

Searching for Serenity in a VUCA-Plus World

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For every complex problem there's a solution that is simple, neat and wrong. -- H. L. Menchen

Where do we begin in providing a capsule but compelling description of the challenging mid-21st Century world in which we now live and work – and in which many of us provide professional coaching services? 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 as a way to distill the challenges we now face. These four words are volatile (V), uncertain (C), complex (C) and ambiguous (A). As a consolidated group of challenges, they are identified as VUCA. Recently, I have added two other characteristics: turbulence and contradiction. Pulling together these six aspects, I have identified the VUCA-Plus aspects of mid-21st Century life and work (Bergquist, 2020; Bergquist, Sandstrom and Mura, 2023). In this essay, I wish to broaden my consideration of each VUCA-Plus element—considering the polarities associated with each element. I also wish to introduce the opposite of VUCA-Plus. These are the aspects of stability (as opposed to volatility), certainty (vs. uncertainty, simplicity (vs. complexity), clarity (vs. ambiguity), calm (vs. turbulence) and consistency (vs. contradiction

Aspect of VUCA-Plus

At this point, I will dwell briefly on the meaning to be assigned to each of the VUCA-Plus terms and then suggest how we might expand on VUCA-Plus. Two of the original aspects of VUCA (Complexity and Volatility) have to do with environment (the number and nature of the elements found in a specific setting). One of these aspects, *Complexity*, concerns the many elements in a specific setting as well as the dynamic interactions that exist among these elements. This setting is complex because we have to consider not only the number of elements (making the setting complicated) but also the interactions and interdependencies (making the setting complex) (Miller and Page, 2007). The second environmental aspect, *Volatility*, refers to the rate and shifting rate of change among the elements as they interact with one another. It is all a bit confusing when everything is related to everything else—and everything is always changing.

The other two aspects of VUCA 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. Reality can appear in quite “fuzzy” form. The fourth aspect, *Uncertainty*, is about the stability of any assessment being made regarding reality. Under conditions of uncertainty, reality seems to be changing in unexpected ways over a short period of time.

Why should we do an extensive assessment, make plans or offer expert predictions if our world is hazy, swirling and always surprising us?

VUCA is deservedly becoming the coin-of-the-realm among those who assess, plan and predict while serving in the mid-21st Century role of leader or expert. The challenges associated with VUCA are deservedly considered large in number and size, as well as multi-tiered and nested inside one another (Bergquist, 2021b). To make matters even more “realistic”—and challenging—I have added two other aspects to VUCA. They are turbulence and contradiction. Both of these aspects are interwoven in the tapestry of VUCA. They each add a further layer of challenge to that now being faced by us in our mid-21st Century society. Turbulence concerns the interplay between rapid change, cyclical change, stagnation and chaos within our current world. Contradiction concerns the ongoing delivery of messages that are each perfectly valid. However, each message offers quite different perspectives on and interpretations of reality.

We must make decisions in settings that are filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Decisions must be made in a turbulent environment that is swirling with contradictory versions of reality and polarizing values. We are worn out having to grapple every day with the conditions of VUCA-Plus. Many observers of our contemporary social condition have gone so far as to suggest that this 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. This certainly is the case if we serve in the role of leader, expert – or coach.

The Search for Serenity

I propose that collective anxiety—often identified as *Angst*--is not some ephemeral and diffuse fear that comes automatically with living (though this might also be the case). Rather, *Angst* in mid-21st Century life is linked specifically to the six aspects of VUCA-Plus. These six aspects not only create *Angst*, all six make the amelioration of the conditions of *Angst* that 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 or consult to 21st Century organizations and social systems. These leaders and consultants often must deal with the major VUCA-Plus-related challenges that escalate collective *Angst*.

Angst and Serenity

Angst can be induced in many ways. There are multiple sources of collective societal anxiety. We often seem to be stranded on a boat that is caught up in the “perfect storm” of societal *Angst*—especially when we are confronted with a major wave such as COVID-19 (Mura and Bergquist, 2020). I propose that the multiple sources of *Angst* and the forces that produce the perfect storm can be summarized as VUCA-Plus. The 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. I further propose that leadership and the offering of expertise in our 21st Century societies has become even more challenging given the big VUCA-Plus waves that are hitting us right now (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024).

Rather than confronting the challenges of VUCA-Plus, we 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 SC^{2+} . 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 SC^2 . We now find the compelling charm of our six aspects of VUCA-Plus in full operation.

Serenity is achieved when these SC^{2+} conditions converge. SC^{2+} provides a formula for the achievement of this Serenity. Taken together these six aspects of serenity yields 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, 2011). Furthermore, we can readily find serenity in our world—at least over the short term. Over the long-term, however, serenity is often elusive—and if we find serenity in our mid-21st Century life, it often comes at a cost. Specifically, it comes with costs associated with the distortion of reality, the rigidity of thought and action, and most importantly, the loss of integrity in our relationship with other people and with the social systems of which we are a member.

For instance, *Stability* requires that we establish strong structures, processes and attitudes. This makes it hard to adjust to the shifting conditions in our mid-21st Century world. We establish what is equivalent to physical (and psychological) triangles in order to create and maintain stability. However, triangles are not easy to adjust. Unfortunately, our 21st Century demands agility—which means flexible structures, processes and attitudes. We similarly find that *Certainty* (the second condition of Serenity) requires rigidity of thought. It is hard to be both certain and creative at the same time, yet the shifting conditions of our mid-century society requires that we be creative. This often means operating in organizational cracks (Stacey,1996) and the intersections between organizations (Johansson, 2004).

Simplicity is an aspect of serenity that requires us to narrow our vision and our criteria of verification. As suggested in the tale about the man who is standing beside the light pole looking for his lost keys (knowing that his keys are not located near the light), so it is that we attempt to find simplicity in our life by standing near the light rather than searching for a problem where it actually 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 that everything is comprehensive and meaningful. Jerome Bruner, a noted psychologist, suggests that 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.”

With regard to the two remaining aspects of serenity, we find what seems to be a condition of *Calm* when we remain silent and immobile is often actually stress-induced freeze. We can easily mistake calm for the response we make when attacked as the weak and slow creature on the African Savannah (Sapolsky, 2004). Unlike the slow and weak rodents of the savannah who also freeze (rather than fight or flee), we humans don't shake off our freeze; rather, we remain frozen in a physically unhealthy state of arousal. We freeze when confronted with mid-21st Century challenges—at a time when we should be taking action. Unfortunately, we are much harder to ignore than the rodent and are easily eaten by the lion (real or imagined source of stress) when we are frozen.

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 in order 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—and even our survival 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 aspects of serenity as each relates to its VUCA-Plus counterpart. I identify several distinctly different ways in which each challenge is manifest in our 21st Century world. These differences are framed as left column and right column polarities. In most cases, the left column represents the 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 as a way to escape from this specific VUCA-Plus challenge. I also expand on the costs associated with the engagement of each aspect of serenity.

Volatility and Stability

We are living in a world where there is rapid change in an unpredictable manner. 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 to some form of continuity and stability in our world—a safe island on which we can land after being tossed about on a stormy sea. This island of safety offers a cure to 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”.

The Polarities of Volatility

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 would be centered on *Commitment* in the midst of volatility. This perspective concerns being faithful. We take action 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 would be on *Contingency* in the midst of volatility. This perspective concerns being flexible. 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?

I introduce the metaphor of anchors at this point to address the issue of continuity and change. Originally introduced by Edgar Schein (1978) in describing the nature of careers, the metaphor of anchors can be expanded to help us make sense of this volatility-based polarity. I expand on this metaphor by noting that there are actually two kinds of anchors. The first type of anchor is the so-called *Bottom or Ground Anchor*. This is the large and very heavy anchor that most of us non-nautical folks envision.

The bottom anchor consists of a shaft with two arms and flukes at one end and a stoke mounted at the other end—or they are slabs of concrete to which a ship is attached when moored. This type of anchor digs into the floor of the sea once the boat begins to move and provides tension on the chains connecting the anchor to the boat. These anchors are meant to be permanent—just as some intentions aligned with a specific issue are meant to remain stationary and are never to be modified (let alone discarded). Commitment is at the forefront.

The second kind of anchor is called a *Sea Anchor* (also identified as a drift anchor or drogue). It typically is not as heavy as the bottom anchor and is often shaped like a parachute or cone with the larger end pointing in the direction of the boat's movement. The sea anchor helps to orient the boat into the wind and slows down (but doesn't prevent) the boat's drift. The sea anchor is used when the boat is far away from the shoreline and the sea floor is located many fathoms below.

The *Sea Anchor* contrasts with the ground anchors in that it is intended not to hold a boat in place but rather to align a ship with the wind and slow down its movement in any one direction. The sea anchor provides flexible anchorage in the midst of shifts in tidal action and wind. Those intentions in an organization that operate like sea anchors. It similarly provides alignment and direction for an organization or community as it shifts gradually with changes in the environment surrounding the presentation of a specific issue. Contingency is at the forefront. The polarity is addressed by acknowledging benefits inherent in both the ground (commitment) and sea (contingency) anchor.

The Search for Stability

We look out over our mid-21st Century world and see something that looks more like a stormy sea than *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 ridges and valleys. We find no one 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.

Nasim Taleb (2010) uses the term *Black Swan* when describing those remarkable and powerful events that have caught our world by surprise. 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 rapid expansion in the global use and influence of the Internet. As Taleb has noted, rogue events are not only unanticipated—these events are also 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. As Taleb has noted, the rogue event is often preceded by periods of great stability (strongly entrenched patterns). This is what makes the rogue event so surprising and is often the reason why this event has such a powerful impact.

We secure *Stability* (the first aspect 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 sometimes let in the outside world. It is essential we spend time considering how isolated we wish to be and for how long a period of time.

An island that remains closed to 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, diversity of products and services in an organization enables it to better 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 make sense as a way 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 execution of 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.

There is a more constructive way in which we can find Stability in the midst of 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 "trim tab." 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 own operation to counter their competitors' new initiatives. They wanted to be sure that these changes were still aligned with the founding values. Reminder 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 that was aligned with new ways in which this bank needed to operate (if it was 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 a trim tab intervention. Conditions of volatility usually require that direct action be taken 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, marketing, production, etc.) while also 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 emergent expertise to be found in job rotations and in ad hoc task forces (made up of both old and new employees from different divisions and levels of the organization).

At an even deeper level, Stability and Serenity are to be found in the way an organization or community 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 required. This mode of planning requires (as the name implies) that we plan for various contingencies—some positive and some negative. I have written about a related planning process, *Pre-mortem Reflection*, that has been advocated by behavioral economists (Bergquist, 2014).

While we are accustomed to doing "post-mortem" assessments after a project is finished, Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues (Kahneman, 2011) propose that we engage in slow and critical thinking prior to the initiation of a project. While optimism is valuable as fuel to get a project started, it is also important to recognize the potential

problems and barriers associated with enactment of the project. This pre-project reflection not only helps a project team prepare for potential challenges (contingency planning), it also helps to reduce the depth of a change curve that inevitably accompanies major new projects or changes in an organization's operations (Bergquist, 2014).

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 and pre-mortem planning. However, I often take the contingency planning and pre-mortem processes a step further as a constructive way in which to find stability in the midst of a volatile world. I invite them to identify some “black swans” that might impact on 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 am working 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, while dramatic shifts in the size or focus of a competitor is 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 a pill that significantly increases our intelligence or it could be 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 (commanding all operations in the world). The key factor is the encouragement of agility rather stability in the midst of volatility. Planning must be contingency-based and begun (premortem) before a project is initiated. Strategies for securing stability such as the use of buffers, history, retired employees and trim tabs must be viewed as adjunctive to a direct confrontation of the stress and challenges associated with Volatility.

Uncertainty and Certainty

Evolution and adaptation to an evolving environment requires variance and uncertainty (anomalies). While we may seek to find a stable and predictable environment in our mid-21st Century life, we are liking instead to find 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 schedule and expectations quite flexible.

The Polarity of Uncertainty

Uncertainty refers to the lack of predictability, the increasing prospects for surprising, "disruptive" changes that often overwhelm our awareness, understanding and ability to cope with events. In this case, the Left Column perspective on Uncertainty would center on the *Assimilation* of changes into 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 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 takes place after either a 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 learn if the incoming experience is totally alien to us. However, as we bring in and incorporate new information, the existing structures must change (accommodation). New experiences simply bounce off us (they are dismissed) if we are unwilling to accommodate. 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 being flexible and open to new perspectives and practices. We are likely to become stubborn if we are not prepared for a high level of uncertainty and for new learning. We find one specific way to be in the world and look for other people who think and act in a similar manner. 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 simply imposed 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.

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 strategy of confinement is aligned with a "modern" approach to management: the focus is on control so that 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 are unable to 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, in some cases, these recalcitrant often seek out certainty and resist change because they were “burned” in the past by uncertainty when they were trying to introduce something new in their own organization or community. Failure in the enactment of new ideas not only leads to loss of the idea but also to loss of someone willing to try something new.

There is a third option, 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 ourself) 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.

It seems that Certainty comes at a great cost. We can manage volatility a bit 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 aspects 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

As I have already noted, 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 take into consideration many different things and multiple, inter-related events that simultaneously impact our life and work. The systemic impact of this complexity is great. It is very hard in mid-21st Century life to make sense of or even find meaning in that which is occurring 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.

There is an alternative. We can choose to reframe our world so that it is not complex. 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 distort their world in a similar manner. We can engage in even greater distortions when relating to these other people who perceive reality in a manner that is aligned with our own 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 are also thinking like us. They might even have helped to “teach” us how to think 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 Polarities of Complexity

Complexity entails the multiplex of forces, the apparently contradictory information flow, the sensitive interdependence of everything we touch, leading to the sense of confusion in which it's hard to make smart decisions, steeped as we are in the moving dance of reality. A Left Column perspective on

Complexity would center on being *Clear-Minded* in the midst of confusion. The central concern is sorting out what is most relevant and most easily confirmed while dancing with reality. The opposing Right Column perspective on Complexity would center on being *Open-Minded* in the midst of 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 the slow, reflective thinking that is described and advocated by behavioral economists – particularly Daniel Kahneman (2011). 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). In the midst of pervasive anxiety associated with Complexity (and the other aspects of VUCA-Plus), it is critical that thinking and decision-making slow down. The polarity between clear and open mindedness can be effectively managed with the use of tools offered by Kahneman and his colleagues (Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman, Sibony and Sunstein, 2021).

The Search for Simplicity

As I have already noted, there is a strong, widespread push for simplicity in our life. This push is aided in mid-21st Century by the media that we consumed. 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 are viewing our evening news on cable TV. “Tell me what I need to know and how I solve the problems I am facing. 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 actually not new. It goes back to at least the world of Ancient Greece and the insights offered by Plato in his parable of the cave. According to Plato, we are all living 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.

Plato thus speaks to us from many centuries past about the potential fallacy to be 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, there is something or someone standing near the opening of the cave. There are narratives and perspectives that serve as partitions which block out some of the light coming into the cave. These partitions are cultural or personal narratives that we meet with every day. Not only don’t we actually see reality, there is something that 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 hold a quite different agenda from ourself and other 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 actually 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 and we often can't even see the walls of the cave and the shadows. We wait for reporter 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 out wall image patterns and trends. Our reports and analysts—even our historians--share their interpretations in sound bits. We are thus removed three steps from reality.

On behalf of Serenity, we believe that the shadows on Plato's cave are "reality." We don't recognize that someone is standing at the entrance to the cave and selectively determining which aspects 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 can hope for a direct experience or at least for "honest" interpretations. Yet, we remained 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 constructions, 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 metaphor of the cave does provide us with the opportunity to gain insights in our reflections on the nature of the cave, 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 actually not be able 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

Living in the mid-21st Century we are likely to find that many of the things we encounter and events that are 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, 2022). 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 in which to assess the real world. We are living in Plato's cave and the light we see projected on the wall is often flickering and not clearly seen.

What does this mean for us personally? It means that we often must look and listen a second or third time to ensure that what is seen or heard is accurate. And we must examine our own assumptions and our own constructive frame of reference to fully understand the way in which we are viewing the world. 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) titles 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 from a position of power. Unfortunately, academic and research-based credibility can readily be questioned given the inherent instability of academia and research in the mid-21st Century (Weitz and Bergquist, 2022). It gets even worse when this instability is accompanied by acknowledgement of social construction as an underlying framework for assessing the value of expertise that is offered. We are faced with the prospect of transitioning to what Perry titled a “Multiplistic” perspective—where all expertise is questioned. Better to turn to power as a second source—that is much more stable and reassuring. It is authority embedded in power that will often win the day when the world is saturated with ambiguity. Regressive Dualism triumphs . . .

The Polarities of Ambiguity

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* the Haziness. The primary concern would center on being patient and 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 (Bergquist and Mura, 2011).

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 (the present time) and as it will probably be (or could be) present at some point ahead of us (the 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.

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 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 on what we are seeing. Most importantly, as I

suggested with regard to 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 that we need only replicate that which we believe worked in the past. As Mark Twain suggested, history might not repeat itself, but it does rhyme—and we can see this past history through lens that we believe are 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 (Bergquist, 2021a). Statistics provides at least probability—which is reassuring in our search for not only clarity but also certainty. This “ideographic” approach to assessing reality leaves us with the capacity to accurately predict how many boxes of Cheerios will be consumed this month. We are given a specific number (very clear) and specific prediction (hovering on the edge of certainty). We don’t have to taste the cereal at all or even meet any of the people who have chosen this cereal. We can look at a distance and need not get emotional involved with anyone eating Cheerios today.

What then happens when we focus in on the act of a specific person choosing a specific cereal (or choosing something other than cereal for breakfast)? Everything gets less clear and less certain. We are suddenly involved in “nomothetic” assessment, with a focus close up on the actual muddy act of making food choices at breakfast. The cereal eater might surprise us and chose 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? The 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. Ariely, 2008; Kahneman, 2011; Ariely, 2012; Thaler, 2015; Lewis, 2017; Kahneman, Sibony and Sunstein, 2021).

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 own life experiences. Often know as phenomenological studies, these inquiries inside our own psyche produces insights of great value to not just ourselves but also other people. I would point, in particular, to the autobiographical and visual portray of his own internal psychic dynamics that are provided by Carl Jung (1963) in *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* and in his large, breathtaking volume titled: *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009). It is in these two documents that we see Carl Jung “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 fundamental assumption that one can be objective in their reporting of events or description of 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 own 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 was witness to the profound engagement in this phenomenological process on the part of a graduate student attending my graduate school in the early 1990s. Living with AIDS, my student had just lost his

own 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 the AIDS-related death of their partner. Taking a phenomenological stance, my student first was interviewed by a colleague regarding his own experience. In 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 of importance was revealed regarding the researcher’s own biases, assumptions and motivations. His dissertation ended up being rough but saturated with profound insights not only about AIDS but also the processes of grieving and dying. My student died several months after completing his dissertation and being rewarded the doctorate. This dissertation process was close and personal for me. I can’t be objective about it even more than 20 years later. The whole engagement is unclear for me and filled with my own 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 pictures (distal/ideographic) are clearer and less emotionally-distorting than local pictures (proximal/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 other things are moving in a cyclical manner. 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 life and work are moving in a chaotic manner/ They are swirling about in an absolutely unpredictable manner. We might be able to adjust temporarily to one of these four conditions, but soon find that we are facing a different set of conditions that require a quite different manner of planning, execution and leadership.

What is the systemic Impact? Four subsystems (rapid change, cyclical change, non-change and chaotic change) are all operating at the same time—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 subsystem) is becoming more prevalent, we are likely to find that chaos (the fourth subsystem) will also become more prevalent. The cyclical changes—that are more predictable—will become less prevalent.

Stagnation (the third subsystem) will also tend to decline in magnitude—or it will become more isolated from the other subsystem. While reduction in the size of this third subsystem might initially seem to be a positive outcome, we find that this is not the case, for the third subsystem 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 subsystem. 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 where they 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. Put simply, this third subsystem is just as important as the other three.

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 direction which in turn requires ongoing attention. Apparently, we need a kayak when navigating the white water. A canoe will just tip over, for it doesn’t have the flexibility of a kayak. Furthermore, we must find our center of gravity when steering our kayak through the white water. Peter Vaill (2008) goes so far as to suggest that this center of gravity is often found in our embracing of a core set of principles and values—even operating from a spiritual perspective regarding life and work.

One might wonder if this core can be found in basic religious beliefs or in an alliance with some authoritarian figure. Do we find balance when guided by a set of firm religious tenants or a strong dictatorial leader? We would suggest that this rarely is the case, for this leader and these beliefs, alliances and tenants are much too rigid. They operate like canoes that can only move in one direction (forward). Furthermore, the person operating the canoe has a single-bladed paddle that requires one to shift the paddle from one side of the canoe to the other side when navigating the white water. One is 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 also found when leading an organization or community through white water. Single-edged solutions simply don’t do the trick in turbulence 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 the navigation of white water in an organization less challenging. Successful white-water leaders engage 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 that have been generated and tested in a skunk-works. 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 the successful operations of a kayak—and to the successful leadership of a mid-21st Century organization. This term does not readily apply to someone or some organization that is caught up in the vice-grips of a rigid religious belief or authoritarian rule.

The Polarities of Turbulence

As I have noted, the aspect of turbulence exists in the “white water” world where four patterns of change intermingle: rapid change, cyclical change, non-change (stagnation) and chaotic change. A Left Column perspective would focus on *Centering* in the midst of these multiple conditions of change. This “kayak” perspective primarily concerns a search for and finding the core, orienting place that provides one with balance and direction. Agility plays a central role with movement of the double-bladed paddle back and forth.

The Right Column perspective focuses on *Forethought* in the midst of multiple conditions of change. From this perspective, we must “lean” and “learn” forward by allowing for and participating in multiple points of balance and direction in our work and life. For the kayaker, this means looking “downstream”

in order 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.

We can address this polarity in an appropriate and effective manner (in keeping with the white-water metaphor) by focusing proximally (up close) on our centering and at the same time focusing distally (at a distance) on what might await us. Specifically, this means using the centering—and the agility—to think outside of the immediate box and to “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.” In order to do this anticipatory learning, Scharmer suggests that we must first seek to change the system as it now exists. Scharmer is emulating John Dewey’s suggestion that we only understand something when we give it a kick and observe it’s reaction. However, Scharmer goes further than Dewey. He suggests that we must examine and often transform our own 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 that we experiment with different ways of engaging our kayak in our current whitewater world. We particularly try out some changes that might make sense in terms of how the river is likely to operate 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 the kayak 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 try out before reaching the next bend in the river. Effective learning, in other words, becomes recursive and directed toward (leaning toward) the future.

None of this learning is easy. Furthermore, it is hard to determine which changes to make and how best to reflect on these changes. These processes are particularly challenging to engage when we are 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 is needed who is willing to travel—on a white-water river—and is willing to learn in real time alongside their client. A proclivity toward leaning into the future is prerequisite.”

The Search for Calm

It is certainly 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 quite spot in the river (the stagnant subsystem) or we might simply put 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 and emotion altering substances. We drink a beer or something “heavier” while sitting on the bank. Things seem to be a bit less turbulent after one or two cocktails. We avoid dealing with the multiple crises in our life by downing a bottle of wine every evening or by taking some of the pills we procured from our somewhat shady friend. Or there are the medications we are taking for our sore back that seems 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 sales that occurs every Fall. 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 that which is always changing.

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 await 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 is actually unpleasant—for we are in withdrawal from our own 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 simply 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, put on some soothing music, work out in the gym for an hour, curl up for a brief mid-day nap, sit in the hot tub, or talk a long hot shower. We might instead apply some “micro-aggression” against someone lower in the pecking order of our organization or community. There is something calming for some of us when we kick the cat or our daughter or 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 own 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 where we set up our easel and paint brushes. However, we 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 period of time--such as spending an extended period of time 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 purpose (Bergquist, 2017).

Sometimes sanctuary is a time and a ritual, like evening prayers for the Jew or one of the five times of prayer for the Muslim. Sometimes it is a practice, 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, get away, rest, and become “more myself again.” It enables us to find calm—away from the turbulence of everyday life. Yet, we can’t live in 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 aspect of our VUCA-Plus environment. This aspect is most likely to drive people to Perry’s Dualism and an authoritarian regime than any of the other aspects of VUCA-Plus. It is also a condition that is mostly likely to prove challenging to the leader who views themselves as open-minded. We are confronted with messages that are being delivered all the time that are valid—though ambiguous. We often wish that they would remain vague, for when they are clear, these messages often point in quite 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 have all of these trivial choices to make. As Erich Fromm (1955) noted many years ago, there is a pervasive marketing orientation in American life (and in most other Western countries) that distracts us from real matters of freedom. 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, in the midst of this widespread escape from true freedom, we find a new challenge—this being 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 real importance.

At a more profound level, we find the radical contradictions offered by political candidates. The men and women running for office often seem to be living in quite different worlds. Their differences are not easily resolved. There often does not seem to be a meeting ground. The moderate candidate and those advocating compromise seem to be 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 of the 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 provides by one or both candidates. Contradictions based on different viewpoints can be addressed constructive dialogues whereas falsehoods and deliberate lies often can be addressed only in a courtroom.

There is major systemic impact when contradiction is saturating our 21st Century life. Credible advice is being 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--to use William Perry’s term (Perry, 1970). Faces with no one clear “reality,” we decide that there is NO true reality. We turn collectively to expedience in our alignment with 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 rule [and provide the truth]!”

At a personal level, contradiction can have a challenging impact. To remain “sane” we often must change our mind 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 a whole other matter to change our political affiliations or our attitude about something as important as domestic violence or climate change. We become cognitively “lazy”—because we are tired, overwhelmed or alienated. We fall back on habitual behavior and fast thinking (heuristics). Under these conditions, the contradictions will disappear. We listen to one expert and one point of view. We rely on one source of dental advice and one political party.

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 some 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.

The Polarities of Contradiction

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 in significant ways from one another and are not readily reconciled. The Left Column perspective would focus on *Appreciating* the value of each viewpoint or practice prior to choosing the best one. The primary concern from this perspective is to determine where the greatest truth is to be found and which option is most aligned with one’s personal values.

The Right Column offers an alternative perspective. It concerns *Integrating* the diverse perspective and practices. The primary concern from this perspective is recognition that there is one (and only one) unified reality which 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 (1996) as a way to address the many contradictions we face in our individual and collective lives. We turn to the perspectives to be offered by Barry Johnson and his polarity management tool. As Johnson notes, when confronted with two viable options, we tend to linger briefly on the advantages inherent in one of the 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 also has its 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 a reframing of 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 in the Left Column focus on Appreciation. 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 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 it’s downside).

With this preliminary analysis completed, we shift our attention to what happens when we try to *maximize* the benefits of either option at the expense of the other option. We search for the rich insights and productive guidance to be found in each option, rather than seeking some simple resolution of the contradiction. There is an important cautionary note to be 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 as well as the duration of our stay with consideration and enactment of this side. How serious are we about focusing on this one side and how long are we going to sustain this focus?

Optimizing also means that 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 the contradictions. Johnson (1996) 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 in an alarm system that warns us when we may be trying to maximize one side and are on the verge of triggering the negative reactions coming from the other side. As in the case of turbulence, we must seek both balance and forethought in the midst of addressing contradictions.

The Search for Consistency

Must we engage the difficult slow-thinking processes advocated by Daniel Kahneman when we are seeking to manage contradictions and polarities? We can instead find consistency and eliminate contradictions by adhering rigidly to a schedule. The same outcomes are produced each time when we engage 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, then all of the outcomes and impacts are likely to be closely related to one another – and fully consistent with one another. We order the same breakfast at our nearby restaurant and know exactly how this meal will assist digestion and prepare us for a day of routinized work. We are wearing a suit of psychic armor that is made of one metallic material and is without any unnecessary joints or opening that would allow for flexibility, variance inconsistency – or incongruence (Bergquist, 2023a; Bergquist, 2023b).

Consistency is also found in the blocking out of all diverse viewpoints. The club one chooses to join is highly selective. The “other” is never allowed in. Homogeneity is of highest priority and group think is a pre-requisite. We don’t want “no bad news” (to quote from *The Wiz* a musical remake of the Wizard of Oz). In many instances, this purity of thought and belief 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 their willingness to subjugate themselves to the will of those who are already members of the inner temple. Purification ensures consistency. All inconsistencies are scrubbed away. Serenity 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 in our life when we become “true believers.” This often accompanies our entrance into the inner temple. There are a set of tenants in our religion or life philosophy that requires us to think, feel and act in a certain manner. Each of the tenants is compatible with each of the other tenants. We find a long history of debate and resolution associated with each tenant that ensures full alignment. This is “God-given” “Gospel” and contains no contradictions (though there are often many contradictions that are never acknowledged).

Furthermore, each tenant is aligned with an overall view of the world and with a set of commandments regarding how one should act in this world. 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 the way in which we are preparing for our own death. All of 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 in which to address the challenges of VUCA-Plus. We can escape to Serenity—and absorb all of the costs associated with this condition of denial and dysfunction. We can instead remain with these challenges and find ways in which to embrace and find both energy and partial solution within each challenge. Furthermore, I believe that we can “manage” the polarities that reside inside each of the six VUCA- Plus aspects.

I find myself asking a first question: am I being overly optimistic in suggesting that polarity management can be helpful as we face the challenges of VUCA-Plus and of expertise in crisis? I also ask a second question: can we really hold on to two or more contradictory beliefs without dropping one of them? Perhaps I should replace these two questions with a third and fourth question. Third, do we have any other option if we are to successfully address the overwhelming challenges of VUCA-Plus? Fourth, if there is another option is it just some form of regression to serenity?

Management of the challenge of VUCA-Plus as well as the polarities inherent in each aspect of VUCA-Plus brings us to a level of meta-learning. We learn about the management of each aspect and each polarity by spending time reflecting on and learning from this management. What are the ways in which we most successfully identify, analyze and manage the contradictions inherent in polarities associated with the six aspects of VUCA-Plus.

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 associated with each of these beliefs. I believe that we can apply what we have learned from engaging each of these six aspects to our work with each of the other aspects. This meta-learning enables us to lean into and learn into a future that will undoubtedly pose even greater challenges than we now find in mid-21st Century life. Am I being too optimistic? The alternative is to remain frozen on a 21st Century savannah inhabited by many VUCA-Plus lions. We stand motionless and helpless watching and feeling the polarities swirling around our psyche and soul. Not a very healthy stance . . .

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