WHAT WE MUST ACCOMPLISH IN THE COMING DECADES

by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Abstract. In order to survive as a species and grow in complexity, humanity must adopt a new image of what it means to be human, rediscover a reward system beyond the merely material, and see that young people find joy in challenges and in cooperating with others.

Keywords: challenge; complexity; cooperation; evolution of consciousness; human responsibility; joy; reward system; social compact.

Let me say first of all that I did not choose the title for my talk, which is a bit too ambitious for my style: "What we must accomplish in the coming decades." I think that is probably the work of Philip Hefner's fine hand. When I first heard it, I recalled an interview we did with one of the leading poets in America, at that time the poet laureate of the United States. The interview started with a question: "What is it that you wish to accomplish in the next two years?" We expected him to give some great notion, a premonition of some glorious epic that he was about to write. After thinking about it very seriously he said, "Well, actually, what I hope to accomplish is to get my dog toilet-trained as soon as possible." Except that he used a much more earthy expression. I was impressed by the humility of his ambitions. But, if you think about it, at the personal level we all just try our best to remain civilized and lead a life that is useful and blameless. And this in itself is not an easy task; it is feasible, but quite difficult.

However, we are faced now also with a much larger responsibility, beyond that of leading a life that is somewhat civilized within the limits of

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our own allotted years. We are becoming increasingly aware that we have responsibility for a much larger project—that of contributing to the well-being, indeed the survival, of our species. We realize that humanity is unlikely to survive if we do not take on the burden of helping to avoid mistakes that we have committed in the past, and we are not likely to continue to exist unless we work to prevent those mistakes.

One of the basic intuitions of all religions has been that we have a responsibility larger than just for ourselves, beyond our individual lives. All religions try to make us aware of the responsibility for our own actions and also for the consequences for the larger and larger scope of effects that our actions have.

Now science also is becoming increasingly aware of the same responsibility and is beginning to take it seriously. This goal is one of those links that Phil was talking about, joining science and religion. I think it is axiomatic that we cannot depend on divine providence or chance or a beneficent fate of some sort for our survival. We have become a force in evolution for good or ill; we must take responsibility for our own destiny. This is the goal we must consider when we think about what we must accomplish in the coming decades. So I focus here on three kinds of topics that I have been involved with in my own research, which is part of the very humble contribution that the young science of psychology can make to our understanding of what we need to do in the near future.

My first article written for *Zygon* was published in 1970 with the title "Sociological Implications in the Thought of Teilhard de Chardin." I want to discuss how the ideas contained in that article have informed my thinking in the thirty-some years that followed. There are three main points.

Complex Humanity: the Cutting Edge in Evolution

The first point is that we need a new image of what it means to be human. We have been quite schizophrenic as a species about our own identity. On one hand, we have thought of ourselves as the supreme goal of creation, as masters of the universe. On the other, we describe ourselves as organisms run by greed and lust and governed by genes that have no interest in our destiny or in the destiny of the world except for their own replication. Neither notion of ourselves—as angels or as selfish gene robots—is very constructive or realistic. I like to think of us as the cutting edge in the evolution of complexity, for good or for ill. It is an incredibly powerful and more interesting way of conceptualizing what human beings can be.

Complexity, as most biologists who are interested in the philosophy of evolution would say, consists of the tendency toward differentiation, individuality, and refinement of specialized functions and is also marked by integration—belonging to expanding circles of relationships. In the case of human beings, integration means belonging not only to a community

of other people but also to systems of value, to ideas, and to the ecosystem.

After a century of debunking old certainties, the social sciences are beginning to take a more benign view of human beings. Arguably, the debunking started with the biological writings of Charles Darwin that inspired Herbert Spencer and other social scientists, continued with the work of Karl Marx, who reduced human beings to the puppets of property relations, and Sigmund Freud, who saw human beings as slaves to libidinal tendencies necessary for survival and reproduction.

Recently, however, the social scientists have become more and more aware of other forces that are just as evolutionarily sound. Just to mention two recent books by persons I happen to know: Robert Wright's *Non-Zero*, a popular view of the evolution of nonzero sum relationships in the world, especially in human history, and David Sloan Wilson's *Darwin's Cathedral*, a good example of that zygotic tendency of drawing together evolutionary biology with the insights of religions. Many other recent works express the awareness that not only greed and sex are necessary for survival but also cooperation, altruism, and even spiritual empathy with the universe at large.

In my own work I have been collaborating with colleagues to try to change psychology from a science of pathology to one of meaningful fulfillment. It is not enough to just correct what goes wrong with human beings and turn them into "normal" persons. That is not a very inspiring task. We have been trying instead to see how normal persons can be elevated to have experiences that are transcendent. For instance, my colleague Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania and I started a movement (I don't like to call it a movement, but everybody else does) called "positive psychology." Essentially it is an attempt to redirect attention toward human behavior that includes courage, hope, optimism, and creativity, and see how these can be fostered and supported.

Another project that I have been working on for nine years with colleagues at Harvard and Stanford universities is a series of studies under the conceptual umbrella of "Good Work." We have looked at people in various professions, ranging from journalism to genetic research to several art forms to higher education, and asked such questions as: How can you do good work in these professions? What prevents individuals from doing good work? More important, How does one overcome the pressures to cut corners or just try to feather one's own nest, and keep in sight the larger good that the profession is supposed to serve?

These are two movements within psychology, and there are signs in other social sciences as well that the dialectic has swung away to a certain extent from a radical critique of humanity to something a little more optimistic.

In my work, I am interested in the evolution of consciousness, which means essentially to know ourselves. Psychology obviously is one of the sciences for which that question is paramount. I think of this as having

two general goals: how to free ourselves from the control of genetic instructions and how to free ourselves from the control of social conditioning—without denying or trying to repress or avoid the reality of these instructions, which we have in our chromosomes and in our early experiences in the family.

The point is that if we just blindly follow those instructions we are probably adapting ourselves to conditions that existed hundreds of thousands of years ago in terms of genetic evolution and thousands of years ago if we consider cultural evolution. I follow the old Latin saying *natura non fecit saltum*—nature does not advance by jumping—despite what Stephen Jay Gould and other catastrophe theorists of evolution may say. Radical changes take time, and we cannot free ourselves easily from these long-standing conditioning forces in our history. But we need to understand them, and we need to know how and under what conditions we can do better than what the past programmed us to do.

That is the first of the three topics: to know better what our nature is like and understand how to control our psychic energy so that we are not simply responding to selective forces that existed in the past but are no longer relevant.

A New Social Compact and Reward System

The second goal to accomplish in the next decades is to develop rules for a new social compact. For decades now we have lived under the impression that Karl Marx's notion of material inequality had been surpassed by the triumph of capitalism, especially with the implosion of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the changes in China. Perhaps we were too optimistic. We believed that there was no longer need to worry about the increasing gap between those who own the means of production and those who have to work for it. If you really look at what is happening, though, it seems that Marx has been vindicated, if not on the local, at least on a global level. We have exported the proletariat, we have globalized poverty, and we think that we can forget the material conditions under which the majority on this planet must live; we can forget them because they live far away from the reach of our attention.

Yet, unless some new rules are developed to decrease—not eliminate completely, but at least decrease—material inequality, that is going to be a severe problem. So will be the inequality of power. It has been said over and over since Lord Acton's time that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We have seen many examples of this recently, when powerful corporations turned out to have achieved power by ignoring laws and ignoring the expectations of their shareholders. And consider the cavalier attitude that our political leaders are taking with respect to the rest of the world. We need to worry, because power does corrupt; it makes us think that we do not need to play by the rules that the rest of the world

lives by and that we can impose our will on other nations, other groups. This is clearly one of the issues that Christianity set out to correct two thousand years ago. We have a long way to go to redress these problems, which reappear in new guises every few generations. If we become complacent, these problems will eventually destroy the system in which we live.

As far as less global problems, one of the issues that I have become more and more aware of as I work in this area is the impoverishment of our reward system in American culture and in many modern cultures in Europe and elsewhere. Human rewards such as respect, honor, and deference that used to be given to people who had different skills or contributed differently to the body politic—all of those rewards have collapsed. Essentially, we now focus on material rewards, and people are responding to an incredibly restricted set of compensations for their work.

I work in a business school now, and so I am more aware of it, but even before it was quite obvious to me that, even at the top universities, with each passing decade people were thinking of themselves more and more in terms of how much money they could secure for research or consulting, which defined how much they were worth. Of course, financial benefits are zero-sum, to use Robert Wright's notion; that is, they include always a scale that makes invidious comparisons necessary. So one thing that is very important for this new social compact is the revitalization of symbolic rewards—rewards that express human appreciation in a variety of ways, not just material ways. In this respect preliterate societies, most nomadic or hunting-gathering societies, are much better able to do that, in a sense making life richer by having different forms of recognitions and rewards for performance that are not reducible to a single and contested metric.

To make the story somewhat less dire, in my new book *Good Business* (2003) I include the stories of forty CEOs, nominated by other business people and by people who knew what happens in business. They were nominated for being very successful and also very socially responsible. These are people who, as the saying goes, walk the walk. An example is Aaron Feuerstein, whose factory burned down; he paid his workers for a year afterward, while the factory was being rebuilt, even though he had no contractual obligation to do so. He wanted his community to survive. An amazing number of people, even in business, invest energy in goals that are larger than their self-interest.

There is a beautiful word that seems to have almost completely disappeared from our vocabulary. It is the term *magnanimous*, which means "having a large soul." There is a word for it in many languages. In Hindi it is *mahatma*, as in the Mahatma Gandhi, which means the "great-souled Gandhi." It is comforting to know that even within such a compromised profession as business there are people who are magnanimous, who invest their life energy into goals that transcend themselves.

We have to do a better job of recognizing and reproducing this behavior. Business schools teach business ethics and medical schools medical ethics, but most of this is about not stealing too much and not hurting people. Little is learned about having great souls. We need new rules for a social compact.

The Power of Joy

The third topic is the one that I have done the most work on and feel the most confident talking about. It is about the power of joy. We must realize that unless we have passion and joy in life we are not going to survive much longer as a species. We need joy to keep the dark night of the soul at bay, to feel that life is exciting and expanding, and to grow in the process of living.

Here again there is bad news and good news. The bad news is that many children are growing up in environments where they almost never experience joy. They have to sit in school, doing abstract tasks they don't care about and without moving their bodies, which were selected by evolution for movement and action. Many live in environments that are boring and essentially meaningless.

Barbara Schneider, my colleague at the University of Chicago, and I have been following a thousand teenagers for nine years in twelve communities across the United States that were chosen to be representative; each has a different economic and social makeup. One amazing thing we have found is that the amount of joy, happiness, and involvement of teenagers goes down as social class goes up, except for the very affluent suburbs. In typical suburbs, where both parents are professional workers and away most of the day, teenage children are essentially left to themselves, and they tend to be worse off in terms of personal commitment to life than the ones from the ghettos and from the inner city. This is one of those ironies of our evolution: we create environments that we think are going to improve our lives because they are more comfortable, secure, and so on, but in the long run they actually undermine the very essence of what makes life worth living.

There are two elements in the experience of these young people from junior high that predict a healthy, happy, and involved young adulthood nine years later. One is the amount of challenge that the child reports in his or her life. To do this research, we provide watches that are programmed to beep ten times during the day. The individuals wear this watch for a week, so in a week the watch beeps at random moments about seventy times. When that happens, the subjects take out a little booklet and fill it in, saying where they are, what they are doing, and whether they are happy, sad, concentrating, or feeling challenged. The amount of challenge that a young person of twelve to fourteen years reports predicts successful adap-

tation to college and work nine years later better than almost anything else.

Only one other thing predicts as well, and the two together make the best predictor. That other component is cooperation. There is an item that says, "at this moment when the watch beeps, on a ten point scale, do you feel cooperative or competitive?" The more toward the cooperative end the child reports being at the moment, and the more challenged he or she is—these are the best predictors for young adulthood. It is an interesting combination, one that I would not have predicted. But apparently these two attributes are essential for healthy maturation into adulthood.

However, often they are completely missing. Cooperation is inversely related to material well-being, because wealthier children have less need to cooperate. They may have hired people mowing the lawn, washing the dishes, and catering to every material need. These individuals grow up without experiencing much cooperation. Challenges also are almost absent from their lives, so they may go out and try to find challenge in ways that are antisocial. Some wealthy suburbs have gangs of young delinquents who, for example, use radio transmitters to blow up a garage at a distance, watching with binoculars to see the roof erupting. One of my students did a study of four hundred teenagers in a West Coast city who were arrested for arson. They were mostly well-to-do boys for whom blowing things up and burning things down were the most exciting challenges they could find, because their life otherwise was just a cocoon. They had no other place to test themselves and find out what they were able to do.

Challenge and cooperation bring joy and commitment to life. Unless we provide that kind of joy in productive activities, materialism and selfishness will consume more and more of our lives. Twenty-five centuries ago Plato wrote in the *Republic* that the most important task for educators is to teach young people to find pleasure in the right things. He knew that children find pleasure in things that promise enjoyment, even if they do not lead to either personal development or social order. It is our responsibility to make sure that there are opportunities for joy that lead to growth.

We need to challenge ourselves to help young people find joy in helping evolution. Perhaps we can come up with ways to make the support of ecological health and diversity into a rewarding game, into a great adventure that stirs the imagination of young and old alike. Instead of hitching our lives to greed and selfishness, we need to find ways to make social justice and cooperation into goals that are challenging. We have to increase the complexity of consciousness by finding ways to make it enjoyable, instead of letting children fall into mindless activities—which is what many of our young people end up doing when they spend many of their hours in activities that do not engage them in anything that builds skills, character, or cooperation. They end up opting for vicarious thrills. The challenge is how to make the task of helping the planet, helping social

justice, and helping the complexity of consciousness enjoyable. If we devoted even a small part of our energies to making these tasks into exciting, adventurous, meaningful activities, that would be one of the best ways to prepare ourselves for the coming decades.

So, to return to the title that was put to me as a challenge by Phil, in the coming decades we must develop self-confidence in our role as stewards of the planet; we must find ways to cooperate and live with each other in peace and mutual respect; and we must discover joyful ways to direct the evolution of consciousness into the future.

REFERENCE

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