

The Price of Speed: Living Whole in an Age of Disintegration

Guru Fatha Singh Khalsa

On Monday, I gave a talk at the beginning of a Kundalini Yoga class I teach on the tumultuous changes we are experiencing in almost every realm of our lives these days. Seventeen-year-old Stephanie and her mother were a part of that class at the Islington Community School in Toronto. Afterwards, Stephanie's mother, with Stephanie just behind her, came forward and told me the fourth girl this year had just committed suicide at her daughter's school.

As Stephanie herself began to speak, it became clear that she was having difficulty coping with yet another loss. "She was two years younger than me," she said incredulously. It was as if Stephanie and her mother had come forward to add emphasis to my conclusion that, as a culture, we don't know where we are going.

Two thousand... two hundred... and in some places as little as twenty years ago, life still followed a long-established rhythm, largely uninterrupted. Most of us lived in rural habitats and existed pretty much as our natural environments and cultural traditions dictated. That in turn was pretty much as our parents, and their parents, and theirs before them, had lived. Most people farmed or fished in small, tightly-knit communities where interdependence was the rule of life. Aside from occasional war or famine or pestilence, not much changed.

That was then. Today we might say: "What *doesn't* change?" Relationships of family and community, work and play, science and education, have changed dramatically, and they continue to change each day. For a day or so, as a dramatic interlude, this can be very exciting. To live in the midst of it, week after week, year after year, can be numbing to the soul.

Two centuries of ever accelerating change have affected our thoughts, our feelings toward our families and our selves, and a good deal more. Books have been written on industrial revolutions, technological revolutions, communications revolutions, political revolutions, social revolutions, sexual revolutions.

For two hundred years, the emphasis has been on the individual, the nucleus, at the expense of our infinite web of relationships. Government policies have been crafted and implemented to fix some of the worst cases of social displacement and environmental upheaval. But the transfiguration of the world as we know it - the eroding of the subtle rhythms and heroic constraints of nature and culture and simple humanity - seems to be outstripping our capacity to appreciate it, let alone anticipate its outcomes on our health, happiness and sense of communion with life in all its wondrous aspects.

Schooling

Let us start our study two hundred years ago with the beginnings of the modern education system.

"Education is good, isn't it?" you might object. "Literacy is a universally recognized sign of advanced culture. Girl's literacy is especially

important in developing countries. What is wrong with education?"

Let us suspend our judgement for a few minutes as we look at the underpinnings of our current system of education. Our public education system had its beginnings in an act of legislation in revolutionary France, then really took root in the proud, little military state of Prussia. There it was, in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat of the Prussian army at the battle of Jena in 1806, that the German philosopher Johann Fichte advocated harnessing the nation's children to the interests of the state. After a decade of debate, a centralized schooling system was enforced to deliver obedient soldiers and workers, well-subordinated civil servants and clerks, and a common culture and ideology.

At first, school was only for boys and only for a few hours of the day. In the early to mid-1800s, most families still farmed, and since every member of the family was needed at harvest time, there was no school then. Over the decades, and reflective of the increased urbanization of societies everywhere, school days eventually came to take up six or seven hours of the day, and to go right through the year.

Mass education served the interests of an emerging industrial society. It created a homogenized work force comprised of interchangeable units with a standardized array of skill sets. In the United States, it served to "Americanize" the large population of Slavs and Mediterranean peoples who by 1896 had begun to outnumber the immigrants from Anglo-Saxon Europe. Mass education also centralized authority in the corporate state at the expense of local autonomy and self-reliance, even going so far as to undermine the once-sacrosanct integrity of home and family.

Everyone entered the school system alone, as an individual. Public health care in the West soon after adopted the same model, where patients were admitted to care as mere individuals. After ten or twelve or sixteen or more years of shuffling from buzzer to buzzer and teacher to teacher and school to school, a student was liable to be completely socially disengaged, and thereby a fully qualified member of our cult of individualism.

The mass education system inhibited individual flights of fancy or genius and generally fostered the median at the expense of the extremes. Thus, the bell curve was born. Even today, the majority of students are regularly made to suffer the humiliation of having their foreheads branded with Cs and Ds. In this grading culture, a good deal of self-esteem and much originality is inhibited, if not utterly destroyed – often despite the best intentions of thoughtful teachers. They themselves are mere functionaries in a grossly impersonal system.

Today, our education system in tandem with globalized media, fulfills a powerful function of cultural relativization. Naomi may be the best mathematician in her class, but she is not the best in her school. Johnny may be the best singer in his school, but he is not the best in his city. Stephanie may be the best runner in her city, but she is not the best in her province. Harry may be the best speller in his province, but he is not the best in his country. Olivia may be the best chess player in her country, but she is not the best in the world.

This system of trivialization through ever-graduated comparisons is humiliating for everybody except a rare handful. It in turn serves the mass commodification of media "stars" and celebrities - individuals far removed from most people's daily lives or abilities. These are the distant gods of our times. Empowering? Not at all.

Many parts of the world are now filled with disaffected, educated young people. And when even a decent education costs a small fortune, many young people, newly educated, start off their working lives wedded to a ball and chain of indebtedness. Inspiring? Not so much. Debt robs a person of time, which makes for more stress.

Urbanization and Social Dislocation and Isolation

In the last two hundred years, tens of millions of country dwellers have left their ancestral lands and lineages to settle in cities and countries far from home. Familial networks that had grown like oak forests over hundreds of generations, were dissolved with the creak of a cart loaded with belongings, the blast of a locomotive whistle, or the roar of a jet plane ascending deep into the sky.

Most migrants came for economic opportunities, some for religious and political freedoms. Today, in city and country, most everyone suffers to some degree from the scourge of rootlessness. In their millions, we exist, many of us in tragically named “apartments,” thoroughly isolated from our web of relations. Women – mothers and grandmothers, aunts and nieces, daughters and granddaughters, sisters and sisters-in-law – themselves the matrix of hearth and home and community, suffer the most from these Sunderings and wanderings.

There is no price that can be put on the loss of these elaborate and intertwined relationships. What is the value of having a favourite aunt or a favourite uncle living just down the street? What does it mean when a child has difficulty with their parents, and there is no one familiar to listen and offer encouragement and conciliation? What is the value to a distraught wife of having a sympathetic ear near to home? The value of trusted childcare close at hand and free of charge?

For many, there is no end to this dislocation. The average North American moves every seven years for reasons of career and family and education. Collectively, do we dare ask where we are going?

Children of Mass Media

As millions upon millions of uprooted individuals descended on the cities, new ways of interacting, relating, and falling into relationships were invented. Giddy or frightened, as the case might be, single women who in the 1800s had entered into courtships under the watchful eyes of their parents, went on dates without supervision and with mixed results. The power dynamics had taken a shift, and that shift, especially during the social upheaval of the world wars, did not favour the young women.

The unravelling of traditional social networks with their concept of “good” families, and emphasis on moral character and social or religious affiliation spawned new industries based on the newly created social media. These new industries profited from and nurtured a newfound culture of superficiality, where someone's proven values and integrity mattered less than sheer first impressions and physical appearance. Beginning around 1900, a mass culture of ever-changing fashions and hair styles, and a new aesthetic of slimness were broadcast and reinforced by advertising and women's magazines, first in the West, and then around the world. Before long, men too were becoming set pieces in an ornamental culture, held to surreal standards of physique.

The “models” of today's mass media model nothing really. They are artificial constructs with no sustaining power. They are not life models.

Divorced from land and lineage, their brains scrambled by school and media, today's generations of school-indoctrinated city dwellers are helpless prey to the alluring messages, overt and subliminal, whereby distant corporations seek to own them through branding. Many end up as Chanel women, Lucky Strike men, Nike teens, Yves St Laurent ladies, even Gap babies... every one proudly strutting their merchandise.

Muzak and flat screen advertisements follow us here, there and increasingly just about everywhere. Can we ever be entertained enough? Can we ever have enough? Not if the vendors have their way.

Chemical Counterculture

Young people, children, infants today are growing up in a world awash in tens of thousands of new chemicals and countless combinations whose effects on human health are either unstudied or understudied. The chemical industry exists to enhance and facilitate certain narrow processes with a view toward making a profit. The longterm human and environmental impacts of the chemicals it manufactures do not figure into its calculations. They are known as “externalities” beyond their concern and responsibility.

Young people's inner world, their bodies are permeated by industrial toxins like never before. There is speculation - for without massive, longterm and expensive studies there can only be speculation – that this witch's brew of chemicals is a factor in growing rates of autism, asthma, childhood leukemia and brain cancer, premature births, girls' early onset of puberty and boys born with genetic abnormalities.

The second source of chemical infiltration into children's bodies are psycho-pharmaceuticals. Until 1980, psychiatric drugs were only rarely prescribed for children and teens. Today they are routinely taken by millions of young people in a culture which every second year recognizes and markets a novel “borderline disorder” with a handy new prescription to treat it. Psychiatric drugs make for manageable youngsters and stressfree teachers and parents, but as in the case of the chemical producers, the longterm effects of useage are not known.

Corporate Responsibility

Changes in commerce and industry over the last two hundred years have occasioned the rise of large, impersonal corporations at the expense of localized, family enterprises. Some consider the corporation to be the source of many of our problems today, but what is a corporation? It is a legal construct, created by people, run by people for people, sometimes very well, and sometimes very unwisely. While we may grant a corporation legal autonomy and even forgive it for transgressions we would not ordinarily forgive in a person, still it is run by and ultimately responsible to people.

The performance of a given corporation may, for example, enhance the income of granny's pension fund. But if the policies and activities of this aggregate incorporation (which exists as the sum of the wishes and desires of many individuals) is complicit in the suicide of granny's granddaughter - even if the company's activities are only one of a number of factors in the suicide, and even if granny is unaware of the causal connection - there is something desperately wrong and something needs to be done if we are to continue to live well on this finite planet.

Holistic accounting and taking of full responsibility for their actions evades today's corporations. Why? Because we don't expect it of them.

Change Fatigue

We are spinning very, very quickly. Change is everywhere afoot. Decisions are always needing to be made. Humans have never before, outside of wars and migrations, needed to cope with so many changes or make so many choices, some of them with little information or substantially incorrect information. While some of these decisions (“What colour of socks will I wear?”) can be trivial and mundane, others (“Shall I take that job in Johannesburg?”) can have utterly life-altering implications.

Change fatigue is a natural outcome of the age of reason, and the struggle for freedom from stifling religions and ideologies. The speed of life is also accelerated by the ever quickening pace of our technologies which place a natural premium on timeliness and speed of interaction. It is enhanced as well by our ethic of individualism. Most adults today make the important decisions of their lives – where to live, what to do for a living, how to spend

their discretionary time, who to associate with – for themselves. The net result is that, in place of any authoritarian voice that tells us what we must do, we have only ourselves and an awful lot of decisions we must make right now, and consequences we must face down the road, on our own.

It is not bad. It is good. But when all this freedom takes the shape of stress and worry, it can be bad for our health.

The Effect of Surfeit on Social Dynamics

For millennia, the certainty of recurrent drought or flood, war or pestilence, ensured a certain elasticity and interdependence in social relations. In good times, everyone prospered together. In hard times, community-mindedness, to whatever degree it existed, pulled the members of that community together in an ethic of sharing for everyone's collective survival. If a whole family was on hard times, surrounding families might drop by and help as best they could. In a culture of excess and psychological isolation where there is a powerful state apparatus, individuals may feel a diminished need for community and its ethic of sharing in hard times. Bullying and many kinds of social ostracism can also be appreciated as an outcome of the unravelling of the ancient ties of social interdependence.

Ours is a strange variety of surfeit. One hundred and fifty years ago, people had less, much less. Everything a person saw in their house had been made by someone they knew. The family hearth exuded an air of economy and homeliness. Economy was lived its original sense as the efficient management of the household's limited resources. And homeliness was considered a virtue in those days. Today, instead, our homes are crammed with the industrial output of strangers.

Moreover, while some on our planet gorge themselves to a state of medical emergency, others' emergency is that they have far too little to eat. While some live a life of relative comfort and ease, often they are doing so because others are engaged in wars and unsustainable practices in the mines, in the forests, on farms and in factories and on the seas on their behalf. While many enjoy the taste of a grilled, barbecued steak, precious few will acknowledge the gruesome harvesting of their dinner.

The Generational Abyss

Our electronic media has turned our concept of culture on its head. Culture used to be what a younger generation learned from its elders – family elders, village elders, religious elders. Culture included the great stories of one's people. It included manners and ethics, traditional dances and music. It included the means of earning one's livelihood in a traditional way, doing the work one's family had been doing for generations. Continuity and inheritance bound young and old together as one. Moreover, the elders relied on the younger generation to look after them in their years of decline as much as the younger generation depended on the elders to succour and protect and teach them the ways of the world.

In today's world of accelerated technological obsolescence, the traditional paradigm no longer applies. Old knowledge is quickly passé. Today it is the elders who increasingly are challenged to learn and relearn the ways of a changing world modulated by new ways of doing things, while the young quickly learn that the worldly knowledge of the elders no longer applies.

Music and all types of artistic expression are burgeoning – with the result that a decreasing percentage of music, visual arts, literature and dance is the product of older generations. More and more of it is being created right now. It may not all bear the mark of timelessness, but right now, who is to judge? The accelerated spawning of new culture and new technology fosters increasing alienation between young and old. The situation is worsened by grownup advertisers who conspire to circumvent the natural constraints – cautionary and budgetary - of elders, the better to capitalize on a growing and lucrative youth market.

As the institution of elder becomes obsolete, so the elderly find themselves increasingly marginalized. Gone too is the perceived need for a younger generation. Many intentionally childless couples consider children a liability. They are expensive and time-consuming. Who wants them?

This must be a historic first where young and old have fallen so far out of reach. In place of common threads of cultural inheritance today we have a social model that isolates not only individuals, but whole generations, while the culture itself spins endlessly, reproducing itself.

Summing Up

As a result of two centuries of change, we are today interconnected as never before, and yet our society – and we who live here – are driven by powerful forces of isolation. While modern schooling does educate, it weakens our natural attachments to family and neighbours. Immigration also serves to create a society of rootless individuals, or clusters of individuals, unlike the elaborate personal networks of traditional communities. The highly individuated – and vulnerable - offspring of our times are prey to the blandishments and shortfalls of corporate media, for shiny corporations have in many ways taken up where traditional communities have left off. Moreover, in a time of surfeit and excess, our instinct toward the security and fellowship of neighbours and family is greatly diminished.

Can we trust the lords of corporations to manage the ever-faster flow of technology that increasingly gives form and definition to our daily lives? Probably not. The captains of industry, and those who hold shares in these great enterprises, can hardly know the cumulative effects of all their profitable innovations on our overall quality of life, let alone their repercussions two or three generations down the road.

We are free like never before. Free of the overbearing burdens of extended family. Free of oppressive religions and ideologies. Free to travel. Free to be entertained. Free to invest. Free to associate freely.

And yet, as we find ourselves crowded into cities worldwide, many of us experience greater isolation and are more tied into cycles of work than ever before. Suicide for young people in Canada and many other Western countries has been rising since the 1960s. The youth are the promise of our future – or so we thought. Is this an acceptable price for living in a culture of speed and choice and innovation?

It is time to look around with fresh eyes and see what is truly going on here, there, and everywhere. We need to finally connect a hundred trillion dots and make a multi-dimensional model of what is going on, the better to assess and address the desperate needs of our times; to make the global personal, and the local truly human and viable.

Four Steps on the Way to Living Whole in an Age of Disintegration

- 1) Slow down. Unplug yourself daily.
- 2) Learn your mind. Cultivate peace – and not complacency – there.
- 3) Become knowledgeable about matters of importance and matters that interest you.
- 4) Organize your efforts toward the greatest possible good. Network with others using any means available to you. Value conscious relationships above all. Engage in the amazing synergy of the whole.