

# Thrivability Strategy

Book manuscript in the making, by Dino Karabeg

*To our next generation*

DRAFT

## Prolog

To many of us who want to be part of a global solution, 'sustainability' fails to be a battle cry that inspires. 'Sustainability' reminds too much of holding down the breaks to slow a process that just has to go through; of trying to sustain a situation that has in some real sense become untenable.

'Thrivability' has recently emerged to replace it. The idea is to see the necessity of change as a calling and an opportunity to make deep and real changes. And by doing that, to lay a foundation for a new era of progress, toward all-encompassing or universal thriving.

We are in the midst of a great breakdown. [...] We are also in the midst of great breakthroughs. [...] As part of the breakdown we are coming to recognize that the way things have been cannot continue. At the same time, 'edge riders' are beginning to see the breakthroughs that are happening: breakthroughs to a human culture that won't just sustain life but will give rise to more abundant life[.]

(Jean Russell, 2014)

In sharp contrast to Jean's are the voices telling us that even the hope of sustainability can no longer be sustained.

A couple of weeks ago (relative to the time of this writing), as I was boarding the plane which would take me from Oslo where I live, to the European Meetings on Cybernetics and Systems Research conference in Vienna titled "Civilization on a Crossroads – Response and Responsibility of the Systems Sciences", I picked up a copy of International New York Times <Endnote: Saturday-Sunday, April 19-20, 2014>. And there already on the front page, the featured article was telling me – softly yet clearly – that we may already be *beyond* those crossroads.

Having started when he was a student at Oxford University, Paul Kingsnorth spent two decades of his life on an earnest attempt to make a difference. Then a couple of years ago he realized (as he told the New York Times reporter): "You look at every trend that environmentalists like me have been

trying to stop for 50 years, and every single thing had gotten worse. And I thought: I can't do this anymore. I can't sit here saying: 'yes, comrades, we must act! We only need one more push, and we'll save the world!' I don't believe it... So what do I do?" Kingsnorth drafted a manifesto nicknamed 'Uncivilization'. "There is a fall coming," it announced. "After a quarter-century of complacency, in which we were invited to believe in bubbles that would never burst, prices that would never fall... Hubris has been introduced to Nemesis." Other people who felt similarly joined him. The mission of the Dark Mountain Project, which is now growing around Kingsnorth, is to help people come to terms with this fact.

Is *thrivability* still a reasonable possibility? Is it something worthy of our intention and effort?

And if it is, can we pursue it by simply trusting the breakthroughs that are already happening? Or do we need to see our situation in a new way, and consciously make a turn?

Our goal is to tease out a clear and practical, common-sense and no-nonsense answer to those questions.

And a bit more than that.

It will turn out that to a large degree satisfactory answers *have* already been given, and also worked on – by visionary thinkers and doers, already a half-century ago. To see the answers, all we'll need to do is see the world through *their* eyes; by letting *them* speak. And that's of course what we'll do.

But *not only* that.

We shall see in the course of this telling that the messages of historical visionaries did not really come across; that their efforts to put their ideas into action did not really succeed. If we would now only repeat their messages – wouldn't we only be repeating the same cycle one more time?

In the pages that follow I will describe a *thrivability* strategy that is already being implemented. And I will communicate it in a way that undertakes to disrupt the conventional communication patterns and introduce completely new ones. That – re-creating communication to enable a shift to *thrivability* – will be a technical theme permeating this essay.

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# Introduction

Is *thrivability* still a reasonable possibility?

And if it is - what changes and what courses of action do we need to focus on, as society and as people, to manifest this possibility?

As it might be expected, the proverbial box will serve us to bridge the chasm between inspired optimism and informed hopelessness, which mark the emotional climate on this frontier. I am about to show that

**No real, sustainable solutions will be found as long as we think and act 'inside the box'.**

And so within limits (of 'the box'), the pessimists will turn out to be right.

But I will also show that

**Outside the box, there is a whole new, thriving human culture that awaits us.**

And so the optimists will also be right, within this larger context.

The existence of the box dividing those two world and realms of possibilities will be my *main point*. The nature of the box, and the way to come out, will be the substance of this essay.

The four chapters that follow this introduction will amount to something close to a proof, or to a *justification* as I prefer to call it, of my *main point*. But this does not mean this book will be a long logical argument, on the contrary! Most of the time I'll be telling and commenting *vignettes* - short, sparkly and sticky stories that one might like to tell over a glass of wine, because they are curious and fun, and because they punctuate a point. Those *vignettes* will allow us to cover a considerable space populated by people, ideas and events - ranging from systems scientists and technologist to social scientists and spiritual teachers - relatively quickly, by sampling and tasting, rather than surveying and describing. My sampling will be personal - I'll be drawing contemporary stories from the work and experiences of the community I've been collaborating with. This will make my telling first-hand and authentic - while still providing sufficient insights to support my *main point*.

Each of the four chapters will illuminate the *main point* from a specific angle; each of the constituent parts will present a fragment of the big picture that brings the *main point* to life.

Each chapter will consist of two sections. You will easily understand their role if you think of the two witnesses that are commonly required in a legal process.

The first chapter will be brief. By revisiting two familiar global issues, sustainability and climate change, we'll see something you might be sensing already – that our conventional “solving global problems” within the mental and organizational limits provided by our institutions and other key societal systems (in what follows I will simply call them *systems*) cannot lead to solutions. I will also point to a tendency to use technological and other innovation to make things worse.

In the second chapter we'll be learning from the past. We'll do that by paying tribute to some visionary thinkers, who saw *the box* already a half-century ago, and worked diligently trying to take us out. The 'two witnesses' here will be drawn from the history of two communities whose insights and work will, as we shall see, need to be combined to 'come out of the box' – namely systemic thinking and technological innovation. This quest for union will be dramatized by telling the stories of two great men – the systems scientist Erich Jantsch and the technological innovator Douglas Engelbart – who lived and worked on two sides of the San Francisco Bay without meeting or collaborating, although they needed each other to complete the way out of the box, which they both saw clearly.

In the third chapter we'll see those two lines of interest build bridges and join forces with one another. We'll witness the birth pains and child diseases of a new knowledge work *systemic* structure with a corresponding way of working, which promises to make the world outside the box visible and amenable to creative exploration.

In the fourth chapter we'll point to resources that become available *outside the box*. We'll see that they are large enough to inspire optimism; that is, large enough to scale to our enormously large problems, and to carry us beyond. The first of the two sections of this chapter will be focused on a specific kind of innovation, the possibility of which has been hidden from us by the very nature of *the box*. We shall see a vast new space on which to continue the momentum of industrial and scientific revolution, reinvigorate entrepreneurship and innovation, and improve our condition *well beyond* what was possible in the just completed phase, during the past two centuries. The second section will be focused on an entirely different range of possibilities, where we take advantage of the heritage of the world traditions to develop a whole new understanding of the nature of human thriving (or

happiness, or wellbeing), and cultural and institutional and technological scaffolding that help us *truly* thrive.

The Conclusion will summarize the messages of the four chapters, to show how the answers to our two questions, and a *thrivability strategy*, naturally follow. Here we shall also call in a few last-minute witnesses, to answer the tantalizing question that might otherwise still remain: If the world *outside the box* is really so much better, what is still keeping us *inside*? We shall see that *the box* is a consequence of the very nature of our socialization, which has been with us since the beginning of civilization. What we are facing is an *evolutionary* step of unprecedented dimensions. While the sight of the box and our condition in it might impel us to begin a revolution, we shall see that it is really a re-evolution that is needed. We shall see that only an entirely new course of action can bring us out, and help us go further.