

Knowledge and Action: Challenging the Limits

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Anne Michaels, the marvelous Canadian poet-novelist, writes: “Nothing is sudden ... just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysm, so history is the gradual instant.”¹

We are all living today the gradual movement of processes and events that will be remembered only as a few dramatic instants some day in the distant future. What historic instant are we gradually building toward?

I believe that our future remains to be determined still, and that we can still have a significant role in determining it.

In making this bet, I recall an essay I wrote some 16 years ago that was originally published in *The Canadian Forum*². It was called “Waiting for the Apocalypse”. It began:

So my eldest kid and I are sitting one morning with the bright winter sun streaming in onto the breakfast table. Our conversation is wandering and light, with the purposeful aimlessness of chats between parents and their teenagers. At one point he wonders out loud whether it really matters what or how he does at school: “...after all, we will all be dead soon any way.” I smile; we have touched on this base before. “What makes you so important”, I ask, “that after all of these eons of time, and billions of people, you get to be one of the special ones to be here at the End of the World?”

I add after a few moments, “You may be that special, I suppose, but I would develop a plan B if I were you.” It was his turn to smile. “You’re weird, Dad.”

Well my young teenager is now a married 30-year old finishing up his studies at Georgetown. And I am *still* weird.

I also still think that we need to think hard on Plan B.

¹ Michaels, Anne, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 77

² Murphy, Brian K., “Waiting for the Apocalypse”, *The Canadian Forum*, Vol LXVIII, No. 782, October 1989. Reprinted in *Rethinking the Future: Canada’s Liveliest Minds Take on the Twenty-first Century*, (editor, Patricia Elliott), Fifth House Publishers, Saskatoon, 1993. Also excerpted as “The Dangers of Doom”, in *Utne Reader*, May/June 1991.

In that essay, which explored the apocalyptic fears of the generation, I elaborated my response to my son's question, "what does it matter?"

It matters because how we understand these realities, and how we respond to them, matters. The problems and scourges of the earth are not apocalyptic. They are endemic and chronic. And they are selective, multiplying the misery of the most miserable, discriminating generally on the basis of gender, race and class.

In reality it is not the exotic virus nor the trendy environmental hazard that cause the most death and destruction. Two of the four horsemen have outraced the others; it is war and malnutrition that destroy the largest majority of lives today.

War in a world that was, not so long ago, ostensibly at peace; hunger in a world that produces much more than enough food for all. The quality of human existence is threatened by a pervasive concentration of political and economic power, by over-industrialization, and by militarization and repression, all of which lock the majority in a stranglehold of poverty and misery.

I finished up that essay long ago with the words: "The world is not going to end tomorrow, next year or next century. It may get more and more unpleasant for more and more people. It may become a living hell, but if we foul the nest, we will have to live in it for the duration ... Extinction may be too good a fate for us the way we are behaving — and, in any case, we will not get off that easily."

For me then, and now, this implies that we had better get a move on to make the world as good as we can. We will have to live here a long time, and future generations depend on our wisdom and courage today. And what we do will be defined very clearly by what we know.

So, what *do* we know?

Well, for sure, an increasing number of people in Canada and around the world know that prevailing political and economic systems work to the disadvantage of the majority on the globe, and threaten the life-affirming quality of the planet itself. The biosphere and human life are under assault, and the conviction that this must change is widespread, and growing. But to achieve the fundamental shift that is required on a global level to recover the planet, and our humanity, requires more than abstract knowledge and good will. It requires a change of mind and ways of being, led by values of health, creativity and love for life, guided by an ethics of international reciprocity, care and community.

There is evidence that this ethos is growing in the world, creating movements of common cause, locally and globally. Some of that evidence is with us in this very room today, among all of you, and among our special guests who have travelled so far to be with us. Everywhere we work we see core human values of care, generosity and mutuality

promoted by a diverse range of citizens working together to defend the rights and lives of those who are besieged, oppressed and impoverished. It is precisely such actions that the people you will hear today promote on four continents.

The experiences and relationships we have developed in our work over thirty years have deepened our sense of the increasing urgency people feel. This urgency naturally focuses on the dangers and misery that people confront every day. But equally, and more importantly, it emphasizes the tremendous opportunities that exist, and that people do not want to see lost — opportunities for meaningful collective interventions to contribute to justice, peace, authentic democracy and long-term social development.

The people who will bring about the global changes that are necessary will be ourselves, individual citizens and citizens in groups, acting in our own name in our own communities, and as advocates with our own governments. The driving force of this transition will be people's imagination and aspirations, based on knowledge and wisdom about how to bring about change in ways that conserve what is most precious to us, while improving the conditions of our lives and opportunities for the future.

In stating this imperative, the controversy is not so much about what is necessary, as about what is “realistic” — that is, what is possible.

But what is possible is not determined by some external truth or natural law. What is politically possible — what actually happens, and what could happen if we dared — will be determined in large part by those with the conviction and capacity to make personal choices to transform our own behavior and lives, and to act politically to transform the world around us. In very real terms, each of us, and all of us acting together, are the ones who will decide what is possible.

We decide what is possible when we choose how to describe the world, and what descriptions to embrace. We decide what is possible when we choose what to make visible and what to obscure. We decide what is possible when we choose which dreams we will allow to fade, and which to make real.

One element of the possible is inescapable. To change things fundamentally, some things are going to have to fundamentally change, and the first of these is how power is structured and used, and in whose interest. And to change the world fundamentally means starting where the problems begin — which is in the political and corporate centres of global power in the transnational north and south. That is, in our own places and lives.

The quest for human dignity and global justice implies genuine self-determination, the authentic participation of all of us in creating solutions to the conditions of our lives, and sharing generously the resources to make these efforts permanent and sustainable.

This means not merely charity, although charity is required; nor global social solidarity, although that too is critical. Most importantly, the future that is possible will be based and built on profound common cause — people working among equals — to change the world in the interest of all of us, and the planet itself.

How can we make this happen? Today's symposium explores the issue of citizen action — action in the sense of mobilization toward progressive transformative change that challenges the limits of what is possible. Key questions in elaborating this theme are: how do we know what we know, and what kind of knowledge leads to action? This does not merely mean, “how do we come to know what we know?” but “What is the act of knowing, and what are the qualities of knowing and of knowledge? What is active knowing and what is passive?”

What we know most actively is indicated not so much by what we say, but by what we do. Knowledge is action. Knowing is politics. What we choose to act on, is politics. And what we choose to know, or ignore, reflects our politics.

It has become a cliché that “information is power”. But, conventional wisdom aside, this slogan is not entirely accurate. Information, at best, is “food for thought”; it only becomes power when it is transformed as energy, when it burns with intention and action, when it mobilizes.

Information is inert; knowledge is kinetic; knowledge-in-action is power.

Later in the program we will be discussing citizen mobilization. There is an important distinction between community organizing and political mobilization. Community organizing can happen with no object other than organization itself; the goal is to organize the community into some kind of cohesive entity, so that it can choose its goals and develop strategies to achieve them. Mobilizing, on the other hand, is geared to marshalling the will and resources among a group of citizens to engage in specific actions to bring about their goals.

It is impossible to mobilize effectively without effective organizing. It *is* possible, however, to organize...and organize...and organize, without ever mobilizing to bring about real change.

Too often local efforts remain at the level of community organizing, with the result that community structures or institutions — and the leaders who are empowered through their institutional role and profile — become gatekeepers that occupy the political space and inhibit broader citizen action, and specifically inhibit radical citizen mobilization, because they do not want to risk the space that has been created by using it to challenge the authority that has sanctioned the space.

In a word, having created a table at which to sit, they refuse to use the table for fear of losing it. Community organizations often direct much of their energy to demobilizing — or de-legitimizing — those who would be willing to kick over the table to challenge power if that is what it takes to finally create some movement towards fundamental change.

One of the questions we need to ask, then, is whether we are in a situation today when the table needs to be kicked over to challenge power. And if so, whether we are the ones protecting the table, or those who will insist that the table be used, or removed.

There is a song by Leonard Cohen, which resonates and haunts every time I hear it:

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
Everybody knows that the war is over
Everybody knows that the good guys lost
Everybody knows that the fight is fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes.....
Everybody knows.

It resonates, but I resist. The struggle is not over, and will not be over until we ourselves surrender. But if we refuse to surrender, then we have to be willing to say openly what we all know. And one of the things we all know is that much of the misery in the world is a direct consequence of the economic policies that have been promoted by the industrialized world — the so-called “donor” nations, including Canada — for decades. If we are serious about global justice and poverty eradication, we have to expose and repudiate these policies and the harm that they have caused.

People are poor because of the way humankind acts and behaves — that is, how we manage our affairs, and in whose interests the world is organized and managed. Wars do not just happen; they are declared, financed, and waged by human beings. Tyranny does not just emerge; it is the brutal and intolerant exercise of power by a few people over the many. People are not simply poor, they are impoverished.

Poverty is too often seen in a limited, and neutral, technical framework — a framework taken to absurd extremes in the contemporary obsession with logical framework analysis and results-based management. This framework presents poverty as a natural phenomenon with many factors and variables, but no agents. It obscures the reality that most structural poverty is a specific effect of the actions, power and greed of real people who are not poor, and whose wealth depends on the poverty of others, the scarcity of others.

If we are to confront the effects of poverty, ultimately we must confront wealth and its privilege. We simply cannot transform the world, without in the process transforming the

structures that maintain the world in its present course. And to do so, we must address not only the factors that define poverty, but the factors that define and maintain privilege and the growing extremes of private wealth and power, within and among nations.

The late David Bohm offered some very useful insights and challenges in this regard. Bohm made a distinction between a “problem” and a “paradox”, and showed how we often focus on defining and confronting problems which obscure the paradox of which the problem is a permanent and continuous outcome.³ He says that for centuries now humanity has been caught in paradoxes while mistaking the resulting difficulties merely as problems to be solved. He pointed out that almost always the only way to actually “solve” the problem is to finally resolve the paradox — that is, resolve the fundamental contradiction that creates the problem in the first place.

This dynamic operates at the personal level. For example, all of us in this room want to solve the problem of poverty — we even have created a campaign to do so, called Make Poverty History. However, each of us is also participating — to greater and lesser extents — and benefiting, from the very systems that create poverty. The paradox embraces our internalized self-interest and our externalized altruism; more critically, it embraces two contradictory senses of self-interest — the proximate and the more remote. Until we resolve this paradox, the problems that flow from it will be legion and permanent.

We also see this dynamic at the macro-level. In setting the much-vaunted Millennium Development Goals, the central construct for the donor-countries, the non-negotiable prior assumption, is that economic growth and globalization is based on natural and inexorable laws, and is a human good, and that what they have wistfully called “pro-poor growth” is sufficient to solve the incidental problem of poverty that is collateral to growth.

Actually, however, poverty is not merely a transitory problem; it is not an aberration within the norm of affluence. Rather it is an intrinsic and permanent norm that is inherent within the paradox that lies at the heart of market capitalism, the paradox of co-existent and interdependent wealth and scarcity.

This reality is obscured by the fact that the prevailing ideology is expressed in metaphors that turn reality on its head. Those, for instance, who promote pro-poor growth, talk — we have all heard this so many times — of creating a “level playing field”.

This is bizarre imagery, and we really have to ask how intelligent people can use it so glibly and sit back as though they have proposed the solution to a problem!

³ Bohm, David, *On Dialogue*, (edited by Lee Nichol), Routledge, London and New York, 1996. David Bohm, Emeritus Professor of Theoretical Physics at Berbeck College, University of London, is considered one of the greatest physicists and foremost ethical thinkers on the 20th century. He died in 1992.

Survival is not a game, and people do not live their lives on the playing field. And to the extent that this metaphor of games and playing fields is even remotely relevant, the game is fixed — as the song says — and leveling out the field won't change that.

Another metaphor: in a rising sea, all ships rise. Well, actually, no. When the sea swells often the smallest ships are swamped, those without a ship drown, and the boats that do remain bobbing on the waves have not changed in size but merely have to deal with stronger waves.

I could go on but I don't think it's necessary — except perhaps a final word on the “trickle-down” metaphor: as all plumbers know, and as we learned watching the spring thaw seep through our roofs and basement walls in March, what trickles down is usually not so sweet, and few of us would want to survive on it.

Defining poverty as a problem and devising technical solutions, including the abstract notion of pro-poor growth, will not solve poverty. Only resolving the paradox will do that, which means confronting wealth itself, and the dualism built inherently within capitalism.

Another wrinkle on this example is the newer notion of “pro-poor science” being vaunted by the impresarios of biotechnology. Science today is largely owned and operated by integrated globalized commercial corporate interests — most particularly BigPharma, the Food and Chemical conglomerates, the mineral resource extractors, and the arms industry — who now even dominate research in our publicly-funded universities. There is hardly a vestige remaining of independent science, and the fact that the products and processes of industrial science bring catastrophe is not merely a problem to be solved; it is an outcome that is implicit in the entire ownership structure and assumptions of industrial science.

Paradox, not problem. We have to resolve the paradox if we want to solve the problems that flow from it.

There are so many examples. Our own government now promotes the profound curtailment of civil liberties to fight a War-on-Terror. Is this really the solution to a problem? Or is it simply a formulation that obscures and deepens a paradox built in to relations between citizens and the corporate state, between the dominant empire and those on the margins?

In March, Justice Minister Cottler testified before committees of the House and Senate to declare that to protect the rights of Canadians the government has enacted laws that necessarily compromise these rights. But, we are assured, innocent Canadians have nothing to fear; only the guilty will be caught up in the secret security apparatus these laws enable.

They call this the administration of national state security. In fact, it is the beginning of the administration of the national security state, and the administration of state terror. The solution has the precise qualities of the problem that it pretends to solve.

And today, all of us in this room is at more proximate risk of abuse by our own governments than by an imagined agent of some shadowy terrorist group. The burgeoning global security apparatus makes us all less secure, and less free, and less human.

For Bohm, the only sane and effective way forward for those who refuse to be complicit with such societal irrationality and folly, is to “start something that has the quality of the solution rather than the quality of the problem”.⁴

By this he means, taking action that begins to make visible, resolve and transcend the paradox and do away with the contradictions implicit in believing and acting on incompatible contraries.

He identifies incoherence — in other frameworks we call it dissonance — as a fundamental source of malaise and violence. The road to sanity and transformation is an increasing awareness of incoherence in our thought, in our lives, and in the belief system that is driving the events that make our future.

But he warns, “if we have a desire for coherence, we can go about it wrongly and simply try to impose coherence, rather than discovering the incoherence and dropping it.”⁵

This is precisely the error intrinsic to the war-on-terror, and the chimera of pro-poor growth and pro-poor science.

Now, in challenging these paradoxes, some tell me, “Come on, we have to live in the real world!”

Well, like many of you in this room, forty years of action have taken me to some remarkably grim and violent places in the world, not a few of them within the borders of this very country. I think most of us here can say we that have looked reality in the eye, and that we have done so close enough to also bear witness to the beauty that we have seen amid the ruins.

Who are these people, cloistered in privilege, who dare to tell us to live in the “real world”? I don’t want to merely live in the real world; I want to *change* it. I would guess that this is true for all of us here. And it is precisely those things that some say can never be changed that we need to work hardest to transform.

⁴ Bohm, David, *On Dialogue*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 78

It has been said that politics is “the art of the possible”. To the contrary, politics *could* be the art of the possible. But historically, politics has largely been the business of persuading people that various transformative social visions and courses of action are *not* possible.

I am reminded of the lines in a poem by Douglas Dunn: “Politics softens everything / Truth is known only to its victims.”⁶

It is the norm in policy circles to identify only those problems for which we have policy prescriptions that are consistent with prevailing ideology and economic orthodoxy. And these policies and prescriptions almost always are technical and technological, rather than social and political. And, as such, they are never sufficient to fundamentally confront the paradoxes in global systems that perpetuate misery for billions.

In the final analysis, this is what at stake in our deliberations. Policy is made by people. People like ourselves. It takes courage and political will to challenge conventional irrationality and the balance of forces that maintain the world in its present trajectory. But other choices are possible.

What is at stake is citizenship itself, and citizen action. But in this critical moment we are in danger of losing precisely the active political citizenship that is so urgently required. The state is being transformed into a one large corporation, and politicians and bureaucrats into mere corporate managers — with citizens as clients, and taxpayers as stakeholders. The primary role of government is seen to be “to create a favourable climate for investment.” Politicians and the media have become obsessed with “looking after the interests of the tax-payer”. When it comes to the disposition of the public purse, we have acceded to a regressive category of private interests that have appropriated a special right to plead, to complain, and to deny.

What an insidious conflation! It’s demagoguery, and it’s nonsense. The rights of citizens are not derived from the fact of paying taxes. Our rights of citizenship are derived from the reciprocity that comes from accepting the responsibilities of citizenship, one of which is the responsibility to pay taxes according to our means, but only one.

This notion of “the taxpayers” repudiates reciprocity, and is defined within a reductionist construct of extreme individualism. It is a transactional notion, devoid of social and civic content. The emergence of the corporate state and the stake-holding taxpayer is the final assault of market capitalism on the institutions of enlightened democracy.

It is one more step on an old road that in the not-so-distant past led to fascism and its catastrophes.

⁶ Dunn, Douglas, “I am a cameraman”, in *Staying Alive, Real Poems For Real Times*, Edited by Neil Astley, Hyperion (Miramax), New York, 2003. p. 138

As citizens we gain our rights from our co-responsibility with the social and political collectivity of citizens. The responsibility of citizenship — and the responsibility of elected citizens in government acting in the name of the collectivity of citizens — is the responsibility to care for each other and the common wealth we share.

It is to behave in such a way — as many traditions express it — that protects and conserves the legacy we have received from our ancestors with the perspective of seven generations into the future

As activist citizens, we are still caught in responding to the 20th century, the formulations and solutions invented in the 20th century and the paradoxes that trapped us there. We need now to turn around to face forward and begin truly to anticipate the 21st, which is still young, with fully 95 years to go, at the end of which none of us here will be alive. But the future we create will endure. And to anticipate and influence this future we will have to reveal and resolve the paradoxes that have brought us to this place.

Over the many years of collective action represented in this room — and there must be thousands of years of action represented here — we have dedicated our lives to telling the truth, witnessing reality as truthfully as we can bear. Now we need to ask whether there is something else we can do, more than we are doing, to honour the truths we know, and indeed whether there are deeper, more complex truths that we need to explore than those we have been telling.

Today we live a bizarre inversion of reality. Things that are natural are seen as aberrations and the unnatural is seen as the norm. People take for granted the criminal and obscene, and remark on events that are hardly remarkable at all. We consider as natural and inevitable the wasted lives of the poor, the carnage on our highways, the murder rate among women at the hands of friends and strangers, the debilitating over-drugging of our children and our elderly, the lonely death of street people, and wars the world round. Natural events such as earthquakes and storms and floods and epidemics are treated as aberrations in an otherwise “managed” world, at the same time as we obscure the historic vulnerability of the poor that exposes them to the destruction that is wrought by such natural events, and the environmental degradation that makes such events more inevitable.

We live in fear — a fear manufactured and reinforced by the very institutions we have created to make us feel secure. To reinforce this fear, much of what passes today is blamed on human nature, and natural law. War and poverty, and now “terrorism”, will always be with us, we are told, because greed and hatred and violence are “only human nature”?

But, what is this human nature?

Human nature is diversity. It is in our nature to be selfish and cruel and even criminal. It is equally in our nature to be caring and generous, brave and self-sacrificing. All things are possible. We have to choose. It is our job to reverse the prevailing morbid logic to reveal the terrible aberration against nature that we have created in this world.

Another poet, Michael Langely, asks: “Who was it who suggested that the opposite of war / Is not so much peace as civilization?”⁷

So, what do we believe is natural, and more importantly, what do we believe is possible? We know enough. What matters is how we know – how we acknowledge what we know so deeply, so ethically, that we cannot fail to act — and then to act in a way that will not fail. And act coherently with the solutions we propose, rather than the problems that we are trying to solve. This releases the paradox, and allows us once again to transcend and to move.

In the final analysis, empires and civilizations are not destroyed or pulled down from without, but corrode and decay within until they collapse on the hollowed out and vacant core. We need to consider how we can continue to cultivate today the future civilization that will replace an empire and an economic system that already are in their final demise.

We see the evidence every day — we see it in this room this morning — that people the world round have the will and the wisdom to struggle together to conserve and promote the humanity and social solidarity that are required to humanize the world. If we can continue to build ways to help each other every day to call on this will and the wisdom, we can, together, still hope to prevail through these difficult times.

I conclude as I began, with Anne Michaels:⁸

It’s a mistake to think that it’s the small things we control and not the large; it’s the other way around ... we can assert the largest order, the large human values daily, the only order large enough to see.

Brian Murphy’s work with Inter Pares has spanned twenty-five years and countless adventures and mishaps on several continents. He is the author of *Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World, An Open Conspiracy for Social Change*, ZED Books (London) and Fernwood (Halifax), 1999; also available as *De la pensée à l’action: la personne au cœur du changement social* (trans. Geneviève Boulanger), Ecosociété (Montréal), 2001.

⁷ Langely, Michael, “All of the People”

⁸ Michaels, Anne, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 21