

Finding Essence in a VUCA-Plus World II: Engagement and Integration

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In this essay, I continue my offering of a 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. This set of strategies and tools centers on focusing one's energy and engagement on the Essence of each VUCA-Plus issue.

I focus in this essay on the ways in which turbulence can be transformed to engagement, and contradiction can be transformed to integration. We find the Essence that is needed to guide us through a white water world filled with many contradictions through these transformative strategies of engagement and integration. We also find that Essence helps us identify the nature of changes (or non-changes) that we wish to make in our own life and work as well as the setting in which we are working and living. I turn first to this matter of viewpoint regarding Essence and change.

The Facets of Essence

As a Lens through which one can view the world, Essence comes with four facets. Each of the facets provides a viewpoint that influences the way in which we engage our world at any one point in time.

Facet One: Zero Order Essence

From the viewpoint offered through this facet, one finds that Essence exists right now in the world we inhabit. We are in "heaven" and need not change anything. We discover our "bliss." Facet One leads us to believe that we should be in the business of preserving what already exists. It offers an appreciative perspective. "Heaven on earth" is to be found in the appreciation of what already exists and what we have already accomplished.

Facet Two: First Order Essence

We can perceive the Essence of what we desire at any one point in time. Knowing what we want, action is taken. First order change is engaged on behalf of this Essence. This facet typically provides a perspective regarding personal transitions. We can lean and learn into the future when viewing the world through this facet.

Facet Three: Second Order Essence

We adjust our view of Essence but recognizing that Essence resides beyond or beneath that which we initially perceived as being the Essence of what we wish in our life. We engage in second order change on behalf of this second order Essence. Personal transformation (Mezirow) rather than transition.

Facet Four: Third Order Essence

When viewing our world through the fourth facet, we come to recognize that the Essence of what we desire requires that the system in which we are now operating must itself be reformed. We must "re-program our environment" if we wish to be successful in achieving that which is the Essence of a good life. We must build our own Jerusalem if we wish to dwell in heaven. Third order change is required.

Facet four concerns systemic transformation. It concerns revolution (rather than evolution). Existing paradigms are challenged. Paradigm shifts occur. As I shall soon note, this form of essence is often found not in large, enduring systems but instead (at least initially) in temporary systems where new perspectives and practices can be introduced and tested in an immediate and dynamic manner (Miller, Galanter and Pribram, 1960).

From Turbulence to Engagement

Of the six conditions of VUCA-Plus, turbulence is perhaps the most visceral. It is immediately experienced in the swirl of events to which we must adjust every day of our life. We listen to the news in the morning and recognize that our world will tilt a bit in some new direction. We might even try to avoid stress elicited by the morning news. We turn off the Cable news and eat our breakfast in silence. However, we encounter other folks during the day who “fill us in on what has occurred.” Many of us are living in urban or suburban areas. We commute to work. Turbulence is found in the “crazy” or “stupid” or “insensitive” driving behavior of those we “meet” on the highway. Even if we work from home, there are always changes to be made in our schedule, people we meet whom we don’t know well or perhaps don’t even trust.

There is no daily routine of walking out to the barn so that we might milk the cow. There is no country store where we go in the late morning to pick up some food or supplies and where we spend time with those neighbors we have known for many years. After work, it is the evening commute, perhaps soccer practice—and the evening news. Dinner is a bit late, and we spend time not just eating the micro-waved dinner but also hearing about what happened in the unpredictable life of other family members. Perhaps an evening movie on Netflix (so many movies to pick from) and a return to the sanctuary of sleep.

This is our immediate world of turbulence. The Lens of Essence is held up to this white-water world so that we can find a way to engage this world in a thoughtful, minimally stressful manner. Specifically, successful engagement with a white-water world requires both centering and balancing. This engagement is best performed in a kayak with a double-bladed paddle. The Lens of Essence provides this type of vehicle and paddle for navigating our daily life. I spend a bit of time exploring both the task of centering and the task of balancing

Centering

As a concept and strategy to be found in a wide range of practices—from pottery to yoga—centering concerns the search for a ground. It is a search for Essence—for a point of orientation, for a desired outcome. The world is typically being viewed through the zero-order facet. With regard to Essence, this is the state of Singularity which I described in my previous essay on Essence. There is one center. It doesn’t change. Everything else might be shifting, but the center remains secure and stable. It is critical for one to find this center when creating a properly shaped vase or seeking to find inner peace. While venturing down a turbulent stream in a kayak, it is critical that ones’ weight remains in the center of the kayak. While the paddler will lean to the right or left when dipping their paddle into the water, they must resist shifting their weight to either side of the kayak.

At a more metaphor level, the centering of oneself in a vehicle (such as one's persona life or one's organization) while navigating a white-water environment requires clarity regarding values and priorities. Paul Tillich (1957/2009) would suggest that an "ultimate concern" should always reside at the center of one's choices in life—especially when there are many choices to be made in a white-water environment that is often chaotic. As I noted in the previous essay on Essential, it is in our engagement of an ultimate concern that we find the courage to reenter or remain on the white-water river of VUCA-Plus

While Peter Vail (1996, p. 56) identifies seven "secular" modes of learning related to navigating the white-water world, he eventually turns to the spiritual core required to provide what I am calling the "centering" of the kayak. When reflecting on Vail's approach to spirituality, it should first be noted that he is not referring to specific religious dogma. Rather, he is describing a process that "centers" on a search for meaning (not unlike Tillich's ultimate concern). According to Vail (1996, p. 180):

Genuine spirituality . . . is the willingness to enter into a process of dialogue about meaning, within oneself and with others; to stay with it over a period of time; and to remember that so far, no one has found the compelling once-and-for-all answer that warrants enforced universal adherence, the doctrines of several world religions notwithstanding. Rather than debate the absolutes of who is right, we all need to learn to think and communicate more theologically—something, however, that is probably not presently contemplated for any known M.B.A. curriculum or corporate management development program.

The search for meaning resides in an ongoing search for and refinement of life purposes in one's own life and for mission in an organization. With regard to our centering on a kayak, a spiritual orientation would be manifest in our ongoing integration of a solid physical positioning at the bottom of the kayak with a sustained (and sometimes altered) focus on the reasons for venturing onto to the white-water river. We look down to and prepare for the next turn in the river while envisioning desired outcomes further down the river.

Vail (1996, p. 182) offers this spiritual orientation (and the courage attendant to this orientation) when turning to the perspectives of Paul Tillich:

. . . how do we know that there is something to search for, that there is learning available? There have been many answers and interpretations over the millennia. To me, one of the most persuasive is Paul Tillich's, for he was concerned with precisely the conditions of modern life that make up permanent white water. In his extraordinary meditation on the spiritual significance of anxiety and meaninglessness, *The Courage to Be*, Tillich (1952) came to what I regard as a most heartening conclusion. The struggle with the unthinkability of the modern condition, the willingness to keep getting back in the boat and shooting the next set of rapids, is fundamentally an act of spiritual affirmation.

At this point, Vail specifically quotes Tillich:

As Tillich says:

Courage participates in the self-affirmation of being itself, it participates in the power of being which prevails against nonbeing.... Man is not necessarily aware of this source. In situations of cynicism and indifference he is not aware of it. But it works in him as long as he has the courage

to take his anxiety upon himself. In the act of the courage to be the power of being is effective in us, whether we recognize it or not. Every act of courage is a manifestation of the ground of being, however questionable the content of the act may be. The content may hide or distort true being, the courage in it reveals true being. Not arguments but the courage to be reveals the nature of being itself. By affirming our being we participate in the self-affirmation of being-itself. There are no valid arguments for the "existence" of God, but there are acts of courage in which we affirm the power of being, whether we know it or not. If we know it, we accept acceptance consciously. If we do not know it, we nevertheless accept it and participate in it. And in our acceptance of that which we do not know the power of being is manifest in us. Courage has revealing power, the courage to be is the key to being-itself. [1952, p. 181]

In his later work, Vaill focused on the role played by a leader as someone who encourages other people. Vaill would break apart the word en-courage-ment and noted that at the heart of the matter is *Courage*. It is appropriate I think to bring together the concepts of centering and courage. It is when we find a firm ground and have established the Essence of our own purpose in life that we are free and enabled to be courageous and take risks. We can enter the world of white water with a clear, centered sense of why we have dared to push off from the shore in our kayak. It is about confidence in one's competencies and clarity in one's purpose. We are centered.

Balancing

When we are stepping into our kayak there is always the immediate challenge of stability. The kayak moves back and forth as we impose our weight. We must immediately find balance and soon find our center as we push off from the shore. A second-order facet is required, for things are shifting back and forth. Third-order facets might even be needed if the environment one is entering is particularly turbulent. We enter the white-water world. Some first-order adjustments must be made as we travel down the turbulent river. This world of turbulent white-water is highly diverse. There is rapidly moving water, water that is moving in a circle, water that is not moving at all, and water that is moving in a chaotic manner (Bergquist, Sandstrom and Mura, 2023; Bergquist, 2024). This is no longer the Essence of Singularity. Rather it is the Essence of Diversity which I described in my previous essay on Essence. There is no better place to witness this Essence of Diversity than in a turbulent, white-water stream. In such an environment one must not only find one's center, but also one's balance.

Fortunately, a kayak is well designed and well-equipped to handle this balancing process. A kayak paddle is required with blades on each end (unlike a canoe paddle that has a blade only on one end). When settled in the kayak, we move the paddle from one side of the kayak to the other side, dipping it into the water and pushing either forward or sideways. The movement back and forth from the left side of the kayak to the right side is not done quickly. This would be a form of disruptive "dithering." Rather the movement from side to side is done in a measured way that provides correction to not only the direction of the kayak (which is being shoved around by the white-water) but also to the angle of the kayak (shifting from right to left).

We can engage this balancing act in our daily lives. Rather than turning off the news, we spend a minute considering the ways in which both sides of an issue offer some insights about our current state of affairs. Even if one of the sides only offers us insights about the fears and frustrations experienced by certain members of our society, these insights are important as we interact with these fearful folks at work (and even on the highway). We might even engage some first-order (second facet) adjustment in

our perspective regarding that “crazy” driver who just switched lanes in front of us: after all, we have also been switching lanes in order to somehow get to work a couple of minutes earlier (or at least feel a bit more in control when facing the traffic “mess”).

The moments when we are dashing off to soccer practice for our kids can be used to reflect on the growth and development of our kids—and on the joy it can be to relax at the soccer match and simply enjoy watching young people engage in healthy and constructive activities. We can do some zero-order “appreciation” of family life. The micro-waved dinner might be offset by a delicious salad we picked up on the way home, while the movie could be an “old-timer” that brings us back to a somewhat less hectic time in our life. These are simple, first-order adjustments we can make every day. It is all about balance and about shifting back and forth between two or more perspectives, priorities or practices.

At a “deeper” level, we see the balancing act operating at a fundamental and critical level in our life. The fourth Lens of Essence (requiring third-order perspectives) is often operating. We often are swinging back and forth in our lifelong development between two forces. There is a push toward greater independence and individual identity. And a counter push toward greater dependence and collective identity (Kegan, 1982). The paddler reaches over the lee side of the kayak for agency and accomplishment. They then turn toward the starboard side to correct for communion and companionship (Bakan, 1966).

We find balancing to exist in the “punch” and “counterpunch” to be found in our ongoing swing between a life filled with action and a life filled with observation and contemplation. In *The Active Life*, Parker Palmer (1990, p. 2) writes about this balancing act—and addresses the issue of balancing vs. centering while navigating a white-water world. He noted that in focusing only on centering we can too easily remain in a state of contemplation (and in-action): “Contemporary images of what it means to be spiritual tend to value the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction, centeredness and quietude . . . over engagement and animation and struggle.” When we engage the world, then we must engage in an act of balancing. We push and pull in one direction, and an opposite force is engaged. Palmer (1990, p. 17) even suggests that “when we act, the world acts back, and we and the world are co-created.” The first half of Palmer’s sentence offers us the challenge, while the second half offers us the desirable outcome. It is in the engagement back and forth with the turbulent world around us that we find balance and an integrative co-creation.

To enter white water in a kayak is always risky business. It is “safer” to remain on the shore and simply marvel at the complexity (and beauty) of movement in the river. We become observers and even contemplative observers of nature’s “wonderfulness.” But we have not engaged this river and have avoided the opportunity to make a difference in our world. Palmer (1990, p. 23) suggests that “there is an intimate link between our capacity for risk-taking and our commitment to learning and growing.” In alignment with Argyris and Schon (1978), Palmer notes the likelihood that mistakes will be made and failures will be experienced when we take the risk of navigating a turbulent river. It is the learning that can take place following a mistake or failure that enables us to successfully travel through the white-water environment. As Palmer observes (1990, p. 23), “a failed experiment [for a scientist] is no failure at all, but a vital step toward learning the truth.”

Engagement: Integration of Centering and Balancing as a Faithful “Way of Being”

Palmer (1990, p. 76) recounts the statement made by one of his colleagues: “I have never asked myself if I was being effective, but only if I was being faithful.” It is in the testing of faithfulness that we find a joining together of centering and balancing. We engage the turbulent river knowing that we must be agile. We must move back and forth as our world reacts to our actions. We learn and adjust. Yet, with all of this movement and adaptation, we also must remain “faithful” to a centering set of core values. Our ultimate concern must be kept in mind as we address the many immediate concerns associated with navigating the turbulent white water. This focus on faithfulness and ultimate concerns requires us to look through the first facet of our Lens of Essence. This a facet that provides clarity regarding zero-order, nonchanging values and priorities.

Peter Vaill offers an insight-rich way of envisioning the learning-based, zero-order integration of centering and balancing while navigating the whitewater environment. He writes about learning as a way of being: (Vaill, 1996, p. 43)

Learning in permanent white water is learning as a way of being. That equation is my basic point of departure. . . . Permanent white water is not just a collection of facts and events external to us. It is *felt*—as confusion and loss of direction and control, as a gnawing sense of meaninglessness. If learning is to be a major means of restoring our understanding of the world around us, the learning process itself should not add to our feeling of meaninglessness. Yet this is precisely what the institutional learning model tends to do as it renders the learner passive and dependent, inundates the learner with great volumes of miscellaneous subject matter presented as absolutely essential knowledge, and then erects a powerful set of extrinsic rewards and punishments to keep the learner's focus on all this jumbled and largely meaningless content. By inadvertently creating meaningless learning experiences, institutional learning exacerbates white water problems and leaves the learner unsure of how he or she is ever going to live effectively in the chaotic organizations of the present and future.

It is at this point that Vaill (1996, p. 43) broadens the concept of learning-as-a-way-of-being:

In the phrase learning as a way of being, being refers to the whole person—to something that goes on all the time and that extends into all aspects of a person's life; it means all our levels of awareness and, indeed, must include our unconscious minds. If learning as a way of being is a mode for everyone, being then must include interpersonal being as well as personal socially expressive being—my learning as a way of being will somehow exist in relation to your learning as a way of being. In short, there are no boundaries to being. . . .

Clearly, as Peter Vaill (1996, p. 43) notes: “learning as a way of being is a very capacious idea.”

As with all approaches to finding the Essence of something, Vaill notes that learning-as-a-way-of-being is not to be found on a list. While Vaill identified several specific modes of learning—which I have enumerated and expanded on in one of my essays on Essentials (Bergquist, 2024)—he believes that they are fully integrated with one another. That which is the Essence of something comes to us as a single, unified entity (Vaill, 1996, p. 51):

Learning as a way of being is a whole mentality. It is a way of being in the world. . . . [The various modes of learning] are twists of the learning kaleidoscope. They should not be thought of as having independent existence or as items that we can work on one at a time. More than

just a skill, learning as a way of being is a whole posture toward experience, a way of framing or interpreting all experience as a learning opportunity or learning process.

The presence of “learning as a way of being” is also not found in the organizational learning processes I described in my earlier essay on Essentials (Bergquist, 2024). As an integrative process and integrated outcome, this unified form of learning is found within one’s own personhood. According to Vaill (1996, p. 53), it is not a collective experience.

Learning as a way of being is not the same thing as either organizational learning or the learning organization. Rather, it is a companion philosophy, at the personal level, to these and other developments involving learning by managerial leaders and by organizations. In the previous chapter, I said that engaging in learning as a way of being is the key to successful institutional learning. Here, I suggest that it is clearly both a basic form of high-quality organizational learning and a prerequisite attribute of men and women who are to lead the way to the new learning organizations. Learning as a way of being is foundational to all efforts to enhance the learning of managerial leaders.

This particular emphasis on learning-as-a-way-of-being holds major implications for those seeking to manage in a whitewater environment. Vaill (1996, pp. 53-54) puts it this way:

Today's management literature is packed with exciting statements about the new kinds of things the managerial leader of today and tomorrow needs to be able to do. Amid all these ringing calls to arms—and they are an impressive array of qualities and abilities, and probably quite valid—we may quietly ask, “And how is it that a managerial leader immersed in permanent white water is going to develop these sterling capabilities!” That is the question of the decade, perhaps of the next quarter century. Many of us who are educators have been trying to answer this question with institutional learning, that is, we have been trying to design learning experiences for these managerial learners, experiences that will foster the abilities so many thinkers are saying they need. There is a good possibility, though, that we have stumbled onto the limits of institutional learning philosophy and practice in these attempts. Certainly there are hundreds of corporate directors of executive development and many, many M.B.A. program directors who are wondering if their curricula are actually developing the needed qualities in participants. Thinking long range, thinking strategically, handling multiple ambiguous variables at once, staying clear on fundamental vision and values, exuding integrity and steadfastness and interpersonal sensitivity in all one's affairs, handling stress with relative ease—these are abilities that we are no longer sure can be developed in a three-day corporate retreat for “high potentials” or the introductory M.B.A. course in “management and organization.” If the truth be told, we are not exactly sure how these qualities develop, although it is a nontrivial observation that they are qualities of character as much as they are behavioral skills . . .

This recognition of character rather than behavior led Vaill to a realization in his original 1990 book (Vaill, 1990/2008) that executive development is spiritual development.” I have already addressed this conclusion reached by Vaill regarding whitewater leadership and the navigation of a kayak on a turbulent river.

Vaill (1996, p. 55) turns once again to the holistic and unified nature of this mode of learning:

For all its significance, learning as a way of being is a rather prosaic phrase for the key concept of this book, but the phrase was deliberately chosen. One of the characteristics of the contemporary education and training world is a proliferation of catchy acronyms and labels that supposedly lend weight and credence to the newest learning technique or theory. Learning as a way of being is not necessarily a catchy label, and this is consistent with the descriptive problem that learning as a way of being poses. If we are trying to envision a learning process that is more personal, more present, and more continual than institutional learning, we should try to talk about it in a way that is as true as possible to the way that it operates. A learning process that is a way of being may be many things, but one thing it probably is not is a static list of verbal characteristics that can be summed up in brief labels.

This perspective on learning is, as Vaill, mentions truly out of line with the traditional approach to the identification of specific management characteristics and behaviors. Furthermore, as Vaill notes, learning-as-a-way-of-being is not easy to market or even fully comprehend. Like all matters concerning the Essence of some phenomenon (in this case learning and leadership in turbulent environments) there is only the journey inward toward the “heart of the matter” and rarely a completed journey. That which is the Essence is elusive—but worth the search.

From Contradiction to Integration

We live in a world that is filled not just with turbulence—but also with contradictions. Each of the other five conditions of VUCA-Plus adds to and amplifies these contradictions. With volatility, complexity and ambiguity come many opportunities for opposing views of the world to emerge. Uncertainty leaves us in an anxious state of anticipation: we are waiting for the next dissonant element to emerge. Yet, it is in the state of contradiction that we find the Essence of Diversity—an important form of Essence that I described in my previous essay on Essence. While it is tempting to always view Essence as a matter of Singularity, there is a very powerful way in which Essence is found in the midst of Diversity. No better expression of the power can be found than in the guiding principle of *E Pluribus Unum* (“Out of many, one”) to be found on the Great Seal of the United States of America.

I turn one last time to the insights offered by Parker Palmer. He quotes Neils Bohr, the renown physicist: “The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.” (Palmer, 1990, p. 15) The challenge thus becomes one of moving beyond the debate regarding truth and false (and the resulting casting off of contradiction). We move to an Essence-based search for the insights and truths to be found in both sides of a perspective and in a diversity of practices. It all starts with the distinction to be drawn between complicated and complex systems. System theorists seem to be particularly intrigued with those systems that are complex (having many connected parts) and, as a result, are dynamic. Each of these complex, adaptive systems will yield interesting and often surprising outcomes. Those systems that are complicated (having many parts that are unrelated to one another) will pale by comparison to those that are complex. However, complicated systems may often be much harder to manage or attack than are the complex ones. Put simply, it is much harder to attend to any one part of a complicated system given that there are many parts--and each part operates separately from the other parts.

Flocking and Outliers

We see this operating in a flock of birds. This flocking serves as a protective device because a predator (such as a hawk) will swoop into the flock and find it hard to concentrate on any one bird. It is only when one of the birds strays from the flock that the hawk will find focus and can attack the lone bird. Among human beings we find a similar process operating as something called a “Gish Gallop.” The Gallop is engaged when one participant in a debate throws out many, unrelated lies and distortions. Their opponent (like the hawk) doesn’t know which of these lies should be the focus of their countering comments. The flock of lies serves as a protection for the debater who engages the Gallop. We saw this strategy on full display during a recent USA presidential debate (Richardson, 2014).

The flocking is particularly impenetrable when the parts of a system are not only independent of one another but also contradictory. It is one thing to convey a pack of lies. It is quite another thing to spew out lies or shout out policies that bounce against one another. This leader or political party is to blame one minute for taking the wrong action on a specific social issue and then is blamed one minute later for taking no action at all on this issue. Our government needs to leave people alone to make their own decisions on key issues in their life, yet our government needs to control the body of those wishing to make certain medical decisions. It seems that the Galloping politician is leaping down the Rabbit Hole to enter a wonderland of Serenity in which contradictions can easily exist next to one another.

How do we address these contradictions using the Lens of Essence? First, like the hawk, one can find the person or event that strays from the flock. On the one hand, the “outlier” (Gladwell) is vulnerable and is often the focus of attacks by those who are guardians of conventional wisdom or accepted practices. These convenient attacks are cowardly and destructive. They are often justified only by entering the wonderland of half-truths and conspiracies. We sacrifice any sense of humanity in order to find Serenity.

There is an alternative, Essence-based, approach to take in working with and on behalf of the outlier. We can focus on their welfare and find ways to support their distinctive perspectives and practices. I once served on a Board of Trustees at a college in the American South. While most of the Board members were staunchly conservative, they brought in a defeated liberal candidate for the US presidency to serve as the Commencement speaker. My conservative colleagues indicated that it is precisely at this point in US history that we need to be sure that both sides of the political spectrum are being honored. The liberal “outlier” was supported rather than being attacked by this Southern Board of Trustees. I was very pleased and honored to be a member of this Board as it applied the Lens of Essence to focus on the guardianship of political diversity.

Bias and Noise

A second approach in the engagement of a Lens of Essence centers on placing a cluster of contradictory outcomes or perspectives on a target. We can think of the display of desired outcomes or diverse perspectives being like the target on which we focus when shooting arrows or playing darts. The important point to make is that a target is not the bullseye. While a bullseye represents the center point, the target represents the broader setting in which a number of different outcomes or perspectives can be identified. Some of these outcomes or perspective reside very close to the bullseye – and might in fact reside inside the bullseye itself – being at the very heart of the matter. This would be the case in a system that is simple rather than complicated. The bullseye represents the Essence of this non-complicated system.

In the case of a complicated system, the outcomes or perspectives reside at varying distance from the bullseye. They are close to other outcomes or perspectives (complementing one another) or at opposite sides of the target (contradicting one another). Items on the target might be compatible or incompatible with one another. Initially, there might even be a sense of win/lose: one outcome can't be achieved if another is achieved. There is only one "correct" perspective. There can't be two differing perspectives that are both valid.

There is another important issue regarding targets that should be noted. Daniel Kahneman and his two colleagues, Olivier Sibony and Cass Sustein (2021) write about the distinction between Bias and Noise. They begin with a story about assessing the success of someone shooting arrows into a target. One desirable outcome would be for all the arrows to hit the target in the same area. When this occurs, we can applaud the consistency of the archer. Another outcome would be for the arrows to arrive all over the target. Typically, we devalue this outcome. The archer has not been consistent in directing arrows toward the target.

Kahneman, Sibony and Sustein suggest that these assessments of success must be questioned. The first outcome indicates only that there is consistency—not that the arrows have arrived at or near the bullseye. The arrows could cluster at some point at quite a distance from the bullseye. This placement would reveal a BIAS. Conversely, arrows arriving at many places on the target reveal NOISE. These authors suggest that these are quite different flaws in the performance of the archer—and that both Noise and Bias are to be found frequently in the judgements made by most of us.

Several things come to mind when we apply the Lens of Essence to our portrayal of the target. First, the Lens of Diverse Essence usually must be deployed. It is a matter of understanding and appreciating the full landscape of the items to be found on the target. A portrait can be drawn when there is only one item on the target that resides at the heart (bullseye) of the target. The richly populated target requires the rendering of a landscape. The target, taken as a whole, is the Essence. It doesn't have to be distilled, simplified or altered to make everything simple and tidy. A Lens of Singularity is not appropriate.

Second, the image of a target brings to mind the interdependence of specific endeavors (arrows). While the arrows might have been shot for specific independent purposes, they all eventually end up together on the target. Some of the arrows may land near one another while others may land on opposite sides of the target. This is similarly the case in our real world. When viewed in a systemic, holistic manner, all of the priorities we face when arriving at a decision and all of our initiatives (endeavors) relate in some way to one another. If nothing else, there is a zero-sum relationship between two priorities: when we attend to one then the other one must languish. More often, the achievement of goals related to one endeavor will have some impact on the achievement of goals related to another endeavor. As I noted in one of the essays on Essentials, the success of some projects enables others to also be successful (or at least increases the chances that they will be successful). Essential enablement and Essence-based integration are closely related. As we increase the opportunity for enablement, we bring the arrows closer together and increase the potential for integration of seemingly disparate priorities and endeavors.

Clarification and Integration

I suggest that the following questions be addressed in seeking to clarify the nature and purpose of specific endeavors:

- How would you know if you have been successful in this endeavor?
- What would make you happy?
- Who else has an investment in this project and what do they want to happen?
- What would happen if you did not achieve this goal?
- What would happen if you did achieve this goal?
- What scares you most about not achieving this goal?
- What scares you most about achieving this goal?

If there is shared agreement regarding the answers to these questions, then a group needs to test its own assumptions. The process of collusion that we have described in this book might be in full effect. BIAS might be fully in effect. Conversely, if there are multiple and often conflicting answers to these questions then NOISE is operating. While diversity of thought and perspective can often be beneficial (Miller and Page, 2007), this diversity can often pose quite a challenge for groups. It is important to remain patient in addressing these differences.

With clarification comes the potential for integration. The following questions might be addressed in seeking to find integration:

- What would happen to the other endeavors if you were successful in achieving goals associated with this endeavor?
- Which endeavor is likely to have “the biggest bang for the buck” in terms of enabling other endeavors to be successful?
- Which endeavor represents the “low hanging fruit” (most easily achieved) and how would its achievement impact the other endeavors (and priorities)?
- What might you do to bring the various endeavors closer to one another (through their sequencing, overlap of resources, sharing of certain benefits, etc.)?
- What seems to be the underlying problem if many priorities seem to be independent of one another or even counter to one another? How do you best address this underlying problem?

There is yet another option when addressing the inevitable contradictions to be found in any VUCA-Plus environment. One can make use of the elegant and comprehensive tool called Polarity Management that I introduced in a previous essay regarding the application of a Lens of Essential to the matter of contradiction. I believe that polarity management can effectively address many of the challenges associated with contradiction (as well as those posed by the other five conditions of VUCA-Plus)—as these challenges are being seen through the Lenses of Essence as well as the Lenses of Essential.

Polarity Management

In this essay, I wish to build on my previous presentations regarding Polarity Management by introducing several concepts found in Barry Johnson’s (2020) more recent book on Polarity Management. Called *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging, Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma*, this book

expands on or clarifies concepts presented in his original, best-selling *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (1996). In concluding this essay, I consider ways in which his model of polarities relates to my concept of Essence

Type of Issue and Essence

Barry Johnson (2020, p. 39) considers it very important to identify polarities—and not treat them as “solvable” problems:

When an organization treats a polarity as if it were a problem to solve, it will reduce the attainability, speed, and sustainability of the “solution” they are trying to accomplish. When an organization can see a key underlying polarity within a difficulty or set of difficulties, it will increase the attainability, speed, and sustainability of the desired outcome.

However, Johnson also notes that not all difficult issues being addressed are polarities. They can be problems. Johnson distinguishes between problems that can be solved and polarities that must be managed. While I appreciate the distinction between drawn by Johnson (2020, pp. 223-230), I wish to draw attention to a distinction between not just problems and polarities, but also puzzles, problems, messes, dilemmas, polarities and mysteries. This is a distinction that I drew in the first essay in this series on Essential and Essence. While Johnson is hinting at this more multi-faceted distinction in the title of his book (including paradox and dilemma in the title), and in several of the case studies he provides, I wish to return to the distinctions I have drawn and briefly contrast each of the issue types to polarity and to the matter of Essence.

Puzzles: the majority of issues that we address on a daily basis are easily addressed if we are knowledgeable about the matter at hand and if we have sufficient resources to address this issue. There is a specific solution to a puzzle--and we know when it has been solved. As Johnson (2020, p. 223) has noted, these are issues that are not ongoing. They have an endpoint and come with a correct answer. They are usually peripheral to that which is the Essence of the system in which the puzzle has emerged. We may find considerable satisfaction in solving the many puzzles that emerge every day in our home or work life but must not be “lured” into believing that these puzzles are all there is to be addressed.

Problems: Much of what Johnson identifies as a problem would be considered in my scheme to be a puzzle. I believe that problems do not have clear solutions; rather, they contain multiple contradictory and interconnected elements that do not lend this issue to direct, predictable solutions. Johnson is leaning toward this perspective when stating that “problems” can have “two or more right answers that are independent” (Johnson, 2020, p. 223). If the answers are interdependent then Johnson considers them to be polarities (Johnson, 2020, p. 225). However, I consider problems to be based primarily in complex system – which as Miller and Page (2007) have indicated contain elements that are inevitably interdependent. Most mid-21st Century systems are complex rather than just complicated (many parts that operate independently). If the issue being addressed does contain two or more independent parts

(unlikely) then I would consider this issue to be composed of two or more puzzles –rather than a problem.

Whether or not we want to use the term “problem” when focusing on specific issues, there is an important point to be made regarding Essence and contradiction. It is when we consider the alignment of some issue with the Essence of the system that we typically find that this issue contains multiple parts (rather than being a puzzle) and these parts are inevitably interrelated. Does this mean that all issues are inevitably polarities or that some issues can contain many interwoven parts that are embedded in a complex system. They are not polarities, for we are not initially forced to prefer one solution over another. We are initially confused but not polarized. An urban planning issue, for instance, might include a concern about zoning laws as well as a concern about the rising cost of materials. The materials costs might produce pressure for modification of zoning laws, while the zoning regulations might require the use of certain high-cost materials. While these two concerns are interconnected, they need not be contradictory. Their interconnection, however, does produce the challenge of finding an urban planning solution that might factor the laws or the costs—thus producing a solution that is never quite “ideal.”

Messes: in some cases, there are multiple interdependent problems which produce messes. Urban planning is filled with messes. Zoning regulations and materials costs are joined by various constituency concerns, transportation issues, collective bargaining agreements, etc. etc. etc. While messes often contain polarities, the “real” challenge concerns sorting out all of the many issues involved in the mess. This is the point where the Lens of Essence becomes particularly important. Somehow, in the midst of the muck and drama of messy deliberations, there should be a “guiding light.” This is the lighthouse I mentioned in my previous essay when applying the metaphor of a ship battling the currents and tides when entering the San Francisco Bay. Several decades ago, I worked with a highly effective executive who ensured that a copy of the mission of her organization was placed (under glass) at each seat in her executive conference room. She also read this statement at the start of each “messy” meeting of her C-Suite colleagues. This engagement of her “lighthouse” was particularly important during the COVID-19 years.

Dilemmas: we are coming close to Johnsons’ polarity when considering the role of dilemmas in our personal life and organizations. Johnson considers some dilemmas to be polarities (such as the pull between being clear and flexible in our relationship with other people. According to Johnson (2020, p. 225), other dilemmas are simply having to choose between two bad options that are independent of one another. I believe, once again, that independence is rarely found in a complex mid-21st Century life or organization. I would agree with Johnson, however, that a dilemma is rarely about two positive options. The choice is often between one option that will lead to an immediate outcome (but involve sacrifice of some other important outcome) or a second option that will lead to a longer-term outcome (but involve sacrifice of the immediate outcome).

We find this type of dilemma playing out in many settings where we have to defer gratification. We save for our child’s education rather than purchasing a home that will please us as a couple. We have decided to offer employee bonuses rather than increase payment into an employee retirement plan. These are

not matters of polarities, *per se*, they concern sequencing and deferment. They also concern a powerful motivating force that I will consider shortly. This motivator is *Regret*. We are likely to find guidance in our attention to that which is the Essence of the system in which we are operating. It is in our ongoing consideration of Greater Purpose (which Johnson emphasizes) that we are likely to find the courage and guidance for addressing an inevitably painful dilemma.

Mysteries: I turn finally to the most challenging issue of all. Mysteries “leapfrog” over polarities with regard to elusiveness and deeply felt challenge. Mysteries are never “solved.” They are not even “managed.” Rather, we sit back and observe mysteries playing out in our life. This can be the mystery of a self-centered teenage grandson turning into a thoughtful and caring young adult. It could be the remarkable *Esprit-de-Corps* that suddenly emerges when our company is faced with a major crisis (such as the COVID-19 virus). It can also be the sight of women and men leaping from a fire-engulfed office building on 9/11. We try to make sense of what has occurred and wonder how we might have made a difference—but come up with no satisfactory answer.

What we can do is focus on how we manage our own emotions (and cognition) in reaction to the mystery. While the mystery is founded in an external locus of control, our own feelings and thoughts reside in our internal locus of control. We can apply processes that I identified and described in previous essays in this series. These processes are Allostasis (Sterling, 2020) (which concerns the way our body operates) and, more broadly, Polystasis (which concerns how we relate to our world) when addressing the challenge inherent in a mystery. We can modify our baselines and our predictions about what is about to occur inside our own body and outside in the world where the mystery is taking place. Our subsequent actions can then be engaged in an appropriate manner—based on enduring values (Essence). We can share our appreciative appraisal with a maturing grandson or with our *Esprit-de-Corps* colleagues. We can find ways to assist those who are grieving the loss of loved ones after 9/11. We adjust yet also endure in our fundamental commitments (Essence).

Polarities: we might now ask what a polarity looks like if we wish to differentiate this type of issue from the other types I have identified. Johnson (2020, pp. 217-222) offers a list of six ways in which polarities “show up”:

1. Polarities emerge as a value or set of values . . .
2. Polarities show up as resistance based on a fear of something that could happen . . .
3. Polarities show up as one or more action steps. . . .
4. Polarities show up as a complaint or a complaint combined with a solution. . . .
5. Polarities show up as a vision or dream for a preferred future. . . .
6. Polarities show up as a conflict.

This list illustrates the breadth and rich insights associated with Johnson’s model of polarities. Several features of this list stand out (at least for me). First, we find polarities showing up out of both a very positive perspective (values, preferred future) and a negative perspective (fear, complaint, conflict). It also shows up when actions are being taken. Given these diverse ways in which polarities show up, I

wish to focus briefly on the nature of these ways as related to the matter of contradiction as it is transformed to an integrated whole via the Lens of Essence.

Positive Perspective: an integrated, action-oriented transformation of contradiction can take place with the introduction of a compelling vision of the future (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024). As Fred Polak (1973) documented in great detail, an image of the future provides any system with direction and motivation. Without this compelling image, any system (such as an organization or society) will soon wither away. Closely associated with this compelling vision is an appreciative perspective (Bergquist, 2003). I have repeatedly brought this perspective into my analysis of both the Lens of Essential and Lens of Essence. For Barry Johnson (2020, p. 7), this appreciative perspective is found in the Polarity-based capacity and willingness to: “see ourselves and our world more completely . . . It is the capacity to see ourselves, our organizations, and our countries as more than our shortcomings.” When we “catch other people doing it right” then we are moving beyond polarization to integration via successful action.

Negative Perspective: it is quite understandable that Barry Johnson focuses on the motivating force offered by fear. The role played by fear is made large by Johnson when he sets up a Polarity Map. It is Fear that drives our movement from one polarity to the other polarity. I wish to push back against Johnson a bit and offer another perspective that comes from the Behavioral Economics school. For many of these folks, fear is not the biggest motivator—at least if fear is defined as the potential loss of something, the potential harm done to oneself or others, or the failure to achieve something. These forms of fear (and accompanying anxiety) are certainly powerful. However, there is another motivator that often tops fear. This motivator is *Regret*. We anticipate that sometime in the future we will feel very bad that we didn’t choose a specific course of action when we had a chance.

If we take Regret into account, then we might move from one polarity to the second polarity not because we fear the ramifications of the first polarity but because we are fearful (concerned) that opportunities offered by the second polarity might be overlooked in our haste to focus on the first priority. As is the case with the proverbial donkey, we sit by the first stack of hay and imagine that we have missed the opportunity to sample the rich texture and taste of the second stack of hay. Delightful smells from this second stack waft over to us. We move over to the second stack and then even more keenly savor the rich smells emanating from the first stack of hay. Off we go back to the first stack. Our life is filled with regret--and we starve to death wanting never to miss the taste of either clump of hay.

I would suggest, even further, that Regret ultimately resides in our desire for but inability to focus on Essence. In some vague way, we “know” what it means to ultimately be satisfied and fulfilled. We can imagine munching on the most succulent hay to be found in the world. We can envision the feeling of happiness and contentment. However, we don’t know how to arrive at Essence. And we are not sure if we really know where to find Essence. In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy discovered that Essence doesn’t exist out there in some myth land of Oz. She was mistaken and only after a long journey finds that Essence exists back at her home in Kansas. The matter of Essence can be even more challenging. We might not be sure that Essence really exists or that it is what we hope it will be. Peggy Lee writes and

sings about what it means to be disappointed (“Is that all there is!”), while many stories have been written about a lifelong, unfulfilled search for Utopia.

Value-Pairs

Barry Johnson (2020, p. 29) proposes that polarities always involve a pairing of contradictory values. Furthermore, if we look at values in pairs, as a polarity, rather than as isolating, competing entities, then we can:

. . . strengthen an organization’s value platform. Not identifying the pole partner of a value will make an organization vulnerable to what is missing. Adding the value partner does not diminish the original value. On the contrary, it contributes to the sustainability of the original value and the sustainability of the company. This is true because a polarity is indestructible while one pole of a polarity is inherently unsustainable. (Johnson, 2020, p. 39)

Putting on my hat as a psychologist, I would note that values (or any image or entity) that is ignored or repressed has enormous influence (often destructive) regarding the operation of the person or social system that is trying to block it out. We must bring our “desires,” aspirations (and values) to the surface if we are to “manage” them as one part of a pair in a polarized system.

Many insights are to be found in Barry Johnson’s recent book. He is teaching me something very important that might help me mature my concept of Essence. I reflect on the nature and dynamics of Essence having read what Johnson has to say about value-pairs and what he has written about the potentially positive dynamics of polarization:

If you can see a polarity within an issue, you can leverage the natural tension between the poles so it becomes a positive, self-reinforcing loop or ‘virtuous cycle’ lifting you and your organization to goals unattainable with Or-thinking, alone. (Johnson, 2020, p. 9)

In seeking to apply Johnson’s insights to my concept of Essence, I turn to one of the most compelling images of Essence—this being the brilliant and multi-faceted Diamond. I am reminded of the way in which Diamonds are formed. They are forged under conditions of intense heat and pressure.

Perhaps, like a diamond, Essence is often forged under conditions of high pressure exerted by a value-pair. The intense energy and emotions associated with that which is the Essence might emanate from this pairing of values. Just as a polarity perspective might leverage tension into a positive “virtuous circle,” so the beam of intense energy radiating from the lighthouse might find its source in the dynamic interplay between competing yet interconnected value sets (and associated perspectives on the world). The Essence of a viable organization might be forced, as Johnson (2020) suggests, in the polarity-based interplay between the values of continuity and transformation. Similarly, the Essence of a viable nation might be forged in the heated (polarity-based) interplay between Justice and Mercy (Johnson, 2020).

Conclusions

In the midst of my exploration of Essence and its functioning in all systems, it is important to pause for a moment and acknowledge once again that this is an elusive phenomenon. It is easy to miss its presence or to miss-interpret the critical role it plays in the dynamic operations of a system. I am reminded of an old joke (that I think I first heard when consulting in one of the former Soviet republics). It seems that there was a worker in a highly secure Soviet factory that would leave each day with a wheelbarrow that was filled with straw. The security inspector was certain that the worker was stealing something that was hidden in the straw. The inspector carefully searched the straw each day but could find nothing hidden away in the straw. This daily search continued for many months. The inspector was growing increasingly frustrated. Finally, he informed the worker that this was his last day on the job. He was about to retire and absolutely needed to know what the worker was stealing. The worker proudly announced: "I am stealing wheelbarrows!"

Here we have a wonderful example of the key feature in this story being ignored. Wheelbarrows were the essence of the worker's plan to steal from the factory. I also have wondered if the worker was also stealing straw!! This is a joke precisely because that which is most important (the wheelbarrow and perhaps the straw) is given no attention. It is a joke, at an even deeper level, because it represents the "stupidity" of the Soviet mode of security. The joke could be told because it indirectly was critical of the repressive Soviet regime. As I found during my work over several years during and after the Soviet collapse, humor was often the remedy for lingering frustration and despair. Perhaps, ultimately, this was the real Essence of this story. It was an expression of strongly held but inexpressible feelings.

We often do not see what is obvious in our world. Our true emotions are not shared. We are stubborn in our unwillingness to view and talk about that which is presence right in front of us. Under the challenging conditions of VUCA-Plus it is particularly difficult to identify and attend to that which at the Essence of the system in which we are operating. We search for meaning and purpose in the straw—and fail to look at the wheelbarrow. Hopefully, some of the tactics and strategies I have identified in the previous essay on Essence and in this essay provide guidance as to how one might discover and make full use of Essence in the transformation of VUCA-Plus challenges into entities and processes that are not only manageable but also constructive and productive. I offer one other essay to illustrate even further the use of one tool (polarity management) that is particularly valuable in addressing the mid-21st Century conditions of contradiction—and the intertwined conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and turbulence. In this essay, I focus on a particularly important and elusive form of Essence operating in our contemporary society. This is the Essence of Trust. Specifically, I offer a case study which portrays the use of polarity management in addressing Trust—as a major contradiction-saturated issue to be found in any interpersonal relationship or organization.

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