

# There is Nothing That the Human Spirit Wants More than to be Free

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Since time immemorial we humans have wanted to be free of constraints and limitations. We have this inbuilt hankering to *break free* of anything that limits us, or constrains us. In exploring limits we have explored the four corners of the planet; we have peered deep into sub-atomic particles and have explored the farthest reaches of space. If there is a limit or constraint, we seem to be genetically wired to understand it and be free of it.

For some of us the quest for freedom is a personal one, one that goes to the inner dimensions of what we experience as limits and constraints. For others it is to obtain greater freedom for self and for society as a whole, or at least, some specific segment of society.

*Being free* is so essential to our sense of being human than one of the punishments that society imposes on its law-breakers is to deprive them of their freedom; in some cases incarcerate them for the rest of their natural lives – the ultimate constraint of physical freedom.

It's hard to think of freedom without inquiring, "freedom from what?" or, "freedom so as to (*fill in the blank-- do, be, have, \_\_\_\_ what?*)" Pursuing this inquiry inevitably brings the quest for freedom down to earth, and very personally. It gives us "our project" -- the future we want to go to work on. It helps us see what's wanted and needed, and the changes that need to be made. Without a lot of effort we are able to see what we need to stop doing, what we need to start doing, what we need to continue doing, and what we need to do differently.

It is only in *going for* the future we want that we begin to feel the *gravitational pull* that keeps our day-to-day way of being, or way of doing things in place – the habits that make up so much of our day-to-day lives. We won't realize the effort that is required to *break free* from our habitual ways of doing things until we take on (as in commit to), personal or organizational changes.

I was personally confronted with the pull of habit, and what it takes to change behavior, after years driving in the UK. During my first months driving in the United States I was constantly being surprised at how difficult it was to remember to go to the left hand side of the car and drive on the right hand side of the road. Really, how hard is it to understand that simple required change? That said, I was even more surprised at how long that "difficulty" persisted, 'till I was on automatic again, but this time on the right side of the road.

We know about invisible forces that hold things in place from Isaac Newton, and more recently, the space program. To get free of the earth's gravitational pull a spacecraft has to reach what is

known as *escape velocity*, which is 17,500 miles per hour. It takes a lot of energy to get any kind of mass to that velocity and be free of the effects of the earth's gravity.

This got me thinking; do we have any idea that we have the equivalent of a *gravitational pull* that constrains our freedom and self-expression? Do we notice the pull of our past ways of being and ways of doing things in our day-to-day decisions and actions, for example? Do we notice the pull of our beliefs and certainties? Or, are they like gravity, invisibly holding us in place attached to the status quo and our version of what's real, and true, and right?

My work is helping organizational leaders and their teams to cause change; change they really want, and change they are pretty clear will require a *breakthrough, a transformation*, to pull off. You would think that with focus and intention in place, all that's left to do is get to work and execute, just get on with all the doing that's needed. Yet 80+% of change efforts fail.

It's as if the collective we, the organization, is invisibly anchored, stuck in place, with the experience that we aren't going anywhere beyond what incremental change will allow. What's going on? Clearly something, something that is not being accounted for, is in the mix. Why else would highly trained business people, with lots of success exploiting the current business model fail so often in their efforts to cause transformational change?

Most of us are pretty good at seeing how people around us act in ways that hold them back, ways that undermine their espoused intentions. We also see where people aren't acting and should. We can see all their ways of being that don't work. Sadly, those perception skills are not so finely honed when examining our own ways of being and the actions we take, or don't take.

Some years ago I was running a division of a UK multinational. At one of my regular weekly leadership team meetings I was particularly aware of my internal conversation. You know, that conversation we have with ourselves that seems to be running all the time judging, evaluating, assessing, commenting and generally being the smartest person in the room. This particular day I *got* (as in had an epiphany), that I wasn't the only perfect person in the room. I *got* that my team must be making judgments, evaluations and assessments about me, just as I was making about them, and none of us were saying what they were – except covertly in zingers and off hand, mostly disempowering remarks.

So on this particular day I told my team that I had these, mostly negative, internal conversations going on. I told them too, that I speculated they were doing the same thing, listening to negative conversations about me. I asked them if they would share with me the content of their assessments, judgments and evaluations – what they were saying to themselves about me that limited our relationships and productivity.

As you can image, my invitation was met with a pregnant silence that lasted for what seemed like minutes. Then one of my team said, "OK boss, I'll start". He spoke about a few very small

things that I did that frustrated him, and a few things that he felt I was not paying sufficient attention to.

I listened, and used every ounce of self-restraint I had to not answer, rebut or justify. Little by little the rest of the team added to the list. And, as they became clear I was not resisting, getting upset or angry (little did they know), they grew more confident and upped the ante. I don't know for sure how long this *sharing* went on for, but it was well over an hour.

I should mention at this point that I was considered to be a good manager and a successful executive, by my peers in other divisions and by my Board. Yet I had all these blind spots that clearly reduced our effectiveness as a team and as an organization.

This experience was our first foray into discovering the gravitational pull of our individual and organizational blind spots. It was the start of a journey that has now been under way for more than thirty years -- distinguishing what is needed to *break free* so that transformational change is a real and viable possibility – the kind of change that is evidenced by outstanding results, and very healthy, alive and related people in a high-performance, purpose-driven enterprise.

Many astronauts report that their experience of being in space, looking back at the earth, was a transformational experience. This looking back at earth and seeing the oneness of it, the wholeness of it, the majesty of it, has been called the Overview Effect, and described as a “cognitive shift in awareness”<sup>i</sup>. Astronauts have said that the Overview Effect shifted their perceptions of themselves, their world and the future. Re-shaped by the experience, many returned to earth and took on “projects” that were grand in scale and transformational in impact.

We will forever see the planet differently after seeing it as the Pale Blue Dot in the books and videos that Carl Sagan shared with the world.<sup>ii</sup>

Is there an opportunity for business leaders who want a “cognitive shift in awareness” for themselves and their teams, by bringing the lessons of the Overview Effect to the thinking and processes that they design to cause transformational change? Can we break free of the constraints that limit us in our efforts to cause the changes we want, for ourselves, our organizations, and the larger society with which we all interact?

Clearly, after years of seeing *cognitive shifts* in thinking and action that the Overview Effect allows for, and the transformational impact that that makes, I am a ‘yes’ on all counts.

In headline form here are some design elements to bring the Overview Effect down to earth:

1. Create your personal and organizational version of the Pale Blue Dot:
  - a. A clearly articulated vision that is inspiring, moving, and compelling;
  - b. A future that will forever change the prevailing view of what's possible;

- c. A future that puts into perspectives the challenges, impediments and perceived limitations of the past – remembering that problems look different, and dealing with them looks more accessible, when viewed from a different vantage point. That was one of the epiphanies of the astronauts.
2. Go public; declare your version of JFK's, "... we will put a man on the moon and bring him back safely by the end of the decade". A bold declaration that is unequivocal, compelling, unreasonable – and an implicit invitation to your tribe to get cracking with inventing, generating and discovering.
3. Get "the fuel" that will help you *break free* and get to terminal velocity:
  - a. A tribe that includes a core group of *zealots* with unwavering stands and commitment to the future with a – "*This shall be!*" mindset.
  - b. Line up the necessary resources: people with necessary skills and temperament; projects with beginnings, middles and ends; priorities -- what's by when; and all the powerbrokers you can enroll.
  - c. Establish the *passionistas* roles and responsibilities, and the protocols, practices, procedures that will shape empowering relationships.
  - d. Create an *existence system* designed to keep the *why we are doing this* always present for everyone.
4. Leave behind the need to control, to be in charge, to know everything, to get it right first time and all the time.

With the context in place – the mission clearly defined and aligned on – the work of implementation becomes progressively more distributed and more granular. It is as if the collective intelligence of the organization knows what is wanted and needed at every stage of the new future's unfolding.

It is useful to recognize in dealing with an organization in the throes of a transformation that we are part of a complex, adaptive, intelligent, human, social system – an organic system that needs lots of freedom and autonomy to thrive.

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<sup>i</sup> The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution, Frank White, 1987.

<sup>ii</sup> Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space, Carl Sagan, 1994.