

SUMMARY PAPER 2



**We have the future of the world in our hands.
Are we up to it?**

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Overview: We find ourselves in a change of era rather than an era of change. A change in human consciousness, which will enable us to reframe both challenges and solutions, is necessary to address the difficulties which we now face as a species. This change is not only possible, it has already started.

Key ideas:

Psychosphere: The holistic, interconnected, interpenetrated system of narratives, symbols, images, representations, language, metaphors, patterns of life, values, epistemologies, cognitive habits, rituals, religions, sports, forms of commerce, metaphysics, art, technologies that together provide the raw materials of identity and the psychological context of life. O'Hara, 2007

Conceptual emergency: A term developed by the International Futures Forum to describe a situation in which the concepts, ideas, models and perspectives, policies, frameworks etc. by which we address the world are no longer as effective as they once were.

Summary

In introducing her theme, Professor O'Hara used the words of Vaclav Havel to summarise both her thesis and her own shift from a primary focus on the world of the individual and psychotherapy to that of the contexts and changes which were causing the difficulties she was encountering in individual clients.

"Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which we are headed . . . will be unavoidable."

Vaclav Havel 1992

She then went on to argue that the change of era, a period when the fundamental conditions of life are changing, is evidenced in a rising tide of difficulties, for example rising levels of suicide and mental illness, as people fail to keep with the pace and nature of change. These difficulties are reflected in the public realm too in ineffective policy responses, war etc.

This is resulting in our collective understanding, shared meaning, culture, economic activity etc being increasingly inappropriate for the world we must thrive in. The frameworks in which we now live were developed for a world which no longer exists and

SUMMARY PAPER 2

must change if we are to thrive. She developed this theme further by the introduction of the concept of the Psychosphere.

Members of a stable society share a coherent psychosphere, which simultaneously expresses, sustains and reproduces the group's psychology. Coherent and stable societies share common stories about value, the organisation of life, what is unacceptable and what the future should be. When these shared narratives come under pressure and change, distress increases. Different psychospheres produce diverse psychologies and these guide and frame brain structures, emotional responses, identities, motivations, the making of meaning, cognitive and emotional strategies for the use of accumulated information or wisdom.

Difficulties arise out of the fact that the changes we are living through make incoherence, uncertainty and anxiety a new universal context which results in widespread cognitive dissonance. The changing world does not fit our categories as readily as it once did. Confusion, anxiety and dissonance results. This dissonance in turn can either provoke pathological or transformational responses. The difficulties caused by the current context are now so widespread that we have a global conceptual emergency which needs a change in human consciousness to overcome it.

A difficulty which arises here is that in order to develop transformational responses, shared meaning and coherence are survival necessities. This presents its own challenge since these are precisely the qualities which are in short supply in such times of change and uncertainty.

There are signs of hope that the necessary innovation is occurring in a wide range of human systems – “on the street”, in some workplaces and training programmes etc. However, this is currently haphazard and may need a guiding mythos or story to provide focus appropriate to the scale of the problem. Professor O'Hara suggested that a new hybrid psychology, which combines elements of the existing framework with those of an emergent psychology, is necessary for the essential transformational approach required. This psychology would, for example, be one which is able to see the whole picture and focus on particular aspects of it, one which can move from objectivist to relational perspectives across fluid rather than fixed boundaries. She summarised this by suggesting we need to be certain enough to act, uncertain enough to learn.

In concluding, Professor O'Hara suggested a number of actions which could be taken to ensure a responsible approach to the long term future. Elements of an appropriate programme need to include education and learning systems which are:

- focused on process not just content,
- whole person life wide learning rather than only narrowly focussed,
- encouraging of qualitative modes of enquiry not just quantitative,
- global and local,
- transdisciplinary and collaborative,
- wise rather than simply expert
- such reframing must also have short term, medium term and long term views.

With increasing saturation of technological change it is likely that those economic processes which can be automated will be automated. This gives rise to the possibility

SUMMARY PAPER 2

that human beings will be needed not for how they can resemble machines, but for how they uniquely resemble full human beings in their manifold capacities - in other words for their humanity.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.