

# Riding the rapids of the great transformation

By Charles Landry, winter 2021

Periods of history involving mass transformation, like the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution or the technological revolution of the past fifty years are cultural shifts. They involve major adjustments in attitudes, ways of being and mindset.

They can produce confusion; yet also a sense of liberation and a mindshift combined with a feeling of being swept along by events. There were delights and dilemmas as they unfolded. Now, by contrast, **the temper of the age**, the Zeitgeist, is one of uncertainty, foreboding, vulnerability and lack of control over overweening global forces. Especially our urgency to avert climate collapse or to avoid the polarizing narratives that poison civilized conversation.

It is **hard to see a way to a golden age** especially since we know we need to shift our economic order and way of life that is materially expansive, socially divisive and environmentally hostile. And doing that cannot be grasped by a business as usual approach as it takes a while for new ethical stances or new ways of operating to take root or to establish a new and coherent world view.

Is there **light at the end of the horizon** in facing those challenges even though some feel Europe is at the edge of exhaustion and without the energy or motivation to think, plan and act afresh and with vigour. Is that really so?

Our crises, often dark and gloomy, weigh heavily and can push us into passivity and resignation. Yet, **crises can be opportunities** and provide a gateway from one world to the next. Take a helicopter view of the vast range of initiatives happening, large and small, across Europe and beyond to address the solutions to create a more human and nature centred world you see some positive patterns. Still for the moment fragmented and without sufficient power and traction big agendas are coming together in unprecedented ways and driving this change are many - activists, civil society, politicians, researchers, inventors, artists, entrepreneurs, business, writers and more.

There is **a mood and a movement emerging**. We are seeing the possibility of creating a different world driven on other principles. There is a Planet B in sight, even though to get there we must get Planet A right. It is a compelling story. Think how eco-principles are beginning to shape our mindscape and how that provides the frame and so courage to move towards a green transition where the circular economy notion plays a crucial part. Think too how newer concepts like resilience help us work through the tasks ahead or how co-creation and the participatory imperative helps harness the collective imagination since transformation is a collective endeavour. Think here too of the notion that the world is our commons. And not to forget a digitizing world that allows, in particular, the cultural creative economy to run through systems like electricity in its inventiveness and with its Immersive capacities. Sometimes the speed of the possibilities are dizzying and we always must be alert that we rather than the technologies are control.

There is convergence and it is happening at escalating speed as from the beginning of the 21st century we finally saw **a rapprochement between the two great ways of exploration, discovery and knowing: art and science**. It begun to break down the widespread mutual incomprehension between the arts and sciences. The premise is that the most fruitful developments in human thinking frequently take place at those points where different lines of creativity meet. By sharing their creativities, ways of knowing and knowledge it enables scientists and artists to enrich and maximize each other's potential and so encourage innovation. The transdisciplinary perspective is powerful when boundaries erode and as the methods of exploration and problem solving can combine the linear, analytical and logical as well as the visual, kinaesthetic, spatial and musical. Allied to technologies that help shift ideas into reality these synergies promote new forms of creativity which can result in ideas that can be turned successfully into products, services and solutions.

This is the radical technological and cultural revolution underway. It has great opportunities. Together it is all transformative.

Incessantly, however, a bigger question remains ever present and it needs to be answered: How do you make people feel viscerally that they must transform and change their minds even though people realize that the world stands at the cusp of a crucial moment. **Time is short to make the big difference** towards one planet living and we need to harness and share our collective talents, will, energy, intelligence and resources.

**2020 was a year of radical reckoning.** It was a time to think afresh. Did it make us finally listen and etch itself into our consciousness as we saw momentarily the skies clear and heard the birds sing again? This unforced experiment and expression of reducing carbon emissions gave us a glimpse of a possible other world. It reminded us that the world of 'more and more' cannot go on even though many still think of the **old normal** as our desirable and **exotic destination**.

Crises like the pandemic provoke a dramatic reordering of priorities, deep reflection and rethinking and focused us – or at least should have – on what really matters: the common good and public interest. We saw too that “**civilization is a thin film of order around the chaos of events**”.

The pandemic wake-up call triggered a dawning of humility as our collective hubris was humbled and old certainties crumbled. The **pandemic created both clarity and confusion** as in the eye of the storm it is difficult to see “where next” and how to get there. There seems to be no blueprint for how to move forward. Yet, we do have them.

We have an image of what could be: a zero-carbon society, a gender equal society, a world where the dividends rather than the threats of diversity are promoted. **The solutions are there** and we think too often that technology will sort it out and that we can continue to just act as before. Technology takes on the responsibility and authority. We abnegate, we feel less answerable to what is happening. Shifting our mindset and how we think, plan and act – so our behaviour – is the far bigger task.

Taking **an eagle view of the world in motion** demands we unscramble the nested complexities and look at existing trends to assess their depth or superficiality, their characteristics and the nature of their impacts.

A good analogy is to **think of change like an ocean**. Ripples on the surface are less important than waves of increasing significance, which are themselves formed by tides, currents, climatic changes and geological events which shape the movement and dynamics of the whole – and which might produce the occasional tsunami and it is that tsunami we need to avert.

We **know the direction of travel** if we do not act and it is the deep trends, think climate change, we need to address. The challenge for all of us is to distinguish between the important, the less significant and the trivial: to understand the difference between a trend and a fad. And some trends are simply persistent they are predictable – just consider that when I was born the world population was about 2 ½ billion and when I die it will be 8 billion people. Not surprisingly nature is suffering. Think water shortages, deforestation and animal extinctions. All are inextricably interwoven. Add to this we are still operating largely with the same institutional structures made for a different age.

To make the rebirth a reality – perhaps a Renaissance – requires us to shift our mindscape dramatically. That mindset should see things as an integrated whole and this is not to downgrade the specialist, it is simply that we need to grasp the interconnections. Is it crisis, danger, the fear of impending doom, awareness, knowledge or is it a thoughtful, inclusive mind that shifts our thinking?

This means **understanding mindset, mindflows and mindshifts**. It implies reassessing how we think and learn, what we learn, the intelligences harnessed, the types of information used and disregarded. It demands new criteria to discriminate, judge and filter and a broader perspective which embodies a more inclusive sense of possible resources that are more free flowing, lateral and creative. A changed mindset, rethought principles, new ways of understanding and generating ideas are the cornerstones of change.

**Mindflow** is the mind in operation. The mind is locked into certain patterns for good reason. To cope with the world we focus on the familiar whether thought processes, attitudes, concepts and interpretations. The environment or context determines what is seen and what meaning is given. It operates below the level of conscious awareness. We cannot be completely open 24/7 although our default position must be a willingness to re-assess. Most of us will look at the world or a problem in a learnt way and have vested interests in perpetuating our current practices. The open focus can be seen as threatening especially for discipline specialists as this might challenge the authority of their profession.

**A mindset** is the order within which people structure their worlds and how they make choices, both practical and idealistic, based on values, philosophy, traditions, experience and aspirations. Mindset is our accustomed, convenient way of thinking and guide to decision making. It not only determines how we act in our small local world, but also how we think and act on an ever encompassing stage. Mindset is the settled summary of our prejudices and priorities and the rationalizations we give them. A changed mindset is a re-rationalization of a person's behaviour and is difficult as people like their behaviour to be coherent—at least to themselves.

**A mindshift** is the process of dramatically reassessing core ideas. But how can you relax when there are pressures around you. Changing a mindset is unsettling and potentially frightening. Transformative effects happen in differing degrees: direct experience, seeing things work and fail and through conceptual knowledge. The most powerful means is the direct experience of having to change behaviour. This is where crisis comes in. By living through and understanding a crisis directly a person internalizes learning and is able to repeat this learning in different contexts—it thus becomes replicable.

The challenge here is that **we travel with a weight of history** attuned to bi-polar thinking, operating in silos and are often sceptical of integrated, 360° perspectives or transdisciplinary thinking. Yet, that cannot generate the solutions the future requires. The greater the number of perspectives applied to a problem the more imaginatively will it be approached. This is not to deny the value of our existing specialist knowledge. We cannot all simultaneously have the skills of an engineer, a biochemist or environmentalist, but we can understand their essence and so merge them with other skills or insights to make them more effective. This integration with other skills, especially in the human and social sciences, such as knowledge of history, anthropology, cultures, psychology has too often been lost in most affairs. For instance, a traffic issue is never only about cars or land use. If transport planners had understood psychology or culture better or the ideas of mental geography they would have been more careful about building urban motorways that scorch their route through communities.

So, how can you **think small and with less** when we are used to thinking big and more. This transformation is a cultural project, the biggest of our times, as it is about values, mindset, attitudes and hearts, minds and skills. Culture and being culturally literate is a powerful way of looking at the world as culture is who we are and creativity helps shape what we can become.

There are **six ways to change behaviour and mindset**: to coerce through force or regulation; to induce through payment or incentives; to convince through argument; to con, fool or trick people; to seduce, an odd combination of the voluntary and involuntary; and finally to create and publicize aspirational models. It is the latter we need to focus on and it is not as straightforward as it sounds and is likely to be a combination of all persuasive devices, that takes into account immediate, short and long term impact. At times the slowest way of changing a mindset can be by rational argument, yet longer especially when evidence based it is the most effective.

This is where **storytelling comes in** and understanding the distinction between forms of communication—especially the narrative and iconic. Narrative communication is concerned with creating arguments; it takes time and promotes reflection and is linked to critical thinking; we build understanding piece by piece. Iconic communication by contrast seeks to 'squash meaning' and to crisply encapsulate an essence in order to create high impact and to show what is being said feels significant. Our challenge is to embed narrative qualities and deeper, principled understandings within projects which have iconic power. This is where the talents embedded within the creative economy are so significant.

They can create the messaging, the products, the experiences that are emblematic and so can leapfrog learning and avoid lengthy explanatory narratives through the force of their ideas, their projects and the symbolism they engender. The iconic project says it in one and as you reflect you understand what it is about.

**How artists and those in the creative economy think can help.** What exactly is it about the process and act of singing, writing, dancing, acting, performing music, sculpting, painting, designing or drawing that is so special? Participating in these activities arguably harnesses the imaginary realm to a degree that other disciplines such as sports or much of science, which are more rule-bound and precise, do not. The latter tend to be ends in themselves, they do not change the way you perceive society; they tend to teach you something specific.

This process of imagining has the benefit of forcing us to reflect, to develop original thought, to confront challenges and, crucially, to imagine that Planet B, which is where we need to get to. Nursing us through a green transition is a creative act where involvement with the arts can help.

Engagement with the creative activities combines **both stretching oneself and focusing**; feeling the senses and expressing emotion. Art, for instance, can broaden horizons and convey meaning with immediacy as well as depth; it can facilitate immediate and profound communication; symbolize complex ideas and emotions or encapsulate previously scattered thoughts; anchor identity and enhance communal bonds or conversely stun and shock for social, moral, or thought-provoking ends. Art can criticize or create joy, entertain, be beautiful and even soothe the soul and promote popular morale. More broadly, expression through the arts is a way of passing ideas and concepts on to later generations in a (somewhat) universal language.

What art does is not a linear process. Humans are largely driven by their sensory and emotional landscape in spite of centuries of developing scientific knowledge and logical, analytical, abstract and technical thought. We are not rational in a scientific sense, but we are a-rational rather than irrational. This is why all cultures develop the arts.

What are the elements that **help transformation along the way**? We see here a combination of urgency, perhaps a crisis and increasing evidence that the old ways do not work. Then a new concept that encapsulates a way forward such as when the notion of sustainability emerged and a mission can help. The new thinking would impact at three levels—the conceptual, the discipline based and implementation levels and involves reviewing the detailed mechanisms to make things happen, such as the financial arrangements or planning codes to encourage and direct development into certain directions.

We are not exhausted – we can be as alive as never before!

Seen together perhaps we can **come to a rebirth** – a Renaissance. A rebirth across the world as remember there was not only a European Renaissance perhaps the best known, but also an Arab Renaissance that preceded it. Now we need one too in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

This could unleash a process of re-enchantment that speaks to our deepest yearnings, our soul and our sense of wanting to become whole again where we and the world around us has the right balance.