Vertigo

Ready or Not, Here Comes the Future

Vertigo . . . a reeling sensation; feeling about to fall. A sensation
as if the external world were revolving around an individual . . .
or as if the individual were revolving in space.
—WordNet 1.6., Princeton University, 1997,
www.health-dictionary.com

When did the unfamiliar become more common than the familiar? During the last forty or fifty years, it seems, our culture was transformed; the dynamics of our relationships shifted; our brains got rewired. Shouldn't we have adapted to a world of continual change by now?

We've been hearing about this perpetual motion lifestyle since at least 1970, when Alvin Toffler first described the damaging effects of constant and unrelenting change in his best-seller, *Future Shock*. He argued that the pace of change was racing faster than our psyches and society were able to digest, and he predicted that we would all burn out if the world did not find a way to alter its course. "Unless man quickly learns to control the rate of change in his personal affairs as well as society at large," Toffler warned, "we are doomed to massive adaptational breakdown."[1]

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Well, as we so often hear, the future is now. Our world has changed. In fact, even the dynamics of change have changed—and like it or not, we are all along for the ride.

For most of us, it's a roller-coaster ride of slow climbs, fast drops, and spinning turns that leave us breathless and disoriented—and then picks us up to start all over again. To use Davis's and Meyer's term, the "blur" of the present is keeping us off balance;[2] and the increasing complexity of our technological present is confounding our efforts to gain solid footing. Attempting to recover from future shock, we are hurtling headlong into a new condition: vertigo.

Hurtling Headlong into Vertigo

> You are here because you know something. What you know you can't explain but you feel it. You felt it your entire life. There is something wrong with the world but you don't know what it is. But it's there like a splinter in your mind.
>
> —Morpheus to Neo in *The Matrix*

My good friend Ed Chinn has a great description of vertigo that I would like to share with you:

> Certain conditions or dynamics are known to induce vertigo: *Fatigue* slows the cognitive process and leaves people or institutions vulnerable to disorientation.
>
> *Moving too quickly* seems to upset the body's balance mechanisms and leads to *coriolis vertigo* (disorientation associated with operating physically free from the earth's movement).
>
> Pilots know that anytime they experience a *loss of horizon* (such as when flying at night or in clouds), they are in danger of vertigo.
>
> Too much *noise and vibration* in the environment creates a mental overload, which very often leads to vertigo.
>
> Finally, *fixating* on a particular item or issue can cause one to eliminate or deny other essential information and thereby lose the panoramic command of the environment.

Another—psychologically brutal—form of vertigo is induced by *flickering light* (such as disco strobe lights or sunlight oscillating through helicopter blades).

Those suffering vertigo lose all sense of vertical and horizontal orientation; they literally lose their alignment to, and placement in, the real world. Pilots suffering vertigo have flown their planes full throttle into the earth.

Because it represents the tyranny of the subjective, the only effective recovery from vertigo is an absolute, resolute, focused reliance on objective reality (such as an airplane instrument panel).

But the same disorientation strikes organizations, businesses, movements . . . even civilizations! All of us lose our alignment to . . . or placement in . . . the real world. And the speed and fatigue of life simply hasten the process. Then, like pilots ignoring their instrument panel, our tunnel vision—our denial of reality—is a crash waiting to happen.[3]

The endless noise and vibration of experts on every issue adds to our sense of vertigo with conflicting opinions and analysis. The media compound the problem by bombarding our attention with the flickering strobe light of daily crisis all day, every day. We are caught in the waning gyrations of a vicious cycle.

So what's on our instrument panel? What reality can we hold on to in order to regain our balance? Step one is to understand the basic nature of the changing world in which we now must operate.

Life Acceleration 101

> Society [and the church], therefore, is out of control because we are systematically destroying all of the authority and all of the control that our institutions once had.
>
> —Peter Senge, *Rethinking the Future*

Future Shock's analysis set a benchmark for understanding the effects of technology and change on society. The assumptions that Toffler used in

1970 were based on a new dynamic: the relentless change in every area of life brought about by technology, a reality captured in the constant flow of televised images. With the advent of digital media—computers, cell phones, file sharing, personal digital assistants—the pace of change has changed again.

Digital networks create simultaneous interactive events that cycle thousands of times per second. Each time information loops through the system, it changes slightly because the system is fluid. Each little change, magnified over hundreds of thousands of cycles, can produce major shifts in the system. The iterations amplify to create a kaleidoscope of possible outcomes.[4] What may take decades to surface within natural systems can show up within minutes in a digital environment. In this new reality, known as systems thinking,[5] the threat of terrorism, a single word from our Federal Reserve chairman, an outbreak of a deadly disease—reverberates globally, systemwide.

We can describe the dynamics of the onrushing events of the new millennium in these seven qualities, all inherent within digital media: interconnection, complexity, acceleration, intangibility, convergence, immediacy, and unpredictability. As the Millennium Matrix makes clear, these seven qualities are also affecting the life of the church.

Interconnection

Instead of living in a domino world, where one change logically causes the next, we have entered a chain-reaction world of exponential outcomes. In this brave new world, interdependent relationships can exhibit extraordinary cohesion or, if destabilized, spiral out of control like a nuclear reaction. We know firsthand how hard it is to predict the outcomes of natural and economic systems, whether it is the effect of a particular pesticide on the environment or the behavior of the stock market or the weather.

This interconnection means that our problems and opportunities are intimately tied together. Rapidly changing and improving telecommunications—broadband, cell phones, portable devices—are making instant access to anything and anyone a not too distant reality.

And emerging networks (virtual communities of common interest)—which seem to have a collective intelligence that defies our old logical or sequential decision-making processes—have already begun to level our hierarchical organizations.[6]

Complexity

Complex systems behave not as a collection of separate parts but as a whole. When you cut down a forest, divide a family, change a line of computer code, or protect a threatened industry with tariffs, you set in motion an invisible ripple effect. Old analytical tools fail to anticipate potential consequences of action and policies within complex systems of relationships. Using linear logic and deductive analysis is like using a bulldozer to cultivate orchids.

Simulation, aided by digital tools, gives us a way to understand complex, delicate, and volatile environments. These tools already aid our understanding in disciplines from surgery to economics, from the military to the environment.

Acceleration

Change accelerates with each new technology and concept. These changes have a compounding effect within a complex and interconnected system, sending out an exponential ripple that drives additional change and accelerates the pace of life. We all get caught up in this acceleration. Many already feel that accelerating change has taken on a life of its own.[7]

We all know about the feedback effect: we see it when rock stars puts their electric guitars right next to the speakers to create a chaos of noise, amplifying and accelerating the sound. This creates a feedback loop. Kept up interminably, something will blow. As our lives become more interconnected—through e-mail, television, phones, the Internet—our actions get cycled back through our living and technological networks and become amplified and accelerated.[8] We all feel out of control from time to time, and sometimes our lives do blow up.

Intangibility

We're moving away from a tangible world we can touch and hold to a world that operates on intangibles like information, potential, and reputation.[9] In our hyper-mediated world,[10] we have little or no connection to the original source of the things we buy, use, and rely on. Do you know who grew the apple you ate the other day, who sews your clothing (and the nation she lives in), or the person who printed your family Bible?

We're also moving away from tangible and rational measures of value. The recent saga of Arthur Andersen's fall from grace is a perfect example. When clients hired the accounting firm, they were receiving some tangible service—accounting, audit, process integration, and so on. But they were also buying intangibles: Andersen's credibility and its reputation for being the best. When its client Enron imploded in scandal,[11] Andersen's intangibles went up in smoke.

Convergence

Convergence is an inherent property of our digital medium of information and communication. Print, graphics, sound, and data can all reside in a single medium—such as a CD or DVD—reproduced through a common digital language of bits and bytes, zeros and ones. Digital data makes no distinction between *Romeo and Juliet,* that snapshot of you on a pony when you were five, geological calculations, or the sound of a Bach cantata—except for the sequence of those zeros and ones. The digital environment is thoroughly integrated. That means we will no longer process these sensory experiences separately. It also means that the past boundaries of knowledge and organizations will blur, crumble, and eventually integrate.

The boundaries that once separated disciplines of knowledge—physics, poetry, metaphysics—are also beginning to blur. Nanotechnology is emerging as one of the world-transforming sciences of the new millennium—converging physics, chemistry, and biology. One book calls this "the convergence of infrastructures."[12] This confusion in categories is also working its way through organizations. For example, AT&T, AOL, and Time all began as separate technologies (phone company, Internet service provider, and news magazine) based on separate tech-

nologies (telephone wire, cybertechnologies, printing press) operating as separate industries, and controlled by separate government regulations.[13] But digital technology essentially provides all with a common platform, and they all know it. So as AOL buys Time Warner and Comcast acquires AT&T Broadband, all are preparing for the day when the government regulations catch up to the technological reality: it's all the same bits and bytes.

Immediacy

The time it takes us to absorb and adjust to digitally paced activities grows ever shorter. As the interval between question and answer, request and fulfillment, grows narrower (the other day Google found the answer to my search in 0.19 second!), we are asked to respond to the world with an immediacy similar to that required by fighter pilots in combat. Colonel John R. Boyd recognized that the context for air warfare involves such high speeds that it requires the F16 fighter pilot to master a different set of rules for decision making. How do we function in an environment where reality leaves us little or no time for reflection but "changes ceaselessly, unfolding 'in an irregular, disorderly, unpredictable manner,' despite our vain attempts to ensure the contrary"?[14]

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Unpredictability

Complex and highly interactive systems are unpredictable. Kenneth Boulding, renowned economist and scholar, says that "the search for ultimately stable parameters in evolutionary systems is futile, for they probably do not exist."[15]

In the old physics, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. When you drop a rock from a window, you can predict with accuracy when it will hit the ground and with what impact. But each factor,

player, condition, issue, or option, when interconnected, exponentially multiplies the number of outcomes. Within complex systems actions often create unintended consequences.

Rob Norton, former economics editor of *Fortune* magazine, cites this example: "In the wake of the *ExxonValdez* oil spill in 1989, many coastal states enacted laws placing unlimited liability on tanker operators. As a result the Royal Dutch/Shell group, one of the world's biggest oil companies, began hiring independent ships to deliver oil to the United States instead of using its own forty-six-tanker fleet. Oil specialists fretted that other reputable shippers would flee as well, rather than face such unquantifiable risk, leaving the field to fly-by-night tanker operators with leaky ships and iffy insurance. Thus, the probability of spills will increase and the likelihood of collecting damages will decrease as a consequence of the new laws."[16]

We see this reflected in many organizations today. Creating efficient health care systems in an increasingly complex and changing world has confounded health care experts. As our means dramatically improve, the number of patients who die or become worse is skyrocketing—so much so that the condition has its own term, *iatrogenic*, meaning an illness that the doctor (*iatros*) induces (*genic*).[17] New laws enacted to correct a problem actually exacerbate it; solving a problem in one area creates five more in other places, and new innovations bring with them a whole list of side effects.[18]

Society's Dam Is Cracking

> The Christendom paradigm is coming apart at the seams.
> All the institutions and patterns of life that grew up during Christendom are having their foundations shaken. . . .
> We live in the memory of great ways of understanding how to be a church and to be in mission. Those memories surround us like ruins of an ancient . . . civilization.
> —Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church*

If you sometimes feel like the little Dutch boy who stuck his finger into the dike to hold back the waters, you're not alone. Society's dam is leak-

ing! Our major institutions—along with our ideas about how the world should work, relationships, and civil society—reveal irreparable stress fractures. When the final breach inevitably comes to pass, what will the floodwaters of change wash away and what new fertile soil will they wash ashore?

This much is clear: the great powers of technology, politics, science, economics, culture, social causes, ethnicity, morality, and religion are all jockeying for the lead position in framing a new order once the retaining walls of our current institutions give way. Over the past fifty years or so, hundreds of cultural battles have been fought locally and nationally; but we are now beginning to witness a convergence of these battles into a global cultural war—thanks to digital media. When the dam protecting insulated organizations and thinking bursts, there won't be much left of the nice and neat world we designed.

Institutions—including the church—approach the world from the vantage point of their unique historical beginnings. But successful habits for one context do not easily translate into another. Over the millennia, the church has adapted to changing social conditions by taking on different forms: the liturgical church was designed to unite a world of tribes and oral communities; denominational churches grew out of the soil of intellectual grounding and the continuity that a rational worldview provides; less structured nondenominational churches fit a world of changing novelty. Yet despite this proven ability to adapt and survive, none of the church's previous forms will survive long in the emerging digital culture.

What used to work—and worked well—won't.

Some counter this argument. "Wait just a minute," they say. "Maybe this is all just a sign that we need to pull up our bootstraps and soldier on. Maybe these challenges are simply a sign of declining morality."

To the contrary. Declining morality is not the cause of a war of worldviews but evidence of it. During times of titanic cultural upheaval, central moral battles rise to the surface. As the old order passes and a new order rises up, the old moral restraints begin to fall away before the new boundaries have stabilized. Paul dealt with this issue in the Corinthian church. As the restraints of the old Jewish law collapsed

under the new freedom in Christ, many took license and were rebuked or excommunicated.[19] The church resisted numerous abuses and heresies for the next three hundred years. The revolution of the Reformation resulted in conflict not only within the Catholic Church but against numerous sects and radicals. The Jesus movement was part of the larger countercultural revolution of the 1960s. On the secular side, we saw a wave of drug use, sexual experimentation, and civil disobedience. On the religious side, we witnessed a rise in cults, alternative forms of worship, and a rapid growth of more fundamentalist churches.

During any transition the rules of life are unclear and shifting. We feel that we have lost our boundaries and our compass. Some throw themselves headlong into extreme behavior to push the limits of freedom, while others clutch to the security of order and control. Only those with transcendent faith and an exercised moral compass are able to navigate such waters. We see our true moral condition in turbulent times.

Life Is Like an Oil Tanker

> All crises begin with the blurring of a paradigm and the consequent loosening of the rules for normal research. As this process develops, the anomaly comes to be more generally recognized as such, more attention is devoted to it by more of the field's eminent authorities. The field begins to look quite different: scientists express explicit discontent, competing articulations of the paradigm proliferate and scholars view a resolution as the subject matter of their discipline.
>
> —Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

An executive for one of my former clients—one of the largest oil companies in the world—helped me understand the underlying nature of the emerging culture. I spent several hours with a director in charge of the design and construction of the company's oil tankers. This helped

me reconstruct my own mental picture of how to build for an environment of turbulent change.

Building an oil tanker is an amazing feat. The number of details is mind-boggling, and the obstacles are incredible. Each tanker is designed differently, depending on its purpose and destination. North Atlantic tankers experience the most treacherous environment—remember the *Titanic?* These oil tankers have to be able to withstand a direct hit from an iceberg at seven knots. They have to be able to locate and attach to a floating mooring in the middle of a turbulent sea. Without dropping anchor, they must maintain a stable position while buffeted by fifty-foot waves. They must remain relatively stationary so that the large hose bringing oil to the tanker does not get ripped from the mooring and gush oil.

These tankers rely on satellite tracking systems to hold their position. They have tremendous stabilizers that keep them positioned, even with waves crashing over the sides of the ship. Multiple redundant systems act as safeguards and backups. These ships are one-third the size of regular tankers but cost three times as much—more than $250 million to build just one.

What a phenomenal metaphor for the church to consider as it builds a vessel to navigate the turbulent sea of social change! The church has been building the spiritual equivalent of vacation cruise liners: large, slow structures made for calm balmy seas and friendly ports of call. We may be trying to make these ships a little faster, a little more up-tempo and with a mission statement, but we are still expecting calm seas and a sunny horizon.

Here's the catch: the church has long since left a stable, homogeneous, and predictable culture. The design criteria for North Atlantic oil vessels included the following: smaller scale (highly agile and faster), redundancy (extra capacity), geopositioning (external awareness), powerful stabilizer engines (counterbalance), double hulls (buffer) and the ability to quickly disconnect from destabilizing conditions. These ships were also much smaller than traditional oil tankers and required fewer crew members to keep them afloat. Is it time for the church to build differently for a different future?

Understanding Where We've Been and Where We're Going

The church is not losing ground. On the contrary, we're simply awakening to our true condition. We have an opportunity to uniquely stand in the middle of opposite poles to provide a prophetic moral compass in a time of profound contradictions. Change and turbulence don't create today's problems; they bring them to the surface. We don't need a change in models but a model for change! Today we need a church that knows how to craft a new ethic, an ethic based on a reality of change rather than a fiction of stability. The church must now, and quickly, learn to build seaworthy vessels that can handle cultural turbulence as challenging as the North Atlantic.

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And the church, as we know, is people: the body of Christ. That's us. As we rush headlong into a world of interconnection, complexity, acceleration, intangibility, convergence, immediacy, and unpredictability, just trying to keep our ship afloat, we will be aided greatly by a broad knowledge not only of where we're going but where we've been. In the next four chapters, we'll slow down a bit and take a leisurely tour of four cultures: the oral culture of Jesus' time (the birthplace of the liturgical church), the print world ushered in by Gutenberg's Bible (the birthplace of the reformation church), the broadcast era of television (home of the celebration church), and finally the emerging digital culture that is rushing to meet us (and where we will meet the convergence church).

Bon voyage!