

Yes! Our World Is Complex, But What Does That Mean?

It may be more than you can imagine.

A WIDER LENS BLOG by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri
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“Between us is the genesis of ability to perceive and respond to the complexity of this time.”

—Nora Bateson

I doubt if anyone can deny that we live in a complex world. And who can disagree with the dictionary definition of complexity: the "quality or state of being composed of interconnected parts"?

There are no opposites

If you take the time to look, it is obvious that the yin and yang of nature depends on collaboration to survive. The Greek word for earth, "Gaia," means that our planet exists as a living entity which is more than the

sum if its parts. There really are no opposites — there is yang in the yin, and yin in the yang. Dichotomies and supposed opposites have been imposed on us through cultural constraints and manipulation. If we learned anything from the ecological movement of the 60s and Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," everything is not only connected, but also interdependent.

Humans, who may be the biggest threat to nature, have many different identities, temperaments, and class distinctions; however, we all have a role in our survival. We are workers, parents, teachers, lovers, politicians, and so on. Yet what does it mean to be part of this complex world and not just recognizing our connections, but being capable of understanding them?

We need multiple solutions

Scientists universally agree that our planet's climate is crying out for help. There is no shortage of instances where human-made disasters exist. Yet, what makes it difficult to address is that we humans seem to be vulnerable to acts of divisiveness and violence, not to mention large gaps in economic standing, privilege, and power. This creates barriers to the needed collaboration that sustains the complexities of nature.

Cheryl Dahle, founder of the nonprofit Systems Change Incubator, Future of Fish, asserts that "Complexity means that even the smartest person cannot come up with the solution, which means there is no one solution. You need multiple solutions working in concert on different facets of the problem." So, what is the wisdom of respecting complexity? To start, being mindful in the present allows you to have a beginner's mind and be a participant observer of all that nature can teach us. With this wider lens, you can expand your view of how patterns connect and identify the interdependency of what makes up your surroundings.

The wisdom of complexity

Once you accept this way of observing, it becomes easier to see how there are multiple ways of assessing and defining situations. In fact, quantum physics asserts convincingly that we can deal with problems by having many different views of how things exist, and they all can be correct. This, by its nature, is the quest to pursue mutual

collaborative relationships and to learn from each other. It is a place where you and others can improvise, especially at those transitional moments from one context to larger and more encompassing environments. This is how nature works . . . where contexts are at the same time part of and connected to wider ones. Here lies the wisdom of complexity, which informs how systems work and provides forums to resolve ecologically sensitive solutions.

There will undoubtedly be unpredictable outcomes and natural fear in this process, since there are a multitude of possibilities waiting to be utilized. Also, inevitable double binds will expose themselves as nature unfolds and unfolds, often more than not providing hints at solutions that represent a unity of many different perspectives. Adam Phillips, in "Darwin's Worms: on life stories and death stories," writes how "Darwin and Freud showed us the ways in which it was misleading to think of nature as being on our side. Not because nature was base or sinful, but because nature didn't take sides, only we did."

The complexity of a family system

Over the past 30 years, I have worked with hundreds of families in crisis, every case different, like every snowflake covering a winter's meadow. Recently I had two parents and their three adult children in my office. I need not get into their backgrounds and Genogram (which provided me with the necessary information as to culture, race, class, gender, diversity, and developmental issues), except to mention their presenting problem was of "communication discord." What concerned me most was how they had been continually repeating roles, patterns, and issues that produced painful grievances and concerns. There was blame and narrow views of "this caused that and so on."

Being that my ethnicity is Italian, I had just bought a loaf of bread during my break. I am not sure what possessed me to do this, but I placed it on the floor and asked each of them to describe it with five different contexts unique to their perspective on life. After a short time, they provided over 100 scenarios, many of which I could not have imagined doing with my beloved bread. The tension subsided, and there was laughter, but most importantly mutual learning from each other and numerous "I never knew that about you" moments.

The subsequent sessions consisted of new dialogues that created a sense of wisdom for this family about how they were connected. The pain of not having allowed those complex pieces of unpredictable information to be shared is what brought them to therapy. Like a work of art, they created new meaning for the future.