Finding What is Essential in a VUCA-Plus World I: Polystasis, Anchors and Curiosity

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In several essays and books, I have posed the challenge of VUCA-Plus. These challenges are associated with conditions in the mid-21st Century of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity, Turbulence and Contradiction) (Bergquist, 2020). When confronted with these conditions, we can escape into a rabbit hole and find ourselves in a wonderland of Serenity (Bergquist, 2024). Volatility becomes stability, while uncertainty becomes certainty—at the cost of denial regarding the real world. Complexity becomes simplicity while Ambiguity is replaced with clarity—at the cost of living in a wonderland that is filled with dysfunctional and destructive behavior. Turbulence is replaced by calm and contradiction by consistency. However, there is in fact little calm or concurrence in the life being led by those seeking Serenity at all costs in a wonderland of distortion and authoritarian rule (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024; Bergquist, 2024).

We can instead remain with these challenges and find ways in which to embrace and find both energy and partial solution within each challenge. At the close of my 2024 essay, I introduced a strategy and tactic called polarity management (Bergquist, 2024). I suggested that polarity management could help us address the many challenges associated with VUCA-Plus. In this essay and the next three, I introduce an even more diverse set of strategies and tactics which I believe provide a viable alternative to Serenity as a way in which to cope with pressing VUCA-Plus issues.

One set of strategies and tactics concerns the Essential factors embedded in each of the VUCA-Plus issues. The second of these strategies and tactics centers on ways in which we focus our energy and engagement regarding the Essence of each VUCA-Plus condition. I turn first in this essay to the nature of an Essential perspective. I then focus on ways in which volatility is transformed to anchoring and uncertainty is transformed to curiosity. In the second essay in this series, I turn to the way in which an Essential perspective can help transform complexity to enablement, ambiguity to an appreciation of perspective, turbulence to learning, and contradiction to prioritization.

The Nature of Essential

That which is essential in a system can be considered those matters that are inherently of the utmost importance. These are the elements and desired outcomes of the system that are basic, indispensable, and necessary. They might also be considered those matters that are unavoidable. When not openly addressed, these are those matters in a relationship, team or organization that are "elephants in the room."

Given these conditions, it is critical that we search for and find the essential outcome of challenges we are facing in a VUCA-Plus world. This search is not easy, for this world is saturated with perspectives and needs that are frequently shifting in unpredictable ways. Given the challenge faced by this search, I wish to devote some attention to the motivations that underlying this search for what is Essential. I will also introduce a new way to think about dynamic processes associated with this search.

The Motivation of Essential

That which is essential is situated at the top of any system. It can be represented as the tip of a pyramid of hopes and needs. From this perspective, that which is essential can be considered *Aspirational*. We believe that something good will be achieved which overrides everything else. The challenge is to retain the core values of the system while aspiring to one set of values that we believe is aligned with the greater good.

There is an alternative representation. It is the portrait of a fiery pit. That which is essential can be oriented toward heaven (aspirational) or toward (hell). The latter way to think of essential is from the fear-based perspective of *Apprehension*. The fiery pit looms in front of us. We fear that something bad will overtake everything of importance in our life. Essential matters become existential. They receive our sustained attention because the future of our relationship, team or organization depends on our successful achievement of specific, essential outcomes.

For many people living in a traditional Christian world, the avoidance of Hell is even more motivating that the entrance into Heaven. From a more secular and contemporary perspective, the fear of loss (according to behavioral scientists) is greater than the hope of gain. The outcome of this perspective typically is a failure to search for anything other than a pathway to survival or escape. We typically end up finding a rabbit hole that allows us to enter the distorted wonderland of Serenity. We exchange our anxiety for a dose of "alternative reality."

A third perspective regarding what is essential can be taken—especially in a VUCA-Plus world in which many issues are elusive. We are grasping for something that we know is important, though we are not quite sure what it is. That which is *Enthralling* becomes that which is Essential in our world. We have to figure out what is happening to us or happening out in the world. We spend time reading everything about that narcissistic leader we hate. Newspapers feature stories about events that are over-powering and destructive—rather than events that are manageable and positive. Our life is spent trying to find something called "happiness" that is supposed to be central to our life—and our society ("the pursuit of happiness"). We are pulled to that which is "awesome" and filled with wonder. Unfortunately, this perspective on Essential often leaves us as powerless observers of that over which we have little or no control.

I vote for the aspirational perspective.

The Dynamics and Statics of Essential

Homeostasis has been the prominent perspective regarding the essential state of any system. We live in a world, supposedly, where there is a strong tendency for things to move back to some preferred state after being thrown out of kilter by some external event. Our blood pressure increases as we are determined to outrun the lion—be this lion real or imagined (Sapolsky, 2004). After we have eluded the lion our blood pressure returns to its normal level. The thermostat in our living room is set to return the temperature of this room to 70 degrees after it drops by several degrees when the window is opened for several moments on a chilly winter day. We will move back to the regular production rate of our high-priced chairs after our master craftsman returns from their sick leave.

All well-and-good. However, we are now finding that the world doesn't really work this way. We live in a world of allostasis rather than homeostasis. First introduced by Peter Sterling (2020) with regard to physiological regulation of our body, Allostasis refers to an organism's capacity to anticipate upcoming environmental changes and demands. This anticipation leads to adjustment of the body's energy use based on these changes and demands. The concept of allostasis shifts one's attention away from the maintenance of a rigid internal set-point, as in homeostasis, to the brain's ability and role in interpreting environment meaning and anticipating environmental stress.

Peter Sterling (2024) puts it this way:

> Nearly all physiological and biochemical regulation is continuously and primarily managed by prediction, even the smallest changes when a thought flashes through the mind and predicts something that needs either raising or lowering various systems to adjust to the predicted demand. Corrective feedback is used secondarily when predictions fail. To me, this is the origin and purpose of the brain, to manage these predictions. When our body returns to "normal" from a deviation, normal is not due to a set point but to the brain's prediction that this is the most likely level of demand. How the brain does this across time scales from milliseconds to decades and spatial scales from nanometers to meters, is a huge mystery.

The interactions that occur between the brain and body are quick and fully integrated, making it difficult to distinguish between these two functions. The brain predicts and the body responses in a highly adaptive and constantly changing manner.

While Peter Sterling, as a neurobiologist, has focused on the body's use of neurotransmitters, hormones, and other signaling mechanisms, we can expand his analysis by looking at the role played by stasis in all human systems. In order not to distort Sterling's important description and analysis of the allostatic processes operating in the human body, I am introducing a new term: *Polystasis*. I have created this word to designate the multiple functions being engaged by complex human systems in addressing the issue of stasis. As Peter Sterling has noted, it is not simply a matter of returning to an established baseline of functioning (stasis) when considering how actions get planned and taken in a human system.

Early in the history of the cognitive revolution and aligned with the field of cybernetics (feedback theory), three prominent researchers and scholars from different disciplines came together to formulate a model for the description of human planning and behavior. George Miller, Eugene Galanter and Karl Pribram (1960) prepared a book called *Plans and the Structure of Behavior* that described the dynamic way in which we are guided by a reiterative process of acting, testing, modifying and reengaging our behavior. They presented a T.O.T.E. (test-operate-test-exit) process that is repeatedly engaged as we navigate our world. As is the case with T.O.T.E, Polystasis blends the concept of statics (stabilizing structures) with the concept of dynamics (adaptive processes). Operating in human systems, we are guided by certain core outcomes that do not readily change (statics); however, we must also be open to modifying these guiding outcomes as conditions in our environment change. As Sterling has proposed, the static notion of homeostasis is not appropriate—especially in our VUCA-Plus environment.

The Polystasis model incorporates three processes. First, there is *Appraisal*. As Peter Sterling has noted, there is an ongoing need to monitor the environment in which we are operating to determine if a new baseline of functioning (outcomes) is required. We informally or formally predict the probability that our current desired baseline of functioning can be achieved or even if it is desirable. As Miller, Galanter and Pribram suggest, we Test out (appraise) the current stasis.

Second, we *Adjust* if the current baseline of desired functioning is no longer appropriate. As Sterling proposes we identify a new level of functioning. An alternative ("allo") stasis is identified based on predictions regarding probability of being successful in achieving this baseline (stasis). Miller, Galanter and Pribram propose that we are Operating (Adjusting) when we establish a new stasis.

Third, we *Act* on behalf of the new baseline of desired functioning. In keeping with Miller, Galanter and Pribram, we then again Test (appraise) to see if the new level is still appropriate given ongoing changes in our environment and our experience of acting on behalf of the new stasis. T.O. T. E. and dynamics feedback systems are alive and well in the world of Polystasis. Under a model of homeostasis, daily adjustments are made by what I would identify as first-order change (Argyris, 2001). They require first-order learning which is usually based on habitual ways of thinking.

Such a model of stasis might effectively operate in a highly stable world. However, our world might actually be operating in a rugged and perhaps even moving (dancing) landscape that looks nothing like a flat, stable plain (Miller and Page, 2007). There is no return to a previous state. Rather as Sterling proposes, adjustments are made based on what we predict will be the next setting of this dancing environment. These adjustments are made in accordance with Essential matters. They require shifts in the interpretation of environmental meaning and anticipation of environmental challenges. These shifts, in turn, require second-order learning and second-order change (Argyris, 2001).

All of this may seem very mechanistic and abstract (a critique offered of Miller, Galanter and Pribram's T.O.T.E. model). However, Polystasis comes alive when we recognize that this recursive process moves quickly. It is often not amenable to the slow thinking described by Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman, 2011) nor to the reflective practice of Don Schön (1983). Polystasis also comes alive when we apply it to real life situations. For example, my blood pressure might not return to "normal" if I am anticipating other lions (real or imagined) (Sapolsky, 2004). A new "normal" is quite fluid--for I continue to appraisal, adjust and act (moving through the hostile environment of the Savannah). Polystatic processes are Essential to my survival in this anxiety-ridden environment. T.O.T.E. based dynamic feedback is alive and well in this hostile environment. I am also alive and well—thanks to polystatic processes.

I next offer an example of Polystasis by returning to the classical homeostatic example of thermostatic regulation. It is Essential that I live in a comfortable environment. I must address this Essential matter of comfortable living in my home. I do so by adjusting the thermostat if I anticipate that the window will remain open to provide some ventilation. However, there is an even more immediate adjustment I can make. I can choose to put on or take off my sweater. I can change chairs, so that I am sitting further away from the window. Even more immediately and intimately, my body will be making its own adjustments based on what it predicts I will do in accommodating to the change in temperature. The thermostat is actually a slow and often secondary player in the world of Polystasis. The homeostatic

adjustments of the thermostat often arrive late. They are not very effective when compared to putting on or taking off that next layer of clothes or moving to another chair.

What about our production of finely crafted chairs? There is the more distant ("distal") solution. Much as we may have to change the thermostat in our home, a decision might be made to train someone else to build the high-priced chairs. We do this if we are uncertain about the long-term health condition of our master craftsman. However, our polystatic adjustments are much more immediate (proximal). They are based on immediate predictions regarding what is taking place on our production floor. As the manager of the production facility, I immediately predict that something has to change when my master craftsman calls in sick. I set new (temporary) standards and priorities regarding what we are going to produce today. We'll produce more of the cheaper chairs. Predicting into the future (distal planning) I will inform our marketing person that we need to push the sales of these cheaper chairs (at least for a short period of time).

At an even more proximal level, my mind will be predicting that the level of stress in my body is about to increase. I will be activating the sympathetic level for a short duration until such time as I get things "arranged" and "adjusted" for the coming day of production. I will also spend some time reflecting on what is likely to be the longer-term health status of my senior craftsman. I can over-think and over-worry (inventing lions) or I can be realistic (assessing the presence of real lions). The way in which I approach this task of planning for my craftsman's absence will have a major impact on how I manage my body and manage my production staff. That which is Essential (the financial viability of this company and the quality of the finished product) will provide important guidance and stability (statics) while adjustments at all levels (dynamics) are being made and remade under the conditions of Polystasis.

The key point to be made is that the baseline itself is likely to repeatedly change when Polystasis is operating in a shifting (dancing) environment. This change might involve quantity (raising or lower the baseline) or quality (shifting to a different baseline). We remain vigilant regarding real and imagined lions. We weigh the costs and benefit of changing environmental conditions (such as an open window in Winter). Our priorities are considered. Do we want fresh air, or do we want to reduce the cost of heating in our home? We decide that reduced costs are Essential. As a result, we not only keep the window closed but also reduce the thermostat to 66 degrees and put on a sweater.

Our body predicts and anticipates this change. Adjustments are made that enable us to live in a cooler environment. The baseline has changed. A new level of homeostasis might be established with a change in the thermostat, but this is a secondary adjustment. Settings on the thermostat will (or may) remain in place until the Spring, while the clothes we wear and the windows we open will make a bigger, more immediate difference. We can do a better job of meeting our Essential goal of reducing heating costs by wearing a sweater or closing the window than by moving the thermostat up a notch.

We alter our ways of adjusting to (and buffering) the impact of shifting conditions. Our craftsman reports in sick. We can do nothing and hope that our craftsman will quickly recover. Perhaps we recommend that he see a doctor or consume some chicken soup. We might engage in wishful thinking about his quick recovery or the healing power of chicken soup. Our errant prediction, in this case, might put us in jeopardy of making wrong decisions and failing to adjust production schedules or change

production priorities. Alternatively (Sterling's Allo), we can predict and plan for immediate (proximal) changes in the schedule and priorities. We can anticipate a need to meet financial quotas by altering our promotion of chairs in a specific price range. We remain keenly aware of what is occurring on the production live (Test), alter our production plans if this is necessary (Operate), see if this alteration is working (Test) and then turn our attention away from the production live (Exit). We set up a meeting with the head of marketing regarding potential changes in promotional priorities.

If we turn to the matter of leadership in an organization system, we find that there is much we can do and must do at both the proximal and distal level with regard to predictions. At the short-term (proximal) level there are the stress-management techniques and production shifts that I have already mentioned. At the longer-term (distal) level of prediction, we anticipate what might happen in our world --such as our craftsman being sick again. As the owner of a small business, we must be prepared for many possibilities. To remain "stuck" with one homeostatic standard is to lose the agility that comes with owning one's own business.

At the same time, we must be cautious about becoming "trigger-happy." We must avoid being fearful of lions that don't actually exist in our life. Furthermore, each major change in the baseline brings about a challenging change curve (Bergquist, 2014). A major change can impact both the level and quality of production and service rendered. Those working on the production line might not be as skillful in churning out cheap chairs. They might themselves be oriented to slower, fine craft work. The change curve can also damage morale among those working in the organization. Those on the line might resent having to "sell their soul" (and their craft) on behalf of the bottom line (producing cheaply made chairs). Furthermore, there is the matter of self-fulfilling prophecies. We must be sure that our anticipations are not self-fulfilling. Our master craftsman becomes sick again because of stress associated with making up for lost time when returning to work or because he is fearful of replacement by a craftsman who doesn't get sick.

I mention one specific condition of Polystasis that is relevant as a difficult societal issue now facing us in the United States. This has to do with the policy of *Reparation.* American policy makers are faced with the challenge of determining if it is appropriate to provide certain citizens with compensation for their lost wages as a result of gender, racial or ethnic discrimination. What about the loss of income for their ancestors who served without pay as slaves? How does one determine the appropriate restoration of that which has been Essential for a specific group of people who have experienced long-standing discrimination and/or physical violence? The baseline will be shifting as we begin reflecting on the appropriate restoration. Hope increases or it is squashed during these deliberations. More is anticipated or less is expected with regard to financial reparations or the offering of apologies.

How ultimately do we assign value to loss of hope or loss of dignity? What payment is due for physical abuse or even death? The answer(s) to these difficult questions reside(s) in the assignment of meaning and value to specific environmental conditions both past and present. This meaning and value will shift from moment to moment and from one constituency to another constituency. Nothing restores the homeostasis of a discriminatory society—especially if this homeostasis involves returning to a previous mode of repression. The environment must (and will) continually shift. Anticipations will change repeatedly as potential solutions are proposed. Meaning will be reconstructed multiple times as each

constituency seeks to understand and perhaps appreciate the perspectives offered by other constituencies. Different values will emerge and gain ascendance as different constituencies are brought to the table. Baselines are constantly shifting. Predictions are frequently modified. Potential actions are proposed and abandoned with the shifts in baselines and predictions. Polystasis will prevail.

Before leaving this focus on Polystasis, I wish to reiterate that this quick moving process often comes at a cost. As I mentioned when introducing Polystasis, the quick engagement of appraisal, adjustment and action is not amendable to either slow thinking or reflective practice. Polystasis is more often aligned with the noncritical, knee-jerk reactions about which Don Schön cautions us (Schön, 1983). Schön is likely to bring in his own teaching of urban planning courses at M.I.T. He would undoubtedly suggest that planning in this domain will inevitably require Polystatic processes. As in the case of reparations, urban planning inevitably involves changing baselines, altered predictions and complex action plans—for an urban landscape is inevitably rugged and dancing.

Daniel Kahneman (2011) would similarly caution us about engagement in fast thinking when operating in a dynamic polystatic manner. He is likely to suggest that Polystasis is vulnerable to the inappropriate uses of heuristics when we are shifting or changing our baseline and making our predictions about conditions in a dynamic environment. We might, for instance, apply a recency heuristic. We make the same adjustment that we did the last time we faced this shift in our environment. We put on a sweater the last time we felt a chill. We took a specific action the last time we lost an indispensable worker (our accountant). We can take this same action regarding our absent craftsman. Furthermore, polystatic adjustments can becomes habitual. We always put on a sweater at this time of day (imagining that the temperature in our room will change). We indiscriminately apply the same employment policy regardless of the employee being considered.

Given this potential vulnerability, we must ask: how do we adjust to a new or changing base line? The process of adjustment will operate differently when we are facing an Essential challenge and when motivations (and anxiety) are high. We are likely to think very fast and be especially noncritical when the stakes are high. Emotions are intense. Furthermore, we might always image a threat when we are tired or distracted—we indeed become "trigger-happy." Anxiety becomes a common experience. Retreat and isolation become a common polystatic action. Kahneman's fast-thinking heuristic might even be the easy labeling of people with different skin tone—especially those who come from a different social-economic level or different culture. We immediately view these people as different. They become the "Other" (Oshry, 2018; Weitz and Bergquist, 2024) Our proximal environment becomes threatening when we encounter a person with darker skin or someone speaking with an accent. We rapidly and uncritically predict trouble. We imagine a dark-skinned lion or lion from another continent. Our baseline changes as we shift into a survival mode. We take action to avoid this person.

All of this means that we need to be careful about assumption we are making and heuristics we are applying under specific conditions. These are conditions that involve Essential matters or that hold the potential of being threatening. It is in these conditions and at these moments that we must be particularly vigilant and reflective. We must ask ourselves: is this situation really like the last one? Can I do a better job this time in coping with this challenging situation? If this is really important (Essential)

then perhaps I should get some assistance. I might have to open up to differing points of view. Is this really threatening to me or am I only imagining that it is threatening?

In short, Polystasis might be an Essential mode of adaptation given our shifting VUCA-Plus environment. However, this process can also lead us astray. We must indeed be vigilant and reflective. The Essential Lens can be of value in this regard.

The Essential Lenses

Following this introduction to the motivations and dynamics of Essential matters, I wish to propose a model of Essential that portrays the fundamental way in which Essential operates as a transformative process. It serves as a safeguard against the maladaptive polystatic processes I have just identified.

This portrayal centers on the function of Essential as a set of convex lenses that transform the conditions of VUCA-Plus into forms and processes leading to constructive engagement of the six conditions of VUCA-Plus. These lenses also lead to creation of a world of Essentials that holds the potential of being a source of purpose and gratification.

I offer the following summary graphic concerning how an Essential lens operates:

Postmodern World	Six VUCA-Plus Conditions	Lens of Essentials	Six Transformations	Essential State
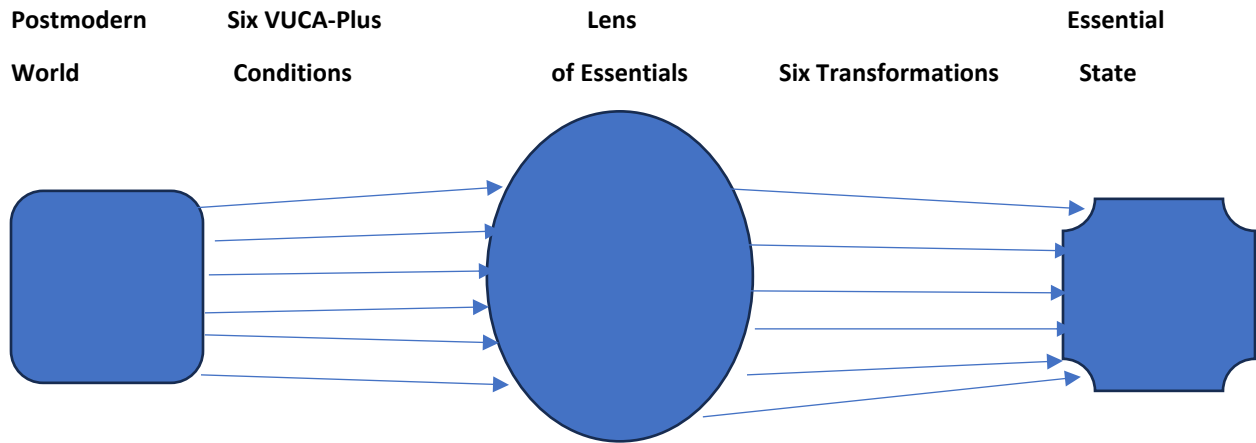
While I am about to suggest specific strategies in which to engage that moves VUCA-Plus conditions to the identification and appreciation of that which is Essential, I first wish to offer four basic questions that open the way to these transformative moves.

Four Functions Served by the Essential Lenses

At least four functions might be identified that can be served by a lens that is intended to detect and highlight that which is Essential. These four functions are convergence, magnification, divergence and extension.

Convergence: What is important and deserving of our attention?

Often accompanied by a filter, a lens can provide clearer vision for us when we are driving a car at night or in a foggy condition. Similarly, the VUCA-Plus world in which we operate is often quite hazy and dimly lit. A lens is required that highlights the key features in the fog and blocks out that which is distracting. The fog itself is distracting when we are driving, whereas other cars on the road deserve our attention.

It is hard to make polystatic predictions when driving under foggy conditions or navigating in a hazy and dimly lit VUCA-Plus world. We encounter the haze of ambiguity, volatility and uncertainty, along with the dim lighting of complexity, shifting scenes of turbulence, and confusing sounds of contradiction. Living under conditions of Polystasis, we must be able to predict and adjust. We need to focus when seeking to make accurate predictions. When we navigate these difficult conditions with clarity regarding what is Essential then we are less likely to be blinded or confused. We can look past the fog to discover what needs our attention. We can distinguish between the sound and the noise. We can attend to our valid feelings and set aside our fears of imagined lions. We can attend to that which is important to our ongoing predictions and our ultimate achievement of specific goals.

A major challenge resides in the adjustment of our lens to focus on Essentials. Sometimes, the important matters are obvious. We need only set up policies and procedures that require our system to direct attention to priorities. For many years this meant some variation on "Management by Objectives." More recently, this has often meant creating an organization that is mission-driven or driven by values or purposes (e.g. Pascarella and Frohman, 1989; Warren, 1995; Wall, Sobol and Solum, 1999). Attention in such organizations often shifts from a bottom-line mentality to a set of outcomes that enable the organization to sustain itself over a long period of time (Estes, 1996). Elsewhere, I have suggested that this challenge can be met by appreciating that which is distinctive and a source of strength in an organization (Bergquist, 2003). I am joined in offering this perspective on Essential matters by those who have championed Appreciative Inquiry (Srivastava, Cooperrider, et. al, 1990; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

At other times, the task of identifying what's important—and ultimately what's Essential—is not quite as straightforward. There may be multiple stakeholders and multiple commitments. For instance, we are finding the emergence of social entrepreneurship as a way to attend both to the welfare of the organization and the welfare of the society in which this organization operates (Bornstein, 2007). Furthermore, complex systems are likely to yield many competing interests for they are composed of many parts--each with its own agenda. A blizzard of diverse (and often contradictory) demands makes prediction and navigation difficult. However, complex systems are also made up of parts that are all interconnected. We need not envision a blizzard. Instead, like Donald Schön (1973) envisioned many years ago, we approach our complex organization as a network with all parts of a system being connected in a pattern that makes some sense. Most importantly, a network contains Nodes where many of the parts connect with one another.

It is at these nodal points that we are likely to find not only concentrated information that can be engaged for predictions but also that which is most important. We focus on and seek to manage change at the node (or at least appreciate the information contained in the node) because operation of the node is likely to have significant influence over the many parts with which it is connected. For instance, the primary node in the transportation system of a major city might be its central train or subway station (the "Hub"). It could also be the major intersection of its many freeways (an "interchange"). In an organization, the C-Suite might be an obvious node. Less obvious might be its business process management unit or its quality control office. Whatever is happening at the nodal point impacts whatever is happening elsewhere in the system. Thus, the polystatic baseline and predictions at the nodes in any system are critical to the overall operations (actions) of the system.

Convergent lenses of Essentials can be deployed to find the critical nodes in any system. We need only monitor the flow of information in a system and prepare narratives regarding how important decisions are really made in the system's nodes. For example, we might ask: who is at the table and what information has been most persuasive when decisions are made at and about each node? An appreciative approach can be taken that focuses on the successes of nodes in the system. Polystatic predictions are based on this appreciation of past success. What are the ingredients and who participated in specific successes at any one node? This analysis will often yield insights regarding how the system as a whole most often operates out of or in conjunction with specific nodes. Efficiency of the boarding process at a railroad hub might be critical to the on-time operation of the entire system. An office of interdepartmental relations might be instrumental in bringing about effective deployment and coordination of resources from throughout an organization. The Marketing Department might have done a great job of gathering perspectives from throughout the organization regarding how best to describe the functioning and benefits to be derived from a new product.

Magnification: What should be understood and appreciated regarding that which is important?

At times, we turn to lenses that are installed in a magnifying glass or microscope. These lenses are directed to a specific entity or cluster of entities. Something is identified as important. It receives magnified attention and is studied in great detail. That which is Essential needs to be fully understood and appreciated. A specific dynamic of magnification and attention is often ignored—though it is of great importance. When an Essential element is overlooked then predictions are likely to inaccurate or skewed toward some "shiny" but distracting goal. We are pulled toward a sweet piece of pie rather than the much healthier fresh fruit. We focus on the upcoming board meeting and spend little time with family members. We ignore or misinterpret our daughter's request for assistance with homework. Our company is guided by quarterly profits rather than longer term financial gains and organizational agility. We set aside the master plan of our company and look only at the spread sheets.

Magnification serves an important function with regard to the valuing of that which is Essential. It is crucial to determining which baseline will be introduced and when to engage in polystatic prediction. We must keep the cost of heating our home at a low level. It is important that we also maintain a

comfortable life in our home. Which is Essential: financial security or comfort? Is it more important to be vigilant about potential threats (be they real or imagined lions) or to be free of stress? We must decide. That which is Essential deserves our attention and our polystatic focus. Furthermore, once we have identified that which is Essential it will become increasingly valuable as a guide to our predictions and actions. We value that which we magnify.

To add more detail to this proposition about magnification and values, I propose that when we study something in detail and with knowledge (magnification), the thing we are studying gains value. I can recount a story of this dynamic occurring in my own life. After my father passed away, I found a very old pocket watch in his dresser. I happened to wind it up and found that it was still able to run. In honor of my father, I replaced my wristwatch with this pocket watch. After about a year, the watch quit running. I took it to a watch repair shop. The gentleman operating this shop examined my watch and declared that it could no longer operate. He warmly and appreciatively stated that my watch: "has worn down after many years of service."

This knowledgeable and thoughtful craftsman then asked me if I wanted to know more about this watch. I immediately said "yes." He opened the back of the watch and took me on a brief tour through all of the interlocking gears. The craftsman that paused and shared some very interesting information. He indicated that this watch was manufactured in Sweden and was worn primarily by men who were doing manual labor. At this moment, I realized that this must have been my grandfather's watch. He had migrated from Sweden to the United States as a young man. The craftsman also opened the back of the watch again and told me more about how the many gears operated in this basic workman's watch to make it always run on time. With a smile, he noted that accurate time is very important when you are working as a manual laborer on "someone else's time."

My grandfather's watch had been fully appreciated by this kind and wise watch repair man. The watch had increased in value for me. While it no longer ran, I kept the watch close to my heart and placed it in a bell jar that now sits on a bookshelf in my living room. [As is the case for many people, my living room bookshelf serves as an "alter" for displaying that which is Essential for me and my family (Ruesch and Kees, 1969).] The watch represents something Essential in the history of my family. It exemplifies the life values that were brought down to me by my father: working hard, being "on time," and taking care of that which is important. The lens of magnification served me well.

Others have observed a similar correlation between appreciation and attention (magnification) on the one hand and increased value on the other hand. As David Cooperrider has noted, when Van Gogh appreciated and attended to (painted) a vase of sunflowers, he increased the value of these flowers for everyone. Van Gogh similarly appreciated and brought new value to his friends through his friendship: "Van Gogh did not merely articulate admiration for his friend: He created new values and new ways of seeing the world through the very act of valuing." (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 123)

Peter Vaill similarly recounts a scene from the movie Lawrence of Arabia in which Lawrence tells a British Colonel that his job at the Arab camp was to "appreciate the situation." (Vaill, 1990, p. 323) By appreciating the situation, Lawrence assessed and helped add credibility to the Arab cause, much as a knowledgeable jeweler or

art appraiser can increase the value of a diamond or painting through nothing more than thoughtful appraisal. Lawrence's appreciation of the Arab situation, in turn, helped to produce a new level of courage and ambition on the part of the Arab communities with which Lawrence was associated.

At any point when we fully appreciate the perspective offered by someone with whom we are working, then we have raised the value to be assigned to this perspective. We may be seeing this perspective in ways that neither our colleague nor his associates in the organization have seen, thus opening new vistas for our colleague. We can similarly benefit from the appreciation offered for our own ideas by people with whom we work (or from a talented coach or consultant). These perspectives and practices will not only increase in value for us--they will also be enriched and may assist us in building more ambitious (yet realistic) baselines for our polystatic processes.

Divergence: What else is important that deserves our attention?

A third function is served by a lens and its accompanying mirrors. A kaleidoscope is created when two or more reflecting mirrors are placed at an angle in a cylinder with a lens through which we view an array of images. This optical device yields many different perspectives in viewing small pieces of glass, stones or other items. These random objects are seemingly in disarray. Yet, they yield a stunning pattern of beauty when seen through the kaleidoscope lens. The beauty is to be found not just in the diversity of objects viewed but also in the way these objects are connected to one another via the mirrors. They form ever-changing displays as we rotate the kaleidoscope tube or attached wheel. The lens, in this case, is expanding our breadth of vision. We see something more than was readily apparent when viewing the assembled objects in the kaleidoscope's tube.

A lens can similarly expand the domain of that which is Essential in our work and life. Our polystatic predictions can become broader in scope and more systemic. We can become more flexible in our assignment of baselines to the polystatic process. Historically, we see this expansion in a document such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence. This document declares that a government should expand its purpose from serving as a source of security regarding the life of its citizens. This expansive declaration ensures that citizens of the soon-to-be-established United State are free (liberty) to live their distinctive life in the pursuit of happiness.

This was a remarkably expansive vision regarding the Essential functions that are to be assigned a "democratic" government. However, a polystatic process includes adjustments in baselines based on the entrance of additional or new information (Test). With regard to the Declaration of Independence, limitations were being acknowledge regarding the scope of freedom being declared. A challenging question, for instance, was posed by women at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Isn't the Declaration, as written, profoundly limited in scope with the exclusion of women? In 1852, Frederick Douglass similarly asked: "are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extend to us [as African Americans]?" (Richardson, 2024, p. 188) More stones and gems of different form and substance must be added to the kaleidoscope of freedom and independence if it is to realize its full potential as a beautiful work of art and justice.

At a psychological level, we find an expanded vision of what motivates people in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 2014). Much as in the case of the Declaration of Independence, Maslow proposed that people are motivated not just by the need for security (physiological viability and safety). They also wish to find fulfillment of a host of other needs—ranging from a sense of belonging and love to a sense of self-actualization. The Essentials of one's personal life are being significantly expanded by Maslow. This leads us from narrow expectations of a healthy and protected life to a life filled with achievement and transcendence. Our polystatic baseline has changed (and been elevated). When we predict a life of mere survival then we will take action and our body will prepare only for this survival. When we predict the achievement of higher order goals, then we will take actions to bring about realization of these goals. Our body will mobilize to assist us in leading an "active life" filled with purpose and meaning (Palmer, 1990).

We find a similar expansion in the listing of work-related needs. Many years ago, Frederick Hertzberg (1959) declared that we need more than just a paycheck and on-the-job safety when we enter the workforce. He called these the hygiene factors. We also wish to find meaningful work and recognition of the tasks we have achieved. These are the motivating factors. In my own writing, I have added the need for companionship in the workplace, interesting work assignments, and opportunity to influence the operations of one's organization (Bergquist, 1993). It is when we predict that these needs will be met that our mind and body look forward to the gratification to be found in the work we do every day. The positive and productive engagement of Polystasis in our life produces self-fulfilling prophecies regarding the quality and meaning of our work.

I propose that the divergent Lens of Essentials enables us to expand our own expectations as employees in an organization and as citizens of a nation. We experience a kaleidoscope of interconnected needs that enable us to enact a beautiful new pattern of behavior. Our work becomes our playground. Years ago, I was with a group of people who created something called "plork" which was the design of activities that blended play and work. Our need for personal achievement becomes fully integrated with our desire to serve our community (we engage in something called "social entrepreneurship"). With this expansion and interconnectivity comes an expanded sense of the Essential roles to be played by the leaders of our organization and nation. Leaders must now be aware of and serve as active advocates for and agents of those policies, procedures and practices that open the opportunity for achievement of an expanded list of Essential needs (Bergquist, 1993: Bergquist, Sandstrom and Mura, 2024). Like those who framed the Declaration of Independence, it is the role of Essential leaders to expand the vision of what can be achieved at a personal and collective level.

Extension: What is of great importance as we look into the future?

In our anxiety filled world of VUCA-Plus, it is tempting to focus only on immediate goals and to assign proximal baselines to our polystatic appraisals. How can one plan for the achievement of long-term goals or set more distal baselines when our world is filled with volatility, uncertainty and turbulence? How can one predict what is about to occur in their VUCA-Plus world? Even short-term predictions and short-term goals are hard to establish in an environment that is saturated with complexity, ambiguity and contradiction. At best, we can prediction short-term financial gains based on decisions we have

made. We can set up financial goals for the upcoming quarter. A "bottom-line" mentality would seem appropriate given that anything other than purchase of goods and services as well as financial status is hard to measure. Our baseline becomes sales volume and profits during the coming three months. WE predict how many shirts we will sell or homes we will sell. Our Excell-spread sheet takes us out three months—and then there is only speculation. We predict, act and adjust based on what we can actually see –and this is provides a very short horizon.

Certainly, a "just-in-time" mentality would seem appropriate given that we don't know what will occur next. Unfortunately, this proximal ('up-close") perspective and accompanying short-term tactical prediction and planning are not adequate to the task of navigating mid-21st Century life and work. This short-term perspective and approach to planning leaves us "knee-jerking" our predictions and our way of navigating life. We risk losing touch with that which is Essential. It is indeed hard to engage in long-term strategical planning based on a distal ("further away") perspective—however there is no other option. As in our use of telescopes, we can design a lens of Essentials that extends our vision. We can use this lens to view distant lands as well as potential conditions in our own land.

This optimistic view regarding the multiple Essential lenses offers us a bit of reassurance regarding engaging VUCA-Plus in a successful manner. The crux of the matter, however, concerns how one might design these lenses so that they can be deployed successfully. I turn now to this matter of design.

Designing the Lens

Much as in the case of the venerable Swiss knife, we can construct a set of Essential lenses that serve several different functions. I would suggest three types that might be incorporated in a set of Essential lenses.

Multiple Visions

First, like the kaleidoscope, a lens can be designed to produce multiple visions of the future. We can trace out several different scenarios regarding what the future might look like. These scenarios should range from best case to worst case. One variant on this approach is the so-called "pre-mortem" process that is recommended by Behavioral Economists (Kahneman, 2011). Prior to initiation of a project, a planning team identifies what it would look like if the project is a success and what it would look like if it is a failure. What is to be learned from both the potential success and potential failure that might influence our current planning (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024)? Specific contingency plans can also be formulated to address each of these diverse outcomes. We predict and build in the capacity to adjust (or abandon) these predictions as a way of living in a VUCA-Plus world.

Backward Vision

A second lens operates like the rearview mirror on an automobile. With this lens we work backwards in our planning process. We begin with our distal goals (3-5 years from now). We then identify what should be accomplished during the coming two years if we are to achieve the distal goals. Our attention then is directed to the coming year. What can be done to ensure success (or at least increase its probability) in

two years. Finally, what can be done right now on behalf of our one-year goals. In this way, we move from strategic to tactical planning.

Given the value of contingency planning in our VUCA-Plus environment, several different conditions might be identified that must be considered when planning for the long-term (3-5 years), then the short-term (2 years), and finally the upcoming year. This would lead to the generation of several different tactical plans for the coming year—alongside of criteria for determining which of these plans to engage at any one time during the coming year. Ironically, predicting backwards and moving from distal to proximal might be one of the most effective ways of being adaptive in our changing world. We project ourselves forward in an unpredictable world and use this projection to set appropriate parameters for our immediate predictions.

Illuminating Vision

The third lens is one that magnifies and illuminates. It is a lens of learning that can be applied when planning for, adjusting to, and finding success and failure midst a journey into the future. Otto Scharmer (2009) writes about "learning into the future." I would suggest that this means we are preparing not only for future initiatives but also for processes that enable one to learn from the relative successes and failures that occur on the way to some desired end goals. Our immediate predictions are improved because we are open to learning. We have created a "learning environment" that makes this possible.

The critical question becomes: how can a "learning environment" be established and sustained? Accompanying questions must also be addressed. How can slow thinking be ensured (Kahneman, 2011)? What types of assessment—both quantitative and qualitative—can be used? In what way can sessions be designed and facilitated to ensure safety in timely reflections on the successes and failures? How can the process of implementation be designed so that mistakes (which are inevitable in a VUCA-Plus environment) are not repeated multiple times (Argyris and Schön, 1978)? How can mistakes be turned into "teachable/learning-ful moments"? What can be done right now to increase the probability that higher order learning can take place during moments of reflection on what is taking place (Kegan, 1982; Kegan, 1994: Vaill, 1996)? This means reflecting on the learning process itself and potentially revising this process.

The End Game

Whichever lens is engaged, and whichever process is implemented, the fundamental purpose of an Essential lens is to keep the "end game" in mind when polystatic predictions are made and the VUCA-Plus environment is navigated. This is an existential matter. The end game might not be the actual survival of a family, organization, nation or global; however, the end game is existential if it means preserving some core (Essential) value or purpose. It is not enough just to continue existence. Why exist if there is no reason for this existence (purpose)? Why exist if it means abandoning the core values on which our existence is based?

I am reminded of a consulting contract I had with a group of small colleges in the United States. I was meeting with the presidents of these often-struggling institutions. I brough in a prominent "futurist" to assist with a planning process that was being engaged by the presidents. The futurist started by asking the presidents to spend a few minutes reflecting on what difference it would make if their college went out of business during the coming year. This respectful futurist was asking the presidents to reflect on the Essential value that their college brought to the world.

The reaction of the presidents to this assignment was passionate and highly negative. They refused to engage in this reflection and asked the futurist to leave immediately! I was not viewed in a very positive manner and had to slowly rebuild my credibility. While the presidents valued the other planning processes that I had introduced, they certainly did not appreciate being asked this existential question: what is the purpose of your institution's existence? They threw out the existential version of an Essential lens that was offered by the Futurist. It is indeed a hard lens to deploy when planning for the future.

With these introductory comments regarding the ways in which a Lens of Essentials can be deployed, I turn to consideration of transformations that can be made regarding each of the six conditions of VUCA-Plus. Each of these transformations requires that we direct our Lens to something that is Essential. I attend in this essay to the Essential-based processes that help to transform two of the VUCA-Plus conditions: volatility and uncertainty. These transformative processes are based on the engagement of appropriate anchors and curiosity. In the second essay in this series, I introduce a process called enablement that helps to transform complexity and identify different perspectives that can be taken in predicting and making decisions--thus reducing ambiguity I conclude the second essay by providing a description of transformations to be made in confronting the final two VUCA-Plus conditions: turbulence and contradiction.

I begin in this essay with Anchors.

From Volatility to Anchoring

This first transformation concerns the engagement of *Contingency* in the midst of volatility. This transformation requires flexibility. Options are kept open. Learning takes place in order to modify the actions taken. As we have noted regarding Polystasis, adjustments are constantly being made—based on shifting predictions regarding the environment in which we are operating. The appropriate engagement of Contingency involves an emphasis on intentions (goals, vision, values, purposes) associated with the issue being addressed. Which of these intentions should (must) remain constant? Which can change depending on the shifting circumstances associated with this issue? I introduce the metaphor of anchor at this point to address the Contingency transformation and to provide a framework for addressing these questions.

The Anchoring metaphor was first used by Edgar Schein (2006) when writing about the nature of careers. I wish to expand on the metaphor used by Schein. In making use of this metaphor, it is important to note that there are two kinds of anchors. The first 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. 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. More simply, a ground anchor can be a slab of concrete to which a ship is attached when moored. These anchors are meant to be permanent. Similarly, some Essentials in an organization are meant to be permanent. These Essential ground anchors are often associated with the mission and values of the organization. They are rarely modified—and are never to be discarded!

The second kind of anchor is called a *Sea Anchor* (also called 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. This anchor provides flexible anchorage in the midst of tidal action as well as shifting wind. The sea anchor is used when the boat is no longer near 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 the boat with the wind and tides. The sea anchor slows down movement of the beat in any one direction.

Some of the Essentials in an organization operate like sea anchors. They similarly provide alignment and direction for an organization or society. They provide guidance and parameters for the organization as it shifts gradually with changes in the environment that surrounds a specific issue. It is important to note that the process of Polystasis operates like a sea anchor—as does the process of Allostasis. While homeostasis is based on the assumption that there is a permanent baseline (ground anchor) to which we continually adjust, both Polystasis and Allostasis suggest that the baseline (like the surface anchor) is shifting while also providing direction and some continuity. Benefits are inherent in both the ground and sea anchor. An Essential Lens can help us focus on the appropriate use of each type of anchor/intention.

I wish to take this analysis one step further. I suggest there is something fundamental operating in organizations. These are organizational patterns. I propose that both bottom and sea anchors operate in the maintenance of patterns in the lives of our organizations. The diverse ways in which patterns are established, reinforced and provide energy in our organizations tend to organize around several anchors. Some of these patterns and anchors are unyielding. They operate as bottom anchors and are firmly implanted in some organizational (or even societal) sea floor. These bottom anchors may be based on a set of strongly held collective values, beliefs, hopes, fears--or even shared myths.

Any disruption of these patterns or this bottom anchor can be profoundly disturbing and can be a source of sheer panic. Our polystatic predictions are disrupted. New predictions of disorder and chaos lead our body to engage in defensive biology. Focus turns to our internal state and away from our external state. We may freeze in a state of inaction. Or we might act in a frenzied and often ineffective manner. Our body is acting in an appropriate manner. It is preparing for fight or flight. However, our mind is messed up, for there is no battle that we can win and there is no safe place to which we might flee.

Other anchors operate like sea anchors. They can be moved in direction or orientation, and they may shift gradually with the tide or the wind. These are the organizational variations. We are challenged, but not profoundly threatened when invited to reflect on and consider changing our predictions based on the direction or orientation of these organizational sea anchors. We thoughtfully determine whether a battle is really required and if it can be won. Rather than flee, we find a way to remain calm and slow down our thinking.

One of the critical roles to be played by an Essential Lens is that of discernment: in this case, discerning the difference between bottom and sea anchors.

From Uncertainty to Curiosity

VUCA-Plus issues associated with Uncertainty (and Surprise) pose a major, multi-tiered challenge for leaders and other decision-makers in contemporary organizations. As Joe Berkowitz (2024) notes "uncertainty is a critical driver of stress." Yet, Berkowitz cites research evidence suggesting that uncertainty can also be aligned with curiosity. Curiosity may, in turn, "be humanity's brightest, most powerful spotlight for illuminating the unknown." Berkowitz illustrates the motivating feature of curiosity by citing Albert Einstein:

> In a letter Albert Einstein wrote to his biographer in 1953, the brilliant scientist claimed to possess no special talents other than being "Passionately curious". False modesty aside, it was only through pursuing his interest in the world's mysteries during his time on this plane that Einstein managed to reveal so many hidden secrets about the universe.

Significant Essentials-based transformation occurs when we discern the nature of an issue that our organization is confronting. We then become particularly curious about those issues that are not simply addressed. That which is Essential will change depending on the type of issue we confront. Certain types of issues evoke our curiosity. Others do not—either because these issues are routine and boring or because they are unexpected and overwhelming.

I briefly describe each of four types of issues and suggest why some of these issues elicit our curiosity. I also propose ways in which each type of issue has been (or could be) most successfully addressed—especially when the issue is critical and Essential. It is in the identification of issues about which we have some control and the issues about which we have no control that we find the capacity to transform uncertainty into an appropriate level of "passionate curiosity."

I begin with issues that serve as routine puzzles and rarely elicit much curiosity.

Puzzles

Puzzles are the everyday issues that we all must face. They are rarely in any way Essential nor do they evoke much curiosity on the part of those people who face them. We are rarely surprised when puzzles occur. However, we may label them as Essential, because they always must be successfully solved. Much as in the fable of the Dutch boy keeping his figure in the dike to keep the city from flooding, we have certain critical tasks to perform every day. At other times, we declare that something is Essential only because we want to appear competent and successful. It is at such a point that we need to ask if resolution of this issue is actually Essential

Answers are easily found when puzzling questions are asked. Puzzles are easily solved--and we know when they are solved. They are unidimensional, in that they can be clearly defined and can readily be quantified or at least measured. With a puzzle, the parameters are clear. The desired outcome of a puzzle-solution process can readily be identified. Actions that bring about success can easily be predicted in our Polystatic world. We rely on tried-and-true heuristics. Habitual behavior reigns supreme. There is little to gain our attention—other than the prospect of success. Puzzles are often imported to (and can be decided by) a relatively small number of people. It is the sort of issue that is rightly passed to the lowest level of responsibility where the necessary information is available. Employees are often placed in specific roles so that they can solve ongoing puzzles—whether they occur on an assembly line, at the front desk of a hotel, or in the accounting office of a small business.

John Miller and Scott Page (2007) use the metaphor of landscape to distinguish various types of issues being faced in organizations. They point to the image of a single, dominant mountain peak when describing the first type of landscape—one that is aligned with the view of a puzzle. Often volcanic in origin, these imposing mountains are clearly the highest point within sight. For those living in or visiting the Western United States, we can point to Mt. Rainer (in western Washington) or Mt. Shasta (in northern California). Mt. Fuji in Japan also exemplifies this type of landscape. You know when you have reached the highest point in the region and there is no doubt regarding the prominence of this peak. Similarly, in the case of puzzles, we know when a satisfactory solution has been identified. Our prediction has led to appropriate action. We can stand triumphantly at the top of the mountain/puzzle, knowing that we have succeeded. We are motivated by achievement rather than curiosity. We label something as Essential—such as ascending the peak—because "it is there" and because we can be successful.

Furthermore, we can look back down to the path followed in reaching the solution/peak. We can record this path and know that it can be followed again in the future. We know how to operate when, once again, we need to reach this peak or solve this puzzle. Our polystatic process remains stable—with the same baseline, same predictions and same habitual behavior. Even when we are not successful in achieving a particular outcome, a simple adjustment can be made in the actions to be taken. We went to a very crowded supermarket last week and felt the physiological impact of crowded aisles and long waits at the checkout counter. We made an adjustment and have gone to the supermarket at a better time—when there are fewer shoppers.

There is a slightly bigger and more complex puzzle to address. My ears have told me that there is too much noise around me at work. I hear what is being said by another staff member at the next desk. I complain. Partitions are set up between desks at my office. It is not uncommon for us to rely on old assumptions and polystatic predictions even when the issue is big and life-threatening. Many of us confronted the challenge of COVID by predicting that a protective device would help. Sure enough, new masks just arrived at our front door to help us confront this virus. We begin to stay home at the recommendation of our state officials. They are to be trusted and their recommendation helped to reduce the rate of infection. A puzzle presented itself and solutions emerged. Or did they . . .

Problems

I have labeled the second type of issue as a Problem. Many Essential issues belong in this second category. These issues often arise without warning. Uncertainty is prominent. Predictions are often inaccurate. Actions can be counterproductive. However, curiosity is aroused. What is going on here? It has drawn my attention. My

magnifying lens is brought out and I focus on the nature of this challenging condition. My polystatic process becomes less automatic. I slow down my thinking and reflect on what has not been working (as well as what has worked).

Problems can be differentiated from puzzles because they are less predictable and because there are multiple perspectives that can be applied when analyzing a problem. Several possible predictions and solutions are associated with any one problem. Multiple baselines can be engaged and many different criteria are applicable to the evaluation of any one solution. There are many more cognitive demands being placed on us when we confront problems than when we confront puzzles—given that problems do not have simple or single solutions and given that they were not anticipated. We also experience affective demands. The problem frightens us for a short period of time. Can we really be successful? And how will we know that success is at hand? Yet, like Einstein, we eventually might become "passionately curious" about this problem. We may spend countless hours (and forfeit nights of sleep) in search of a solution.

Problems are multi-dimensional and inter-disciplinary in nature. They are inevitably complicated in that they involve many elements. Any one problem can be viewed from many different points of view—each of which is creditable. Thus, it is unclear when a problem has been successfully resolved. We face the cognitive and emotional challenge of acknowledging multiple realities, multiple possible predictions and multiple possible solutions. The challenge is amplified, based on the level of importance to be assigned to this problem. If we are not overwhelmed by its importance, the problem is likely to provoke our curiosity if it is Essential. In fact, we might be curious about the actual status of this problem. Is it really Essential to find the solution to this problem in short order? There are additional matters associated with confrontation of a problem. There are cognitive and affective challenges associated with the Uncertainty aroused by the unexpected appearance of this problem. There is also the possibility that it will reappear at some point in the future if not solved right now. Even if it is solved, the darn thing might reappear later—like an unwanted relative or guest.

There is also the matter of stakeholders and audience. The outcome of the problem-solution process itself is likely to be of significant interest to many people when it is engaged to address a problem that is Essential. How do we know if this Essential problem has been permanently resolved? The criterion will often vary depending on the stakeholder group being considered. Often the most important and difficult discussions revolve around agreeing on the criteria for solving an Essential problem. For instance, at the level of public policy, Essential discussions regarding a virus can revolve around reducing the number of deaths or keeping the economy from total collapse. How will we know if we have been successful in combating the virus if we don't even know what "success" would mean. Is success all about lives or does it center on livelihoods?

At the personal level we must ask questions that are impossible to answer. Whose feelings and whose life are most important in this family? With our limited budget, who receives funds for college? When and how do we tell our kids that Dad has lost his job or that Mom is pregnant? We can't even evaluate if the solutions are successful. Was a college education "worth it"? Was this a good thing that we shared our news about Dad or Mom right away? We will continue to be plagued by the unanswerable question: "Did we do the right thing?" There is the lingering concern: "Have I been a wise and caring parent?"

At this stressful point, it is tempting to abandon curiosity. We move into a survival mode. We freeze in place and abandon any reflection or exploration of alternative perspectives or practices. Yet, it is at this point that we

must apply an Essential lens. It is a lens that magnifies the details of this problem and a lens that expands our viewpoint regarding the problem. What are alternative ways in which to view prevention or alleviation of this problem? Should we consider both strategies for protecting ourselves against the virus as well as ways in which we gain immunity by being exposed to the virus? Should we explore a variety of perspectives regarding the treatment of this problem? Do we listen to the viewpoints on Covid vaccinations offered not only by scientists at the National Institute of Health, but also by those scientists and physicians who warn about the potential side effects of available vaccines? Are there some new opportunities that emerge from the solution to this problem? Has Covid taught us some important lessons regarding how to confront viruses in the future?

We can become curious about the best ways in which to handle many domestic issues. To what advice do we listen regarding the value of a college education? What are the personal qualities that best predict a successful college career? What can we learn about parent-child communication? Do we feel more empowered and less helpless because we gathered some information before making a difficult decision? Do we have an opportunity to learn something new based on the curiosity that is elicited by this Essential challenge facing our family?

Miller and Page describe the settings in which problems tend to emerge. They are "rugged landscapes." This type of landscape is filled with many mountains of about the same height. Think of the majestic mountain range called the Grand Tetons or the front range of the Rocky Mountains that residents of Denver Colorado see every day. Compare this with a landscape in which one mountain peak dominates. In a rugged landscape that is complicated, one finds many competing viewpoints about which mountain is higher or which vista is more beautiful.

A similar case can be made regarding the challenging problems that must be addressed by each of us individually and collectively during a pandemic invasion (such as COVID-19). Multiple perspectives are credible. A host of priorities can be cited. Public policies are saturated with politics and competing financial interests. Our polystatic predictions are wandering all over the place. What about our domestic challenges. How do we choose between the welfare of our son and daughter with regard to college tuition? It is potentially the best thing and potentially the worse thing to share this "intimate" information with our children? Can we remain curious about the problem as well as our confusing reactions to this problem? Curiosity must remain dominant. We must continue to explore, research, confirm and disconfirm as we journey through this rugged landscape—making full use of our set of Essential lenses.

Messes

There are problems… and then there are big messes! We tend to see many issues in a limited or simplistic way. We attempt to deal with them as if they are puzzles or problems. When that happens in addressing an Essential issue then we are likely to be surprised. Furthermore, we are likely to dig ourselves deeper into the complexity, seriousness, and potential tragedy of the issue being faced. Our polystatic process "ain't working!" Our predictions lead us astray. When faced with the multi-faced challenges of a pandemic (such as COVID) we are navigating more of a "swamp" rather than a sea. When figuring out where to allocate college funds, we are faced with many related issues that can create a swamp. What about past relationships with our kids? Do we consider the attitudes of our children about "fairness" in family relations or about the worth assigned to a college education? Russell Ackoff (1999) describes this swamp many years ago as a "mess." Others have identified these messy issues as "wicked problems" or "tangled webs." Whatever we call this type of issue, we

must stay with "messes" that are located in a swamp long enough to achieve real and sustained solution to the uncertain Essential issues we are facing. We can't avoid making Polystatic predictions and living with the consequences of these predictions.

Messes are to be distinguished from problems in that they don't just involve multiple elements (a complicated system). They also involved a complex interweaving (tangled web) among these elements (a complex system) (Miller and Page, 2007). Messes are indeed "wicked" when it comes to understanding let alone seeking to predict what is about to occur and finding the "solution" to an Essential issue. Each of the many elements embedded in the mess is connected to each (or most) of the other elements. Uncertainty abounds in large part because these elements have suddenly connected. It is like the complex and powerful processes to be found in nuclear fusion and fission. Perhaps like those scientists who have spent their lifetime being curious about fusion or fission, we can be curious about the messes we face and can apply our set of Essential lenses. Family priorities and patterns of behavior among family members can be intriguing. We can be curious about family dynamics and acknowledge that all families operate in "messy ways." Most importantly, we can "cut ourselves some slack" when setting up financial priorities and managing important disclosures.

The challenge is every greater. The rugged landscape is shrouded in clouds. Not only can't we determine which is the tallest mountain and how to navigate in this rugged terrain, we can't clearly see the mountains through the haze. It is like traveling along the highway leading through the Great Smokey Mountains (in the Eastern USA) Everything (as the name implies) is often "smokey." The VUCA-Plus condition of Uncertainty is joined with the condition of Ambiguity. The mountains are beautiful—but the beauty is captured in the vague outline of peaks and valleys. VUCA-Plus reigns supreme, with conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity both appearing in full strength when we are confronting a Mess.

What might lead us to be curious? We might wonder what it would look like if the fog cleared. We generate several alternative predictions of what resides on the other side of the fog. We create contingency plans for addressing each of the possible environments that are now shrouded. Do we find out what this environment was like before there was fog? Is information about pre-fog conditions still relevant? We might even be curious about the source of the fog. Is someone or some institution benefiting from the fog? Should we direct our attention to the fog-maker(s) rather than that which resides in the fog? However, we wish to explore the landscape with and without the fog, it is most important that we acknowledge the inevitability of making some mistakes in the midst of the mess. Our predictions will not always be accurate. Our actions will not always yield desired outcomes. Some self-forgiveness is requisite when addressing any mess. Curiosity is only possible with the prospect of this self-forgiveness regarding the potential of making a mess of the messes we are facing.

Dilemmas

Certain Essential issues that we face appear impervious to a definitive solution. This leads to a significant increase in levels of collective anxiety—which, in turn, leads to rigidity of thought and a preference for fast-thinking and fast-solutions. Under these conditions, polystatic predictions are likely to be lousy. Resulting biological reactions and behaviors are likely to be mal-adaptive: "garbage in and garbage out." With recognition of a mal-adaptive response, we are likely to try out something else – which also will fail. There is now dithering of biology and behavior—which creates yet another challenge.

It becomes useful to classify these Essential issues as Dilemmas—and to acknowledge that these contradictions are likely to occur frequently in our mid-21st Century society. We may be uncertain about the immediate dilemma that has occurred but can remain certain that there will be many dilemmas in our VUCA-Plus environment. I propose that many elusive problems and messes are actually dilemmas. Dilemmas are like problems in that they are complicated. Like messes they are also complex. In addition, the interwoven elements are often in opposition to one another. The VUCA-Plus condition of contradiction joins with the condition of uncertainty. Different priorities and/or different perspective are present. We may view the issue from one perspective and take action to alleviate one part of the issue. We then immediately confront another part of the issue. This other part is often represented by an opposing point of view that is offered (with passion) by other members of our family. community or society. We move from one prediction to another prediction and from one dithering reaction to a second or third reaction.

As in the case of problems and messes, dilemmas can be described as "rugged landscapes." However, because dilemmas involve multiple elements that are intimately interlinked and in opposition to one another, they are far more than a cluster or range of mountain peaks of similar size. This type of landscape is filled not only with many mountains of about the same height, but also with many river valleys and forests. An entire complex ecosystem is involved. This ecosystem incorporates the outcomes of competing elements that push against one another (earthquakes), erode one another (riverbeds) and/or produce diverse fauna and flora (trees, plants, animals, etc.). Think of the Appalachian Mountains (in the Eastern United States) or the Alps (in Europe). Compare this with a landscape in which one mountain peak dominates or in which a series of mountains dominate. In a rugged and dilemma-filled landscape, one finds not only abundant competing viewpoints and values, but also an intricate interweaving of these differing viewpoints and values in new and surprising ways. In this setting we also find exceptional beauty that presents itself in many ways—suggesting our use of a diversity-based lens of Essentials. Nature can be viewed like a kaleidoscope.

The uncertainty itself creates opportunity for not just beauty but also curiosity. And when we are curious—as was the case with Albert Einstein—we become creative. Ralph Stacey (1996) has noted that it is in the midst of richly textured (complex) systems that we are most likely to find creative solutions. These solutions are often located in the curiosity-filled gaps that exist between various sectors of a family, organization or community. Franz Johansson (2004) writes about the *Medici Effect* (referring back to leadership provided by the Medici family during the Italian renaissance). This effect is engaged in the intersection between often-competing disciplines. New solutions are generated in this intersection. Members of one discipline are curious about what those in another discipline have to say. New learning can occur as alternative perspectives on an important issue are introduced. Artists can learn from scientists. Historians can provide insights to those who are engaged in politics. I have myself conducted sessions where art professors in a college can learn about the use of laboratories from professors of chemistry, while at the same time teaching these chemists about the use of studios as a mode of education.

Members of an organization can hold opposing and contradictory views and still be effectively and creatively engaged with one another. By being curious about the perspective held by the other side, they can meet the challenge of VUCA-Plus. Their personal and collective polystatic processes can yield thoughtful and appropriate predictions and actions. The sign of a viable, creative organization is that it can live with and manage its dilemmas in real time. This is also the sign of a viable and loving family. The leaders of this organization or

parents of this family can address the dilemma without questioning the identity of the organization or family at every turn in the road. These leaders and parents can avoid whip-lashing strategies. The leaders need not confront dilemmas by reactively tearing down and rebuilding their organizational structures. The parents need not scapegoat or exhibit preferential treatment for one of their children. Accurate predictions can be made and continually adjusted to the many competing viewpoints and values of the organization or family. It all depends on the acceptance of diverse perspectives, the encouragement of creativity, the acceptance of mistakes (and learning from these mistakes)—and a climate of appreciation in the organization or family (Bergquist, 2003; Bergquist, 2023).

To return to our landscape metaphor, we may find that we are living not in a complex rugged landscape but in what Miller and Page call a "dancing landscape." Their term is certainly very appropriate in describing many of our current challenges. The VUCA-Plus conditions of volatility, uncertainty and turbulence speak to the nature of this dance. Clearly, when a world of complexity collides with a world of volatility, uncertainty and turbulence, the landscape begins to dance. We must all learn how to make our families, organizations, communities and societies dance along with this challenging landscape (Kantor, 1989). It is worth noting that dancing is often a source of creative movement—and this movement is a source of joy. We create something new that expresses something that is Essential. This resides at the heart of dance and at the heart of a vital personal and organizational life.

Polarities

There are simple issues, and then there are challenging problems, messes and dilemmas – and then there are really challenging and dynamic polarities! Like dilemmas, polarities are inevitable and predictable. They need not reside in uncertainty. We can predict that they will occur and adjust our baseline in accordance with this recognition. Furthermore, like dilemmas, polarities are multi-dimensional with many moving parts that stand against one another. This means that it is not easy to target just one baseline. Polarities are unlike dilemmas in that these parts (and the perspectives and priorities associated with these parts) don't just stand there in opposition. They create a dynamic oscillation in the system in which they operate. Furthermore, this oscillation can be quite destructive to this system, bringing about either a state of freeze or a state of instability. Given these dynamic conditions, the baseline might be quite "slippery" and will itself oscillate in alignment first with one end of the polarity and then with the other end.

I bring back the concept of polarity management that I introduced in the previous essay in this series because it is critical to the navigation of a VUCA-Plus environment (Bergquist, 2024). Barry Johnson (1996), the principal architect of polarity management, observes that we are often confronted in our contemporary world with polarities. Two or more legitimate but opposite forces are at work in what I have been calling a VUCA-Plus condition of contradiction. Reflections and debates are engaged concerning the benefits and disadvantages of each side. Organizationally, the two or more opposing and contradictory forces are often embodied in "camps." For example, the health care administrator's interest in minimizing expenses is pitted against the primary care department's need to invest in new equipment. A centralized corporate system has the need to standardize its offerings, but the offices of specific branches of this corporation need flexibility in running their daily affairs.

Neither position is "wrong." "Exquisite truth" is to be found in the positions taken by both camps. The organization is now in the midst of polarization. Uncertainty no longer exists. The opposing perspectives and

positions are "painfully" obvious. Fortunately, someone who recognizes this as a polarity can bring both parties to the table. A mutual understanding can be reached regarding the respective benefits and possible negative consequences of holding either position to the exclusion of the other. Once the strengths and risks of the two sides are understood, the dialogue is directed to what happens when we try to maximize the benefits of either side at the expense of the other side.

An additional step is taken. Here is where curiosity gains a foothold. An Essential question is posed: what do both sides have in common? What is the goal, outcomes or value that they both share? If nothing else, this might be just their shared survival or at least finding an end to the swinging back and forth. Usually, however, there is something more than just this lower order shared purpose. In a safe and supportive environment, we can be curious about some higher order purpose—and in this curiosity comes the potential for someone in the midst of the polarity to "discover" or "uncover" this higher-order purpose.

To return to our dancing landscapes, we find (as in the case of dilemmas) that there are multiple mountains to view when we look out over the mid-21st Century landscape. As with dilemmas, the landscape is dancing. However, in the case of polarities there is another force operating that produces the dance. This dynamic is the swinging back and forth between the two contradictory and competing polarities. There is oscillation in the dance—with the dancer twirling around—often to a point of exhaustion or madness.

Back to the mountains. We first decide to climb up to the peak of a nearby mountain. We immediately identify the many challenges we face in seeking to ascend this mountain. So, we turn our attention to the second nearby mountain (which is just as tall). We soon come to recognize that this second mountain has its own obstacles. We stand there uncertain regarding which way to move. We are frozen and stressed. No action is taken and the opportunity to reach either summit is lost. The lost opportunity, in turn, further increases the stress. There is a further negative impact. The frozen condition seriously damages our personal health. We never want to return to this damned mountain range.

In turning our attention from mountain climbing to organizational leadership, we find that an important sign of viability and vitality in a mid-21st Century organization is its capacity to live with uncertainty--and its leaders use of this uncertainty to produce clarity and resolution. Through the use of polarity management, leaders of an organization can engage their organization's dilemmas, paradoxes and polarities in real time. The dance of oscillation is hard to avoid. However, it can (and must) be anticipated and managed—especially when the issues being faced are Essential to the organization's functioning. And it is worth keeping in mind that curiosity can arise when we observe other people dancing: "What are they doing and are they enjoying themselves and perhaps even trying to convey something?"

There is something that is even more important: we can be curious about our own dancing (alone or with one or more partners). Do we follow a standard pattern: perhaps a fox trot (for the really old folks) or a bit of twisting (for the middle aged and semi-old folks) and some "free-lance" dancing (for the young folks). Or do we just "strike out on our own' and create our own dance. What about our dance-like engagements in our organization? Are we old-fashion, new age or improvisational in our work with other people and in our personal and collective envisioning of the future for this organization? Rosabeth Kanter (1989) believes that even the leaders of big, old organizations can dance—so can we . . .

Mysteries

We enter a domain in which problems, dilemmas and polarities seem to merge into Mysteries when we begin to address challenges associated with dancing (and even oscillating) landscapes. Mysteries operate at a different level than puzzles, problems, messes, dilemmas or polarities. First, it is important to note that mysteries are often associated with Essential issues that can be predicted. Uncertainty can be avoided when the inevitable appearance of Mystery is acknowledged. However, it is not enough to acknowledge the inevitability. Though these mysterious Essential issues may be predictable, they are often difficult to understand and are ultimately unknowable. We must also acknowledge that many mysteries are filled with complexity, ambiguity and contradictions. A specific mystery is profound. Unfortunately, in many cases mysteries reside in the world of negative apprehensive Essentials. They are "hellish." In some cases, fortunately, mysteries reside in the world of positive, aspirational Essentials. They are "heavenly." Thus, the Mystery is either awe-inspiring (aspirational Essential) or awe-ful (apprehensive Essential). If nothing else, this mystery is likely to be Enthralling. It is therefore hard to ignore as an "the Elephant in the room".

As in the case of dilemmas and polarities, we anticipate the encountering of many mysteries in our lives—but also find it hard to do much about these mysteries. Like Einstein, we can be "passionately curious" about the profound mysteries we encounter. However, most of us don't have the brainpower of Einstein to successfully confront mysteries with curiosity. We have to narrow down the mystery and deal with only a portion of its big "awe-full-ness." For instance, we know that powerful storms will occasionally impact crops that our agri-business is raising or the tourism on which our resort depends. Increasingly, we are aware that climate change will make these storms even more predictable. We can't do much about climate change (a distal event), but we can do some contingency planning (proximal event) regarding the potential loss of crops or tourist trade.

I offer a particularly timely example of a mystery about which we are apprehensive. This mystery concerns the viruses that are now impacting our collective lives. Ultimately, we probably can't do much to control the occurrence of viruses –at least not in our persona life. Viruses are distal events. However, we can focus on steps to be taken in avoiding the virus or treating it. This proximal perspective turns the mystery into a somewhat manageable problem--or it becomes a some less manageable dilemma. As I have already noted, it can also become a particularly challenging polarity.

Then there are the very personal (proximal) and profound mysteries surrounding the impact of births and deaths on our individual lives. We know that all things have a beginning and must come to an end. However, we still find it hard to accept these inevitable, mysterious outcomes. Doulas can help us prepare for the birth of a child, and hospice workers can help us prepare for death--as can reading a book such as *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande (2014). We can even be curious about the process of birth and death. These mysteries have always been a source of curiosity and creativity for authors, dramatists, poets, artists and philosophers—leading to many books, plays, poems and paintings depicting birth or death.

Frequently, it is not a matter of addressing a portion of a mystery so that it becomes a problem, dilemmas or polarity. Rather it is a matter of acknowledging that a mystery is itself constituted of multiple and often nested dilemmas. The mystery might even reside in the midst of a polarity. These dilemma and polarity-filled mysteries are particularly hard to understand or address. They reside beyond rational comprehension and resolution. They must be viewed with respect and cannot be ignored (which would lead to Uncertainty). Some mysteries relate to

traumatic and devastating events. These yield to what I have identified as an apprehensive perspective regarding what is Essential. Why did I get out of the World Trade Center while my desk mate perished? Why did the fire reach our home but not the one next to us? Why did my child die before me? The virus evokes many profound questions of mystery that are nested or that evoke polarities. Why was my mother forced to die alone when COVID-19 hit? Could the government have done something about this—or could I have done something? Our troubling concerns are based in a nested dilemma. Where did all of this anger in our society about the virus come from? Why was there such distrust of some people and agencies? Will this anger and distrust reappear when the next virus hits our shore? Should we impose some restrictions on the expression of this anger or confront the distrust more forcefully when future viruses invade our life? Or do we just let this anger and distrust be freely expressed in our "open" society? The mystery of reoccurring viruses is now couched in a polarity regarding societal restrictions.

Mysteries can also provide an opportunity for engaging what I have identified as aspirational Essentials. The productive processes of Polystasis enter the picture at this point. A new project has fallen into my lap. I have received a remarkable opportunity to demonstrate my competence in leading this project. I shift my baseline. I set up predictions and plans for success in operating this new project. I then act on behalf of the new baseline I have established. Another opportunity might arise that we have brought about ourselves. My partner and I have shared five wonderful years together—perhaps it is now time to have a baby. New baselines regarding child-centered accomplishments are established by the two of us and we make plans. Opportunities might also emerge in reaction to events in the immediate past. I have gained so much support during my treatment for Cancer that it is now time for me to "give back" and do volunteer work at the treatment center. I create a new baseline regarding time spent in assisting other people with cancer. I predict that there are certain ways in which I can be most helpful. I find that the baseline must be adjusted, and my predictions must shift a bit as I actually begin working with those people who are facing the often-mysterious challenges of cancer.

A mystery is inevitably viewed from many different perspectives and is often deeply rooted in a specific culture and tradition. Mysteries have no boundaries, and all aspects are interrelated. As I have noted, COVID-19 is fundamentally a mystery. We don't know why this horrible virus has afflicted us. There is often a "Why" question to be addressed when confronting a mystery such as COVID-19. We can seek out a religious or sacred answer by asking if we, as human beings, somehow deserve to be "punished." Is COVID an apprehensive Essential? Are the wages of sin now evident in the impact of this virus on our collective life? Is this some divine retribution for the inequities and warfare we have inflicted on our fellow human beings? From a more positive perspective, we might perceive that God is just trying to show us that life is precious. We should spend more time with our loved ones and provide our neighbors with gracious support. There is a divine presence that is guiding us through troubling times.

The question of "Why" regarding COVID can be addressed at a more secular and political level. Perhaps the virus is just highlighting the cracks in our societies that have been ignored for many years. The virus is trying to teach us. We can learn from the virus about how to engage a polystatic process that contains realistic baselines and predictions regarding ways in which to address future viruses. Can we, in any way, frame COVID as an aspirational Essence that enables us to learn about and reform our health care system (as well as our own approach to confronting future viruses)? At yet another level, we might ask if Mother Nature is simply trying to take back her environment. During the COVID outbreak we could see all around us the signs of a clearer and less

contaminated world--given reduced automobile travel and industrial production. Can we learn a lesson given this improvement in our environment? Can we assist Mother Nature without having to endure a pandemic?

Locus of Control: Uncertainty, Curiosity and Discernment

Psychologists have provided a label for this assumption that we have no control over the mysteries (or other issues in our life). They call this an *External Locus of Control*. They note that some people are inclined to view most issues as outside their control. Many issues are framed as mysteries. Operating in a Polystatic system, those who embrace an external locus of control do not believe that they can predict a specific change in our environment and that they can do nothing to influence those changes that do occur. They either adapt to the change or do nothing. A dominant external locus of control can leave us passive or frozen.

By contrast, some people tend to frame everything as puzzles which can be controlled—and are predictable. Psychologists identify the perspective embraced by these people as an *Internal Locus of Control*. Given this more optimistic perspective we can engage an activist polystatic process. We can predict that something can be done about this change in our environment. We act, await the outcome of this action and readily adjust our actions based on the initial outcomes. we find ourselves taking responsibility for this outcome when embracing an internal locus of control. We rejoice in the successful outcome and may enjoying a squirt of feel-good dopamine. Or we are hit with a bout of anxious given an unsuccessful outcome that should not be repeated. This leads us to prepare physiologically for a new set of actions. Given an internal locus of control, we may often be optimistic about the future but can easily be disillusioned. Those with an internal locus of control are vulnerable to mood swings, moments of intense anxiety, and late nights of work.

A critical role is played by discernment when it comes to locus of control. We tend to perceive puzzles, problems—and even messes, dilemmas and polarities—within our control if we have an internal locus of control and are inclined to act rather than sit back and reflect. With an external locus of control, we might perceive everything as being outside of our control—even puzzles. There is more likely to be agreement among all parties when it comes to mysteries. We all tend to agree that mysteries are taking place outside our sphere of influence or control—this is part of what makes mysteries so awe-full and compelling. This is also why collective angst regarding mysteries is often associated with the VUCA-Plus condition of Uncertainty.

Problems, messes, dilemmas and polarities are usually complex mixtures of controllable and uncontrollable elements. VUCA-Plus conditions inevitably contain this mixture. Furthermore, this mixture inevitably produces perceived uncertainty regarding the appearance of many Essential issues. Internal and external locus of control exist side by side—especially in the nested dilemmas and in the challenging polarities we often face with the virus and other mid-21st Century conditions.

A problem or dilemma that is embedded in a rugged landscape is likely to have a large proportion of components that are under one's partial control. By contrast, a problem, mess or dilemma that is embedded in a dancing landscape is less likely to be under one's control. A polarity that is embedded in and has likely been the primary cause of an oscillating landscape is even more elusive when it comes to control. It is hard to determine what actually is potentially under our control. This doesn't mean that we give up on our attempt to lead in a

dancing landscape or manage an oscillating landscape. It only means that we need to be patient and persistent in engaging this landscape of mixed uncertainty and certainty.

Our primary (Essential) task is to carefully and thoughtfully engage in a slow-thinking process that I have already introduced several times in this essay. This is the process of discernment: what can we control and what can't we control? We should be curious about how our dancing landscape operates with regard to our own participation. How does this landscape work? Are there any nodal points in this dancing network where so influence can be asserted? As I have already mentioned, we might be able to control or at least join with other people in pushing or pulling one element of this landscape.

Curiosity should reign supreme when living and working in a dancing landscape. Many intriguing questions can be posed. Which elements connect with which other elements? Are there some patterns in this rich, evolving tapestry? What really is predictable and what clearly is uncertain? We will be able to successfully address a challenging Essential issue – be it a problem, mess, dilemma or polarity-- only by being curious and creative in exploring alternative roles for us to play individually and collectively in a dancing landscape. Most importantly, we can embrace a balanced perspective in our polystatic stance regarding predictability as well as internal and external loci of control.

The Fundamental Decision: Serenity or Essentials?

As I bring this first essay on the Lens of Essentials to a close, it seems appropriate to return to our opening observation. When faced with the many challenges associated with VUCA-Plus it is very tempting to seek out the rabbit hole as an entrance into a serene wonderland of distorted reality. The alternative is to find or create one or more Essential lenses. An Essential lens might help us converge on that which is important in our life and work. This lens might also enable us to magnify and attend to that which is most important.

Essential lenses can operate in many ways. They can assist us expand and diversify our vision regarding what is most important or help us extend our perspective (in time and space) regarding that which is of greatest importance and value in our life and work. In this essay, I have specifically tended to those lenses which transform the world of VUCA-Plus into one with stabilizing anchors. Furthermore, through the engagement of an Essential lens, we may find ourselves being curious regarding the issue(s) being addressed—this curiosity leading to clarity and creativity.

Dualism and Serenity

Even with the potential assistance provided by Essential lenses, it is necessary for us to recognize that operating in the "real" world is never easy. The application of an Essential Lens requires slow and reflective thinking, appreciative feelings, and tolerance of that which remains volatile and uncertain. As I shall observe in the next essay, challenging conditions of complex, ambiguous, turbulent and filled contradiction also must be addressed in a VUCA-Plus environment. Some people clearly find it much easier to live their life in the wonderland of Serenity. They prefer finding Serenity in a distorted

wonderland rather than finding what is Essential in a VUCA-Plus world. As described by William Perry (1998), those people living in Serenity see the world in black/white, good/bad, right/wrong terms.

Perry uses the term *Dualist* when describing the world in which these people choose to live. Seeking out Serenity, these members of our society are inclined to accept the expertise of someone who is in authority and offers simple solutions to complex issues (problems, messes, dilemmas and polarities) These "experts" are luring the dualists down the rabbit hole to Serenity. Facts offered by an authority figure are accepted uncritically and without hesitation by those seeking Serenity—for the authority is right, good and strong when we are dwelling in a wonderland of Serenity.

Elizabeth Kolbert (2022) recently wrote about this pull toward Dualism when reflecting back on a famous social psychological study. The Robbers Cave studies of the 1950s provided a compelling narrative of how two group of boys at a summer camp readily polarized and assigned good/bad labels to one another. Kolbert suggests that we might be conducting a comparable "real life" experiment today as we Americans divide not into the Boy's Camp Rattlers and Eagles—but instead into red Elephants (Republicans) and blue Donkeys (Democrats).

Given that we are a bit older than the boys at camp, we can do much more harm to one another than could the boys—especially if we are living in a wonderland of Serenity. Kolbert proposes that this dualism is particularly seductive for adults—for dualims "flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority." She goes on to note that "the solace of its simplicity comes at no little cost. It disregards what we know and asks that we forfeit, too—forget about the pleasures of not knowing." (Kolbert, 2022).

Relativism and Reality

What about this "pleasures of not knowing"? These pleasures seem to align with the concept of curiosity that I have associated in this essay with the transformation of uncertainty into clarity and curiosity. Furthermore, in reading Kolbert's account, William Perry would suggest that the pleasures of not knowing belong to those people whom Perry calls the *Relativists*. These are members of our society who take on the challenge of freely viewing an uncertain world. They are open to the idea that there are relative truths, relative goods and relative bads—and even relatively trustworthy or untrustworthy authorities.

Relativists are willing to critically examine their own perspectives and practice. They are even curious about these often tacitly held (unconscious) perspectives and practices. However, there is another important characteristic that Perry emphasizes. The relativists are doing all of this while sitting on the sidelines. They are studying the Robbers Cave results, but don't go to the cave themselves or participate in a real-life adult experiment on attitude formation. If the relativists do go to the camp, then they are likely to find this camp filled with Dualists. The Dualists readily attend the camp if they assume that they can readily identify the "good guys" and that they have strong authority to back up their version of the Cave and camp. If the Relativists are "in charge" then Dualists are likely to wait impatiently for these Relativist leaders to "make up their minds" and take some action.

The Dualist is likely not only to grow impatient with Relativist delays, but also to grow suspicious of the Relativist's ultimate alliance. It doesn't take long for the Dualist to assign all Relativists to the bad (and evil) side of the two-partition bucket. Finally giving up, Dualists are likely to decide that action must be taken based on the Facts provided by other trusted authoritative experts. The Dualists provoke a revolution against the Relativists--thus enacting a polarization that parallels that of the boys in the original study. Alternatively, the Dualists leave this camp in order to find one where their version of reality is supported by authority. The "Cave" in this camp will be one in which they can find Serenity.

There is an alternative outcome of the adult Robber's Cave experiment. It is an outcome that generates a different set of challenges. Instead of revolting (fight) or leaving the camp (flight) the Dualist might actually be influenced by the Relativist. They might be attracted to the world of curiosity offered by the Relativist (vision). Furthermore, the Dualists might find good reasons to finally doubt the experts that offer an alternative reality. When this cognitive and affective "revolution" occurs then the Dualists will shift their perspective. However, they typically do not become Relativists. According to Perry, there is not a move to Relativism. Instead, the Dualist embraced *Multiplicity* – which is a variant on dualism. If there the alternative authority can't be trusted, then what's to say that the Relativists can be trusted to provide the "truth." Perhaps NO authority is to be trusted! Everyone is suspect. We are all on our own to find the truth and check out the Facts. The Multiplistic stance was on full display in American culture during the 1960s. It might also be the dominant perspective in our VUCA-Plus world of the mid-21st Century.

The Multiplist might not chose to enter the wonderland of Serenity—for it is filled with "true-believers" who can't be trusted. However, the multiplist is also unlikely to accept the world of VUCA-Plus with its swirling uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity. They are likely to remain in some aimless state of alienation (from authority) and confusion (about what to believe). Neither Serentiy nor alignment with anything Essential is to be found in the heart and mind of the Multiplist. They are truly "strangers in a strange land." Do they grow out of this alienation and confusion? Perhaps. Alternatively, there is always a cycle of addiction that numbs the alienation and confusion. What is to be done?

Conclusions

I would suggest that something can be done regarding challenges that both the Multiplists and Dualists face in dealing with the real world. Both can be met with understanding and appreciation for the transition of thoughts and feelings in which they are now engaged. William Perry notes that transitions at any level (be it from Dualism to Multiplicity or from Multiplicity to Dualism) are difficult. Each transition requires that we grieve the loss of contentment (and even loss of innocence) to be found at the previous developmental stage. It seems that we are being kicked out of multiple Edens on our way to a life of thoughtful action (Palmer, 1990).

Transition of Multiplists

The Multiplists can also be gently invited to try on an Essential lens. This might be a lens that helps the Dualist focus on a specific aspect of "real life" that is important to them. For instance, they might focus

on their family and its priorities. Rather than accepting the expertise offered by any fancy expert on family relationships, the Multiplist is invited to take on a focused lens of appreciation that enables them to find a time in the life of their own current family (or family of origin) when "they were doing it right." They become their own "expert". When has love been effectively expressed in their family through the showing of empathy and support for some member of the family who has been struggling? What about moments of caring (called "bids") when one member of the family has felt loved and protected by other members (Bergquist, 2023)?

The Multiplist might also (or instead) be invited to put on a lens that expands their vision. Rather than seeking out a specific truth, the multiplist is gently encouraged to see the beauty that is manifest in kaleidoscopic diversity. They attend a lecture where five different versions are offered regarding what their favorite movie is "about." What might the "force" mean in the Star Wars series? What are the many different strengths (and weaknesses) being portrayed in superhero movies? For those who are not "into" science fiction or action movies, there might be an invitation to explore different ways in which love or grief are expressed in contemporary movies, or ways in which the developmental challenges of adolescents are portrayed. We begin with movies (or TV series or novels) and can then move into real life and reflect on the diverse expressions of one's own heroism, love, grief, or developmental challenges. Our Multiplist is guided in their transition to Relativism by first engaging a distal perspective (watching a movie or reading a book) and then moving to a proximal perspective (their own life).

 A third Essential lens might be offered to the Multiplist. This lens would guide this person toward their own future. The Multiplist is invited to consider what their life might look like 10 years from now—or even 25 years from now. They will be older. The world is likely to look quite a bit different. I often ask someone to imagine looking in a mirror and viewing the person they will be at some point in the future. What would they look life? How would they feel? What health issues might be present?

From this very intimate view of themselves (proximal perspective), I invite my client to consider what the world would look like that surrounded them in the mirror (distal perspective). Other family members? Their work environment? Maybe the state of their community and nation (including where they might be living at this point in the future). This process of "life planning" enables a Multiplist to recognize that they are likely to no longer be the "same person" in the future – yet will retain certain features and beliefs. Their "surface" anchor allows them to drift over time to a new location; however, their ground anchor is there to ensure that they don't drift too far. For the Multiplist, this means that there can be changing "truths" and "realities" in their own life over time. This, in turn, allows them to accept and appreciate the multiple truths and realities to be found in the heart and mind of other people. Relativism is slowly and caringly introduced.

Transition of Relativists

I would also suggest that something can be done to help Relativists deal with Dualists and their own transition from sideline observer to activist. There are ways for the Relativist to effectively make decisions and act in the world of VUCA-Plus. They can engage polystasis in a thoughtful manner. They can act and reflect on this action. Relativist should indeed be encouraged to participate in an adult version of the polarization experiment—this "experiment" being the real polarized world of mid-21st

Century communities. They might seek to eliminate or at least reduce polarization at the cave. They can become peacemakers. The Relativist can help other participants in the experiment to slow down their own knee-jerk polystatic process. They can find the appropriate Essential lens to guide their own actions regarding struggles taking place at Robber Cave.

If they are to become engaged rather than sitting on the side-lines, the Relativist must continue to be reflective and critical in their own judgements. They must slow down the polystatic process or at least be reflective regarding the outcomes of this process. This mode of thought is now applied not just to the observational, predictive and interpretative phases of Polystasis but also to selection of the best (most realistic and ethical) actions to be taken (Schön, 1983). The Relativist will undoubtedly be hesitant to take any action given the confusing world in which they are living. However, they do eventually have to move forward if the world in which they dwell is no longer sustainable.

Perry identifies this as a movement from relativism to *Commitment in the Midst of Relativism*. Despite our biases and distorted perspectives on the world in which we live and our vulnerability to distorting heuristics, we make a commitment to do something. This is better than sitting back and doing nothing in a polarized rubber cave world—for this world is not sustainable. This shift to commitment is inevitably painful—much as the shift from Dualism to Multiplicity (and from Multiplicity to Relativism) is painful.

Serenity or Courageous Engagement

Retreat to Serenity is not an option in our challenging mid-21st Century world. The navigation of life and work in this world is not easy, for it is guided by imprecise and often conflicting Facts, as well as by relative truths, unreliable authorities and contradictory values. Our Essential lenses certainly help. However, courage is still required. And it takes great courage when the stakes are high—when we are seeking to find what is Essential and to commit to that which is Essential. All of this must be done while navigating a VUCA-Plus world that is filled not only with volatility and uncertainty but also complexity, ambiguity, turbulence and contradictions—the conditions to which I turn in the second essay on the Search for Essentials.

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