

Chapter 8

Coping with a Complex Messy World: Education for the Twenty-First Century and Beyond



In the end, this book is not only about the enumerable arguments that we are required to make in order to function, but equally about a world that challenges us in every which way. The short of it is that we live in a world whose complexity grows by the nanosecond. Unfortunately, few have been taught the full complement of skills necessary to make sense of and thereby cope with a complex, messy world. And yet, our very survival hinges on it.

As I've argued throughout, it requires our ability to reason critically and thus to give the most serious arguments/claims the intense scrutiny they demand. Anything less is irresponsible. In this regard, as much as CRT has rightly stood for Critical Race Theory, it needs just as much to stand for Critical Reasoning Theory.

Because they're all highly interdependent, we could start with any one of the critical skills that are necessary in today's world and beyond. But since the kind of knowledge needed to deal with a complex, messy world is paramount, Philosophy is a natural starting point. Further, if any Philosophic system is especially suited for dealing with complexity, it's the Philosophical School of Pragmatism. Its essence is best captured in terms of a brief definition of what it regards as the Truth, especially how to achieve it. While the definition is significant in and of itself, its importance is made even greater by the unparalleled insights it offers into the nature of complexity.

In brief, Pragmatism is best summarized by the following: "Truth is that which Makes a Profound Ethical and Spiritual Difference in the Quality of Our Lives." Thus, unlike other Philosophic systems for producing knowledge, according to Pragmatism, Epistemology, Ethics, Spirituality, and Aesthetics are not only inter-related, but inseparable. In short, Truth does not consist of abstract facts, propositions, and theories alone. In a word, Truth requires ST, NT, NF, and SF working together. To be sure, it definitively does not consist of ST or NT alone.

The true importance of the definition is that it's the Philosophical Basis of The Socially Responsible Organization.

To elaborate, Epistemology is the systematic means by which produce and thereby secure Formal Knowledge. Ethics is the means by which we know what is

Right Ethically and what we need to do in order to bring it about. Spirituality is the feelings deep inside of us by which we know that there is more to the Human Condition than our bodies and Pure Thought alone. The phrase Quality of Life is a stand-in for Aesthetics, that is, what's Harmonious and thereby makes life Pleasing for ourselves and others. Finally, the little word "Makes" means that Truth does not consist of a set of Hard Facts, published articles, and books, but a carefully crafted set of Ethical Actions designed to Right a set of Wrongs. In other words, Ethical Actions are not only the primary means by which Truth is secured, but its very essence. To reiterate, Truth neither consists of nor is produced ST and NT alone.

The true significance of Pragmatism is that it leads to a deeper understanding of complex, messy systems, and thus of the complexity with which we are faced.

The late, great distinguished Social System's Educator and Scientist par excellence, Russell L. Ackoff appropriated the word "Mess" to stand for a whole system of problems that were so highly bound—thus interrelated—and constantly changing in direct response to one another such that one couldn't take any of the so-called individual problems out of the Mess and attempt to analyze them on their own without doing irreparable damage both to the fundamental nature of the so-called individual problems and the entire Mess of which they were an integral part. In other words, looking at problems in isolation violated one of the key properties of a Mess, namely all of the critical interactions between them. Indeed, interactions are the key attributes of every Mess. In this way, the notion of "self-standing individual problems" is a complete misrepresentation of today's world. As such, it needs to be thoroughly abandoned and thus put to rest.

(As an important aside, Ackoff was the first PhD student at Penn of my Philosophical mentor, C. West Churchman, with whom I studied at UC Berkeley. In turn, Churchman was a student of E.A. Singer who was one of William James' best students. And of course, James was one of the principal founders of Pragmatism. Thus, if intellectually speaking, Singer is my Grandfather, then James is my Great Grandfather, a matter of which I couldn't be prouder. My link with Pragmatism is especially strong indeed.)

There's another important consideration that makes things both much more interesting and complex. The late, distinguished UC Berkeley Architectural planner Horst Rittel introduced the notion of Wicked Problems. Wicked Problems are the complete opposite of Tame Problems, of which Exercises are the prime examples. The enormous attention given to Exercises throughout Education is due to the fact that they're Bounded and Well-Structured, thus lowering the enormous anxieties and stress that are often associated with problem solving, if not Schooling in general.

" $X+5=11$, find X " is a typical example. Thus, following the classic rules of Algebra, everyone is expected to get the single right answer, $X=6$. Furthermore, once solved, Tame Problems stay solved forever. Not so with Wicked Problems. No single academic discipline or profession has the final say in either their definition or solution. Furthermore, they are constantly changing so that a solution for one time is not necessarily one for others.

Putting the two together, the result is Wicked Messes. All of the key problems with which we are faced—Climate Change, the Economy, Extreme Divisiveness

and Polarization, Homelessness, Women's Rights, etc.—are Wicked Messes. But things are even more complicated. Because at least one problem of every Mess is part of every other Mess, all Wicked Messes are thereby part of the larger Wicked Mess best described as The Societal or World Mess. In short, all of the known problems of Society and the World are deeply interconnected.

In this way, Pragmatism not only forces us to grapple with, but challenges us constantly to surmount the immense turmoil associated with the most complex entities imaginable. Psychology is thereby a key element with regard to our ability to bear with and thus cope with complexity. In short, one's state of mind is a key component of every Wicked Mess. Not only does one need to be able to tolerate high degrees of uncertainty, but to appreciate the widest possible diversity of Expert Opinion. (Once again, notice the direct bearing on Covid 19.) Indeed, one needs to seek it out. Once again, without it, one is doomed to falling prey to the Errors of the Third Kind: "Solving the Wrong Problems Precisely." Before one makes the critical decision as to which problem one needs to solve, multiple perspectives are absolutely essential. In this way, NT and NF play critical roles in revealing alternatives.

Since crises are an ever-present feature of today's world, Crisis Management (CM) is also an integral component of coping with Wicked Messes. Indeed, every Wicked Mess both contains and leads to enumerable crises.

(The Epilogue contains a sampling of the various kinds of crises that are connected with and thus are integral parts of Covid 19.)

CM fundamentally consists of Thinking the Unthinkable and then doing everything in one's power to prevent it from happening. But since crises both happen to and are often the result of the faulty and irresponsible—read "Unethical"—behavior of organizations, specialized knowledge of organizations is also a critical ingredient in coping with complexity. This is not to say that all crises are thereby the direct fault of every organization. However, not considering their possibility and thus not preparing for them is.

In order to be as prepared as possible, CM not only necessitates understanding what organizations need to do Before, During, and After crises, but especially why far too many are resistant to CM.

The set of activities that encompass Before are first of all the consideration of as many Worst-Case Scenarios as possible. Namely, how crises can and will occur in the most unimaginable ways—again see the Epilogue—and at the most inopportune times. Second, that none of the known types of crises should be discounted. Rather, the key question is, "What is the form that say Product Tampering or Domestic Terrorism can and will assume such that it's either our fault or does insurmountable damage to us?" Third, how do we identify and overcome the barriers that stand in the way of making CM a key priority for our organization? Fourth, how do we form and maintain Crisis Management Teams (CMTs) throughout our entire organization that will meet regularly, assess our susceptibility to crises, and address if our preparations are adequate?

During involves enacting all of one's Before preparations. If one is not prepared Before, then a crisis will only make things worse for a crisis is the worst time to develop the skills necessary to deal with it. And After involves the most brutal,

no-holds-bared assessment of what one did right versus wrong so that one is better prepared for future crises. In other words, Learning the Lessons from Past Crises is key. Sadly, as I've pointed out throughout, we failed to learn key lessons from previous Pandemics.

One of the most critical of all activities is coming to terms with the different forms and sources of Denial.

In Chaps. 1 and 2 we examined a series of arguments/claims that have been constantly bandied about for *not* getting vaccinated for Covid 19. As bad as the individual arguments/claims were, they were made even worse by the highly disturbing fact that they reinforced one another by forming into tight clusters thereby bolstering one another even more.

While they are by far one of the most distressing outcomes of Covid 19, the situation is made worse by the fact they are a direct reflection of the sad state of Reason in general. The greatest downfall is that they impede our collective ability to tackle the important issues facing us. In short, they are Denial writ large.

The point is that all of the Clusters are part of every Wicked Mess. Whatever the particular case, there are always voices claiming that it's a Hoax, and so on. For this reason alone, Critical Thinking—surfacing and rebutting fallacious arguments/claims—is one of the most important skills in dealing with Wicked Messes.

Coping with Wicked Messes calls for all the fortitude and skills we can muster. Nothing less will suffice.

In the end, either we are prepared for the most godawful arguments that accompany every major crisis, or we will continue to suffer their most horrific consequences. In this regard, let me close with a recap of the general categories into which the major arguments/claims for not getting vaccinated for Covid 19 fall. They need to be taken with the utmost seriousness for with little modification they apply to virtually all crises.

They are presented in the form of questions for they are nothing less than Existential Questions of the first order:

First, is the Threat Real/Believable/Credible?

Is it Serious Enough to be given Attention?

Am I Safe/Protected?

Whom can I Trust/Believe to Give me Accurate and True Information?

Am I being Mislead by False Information? By the Government? The News Media? Social Media?

Is the Government out to get me?

Are the Vaccines Safe or are they the Cause of the disease? Have they been tested enough?

Am I Dependent on Others or do I Know Best when it comes to my body?

How much Faith am I to put in Authorities? In Science?

How much Certainty do I require before I can Function?

The responses to the above lie on a sharp continuum. They range from extreme cautiousness and concern on the one hand, thus taking Threats seriously, to that of Denial and Dismissal on the other. Since the two sides are always contending, they are thereby an integral part of every crisis, indeed of every Wicked Mess.

It cannot be said enough: Be prepared or suffer the consequences.

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