

# SPACE AND IDENTITY EXPANSION

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## Preface

Today, there are countless people around the world who recognize that a new way of looking at business, society and economics needs to infuse the planet if we are to survive in a non dystopian world framed by humane rather than non human technological and financial values. Mostly, no one yet has a clue, and what's needed is a modern  $E=MC^2$ , a theory that let's us practically release the energy required for such a dramatic change.

I propose that this article is directionally correct.

Time is running out

- Fascism is on the march.
- Democracy is losing its street credentials worldwide.
- Money is more important than people, almost everywhere.
- Conflict is normal.
- Corporations and very wealthy people control media, and with that control politics and government.
- Greed and self-interest have convinced vast numbers of people to believe that thinking and analysis is a liberal plot.
- Debilitating Racism is in the air we breathe and invisible to the majority.
- Civil liberties and institutional protection of individual and group freedom are

under assault.

- World population is growing by billions every few years.
- Scientific evidence is discredited to excite uneducated political constituencies.
- The god of digital reality embraces economics, while too many people work for hopelessly low wages.
- The ability to make big war prevents attention to critical human needs.

If only we could imagine something inspired and build a bridge back from that something else to today, the only place where we can do anything.

I fear for my children and grandchildren, and for my abiding anger at so many people who prefer the ignorance of isolation over the wisdom of history and being informed. This article is my attempt to imagine something else.

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I've had an intimate relationship with space since July 1969. Sometime after 3 am, lying in bed in a Newcastle hotel, in the north of England, the room was cold, and the black and white television screen was small. Never-the-less, the next hour was a rush of sensation, unbelievable energy expansion, impelled into a science fiction movie, but real, hundreds of thousands of miles away in space. Would the "Eagle," the small spaceship, actually land on the moon? If it did land, what would they find? Where was space anyway and what was it, really?

Then, watching Astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walking on the moon opened a door for me -- a portal to a universe of wonder, awe, and possibility without explanation. My life on Earth was suddenly part of a greater whole without boundaries. I fell in love.

In the following years, author of *The Overview Effect*<sup>1</sup> Frank White recounted the many astronaut experiences of viewing the Earth from the vantage point of space and undergoing fleeting moments of transcendence -- they saw themselves and the complex communities inhabiting the Earth in a pattern of complete interdependence, from top to bottom and bottom to top.

During the same period, I experienced complex communities here on Earth through the lenses of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, racial tension, intractable political disputes, religious hatred, marriages, and exploitative workplaces that suppressed people's freedom and all too often, turned human energy into sludge. The contrast between the experience of freedom and transcendent connections in seeing Earth from space, and the business-as-usual, right/wrong, win/lose, dominate/avoid domination, justify oneself/invalidate others in international relations, corporations, government, and dysfunctional relationships, became harder and harder to bear.

### **When Does the Overview Effect Happen?**

Some have made the case that the Overview Effect happens only when someone experiences the world from low Earth orbit or deep space. Others say that that space images and simulations can induce similar effects. I've personally had transcendent experiences of being without boundaries, wonder, awe and unlimited possibility -- in a Roman Catholic mass, in Native American tribal ceremony, in Gestalt Therapy, in transformational personal growth training, and in organizational intense culture change events in several corporations in a number of countries. This effect has also been present in the New Mexico mountains, in deep friendships, in looking at my children's faces, in listening to John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King speak, in feeling how much

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<sup>1</sup> Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*, Second Edition, Library of Flight,

my wife loves me, and with gratitude when seeing a client discover a life-altering new possibility and the experience of freedom.

Sometimes, the impact of these experiences lasted for years and other times they faded soon after returning to business-as-usual. While there are parallels in all of these experiences, the astronaut in space is of particular interest because it is so prominent, so bold, so captivating.

### **Blocks to the Overview Effect**

When we talk about transcendence or the Overview Effect, we describe the experience as best we can. The words we use are abstractions and rarely, if ever, capture the vibrational essence and complexity of what's actually happening in the moment. Turning the above proposition on its head, it struck me that the 'Effect' might come about as a result what *wasn't there* in the first place, that released the experience of transcendence.

Consider that the Overview Effect is evidence of the fabled 'interconnectedness of all things' and present awareness of that interconnectedness releases immense energy. Consider further that certain blockages in human nature and in cultural imperatives prevent the Overview Effect from being experienced in life and work, much or most of the time.

To identify some of these blockages, I contemplated on images and videos of astronauts in space, listened to first-person accounts, and imagined what it was like. I then asked myself, *"What was not there, not present, and therefore not preventing the experience of the Overview Effect?"*

Was this the limiting context, or the 'Space of Possibility' that allowed the Overview Effect to manifest and to be experienced?

Using the Astronaut experience as a stimulus, might it be possible to create a Space of Possibility outside these blockages to help resolve conflict and debilitating boundary problems in business, government, politics and healthcare?

Such blocks include:

### **CERTAINTY**

There's a paradox, an apparent contradiction, between the certainty required for high performance and the Overview Consciousness that allows for the experience of wonder and sustainable positive relationship. Consider that attention to both is fully legitimate and necessary to create high performing and *human* systems in business, government, and relationships.

My wonderful teacher and friend, Erving Polster was a founder of Gestalt Therapy and has made stellar contributions to people and psychology all over the world. I once asked him, *"How can you be so creative, present, imaginative, and agile in your thinking and impact?"* He paused, then said, *"I always pay attention to my confusion before my certainty."*

Most everyone I've ever met is looking for certainty all the time. The more you must have certainty, the less attention you can pay to creativity and possibility. The astronauts who seemed to most embrace the Overview Effect were those who least needed certainty from their experience in space. Addiction to certainty eliminates the possibility of transformation or transcendence. In moments when the Overview Effect is present, there is no possibility of certainty, and requiring it keeps the effect from happening.

## IDENTITY

A close friend was a community leader, a senior business executive, and large property owner. We respected and supported each other, in business and personally, for almost 30 years. We often differed politically, but I always listened to him generously and affirmed many of his criticisms and aspirations. In the weeks before a recent U.S. Presidential election, I made the mistake of telling him that I wouldn't vote for his preferred candidate. A few days later I got an email (written at 3:00 am), saying I was no longer his friend and was no longer welcome at his farm -- I was a friend of his enemy and therefore was now also his enemy, and an active partner in the destruction of the country that he loved.

I was stunned, shocked, hurt, confused, filled with loss, and clueless as to how this could be. I'd threatened his identity. At the deepest level, he considers himself to be someone who controls what he thinks is important; his money and his belief that profit is the fundamental basis of freedom and of his own and his country's success. This identity trumped friendship, history, and our future.

My former friend is a victim of his own identity, his own rules for right and wrong. I had threatened his very survival, his future, his money, his family. It seems to me most strange that people who value personal freedom above all else can succumb to their own beliefs about who they are, and in doing so make a mockery of the very freedom they love.

Identity can be personal, relational, tribal, religious, national, political, or rooted in a profession or a business. Identity is who you consider yourself to be and when unbridled, is a relationship killer. In his remarkable new book, Negotiating the

Non-Negotiable<sup>2</sup>, Daniel Shapiro, Founder and Director of the Harvard International Negotiation Project, refers to 'relational identity' as the greatest barrier in conflict resolution and meaningful progress in many personal and collective efforts to change, or to resolve conflict. Identity is who a person or a group believes they really are, who they consider themselves to be, and what they consider themselves not to be. Identity is a state or fact of remaining the same under varying conditions -- it is the character of who a person or group is; their qualities and beliefs.

In the moment of transcendence, experiencing the Overview Effect, you're no longer simply your personal identity -- you are part of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It's both you and the whole at the same time. From that place, the Overview Effect, wonder, awe, compassion and forgiveness just show up, like the baseball players in Kevin Costner's movie, 'Field of Dreams'.

## **FORCE**

Jim Goldstein is a brilliant partnership consultant and therapist in Bethesda, Maryland. He once said that his mission was to help people take the force out of their relationships. Long ago, Isaac Newton demonstrated that force causes resistance. Today, and maybe always in the past, the use of force is everywhere in human relationships, from people 'on the make' to 'bait and switch sales, to manipulation disguised as seduction, to false promises in hiring practices. Overt and covert force in marketing, politics, education and finance is in the air that we breathe. The result is that most people have come to accept distrust as just what happens in life.

In the moment of experiencing transcendence, the Overview Effect, there is no force present. There are no boundaries. Harmony, possibility, wonder just happen. Defensive aspects of personal or group identity disappear, for the moment and sometimes longer. As soon as 'force' returns in any form, identity and the need to

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Shapiro, *Negotiating the Non-Negotiable*, Viking Press, 2016.

protect it returns as well, and at the same time, the harmony of the Overview Effect disappears.

Can I choose to take the force out of my relationships where I want to? Can I somehow put ['brackets'] around my resistance and my identity, such that the force disappears, and the background of the relationships allows the Overview Effect? Am I not, in fact, the cause or source of the 'Overview Effect' whenever my identity-based resistance disappears?

### **EXPLANATION**

Looking at the earth from space is deeply moving and words cannot capture it. It's too complicated and my response is visceral, not mental.



From Apollo 8

Explanation itself suppresses the Overview Effect. In the moment of experiencing transcendence, there is never any explanation, nor the need for it. What's not there in that moment is explanation itself.

The human race is drowning in a sea of explanation. We are fish living in oceans of explanation. Women explaining men and men explaining women. Religious explanations about how the world was created, what God wants from us, and how

I'd better be good or else. I listen to Rush Limbaugh on the radio; I like way he thinks. He's smart, has an explanation for everything, and it's always the same; Conservative is good, and Liberal is bad. Rush could find something wrong in the way Barack Obama feeds his dog. Everybody has clay feet, but their explanations always make themselves right and their opponents wrong. Investment companies and banks explain the virtues of security and greed. I can no longer believe the explanations of anyone who is selling something; they only tell me the part aimed at helping the sale. Advertising, public relations, people in bars, politicians and nations all have 'Explanation Addiction' in common. These explanations create the illusion of certainty and avoid the discomfort and anxiety inherent in raising fundamental questions.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "*To trace something unknown back to something known is alleviating, soothing, gratifying and gives moreover a feeling of power. Danger, disquiet and anxiety attend the unknown — the first instinct is to eliminate these distressing states and the first principle is that any explanation is better than none..., what drives this addiction and excitement is the feeling of fear...*"

John Mauldin in his *Thoughts from the Front Line*<sup>3</sup>, points out that behavioral psychologists say the process of explaining actually releases chemicals in the brain that make us feel good. We literally become addicted to the simple explanation. The fact that our explanations may be irrelevant or even wrong is not important for the chemical release. Jonathan Lewis Smith observed that, "*most people, when faced with uncertainty, need the 'fix' of their already adopted explanation to feel secure.*" So, we eagerly look for more explanations in order to feel good. The imagery of a junky blindly following his 'feel good' could easily be linked to the stubbornness we see in politics, among other things.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mauldineconomics.com/frontlinethoughts/archive>

A colleague invented a new way to stop terrorist explosive devices (IEDs) from killing people in Iraq. Over several years of review, the government would not buy it, nor would their researchers acknowledge its validity. The awful truth was that they could not explain it. It worked. It saved lives. Explanation addiction won. People died.

Explanation addiction prevents innovation. In a corporate workshop on innovation in China, an executive had been charged with inventing a new kind of delicious cookie. Her bosses rejected every new idea that did not look like an existing cookie or fit in an existing box. Their explanation was that none of what was presented was a cookie. Explanation addiction won, and set the limits of possible futures to that which was allowed by the explanation.

An Energy Company CEO told me that addictive, innocent explanations kept many people in his company from having to be responsible in the moment they explained something. The cause was always in the explanation and never in them.

If a leader's goal is to bring the Overview Effect to work, life, and conflict, and to see a reciprocal relationship between the Overview Effect and explanation, we will have to stop unnecessary explanation, at least for a while, to establish and maintain an Overview framework that we aspire to.

## **TRANSACTION**

In the experience of the Overview Effect, there is no sense of transaction and no facts are being exchanged. There is no hint of persuading, concluding, settling, managing, or negotiating. Consider that the absence of transaction allows transcendence, the Overview Effect, to happen.

In everyday experience, when calling a business for information, voicemail is an example of transactional engagement. It's a non-caring exchange of questions and

facts. It's not transcendent nor wondrous, it's full of boundaries, lacks curiosity, and dehumanizes the relationship.

Bureaucracy itself is transactional. It's machine-designed to maintain order and control. People who become agents of a machine become machines themselves, effectively objects transacting with objects, producers transacting with consumers. As Martin Buber wrote, transaction is not an '*I-Thou*' experience, but rather an '*I-It*' experience. The transcendent Overview Effect experience doesn't and cannot happen in such a context. Bringing the Overview Effect to work, life, and relationships must preclude the experience of transaction.

Given the digitization and transactional nature of business, media, commerce, politics, and government, moving beyond transaction is daunting, possible, and radical.

## **NOISE**

Noise and transcendence cancel each other out. When astronauts experienced the Overview Effect there was no noise. I had the good fortune of attending a Thai Buddhist Temple when they introduced a guest as a 'Forest Monk.' He had spent the last ten years in a forest in Thailand, mostly by himself. He went to the front of the room and sat cross legged on the floor, eyes closed, without speaking. Utter silence. I can't begin to explain what happened except that his calmness filled me and filled the room. His inner silence was transcendent, and I felt in the presence of pure possibility and pure interconnectedness. He was being the Overview Effect.

Constant emails, adversarial television, fear of running out of money, not being able to protect the ones I love, constant inner mental criticism is noise we live with. Meditation, prayer, deep breathing, friendship, genuine intimacy, safety, consuming hobbies can make the noise go away and create an Island of Sanity -- a

mini Overview Effect. In the grip of corporate, government, and most any institutional or fundamentalist culture, there's little silence and there are a lot of 'electric fences' -- beliefs to embrace, thoughts you are paid not to think, and required results, the absence of which threaten your survival.

Bringing the Overview Effect to work, life, and conflict has to involve replacing at least some of the noise with silence, quiet and calm.

### **Contemplative Concrete Action**

A context of Transcendence and Overview Consciousness is necessary for a company, government, or planet that works for most people. A culture that demands or reinforces certainty, identity, force, explanation, transaction and noise is a culture that suppresses or eliminates the possibility of sustainability, the possibility of an environment that's good for companies and good for people.

Professor Yehezkel Dror writes<sup>4</sup>, *"All prevailing forms of governance in democracies and non-democracies are increasingly 'dead ends'..., radical [re]design of governance is required, otherwise increasing social costs, ever threatening failures, even to existence are unavoidable... At best, markets are well-suited for delivery service functions. They are not suited for being in charge of and shaping critical future choices."* His conclusion, stated unequivocally, is that good ideas and new methods will make no difference. *"The changes called for are fully a matter of the mental and moral qualities that distinguish a leader of character."*

Transcendence, Overview Consciousness and high performance rely on the character of leaders who control the most important infrastructures in a system. Part of me says this

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Yehezkel-Dror/e/B001HPE3GE>

vision is 'pie-in-the-sky.' Systems are rigged to promote people who require certainty, identity, force, explanation, transaction and noise..., and human nature isn't trustworthy. If this is terminally automatic behavior driven by survival and fear, the vision is equally hopeless.

But a better part of me says that the Overview Effect *is* possible, and it happens when individuals and leaders practice bring curiosity and practice to what they see in front of them. From this place, this character, this 'curious' way of being, they are able to: "Bring the Overview Effect Down to Work and Life."

These are Personal Practices that Develop such Character.

- Curiosity
- Present awareness and emotional intensity
- Mutual freedom first
- Personal Energy Expansion
- Absence of Force
- Absence of Explanation
- Absence of Transaction
- Speaking from the Heart
- Eliminate Noise

- Contemplative and Concrete Action

The Overview Effect is an exceptional portal for introducing leaders, people, and institutions to the pursuit of a culture in which negative requirements are reduced and high performance is honored, and a future worth having is possible.

Today, there are countless people around the world who recognize that a new way of looking at business, society and economics needs to infuse the planet if we are to survive in a non dystopian world framed by humane rather than non human technological and financial values. Mostly, no one yet has a clue, and what's needed is a modern  $E=MC^2$ , a theory that let's us practically release the energy required for such a dramatic change.

The Overview Effect is a place for people to stand.