

## **Are We Sinking — Or Are We Beginning to Rise?**

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Tuesday, May 13, 2014 -- Otto Scharmer

The other day I sat in a World Bank meeting in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the gathering was to initiate a Collective Action Platform that would help multi-stakeholder groups to collaborate more effectively in addressing the major challenges of our time. Here are a few observations that I found interesting:

The World Bank itself is going through a radical transformation, from operating as a bank (creating change by making loans) to operating as a knowledge-based organization that multiplies its impact by convening platforms of collaborative action that involve crowding-in dozens or hundreds of other players (example: [Global Partnership for Oceans](#)).

Leaders at the Bank have begun to realize that the massive challenges we face require new ways of catalyzing collective action on an unprecedented scale — which in turn requires a new collaboration infrastructure such as the Global Partnership for Oceans platform cited above.

One participant in the meeting, the COO of one of the biggest global environmental NGOs, put it like this: “We are just coming from a strategic review process. We assessed everything we have been doing over the past decade or so and realized that, although we are winning some of the battles, we are about to lose the war. All major main indicators of global environmental well-being are moving in the wrong direction, many of them rapidly. Unless we begin to act in radically different ways to catalyze massive institutional change, we will be losing the war.”

A few days later I had another two-day meeting. The [MIT Community Innovators Lab](#) (CoLab) in Cambridge, MA, convened a group of remarkable leaders working to organize the most marginalized and exploited groups in the U.S. economy:

undocumented people; home care and home service workers; and those who are incarcerated in prison. This group of change makers works for the most invisible, marginalized, exploited, and underserved people in our economy and society.

Sad fact: Over the past few years the Obama administration has deported two million undocumented people (a rate of 1,500 each day); and another two million Americans are incarcerated, mainly black and brown men and most for non-violent drug crimes. The United States leads the world in both of these categories. What do these four million people have in common? Most of them are people of color, as are the remarkable leaders who attended the MIT CoLab workshop. They are part of an MIT fellowship program that supports them in their search and journey toward creating an economy that generates wealth and well-being for all. What inspires me about this circle is that all of them work under very high levels of pressure and hardship — and yet they continue to come up with powerful new forms of mobilizing collective action at the grass-roots level in their communities. The life journey of the members in this circle are closely connected to the backstory of the civil rights and anti-racism movements and the election campaigns that put Barack Obama, and more recently New York mayor Bill de Blasio, in office. They are the emerging new America — an America in which people of color are in the majority and forming new alliances with the more progressive-leaning part of the urban white population.

When we come together in this circle we start by asking members to talk about their current situations. Here is a phrase that frequently comes up: “We are under attack.” We are under attack means: members of our community are being deported and incarcerated at a rate without parallel in the world. It means that the Supreme Court keeps rendering decisions as if it is acting on behalf of the 0.1%, not the 99.9% (see [McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission](#) and [Citizens United](#), the recent Supreme Court decisions that abolished the limits on campaign contributions by individuals and corporations. It means that in June, in the case of [Harris v. Quinn](#), the Supreme Court is likely to deliver another blow against the 99%, effectively limiting the right of homecare workers — among the lowest paid and most vulnerable members of the low-wage workforce — to join unions and engage in collective bargaining. We are under attack means more than being a member of the working poor (working for a minimum wage that can’t support a family); it means living in a society that strips away an individual’s dignity as a human being. Similar circumstances prompted the anti-apartheid movement against the oppressive regime in South Africa, the civil rights movements in the U.S. and in Eastern Europe,

and the Arab Spring movement in the Middle East. All of them, in spite of many obvious differences, were fighting essentially the same enemy: a system that denies many of its people the most basic human rights and dignity.

My experience of the past couple of weeks can be summed up in these two sentences: Are we are losing the war? We are under attack. Take a moment to let these two sentences sink in. The first refers to the ecological divide, the second to the social-economic divide. Take them as a reality mantra. How does this mantra resonate in your mind and in your heart? The resonance that I feel appears to me in these questions: Is our courage sinking? Are we losing the essence of our humanity? Is our energy for profound renewal slipping away?

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*Her Village International Forum  
2014*

Last stop: China. As I write this I am returning from a remarkable gathering in Beijing, the Her Village International Forum. The meeting brought together 300 impressive women entrepreneurs and leaders from all sectors and geographic areas of China. The gathering was hosted by Yang Lan, who has been called China's Oprah. Her intention was to bring together thought leaders and innovators who are pioneering new ways of blending mindfulness, well-being, health, science, technology, and entrepreneurship, from both East and West. Lan and her network reach 300 million people every week with their programs. Feeling the energy of these inspired change makers made me aware that they are an example of a new global movement that is taking shape in many different places around the globe. It is a movement that integrates mindfulness, science/technology, and profound social change. In most countries, women are at the forefront of this movement.

I personally believe that the future of leadership will be more mindful, more collective, and more feminine. Holding the space for others, cultivating relationships, and giving birth to a future that wants to emerge are all leadership capacities that are arguably different from the masculine ego-leadership culture that is hitting the wall in ever more evident ways (and yet staying strong and almost unchallenged).

So what is the moment we are living in? Are we losing, are we sinking — or are we beginning to rise? Are we losing the deeper levels of our humanity? Or are we rising by becoming aware, by waking up at a more profound level of our own humanity?

Maybe the answer to that question is not out there in the world — it emerges from the inner place that we choose to operate from. When I experience the beginnings of a movement, like the one I witnessed in China, it feels as if a new relational quality of the social field is being activated. It's a quality that blends the power of entrepreneurship with the awakening intelligence of the heart.

Have you experienced such changing field qualities in your circles? What do you see going on in your community today?

*This blog was originally posted to the [Otto Scharmer site](#), and appears here with permission.*