Adjacent opportunities (10.1)

The "Great Depression" of the new millennium

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What will you say to your grandchildren when they ask you about the Great Depression that took place just after the turn of the 21st century and plunged the United States into a funk that took decades from which to remove itself? What? You didn't hear about the Great Depression of the 21st Century? Denial is often the first sign of depression, you know. You start feeling things like sadness throughout the day, loss of interest in or enjoyment of your favorite activities, feeling of worthlessness, inappropriate feelings of guilt, fatigue, trouble concentrating, or restlessness. Do those symptoms sound familiar? Those of us living in the United States are in the middle of what can arguably be called, if there are those among us still willing to argue, the Great Collective Depression of the 21st century. The question we can ask then, is when the country finds itself in a mental depression as deep as the one it now finds itself, is that a precursor to a financial depression to come? Ask those who have lost their homes if they think it has been.

I don't want to sound like Marvin, the depressed robot in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, who would enter a room and ask, "I'm not bringing you down, am I?" But we do seem to have brought ourselves down. When the resonant connection that triggers our interactions is void of an uplifted underlying motivation, no national Prosac is going to lift our desolation and despair. So, is what emerges from these co-depressed interactions a deepening of the depression, or can two depressed agents produce an emergent opportunity that is not subject to the mental state of those beings? I would say yes to both, but the latter can only arise when a level of recognition and consciousness has been developed that something different might be possible. And unfortunately, we still see very little of this consciousness percolating up from the great gob of bi-polar mania for such things as senseless wars and collapsed economies brought down by sheer greed.

In searching for the real source of this malaise, rather than focusing on childhood's gone wrong or parents on Martini's, I think we need to look further back in our evolution. Part of the problem can be traced to the fact that as a species, when we take into account the length of our lifetimes, we tend to learn about the world with which we interact very slowly. Often, by the time we have gained the slightest amount of wisdom it's usually close to "back to dust" time. The scary part about this, of course, is that we make a conscious decision to stop learning.

As those who read this journal are well aware, actualizing the possibility space is contingent on the interactions we choose. If real self-discovery and authentic self-accountability are the path, we may yet all be Buddhas. But for the most part, many of us make a choice, often early on in our life cycles, when answers don't come fast and easy, to stop any deeper learning and start taking things on faith. What does this faith-based perspective deliver when what emerges is not the response we expected to our hopes and wishes? I think I can hear that robot about to enter the room, again.

The agreed-upon lie that permits our taking things on faith, because we don't have time to learn about other choices, is why we start unnecessary wars and we create economies that favor one class over another. As a nation, the United States has been experiencing a long nightmare brought on by acquiescence of the faithful and their belief in the great agreed-upon lie. It is no surprise then that our nation finds itself in the mental and fiscal depression into which it has now slipped.

What can be done to extricate ourselves from this situation? Perhaps a first step is to recognize something not to be taken on faith, but which has been studied for thousands of years. And that is that "suffering is facing every moment absolutely capable of transforming it and not taking the opportunity to do so." This was said by the Venerable Khandro Rinpoche, the leading female Tibetan Buddhist teacher alive, today. This is not some faith-based realization, however. It is quite a pragmatic statement and speaks directly to the notion of our personal accountability for living the life we get to live.

What Khandro Rinpoche is saying to anyone who understands complexity, is that transformation, is what emerges when one possibility space opens to a new set of adjacent opportunities in which something completely different is chosen. It is a product of our ability to consciously interact with our world and in recognizing the opportunities that emerge, change it. This requires a self-learning that many of us are simply unwilling to undertake. It's far easier to take the world as it appears on faith. In doing so, we have willingly accepted the agreed-upon lie from which there is no transformation, and all we can possibly expect from that is a continuation of the Great Depression of the New Millennium.

Sadly, our slowness to learn as a thinking species is often true of those we honor as the smartest among us. Interestingly, it is often those who can best reason between this and that in the world they observe outside of themselves, who are unwilling to do so when it comes to learning more about how they, themselves, face the world.

The prognosis is certainly more of the same if we continue as we have. The least productive adjacent opportunity within all of this would be to take the depressed perspective that it's all too hard to do differently and therefore miss the opportunity for...
transformation. The real adjacent opportunity that can come from this prolonged depression, we as a nation find ourselves suffering through, is not finding better drugs, but taking the actions we are capable of and really transforming our suffering and that of those who we have brought along for the ride. This is not something that is going to be satisfied by a vote for change this November. It will only come about when we speed up our learning curve and meet the opportunity right in front of us without putting all our faith in the agreed-upon lie. Now, that would be the anti-depressant we could really use.