

The Mobius Strip and the Mountain Climb

The case for inclusivity

Long ago a servant was sent to the market to buy some salt and flour for his Lord. "Here, bring the flour and salt to me on this plate, but don't mix the two; keep them separate," the Lord says, handing the plate to his servant. So the servant heads to the market, mindful of these instructions.

At the market, the servant has a shopkeeper fill the plate with flour. But as the shopkeeper is about to measure the salt, the servant stops him. He remembers what his master had told him. So the servant turns the plate over and has the shopkeeper pour the salt on the bottom side of the plate. Careful not to spill any of his cargo, the servant proudly returns to his Lord.

"Here's what you asked me to bring you," the servant says. And he presents the Lord with the plate of salt. "But where's the flour?" commands the Lord. "It's here," says the fool, turning over the plate. But nothing is there, and as soon as the plate is turned, the salt is gone as well!

So it is, in doing one thing that you think to be right, you may undo another which is equally right.

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Exclusivity breeds destruction. Patterns of exclusivity pervade our thinking. We can see their emergence at Jericho, with the walls being built that separate, and the towers being built that dominate. The "wild" dichotomized and rigorously excluded from the "domestic." Patterns of exclusivity are often manifested in dichotomized, either/or thinking such as is found in situations characterized in terms of us/them, friend/foe, good/evil, win/lose, true/false, black/white. In these situations of polar opposites, any given position or category is arbitrarily perceived as not the other and is excluded from it. However, when dichotomized thinking is taken to extremes it can stereotype, distort, limit choices and options, and is divisive. In the instance of the Glass Pane (e.g., Modern or Euro-American) and the Looking Glass (e.g., Tribal-Traditional) cultural values and world views, when one world view has dominated the values of a particular society or individual, exclusive of the other, the earth and humanity have suffered.

To embrace Looking Glass cultural values, exclusive of Glass Pane cultural values, is to ignore the welfare of humanity. The creation and accessibility of food, shelter, health care, communication, transportation, recreation: all are contingent upon Modern values. The understandings of our biological, historical and social being as well as the attempts to thwart those stereotypes, prejudices and hatreds driven by our blind ignorance and false assertions: all are contingent upon Modern cultural values. "History," after all, has chronicled the considerable and senseless destruction of human and animal "peoples" in the name of "religion," or "Manifest Destiny," or some other narrowly-defined conviction. And we are reminded that much of the impetus for the emergence of our contemporary "social sciences" was the challenge to the prevailing and pervasive oppression of other peoples – African American, American Indian, Jew.¹ Certainly the very assumptions upon which you have endeavored in this workbook, to

¹As in the example of the American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) and the American sociologist and educator W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963).

"interpret," to "eye juggle," are in part grounded in Glass Pane cultural values. Our sciences and technologies, our analytical pursuits and intellectual curiosities are all thus made possible. Glass Pane values bring forth a world of discovery, as new frontiers are to be explored, and a world of hope, as obstacles to human betterment are overcome. Human populations need the nourishments that Glass Pane cultural values provide.

On the other hand, to embrace Glass Pane cultural values, exclusive of Looking Glass cultural values, is also to ignore the welfare of humanity as well as the welfare of all the earth. When animal, plant and human are defined as material objects alone, and are denied a spirit and soul, are denied what Gregory Bateson calls, "Mind," they are rendered susceptible to neglect, abuse, degradation and destruction. It is so much easier to cut down a stand of trees, endanger a species of animal, and pollute a stream when that tree, animal and stream are seen as nothing more than objects. It is so much easier to hate another person, to be a racist, and to engage in war when that person is seen as nothing more than an object. While the causes of prejudice, whether directed at human or animal "peoples," are certainly varied and numerous, the necessary precondition for them all is objectification. And the greater the objectification, the greater the potential for abuse.

Paradoxically, while Glass Pane cultural values at once bring forth new understandings upon which we as a humanity depend, those understandings are also predicated on the very same values of which we must also be cautious. For those values, when untempered by Traditional cultural values, have ultimately fostered our insidious hatreds and wanton destructions of other "peoples." As two expressions of that destruction, we are further reminded that our emerging "social sciences" also contributed to and, however unwittingly, became instruments of European and American colonialism, and of racist doctrine.²

And "*the creature that wins against its environment destroys itself.*" In our cybernetic ecosystem, the continued viability of any given component, as well as the viability of the complete and total circuit, are dependent of the free flows and exchanges of information through *all* pathways and among *all* components. As the wheel fails to roll when some of its spokes are removed, so too within a closed ecosystem. When segments of the circuitry are ignored or eliminated, entropy and chaos ensue, and death is assured. The Inuit "peoples" maintain a balance in their delicate ecosystem by entering into an *all-inclusive* web of feedback loops and information exchanges with the animal "peoples," regulated in the character of Sedna and an intricate series of hunting taboos. The driftwood survives the turbulence because of the lodging of *all* the driftwood.

And should not the moral rights of *all* "peoples" be acknowledged and assured?

The Looking Glass cultural values necessitate a participation with animals, plants and culturally distinct peoples, with the entirety of the planetary ecology. Brought forth is a world of kinship, as an ethic of respect and cooperation among kinsmen is fostered, and a world of inspiration and imagination, as the ultimate destiny and purpose of the Earth and of Humanity, each inseparable, is revealed and given meaning. Brought forth is the world of the *Alcheringa*

²As in the instances of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the German writer Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), the English eugenicist Francis Galton (1822-1911), and the American sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840-1910).

and of "Mind." The Earth and Humanity need the nourishments that aesthetic inspiration, spiritual revelation, and ecological humility and balance provide; the Earth and Humanity need what Looking Glass cultural values provide.

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Is exclusivity an inevitable feature of our humanity? Or can one category, seemingly an opposite, embrace and be included along side the other? How then are we to view phenomena as simultaneously divisible, unique, material, devoid of spirit, as well as united within a singular whole, indivisible and transcendent? How can something be *many* and *one*, as well as *material* and *transcendent* all at the same time? Are we as the fool? Or can we carry the salt and the flour together on the same plate, without spilling one or the other or both?

Our first task is to be alert and receptive to the "possible," and not blinded by unchallenged preconceptions. We must apply elasticity to our story. I am reminded of the Mobius strip.³ When can two parallel lines, each exclusive of the other, never crossing over to the other and each with a discrete beginning and end, become a singular line, each inclusive of the other, with neither beginning nor end? An impossibility you say? The resolution is, in part, perceptual, in the way we think and tell the story.

Take a long narrow strip of paper. The outside edges of the strip represent two parallel lines, each separate from the other, each with a beginning and an end – exclusivity. Now twist the strip 180-degrees and link one end with the other. Out of an exclusive, lineal structure of two parallel lines you have created an inclusive circular flow of a singular line, without beginning nor end – inclusivity.



As an expression of our perception of the world, as an ingrained value within our cultural story, I would argue that exclusivity is neither inevitable nor intransigent. Is not the Dreamer a part of the Animal, and the Animal the Dreamer? Can we not attempt with one eye to see through a Looking Glass lense while with the other eye look through a Glass Pane lense? As the old man with long, black braids juggled his eyes to the top of that tall cedar, can we not attempt to balance our eye juggling?

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Once freed from the shackles of preconception and open to the realm of the "possible," we must next complete our new story. An appropriate metaphor is to be found.

Such a metaphor, I would argue, is to be found when Traditional cultural values, and especially the value of transcendency, are acknowledged and brought into consideration. This apparent contradiction, of the *many* and *one* and of the *material* and *spiritual*, can be clarified

³After August F. Mobius, a German mathematician who died in 1868.

and resolved. Simply put, the multiple of phenomena is associated with the overt and the manifest, while the oneness of phenomenon is associated with the transcendent. While boundaries demarcate and separate the "conspecific individuals" within the bioenergetic ecology, a unity of interconnected information pathways encloses the entirety of the cybernetic ecology; Mind and body are unified. Was not this suggested previously in the symbolism of the spokes and hub of the Crow Indian "wagon wheel" imagery. If the wheel is to continue to turn, that which is unique and separate, the spokes, must nevertheless remain part of the wheel, anchored to the rim and hub.

The ancient parable of the "mountain climb" adds further resolution. On the mountain there are many and differing routes for reaching the summit. One route comes out of the hot desert, another from the grassland prairie, one from a lush jungle, and a fourth comes out of a rugged mountain range. As each climber begins his or her ascent of the mountain, each is attired in the clothes and gear appropriate to his or her home terrain. Each necessarily differs from the other, unsuited to the terrains of the others. As the climbers continue toward the summit, much of the gear each once wore is discarded along the way. After much effort, each of the climbers finally reaches their common goal. And what each is now wearing is indistinguishable from the others. In our metaphor, the home terrains represent the unique and multiple found in the history and geography of a people, the overt and manifest differences that separate – the Glass Pane cultural world. The summit, reached only "after much effort," represents the unity and oneness to be found in the transcendent – Looking Glass cultural world.

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As we have discovered, awareness of our stories is a task not easily accomplished. Values are never readily revealed. Yet an informed life is a life with meaning. An uninformed life is no life. To "live lives of quiet desperation," as Thoreau suggested, is to be bound in our imagination and being to a life enslaved by forces unknown to us, to be at the mercy of our ignorance, to be owned by our stories. With knowledge comes an opportunity to celebrate our stories, to rejoice in the meaning and beauty they have for us. With knowledge also comes an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-combine the values of our own stories, and to incorporate the values of another's story, if we so choose. With knowledge comes ownership of our stories and choice; and, with choice comes the possibility of an improved quality of life.

As with the choices offered the *akbaalia* when he was visited by the Little People, we all have a choice in the particular combination of stories we wish to tell of and to ourselves, a choice in the path in life we wish to take. Because of the tremendous consequences to ourselves, to others, and to the world about us, should we not then take responsibility to explore the particular stories we tell and to appreciate the values that emanate from them, to grow in an awareness of who we are and what humanity is? Which Glass Pane and which Looking Glass stories are our stories? Which combination of Glass Pane and Looking Glass stories do we wish to tell? And what do our stories tell – what are their implications – implications for us, for others, for the earth? Should we not take ownership of our stories? Not to take ownership of our stories is to allow our stories to own us.

Eye juggling, in its most essential form, is after all the human act of making choices and pursuing options, of sending our eyes to the sky and looking in the four or in the many directions, or in altogether new ways, or in ways forgotten and now remembered.

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"The essence of moral decisions is the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice."

So wrote Carol Gilligan in her book entitled, *In A Different Voice* (1982).