

HOW CONNECTEDNESS HELPS BATTLE 21st CENTURY AUTHORITARIANISM

by Nadine B Hack

From the Stone Age to the present, humankind has first and foremost been tribal. The need to feel part of a common collective – for survival, uniform culture and values, and an established sense of identity – defines our social and physical DNA. Most tribes desire a leader, the one who establishes standards and practices and maintains order by inspiring the tribe through strength, courage, dogma and charisma.

Not all tribal leaders are Authoritarian – but all Authoritarian leaders are tribal.

Authoritarianism is in essence *toxic tribalism* and rises up in times of unprecedented and often unwanted change. Some people embrace it because it is a fear-based response to senses of loss of personal and national identity, status and security. And powerful despots reach for the crown because, as the old saying goes, "*In chaos there is profit.*" So, in contemplating it, we must examine its contemporary motivators: the multi-faceted impact of the Digital [Third Industrial] Revolution; the downside of Globalization, including growing inequality between the haves and have-nots; and the devastating consequences of Climate Change, which will only continue to wreak ever-greater havoc.

As we begin a new year after the incredibly tumultuous 2020, we must also note the personal, social and economic damage wrought by Covid-19: the soul-crushing human and economic death that all nations, whatever their politics, will have to work to overcome in 2021 and beyond.

Given all this, the idea of fighting 21st Century Authoritarianism makes many feel like we're living in the fairy tale of Gippetto trying to turn the wooden Pinocchio into a real-life boy. Impossible! There's no Blue Fairy to make it so and no Jiminy Cricket to guide us. Why even try? And what would trying consist of? I say calm down and take heart. Crisis clarifies social ills and motivates action for change.

Consider the wisdom of those who fought before us. When a reporter once asked the beloved Martin Luther King Jr. why he believed non-violent civil disobedience could actually defeat segregation, he said "*Because you can't fight fire with fire, you have to fight fire with water.*" The mantra of the valiant Mother Teresa was "*You cannot do great things. You can only do small things with great love.*"

The profoundly influential Mahatma Gandhi who said, “*In a gentle way you can shake the world*” also said, “*If I have the belief that I can do it, I shall surely acquire the capacity to do it even if I may not have it at the beginning.*” The dear departed US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg reminded us to “*Fight for the things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you*” while cautioning “*Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time.*”

The pioneering anthropologist Margaret Mead said, “*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*” And the groundbreaking political activist Rev. Jesse Jackson created a clarion call to “*Keep hope alive!*” Collectively, these and other thought leaders have shaped my guiding concept of “Connectedness.”

Connectedness is a philosophy and practice I’ve espoused throughout my 50-year career generating intergenerational, multi-sector, cross-border alliances. With my company, beCause Global Consulting, and its sister non-profit, Global Citizens Circle, I’ve worked with senior executives, heads of state, and other leaders and organizations on clarifying their goals and tackling obstacles to achieve them by formulating and bolstering foundations for values, trust, ethics, sustainability and diversity, as well as instituting governance structures to achieve these and other goals.

Connectedness is belief in the power, importance and result of unity, empathy, fairness, and the acceptance of human differences. It requires the capacity to examine and expand one’s sense of identity, and the readiness to do one’s own small part in being socially or politically active about something – with a group large or small, local, national, or international. It’s a way of viewing life and the world. It’s believing that all living creatures and the planet itself, very much a living thing, are connected in a fundamental way, literally through our shared DNA – not necessarily in a religious sense or hippie-dippy-kumbaya idealism, but in an actual, factual, physical, emotional, and systematic way.

I’m currently writing a book on Connectedness with a foreword by a true Master of Connectedness, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. His every action is guided by the South African concept of Ubuntu, “*A person is a person through other people*” and “*I am because you are.*”

Until now, I’ve focused on what I call The Four Cs of Connectedness: communication, cooperation, compassion, and consistency as my prescription for effective, successful change within, between and among individuals, companies, non-profit organizations, communities, and countries, *be they allies or adversaries*. Lately I’m thinking of adding a fifth: courage. Not because connectedness is dangerous, but because it demands the maturity to recognize the limitations as well as the importance of your efforts.

Effecting change – small or big – is a relay race, not a marathon. Fighting 21st Century Authoritarianism will not be fast or easy, and it will take action by millions of people, working individually and collectively. Each generation must do its part, then pass the torch of advancing change onto the next. Several generations are currently fighting Authoritarianism in different ways, depending on their issues, customs, beliefs, and history – from stalwart Baby Boomers to spritely Gen Xs, Ys and Zs – especially those last three, because the future is theirs.

Contemporary Authoritarianism, fueled by hate, fear, greed, grandiosity, and in some cases armed with nuclear power, could literally bring about the end of the world. So how can people use the tools of Connectedness to thwart this danger? Examine the processes of The Four Cs.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is the most important tool because it makes cooperation, compassion, and consistency possible. At every level of society, from grassroots local to global, clear and honest communication is essential – not just among those fighting the good fight, but also between “Us and Them.” Every nation, from the smallest and poorest to the biggest and richest has its own version of Us/Them. Authoritarians exacerbate this division to sow chaos and destroy truth.

Digital technology has transformed the way we do (and don’t) communicate, as well as everything else we do. Digitized commerce has transmuted the nature of work and increased the imbalance of wealth. Social media has both separated and unified us, cracking social sanity by creating the illusion of alternate realities, each with their own facts, conspiracy theories and negative perceptions of “The Other.” All tribes fear The Other because they don’t understand it and/or just plain dislike it.

Globalization, intended to improve and simplify international exchange, has produced a distaste and distrust of globalized culture and politics. We want each other’s goods and services, but *we do not want to be The Other*. Turns out (surprise...) that people are very attached to their tribes – their national norms, beliefs and traditions. The resulting disparities reinforce a sense of a 1% elite not caring about the 99% who feel disenfranchised.

Climate change is destroying natural resources and Earth’s delicate environmental balance, creating a major threat to our very survival, with more destructive natural disasters resulting in massive human displacement, increased warfare and conflict, and disorienting climate migrations. This, in turn, has increased nationalistic fears of being “invaded” by outsiders that threaten cultural identity.

In the face of these daunting challenges, it is imperative that more people learn more and new methods of communication, approaching those within and beyond their tribes to gently and respectfully address common and differing problems. An essential part of communication is *listening* because you can't gain the trust of people who feel unheard and unwanted. If we use interpersonal communication-- digital and live – to approach others with open hearts and minds, we can learn to better understand each other and create opportunities for joint action. There's an old saying in advertising: Find the Need, Sell the Want. The needs are universal. Selling the want of improvement and resolution begins with communication.

COOPERATION

In the classic American musical *Oklahoma*, set in the rural southwest of 1906, solutions to the rivalry between farmers and cowboys over fences and water rights are expressed in a song, *The Farmer and the Cowman*, stressing that “The farmer and the cowman should be friends: “One man likes to push a plough/The other likes to chase a cow/But that's no reason why they can't be friends/ *Territory folks should stick together.*” Every population has its version of rival farmers and cowmen. But they share (metaphorically or literally), the same territory and desire: happy, healthy, prosperous lives. Territory folks sticking together in mutual harmony can make it so.

It is ironic but true that while the Digital Revolution and Globalization have made the world smaller and more interconnected, they have also divided us further. The 21st Century Authoritarian plays on this, serving himself and his tiny percentage of supporters by convincing/forcing the proverbial farmers and cowmen to see each other as enemies trying to rob each other of their common territory. This sell is a self-serving narrative designed to avert their focus from their real enemy: The Authoritarian state that seeks to enslave, even destroy them. If we expose this false dichotomy, cooperation is possible.

The old adage “two heads are better than one” is a reminder that cooperation, *collaboration*, leads to the best solutions. Don’t worry that others will steal and take credit for your ideas, or that sharing will lessen your status. Cooperative participation doesn’t diminish your self-worth, it enhances it.

Indeed, “co-creation” has entered the popular lexicon – but do we embrace it? If we cling to the idea that our individual power comes from being the sole keeper of knowledge, contacts or skills, we take our eyes off the prize. The more we engage with each other, making our egos less important than our broader goals, the better “the whole” functions – and we increase our chances of being successful with our own endeavors.

COMPASSION

Compassion is the bedrock of Connectedness. Without compassion for others, and ourselves, there's very little motivation to communicate or cooperate. The late US Congressman and longtime civil rights activist, John Lewis, wrote in an op-ed piece published posthumously, "*Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division.*" His life's work was an example of what the American psychologist, author, and proponent of Buddhist meditation, Tara Brach, calls "Radical Compassion."

How do we lay down our burdens of division? Compassion, particularly for those from other tribes, is difficult for many. Some may feel that sympathy, empathy, sharing, connecting, will rob them of what they have. Frequently those who once had the least but managed to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" have contempt for those who haven't done so as well. Never mind that many of those who suffer the most and have the least have no proverbial boots and therefore no bootstraps.

It's easier to feel sorry for ourselves and *envy those who have more* than it is to be grateful for what we do have and be willing to share it with those who have less. Until the majority of us can see ourselves compassionately as one human family, our rogue relatives, the 1% who have most of everything and are determined to keep it at all costs, will prevail – by Authoritarian means if necessary.

Compassion, which unites us as humans, begins at a personal level then extends from community to the world at large. But cultural differences are big humps to get over. For example, the French see themselves as a bedrock of democracy, having brought down Louis XVI and [eventually] fighting Hitler. Recently however, right-wing and Authoritarian sentiments have begun to creep into France, posing new threats to both native and immigrant populations with growing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Similarly, Germany, which unified after the fall of the Berlin Wall and dealt forthrightly with its Nazi past, is seeing an alarming increase in Neo-Nazi sympathies and activities. Germany is not a melting pot – and it's boiling over. Much of this can be attributed to the influx of over 12 million refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Southern and Eastern Europe.

We see this in other parts of Europe, the UK, Africa and the US. For so long, America, for all its historic sins and systemic inequities, behaved and was seen as the world's most successful democracy. But a mere four years of a president who governed like an autocrat and cuddled up to the planet's top Authoritarians has divided America in ways not witnessed since the Civil War.

CONSISTENCY

It is not enough to take on a cause or project, achieve a modicum of success, then walk away, patting ourselves on the back for a job well done. The exhausting truth is that the job is never done. Constant oversight and adjustments are critical. Tremendous, even modest, advancement must be continually increased and the methods that achieved it must be shared and duplicated.

You may be determined to do civic and civil battle against the rise of 21st Century Authoritarianism. You may strive for human mutuality and seek Islands of Sanity. You may look for strategies and hopeful signs that progress is possible. Yet it's hard to function in the dark. But slipping into despair, bemoaning the darkness instead of amplifying the voices of light is pointless – and this is where the fifth "C" of Courage comes in. Whether or not you're religious, the biblical adage "*Act as if you have faith and faith will be given to you*" applies. I say, "*Faith is believing despite the evidence and then working to make the evidence change.*" That requires a long-haul view of change – the relay race instead of the marathon.

In conclusion, I urge you to have faith in the power of Connectedness, even if on first consideration it seems unrealistic or idealistic. Think of the famous Aspen Trees, the largest living organism on Earth, over 106 acres of a single root system supporting hundreds of seemingly separated towering trees spaced out like the columns of the Parthenon (not just in Utah; they continue in Colorado). But take heed: The Aspens are in poor health because *they have not been consistently nurtured and guarded.*

Humanity may appear to be disconnected – but that's just the surface view. At our core we are intricately, intimately connected and that relationship is the route to social change. Connectedness gives us the best chance of saving humanity, saving the planet, and cementing political and social systems that help us thrive rather than dividing and destroying us. So, take a deep breath. Figure out what you want to do, then find others to work with you. And as a symbolic reminder, put a plant on your windowsill. Name it. Water it. Feed it. Then act as if meaningful change can be achieved – and it will be.