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# “Understanding how context moves us and an over dependency on content sucks as a means to being Mindful” by Kenneth Silvestri

By *Kenneth Silvestri*  
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“Understanding how context moves us and an over dependency on content sucks as a means to being Mindful”

By Kenneth Silvestri, May, 2013 (Excerpted from my forthcoming book *Living Systemically: How To Make Your Life Better*)

“The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think it works”

— Gregory Bateson

For many years I have been looking at the world in a systemic manner, how we and our environment are interconnected. My study of anthropology and psychology has taught me that the world, as the Greeks saw and called it “Gaia,” is more than the sum of its parts. This recognition is the basis of being mindful; it is such a profound and different way to view and act on our reality. It is a celebration of “context.” This is remarkably different from our historically narrow dependency on “content” and a misguided belief that the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. Yet the constraints of western technological language and many imposed cultural beliefs have co-opted these holistic efforts to harmonize with how nature or Gaia actually works. This continues to create negative consequences of fragmentation and division within our socio-economic, environmental and health structures. What follows is a plea for the needed recognition, and understanding the importance, of seeing things in context as a means to being mindful.

According to many anthropologists, context is where we evolve. Every interaction is a transformation of experience, as in the metaphorical flash and flow of an Aikido movement (a martial art based on peace and harmony) which I practice or a well choreographed dance. The Latin “con” means “with” or “together” and “texere” is defined as “to weave.” The thing that we call context is a description of patterns that connect and give us meaning to grow, learn and share. In other words, it is how we relate to the total environment that allows a resonance to influence and create not only everyday reality but also our very own legacy. Context allows us to mindfully navigate the maze of life quicker and wiser than our preceding generations as described by Rupert Sheldrake’s theory of morphogenesis.

Content alone sucks because we live in a culture that defaults to facts. Facts and data without context are limiting. Think about this. There is a saying by Alfred North Whitehead, the noted British mathematician, logician, educator and philosopher that “The map is not the territory.” We cannot tune into an energy field when we are only given facts. Try seeing for instance how things are interconnected when using a one dimensional map or trying to understand a complex problem. We can look at pieces and segments of anything but without understanding its connections there is little real applicable wisdom. You can always tell for instance when a politician or salesperson is duping

the public when they distort facts by eliminating the context i.e. “This president is the worse president ever,” or “We need access to guns in order to protect ourselves.” No context just fear.

The ecological movement of the sixties explained how we can be short sighted by depending on content alone. The chemical DDT, for instance was originally heralded for saving crops of cabbages from a bug infestation. There was little recognition of a wider perspective or context. Unfortunately the chemical went up the food chain and eventually found itself in human breast milk. It caused the demise of several species of animals and yet even today manufacturers are attempting to rid themselves of stockpiles of DDT to third world countries. Nature and all that is part of nature, social and biological, evolves through context. Not recognizing this causes havoc.

When I worked on a multi school improvement project several years ago, I would initially assess the climate and ethos of the building context. What was on the walls, the colors, the nonverbal cues and expressions on the faces of teachers, students, parents and support staff? If an administrator asserted that we tolerate no disruptions I would ask how this was accomplished. Usually the answer consisted of punishment. During one project at a large urban high school, I was told that they had fifty trouble makers. I encouraged the principal to round them up and put them in a self-contained program temporarily. This was happily accomplished, however within one week; the staff was able to identify fifty new (previously not labeled) “trouble makers.” Systemically, this classification of students was needed to perpetuate the established cultural context of the school, harsh discipline. When later the school was divided into smaller units based on a climate of positive collaboration and a context that supported a new mission of working from the needs of the students, (not the bureaucracy of the school) achievement and attendance went up and discipline problems went down.

In another large urban high school which had one of the lowest attendance and graduation rates in the nation, I helped develop a test project utilizing the concept of mindfulness through emphasizing context. Half the freshman class would continue their regular home room period as usual. This consisted of taking attendance and reading announcements. The other half would take five minutes and do a simple mindful centering exercise that consisted of thinking of something that each student was grateful for and an induction of being collaborative rather than adversarial. The control group where the context was changed continued doing the centering exercise over a semester, the result was decreased discipline instances, increased attendance, and when surveyed students expressed that they felt more positive toward their peers. The other half remained near the national low in these areas.

This experience motivated me to work with several community based programs through the Educational Improvement Centers in New Jersey. Several community schools were developed using a collaborative context that housed public agencies in the school and encouraged inter agency cooperation and multi age learning environments. My doctoral dissertation was based on these initially successful programs that unfortunately failed in most cases. The answer to why they did not continue was painful but simple, when programs based on holistic collaboration were governed by narrow and myopic bureaucratic based goals the resulting double binds (i.e. yes it is a great idea to have seniors in the school but insurance and difficult stairways just would not allow for this etc., etc.) would coop the innovations. The moral is that collaborative environments need collaborative language, support and representative governance as a context. This is what a mindful community is all about. When the decision making was decentralized and the context represented the life of parents, teachers, students and community members, the programs succeeded.

Here is another example of how depending on content causes problems, which still befuddles contemporary health officials, so it continues. Nearly 70% of those in hospitals are consistently there as a result of secondary side effects of medications and nearly 100,000 deaths a year are hospital caused. It's like the dog chasing its tail. Ivan Illich in *Medical Nemesis* coined the word “iatrogenic” to describe this process of hospital and physician caused disease resulting from quantitative based standards and void of seeing the whole picture. Where is the context that can prevent this pattern? The territory as implied in the quote above is nature itself and it's not good to mess with her. We indeed evolve and grow through context. This is not easily grasped. Our very own language makes this difficult by separating subject and predicate. Integrating ourselves into a mindful framework that

recognizes the interconnections of our existence can meet with great resistance. It is hard to move beyond business as usual, but we may eventually have little choice but to understand how nature actually does work.

At one time in my life, I had received a National Defense Scholarship to study South Asian culture. A stipulation was that I had to study a South Asian language. I choose Tamil, which much to my surprise was mostly based on idioms. The prose and communication rarely had subject and predicates. It flowed like a harmonious rhythm. I started constructing and reframing my mental images with what later I realized was a stereoscopic lens. I was simultaneously seeing the whole and its parts at the same time. Content provides many building blocks but when you step outside of content you connect with the environment and dance with its essence. It supports collaboration because it allows for a sensitivity to adjust and grow from many different angles and entry points. In simple terms context is myopic interuptus.

The implications for recognizing that an overdependence on content sucks is the precursor to understanding that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, a prerequisite for being mindful, or what we now understand from quantum physics is that we can have many opposing views of our environment and they can all be correct and have validity. This is the segue to assessing any dysfunctional patterns and consequent anomalies that will lead to change. This process offers a real means not to mess with Mother Nature.

According to Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese teacher, the energy that is the origin of the universe is the Tao, the oneness of all reality which can easily be equated with Mother Nature. It manifests itself in “Being” rather than “Doing” or “Trying.” We have the technology to resolve many of our world’s problems but we lack full understanding of the interconnections inherent in being in context. The verses of the Tao Te-Ching are full of this wisdom. The message is context over content; cooperation rather than competition; knowing instead of knowledge; aesthetic contrasted to commercial; the whole being more than the sum of the parts and intuitive beyond analytic and so on. Content has its place within context. Facts and figures help create bench marks for accomplishing things. But context, if it is overshadowed by content, will hinder creativity.

Our cells respond to our environment which in turn sends messages to our brain that then releases hormones creating our reality. We are not victims of our DNA, genetically trapped in a self-fulfilling prophesy, the fields of energy psychology and medicine have now proved that we can be master of our lives. How we mature is to recognize our interconnections and our attainment of wisdom understands how we are connected. Content alone brings fear since we cannot conceive what the consequences will be without context. It also prevents us from seeing viable directions. This is the strategy of negative attacks seen in our political campaigns. The Governor of a large urban State, for instance, had recently alluded to how proud he was that he did not have to be truthful. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi who was much thinner than this particular governor and more mindful, referred to the positive power of truth that comes out of seeing things in perspective (context) when he said:

Your beliefs become your thoughts; your thoughts become your words  
Your words become your actions; your actions become your habits  
Your habits become your values; your values become your destiny

Years ago, I had the opportunity to walk on the low tide flats in Provincetown Massachusetts. I remember remarkable evidence of nature’s plan of growth and demise; sprawling examples of death and decay and ever present seeds of growth and replenishment were evident. All this content was within my view. I could recognize that all these pieces were connected, yet was not sure if I understood how. It did not totally dawn on me what it would take to understand these interconnections. Thich Nhat Hanh the Vietnamese Buddhist monk describes wisdom as being able to embrace nature’s intent with compassion. This can be manifested for example by simply respecting that flowers are always on their way to becoming garbage and garbage is on its way to producing flowers.

There are no isolated fragments or opposites in nature, but rather a unity that is in the form of energy that connects us all. So whether our task is as mundane as washing dishes or acknowledging a sunny day, or seeing the Cape Cod shoreline, it is part of a wider connection. In

my case, I was a mile from the shore at low tide picking shells and other sea treats, when I felt the earth stop and move at the interface of the switching tide. The sea had reversed itself and I realized that, not being the best of swimmers, I may not have time to get back to the shore. The town looked so small and insignificant from this distance, in reality it is a thin land mass that is thirty miles out to sea and its' narrow snake-like curvature could easily be overwhelmed by what looked like a violent impending storm.

I thought of the story of a little girl frantically throwing star fish back into the ocean after thousands were marooned from a violent storm. A passerby looks and says to her “Why bother, it doesn't matter, there are so many,” and she replies “But it matters to this one.” At that moment I realized that I mattered. It was in this context of nature's powerful intent, that I draped my cloth net bag over my shoulder and with a strange surrendering of my anxiety, floated toward the flickering dim lights of the town until I felt the sand beneath my toes. It would have been injurious to say the least, had I framed my being as independent or separated from this awesome environment. It would have come back to me with a vengeance if I did not blend with the context of that moment and feel nature's compassion.

The founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, encountered many such conflicts in his life, was once asked if he ever would lose his center. Of course, he replied “I am human, but I get it back quickly.”

Similarly the Dali Lama said that he too gets angry, but he puts things into perspective in a very short time. I always ask myself when I feel out of sorts how I can widen my view and see things in a part to whole stereoscopic lens and find my center. I have done this many times, because I too am human. I also ask myself on a regular basis what does it mean to be alive and how can I reframe being “stuck” in the inevitable content that surrounds me and move into a wider context that evolves into even wider ones and so on.

Lao Tzu bemoans this ubiquitous inescapable everyday conflict resulting from the imposed separation of time, space, and matter and encourages us to step above it and feel the “integrity” or unity of our existence. This is much more available today than ever, especially with resources emanating from the powerful insights of quantum physics which have given us scientific verification of a universal unity. However, we still live in societies where elected decision makers in many cases ridicule environmental warnings such as the Green House Effect that threatens our environment. Abandoning this ecological reality is part of westernization's legacy. It can also be seen in developing nations throughout the world as “technological progress” alters traditional ways, and disrupts centuries of ecological balance. The paradox here is obvious, and the solution is possible as we learn that there can be no awareness of humanity without inhumanity, no justice without injustice and no right without wrong. In the total scheme of unity or integrity, such dichotomies will dissolve when we become mindful by believing that the whole is more than the sum of its parts as in “Gaia” if we can truly respect our interconnectedness and with the advances in technology, there is the possibility of fulfilling everyone's needs on this planet. According to the Tao Te Ching, respecting nature is the greatest integrity one can achieve.

### **Author's Bio:**

Kenneth Silvestri ([www.drkenethsilvestri.com](http://www.drkenethsilvestri.com)) holds a doctoral degree from Columbia University in anthropology and psychology. In addition, he has been the recipient of national fellowships in the social sciences at the University of Chicago and University of Pennsylvania. He has published more than sixty professional articles and monographs, as well as several chapters for books on mental health and homeopathy. He has consulted with many community agencies/schools, conducted numerous workshops on family therapy, alternative education, communication skills, forgiveness and homeopathy. He is an American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) clinical member, AAMFT certified clinical supervisor, Certified Classical Homeopath and an active black belt student of Aikido. Through his overall systemic approach to healing, Dr. Silvestri has assisted many in finding resolution of their emotional and/or physical challenges by assisting them in making mindfulness and context an effective tool in their healing.

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