

Engines of Power: Managing in the Age of Connection

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Abstract

Only humans are universally endowed with a spiritual dimension, central to which is an eternal quest to end “existential” sorrow and unhappiness. Humans everywhere also consciously create and manage their collective enterprises. In this the central quest is material, to provide for the inevitable needs of existence itself, to ward off material sorrow and unhappiness. Management is thus a sister to spirituality in being uniquely and universally human.

The connection between spirituality and management lies in the insight that both are centrally about empowerment. Spirituality is about conquering inner demons by the power of the mind. Management is about conquering the demons and demands of individual and collective existence itself, through the power of collective effort.

This paper suggests that the turmoil of 2011 is evidence of a paradigm shift already underway, rather than a temporary “crisis” to be overcome by civic society. The emergence of this global consciousness flows from three engines of connectedness that have been building up steam for many generations and have now converged. The Material, Social and Spiritual domains that have hitherto been alienated from each other are in fact manifestations of One great cycle of energy and power. Integration in the sciences under the umbrella of evolution has revealed man's inseparability from Nature. The explosive growth of social connectivity of the last three decades has brought forth a radical democratization of the power of organization, a power till recently accessible only to the already powerful. Meanwhile large numbers of people everywhere are turning inwards in their thirst for spiritual comfort, as it becomes increasingly clear that neither fame nor fortune can deliver Peace.

If organizations and institutions and laws are re-envisioned from the ground up under this overarching umbrella of empowerment, the moral bankruptcy of the status quo – in the private sphere and the public square -- could perhaps be halted, and reversed.

Introduction

The Tao begot one.

One begot two.

*Two begot three.
And three begot the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang.
They achieve harmony by combining these forces.*

(Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu)

Humans inhabit the world of the ten thousand things, a vast multitude of objects natural and manufactured, words without end, people and shops and offices, things to avoid, things to love, storms and wars, nations and more people and organizations and institutions, ideas and theories and many wondrous castles of words, and talk, talk, talk. They look out from within the confines of their bag of skin and bones and blood at a world on which their survival and success depends; a bewildering, eternally restless world of friends and foes, family and more people everywhere, politicians lusting after their vote and making incredulous promises, shops and taxes and the thousand tentacles of government power, laws and rules and doctors and lawyers. Through this tangled and shifting jungle they are expected to chart a course in pursuit of that elusive state of consciousness called “happiness”.

The wise ones tell us that this pursuit is futile, that what humans really seek, or should want, is not to be found in the pleasures and delights of the ten thousand things. The Gods blessed humans with *intellect*, they say, and this is the special blessing of human birth for this alone can propel him towards true, eternal happiness. We pray, with the Upanishads: “Lead me from the unreal to the Real; Lead me from darkness to Light; Lead me from death to Immortality”. The Light of Knowledge is the illumination we need, but beware; the unreal has a tenacious hold on our consciousness.

This world of ten thousand things is an illusion, figments of the mind, mere mental constructs made up of names and words and images which are in fact many layers removed from the Real world: Tree → image of Tree on retina → swarm of electrical signals → cascade of charged neurons that travels far and wide in the landscape of the brain → similar patterns stored in memory → consciousness of “tree”, a pale, evanescent reflection of the Tree 'out there”. The “unreal” the Upanishad talks of is precisely this fundamental error: humans regularly attribute concrete reality to the conceptual models they think up in their imagination. Thinking of something, giving it a name and face, does not thereby confer *existence* to it. We say “gravity exists”, but not even Einstein understood what gravity is or whether it is “real”, and the problem of gravity remains at the center of Physics even today. And like gravity, time too is a mental construct, a name given to the “intellectual” observation that consequences *follow* actions.

Sometime in the mists of time hundreds of thousands of years ago, humans turned their

vision *inwards* and started to make connections between before and after, between the memory of a place and the place itself. They started to become aware of the connection between an action and its consequence. From this primordial insight is born the uniquely human knowledge of life as a trajectory, with a beginning and an end.

The awareness of the passage of time is attendant in all adult human experience: it is at the core of how human consciousness differs from animal consciousness. It is a blessing beyond compare. It enables foresight, delayed gratification, imagination; and from imagination come the astonishing accomplishments of human power and ingenuity, from symbolic communication and language to the extension of the reach of this wonderful but woefully limited human frame to the stars and beyond. Imagination is also the ground from which both ego and empathy develop, for empathy requires that we imagine ourselves, as an entity separate from others, in the other person's shoes. It enables the insight that actions have consequences, since the one follows the other in time; the mighty law of *karma* is, at a certain level, an encapsulation of this awareness of the passage of time.

The same “knowledge” of time or, which is the same thing, the insight that actions have consequences, also lands humans in big spiritual soup, however: the burden in the blessing we so love to find! The insight that life is a trajectory is the ground on which the notion of *death* grows: *awareness* of the passage of time gives birth to the *awareness* of impermanence! Humans are aware of mortality, with all the attendant sadness and general grey pall over life and love this *awareness* entails. Animals are mortal too, but they don't go through life “burdened” with the knowledge of the certainty of their death. And along with having to live with death breathing down our neck all the time, we are also confronted, due to the same blessing/burden of the knowledge of the passage of time, with our secret culpability for past actions, our fears and uncertainties and doubts. From this fertile ground we get guilt, shame, and many other manners of eruptions. Regret for the past, fear of the future, of these things our spiritual darkness is made, and all flow from the blessing/burden of the awareness, the consciousness, of time; for now, the past and the future, both nothing but “modifications of the mind” and thus unreal, nonetheless become a heavy, life-consuming, vitality-sucking presence.

The world within is thus also full of multitudes! Deep and dark, with endless alleys and a million blind spots, inhabited by powerful impulses and instincts and habits, a nightmarish world of forbidden desires and corpses of stillborn intentions, the journey within seems, to put it mildly, not very inviting. For all its ups and downs, the world of the ten thousand things seems far more promising for reaching “happiness”. It is hard enough to keep the engine of the body running in good order: it demands regular food and water, shelter and warmth, all of which come from outside, from the material world. These demands are not negotiable; no human can escape them. To then suggest an inward journey, often arduous and certainly

traumatic, seems a bridge too far, especially since the first demon one encounters on this inner journey is the Reality of the *impermanence* of the ten thousand things which we have come to identify as real, as lasting “forever”! The human dismay with mortality and the sheer injustice of death prevents us from holding fast to the Knowledge of impermanence at all times during our short sojourn in this world of ten thousand things. Paradoxically then, the awareness of death motivates us to try to live as if there were none, and leads us to attributing permanence where none can be found. “Time” has shriveled in human consciousness from eternity to the span of a single lifetime – and now even less, as the pace of life makes us even more a-historical, less strategic in our actions and decisions.; reality has shrunk from the vast wondrous cosmos of unimaginable beauty and immense forces to the contents of the puny human intellect, of which we are nonetheless so proud. And the vast human family, and the even vaster family of life itself, has been reduced to yours and mine, clans and tribes, black and white, rich and poor.

The world as humans know it has changed as much in the last thirty years as in all of the previous thirty centuries put together. My son's experience of life is so far removed from mine that our relationship skates on a very thin sheet of ice of shared experience. This *compression of Time as an experienced reality* is at the root of both the spiritual angst of the modern era and the profound changes sweeping the practical, material world of economic and political arrangements. Corruption and fraud and bad men have existed in human societies since the dawn of what we used to optimistically call “civilization”. Economies have crashed and burned before with the regularity of a metronome, brought down as always by the internal contradictions engendered by their very success. Revolutions and mass uprisings are not new either: it is only a matter of time before oppression breaks the back of society, before corruption brings down the entire rotten structure that is supported by it.

What is more remarkable and worthy of investigation is the unprecedented simultaneity of the events worldwide, and the tenacity and persistence of the demands of the people for fundamental reform. Why have all these things erupted all together, in the short span of a few months in 2011? And what is it that has enabled the brave and steadfast response from the masses, in so many nations around the world?

When profound change descends, seemingly suddenly, uniformly across a large swath of humanity, the dynamic must be sought not in the particulars of each eruption in isolation and as an event at a specific moment in time, but in a more sweeping trajectory that operates over generations. In order to truly comprehend the “crisis” and especially to connect it to spirituality and management, one must step back in time. Viewed through the lens of the eternal rhythms that have attended man's long and ongoing journey “from darkness to Light”, all the turmoil and upheavals of the past few years turn out to be not a cry for a spiritual paradigm to save the day but rather the labour pains of a spiritual awakening,

brought about by a fundamental and permanent change in the nature and distribution of *power*.

Material and Social Connectedness

Chimps everywhere can rejoice: The US government said recently that it will accept strict new limits on using chimpanzees in medical research, after a prestigious scientific group said that experiments with humans' closest relative should be a last resort. When the connection between humans and chimps was revealed under the glare of the microscope and in laboratories, the “powerful” humans who had appropriated to themselves the power to poke, prod or poison the creature at will, proactively demanded a new relationship between humans and chimps.

Chimps are only our *closest* cousins, all the rest of life is of the same One family. This has been known to the ancients for thousands of years. Science has finally caught up. The foundational outlook of science is to “divide and conquer”: the scientist divides the phenomenon of interest to its component parts, subjects each to a clinical investigation, varies one variable at a time, and then tries to reassemble the pieces to “understand the whole”. The history of science is a story of narrower and narrower specializations, more and more isolated disciplines pursuing knowledge of tinier and tinier segments of the whole. In the past few decades, however, there has been a revolution in all the natural sciences: within each discipline the new tools made available by technology have spectacularly expanded the knowledge within the specialized area of study, while at the same time there has been a dawning of the reality that “everything is connected to everything else” and only an interdisciplinary, collaborative effort can reveal the working of the whole. The Information and Communications (ICT) revolution – think the Internet and smart phones – had its earliest and greatest impact on the ability of scientists and researchers to collaborate remotely in real-time, hastening the rush towards synthesis and integration. Boundaries between disciplines have virtually disappeared; what astronomers are discovering about the Cosmos is no longer viewed as being irrelevant to the subject matter focus of the biologist; chemistry and biology gave birth to bio-chemistry, which is now all embraced, along with such diverse fields as psychology and even economics, under the overarching umbrella of *evolution*. The viewpoint evolution urges upon us is to consider life not in the context of the “here and now” but as a *trajectory*, and not as a collection of individual journeys through time and space but as an overarching collective journey of all life on earth, ever up towards the Light.

Connectedness, in other words, is at the very heart of evolution, and evolution has emerged as the great integrative insight that has laid bare the inter-connectedness among everything in nature, including humans. Scientists of all stripes are thus beginning to question the power humans have hubristically claimed over animals, and marveling over the scale and majesty

of nature as if noticing it for the first time. It is no longer possible to maintain the conceit of humans being somehow apart from nature, and standing above it as lord and master. But this is also precisely the vision the ancients enshrined in the unshakable law of *karma*, and the workings of reincarnation! What the yogis knew from revelation, from intense meditation, and through observation of life left whole and not fragmented into 10,000 pieces to be studied in isolation, is now being revealed by science to be in fact what the evidence suggests.

The tidal wave of synthesis and integration in the sciences has led to an explosion of new discoveries, an avalanche of very powerful integrative technologies including ICT, and, most significantly, the global awareness and debate over climate change. The one common thread that runs through material, social and spiritual realms, and thus can reveal the connections among them, is *energy*. In the material domain, from energy we get the power to run everything, from cars to fans to factories and cities. A *global* awareness of the reality that energy runs through every tissue and organ of modern life is new, and is bringing forth a new integrative outlook to the challenges humanity faces. The clamor for sustainability and efficient, wise use of energy is driving fresh thinking not only in the “energy industry” but in every corner of society, in fields distant and near. This integrative push is cause for cheer. The clamor itself comes not from the powerful elite in society but from the masses: ICT has enabled science to extend its reach to an educated and thus more receptive worldwide audience, where once it was the domain of the ivory tower and multinational corporations. And ICT has enabled the masses to connect and to make their voices heard from every corner of the globe. This shift in power away from “special interests” to the people is fundamental and irreversible, and a new reality politicians as well as managers will perforce have to adapt to. The fruits of scientific knowledge have up to now mostly been garnered by the rich and powerful, by military industries and private corporations and multi-nationals. The new connectedness has enabled the democratization of knowledge and information, enabling upstart entrepreneurs and engineers with attitude to bring down mighty industries and create huge new ones, allowed consumers to challenge irresponsible companies. The new connectedness has most significantly democratized organization power, which too has been monopolized by the rich and powerful for centuries; today, people can organize themselves across the globe in less than a day, creating immensely powerful mass movements in countries despotic and democratic, shaking the very foundations of oppressive political and social arrangements. And the new connectedness has made of every citizen a public interest reporter. Misdeeds are becoming impossible to hide; one hopes this will convince public officials and greedy businessmen to stop misbehaving to begin with!

Spiritual Connectedness

The spiritual awakening occurring now is bringing about a similar global awareness of the

centrality of energy throughout *all* facets of life, material and spiritual: the energy humans bring to the table is in fact invaluable to the whole enterprise, and powerful in ways no machine can match, so that it becomes even more important to ensure that human energy be accorded its due, respected and utilized with wisdom, and with a view to sustainability. The colossal waste of human energy we live with daily in modern life, in crowded cities lacking even basic civil facilities and crumbling, overcrowded infrastructure, and under corrupt regimes and shady businessmen, is criminal at best but in fact no less than genocide. We will never achieve the goals of harmonious co-existence with Mother Nature only by attending to the *material* energy economy; what the present moment calls for is completing this energy audit full circle, from consumption of fuel by humans to the ways in which human energy is produced and managed and converted to work, and then on to how their work in turn connects up with the energy economy as we currently think of it. The harsh chemical energy of cleansers frees up the human energy that would be required without it; the energy used by the car to go a mile has the human energy equivalent of the calories the human occupant would consume in walking a mile, perhaps in hot and humid conditions. It takes far more energy to produce a pound of meat than it takes to produce an equivalent amount of grain and vegetable; but furthermore, it takes a lot more energy to derive nutrition from meat than it takes to digest vegetarian fare. Meat consumption turns out to be not only 'economically' unsustainable but ultimately biologically unsustainable too!

There are two aspects to spirituality, personal and social. The yogi, the *fakir*, chooses the arduous and lonely path of entrusting his salvation to his own inner resources, away from the distractions and demands of ordinary life. Our daily or weekly visit to the temple occurs in public space but here too the connection between the deity and the devotee is direct, unmediated. But ever since our ancient ancestors gathered nightly around the camp fire, there has been as well a robust social counterpart to spirituality: a powerful, almost palpable sentiment arising collectively from a sense of shared identity, shared experience. For it is our sense of being ultimately and insurmountably alone, *disconnected* from everything and everyone else, that causes us the most anguish, and any experience that allows us to overcome this spiritual loneliness, even if temporarily, is eagerly embraced. Perhaps in the modern world the most familiar example is the collective joy of the audience at a musical concert, or the roar of the crowd at a cricket match. But the mob on the street too displays something akin to this group spirit, as does every family, and the millions when they gather together in public squares and become one large mass of "protesters".

The Eternal Light of India

In both of these aspects of spirituality, the last few decades have brought about transformation on a massive scale. A hundred years ago, Yoga was virtually unknown in the West, mostly a scholarly pursuit by German Sanskrit academicians. Today, Deepak Chopra,

to give just one example, is a multimillionaire from re-packaging the insights enshrined in this crown jewel of India, and peddling them to millions of seekers who have been left feeling empty and unfulfilled by mere material abundance. The search term “yoga” returns 420 million web pages in 30 seconds! Hundreds of websites are exclusively devoted to it and countless You-Tube videos provide instruction in everything from pranyama to jal-neti to Tantra. Millions worldwide today practice meditation regularly.

The Light of Yoga will shine eternally over India and the East, as it has entered into every segment of society and culture here; but now it also shines in the farthest corners of the globe, especially in Europe and the Americas. Perhaps one can credit the Beatles for popularizing meditation; perhaps the time was ripe for the West to receive the message. In any case, what started as a small trickle of interest 50 years ago has now become a mighty river, and many millions of people have turned their vision inwards and now seriously pursue the goal of *connecting* with their inner selves, or “discovering” themselves, or becoming more aware, or becoming more authentic. The “self-help” industry generated more than \$ 10 Billion in the US alone in 2010. However one labels it, the inner journey is no longer the preserve of a few strange people but a huge new hunger in the soul of humanity.

When Maharishi Mahesh Yogi brought his message of Transcendental Meditation to the West, he repeatedly reminded his audience that even if only one percent of the world's population practiced meditation regularly they would usher in world peace. Among Muslims, perhaps education combined with the diligent religious practice has engendered a blossoming of *true* Islam, which has always been about connectedness, about Umma: community and spirituality and the secular are in Islam inseparable from each other. Whatever the explanation, there is little to dispute the reality of a new-found courage and determination among people everywhere to control the circumstances of their lives. When the Arab Spring protests erupted in Egypt last year, we witnessed the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi rise phoenix-like in the hearts and minds of millions of young people and old, men and women. For here was *leaderless* peaceful civil disobedience, awakening spontaneously and coalescing into a mass movement rapidly, powered by the new connectedness of ICT and social media. With this new power the *aam junta* turns the “divide and conquer” style of the old order on its head and counters it with the power of “connect and overcome”, the essence of Gandhiji's way. But even with the courage that comes from being connected to like-minded people, the heroic stance taken by the protesters in the face of barbaric and bloody suppression inspires admiration and surprise, and suggests that there is a profound spiritual element underlying the uprisings, in the Middle East and now worldwide including of course India. This is due to both personal courage and the courage that comes from being part of a mass movement. Indians have been fed up with corrupt politicians for decades; what drives the current movement is of course Annaji's leadership and spiritual prowess but also the fact that the frustration of the masses could be mobilized rapidly, that “group power”

did not have to await a national *yatra* by Anna Hazare or anyone else.

The connectivity dominating the sciences today thus meets social connectivity among people increasingly determined to connect with their inner selves. The *sangam* of these three great rivers of human consciousness is the ground from which the new global spiritual awakening is arising. All three lead to the same insight about the inter-connectedness of the whole enterprise of life, viewed not in freeze-frame but as a process, a trajectory of the whole organism composed of the *individual but intertwined* trajectories of each member of the tribe. The new world order built on the paradigm of “connect and overcome” will continue to swallow up the “divide and conquer” world, because people are newly empowered with information and education, and newly empowered to connect, and empowered to assert their humanity and dignity and legitimacy like never before in history. The simultaneity of the “crises” throughout the world is due to this *sangam*, and due to the Internet, which also underlies all components of the new connectedness. And the spiritual awakening explains the irrepressible nature of the protest movements: regardless of what path one follows, this quest to connect with our inner selves can only end in the realization that if I am of the nature of Divine Consciousness, so is everyone and everything else! This sentiment, *that we are all in it together*, and inter-connected materially and spiritually in a great cycle of energy and power, is the core of the new global consciousness, and marks a turning point away from a consciousness dominated by consumerism and narcissism, away from the world of the ten thousand things and towards the three and the two and the One of which the ten thousand things are mere epiphenomenon.

Entitlement to Empowerment

To assure each one the facility of perfecting his skill.....those talents with which Nature has endowed him; and thereby to establish among all citizens an actual equality, thus rendering real the political equality recognized by the law. This should be the first aim of any national education...an obligation of justice."

(Marquis de Condorcet, 1792).

Nothing will remain untouched by the new connectedness. If the “heat” is primarily being felt by politicians today, educators and managers will not be spared either, to the extent that they persist in clinging to the old “divide and conquer” mode of operation. This river of empowerment is unstoppable; the wise manager will learn to embrace it rather than try to dam the flow or seek the security of a fortress within which the old ways can be maintained. If the budding democracies of the time had heeded Condorcet's message, if each and every child of these nations had been nurtured and educated, and helped to perfect the blessings of the intellect and revel in the joy of discovery and creativity, and treated with compassion, the world would not be in such a sorry state today. Now the rulers and policy makers will be

dragged perforce into granting that *empowerment is the birthright of every human*: Descartes may as correctly have said “I have power; therefore I am”! The “divide and conquer” strategy of votes in exchange for *entitlements* has revealed itself to be self-defeating and unsustainable everywhere. The Arab Spring heroes and the Occupy movement do not seek handouts, are in fact the children of the masses who have been bought off or beaten up to submit to the theft of their precious life energy for the aggrandization of a few. They are informed, they are connected, and they will not be fooled any more by the old lies and promises. They demand political and economic *empowerment* and nothing less will do.

Policy makers, educators, managers and other foci of material power would all be well advised then to reflect on the parameters of the new Age of Connectedness, and reconsider the role they seek to play in the lives of others. Education cannot remain the mere pouring of facts and theories from one mind to another, for in fact the theories and even the facts have no concrete reality, and fail to empower. Learning how to read and write, for example, cannot be the terminal goal of school education. Empowerment for the modern world requires not only the ability to read and write but a lifelong *habit* of and passion for reading and writing. The curriculum must be re-considered to emphasize the connections among topics and subjects, while the knowledge producers too must abandon the safety of the narrow confines of their disciplines and embrace inter-disciplinary and integrative strategies. Management is already in the midst of rapidly adapting itself to the new connectedness, most significantly in the Information Technology fields. IT is a massively integrated technology, for it deals with *systems*, in which by definition no individual component stands alone or can be considered in isolation. The more networked style of management of IT workers is perhaps the prototype of how empowered workers will demand to be treated. One wonders if it is a coincidence that Bill Gates and Aziz Premji and scores of other IT industrialists find themselves spiritually in a place where they are motivated to give away their wealth for the betterment of society.

Does spirituality have a formal place in organizations? If there are humans involved, spirituality is present. The earliest employer-employee relationships were mostly focused on the “body” of the worker, on his “unskilled” labour of shoveling coal or whatever. Work was divided into its tiniest fragments, and the activity of individual workers became an insignificant and invisible part of the end product, rendering the poor worker himself invisible and feeling powerless against the mighty power of the “machine”. In the “Information Age”, the primary source of power comes from the “mind”, which has now become the focus of management. But more organizations today recognize that humans are never merely a body, and not even only body and mind. The wisdom that “I” am neither my body nor the contents of my mind but the one Master of both, the *experiencer* and not the medium of experience, the *observer* of the mind and not the mind itself, leads to an erosion