

A Greater Force than the Challenges We Are Now Facing

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We are living in very complex and challenging times. More and more people, in more and more parts of the world, are coming to the conclusion that all of us have important responsibilities associated with resolving a significant number of very serious challenges. Currently, here in the United States, the crisis in the financial markets has become the challenge regarded as most in need of urgent resolution.

This writer has viewed or heard observations and commentary on the nature of this financial market crisis, and descriptions of possible solutions, from many credible sources—as a result of access to the Internet, and access to programming provided by C-Span (a private, non-profit company, created in 1979 by the cable television industry to provide public access to the political process). In the context of this essay, this writer will make reference to two comments made by Dr. Peter R. Orszag, who is Director of the Congressional Budget Office (briefly, a government agency with a mandate to assist the House and Senate Budget Committees). One comment is from his testimony before the Committee on the Budget, U.S. House of Representatives, on September 24, 2008 (“Federal Responses to Market Turmoil”)(testimony accessible at <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/97xx/doc9767/09-24-MarketTurmoil.pdf>), and one from the Director’s Blog section of the Congressional Budget Office’s website [see blog entry titled “Troubled Assets Relief Act and Insolvencies” (September 25, 2008) at <http://cboblog.cbo.gov/>].

Why Confidence is Dissipating: Yet Another Viewpoint

Consider first this comment:

“Over the past several weeks, the collapse of confidence in financial markets has become particularly severe.” (Dr. Peter R. Orszag, House Budget Committee Testimony, see p. 3, 3rd paragraph)

It is this writer’s interpretation that Dr. Orszag’s comments in this particular testimony focus primarily on the kind of “confidence” which is built up or dissipated depending on whether there is more or less certainty about the structure and systems of the financial markets. It is also this writer’s interpretation that much of the observations and commentary he viewed or heard relating to the financial crisis focused on the structure and systems of the financial markets—in accordance with the view that the financial markets are the “grid” through which transactions are conducted, and if the “power stations” are constrained from generating “current”, there will be a limit to the number of financial transactions which can be “conducted”, no matter what else happens.

This writer believes that it will always be helpful for people with much experience in the related fields to assist the general public in understanding of the structure and the systems associated with financial and economic markets. However, public discourse of this nature will consistently fail to provide sufficient

understanding of how to build up “confidence” as long as it cannot or will not identify enough of the “whole picture” to properly serve the needs of the problem solving process. For *true confidence* is never really built up by merely convincing a majority of the people involved that they *believe* the markets are based on sound and practical principles; *true confidence* is built up because people believe that the efforts of everyone working together is a greater force *than the challenges they are facing*. In accordance with this point of view, confidence is dissipating rather than being built up—particularly in the United States—because our public discourse does not honestly and truthfully identify enough of the actual challenges we are now facing for all of us—collectively—to **know** that our efforts will be enough to overcome them.

How We Can Know Which Institutions Are More Likely to be Solvent in the Future

Here this writer will acknowledge that specific expectations are created by the above discussion: in particular, that this writer can offer a sufficiently compelling approximation of the “whole picture” with regard to the challenges which we are facing—and that this writer can provide suggestions for how we can arrive at **knowing** that our efforts will be enough to resolve those challenges. And here he will assure readers that he intends to fulfill those expectations. But first, it will be helpful to consider one additional comment from Dr. Peter R. Orszag, this one from the blog he provides as Director of the Congressional Budget Office (from September 25, 2008):

“As I stated in my testimony yesterday before the House Budget Committee, the current crisis is fundamentally one of collapsing confidence in the financial markets and ‘providing more transparency about the lack of solvency at specific institutions may be necessary to restore trust in the financial system.’ In other words, to restore confidence, participants in the financial markets need more clarity about which institutions are solvent and which are not. To the extent proposals like the Treasury one can accomplish this end, it would be a step toward resolving the crisis, not worsening it.” (see above reference, paragraph 3)

As a way of expanding on the above observation, this writer would add that *everyone* would be more confident if there was also more clarity about which institutions—*of every kind*—were more likely to be solvent **in the future**, and which less likely. But unless we can see into the future somehow, how can we be sure which institutions are more likely to be solvent in the future? This writer believes that even though we cannot see into the future, **we can achieve much more clarity than we have now about which institutions—of every kind—are more likely to be solvent in the future**. We can do so by being more honest and truthful in our public discourse. In our own personal lives, honesty, responsibility, transparency and confidence are all mutually supportive... we must find ways to inspire, encourage, and support honesty, responsibility, and transparency in our public discourse. Returning to the “electricity” metaphor, when the “power stations” are more honest, responsible, and transparent, the “current” more naturally flows to the institutions which are most critical to overcoming the challenges ahead.

We are living in very complex and challenging times. Currently, here in the United States, the crisis in the financial markets has become the challenge regarded as most in need of urgent resolution. However, there are other crises which are also in need of urgent resolutions, both here in the United States, and in other parts of the world. This writer identifies the following five challenges as sufficient to suggest that we—collectively—are in urgent need of problem solving on a scale most of us have never known before:

- a) global warming and reducing carbon emissions
- b) peak oil and reducing dependence on petroleum based products

- c) global inequities and the tragic cycles of malnutrition, disease, and death
- d) an increasing world population requiring more resources when many resources are becoming more scarce (*with a special emphasis* on the increasing number of people who are consuming resources and ecological services *indiscriminately*)
- e) there still seems to be a majority of people on the planet who do not have a clear understanding, well-grounded in personal experience, of which basic elements of community life and cultural traditions lead to mutually beneficial understandings, which lead to cycles of violence—and why it is so important for people to achieve clarity on this subject.

There may be many readers who disagree with the emphasis on these particular challenges. Those readers may then just consider the above list *as an example* which will serve to illustrate how we can answer the question raised above: “Can we really **know** which institutions are more likely to be solvent in the future, and which are less likely?” Here is how we can **know**. Earlier in this essay, this writer stated the following:

“... *true confidence* is built up because people believe that the efforts of everyone working together is a greater force than the challenges they are facing. In accordance with this point of view, confidence is dissipating rather than being built up—particularly in the United States—because our public discourse does not honestly and truthfully identify enough of the actual challenges we are now facing for all of us—collectively—to **know** that our efforts will be enough to overcome them.”

The above challenges identified by this writer may or may not be the challenges other people would identify as the five challenges most in need of urgent resolution, but the most important points to be made here are as follows:

- 1) if public discourse does not honestly and truthfully identify enough of the actual challenges we are now facing for all of us—collectively—to **know** that our efforts will be enough to overcome them—how will it ever be possible to build **true confidence**?
- 2) if our public discourse does succeed in bringing to the forefront enough of the actual challenges we are now facing—and also contributes to the creation of a greater force (in the form of high levels of citizen participation in local, regional, national, and international action plans) than the actual challenges—then we will have established a high degree of *true confidence* about what institutions will be more likely to be solvent in the future (*i.e. the ones which will be most helpful to us in overcoming the challenges ahead*).

What then do we need to do? We need our public discourse to be as honest, responsible, and transparent as possible, so we can identify, nurture, support, and sustain ways to build a collective force greater than the challenges we are now facing. The remaining part of this essay will focus on how we, collectively—through the efforts we can make in the everyday circumstances of our lives (by deliberately focusing our time, energy, and money)—can become that greater force.

Creating a Multiplier Effect of a Positive Nature: The “1000Communities²” Proposal

In 1984, the non-profit organization Chattanooga Venture [Chattanooga, Tennessee (USA)] organized a Community Visioning Initiative that attracted more than 1,700 participants, and produced 40 community goals—which resulted in the implementation of 223 projects and programs, the creation of 1,300 permanent jobs, and a total financial investment of 793 million dollars. (For source references, see p. 9 of the “1000Communities²” proposal)

This writer has recently created a 161 page proposal which expands on the community building tools used in the above mentioned Community Visioning effort, and which is tailored specifically so that it will be possible for communities of people to overcome even the most profound challenges. The proposal is titled “1000Communities²”.

The “1000Communities²” proposal advocates organizing and implementing Community Visioning Initiatives in 1000 communities (communities—or segments of rural areas, towns, or cities—with populations of 50,000 or less) around the world

1. which are time-intensive, lasting even as much as 1½ years (18 months), so as to give as much importance to developing a close-knit community as it does to
 - a) accumulating and integrating the knowledge and skill sets necessary for the highest percentage of people to act wisely in response to challenges identified as priority challenges
 - b) helping people to deliberately channel their time, energy, and money into the creation of “ways of earning a living” which are directly related to resolving high priority challenges
 - c) assisting with outreach, partnership formation, and development of service capacity for a significant number of already existing (or forming) organizations, businesses, institutions, and government agencies
 - d) helping to build a high level of consensus for specific action plans, which will help inspire additional support from people, businesses, organizations, institutions, and government agencies with significant resources
2. which expand on the concept of “Community Teaching and Learning Centers” (created by the “Teachers Without Borders” organization) so that such local community points of entry function as information clearinghouses, meeting locations, educational centers for ongoing workshops (on a broad range of topics related to the Community Visioning Process, and to building the local knowledge base), practice sites for developing “teacher-leaders”, a location for an ongoing “informal” “Community Journal”, a location for listing employment opportunities—and provide a means of responding quickly (by changing the emphasis of workshop content) to new urgencies as they arise
3. and which suggest—as a way of emphasizing the need for an exponential increase in compassion for our fellow human beings—that communities (with the resources to do so) enter into “sister community” relationships with communities in other countries where there has been well documented calls for assistance with basic human needs.

What are Community Visioning Initiatives?

Here it may be necessary to pause for a moment... for there is good reason to imagine that there are many people who do not know what a Community Visioning Initiative is. Unfortunately, at this particular point in time, there seems to be *many* important initiatives which are critical to overcoming the challenges of our times, but which are not quite “coming through the mist as much as they should be.” Thus, this writer believes it may be very helpful, as a supplement to the above proposal description, to offer in this place a brief “primer” on Community Visioning Initiatives. This “primer” is an excerpt from the “1000Communities²” proposal, mentioned above. It is worth noting that although there are at least 100 cities and towns in the United States which have carried out strategic visioning initiatives or community visioning initiatives, and although some of these initiatives have been time-intensive as suggested by the above proposal, there have not been any such initiatives—that this writer

is aware of—which identify community visioning initiatives as a “centerpiece” for problem solving as it might relate to the five challenges listed above... and thus as a “centerpiece” for helping us—collectively—to become a greater force than the challenges we are now facing.

Here is the excerpt from the “1000Communities2” proposal, offered as a brief “primer” on Community Visioning Initiatives.

[beginning of excerpt...]

[From Section 3—“A Summary of the Potential of Community Visioning Initiatives”]
(see pages 5-9 in the “1000Communities2” proposal)

A. What are Community Visioning Initiatives?

1. Well organized efforts to identify problems and brainstorm solutions are a universally recognized approach to problem solving which is commonly used in family, community, business, and government settings in every part of the world.
2. In its most basic format, a Community Visioning Initiative (CVI) is simply a more comprehensive variation of the above mentioned approach to problem solving.
3. Community Visioning Initiatives (CVIs) are especially useful as a means of increasing or maximizing citizen participation in the planning phase of community revitalization efforts.
4. In 1984, the non-profit organization Chattanooga Venture [Chattanooga, Tennessee (USA)] organized a Community Visioning Initiative that attracted more than 1,700 participants, and produced 40 community goals—which resulted in the implementation of 223 projects and programs, the creation of 1,300 permanent jobs, and a total financial investment of 793 million dollars. (For source references, see p. 9 of the “1000Communities²” proposal)
5. Community Visioning Initiatives (CVIs) can be described as a series of community meetings designed to facilitate the process of brainstorming ideas, organizing the ideas into goals, prioritizing the goals, and identifying doable steps.
6. Many CVIs have followed a model which has three basic steps, and which requires 3 to 6 months to complete (this is a variation of the “Oregon Model”²):

a) Where are we now? (or What are we now?)

An assessment which incorporates:

- Community Values
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Most Difficult Challenges
- Most Valuable Resources

b) Where do we want to go? (or What do we want to be?)

Brainstorming and strategic planning sessions which involve:

- Brainstorming Positive or Desirable Community Improvements
- Developing these Ideas into Practical Goals
- Prioritizing the Goals

c) How can we get there?

Brainstorming and/or focus group sessions which answer the questions:

What action plans will help us achieve our goals?

Who will implement the action plans?

How will they be implemented? (With what funding?)

How will we know if our efforts are achieving the desired results?

7. Many CVIs require steering committees, preliminary surveys or assessments, workshops, task forces, and collaboration between many organizations, government agencies, businesses, and educational institutions—and seek to build up consensus in the community for specific goals and action plans by encouraging a high level of participation by all residents.

8. This “1000Communities²” proposal incorporates input from many different fields of activity, and emphasizes a time-intensive approach to Community Visioning, which may take up to 1^{1/2} years (18 months) to complete. (For more details, see Section 6 “A 15 Step Outline for a ‘1000Communities²’ Version of a Community Visioning Initiative” of the “1000Communities²” proposal.)

[end of excerpt]

An Additional Note: The “1000Communities²” version of a Community Visioning Initiative includes a step (Step 12) which is described as follows: “Summary Presentations and Job Fairs”. Here is an excerpt relating to job fairs, from p. 39 of the “1000Communities²” proposal: “The job fairs which come at the end of the CVI process provide opportunities for all key stakeholders in the community (businesses, organizations, institutions, government, etc.) to demonstrate their upgraded awareness—and their interest in the welfare of the community—by offering and facilitating new employment opportunities...”

If even a few....

There are many important initiatives which are critical to overcoming the challenges of our times, but which are not quite “coming through the mist as much as they should be.” Community Visioning Initiatives can be very helpful in exactly these kinds of circumstances, as this community building tool encourages and facilitates the creation of a “constellation” of initiatives by which the best (*in view of the participants in the community visioning initiatives*) solutions to the most difficult (*in the view of the participants in the community visioning initiatives*) challenges can bubble up to the surface, be recognized as priorities, and therefore be brought forward as appropriate recipients of people’s time, energy, and money. Many people can realize the wisdom of deliberately focusing the way they spend their time, energy, and money. The result can be a deliberate increase in the “ways of earning a living” which are directly related to overcoming the challenges identified by residents as priority challenges. As the ancient Chinese proverb says: “Many hands make much work light.”

If even a few of these kind of Community Visioning Initiatives generated results similar to those achieved by the Chattanooga, Tennessee (USA) Visioning Initiative carried out in 1984 (see references in both of the last two sections of this essay), people in all parts of the world—keenly attuned when it comes to resolving challenges which require urgent solutions at all levels of society— *could be* inspired to carry out similar Community Visioning Initiatives. And if many communities carried out similar initiatives, and also achieved significant results, our collective capacity to resolve the challenges of our times *would surely* begin to accumulate at an accelerating rate.

Concluding Comments

“...the soundness of ideas must be tested finally by their practical application. When they fail in this—that is, when they cannot be carried out in everyday life producing lasting harmony and satisfaction and giving real benefit to all concerned—to oneself as well as to others—no ideas can be said to be sound and practical.”

(D.T. Suzuki, from “Essays in Zen Buddhism”)

Are our economic and financial markets based on sound and practical principles? Are our government and educational institutions being honest, responsible, and transparent about the challenges we are now facing, so that we may be *truly confident* that our efforts will be enough to overcome the challenges of our times? Which institutions—*of every kind*—will be more likely to be solvent and sustainable into the foreseeable future, and which less likely?

The above mentioned “1000Communities²” proposal suggests one way in which a significant majority of people can attain a high degree of *true confidence* that economic and financial markets, government and educational institutions—and all other fields of activity which have a significant role in determining the quality of everyday community life—are based on sound and practical principles, and are likely to be solvent and sustainable into the foreseeable future.

Everyone is involved when it comes to determining the markets which supply the “ways of earning a living”. All of us have important responsibilities associated with resolving a significant number of very serious challenges in the months and years ahead. Communities of people can deliberately create countless “ways of earning a living” which contribute to the peacebuilding, community revitalization, and ecological sustainability efforts necessary to overcome the challenges of our times. *We—collectively—can become a greater force than the challenges we are now facing.*

Even now, as you are reading this, truly inspiring contributions of genuine goodwill are being generated in a variety of ways—and in a variety of circumstances—by countless numbers of people in communities around the world. A combination of Community Visioning Initiatives, “Community Teaching and Learning Centers” and “sister community” relationships can bring to light the many truly inspiring contributions of genuine goodwill in your community and region, and contribute much to the building of “close-knit” communities of people... communities with a healthy appreciation for each others strengths, communities with a well-developed capacity to resolve even the most difficult challenges—and communities which demonstrate a high level of compassion for their fellow human beings.

Note: In light of the urgent need to increase collaboration between diverse communities of people, anyone may access all IPCR documents (including the above mentioned 161 page “1000Communities²” proposal) for free, at the website of The Interfaith Peacebuilding and Community Revitalization (IPCR) Initiative (www.ipcri.net). In addition, this writer has created an “Educational Materials Outreach Package” which introduces the “1000Communities²” proposal, and which is also accessible for free (see the bottom of The IPCR Initiative homepage).

With much hope for a more peaceful and sustainable future,

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