

Economics, Psychology, and Professional Coaching III: The Shifting Conditions of Reality

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Obviously, there are many specific challenges that mid-21st Century citizens face as they live and work in their own communities and nations. These challenges might relate to commuting by car or train into a major city or simply finding fresh and uncontaminated water when living in a small rural community. They might be domestic challenges concerning a child going off to college or a grandparent who is struggling with dementia.

These challenges are unique to each person and to each society in our world. However, as I have already mentioned, there are the almost universal challenges associated with the volatility (V), uncertainty (U), complexity (C) and ambiguity (A) in our collective lives, as well as the equally as challenging turbulence and contradiction that we all encounter every day. This is the VUCA-Plus of mid-21st Century life—and it generates multiple challenges.

We will dwell briefly on the meaning to be assigned to each of the VUCA terms and then suggest how we might expand on VUCA. In essence, complexity concerns the many elements and dynamic interaction among elements that have to be considered, while Volatility refers to the rate and shifting rate of change among the elements. The other two terms have to do with epistemology (the way in which knowledge is acquired and reality is defined). Ambiguity concerns the assessment of both the evidence available regarding reality and the meaning assigned to this reality. The fourth term, Uncertainty, is about the stability of any assessment being made regarding reality. Does reality change over a short period of time? Why do an extensive assessment if our world is constantly shifting? VUCA is deservedly becoming the coin-of-the-realm among contemporary organizational analysts. is a bit more detail regarding each element.

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These challenges are unique to each person and each society in our world. However, there are the almost universal challenges associated with volatility (V), uncertainty (U), complexity (C), and ambiguity (A) in our collective lives, as well as the equally challenging turbulence and contradiction that we all encounter every day. These are the VUCA-Plus conditions of life in the mid-21st Century —and each condition generates multiple challenges.

The VUCA Challenges

This essay concerns these six VUCA-Plus challenges and some unique ways in which to view and act upon these challenges. I will be viewing each of these challenges from several different perspectives in this book and offer several distinctive strategies for addressing these challenges. Here in the Preface, I will dwell briefly on the meaning to be assigned to each of the VUCA terms and then suggest how we might expand on VUCA to produce VUCA-Plus.

In essence, complexity (C) concerns the many elements and dynamic interaction among elements that have to be considered, while Volatility (V) refers to the rate and shifting rate of change among the elements. The other two terms have to do with epistemology (acquisition of knowledge and definition of reality). Ambiguity (A) concerns the assessment of both the evidence available regarding reality and the meaning assigned to this reality. The fourth term, Uncertainty (U) concerns the stability of any assessment made about reality. Does reality change over a short period of time? Why do an extensive assessment if our world is constantly shifting? VUCA is deservedly becoming the coin of the realm among contemporary organizational and societal analysts. Here is a bit more detail regarding each condition.

Volatility

Volatility refers to the dynamics of change (accelerating rate, speed, and intensity) as well as unexpected catalysts of this change. Basically, volatility concerns rapid change in an unpredictable manner. Volatility has a systemic impact on our world: changes are occurring everywhere. There are change curves on top of change curves (Bergquist, 2014a). There is also an immediate personal impact. We are often surprised and unprepared under conditions of volatility.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty refers to the lack of predictability. This condition concerns the increasing prospects for surprising, “disruptive” changes that often overwhelm our awareness, understanding, and ability to cope with events. Uncertainty concerns a lack of continuity and a resulting lack of clarity regarding what is going to happen from day to day. There is a systemic impact.

Under conditions of uncertainty, it is hard to plan for the future or even for one or two days from now given that nothing seems to be permanently in place. Contingency (reset) planning is required rather than tactical or strategic planning (Heath, 2025). At the personal level, conditions of uncertainty require that we keep our schedule tentative and our expectations quite flexible.

Complexity

Complexity entails the multiplex of forces operating in our world as well as the apparent inconsistent flow of information. Complexity also concerns the sensitive interdependence of everything we touch. This leads to a pervasive sense of confusion—making it hard to arrive at smart decisions (steeped as we are in the moving dance of reality). The condition of complexity concerns the presence of many different things and events that simultaneously impact life and work.

There is a systemic impact. It is very hard to make sense of or even find meaning in that which is occurring every day. Slow thinking is required rather than fast thinking (Kahneman, 2013). There also is a

major personal impact. We often must spend a considerable amount of time trying to figure out what is happening before making decisions or taking actions.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is the condition of 'haziness' in which both cause and effect are hard to attribute. Relativity seems to cast a shadow over established rules. The condition of ambiguity weighs heavily on our ability to function and make choices while holding on to inconsistent data. Ambiguity concerns the presence of many things and events happening at the same time. Our imposing world is confusing and often easy to observe clearly and consistently.

The systemic impact of ambiguity concerns a loss of trust. We can't trust the accuracy of what we see or hear or of what "experts" tell us (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024). More than the other five VUCA-Plus conditions, this condition of ambiguity forces us to accept a social constructivist rather than an objectivist perspective on reality (Berger and Luchmann, 1966). When ambiguity prevails, all bets are off regarding the appropriate verification of truth.

What about the personal impact? Under conditions of ambiguity, we often must look and listen a second and third time to ensure that what is seen or heard is accurate. Even then, our view of the world is seen "through a glass darkly." We are vulnerable to messages offered by those who assure us that we are "correctly" seeing the world. Alternatively, we create our Bubble of Belief and remain steadfast in our view of the world in one particular (often ideological) way (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024).

The Additional VUCA-Plus Challenges

I add two other challenges: turbulence and contradiction. They are both interwoven in the fabric of VUCA. They each add a further layer to the challenge we now face in our mid-21st Century society. Furthermore, turbulence and contradiction often pair up with one or more of the other VUCA conditions to add even more weight to the mid-21st Century burden.

Turbulence

Some things are rapidly moving, while others are engaged in cyclical movement under turbulent conditions. Other things are not moving at all or moving chaotically. The systemic Impact concerns the operations of a world in which four systems operate simultaneously. These four systems create the "white water" world prevalent in mid-21st-century societies (Vaill, (1989/2008). At a personal level, navigation of a white-water environment requires an ongoing search for balance and direction which in turn requires ongoing attention to the shifting conditions of this environment.

In describing Turbulence, I am turning to a metaphor offered by Peter Vaill, who suggests that we live in a "white water" world. I have added to Vaill's metaphor by noting that this whitewater system incorporates four systems that are exemplified by the properties of a turbulent stream: (1) rapid change (flowing segment of the stream), (2) cyclical change (the stream's whirlpools), (3) stability/non-change (the "stagnant" segment of the stream), and (4) chaos (the segment of a stream existing between the other three segments).

All four of these systems are operating in our current environment. For instance, if we examine the COVID crisis, we find that rapid change occurred as the virus rapidly spread and communities

throughout the world were massively impacted. Cyclical change was to be found in the patterned way that COVID-19 entered and spread in a community—and tragically in the way this virus or a sister virus probably will return.

We can find stability and non-change in the resistance to new norms and rules regarding addressing future virus invasions. All of this leads to the growing presence of the fourth system: Chaos. This is to be found not only in the inconsistent way we were each living our lives in response to the virus but also in the way public policies were formulated and revised in the United States and many countries over the past decade – and are soon likely to mutate (Christakis, 2020).

Contradiction

Contradiction concerns the frequent presence of radically different constructions and interpretations of reality—and the differing meanings assigned to the constructed reality. It should be noted that Contradiction is perhaps the most soul-wrenching of the six VUCA-Plus conditions. Valid and useful messages are delivered to us every day. However, they often point in quite different directions. They provide guidance and encouragement that lead us potentially to quite different outcomes. We are encouraged to eat one brand of cereal today and are told to eat a different brand tomorrow that “is much better for us” or “is more likely to be our child’s favorite”.

We also are told one day that most (or at least some) cereals are good for us. On another day we are told they are bad for us or worthless in the promotion of health. In one of our favorite magazines, we read about a major study that reports findings suggesting that moderately consumed cereal is good for our health. We need fiber in our well-balanced diet. Furthermore, cereals in one form or another have been around since humankind first wandered on earth. How can a grain of wheat or corn be bad for us? One day later we read an Internet article detailing the corrupt marketing of cereal. Even the so-called “organic” and high-fiber cereals offer little health-related value. Furthermore, the price of cereal is unconscionable. We are paying primarily for the fancy box in which the cereal comes to us and for the marketing of this cereal—not the grain itself.

Even more profound sources of contradiction are found in politics and social policy. We constantly face a choice between two options with both an upside and a downside. Furthermore, the achievement of one is likely to reduce the achievement of the other. Our governmental leaders solve a major social problem but increase the national debt. The need for control of pornography on the Internet is great but so is the need for an Internet that is free of constraints and values imposed by one group of “believers.”

It is even more challenging to recognize that each side of the contradiction often needs the other side to exist to find direction and energy. We need a strong enemy if we are to build commitment to our cause. Having lost an election, our political party becomes the “loyal opposition” and often finds greater clarity and coherence in this role than when we are in power. We need to spend money on fancy cereal boxes precisely because other cereal boxes on the supermarket shelves catch our attention.

I wish to push the consideration of Contradictions a step further by suggesting that contradictions are often polarities. This being the case, then we can turn to the remarkable insights and strategies regarding polarities offered by Barry Johnson (1992/1996). As the “dean” of *polarity management*, Johnson identifies polarities as “interdependent pairs that need each other over time.” He notes the

soul-wrenching effect of polarities: “They live in us and we live in them.” According to Johnson, polarities are pervasive in our life. “They exist in every level of system from the inside of our brains to global issues.” Their soul-wrenching impact is based on their “unavoidable, unsolvable (in that you can’t choose one pole as a sustainable solution), indestructible, and unstoppable” presence.

The systemic impact of Polarities and Contradictions centers on the credibility of advice being offered by people and institutions that can be trusted. Credibility is being challenged because the advice one trusted source offers is often inconsistent with the advice offered by a second trusted source. When we bring in dynamics associated with polarities, then we are likely to discover that advice offered by the second source is often triggered by the first source. The first source, in turn, becomes more vociferous (and often more extreme) in their pronouncement regarding what is correct and good in the world. The debate between two warring givers of advice is fully engaged. The intended recipient of useful advice is often left on the sidelines.

Many years ago, Plato offered the allegory of people living in a cave. These cave dwellers never directly review the world outside the cave but rely on the shadows being cast on a cave wall—these shadows produced by placing some shapes in front of a fire lit on the cave’s floor. Another version of the allegory identifies the source of the cave’s shadows as the blocking of light at the cave’s opening by people passing in front of the cave.

Once again, reality is equated with the shadows on the wall. Reality is not identified with events occurring outside the cave. Believing that these shadows are “reality”, we find that the cave dwellers obtain an interpretation of meaning to be assigned the shadows from a trusted “expert” who lives with them in the cave. Soon, there is widespread reliance on the expert’s interpretation rather than reliance on the shadows themselves.

I wish to update Plato’s allegory by introducing the condition of Contradiction. We find that multiple experts offer alternative interpretations regarding the shadows. These interpretations are not aligned with one another. The debate between confident but contradicting interpreters ensues. Some of the cave’s “experts” go even further. They claim that these are just shadows. They point to the figures inserted before the fire to produce the images on the wall.

Other experts might suggest that a “real” (or alternative) world exists outside the cave. The cave dwellers are confused and frightened. To whom do we listen? What do we do with those experts who are not to be believed or trusted? Do we ignore these experts? They are hard to ignore since they hang around the cave and offer disturbing observations. Do we instead throw them out of the cave—but then we would have to acknowledge that a world exists outside the cave? It is all soul-wrenching.

We need not live in a cave. Even outside the cave, we find it difficult to live with and be guided by contradictory information. All of this has a personal impact on us. We must change our minds—or at least be open to new perspectives and ideas. Agility is required (reference) along with an enduring tolerance for dissonance that repeatedly appears in our assignment of meanings to shadows appearing in our world.

These shadows represent not only what exists out in the world but also that which exists inside us. Our minds and hearts are saturated with multiple images of self and reality (Gergen, 1991/2000). Midst

Contradiction (alongside the other five conditions of VUCA-Plus) we must somehow find the capacity to think in a deliberative manner about difficult issues (Kahneman, 2013) and engage a high level of social intelligence in our interactions with other people (Goleman, 1995). Quite a tall order . . .

Implications of VUCA-Plus Conditions

In our mid-21st Century world, we must make decisions that take VUCA-Plus conditions into account. There is ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction. Polarizing values are present making thoughtful consideration and caring compassion difficult to sustain; furthermore, these decisions are subject to frequent review and modification as we try to navigate our volatile, complex, and often turbulent VUCA world. Goal setting is often unrealistic. The ad hoc character of our VUCA-Plus world often produces a feeling of infinite possibility and an unrealistic sense that the sky's the limit.

Failure and disenchantment frequently are associated with a lack of realistic goal setting unless the process of designing and managing an organization includes not only the re-examination of context and strategy but also the regular re-examination of goals. Another frequent problem we face in a VUCA-Plus world concerns the complex interpersonal- and task-related skills needed to run an organization—or government. We are often “in over our heads” when seeking to build and sustain a viable working relationship with other people.

Thus, we must enter the challenging world of VUCA-Plus with several critical skills. First, is the ability to think in a careful, systemic manner about the world swirling about us. It is easy to think quickly with nothing but a desire to make the anxiety go away. We are fleeing the lions—but to little avail. Second, we must acknowledge the stress associated with VUCA-Plus challenges. We must be mindful of this stress—and find ways to reduce it while being proactive in responding to the VUCA-Plus challenges.

Finally, our problem-solving and decision-making in a VUCA-Plus environment must be done in collaboration with other people. We are not strong enough to confront the VUCA-Plus challenges alone. It is in collaborative dialogue with other important people in our life that we find the courage, clarity and strength to not just make sense of our mid-21st Century world but also learn from the VUCA-Plus challenges and find nourishment and sense of self-purpose in successfully confronting these challenges.

I have intended in this book to make the conditions of VUCA-Plus not only more comprehensible but also more amenable to transformation from challenge to opportunity. Hopefully, the unique perspectives and strategies offered in this book assist in bringing about this transformative process. I first identify ways in which we are lured away from the task of directly addressing these challenges and are encouraged to travel down a rabbit hole into a distorted world of serenity.

I then offer several distinctive perspectives (lens) that make VUCA-Plus conditions more manageable—and the source of new ideas and new initiatives. These distinctive perspectives concern the effective engagement of Essentials in our life and work. I also introduce ways to focus on that which is the Essence of our life and work. In my exploration of Essentials and Essence, I introduce a new concept called *Polystasis*. This concept builds on the neurobiology model of Allostasis offered by Peter Sterling (2020) along with the dynamic, feedback-based T.O.T.E. model introduced many years ago by George Miller, Eugene Galanter, and Karl Pribram (1960). Specific strategies and tools (such as polarity

management and white-water navigation) are introduced as ways to deploy the unique perspectives offered in this book.

Anxiety in a VUCA Plus Environment

Leaders of mid-21st Century institutions often face the “perfect storm” of organizational anxiety. They must deal with major VUCA-Plus-related challenges alongside the anxiety that accompanies these challenges. They must lead through the anxiety experienced by specific members of their organization. Furthermore, it seems that anxiety is quite contagious. One anxious person in an organization (or any group) can readily spread this anxiety to everyone else in the organization.

Diffuse anxiety (“angst”) often pervades specific departments in the leader’s organization. The diffusion can be even greater. Angst can pervade their entire organization and even the society in which it operates. This anxiety can be induced in many different ways—and there are multiple sources of organizational anxiety. If the challenges of VUCA-Plus are to be met, then the anxiety (and angst) that accompanies (and is often elicited by) the six conditions of VUCA-Plus must be understood and contained. I attend in this chapter to the nature and dynamics of anxiety.

The Nature of Anxiety

In some ways the contagion of anxiety is quite adaptive. When human beings were living on the African savannah, they were among the weakest and slowest creatures to populate this often threat-filled environment. It seems that we humans survived (and ultimately thrived) by working collaboratively via language and strong family and clan bonding. We all wanted to know if something was threatening one or more members of our group so that we could act together to fight or flee from the source of the threat. Anxiety served this purpose.

Anxiety as a Signal

Many years ago, Sigmund Freud (1936) wrote about the signal function of anxiety. At the time, he was pointing to how anxiety alerts us to an important psychic reality: we are moving into dangerous territory regarding unconscious processes. We can expand on Freud’s analysis by considering the collective signaling function served by anxiety in warning us (as families or clans) about sources of danger that are real (such as predators, crop failure or the pending invasion of an adversarial clan)—or are anticipated or imagined.

Two sets of neurobiological mechanisms might be implicated in Freud’s signal of anxiety. These are the sympathetic and countering parasympathetic systems that serve critical functions in our daily journey through a shifting and at times challenging world. Within each of these two systems, specific neurochemicals play a central role. We can probe for a moment into the nature of these chemicals and, more broadly, the neurobiological basis of collective (and contagious) signaling anxiety.

First, there is the sympathetic system and adrenaline (also called epinephrine)—one of its primary agents and a key activator of our anxiety. When we are anxious, epinephrine and other arousing chemicals course through our veins and muscles. We are primed to take action that can alleviate the anxiety—be it against an approaching predator or invading clan. Without the sympathetic system in

place, we would probably not feel anxious. Many of the anxiety-reducing pills that some of us take are in the business of blocking sympathetic activation.

The countering parasympathetic system also comes into play regarding the signaling function of anxiety – especially as this anxiety becomes contagious. In recent years, neurobiologists have come to recognize the important role played in our lives by a specific neurotransmitter: oxytocin. It serves as a central agent in the parasympathetic system. Often referred to as a “bonding” and “nurturing” chemical, oxytocin is coursing through our brains and veins—more than is the case with most animals. Oxytocin pulls us together and makes us particularly fearful of being alone and isolated from family and clan members. We want to be close to others and feel threatened when others feel threatened. Anxiety is contagious and spreads rapidly precisely because we are pulled toward bonding.

Contagious Signals

This secretion of oxytocin could be considered the basis of empathy and might even be mediated by something called “mirror neurons” which are activated in us when we experience the wounding (physical or psychological) of other people. While the role played by mirror neurons is still quite controversial, there is very little dispute regarding the typical (and necessary) bonding of human beings with one another and the high level of sensitivity regarding our discomfort with witnessing the potential or actual suffering of other people with whom we are bonded – further intensifying the contagious and signaling nature of anxiety.

Clearly, we are attuned to the signal of threat transmitted by other people. This signal can be based on “legitimate” threats: the lion can be stalking us or the tribe living in the next valley can be plotting to take over our hunting ground or pastureland. However, as made famous by Robert Sapolsky (2004), we are quite adept at creating imagined lions. We can falsely conclude that our neighboring tribe is plotting against us. It’s not hard to project evil intentions onto our in-laws or former spouse. Thus, there can be “false alarms” that we have to manage with just as much skill as the alarms based on reality.

As parents, we must help our children sort out the difference between the bad things in life that are real and the “unreal” monsters lurking under their bed at night (equivalent in contemporary life to the imaginary lions of the African savannah). As leaders, we must assist with addressing the imagined VUCA-Plus monsters lingering under our organizational beds. We are expected to discern the difference between valid signals and invalid signals. Leaders are “paid big bucks” to detect the real from the unreal. This can be quite a challenge in the world of VUCA-Plus.

There is a second task of discernment that is assigned to us, as leaders. This discernment is needed to differentiate between various types of anxiety that are precipitated by the kind of issues we face in our organizations (and our life outside the organization).

We must not only sort out the real and imaginary predators but also determine what kind of predator (issue/challenge) confronts us. I propose that we face six types of issues. Each type of issue possesses its own threat and opportunity for resolution. Here are the types—as they relate specifically to the overarching challenges of VUCA-Plus and as they produce anxiety.

A World of Puzzles, Problems, Dilemmas and Mysteries

The concept of VUCA has become quite commonly introduced into considerations of 21st-century organizational challenges. I would suggest that we move beyond the VUCA and VUCA-Plus environment by considering not just the content contained in these analyses, but also the nature of the issues embedded in this environment and the threat each condition poses.

I propose that four types of issues are addressed in this environment. The most prevalent of these issues are not puzzles. However, the most important and most difficult to resolve are problems, dilemmas, and mysteries. These latter issues represent the fast, powerful (and elusive) lions that actually threaten us in the mid-21st Century savannah. I briefly describe all four types and identify the distinction threat(s) each of them poses.

Puzzles

Puzzles are the everyday issues that anyone working in an organization must face. Puzzles have answers. They are unidimensional in that they can be clearly defined and easily quantified or (at least) measured. Puzzles concern such things as changing a production schedule to accommodate a major new order or determining the appropriate fee for a new, longer training program. Changes in organizational policies to accommodate new federal laws can be “puzzling” as can the rearrangement of office space or distribution of parking spaces.

With a puzzle, the parameters are clear. The desired outcome of a puzzle-solution process can readily be identified and is often important to (and can be decided by) a relatively small number of organization members. It is the type of issue rightly passed to the lowest level of responsibility where the necessary information is available. Puzzles were quite common in pre-VUCA-Plus organizations.

Anxiety arises from failure to solve a puzzle. The desired outcomes are clear and the inability or unwellness to achieve these outcomes is cause for concern and even punishment (demotion, loss of pay, removal from the job or project). Was the wrong person assigned to this task? Didn't we have enough resources? Was this the wrong solution?

There is yet another source of anxiety that is not often acknowledged – though it is frequently present. Those who have identified and perhaps started working on a puzzle discover that it is not actually a puzzle but is instead a problem or dilemma. There is a moment of shock—and perhaps some freezing. Then a shift in perspective and practice must be engaged. Otherwise, there will be repeated unsuccessful attempts to solve the puzzle.

Researchers who study complex systems use a landscape metaphor to distinguish a complex challenge from simpler challenges faced in various systems, including organizations. Miller and Page (2007) provide the image of a single, dominant mountain peak when describing one type of landscape. Often volcanic in origin, these imposing mountains are the highest point within sight. There are no rivals. For those living in or visiting the Western United States, we can point to Mt. Rainer (in western Washington) or Mt. Shasta (in northern California). Mt. Fuji in Japan exemplifies this type of landscape.

You know when you have reached the highest point in the region and there is no doubt regaining the prominence of this peak. Similarly, in the case of puzzles, one knows when a satisfactory solution has

been identified and one can stand triumphantly at the top of the mountain/puzzle, knowing that one has succeeded and can look back down to the path followed in reaching the solution/peak.

We know how the peak was reached, or the puzzle is solved. We can readily replicate the actions taken. Conversely, anxiety fills us when we have failed to reach the peak and can't figure out how to be successful in the future. Unfortunately, other landscapes are much more challenging—and these represent the dominant environment of VUCA-Plus. Our mid-21st Century world is filled with collective angst precisely because many issues we face are NOT puzzles.

Problems

The second type of issue that a 21st Century leader faces with VUCA and VUCA-Plus can be labeled a “problem”. Some other authors have described these as “wicked” issues. Problems can be differentiated from puzzles because multiple perspectives can be applied when analyzing a problem. Several possible solutions are associated with any problem and multiple criteria apply when evaluating the potential effectiveness of any one solution.

There are many more cognitive demands being placed on us when we confront problems than when we confront puzzles—given that problems do not have simple or single solutions. Anxiety often arises in conjunction with these cognitive demands. Problems are multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary in nature. They are inevitably complicated and anxiety-inducing in that they involve many elements (Miller and Page, 2007).

Any problem can be viewed from many different points of view—thus it is unclear when they have been successfully resolved (producing even more anxiety). For example, we find a technical solution and realize the problem has financial implications. We address these financial implications and soon find a whole host of managerial concerns emerging that are associated with the problem. We are perplexed, befuddled—and anxious.

Researchers and theorists who are seeking to understand complicated problems often describe the settings in which problems emerge as “rugged landscapes.” (Miller and Page, 2007, p. 216) This type of landscape is filled with many mountains of about the same height (think of the majestic mountain range called the Grand Tetons or the front range of the Rocky Mountains that citizens of Denver Colorado see every day), as compared with a landscape in which one mountain peak dominates (think of Mount Rainier). In a rugged, complicated landscape, one finds many competing viewpoints about which mountain is higher or which vista is more beautiful. A similar case can be made regarding the challenging VUCA-Plus problems facing the 21st Century leader. How are clear, consistent, and accurate judgments made when we are anxiously torn in multiple directions?

Dilemmas

When certain issues that managers face appear impervious to a definitive solution, it becomes useful to classify them as dilemmas. While dilemmas like problems are complicated, they are also complex, in that each of the many elements embedded in the dilemma is connected to each (or most) of the other elements (Miller and Page, 2007). We may view the problem from one perspective and take action to

alleviate one part of the problem; we then immediately confront another part of the problem, often represented by an opposing stakeholder group.

Dilemmas are intimately aligned with the challenge of uncertainty in the VUCA model and the challenge of turbulence in the VUCA-Plus model. Uncertainty and turbulence travel hand-in-hand with personal and collective anxiety. We tighten our policies regarding new product development and creativity drops off. We increase prices to increase revenues and find that we are losing customers, thereby losing revenues.

Leaders do not always recognize a dilemma for what it is. They want to avoid the anxiety associated with uncertainty. New leaders who have not fully understood or acknowledged the unique nature of VUCA-Plus tend to see problems and dilemmas in a limited or simplistic way. They attempt to deal with them as if they are puzzles—hoping they are operating in a quiet stream rather than a turbulent river.

Turbulence is bad enough. The dilemma often is even more challenging. At times we find that the issue is a set of nested dilemmas. One set of conflicting priorities exists within another set of conflicting priorities. For instance, we want to pay one employee a bonus but are concerned that if we do so other employees who find out about it will be resentful and less likely to collaborate with their bonused colleague.

This dilemma, in turn, resides inside an even bigger dilemma: we want to increase salary and benefits for all our employees, yet also are trying to keep down costs because the market in which our product is being sold is highly competitive. These are complex dilemmas - not readily solved puzzles. Feelings of anxiety do not reside so much in potential failure; they reside more often in our inability to know how to address the issue at hand.

Living in a VUCA-Plus environment, contemporary leaders often confront the challenge of dilemmas and even nested dilemmas at almost every turn. As in the case of problems, dilemmas can be described as “rugged landscapes.” (Miller and Page, 2007) However, because dilemmas involve multiple elements that are intimately interlinked, they are far more than a cluster or range of mountain peaks of similar size.

This type of complex landscape is filled not only with many mountains of about the same height but also with river valleys, forested plains, and many communities (think of the Appalachian Mountains), as compared with a landscape in which one mountain peak dominates or in which a series of mountains dominate. In a complex, rugged landscape, there are not only competing viewpoints; these differing viewpoints are intricately and often paradoxically interwoven.

Life as a leader (or member of an organization) is often even more challenging and anxiety-filled in a VUCA-Plus environment. As leaders, we are likely to find that we are living and leading not just in a complex rugged landscape. We operate in what Miller and Page (2007) call a “dancing landscape.” Priorities are not only interconnected. Priorities are shifting, and new alliances between old competing sides are forged. The landscape begins to dance when a world of complexity collides with a world of uncertainty, turbulence, and contradiction. Anxious leaders must learn how to dance.

Mysteries

When addressing the challenges associated with dancing landscapes, we enter a domain in which problems and dilemmas seem to merge into mysteries. Mysteries operate at a different level than puzzles, problems, and dilemmas. Mysteries are too complex to understand and are ultimately unknowable. It is inevitably viewed from many different perspectives that are systematic and deeply rooted in culture and tradition. Mysteries have no boundaries, and all aspects are interrelated. Anxiety associated with mysteries resides deep in our heart (and soul)—it is existential (May, 1996/2015).

A specific mystery is profound. Desired outcomes are elusive, yet they linger with all members of a society. They serve as the foundation for all sacred institutions in this society—for, ultimately, mysteries are spiritual in nature. Unlike puzzles, problems, and dilemmas they are not secular. Eliade's (1959) distinction between sacred and profane is directly applicable.

Mysteries are beyond rational comprehension and resolution. They must be viewed respectfully because they are awe-inspiring or just awe-full (Otto, 1923/1950). Depending on one's perspective, mysteries are the things "we take to God" or at least "take to heart". We don't turn to an organizational leader, public official, or high-paid consultant. Instead, we turn to our pastor, a worldly friend, or (as a child) our wise grandmother for guidance (or at least reassurance) when confronted with a mystery.

The typical description of VUCA captures several of the most important dimensions of organizational mystery. The term unpredictable (U) is particularly relevant. As Taleb (2010) has noted, many Black Swans are to be found in our 21st-century world. Many VUCA-Plus events are like Black Swans—they can be imagined but are not likely to ever be encountered—until they occur. Specifically, some mysteries relate to traumatic and devastating events: Why did I get out of the World Trade Center while my desk-mate perished? Why is there evil in the world? Why did lightning strike our freighter but not the one next to it? Why did my child die before me?

Mysteries also encompass many positive events and moments of reflection. They can not only evoke threat and elicit anxiety-producing adrenaline but also evoke comforting memories and elicit pleasurable oxytocin. We ponder the source and meaning of a mystery: How did I deserve all these talents? Why have I been so blessed in my professional life? How did I ever raise such an exceptional child? How did I earn so much affection from these people at my retirement party? What is my destiny? Why did I fall in love with this person? Why did this remarkable person fall in love with me? Operating in a container of safety, privileged reflections on these questions can occur. Lingering joy and appreciation replace existential anxiety.

Locus of Control

There is one additional dimension to be considered when identifying the sources of anxiety. This dimension concerns our assignment of control in a specific situation. We perceive mysteries as taking place outside our sphere of control or influence. Psychologists call this an external locus of control and note that some people are inclined to view most issues as outside their control (that is, as mysteries). By contrast, puzzles are usually perceived as being under our control.

Psychologists, such as Julian Rotter (1966), have identified this perspective as an internal locus of control and note that some people are likely to view all issues as being under their control (as puzzles). Anxiety for those with an external locus of control is likely to reside in their sense of helplessness in the face of

threatening external forces that seem overwhelming. For those with an internal locus of control, anxiety is more likely to reside in their overwhelming sense of personal responsibility for everything that is happening in their life.

Problems and dilemmas are usually complex mixtures of controllable and uncontrollable elements. To successfully address a problem or dilemma, one typically needs a balanced perspective regarding an internal and external location of control. This is an important discernment in which to be engaged—and often quite difficult to engage when members of an organization (and particularly leaders of the organization) are anxious. When anxious, we revert to our preferred perspective (internal or external locus of control).

As I have noted, the sources of anxiety are likely to differ depending on one's locus. We are overwhelmed in different ways and find it difficult to provide any kind of discernment, including distinguishing between the types of issues we confront. It is indeed quite a challenge—but worth the effort—to focus on issue type. One of the most helpful inquiries when facing problems, dilemmas, and (in particular) nested dilemmas is for us (individually and collectively) to identify what is and what is not under our control. A problem or dilemma embedded in a rugged landscape is more likely to have components under at least partial control of a leader than is a problem or dilemma embedded in a dancing landscape.

Conclusions

I am suggesting that we must fully appreciate the nature of a VUCA-Plus environment in which most contemporary leaders operate. This is especially under conditions when real (and imagined) lions are threatening us and triggering anxiety. A myriad of VUCA-Plus challenges are associated with identifying and addressing puzzles, problems, dilemmas and mysteries. Leaders typically want their issues to be puzzles that they can control or perhaps mysteries for which they have no responsibility. They are anxious when moving outside the domain of puzzles.

Puzzles can be solved—and we know when we have solved them. Mysteries are outside our control, so we don't have to feel it is necessary to resolve them. But problems and dilemmas—these are much more difficult to address. We must determine which aspects of the problem or dilemma are under our control and which are not. Typically, we engage this determination while experiencing some anxiety—for a confusing mixture of internal and external control is inherent in problems and dilemmas. That's what makes them so difficult to address.

A second set of challenges concerns the values inherent in the typical role played by leadership. Leaders are often considered much more successful, in terms of both fortunes and fame, if they can “solve problems”—often by approaching them as puzzles. This criterion of success is prevalent even in a VUCA-Plus environment. It takes a strong dose of courage, commitment, and persistence for a mid-21st Century leader to acknowledge that the challenges are problems and dilemmas—which are not easily solved and need everyone to roll up their sleeves and work toward resolution. Fortunately, oxytocin exists alongside the adrenaline. We can bond while frightened. We can close ranks and collaborate in finding elusive solutions to elusive problems and dilemmas.

Searching for Serenity in a VUCA-Plus World

Where do we begin in providing an encapsulated (yet compelling) description of the challenging mid-21st Century world in which we now live and work? We can use words like “bewildering”, “incomprehensible,” or “chaotic”. These words describe how we feel, think, or see. We can also provide a label. We may declare that we live in a “postmodern world” or perhaps in a “post postmodern world.” I have written about (and soon will be preparing a book about) what I am calling an “ironic world.” These titles might be nice and tidy, but they don’t say much about what this world looks like or how we think about and feel about it.

In recent years, four words have often been offered and grouped together to distill the challenges we now face. As I have already noted, these four words are volatile (V), uncertain (C), complex (C) and ambiguous (A). As a consolidated group of conditions, they are identified as VUCA. I have added two other conditions: turbulence and contradiction. Pulling together these six conditions, I have identified the VUCA-Plus aspects of mid-21st-century life and work.

In this chapter, I wish to broaden my consideration of each VUCA-Plus element by identifying polarities associated with each condition. I also introduce the “shadow” of each VUCA-Plus condition. These are the conditions of stability (as opposed to volatility), certainty (vs. uncertainty), simplicity (vs. complexity), clarity (vs. ambiguity), calm (vs. turbulence), and consistency (vs. contradiction).

Together, the six oppositional conditions create a state of *Serenity*. While there is much positive to be said in the short run about this state, the costs are great regarding the relationship between Serenity and any clear and accurate perception of the “real” world in the mid-21st Century.

VUCA-Plus Polarities and the Search for Serenity

As I have noted, VUCA and VUCA-Plus can be of great value to those who assess, plan, and predict while serving in the mid-21st Century role of leader or expert. The challenges associated with the six conditions of VUCA-Plus are deservedly considered large in number and size. Each condition is fraught with multi-tiered problems and dilemmas often nested inside one another. We must make decisions in settings filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Choices must be made in a turbulent environment swirling with contradictory versions of reality and polarizing values.

We are worn out, having to grapple every day with the conditions of VUCA-Plus. Personal and collective anxiety grip us, based on our frequent encounters with both real and imagined lions. Many observers of our contemporary social condition have gone so far as to suggest that this is an era of Great Exhaustion (e.g. Newport, 2016; Stoycheva, 2022). Thoughtful consideration and caring compassion are required—even when we are overloaded and tired. Furthermore, analyses we have made and decisions we have enacted are subject to frequent review and modification as we try to navigate a turbulent and contradictory VUCA world.

Angst and Serenity

I have proposed that collective anxiety (*angst*) is linked specifically to the six conditions of VUCA-Plus. These six conditions make the amelioration of Angst much more difficult. This cognitive and affective difficulty, in turn, tends to pull us toward simplistic, reality-denying, and polarizing beliefs and solutions.

There is an important ramification here for those who seek to lead 21st-century organizations and social systems.

These leaders often must deal with the major VUCA-Plus-related challenges that escalate and sustain collective Angst. These women and men seem to be stranded on a boat that is caught up in the “perfect storm” of societal Angst. This is especially challenging when confronted with a major disruptive wave such as COVID-19 that is washing over the boat (Mura and Bergquist, 2020). Leadership in our 21st-century societies has become even more challenging given these unique Black Swan waves, as well as the big VUCA-Plus waves that are crashing over our boat right now.

The fundamental challenges in a VUCA-Plus environment involve determining what is “real” and how one forms beliefs, as well as predicting and making decisions based on beliefs and an assessment of this elusive reality. These thoughtful reflections are not easily engaged when the waves are crashing over us. We are anxious and exhausted. It is tempting to seek an easier way to meet mid-21st-century challenges. An alternative exists right before our “eyes” (and hearts).

Rather than confronting the challenges of VUCA-Plus, we can find ourselves in a real (or invented) land of serenity. Instead of volatility (V) we find stability (S). Uncertainty (U) is replaced by Certainty (C). We find SC rather than VU. This is a world of Simplicity (S) rather than Complexity (C), while the ambiguity (A) of VUCA-Plus is replaced with clarity (C). Another SC replaces CA. We find a two-fold SC. It is SC².

Serenity loves redundancy – and we have it with two SCs! Dwelling in this wonderland, we no longer have to navigate a turbulent environment. Rather there is calm. There is also consistency rather than contradiction. We can add calm and consistency to the world of SC². We now find the compelling “charm” of our six alternatives to VUCA-Plus in full operation. SC²⁺ is alive and well!

Serenity is achieved when these SC²⁺ conditions converge. SC²⁺ provides a formula for the achievement of Serenity. Together these six conditions of serenity yield something of a utopian environment. Stability, certainty, simplicity, clarity, calm, and consistency perhaps even offer us a touch of Eden . . .without the snake.

Seeking Serenity

On the surface, serenity does look quite tempting. It reduces Angst and opens the way for fast thinking and facile solutions (Kahneman, 2013). Furthermore, we can readily find Serenity in our world—at least short-term Serenity. Over the long-term, however, serenity is often elusive—and if we find Serenity in our mid-21st Century life, it may come at a cost. Much is lost when reality is distorted, and thoughts and actions become rigid. Most importantly, integrity is lost concerning our relationship with other people and our social system.

For instance, *Stability* requires establishing strong structures, processes, and attitudes. This make adjusting to the shifting conditions in our mid-21st Century world difficult. We establish what is equivalent to physical (and psychological) triangles to create and maintain stability. However, triangles are not easy to adjust. Unfortunately, our 21st Century demands agility. This means flexible structures, processes, and attitudes. We similarly find that *Certainty* (the second condition of Serenity) requires a rigidity of thought. It is hard to be both certain and creative, yet the shifting conditions of our mid-

century society require that we be creative. This often means operating in organizational cracks (Stacey, 1996) and the intersections between organizations (Johansson, 2004).

As a condition of serenity, *Simplicity* requires us to narrow our vision and our verification criteria. The cost of Simplicity is conveyed in the often-told story about the man standing beside the light pole looking for his lost keys, knowing that his keys are not located near the light. We attempt to find simplicity by standing near the light rather than searching for the problem where it resides. Similarly, we search for *Clarity* by standing at a distance and reconstructing what we are seeing so that it becomes clear. We “fill in” what we don’t see or hear so everything is comprehensive and meaningful. Jerome Bruner, a noted psychologist, suggests we go “beyond the information given” (Bruner, 1973). Even more broadly we participate with others in the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) so that we might see, hear, and understand more “clearly.”

There are two remaining conditions of Serenity (the + in SC²⁺). We find what seems to be *Calm* when we remain silent and immobile. However, this might not be a condition of Serenity. It might be a threat-induced freeze. We can easily mistake Calm for the Freeze response we make when attacked as the weak and slow creature on the African Savannah (Sapolsky, 2004). We act just like the other slow and weak rodents of the savannah who freeze rather than fight or flee. The defenseless rodents remained motionless. They hope the predator does not see them or ignore them and walk away. As Savannah inhabitants, we humans similarly would not move a muscle hoping for nonrecognition or indifference. Unfortunately, we were much harder to ignore than the rodent—especially when an attacking tribe approached.

Most of us no longer live on the African Savannah. Lions and invading tribes no longer threaten us. However, we frequently face other real (and imagined) threats. We still freeze when confronted with mid-21st Century challenges—at a time when we should be taking action. Unlike other undermanned creatures, modern-day humans don’t shake off our freeze. Rather, we remain frozen in a physically unhealthy state of arousal for an extended period. Furthermore, we are easily eaten by lions (legitimate sources of threat) when we are frozen. We are “devoured” even more frequently by the unprocessed stress that the real or imagined threat triggers.

Similarly, we are inclined to get eaten when we insist on being *Consistent* and congruent in our beliefs and actions. We take wrong action and distort reality to avoid dissonance. We desperately seek out congruence and consistency between our self-image and our actions, between our espoused theory and theory-in-action (Argyris and Schon, 1974), and between our values and our choices in life. Serenity comes at the cost of integrity. Like Faust, we sell our soul—now in exchange for “peace of mind.” This exchange might require something more—that we sacrifice our lives. We are frozen in consistency. We are vulnerable to many anticipated and unanticipated predators. It seems that Serenity isn’t always a desirable state when we try to survive on a 21st-century savannah inhabited by VUCA-Plus lions.

Given this summary description of costs associated with Serenity, I turn now to a more detailed analysis of the six conditions of serenity as each relates to its VUCA-Plus counterpart. I identify several distinctly different ways that challenge appears in our 21st-century world. These differences are framed as the left column and right column of polarity. In most cases, the left column represents a more conservative perspective on this challenge, whereas the right column is more likely to be at a cutting edge. I then

identify ways in which the accompanying option of Serenity can be achieved to escape from this specific VUCA-Plus challenge. This allows me to expand on costs associated with engaging each condition of Serenity (SC²⁺).

Volatility and Stability

Volatility refers to the dynamics of change: its accelerating rate, intensity and speed as well as its unexpected catalysts. The Left Column perspective on volatility centers on *Commitment* in the midst of volatility. This perspective concerns being faithful. We act in a consistent and sustained manner. In this way, other people can readily understand and predict our behavior. What about the Right Column? The focus from this perspective is on *Contingency* in the midst of volatility.

This perspective concerns flexibility. We keep options open and allow learning to occur in order to modify the actions taken. An appropriate engagement would involve emphasis on the intentions (goals, vision, values, purposes) associated with the issue being addressed. Which of these intentions should (must) remain constant and which can change depending on the shifting circumstances associated with this issue?

The Search for Stability

We live in a world of rapid unpredictable change. Furthermore, from a systemic perspective, volatility involves multiple changes that are often interwoven with one another. The rapid changes, cyclical changes, and chaotic changes of a white-water world are clearly evident. The personal impact of volatility on our sense of continuity and stability is profound.

We are often surprised and unprepared. Consequently, we look for some form of continuity and stability—a safe island on which we can land after being tossed about on a stormy sea. This island of safety offers a cure for the ailment of volatility—but at quite a cost. The cost is the loss of reality and the construction of a world that relies on a dualistic alignment with authority and a splitting of good from bad and “us” from “them”.

We look out over our mid-21st Century world and find nothing that resembles *terra firma*. Miller and Page’s (2007) would suggest our world resembles a rugged landscape. There is no one dominant element (no single presiding mountain); rather there are a host of mountain ridges and valleys. We find no single intention (goal, purpose, desired outcome) standing out as of greater importance than any other intentions. Furthermore, as Miller and Page noted, the landscape might be dancing. Priorities are constantly changing.

Unexpected (“Rogue”) events are to be seen in our rugged and dancing landscape. These are big things that occur in an organization or community. They often serve as the base for the powerful narratives that are to be found in all social systems. These are narratives about heroic actions, foolish or even disastrous decisions, or a moment of courage or honesty. These are frequently repeated stories about a critical and unanticipated decision made at the crossroads in the life of the organization or community. The success of an underdog (person or department) is often conveyed.

“Black Swan” is an appropriate label for the remarkable and powerful events that have caught our world by surprise (Taleb, 2010). We all know that swans are white—but what happens when a Black Swan is

discovered? Similarly, how could we have predicted the Arab Spring, the election of an African American as president, or the expanded use and influence of the Global Internet.

As Taleb has noted, unanticipated rogue events are often governed by power laws (exponential increases) that move the rogue event quickly from small to large. Within organizations and communities, small variations in the dominant pattern of the system can lead to major changes in certain, unanticipated ways. These are the rogue events and the emergence of a whole flock of Black Swans. The rogue event is often preceded by periods of great stability (strongly entrenched patterns). This is what makes a rogue event so surprising and is the reason why this event has such a powerful impact.

We secure *Stability* (the first condition of Serenity) by dismissing or ignoring the Black Swans. An island of safety and stability awaits us when we pull ourselves away from our stormy 21st-century world. Our island can be surrounded by a large body of water. We vigilantly protect ourselves from the outside world. Our island might instead be surrounded by a small stretch of water and perhaps a sand bar that can be crossed at low tide. We hesitantly let in the outside world. We must consider how isolated we wish to be and for how long a period.

An island that is remote from the mainland can serve as a *Buffer* against an unanticipated rogue event. In an organizational setting, this buffer might be a financial reserve or a human resource reserve. The latter reserve can be created by the cross-training of employees to step into functions other than their own if emergency action is required. The buffer might instead involve diversification of an organization's offerings. As in the case of a healthy ecosystem, product and service diversity in an organization enables it to survive changes in its "environment." Similarly, a community is more "adaptive" if its population is diverse (in terms of ethnic identity, race, socio-economic position, age, and gender identification)—despite the declarations made by advocates of "homogeny".

While buffers help to secure stability, they also require an expenditure of surplus money and time—which isn't always available in organizations or communities (especially when VUCA-Plus is prevalent). Buffers also can become an excuse for "hanging in" with the old way of doing things. Agility usually requires that leaders of an organization recognize the real consequences of remaining unchanged—even though it is tempting to delay executing a new initiative when a buffer is available. As system dynamics specialists (e.g. Meadows, 2008) have repeatedly demonstrated, delays can dramatically change the outcomes of a new initiative if and when it is finally enacted.

Leveraging and Trim Tabs

There is a more constructive way to find Stability amid volatility. We can offer *Organizational Leverage*. We set up a small stabilizing event or process in our organization or community to offset the volatility—much as we find with Buckminster Fuller's insightful analogy regarding "trim tabs." Fuller's trim tab is a small metal plate on the rudder of a ship that is set against the current direction of the ship—thus providing hydrodynamic stability for the boat. We set up a stabilizing trim tab in an organization as a countermeasure against newly emerging volatility and instability.

For instance, when a rogue event occurs, we remind our employees of our founding mission. This was done by the leaders of a major banking firm when they faced (unexpected) competition from another

major bank that was dramatically changing several of its banking services. A major initiative in this bank focused on the founding story of the bank. Core values are represented in this founding story.

The leaders of this bank recognized that they were about to introduce major changes in their operations to counter their competitors' new initiatives. They wanted to be sure that these changes were still aligned with the founding values. Reminders of the founding story served as a trim tab for this bank—and it yielded some benefits. However, this stabilizing initiative soon lost energy. Employees were not particularly interested in studying the bank's history when they had to learn new skills and acquire new knowledge aligned with new ways in which this bank needed to operate (to survive).

A stabilizing trim tab was also introduced by the leaders of a utility company. Retired employees at all levels of the organization were invited (as volunteers) to mentor newly hired employees. The retirees provided a stabilizing history, knowledge of the business (at all levels), and a diverse set of skills that helped guide and support the transition of these employees into their new jobs. Once again, this trim tab intervention was of limited value. New employees politely listened to the "old timers" but paid more attention to the "new stuff" they had to learn.

We find that stability is rarely gained when engaged indirectly through trim-tab intervention. Conditions of volatility usually require direct action to "right the ship." This typically means that leaders of the organization introduce *New Structures and Processes* without relying on trim-tab countermeasures. Volatility produces stress and there is no escaping it with history or foundational values. We might set up a matrix structure that enables our organization to rely on existing functional departments (finance, R and D, production, etc.) while readily establishing new product or service lines. We can also introduce organizational processes that acknowledge both the value of stabilizing expertise found among those employees who have worked for many years in the same job, and the value of emerging expertise to be found in job rotations and ad hoc task forces (made up of both old and new employees from different divisions and levels of the organization).

Contingency Planning and Pre-mortem Reflection

At an even deeper level, Stability and Serenity are to be found in an organization's or community's plans for its future. The inability to avoid stress under conditions of volatility requires that we do some planning for rogue events and Black Swans—rather than ignoring them. *Contingency Planning* is needed. This mode of planning requires (as the name implies) that we plan for various contingencies—some positive and some negative. I (Bergquist, 2014a) have written about a related planning process, *Pre-mortem Reflection*, that has been advocated by behavioral economists.

While we are accustomed to doing "post-mortem" assessments after a project is finished, Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues (Kahneman, 2013) propose that we engage in slow and critical thinking before initiating a project. While optimism is valuable as fuel needed to start a project, it is also important to recognize potential problems and barriers associated with the project. Pre-project reflection helps a project team prepare for possible challenges (contingency planning). This reflection also helps to reduce the depth of a change curve that inevitably accompanies major new projects or changes in an organization's operations (Bergquist, 2014a).

Over the past decade, I have frequently encouraged planning teams to identify and address probable problems and barriers associated with the project or organizational change that is about to be mounted. This is contingency planning and pre-mortem planning. However, I often take contingency planning and pre-mortem processes further as a constructive way to find stability in a volatile world. I invite them to identify Black Swans that might impact their project or change. The shade of black can vary--with both unexcepted positive events lighting the way and darker negative events posing a major challenge.

When I work with a nonprofit organization these rogue events often involve surprising new sources of money or loss of financial resources. Unanticipated changes in public policy regarding funding priorities are introduced when I am working with a government organization. Dramatic shifts in the size or focus of a competitor are common when I am working with a corporation. I even introduce some more humorous or “far out” Black Swans just to lighten the conversation and encourage creative problem-solving.

The swan might be the pill that significantly increases our intelligence or the landing of friendly aliens on Planet Earth. I sometimes suggest that the Black Swan is the elevation of one member of the planning team to the position of Emperor. They are commanding all operations in the world! The key factor is encouraging agility rather than stability amid volatility. Planning must be contingency-based and engaged prior to initiating a project. Strategies for securing stability such as buffers, history, retired employees, and trim tabs must be viewed as adjunctive to confronting the stress and challenges associated with Volatility.

Uncertainty and Certainty

Evolution and adaptation to an evolving environment require variance and uncertainty (anomalies). While we may seek to find a stable and predictable environment in our mid-21st century life, we are likely instead to discover a lack of continuity and resulting lack of clarity regarding what is going to happen from day to day in our life. There is an important systemic impact: it is hard to plan for the future or even for one or two days from now. Nothing seems permanently to be in place. At a personal level, we must keep our schedule and expectations quite flexible.

Uncertainty refers to the lack of predictability, the increasing prospects for surprising changes that are disruptive and often overwhelm our awareness, understanding, and ability to cope with events. In this case, a Left-Column perspective on Uncertainty would center on the *Assimilation* of changes into the existing framework. This perspective concerns making sense of and finding meaning in what is occurring in the present reality. By contrast, a Right-Column perspective on Uncertainty would center on *Accommodation* to changes by adjusting or reworking the existing framework. This perspective concerns learning from and adapting to what is occurring in the present reality.

The appropriate management of this polarity would involve the creation and maintenance of a learning organization (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Emphasis is placed in such an organization (or community) on the learning that occurs following either success or failure in addressing issues associated with uncertain conditions.

The polarity is addressed by recognizing that learning always involves structures and concepts that already exist (assimilation). We don't acquire anything of importance if the incoming experience is alien

to us. However, as we bring in and incorporate new information, the existing structures must change (accommodation). New experiences bounce off us (they are dismissed) if we are unwilling to accommodate them. A joint assimilation/accommodation process is required.

The Search for Certainty

There is a strong pull in our VYCA-Plus world to be rigid rather than flexible and open to new perspectives and practices. We become stubborn if we are not prepared for a high level of uncertainty and new learning. We find one specific way to be in the world and look for other people who similarly think and act.

Together, we create a Bubble of Belief. We collectively push for laws that enforce this one way of being in the world and seek to elect those leaders who are just as committed to this one way of thinking and acting. If we can't elect them in a legitimately recognized manner, then we are likely to join with others in manipulating the existing system or impose our own choices by force. Our rigidity leads to authoritarianism—as a cure for the seeming malady of uncertainty.

The search for *Certainty* is a major driving force for many people. It is probably the most compelling of the six pathways to Serenity. In writing about the quest for certainty, John Dewey (1929) had the following to say:

When theories of values do not afford intellectual assistance in framing ideas and beliefs about values that are adequate to direct action, the gap must be filled by other means. If intelligent method is lacking, prejudice, the pressure of immediate circumstance, self-interest and class-interest, traditional customs, institutions of accidental historic origin, are *not* lacking, and they tend to take the place of intelligence.

We see even in the early 20th Century perspective of John Dewey that the lure of Serenity is present. We can easily replace intellectual assistance with prejudice, immediate pressures, self-interests, customs, etc. that lead us to certainty and the comfort of Serenity (SC²⁺).

Three Paths to Certainty

Here in the middle of the 21st Century, our search for certainty might require that we *Confine Ourselves* to a small, confined silo where we can control (and therefore predict) everything. We set up large, thick boundaries between ourselves and those who are “other.” (Oshry, 2018). In search of Serenity, we establish a closed system that can't sustain itself over the long term.

Ironically, this confinement strategy is aligned with a “modern” approach to management: the focus is on control so one can predict and subsequently plan and execute without disruption. I am reminded of the witch in the musical *Into the Woods*. She confines her daughter in a tower so that nothing can harm her. However, the daughter can't survive (psychologically) in this closed system and must find a way to escape the tower. Like the witch, we often suffocate those which we love when we seek to find safety and certainty for them.

If we can't control and build strong walls and towers, then we must *Limit Our Aspirations* and house these aspirations in the past: “We have always done it this way and will always do it this way in the future.” This is the perspective of the recalcitrant in Everett Rogers (1962) model of innovation diffusion.

The recalcitrant is a person who is resistant to all new ideas. They are never likely to “leave home” and venture into new territory.

Actually, a recalcitrant often seeks out certainty and resists change because they were “burned” in the past by uncertainty—when they were trying to introduce something new in their organization or community. Failure in the enactment of new ideas not only leads to the loss of the idea but also to the loss of someone willing to try something new.

There is a third path. We ensure certainty by *Finding and Securing Power* in a system. With power comes control and with control comes an ability to do things “the good old way.” There is also the matter of self-fulfilling prophecy. We can establish a system of power that will ensure our own assumptions about other people (and ourselves) are being fulfilled.

We assume that those “Other” people are unskilled, untrustworthy, and/or different from us. Without any power, they will fulfill our expectations—because we are free to act in a manner that elicits their poor performance, disruptive behavior, and/or strained relationship with us. We project all forms of negativity onto them. They become part of what Carl Jung would call our personal “shadow.” Without power, these “Other” people are unable to oppose these personal projections. Furthermore, these personal projections often become part of a society’s collective “shadow”.

It seems that Certainty comes at a great cost. We can partially manage volatility with some pre-mortem planning; however, certainty is another matter. For us to be “certain” about something is to be removed from any serious attempt to deal with the other five conditions of VUCA-Plus. It is impossible to be certain when volatility, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradiction are swirling around our Head and Heart.

Complexity and Simplicity

Complexity entails the multiplex of forces, the flow of information that seems contradictory, and the sensitive interdependence of everything we touch. This leads to confusion, making it hard to arrive at smart decisions. We are swept up in a moving dance of reality.

A Left-Column perspective on Complexity would center on being *Clear-Minded* amid confusion. The central concern is sorting out what is most relevant and easily confirmed while dancing with reality. The opposing Right-Column perspective on Complexity would center on being *Open-Minded* amid confusion. From this perspective, we would be primarily concerned with recognizing and holding on to the multiple realities that reside in the dance with reality.

Coaching and consulting services can be appropriately and effectively used in addressing this polarity through encouragement and even facilitation) of slow, reflective thinking described and advocated by behavioral economists. Daniel Kahneman (2013), in particular, emphasizes the importance of avoiding fast, habitual thinking.

Slow thinking incorporates both clarity of mind (identifying and setting aside biases and sloppy heuristics) and open-mindedness (consideration of alternative perspectives, practices, and options). It is critical that thinking and decision-making slow down while we are saturated with the pervasive anxiety that accompanies Complexity (and the other conditions of VUCA-Plus), The polarity between clear-

mindedness and open-mindedness can be effectively managed with the use of tools offered by Kahneman and his colleagues (Kahneman, 2013; Kahneman, Sibony and Sunstein, 2021).

Complexity

We live in a world that is not just complicated (with many moving parts) but also complex (with many parts that are interconnected) (Miller and Page, 2007). We must consider many different things and multiple, interrelated events that simultaneously impact on our life and work. The systemic impact of this complexity is great. It is hard in mid-21st century life to make sense of or even find meaning in that which occurs every day.

At a personal level, this means that we often must spend a considerable amount of time trying to figure out what is happening before making decisions or taking actions. Slow thoughtful analysis is required (rather than fast “knee-jerk” and habitual thinking) This requires discipline and sustained concentration—which is hard to maintain in our fast-moving world. We also find it hard to concentrate when facing the other VUCA-Plus conditions (ambiguity, uncertainty, volatility, turbulent and contradictions).

There is an alternative. We can choose to reframe our world so that it is not complex nor are the other VUCA-Plus conditions present. We can ensure that fast, habitual thinking wins the day. This requires that we radically distort the reality of our mid-21st-century life. To do this distorting of reality, we must join with others who similarly distort their world. We can engage in even greater distortions when relating to these other people who perceive reality in a manner aligned with our perceptions.

We form an echo chamber with those who think like us. Our Bubble of Belief is impenetrable. We devote energy (and money) to ensure that those who lead and have power will think like us. They might even have helped to “teach” us how to reason in this simplistic and fast manner. We are fully devoted to these people who are now in authority—or are vigorously (and often violently) seeking to be in authority.

The Search for Simplicity

As I have already suggested, there is a strong, widespread push for simplicity in our lives. This push is aided in the mid-21st Century by the media we consume. We ask other people at work to “give it to us in bullet points.” We want to know the ten keys to success or the seven steps to take on the journey to health (or even happiness). We want sound bites when we pick up the news on our handheld device or even when we view our evening news on cable TV. “Tell me what I need to know and how I solve my problems. Make it fast and digestible.” This demand for simple information and simple solutions is particularly prevalent when Angst is swapping the country or at least invading our workplace or household.

This search for simple, easily digestible views of reality is not new. It goes back to at least the world of Ancient Greece and the insights offered by Plato in his allegory of the cave. I first offered his allegory in the preface to this book. As you might recall, Plato proposed that we live in a cave and never gain a clear view of reality. Instead, we view the shadows that are projected on the walls of the cave. We live with an image of reality (shadows on the wall of the cave) rather than with reality itself. Plato notes that we

have no basis for knowing whether we are seeing the shadow or seeing reality, given that we have always lived in the cave.

Shadows on the Wall

Plato speaks to us from many centuries past about the potential fallacy found in our search for simplicity in 21st-century societies. Most importantly, in our search, we can never know whether we are living in the cave or living in the world of reality outside the cave. It gets more complex.

Today, we live with an expanded cast of characters in the cave. First, something or someone is standing near the opening of the cave. Some narratives and perspectives serve as partitions blocking out some of the light coming into the cave. These partitions are cultural or personal narratives that we meet with every day. We don't see reality. Someone or something else determines which parts of objective reality gain access to the cave and are projected onto the wall. Those holding the partition have grown up in the cave; however, they may embrace a different agenda from many (perhaps most) cave dwellers. They may even control the media in our mid-21st Century world.

There is yet another character in our contemporary cave. This is the reporter or analyst. We don't have enough time in our busy lives to look directly at the wall to see the shadows that are projected on the wall from the "real" world. The cave has grown very large. We often can't even see the walls of the cave and the shadows.

We wait for reporters to tell us what is being projected on the wall and for the analyst to tell us what the implications of these images are for us in our lives. At times, we might even turn to historians of the cave to trace wall image patterns and trends. Our reports and analysts—even our historians--share their interpretations in sound bites. Thus, we are three steps from reality. Furthermore, as I noted in the Preface, we might face the unsettling condition of Contradiction. We are offered differing and often contrasting analyses.

On behalf of Serenity, we believe that the shadows on Plato's cave are "reality." And we accept only one rendition of these shadows. We don't recognize that someone is standing at the entrance to the cave and selectively determining which conditions of reality get projected onto the wall. We don't acknowledge that someone else is standing inside the cave offering us a description and analysis. We don't accept that alternative (and contradictory renditions) might be valid.

We can hope for a direct experience or at least for "honest" interpretations. Yet, we remain confused about what is "real" and often don't trust our direct experience. We move, with great reluctance and considerable grieving, to a recognition that reality is being constructed for us and that we need to attend not only to the construction but also to the interests and motives of those who stand at the entrance to the cave and those who offer us their interpretations.

Plato's allegory of the cave does provide us with the opportunity to gain insights through our reflections on the nature of the cave. We can critically examine the world that is projected onto the walls of the cave and the nature and agenda of the interpreters. This requires that we tolerate or even feel comfortable with Complexity. We should also consider whether or not to step outside the cave (direct

experience). However, we must recognize that we might lack the ability or be allowed to step outside the cave. Or we might just be stepping into another cave.

Perhaps it is safer to remain inside the cave than to venture outside without the help of interpreters. Should we (and can we) face the profound challenge of unmediated experiences (stepping outside the cave)? This certainly leads us far away from Serendipity—but may open the door (or cave entrance) to the fresh breeze of VUCA-Plus diversity—and reality.

Ambiguity and Clarity

Ambiguity concerns the 'haziness' in which cause-and-effect are assessed. Causes are hard to attribute. Relativity seems to trump established rules. Conditions of ambiguity weigh heavily on our ability to hold contradictory data and still function and make choices. An accompanying Left Column perspective on Ambiguity would focus on *Tolerating* this haziness. The primary concern would center on patience and being willing to remain in "limbo" until such time as the haze clears and actions can be taken. The Right Column perspective stands in opposition. This perspective would focus on *Engaging* the haziness. The primary concern is establishing a viable "truth" and "reality" upon which one can base and guide actions.

Appropriate coaching and consulting services can be requested to address the ambiguity-based polarity. Those providing these services can introduce multiple templates for assessing the nature of any challenging issue. One of these templates concerns the identification and analysis of both the immediate issue (the figure) and the context within which this issue is situated (the ground). A second template concerns the distance from which a specific issue is being addressed. It should be examined close up (as an intimate portrait) (proximal perspective) and at a distance (as a broad landscape) (distal perspective).

The third template involves temporal distance. The issue should be examined as it is currently being experienced (present time) and as it will probably be (or could be) present at some point ahead of us (future time). The polarity of engagement and tolerance is managed when each of these three templates is applied to the analysis of an important issue. The convening issue can be viewed from multiple perspectives—which allows for both immediate engagement and tolerance of certain immediate circumstances as well as longer term and “bigger picture” engagement and tolerance.

Confusion

Living in the mid-21st Century we are likely to find that many of the things we encounter and events happening around us can be quite confusing. Our world is often not very easy to observe clearly and the conclusions we reach about reality are often not consistent. Our collective blurry vision has an important systemic impact. As a society, we can't trust the accuracy of what we see or hear. Furthermore, we can't trust what “experts” tell us about the world in which we are living (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024).

If we are being honest with ourselves, then we are forced to adopt a social constructivist view of the world. There is no fundamental reality that can somehow be accurately assessed. Rather there are alternative constructions of the “real” world—which leave us with no clear, unambiguous sense of what is real and what is false. The traditional objectivist perspective must be abandoned. There is no objective

way to assess the real world. We are living in Plato's cave. The light projected on the wall is often flickering and not seen clearly.

What does this mean for us personally? It means we often must look and listen a second or third time to ensure that what is seen or heard is accurate. We must examine our assumptions and our constructed frame of reference if we are fully to appreciate our distinctive worldview. This task is quite challenging given all of the distorted lens and shades that are blocking our vision and creating our Bubble of Belief. How do we deal with what Frederick Jameson (1991) once called the "troubling ambiguity" of postmodern life?

We can regress to what William Perry (1970) labels a "Dualistic" perspective. We subscribe to the reality offered by one particular "expert" who arrives at our doorstep with a mantle of authority. This authority can come from academic or research-based pedigrees or a position of power. Unfortunately, academic-based and research-based credibility can readily be questioned given the instability of academic institutions and research in the mid-21st Century (Weitz and Bergquist, 2022).

Credibility can also be found in the repeated appearance of specific information (accurate or inaccurate) on the Internet. Apparently, many of us living in the mid-21st century are convinced by volume and redundancy. It must be true if we read and hear it often enough. Perhaps this maxim has always held true—predating the Internet. It gets even worse when this instability is accompanied by acknowledging social construction as an underlying framework for assessing the value of expertise. Patterns and assemblies of "fact" are assembled—making an "alternative reality" that much more acceptable.

With this assault of both defensible and indefensible "truths", we face the prospect of transitioning to what Perry titled a "Multiplistic" perspective. All expertise and expert messages are questioned. When faced with an assault of truths, it might be preferable to turn away from "credible" expertise and volume of information as primary reasons to accept what we see and read. We are guided instead by power and authority. Power is much more stable and reassuring than academic credentials or redundant Internet-based information. It is authority embedded in power that will often win the day when the world is saturated with ambiguity and flooded with information. Regressive Dualism triumphs and joins with an authoritarian perspective: We believe and follow those who rule. Those who advocate a version of reality that doesn't align with those in charge retreat to a corner of the cave. Those who suggest that there are multiple versions of reality are driven out of the cave . . .

The Search for Clarity

As we look at the world (from inside the cave or outside the cave) it is important to consider what we are looking at and what we are not looking at (ignoring) or seeing through a distorted lens. This means that we look back at our own attention strategies. Michael Polanyi suggests that we attend to that from which we are attending (Polanyi, 1969). The lens we are using greatly impacts what we are seeing. Most importantly, as I suggested about templates, we can look at objects and events that are distant in time and space, or we can look at objects and events that are close to us in time and space.

The distant (distal) objects and events are usually seen more clearly than objects and events that reside very close to us in time and space. Thus, in our search for clarity, we often remain at a distance and view everything from afar. We become historians of the past and might believe we need only replicate what

we think worked in the past. As Mark Twain suggested, history might not repeat itself, but it does rhyme—and we can view this history through a lens that we believe is objective and free of present-day emotions and biases.

We also seek clarity by reducing everything to a distant number rather than a more intimate narrative. Statistics provide at least probability. This is reassuring in our search for certainty along with clarity. This “ideographic” approach to assessing reality enables us to accurately predict how many boxes of Cheerios will be consumed this month. We are given a specific number and prediction that hover on the edge of certainty). We don’t have to taste the cereal or even meet anyone who has chosen this cereal. We can look at a distance and need not get emotionally involved with anyone eating Cheerios today.

What happens when we focus on a specific person's choice of a particular cereal (or something other than cereal for breakfast)? Everything gets less clear and less certain. We are suddenly involved in a “nomothetic” assessment, with a focus close up on the actual muddy act of making food choices at breakfast. The cereal eater might surprise us. They might choose a waffle rather than Cheerios. They haven’t eaten a waffle in more than a decade.

We are witnessing a Black Swan. Why the waffle? Does the breakfast eater even know why they made this choice? Behavioral scientists have won major awards (in economics rather than psychology) by delving into these fuzzy decision-making processes. They are willing to live with ambiguity and have offered many valuable insights based on this tolerance of ambiguity (cf. Kahneman, 2013; Ariely, 2008; Ariely, 2012; Thaler, 2015; Lewis, 2017).

What happens when we move in even closer to the subject of our study? What happens when this “subject” is us? What do we do with personal and highly intimate portraits of our life experiences? Often known as phenomenological studies, these inquiries inside our psyche produce insights of great value to not just ourselves but also other people.

I would point, in particular, to the autobiographical and visual portrayals of his internal psychic dynamics provided by Carl Jung (1963) in *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* and in his large, breathtaking volume titled: *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009). In these two documents, we encounter him “upfront and personal.” Very few other psychologists (or authors of fictional or nonfictional books) have been as brave (though Jung did request that *The Red Book* not be published until after his death).

The phenomenologists take it one step further. They challenge the assumption that one can objectively report events or describe objects. Like Michael Polanyi, phenomenologists push for an exploration of one’s own biases and perspectives as an observer and commentator on human behavior. Instead of trying to be objective, one can be honest and transparent. That means being candid about one’s assumptions, biases, and purposes for writing about or discussing a specific event or object. One of the best ways to do this is to be interviewed about one’s direct experience regarding this event or object.

I personally witnessed the profound engagement in this process of phenomenology on the part of a graduate student attending my graduate school in the early 1990s. Living with AIDS, my student had just lost his partner to this disease. I encouraged him to “enter the mouth of the dragon” and focus his dissertation on the experience of losing one’s partner to AIDS and preparing for one’s own death (which was likely during the early years of AIDS).

My student took on this profoundly challenging task by conducting in-depth interviews with six other men with AIDS who were grieving AIDS-related death of their partner. Taking a phenomenological stance, my student was first interviewed by a colleague regarding his own experience. During this interview, his own biases, fears, hopes, and reasons for conducting this study were revealed.

I have never seen a more “objective” study in which everything was revealed regarding the researcher’s biases, assumptions, and motivations. His dissertation ended up being rough but saturated with profound insights not only concerning AIDS but also the processes of grieving and dying. My student died several months after completing his dissertation and being awarded a well-deserved doctorate.

This dissertation process was close and personal for me. I can’t be objective about it even more than 20 years later. For me, the whole engagement is unclear. It is filled with my feelings of admiration, sadness--and a sense of privilege that I was able to be with him for this final act of his life. Thus, I, like most people, can be clear from a distance but not clear up close and personal. Numbers are simpler than narratives. Big distal and ideographic pictures are clearer and less emotionally distorting than local pictures which are proximal and nomothetic). Serenity can ultimately be achieved only by closing our eyes and our hearts.

Turbulence and Calm

The white water is all around us at this point in the 21st Century. We are living in a turbulent world. Some things in our life and work are moving rapidly, while others are moving cyclically. We are also likely to find that some things are not moving at all—even if we would like them to move. Perhaps, most importantly, some things in our lives and work are moving chaotically. They are swirling about unpredictably. We might be able to adjust temporarily to one of these four conditions. However, we might soon find that we are facing a different set of conditions that require a different manner of planning, execution, and leadership.

What is the systemic impact? The four systems (rapid change, cyclical change, non-change, and chaotic change) are all operating simultaneously—and they are often bumping into one another. There is another important factor that we must add to this complex equation. We know that any system will become chaotic when it moves fast. Overly rapid change damages everything in a system and makes this system hard to manage. Thus, in a world where accelerating change (the first system) is becoming more prevalent, we find that chaos (the fourth system) will also become more prevalent. The cyclical changes—that are more predictable—will become less prevalent.

Stagnation (the third system) will also tend to decline in magnitude—or it will become more isolated from the other systems. While a reduction in the size of this third system might initially seem to be a positive outcome, we find that this is not the case, for the third system is often a source of stability for any system (especially a human system).

That which Talcott Parsons (1955) called “latent pattern maintenance” tends to reside in the third system. Furthermore, we know that the nutrients in a natural system (such as a mountain stream) reside primarily in the so-called “stagnant” portion of the stream. This is where leaves eventually end up and sink to rot (convert into new forms of nutrition for other living beings in this stream). We might find that

this same nutritional function is being served in human systems. This third system is just as important as the other three.

Centering and Balancing

Given these characteristics of a “white water” world, we find that the personal impact is likely to be great for any of us who are living and working in this environment. The white-water world requires a search for balance and a centering direction—which in turn requires ongoing attention. We need a kayak when navigating the white water. Canoes will tip over. They don’t offer the agility of kayaks. There is another requirement. We must find our center of gravity when steering our kayak through the white water. Peter Vaill ((1989/2008) goes so far as to suggest that this center of gravity is often found in a core set of principles and values. We might even adopt a spiritual perspective when searching for this center of gravity.

One might wonder if this core can be found in basic religious beliefs or an alliance with some authoritarian figure. Do we find balance when guided by firm religious tenets or the dictates of a strong leader? I would suggest that this rarely is the case, for this leader and their beliefs, alliances, and tenets are much too rigid. Like those operating the canoe, these leaders can only move in one direction (forward) and must shift their rigid perspective (single-bladed paddle) from one side to the other when navigating the white water. These leaders are working with a “one-dimensional” tool when counterbalancing and adjusting to changes in the water’s direction. This makes navigation very difficult. Similar limitations are found when leading an organization or community through white water. Single-edged solutions don’t do the trick in turbulent environments.

By contrast, the person navigating a kayak engages a two-bladed paddle that makes counterbalancing and shifting directions much easier. Similarly, a multi-dimensional tool makes white-water navigation in an organization less challenging. Successful white-water leaders employ a variety of tactics and strategies when navigating the white water. At times they stick to tried-and-true procedures, while at other times they might rely on new procedures generated and tested in skunkworks.

The leader might look for a competitive advantage by venturing out to a new international market or they might look for a collaborative advantage by joining a consortium started by one of their competitors. The term Agility can readily be applied to successful kayaking—and successful leading of a mid-21st Century organization. This term does not readily apply to a person or organization caught up in the vice grips of a rigid religious belief or authoritarian rule.

A Left Column perspective would focus on *Centering* amid multiple changing circumstances. A “kayaking” perspective primarily concerns searching for and finding the core, orienting place that provides one with balance and direction. Agility plays a central role in moving the double-bladed paddle back and forth. A Right Column perspective focuses on *Balancing* amid multiple conditions of change.

From this perspective, we must allow for and participate in many balancing points and direction shifts in our work and life. For the kayaker, this means looking “downstream” to prepare for the upcoming challenges presented by the white-water river they are navigating. What might be found around the next bend in the river and how does my current position on the river prepare me for what might await

me around the bend? Kayakers and leaders do contingency planning when navigating their turbulent environment.

Keeping with the white-water metaphor, we can address this polarity appropriately and effectively by focusing proximally (up close) on our centering and simultaneously focusing distally (at a distance) on what might await us. Specifically, this means using centering—and agility—to think outside the immediate box and “lean into the future” (Bergquist and Mura, 2011) with forethought.

Otto Scharmer (2019) offers a *Theory U* way of thinking about and acting in a world of turbulence. He writes about “learning into the future.” When engaging in this anticipatory learning, Scharmer suggests we must first seek to change the system as it now exists. Scharmer emulates John Dewey’s suggestion that we only understand something when we kick it and observe its reaction. However, Scharmer goes further than Dewey. He proposes that we must examine and often transform our way of thinking in the world—which requires both centering and forethought—if this change is to be effective and if we are to learn from this change in preparation for the future.

From the perspective of whitewater navigation, this would mean we experiment with different ways of engaging our kayak in our current whitewater world. We particularly try changes based on polystatic predictions about how the river is operating around the next bend. Will there be more rocks, greater drop in elevation, more bends, etc.? We take “notes” on how our kayak is behaving in response to changes in our use of the paddle, our way of sitting in the kayak, etc.

Scharmer requires that we not only try out several ways of kayaking, and take notes on these trials, but also explore and embrace new ways of thinking about kayaking and the dynamic way it operates in the river’s turbulence. These new ways are activated by what we have learned from the current trials. The new ways, in turn, influence other changes we might wish to test before reaching the next bend in the river. Effective learning becomes recursive and directed toward (leaning toward) the future.

This type and level of learning is challenging. Furthermore, it is hard to determine which changes to make and how best to learn about them. These processes are difficult to deploy while still navigating the current white-water world. An expert on white water navigation might join us in the kayak (without tipping it over!). They can help us manage the real-time interplay between centering and forethought. It takes a particularly skillful coach or consultant who is herself both centered and forethinking if she is to be of benefit in the management of this dynamic, turbulent polarity. The request should read: “Coach or consultant requested who is willing to travel—on a white-water river. They must be willing to learn in real time alongside their client. A proclivity toward leaning into the future is a prerequisite.”

The Search for Calm

It is understandable why we search for calm while navigating a treacherous white-water world. We do experience the Great Exhaustion. We might steer our craft to a quiet place on the river (the stagnant system) or pull our craft over to the side of the river and sit on the bank for a short while. In an organizational or community setting we look for calm in several ways.

The most obvious is consumption of mind-altering and emotion-altering substances. We drink a beer or something “stronger” while sitting on the bank. Things seem to be a bit less turbulent after one or two

cocktails. We avoid dealing with multiple life crises by downing a bottle of wine every evening or by taking some of the pain-killing pills we obtained to treat a sore back. The pills seem to be helping as well with our sore life.

Alongside the pills are the denial and isolation strategies. We focus on only one segment of the white-water system. We may see only the recurring challenges—such as the annual audit or the drop in Fall sales. We might instead focus on the part of our life that has remained the same for many years. We still go down to the local tavern and drink with our buddies. We leave the swirling world around us at the front door of this welcoming Bar. Daily rituals of many kinds make it a bit easier to deal with the ongoing changes.

Conversely, we might be addicted to the thrilling challenge of fast-moving operations in our organization. There is always a crisis and challenging deadlines. As long as we focus on the short-term, we don't have to worry about the long-term and serious, deep-seated challenges to our business. We never look down the river to what awaits us, for the current rapids offer us sufficient "highs". Neuroscientists tell us that we can easily get addicted to our own adrenaline. Under these conditions, a vacation from the "stress" of work ends up being unpleasant—for we are in withdrawal from our addictive internal chemicals. Similarly, we need the threatening competitor ("it is all win-lose") as well as toxic (and addictive) company politics ("Can you believe what he/she did! We must counter it!").

The calm might be applied at one moment as a short-term stress-reduction technique: "I am calm. I am perfectly calm!" We take a deep breath, meditate, listen to soothing music, work out in the gym for an hour, curl up for a brief midday nap, sit in the hot tub, or take a long shower. We might instead apply some "micro-aggression" against someone lower in the pecking order of our organization or community. A few of us are calm after we kick the cat, insult our daughter, or harass a clerk in our office. Some of these short-term remedies do work. We are calm—but only for a brief moment and sometimes at the expense of other people or our productivity.

Finally, there is a major, long-term calming strategy. This involves the search for sanctuary (Bergquist, 2017). We find short-term relief in the stress-relieving mini-sanctuaries we create (music, hot tub, meditation, etc.). This mini sanctuary might be a large, soft chair in our living room where we can read or listen to recordings featuring our favorite jazz pianists. We might also find this mini sanctuary in our garage where we can work on a new cabinet or in a spare room in which we set up our easel and find a container for our paint brushes.

However, this might not be sufficient. Many of us long for relief that is not momentary. We find (or create) sanctuaries that last a day or two (festivals, fairs, vacations, etc.). Or we find sanctuaries that can last for a longer time. We can spend an extended period at a Zen Center or Recovery Center. Traditionally, sanctuaries were often established for people who had lost a battle or violated some societal norm. These losers and transgressors would enter (or escape to) a sanctuary that provides healing and learning. The heiau called "The City of Refuge" on the Big Island in Hawaii has served this important function.

Sometimes sanctuary is embedded in a ritual, like evening prayers for the Jew or one of the five periods of prayer for the Muslim. Sometimes it involves a routine, like stopping in the park to feed pigeons on

the way home from work at the end of the day or having a quiet cup of coffee in the staff room of a busy corporation. Not always, but often enough to keep us engaged, these moments take us to a place we call our true home.

We are rested and renewed. We say, “Now I am more myself again.” Sanctuary enables us to stop, hide, retreat, rest, and become “more ourselves again.” We find calm away from the turbulence of everyday life. Yet, we can’t live in a sanctuary all the time. We might heal and learn in a Heiau—but must return to a VUCA-Plus world that continues to do damage and elude comprehension.

Contradiction and Consistency

We have now arrived at the final condition of our VUCA-Plus environment. This condition is more likely to drive people to Perry’s Dualism and an authoritarian regime than the other VUCA-Plus conditions. It is also the condition that is most likely to prove challenging to leaders who view themselves as open-minded. We are confronted with valid (though often ambiguous) messages constantly being delivered. We often wish they would remain vague, for clear messages may point in different directions.

At a trivial level, we are inundated with advertisements that conflict with one another. Which, after all, is the best way to brighten our smile? Do we need one of those fancy whitening trays prepared by our dentist or will one of those much less expensive whitening toothpastes be sufficient? And what about mouth odor, wrinkles, and digestive challenges? There is a false sense that we are free when we make all these trivial choices.

As Erich Fromm (1955) noted many years ago, marketing orientation is pervasive in American life (and in most other Western countries). This orientation distracts us from real matters of freedom (Bergquist, 2024a). In mid-21st Century life, this distraction is not confined to Western societies. We even find it in the very different societal structures of China (Ma, 2019). Yet, we discover a new set of challenges amid this widespread escape from true freedom. These challenges center on contradictions in the marketing messages we receive every day. It is hard to be Serene if the world is hitting us hard from many different angles and forcing us to make difficult decisions about things that aren’t ultimately of importance.

At a more profound level, we find political candidates offering perspectives and practices one day that seem to contradict what they propose one day later. Furthermore, one set of political candidates seems to be living in a quite different world from another set of candidates. There often does not seem to be a meeting ground. The moderate candidate and those advocating compromise seem out-of-date with current polarized political realities.

The splitting of political reality into profoundly contradictory camps is exacerbated by the misinformation, lies, and distortions offered by one or more camps (Weitz and Bergquist, 2022). It is one thing to acknowledge that there are valid differences in the way two political candidates view the problems their constituents are facing. It is quite another thing to be confronted with profound differences based at least in part on the inaccurate information provided by one or both candidates. Contradictions based on different viewpoints can be addressed through constructive dialogue whereas falsehoods and deliberate lies often can be addressed only through litigious confrontation.

A major societal impact occurs when contradiction saturates our 21st-century life. Credible advice is offered by people and institutions that can be trusted—but the advice is often inconsistent. As a result, we can't trust any expertise, since the "experts" don't seem to agree on anything. We collectively regress to Multiplicity—using William Perry's term (Perry, 1970).

Faced with no one clear "reality," we decide that there is NO true reality. We turn collectively to expedient alignment with an authoritative version of "truth." Whoever has the most power and the highest status provides the "truth" and those who offer their version of the truth from outside the circle of power and status are ignored or isolated. The new golden rule is in effect: "Those with the gold will/should rule [and provide the truth]!"

At a personal level, contradiction can have a challenging impact. To remain "sane" we often must change our attitude about certain issues or at least be open to new perspectives and ideas. It is not hard to try out a new teeth-whitening procedure. It is much more difficult to change our political affiliation or attitude about an important issue such as domestic violence or climate change.

Psychologists and behavioral economists, such as Dan Ariely (2012), have conducted experiments revealing that we become cognitively "lazy" when tired, overwhelmed, or alienated. We fall back on habitual behavior and fast thinking (heuristics). Under these conditions, we not only can "relax" our critical capacities, but also take "delight" in finding that the contradictions disappear. We listen to one expert and one point of view (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024). We rely on one source of dental advice and one political party. There is no need to ever depart from our individual or collective "bubble of belief."

Life becomes much easier: "Don't change the news channel or pick up a newspaper or social media posting that offers an alternative interpretation of the daily news—or even a more balanced perspective." After a hard and demanding day of work and time playing with our kids, the last thing we need is a thoughtful analysis offered from several different political perspectives. Enough already! Authoritarianism makes it much easier to relax and retire from the daily challenges of life and work. No more contradictions. It is all clean and simple. Our Bubble of Belief is soundly in place and will never be disturbed by disruptive messages.

Perspectives, Practices, and Polarities

Contradictions exist when we are presented with two or more perspectives or sets of practices that are of equal validity and are equally useful. However, these perspectives and practices differ significantly from one another and are not readily reconciled. The Left-Column perspective would focus on *Appreciating* the value of each viewpoint or practice before choosing the best one. The primary concern from this perspective is determining where the greatest truth is to be found, and which option is most aligned with our values. The Right-Column offers an alternative perspective. It concerns *Integrating* diverse perspectives and practices. The primary concern from this perspective is the recognition that there is one (and only one) unified reality that can be viewed from multiple, complementary perspectives. The differing perspectives and practices that we encounter are only components of a larger, unified perspective or practice.

These two columns need not remain in conflict with one another. A tool called Polarity Management was first introduced by Barry Johnson (1992/1996) to address the many contradictions we face in our

individual and collective lives. We turn to the perspectives offered by Johnson. As he notes, we tend to linger briefly on the advantages inherent in one option when confronted with two viable options. Then we begin to recognize some of the disadvantages associated with this option. We are pulled to the second option. Yet, as we linger on this second option, we discover that this perspective or practice has flaws and disadvantages. We are led back to the first policy—and must again face the disadvantages inherent in this first option.

The swing has begun from option one advantage to option one disadvantage to option two advantage to option two disadvantage back to option one advantage. We are whipped back and forth. Anxiety increases regarding the swing and failure to find the “right” answer. The vacillation also increases in both intensity and rapidity. This is what the dynamics of polarization are all about. There is inadequate time and attention given to each option.

Polarity management begins with reframing our focus from Either/Or to Both/And—thus bringing in the Right-Column focus on Integration. The next step is to recognize the value inherent in each perspective or practice—thus bringing an Appreciative focus to the Left-Column. Rather than immediately jumping to the problems and barriers associated with each option (which drives us to the second option), we spend time in the appreciative column seeking a better understanding of the merits associated with each option. Only then do we consider the “downside” of this option—and only then do we turn to the other option (once again noting its strengths and then its downside).

With this preliminary analysis completed, we shift our attention to what happens when we seek to optimize the benefits of either option at the expense of the other option. We search for rich insights and productive guidance in each option, rather than seeking some simple resolution of the contradiction. An important cautionary note is introduced at this point. Barry Johnson warns that we must not try to maximize the appeal of any one side. Rather we must carefully optimize the degree to which we are inclined toward one side or the other. How serious are we about our exclusive focus on one side and how long will we sustain this focus? We must balance the duration of our stay on one side with consideration of the other side.

Optimizing also means we must find a reasonable and perhaps flexible set point as we act in favor of one side or another. Finding these acceptable optimum responses and repeatedly redefining them is the key to polarity management. We must be flexible in both our appreciation and our integration of contradictions. Johnson has one more important point to make regarding the management of polarities. He identifies the value inherent in setting up an alarm system as a safeguard against overshooting either side of the polarity. It would be prudent to build an alarm system that warns us when we may be trying to maximize one side and are on the verge of triggering negative reactions coming from the other side. As in the case of turbulence, we must seek both balance and forethought while addressing contradictions.

The Search for Consistency

Must we engage the difficult slow-thinking processes advocated by Daniel Kahneman when we seek to manage contradictory perspectives and practices. Do we need to call up Barry Johnson and use polarity management? Instead, we can find consistency and eliminate contradictions by adhering rigidly to a

schedule. The same outcomes are produced every time we adhere to this schedule. If we have a regimented routine, there are likely to be predictable impacts on other people and our environment. Everyone is relieved.

When this routine is highly restricted, each outcome will be closely related to other anticipated outcomes. They will be fully consistent with one another. We order the same breakfast at our nearby restaurant. We know how this meal will assist digestion and prepare us for a day of routine work. We are wearing a suit of psychic armor made of one material. It is without any unnecessary joints or openings that might allow for flexibility, variance, inconsistency – or incongruence. We are clad in a metal suit, like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*—unable to move and in search of a heart (Bergquist, 2023a; Bergquist, 2023b). We protect ourselves with “character armor” (Reich, 1933/1980) that admits no intrapsychic challenge (dissonance) or contradiction—but at considerable cost. Much like the Tin Man, we not only lose all flexibility but also our unique and authentic self (our heart) when donning the armament of deeply protective character.

Consistency is also achieved when all diverse, external viewpoints are blocked out. The club one chooses to join is highly selective. The “other” is never allowed in. Homogeneity is of highest priority and groupthink is a pre-requisite. We don’t want “no bad news” (to quote from *The Wiz* a musical remake of *The Wizard of Oz*). This purity of thought and belief often is reinforced by a formal or informal “black ball” system. One is admitted to the club only when everyone inside the club agrees to the invitation.

Admission to the “inner temple” requires not only a test of shared belief but also a process of “purification” (or “initiation”). Initiates are required to sacrifice a part of their identity. They endure trials that test their commitment and willingness to subjugate themselves to the will of those already residents of the inner temple. Purification ensures consistency. All inconsistencies are scrubbed away. Serenity (SC²⁺) is assured. However, this is quite a sacrifice to make on behalf of one’s search for consistency. Cognitive and emotional congruity are attained but at the cost of a deeper level of personal integrity.

Finally, we find consistency when we become “true believers.” This often accompanies our entrance into the inner temple. A set of tenets in our religion or life philosophy requires us to think, feel, and act in a certain manner. Each of the tenets is compatible with each of the other tenets. We find a long history of debate and resolution associated with each tenet that ensures full alignment. As “God-given” gospel, it purportedly contains no contradictions (though many are present but never acknowledged).

Each tenet is aligned with an overall view of the world and a set of commandments regarding how one should act. There is nothing but consistency in our life when there is full alignment with the food we eat, with the prayers we pronounce several times each day, with the people (“fellow believers”) we allow into our life, with the person we choose to marry, and with how we are preparing for our own death. All these “faithful” preferences and practices fit within a single comprehensive and rigid framework. With this framework in place, there is little opportunity for contradictions to arise in any domain of our world or at any moment in our life. Yet, at what cost?

Conclusions

In essence, there are two ways to address the challenges of VUCA-Plus. We can escape to Serenity (SC²⁺)—and absorb all of the costs associated with this condition of denial and dysfunction. Instead, we remain with these challenges. We find ways to embrace and find both energy and partial solutions within each challenge. We can even “manage” the polarities inside each of the six VUCA-Plus conditions. There is so much more that can be done with VUCA-Plus challenges than hightailing it to a rabbit hole.

Having made this brash statement, I ask myself a fundamental question: am I overly optimistic in suggesting that we don’t need to escape into Serenity? A second question is posed: Can polarity management help us face the challenges of VUCA-Plus? I also ask a third question. Can we hold on to two or more contradictory beliefs without dropping one of them? Perhaps I should replace these three questions with a fourth and fifth question. Fourth, do we have any other option if we are to be successful in addressing the overwhelming challenges of VUCA-Plus? Fifth, if there is another option is it just some disguised form of regression toward Serenity?

Management of VUCA-Plus challenges and the polarities inherent in each VUCA-Plus condition requires a level of meta-learning. We learn how to manage each condition and each polarity by reflecting on and learning from this management. We discover ways to more successfully identify, analyze and manage the VUCA-Plus polarities.

I propose that Polarity management enables us to hold two or more beliefs in abeyance as we slowly and thoughtfully consider the merits and drawbacks of each belief. I believe that we can apply what we have learned from engaging each of these six conditions to our broader appreciation for our mid-21st Century world. This meta-learning enables us to lean into and learn into a future that will undoubtedly pose even greater challenges than we now face. Am I being too optimistic? The alternative is to remain frozen on a 21st Century savannah populated with many VUCA-Plus lions. We would stand motionless and helpless in this threatening environment. We would feel polarities coursing through our psyche and soul. Not very healthy . . .

VUCA-Plus conditions: \$ and Coaching

Volatility: unable to predict. Need strong reserve

Uncertainty: contingency planning, “agile” dollars

Complexity: slow thinking regarding allocation of dollars; systemic thinking

Ambiguity: looking to multiple advisors, multiple perspectives

Turbulence: patience and learning

Contradiction: managing the polarities

Conclusions

Meta Coaching Challenge: while economics was established in modern societies, coaching clients often live and work in premodern settings and face the challenge of postmodern VUCA-Plus settings and conditions.