of interdependence is in ascendance among the sort of folks like the two of us, those who tend to read and write chapters like these, a group often called the liberal elite. For these people, it might look like the interdependent narrative is pulling us in the right direction. And yet our deep concern is that this interdependent narrative—like any narrative—could ironically banish the power of other narratives and increase polarization. In our view, it is more likely that all three of the narratives contain gems of wisdom worth heeding. Thus, our argument is that the way any narrative is held determines its capacity to enroll people at scale and to bring about change effectively.
So, let’s play with this question: *How does the way we hold these narratives make a difference in what options are available to us?* You’ll have noticed that with both the socialized mind (where we hold narratives that come to us from our community and which mark our identities about which people we belong with) and the self-authored mind (where we hold narratives that we hone and shape ourselves and which mark our identities about who we are), are likely to have their narratives carved in stone: I am *the same* as my beliefs. This way of holding a narrative has real power: it makes it worthwhile to risk your health, your livelihood, even your life to defend the story. No one would die over a story they held with a gentle smile (does Santa exist? Does it really create better luck to throw salt over your shoulder when you spill some?) but millions and millions of people have died over a story they have held with a closed fist.

It is with a self-transforming mind that we can hold a narrative about the world as true and also not as The Truth. We can care deeply about interdependence and believe that our collective future depends on it, and also understand that there are pieces of our history in a traditionalist narrative that are vital. Whereas the socialized and self-authored ways of holding these narratives do not allow them to “contaminate” one another (indeed, even the very idea of contamination itself exists as a warning), the self-transforming mind understands that each of the narratives is helpfully woven through with the others: that there are times when the quest for progress is the most important thing (like when we are mobilized to create a COVID vaccine), times when the return to traditions of the past is the most important thing (like when we rediscover ancient forms of living in harmony with the earth) and times when the sense of interdependence is the most important thing (like when we are trying to make sense of our most complex challenges as a human race). It is not *which one* of these narratives we hold that matters most, it is the *way we hold them* and the way we are able to lean into them when we need them most.

Perhaps in Zafer’s story, you can see the power of this change to not only change his experience but also to change the context of what was happening around him. Here’s his voice:

For as long as I remember, I have been a dreamer. I look at the world and I imagine how it could be better. In my youth, this inclination made me restless. No belief system could hold me long enough because it could not accommodate my dreaming. I felt hemmed in again and again: in my search for a better world, I turned towards—and soon enough away from—family traditions, school strictures, religion, the politics of Lebanon and the Middle-East, the orthodoxies of economics and the value system of a professional services institution. By my late thirties, I had developed my own compass, a patchwork of beliefs that I had gathered and stitched together over the years. This new self-authored lens allowed me to see solutions that were novel, beyond the confines of any established authority. I was inhabited by a questing energy that was infectious. Many colleagues rallied around me, inspired by the purposefulness and the clarity of my plans. But with every convert came two or more enemies. I felt thwarted over and over again. It wasn’t that my ideas were not good (although some weren’t), nor necessarily that they were ahead of their time (although some were). It was that I held them so tightly, so uncompromisingly, that I had left no room to host different perspectives in a way that made others feel welcome. The immaturity was not in my ideas; it was in me.

It took many a slap on the face over a decade for me to understand what was going on and to begin to work on myself rather than focusing on developing better ideas or being more convincing. As I learned about the possibility of development, I began...
to intentionally push myself to have a different capacity, one where I would form an intention around some dream of mine, hold it lightly and let the world around me give it shape, often beyond my recognition. I realized I had nothing to defend as I offered this dream to the world, and because of that, there were no efforts to attack. Instead, the energy that used to be put into defending and attacking was put into crafting and co-creating something more powerful than I would ever have been able to imagine. Over time, I noticed that my impact grew as my ‘efforting’ evaporated. I was making a difference with ease and genuinely enjoying the process—not always but often enough to feel substantially happier.

So here you’ll see that as Zafer faced into his hopes and dreams with more of a self-authoring mind, he created resistance as he created followers—they went together hand-in-hand. But as he intentionally stretched to try to hold a more self-transforming mind, he found that the path toward his hopes and dreams was easier. It is with this more self-transforming mind that we can hold our hope for creating a better world—no matter which of these narratives we might think is the best route. It is with this self-transforming mind that we can co-create a more innovative future for us all.

**Practices for cultivating spaciousness**

But wait. If you’re now thinking that the self-transforming mind is useful as we make our way through our landscape, and you’ve noticed that development can take a lifetime, you might be throwing up your hands in despair. The question that has animated the last 15–20 years of our practice is about whether it’s possible to use these distinctions around the forms of mind not only as a map of the present but as a personal curriculum to create a new future.

We have helped hundreds of leaders make sense of the parts of themselves that are now socialized and to decide where—and how—to pick up the self-authored pen. We have seen intentional evolution happen more quickly and with less pain than seems to be common in the general halting, difficult, and slow work of development. And so, we have brought to this fractured world this question: *Is it possible to identify practices that allow anyone to grow into a lighter way of holding their story, and sort of hack their way into the wisdom of the self-transforming mind?* Our work on ourselves and with thousands of clients points to three promising practices.

**Creating lightness**

This is a practice to gain distance on any belief that you hold tightly, loosen its grip on your meaning making, and ... laugh. There is a reason that in so many traditional societies, the role of the wise person and the clown is the same: laughter is a pathway to wisdom. And, of course, since this is a complex phenomenon, the lines of causality go both ways: the Dalai Lama’s famous giggle is both the cause and the effect of his wisdom. The self-transforming mind offers an automatic lightness that is one of the hallmarks of its state—life is serious and not serious at the same time. For those of us who don’t yet see the world through these eyes automatically, there are ways to create lightness even if it doesn’t automatically arise.

To get primed, bring to mind the gentle smile of a wise person welcoming your passionate defense of a truth you once held dear. Or recall a moment when you held firmly to a conviction which now, with the passage of time, you recount with a kind, self-deprecating humor. And then think of a belief you are holding with a great seriousness that might require a little lightness.
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For example, Jennifer is engaged in the forming of a community of people living together on a big old estate in the southwest of France. She is the standard-bearer for communal decisions, communal ownership, and creating communal practices. Zafer, one of the members of the community, is in the process of buying a car—a car he will own but which others can drive when he doesn’t need it. Jennifer notices the iron grip with which she holds the wish for the community to own things together. She is not laughing. So, a practice:

- **Notice when you reflexively leap to assert a belief.** Jennifer sees this belief, feels the seriousness of it, and notices that it feels like the truth. This is the hallmark of a belief that could use a little loosening.
- **Amplify the belief until it is absurd—push it, stretch it, make it ever more of a caricature.** Jennifer imagines a world where every morsel of food is co-owned, where the use of every bulb of garlic requires discussion and agreement.
- **Find the humor in this caricature of your belief.** Jennifer can see the conversation in the kitchen, a meeting called for every meal, the other decisions piling high as the community simply cannot handle the load of collectivity.
- **Now look back at yourself. Can you find that there is a little more space between this belief and the way you hold it?** Yes. A little: -).

Listening to grow

This is a practice to expand your perspective in a way that makes room for other seemingly competing ones. It is a practice to move from an attachment to our own righteousness, to an embrace of what we can learn from the many ways things can be right. With a self-transforming mind, we hold our own beliefs and attachments and we can also see the merit and importance of the opposite ones—even when they frustrate or enrage us. And, unlike when we are in a more self-authored place, we don’t use this opposition to either tinker with ours (to make it even better than it was) or to hone our argument to convince them (to hold their perspective long enough to defeat it). It requires that we believe that there is genuine merit in the perspective of the other person and that it is in the synthesis of opposing perspectives that innovation thrives.4

- **Notice when you feel opposed to someone else’s opinion (you might need to take this in smaller bites—before taking on a difference in beliefs about something that matters intensely to you, for example, you might practice on a difference about something less weighty and level up over time);**
- **Imagine what it would be like to stand in this other person’s shoes and see the world as they see it. Force yourself to regard them not as a stupid or evil person but as a wholesome human who feels like a hero in their own story;**
- **Now ask: What does their perspective about the world include that yours excludes? What is noble and important about theirs that is missing or disregarded in your story?**
- **And then the hardest bit: What part of your sense of certainty or righteousness do you feel now able to put down because of this new insight?**

Disrupting causality

This is a practice to break out of the natural—and often hidden—lines of causality that trap us as we see the world from a socialized or a self-authored form of mind. As we break the
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assumption of causality, we find ourselves with an ever-increasing set of options. Try these steps to disrupt your own assumptions around causality:

- **When faced with a complex problem, notice your impulse to want to get to the root of it and solve it once and for all.** Felix, your 4-year-old toddler, is throwing a tantrum in the family room at bedtime, and you are about to send him to his bedroom and wait out the horrible 75 minutes of crying until he falls asleep.

- **Notice the chain of causality that you seem to be tracking.** Felix is exhausted, he needs to sleep right now, and we’ve left it too long to make this a peaceful process.

- **Zoom out and list any number of other factors that are in play, albeit less visibly.** You see that everyone else is captivated by a stressful documentary, that there are strong emotions throughout the room including in you.

- **Imagine the different causality lines that crisscross these factors.** You remember your original (presumably linear) chain of causality and insert the new factors you have added (everyone else is watching TV, your own anxiety is ramping Felix up).

- **Consider a small, easy, safe intervention that you could try to nudge the system toward a desirable pattern.** You could turn off the TV for a moment, ask everyone else to leave the room.

- **Notice what happens** (sobs subside, Felix looks around for someone to play with) and consider how to take the next bundle of steps to amplify what you like and to dampen what you don’t (ask him to pick a favorite book of his, huddle and read it together).

And there are, of course, other practices. A lifetime of them. Our main point here is that whenever we are lost in considering what needs to happen with the world out there, and whenever we pick a narrative that seems to us to answer the question of what should be done to effect change on the world out there, we might notice what is going on inside us. In our own experience and with those leaders with whom we’ve worked, we see this shift of perspective change not only what the leader thinks and feels but also what becomes available to those around her. It is not just that she is more creative or less combative, it is that in her company others become more creative, less combative, and more collectively invested in creating a future that is perhaps different—and better—than any individual one of us could imagine.

We have created a world so complex that it has outstripped our natural ability to imagine a shared roadmap to a better future. In the face of our predicament, multiple narratives are competing to prevail—progress, tradition, and interdependence. While we might be drawn to one or the other, it matters less whether “ours” is the most promising. What matters most is whether more and more of us are capable of holding “theirs” in a way that makes room for the others. This capacity for spaciousness is not automatically available to the socialized and the self-authored minds that most of us inhabit. It is a hallmark of the self-transforming mind which accounts for only a small minority of humans. We have offered three simple practices that can bootstrap anyone’s move into the self-transforming mind’s modus operandi. Our hope is that the ranks of the spacious storytellers will swell to the point of tilting the odds in favor of a sustainable, thriving future for the planet.

**Notes**

1 Note that you might also see these narratives as traditional/ modern/post-modern (as in Kegan, 1994 and many others), or you might see them as directions of political parties conservative/liberal/green. We don’t claim that the labels here are the ones you’ll gravitate toward, but there are significant discourse communities around these sets of ideas and values.
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2 While we’re pointing to the modernist interdependent narrative, we want to underscore that the idea that humans are part of an interdependent web of life has been central to practically all Indigenous traditions. We could cite endless examples of this, but our current favorite is Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass.

3 Most of the research into adult development theories has been conducted in places like the US, New Zealand, Australia, and Europe, but there are increasing numbers of researchers who come from a more global background and peer into a greater diversity of societies. As the data diversifies, the percentages are likely to change and so are the descriptions themselves. The patterns we offer here are the best we have to date.

4 When we offer this practice, we often get questions about whether we are claiming that around horrific perspectives—the most common example is the rise of the Nazi movement—there is merit or whether some things are just morally wrong and horrible. Of course, there are some things that are wrong and horrible. And it’s also true that there is profound utility in understanding the roots of even horrible ideas and figuring out what meaningful and important perspectives existed that gave rise to the morally wrong response. It might be that to prevent the next Holocaust, we need to understand and find in ourselves the ways that there are pieces of this perspective worth heeding, no matter how repugnant the overall view.

References


