

Global Systems INITIATIVES

"Applying a whole systems approach to complex global issues."



The Global Systems Review is a periodic e-newsletter that explores critical world issues through the lens of whole systems thinking

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The *Global Systems Review* is a periodic e-newsletter that explores critical world issues through the lens of whole systems thinking.

In this Issue of the *Global Systems Review* we examine the springtime of uprisings in their many forms – in the Arab world, in Wisconsin, and in Japan – and how they are related to one another - all through a systems lens.

Uprising! Arab Spring

Louise Diamond

As people across the Middle East and North Africa rise up against repressive regimes, they are providing the rest of the world with many lessons: lessons in courage, in determination, in people power, and more. They are also offering us an exquisite example of complex systems change, from which we have much to learn.

I have often written about the shift in worldview that the human family is undergoing – from a reductionist, mechanistic understanding about how things are in the world that sees everything as separate, to a holistic, integral view that recognizes the interconnectedness of everything in a larger whole. The uprisings we are witnessing in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Iran, Bahrain, and elsewhere are expressions of that shift.

First, let's talk about worldview itself. Our worldview is the narrative context, or the stories we tell ourselves, about who we are, what we do, and why we do it. These stories operate, often unconsciously, at every scale – from the individual to the group to the nation to the global community – and they are critically important to understand because all our actions arise from these assumptions and beliefs.

When we look at the uprisings from the perspective of worldview, we see that the people are changing the story from one where a small group of people are entitled to control the resources of the whole and limit access to those resources through fear and force, to one where all the people are entitled to that access. The former is based on that reductionist mind of separation, an 'us' and 'them' mentality. The latter is systemic – a sense of 'we're all in this together.'

Contrasting the uprisings in Egypt and Libya is instructive in this sense. In Egypt the Army is making the shift along with the people to a more inclusive storyline, if haltingly and unevenly. In Libya the ruling family continues to use violence against its people in an attempt to maintain its power over them.

In the reductionist world of separation, power means power of one **over** the other to secure privilege, and is enacted through control. In the new integral world we are becoming, power means power **with** each other to attain collective benefits for the well-being of all. What's happening in Libya is a graphic example of those two approaches, and could be understood as a microcosm of the larger shift happening on the planet in these times. We see these two different storylines clash and swirl together as the new narrative seeks to emerge from the ashes of the old and the old seeks to maintain the status quo.

Indeed we can see this dance in many of the headlines around the world, as religious or political fundamentalists seek to limit and control others while new Information-Age social media spread power throughout self-organized networks. When new conditions arise, as in the technologies that allow us to communicate instantaneously anywhere and everywhere, systems naturally adapt, and this requires re-wiring our mental models to accommodate new realities. However, some are more able to re-wire than others, for various reasons, and a complete shift may take several iterations of the dance over time to become firmly embedded.

Another thing we know about complex systems change is what is called 'sensitivity to initial conditions.'

This means that a small event might affect the system in unpredictable, non-linear, and eventually massive ways. Thus a fruit vendor in Tunisia is slapped in the face by police; he sets himself on fire; and a regional revolution is born. We tend, though, to think of change as something we can strategize and plan, something we can control, if only we have enough data and people who will do what we tell them or expect them to do.

Again, the protesters in the Middle East are showing us another form of change that is beyond centralized control. It depends on self-organization, networks of communication, quick adaptation to arising conditions, and the dynamics of tipping points, where the system reaches a threshold or critical mass at which it tips the balance from small-scale transition to large-scale transformation.

Yet another principle of complex systems change has to do with attractors, or that which draws the system's energy to itself. These are often values, and we are quick to name Democracy as that which is attracting such a large following in the Middle East. At the same time there is much discussion and concern about whether the changes we're witnessing might result in the rise of religious fundamentalist regimes.

This dichotomy – Democracy versus Islamism – is a false one. The systems change underway now is occurring at what is called the edge of chaos, which is a highly creative place to be. There is enough instability in the system to allow for new energies to be awakened, and yet just enough stability to allow for those new energies to coalesce into new attractors. (The situation in Libya may be an exception to this – it may have devolved over the edge of chaos, where there is a tendency to revert to older and more familiar forms of organization.)

Just as we cannot predict the exact trajectory of the change process once the tipping point has been reached, so we cannot predict the exact nature of the new attractors that will emerge and allow the countries now in turmoil to define their own forms and meanings going forward. Democracy will look different in each place; so too will the role of Islam in culture and governance be uniquely expressed in each situation. And this is a good thing, for diversity is a key element in the health and resilience of any system.

Lastly, I would suggest that in the evolution of the human journey on and with this planet there is something we can call the self-actualizing imperative. Throughout all the different civilizations, eras, periods, and movements we have experienced historically, there is a thread that draws us toward greater complexity, greater wisdom, and greater realization of the potential of the human spirit to thrive and soar, individually and collectively.

Today we are witnessing that imperative at play throughout an entire region of the world. Whether we name it a desire for freedom, for justice, for equality, for democracy, or for self-determination, we recognize it as an awakening, an up-rising or up-welling of hope and intention to throw off our limitations (those imposed from outside and those self-imposed from within) and become all that we can be.

We say in systems theory that there is no clear distinction between actor and observer. Those of us watching from afar what is happening in the streets and back rooms of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, and more, are also participating in this up-rising. It is happening in and through us as well. We are waking up to more possibilities than we ever imagined. Scary for some, exhilarating for others, but in terms of systemic change, unstoppable. Welcome to the new world.

Uprising! Wisconsin Spring

Louise Diamond

In systems theory we notice what is called 'self-similarity across scale,' meaning that we see the same pattern expressed in smaller and larger dimensions of the system. The uprising in Wisconsin is similar to what is happening in the Arab world. We're seeing that same dance between those who wish to maintain and increase their political and financial power by imposing limitations on others, and those who wish to stand up for their collective right to a better life.

Though the Wisconsin protests are occurring at both a smaller and less violent scale than in the Middle East, they are nonetheless also about the rising voice of democracy within a constricted structure. One of the differences is that in Wisconsin (and other states where similar 'conversations' are going on about the rights of public employees to bargain collectively), there is also another pattern at play: the crabs in the bucket phenomenon, where as some crabs start to crawl out of the bucket to greater possibilities other crabs pull them back down.

Thus we see the many comparisons between private sector and public sector employees attempting to show who has it better and demanding that neither should have more than the other. This is a fine distraction for the corporate elite – pit the workers against each other so no one pays attention to who is really benefiting from the limitations and burdens experienced by the working class, in general and especially during this period of economic downturn.

Political repression in the Middle East and North Africa exhibits some similarities to the financial situation in

this country. In both cases there is a small elite that manipulates the resources of the whole for their own benefit, and cares not a whit for the suffering this produces among the people. In the Arab world it is dynastic families at the top, holding the strings of power and wealth in their hands. In the US it is the financial players (institutions and individuals) and their partners in the political arena.

In the former case, the people are rising up and demanding transparency and accountability along with freedom to express themselves and control their own destinies. In the latter case, the Wisconsin demonstrations by public employees are just the tip of the iceberg of what could happen if the people (and the government) decided to truly hold Wall Street accountable for the sufferings of Main Street.

What strikes me as interesting is how much easier it is to align with the plight of the Egyptian people in Tahrir Square or the Libyan rebels in Benghazi than to highlight the suffering of the unemployed, the homeless, and the impoverished in this country. Before the Great Recession there were approximately 14 million children living in poverty in the US. Now, just a few years later, there are approximately 16 million. Who is in the streets on their behalf? What still needs to rise up in our national conscience that we do more than complain about the obscene bonuses taken by Masters of the Universe and truly champion the well-being of all our citizens? The teachers, firemen, police officers, municipal workers, and other public employees (and their friends and neighbors) in Wisconsin are the front lines of this uprising. Stay tuned for more to follow.

Uprising! Japanese Spring

Louise Diamond

Here in Washington the highlight of the year is the springtime flowering of the Japanese cherry blossom trees. Something else is flowering in Japan at this time – massive suffering from earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown.

Confronted with devastation on such a vast scale, our attention naturally goes to the immediate needs – how can we help Japan mourn its dead, contain its radioactive menace, begin to clean up and ultimately rebuild its towns and infrastructure, and heal the wounds of the people? And we are responding, as we do with all major disasters around the world, with generous aid and compassion in a wide variety of forms.

What we're not doing, though, is looking beyond and beneath this disaster to ask 'What is truly rising up in the Earth system to cause such a series of catastrophes?' Indeed, we rarely ask any questions about what is happening in the Earth other than purely scientifically, because we have operated on the assumption that the Earth is a material body separate from humanity. What we have forgotten, and what indigenous peoples all over the world have sought to remind us for centuries, is that the Earth is a living system of which we are an integral part.

What does it mean, to say that the Earth is a living of which we are an integral part? At the simplest level it means that the minerals, plants, and animals; the wind and water and sun and soil cycles; and human thought and action are all interconnected, all in a dynamic relationship with one another. We are one integrated ecosystem, and what happens in one part of that ecosystem affects the whole.

By seeing ourselves as separate from and superior to this ecosystem, we have acted as if we can control the natural world for our benefit. Just as we saw in the two previous articles on Arab Spring and Wisconsin Spring, one small part of the system seeks to gather the resources of the whole to and for itself, at the expense of the rest of the system. And just as in the other two cases, that part of the system that has been oppressed for the sake of the leadership elite is rising up and saying, 'no more!'

In this case it is Mother Nature herself who is rising up. She is literally shaking and quaking and raising her mighty waters to remind us where the true power lies. If we focus on only the small part – the science of earthquakes and tsunamis – we can explain away what happened in Japan as a natural occurrence built in to the structure of the planet.

But when we pull back to look at the larger picture of the whole relationship between humanity and the natural world, we can see something else. We notice that the living Earth is herself, in her totality (which includes us), also on that self-actualizing journey described above. She is intimately connected to our own strivings; as we grow to express our fullest potential on our planet, so too does she grow to express her potential in our solar system, our galaxy, our larger universe. We are in a great 'call and response' dance with the natural world, and we can no longer pretend that Mother Nature's doings are arbitrary and unconnected from how we think and how we treat her and each other.

Once you start understanding how everything is both a whole in itself and also part of a larger whole, there is no hiding from the fact that we are an integral part of the whole universe, not the center of it. This art of 'telescoping' – being able to focus in on ever smaller parts and also to step back and look at ever larger wholes and the relationship of the parts to the whole – is one of the most basic skills of applied systems thinking and one that we need to further develop in these times.

I say 'in these times' because the uprisings this spring around the world are forerunners for our future. As

food supplies decrease, population increases, environments degrade further, and countries play out their games of power, we will see more upheavals in every domain. That's what the prophecies about 2012 are all about.

But what the indomitable spirit of the Arab people in the Middle East and North Africa; of the public service employees in Wisconsin; and the courageous people of Japan are showing us is that ultimately what we are engaged in is a global uprising, a rising up of opportunity, of hope, and of creative, collective, and corrective action. We are addressing the damaging ways we have organized ourselves, politically, economically, and environmentally. We are reclaiming our shared ability to find new and better ways more aligned with the true state of how things are, namely that we're all in this together, people and planet alike.

As the cherry blossoms move inexorably to the peak of their blooming here in DC, may that which is rising up this spring around the world also come to blossom and fruition.

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