

Review for AMED Journal O&P, August 2003, *The Hidden Connections — A Science for Sustainable Living*, by Fritjof Capra, Harper Collins, 2002, ISBN 0-00-25704-5

“Education is the ability to perceive hidden connections between phenomena” Vaclav Havel

*“The great challenge of the twenty-first century will be to change the value system underlying the global economy, so as to make it compatible with the demands of human dignity and ecological sustainability. **“The Hidden Connections — A Science for Sustainable Living”**, Fritjof Capra*

This is an exceptional book — the most valuable I have read in at least five years. I have been widely recommending it as I progressed through it over two recent train journeys from London to Penzance and back. It is a marvellous book for leaders or consultants who believe they need a systemic understanding of globalisation, the threats and the opportunities it presents; how society and organisations actually adapt, transform and renew themselves; and how this process is best led or encouraged. It will be of particular interest to readers interested in sustainability in the broadest sense who are engaged in helping any organisation survive and thrive in the challenging conditions of the early 21st century – including AMED and its regions.

Why do I rate it so highly? There are many books on globalisation, sustainability, complexity, leadership and transformation. Quite a lot of the content was not new to me. What makes it exceptional is that Fritjof Capra takes a systemic view; like Meg Wheatley, his starting point is a study of life and how it works. The book is all embracing, radical, trustworthy, reflects the quality of an American man, not afraid to challenge the current state of global capitalism and its destructive effect on life and the mass of humanity. Unlike some, his book is not sensational, but it does not pull its punches. It explains to me why many well meaning initiatives are not likely to succeed for long or make much of a difference because more radical, systemic changes are needed at a global level. It is also hopeful and constructive book, which gives information about innovations and developments that are helping humanity find its way through a crisis. It offers an understanding that is of practical use. It is beautifully written, full of clarity and quotable insights, best read slowly and relished for its quality. I end up feeling wiser, encouraged, inspired, clearer about what is likely to emerge, what has to be done and my part in it.

Because of these qualities, it is also not easy to summarise but I shall try.

Part 1 Life, Mind and Society presents his study of nature and life; mind and consciousness and social reality – his new understanding has emerged from complexity theory, integrating studies of the external world, the social world of human relationships and the inner world of values and meaning. Applying knowledge of living networks in life to the social domain forms the basis for the next part. Part 2 The Challenges of the Twenty-First Century, contains four chapters which describe his understanding of Life and Leadership in Organisations (4), the Networks of Global Capitalism (5),

Biotechnology at a Turning Point (6), Changing the Game (7) followed by an epilogue, Making Sense.

At this point there is only space left to give you some of the insights I most valued.

Chapter 4, Life and Leadership in Organisations: Complexity, uncertainty and turbulence are the foremost characteristics of present-day society. The roots of the failures to bring about change in this complex society lie in the dual nature of organisations, on the one hand, designed for specific purposes and on the other, communities of people interacting and building relationships to help each other and make their activities meaningful. Part of the reason for failure, is not understanding that resistance reflects the need for a living system to be involved in change. Hence the leader needs to focus not on delivering change but how to involve people in its creation. It is so easy to forget this in the haste and urgency of life in organisations. The inherent change process of human organisations, as living systems, mirrors life, not the machine. They change and adapt in similar ways to life, through undergoing continual structural changes while preserving web-like patterns. Most of us are already well aware of the need to relax into uncertainty and confusion. It is a world in which the flexibility, creativity and learning capability that come with the organisation's aliveness are most needed. "Communities of practice" play an important part in self-generating, living networks. These share common purpose and meaning and have tacit rules of conduct. Here are some relevant extracts from which I gained the clearest understanding of "communities of practice".

"The aliveness of an organisation – its flexibility, creative potential and learning capability – resides in its informal communities of practice. ... These are informal networks – alliances and friendships, informal channels of communication ... and other tangled webs of relationships – that continually grow, change and adapt to new situations. ... We are dealing with the crucial difference between a living system and a machine. A machine can be controlled; a living system.... can only be disturbed. They can be influenced by giving them impulses rather than instructions. Living systems always choose what to notice and how to respond. The most effective way to enhance an organisation's learning potential is to strengthen its communities of practice." (pp 95 to 101)

Leadership is crucially important in this process.

"Being a leader means creating a vision; it means going where nobody has gone before. It also means enabling the community as a whole to create something new." (p106)

In this situation, we need a clear understanding of the dual nature of change and leadership. There are two ways of creating the future. On the one hand, there are **designed** structures, which are first created in our imagination; on the other, there are **emergent** structures. The leader requires the right balance of design and emergence.

Ch5, The Networks of Global Capitalism: New technology, through the interaction between computers and financial markets, facilitated the rise of global capitalism leading to a global casino, huge instability and financial markets essentially out of control. The underlying value is that money-making, focus on profit and shareholder value, should always be valued higher than human needs and rights, democracy and the environment. This has produced a mania of mergers that fail to bring advantages in greater efficiency or profits and have dramatic effects on people and economic hardship. The new economy has transferred power from governments to large corporations, financial markets and a growing criminal economy. It has enriched a small elite and overall its social and economic effects have been disastrous, dismantling social welfare, creating rising inequality and poverty, huge threats to social stability, new diseases and growing threats to the environment. If consumption in the third world reached American levels the annual damage to the environment would be 220 times present levels. Essentially, he believes the World Bank, World Trade Organisation and IMF instead of producing a new order that would benefit all nations, serve this process of globalisation and will need to be replaced. This form of globalisation is socially and ecologically unsustainable.

Chapter 6, Biotechnology at a Turning Point: gives an account of the failures of the green revolution and agribusiness and a cautionary lessons for us in exploiting biotechnology and genetic engineering in medicines and in agriculture. Once a systems view of life is embraced by scientists, there will be hope for the future.

He that rejection of global capitalism and its values may have already begun. These values are linked to our concept of manliness the Chapter 7, Changing the Game, will be of special interest to members of AMED's Sustainable Development Network. It describes how this process is emerging, as one would expect in a living system, through networks, using new technology, creating new political power. The Alternatives Task Force and its report "*Alternatives to Globalisation*" offers proposals for shifting government, global and national, from serving corporations to government serving people and communities. He describes about all kinds of innovations that many of us may not be fully unaware of and have the potential to transform the situation — changes in industrial production, transportation, food production and distribution, eco-design, localisation, car design, eco-literacy, subsidies and taxation are all involved. Fortunately eco-design is good business. He describes the principles of ecology. Ecological principles are an essential component of the core values that form the basis for reshaping globalisation. This reshaping will require changes in values, political will and operational rules.

Most people in the world have an intuitive understanding of the destructiveness of globalisation and realise we are probably at a turning point. Through the glorification of material consumption and in other ways, America especially, wields tremendous power to maintain optimal conditions for the expansion of production. But instability, disturbances and breakdowns, which we are now facing, will lead to breakthroughs. This book explains the situation with clarity, gives a deeper understanding of globalisation, the process that has created it, how it will be reshaped and how we can help. It will give

hope, a vital ingredient, and momentum to the radical changes that are most likely to emerge.

"So what can we hope for the future of humanity?" asks Fritjof on the last two page, 233-4, before quoting Vaclav Havel again: "The kind of hope that I often think about ... I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't: it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation ...(Hope) is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but certainly that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

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