

# Tragedy: What Futurists Can Do

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Futurists have important roles to play after events like the September eleventh terrorist attacks. The questions raised beg for long-term perspective. And effective decision-making requires big picture, systemic understanding, a strength of good futures thinking.

As a social psychiatrist, I feel additional obligation. At the least, I want to help people avoid being overwhelmed by events. When individuals-and social systems-are inordinately stressed, they respond in reactive and deleterious ways.

In addition, I want to facilitate collaboration and mutual understanding. One immediate reaction to events of September eleventh was a contentious "circle of blame" setting one simplistic explanation-and implied solution-off of another.

Were the attacks simply a product of the warped beliefs of evil men? Were they a reaction to United States' bias toward Israel in Middle-East policy? Were they a function of age-old religious differences? Or was the real cause Western insensitivity to global economic inequities? Any effective long-term response will require a broadly comprehensive perspective and the ability to weave together complex layers and levels of cause and effect.

In response to events of September eleventh I have agreed to write a series of four "letters" at pertinent junctures over the next year. The first two have been written. They were sent out by e-mail to a personal network of 4,000 colleagues, opinion leaders, and media representatives around the world. I've included these two letters along with a few additional comments (in parentheses) made at the time of this article's writing.

Following the letters, I describe some of the thinking through which I reached the conclusions I put forward. All the observations that follow have their roots in a body of work called Creative Systems Theory devel-

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oped by myself and others at the Institute for Creative Development over the past twenty years. CST addresses the mechanisms of change and interrelationship in human systems and has particular pertinence to changes shaping today's world.

The letters should be read keeping in mind both when they were written and their intended audience. Given the immediate need for rapid decision-making, I made them brief. I would have loved the luxury of in-depth analysis. But anything longer would have too often not been read.

In addition, because the recipients held a broad diversity of political and social beliefs, my comments are much more general than they would be otherwise. At times they are also more muted than they would be if intended for a more specific audience. Given the importance of a collaborative response, I wanted whenever possible to bridge across disparate viewpoints.

I sent the first letter three days after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. At that point, my intent was to help put fears in perspective and to emphasize the importance of a mature measured response.

September, 14, 2001

Dear Colleagues:

Below are some big-picture observations on the events of September 11th. I've been asked to write a series of four "letters" over the next year reflecting on terrorism and its implications. I hope you find these observations of value.

Best - Charles Johnston

### ***Tragedy: The Next Steps***

We are in a time of mourning. Ahead, and just as appropriately, will come a time when what is called for is action.

But this call to action presents a complex and hugely demanding question, a question that will stretch everyone regardless of political or philosophical persuasion. What kind of response will best serve us in the only way that ultimately matters, by making the world a safer place? Wise leadership will require a breadth and maturity of perspective we are only learning how to muster.

Our question requires a new kind of answer. After Pearl Harbor the United States faced a clear enemy. The only question was whether they had the might and the fortitude to prevail. Part of our shocked response to watching the suicide attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon came from the immense carnage and the terrible loss of life. As much came from a realization, conscious or not, that the world would never be quite the same.

It is important to appreciate that while the attack was startling, it was not wholly a surprise. Indeed, if anything was surprising it was that something like this had not happen sooner. A lot is new today. Most important, we live now in an increasingly interconnected world. Animosities between neighbors are certainly not new. But the way a globally connected world makes all neighbors is. This combined with huge global inequities made it only a matter of time before terrorism's ugliness, common to other places, arrived on America's doorstep.

That we live in such a technological world is another contributor. We have greater means to effect destruction. And, paradoxically, our technologies make everyone more vulnerable to destruction. What could be a more perfect target than a towering skyscraper holding thousands of people (or in the future our complex electronic infrastructure) ?

Just as important for making mature decisions as recognizing what is new, will be recognizing what is not new. Such historical perspective in no way excuses these horrific acts. But it does help us get past framing what has taken place solely in the language of good and evil (and have our actions in the end only create more evil).

Terrorism is not new. And it has not at all been limited to people who look different from ourselves. The colonial soldiers in America's Revolutionary War were in an important sense terrorists. Their most important weapon against the British was often their invisibility. One might counter that this was terrorism for the purpose of good. But today's modern terrorists regarded their actions, however misguided, similarly.

Even suicide attacks are not new. Throughout history religious and political fervencies have inspired the ultimate sacrifice. The most familiar example is the Kamikaze pilots of W.W.II Japan. But equally good examples can be drawn from Western European history. The "onward Christian soldiers" of the medieval crusades come most immediately to mind. While their actions were rarely so explicitly suicidal, they similarly regarded death in battle as divine sacrifice.

Given all of this, what do we do? To start we need to confront the fact that we lack adequate language for the tasks ahead. The terrorist assault has been labeled an act of war, and in many ways that label is appropriate. More American lives were lost than on any other single day in history since the American Civil War.

But while the war metaphor helps galvanize resolve, the complexities of today's world make it in many ways less than helpful. If we use it, the best parallel is with today's "war" on drugs. Like drugs, terrorism cannot be once and for all eliminated. Hopefully we will get better at countering terrorism, but there will be no end to this war. And might alone can combat neither drugs nor terrorism. Each requires sensitive attention to underlying causes and to the personal and cultural contexts in which they take place.

Our response must have three parts. Like the legs of a three-legged stool each is critical. No one leg can stand by itself.

And each effort, to be effective, will stretch us in ways we may not at first find pleasant. Each confronts us with how very real limits exist to what can be done. And each, at least if adequately conceived, requires us to step outside the comfort of traditional political allegiances. Conventional liberal or conservative perspectives can help illuminate parts of the picture, but neither, alone or even together, can get us where we need to go.

First: Those responsible need to be dealt with, both to lessen the chance of future such attacks and to send a clear message that terrorism will not be tolerated. In some form that means a military response. But for such response to serve us, we must understand how limits exist to what military action can accomplish. We face confounding questions: Exactly who should be held responsible—the direct perpetrators, those immediately supporting them, countries that gave them refuge? And in other than the most extreme situations exactly what should holding responsible mean. Define who is responsible too narrowly and actions taken will be symbolic at best. Define it too broadly and large numbers of innocent people will die. Such would be morally reprehensible and likely in response lead to greater carnage. However successful such efforts, our actions will be necessarily imperfect and incomplete.

*This has been the dominant focus of the first three months. How wisely this response has been crafted is open to debate. The most important question ultimately is how well this leg of the stool is balanced with others. As the old saying goes, if all you've got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The military option is the most familiar and most easily conceived.*

Second: We need to commit ourselves to stopping terrorist actions before they start. This means more effective intelligence. Too it means greater security, and not just at airports-at borders, government buildings, university research facilities, and more. But again we face limits, both to what is desirable and to what is possible. Many have pointed out correctly that imperfect security is part of the price we pay for a free society. But even if we turned the democratic countries into police states, we would not be safe from terrorism. Indeed the effect might again be the opposite. Timothy McVeigh attacked the Oklahoma City Federal Building in large part because he saw the US as already a police state.

*There is growing concern about security, particularly since the anthrax scare. But I don't think many people grasp how complex any substantive effort at homeland security effort would be, and how necessarily imperfect. The debate about how best to balance homeland security and protection of civil liberties is just now surfacing in the United States. This conversation has been dampened by people's fears that speaking out too strongly for civil liberties will be seen as unpatriotic.*

Third: We need to establish deeper and more supportive relationships with peoples throughout the Middle East and wherever terrorism has its roots. The sophistication of intelligence needed to effectively safeguard against terrorism will require the active cooperation of the countries where terrorism originates. And we face the simple fact that just being more powerful is no longer enough to guarantee safety. In a globally connected world, no one can feel safe unless everyone feels safe.

We need to reach out politically and economically. The United States needs to establish more balanced Middle-East policies. And we need, individually and collectively, to do everything we can to counter attitudes that confuse whole populations with specific perpetrators of violence. Even in the most extreme of situations, we accomplish nothing by viewing people who may see us as "the great Satan" as Satans in return.

And again limits exists, here to what even the best efforts at friendship and alliance can accomplish. Inequities are real. In addition, modern Western values are inherently a threat to the almost medieval fundamentalist beliefs from which terrorism arises (a situation made more complicated by the fact that grains of truth exist in even the narrowest of Islamic fundamentalist critiques - I too, for example, have deep concerns for what one cleric called the "McDonald's-ization" of global culture). And even if

the East-West divide was not religious, but simply one of power, the West would still be Goliath to the Middle-East's David.

*The biggest questions lie with this third leg. So far political and humanitarian efforts have taken a back seat-not inappropriately given the need for quick action against the present terrorist threat. But this is the leg that will require greatest wisdom and long-term commitment.*

What these three actions ask can easily seem contradictory. On one hand we need to be hard and unforgiving, on the other open and embracing. A chance exists that disagreements about which hand should prevail may become as divisive as those seen during the Vietnam War.

The necessary decisiveness-the hardness-of the first response may be more than many of liberal persuasion can stomach. And the degree of acceptance, and even forgiveness-the softness-demanded by the third response may only look like weakness to those of more conservative bent. But both are needed, and not diluted by mushy compromise.

*The "circle the wagons" response common after social emergencies has limited this divisiveness thus far. But it simmers just beneath the surface.*

The more mature leadership on which the future depends must successfully get its arms around such contradiction. While what happened in New York and Washington was horrendous, the carnage we might see in the future-for example, with the use of chemical or biological weaponry-could be much worse.

*And now the biological threat has become just as real.*

And more broadly, such maturity of leadership will be essential if we are to effectively address any of a growing array of challenges presented by life in a globally connected world. It is important that we respond effectively to the specific events of September eleventh. But even more important will be what the task of choosing how to respond will teach us for the future.

I wrote the second letter three weeks later. People had begun to get over the initial shock. But for some, it was replaced by immobilizing fear and feelings hopelessness. For some others it was replaced by a need to act, to do something, often without the consequences of possible actions

at all well thought out. Neither response would in the end be helpful. I felt further perspective was called for.

October 5, 2001

Dear Colleagues:

Following is the second of four "letters" I will be sending out reflecting on challenges made newly real by the events of September 11th. I hope you find these thoughts of value.

Best - Charles Johnston

### *Tragedy: What we can learn*

The ultimate task with tragedy is to learn from it. The mourning is appropriately far from over. But much can be gained by beginning to ask where the most important learnings may lie.

We have made a good start with many of the most immediate learnings. Obviously, countries need to give new priority to homeland security. And everyone needs to take the threat of terrorism in general more seriously. That means more focused global intelligence. And it means better preparedness: for example, readying our health care systems for the prospect of biological or chemical attack.

But long-term learnings will in the end prove most important. A friend recently asked me if I thought there was a silver lining in all of this. Those who know me understand that I am neither a Pollyanna positivist nor someone who ascribes to the "everything happens for a purpose" school of belief. But I do think there exists much of fundamental importance that these events might help us learn.

Some of the lessons pertain specifically to making the world a safer place. But many are broader. Understood with enough perspective, events of September eleventh can help us get our arms around some of the most important truths of twenty-first century leadership (and not just political leadership, but leadership of all sorts).

This listing of possibilities is to in no way to minimize the dangers of the current situation. Indeed, I think the dangers are greater than most people are willing to entertain. Certainly there is the well-articulated pos-

sibility that military intervention will only escalate terrorist activity. But the risks are deeper. We underestimate how little it would take to transform present circumstances into an all out war between the Middle East and the modern West. The governments of both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are fragile. It would take only a small shift in sentiment for one or both to fall under fundamentalist control. Combine their influence with that of the fundamentalist regimes in Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan and one has a volatile situation at best. The danger is compounded in the United States' long-time alliance with Israel and the frightening fact that Pakistan has nuclear weapons. Perhaps most frightening, it is not at all clear how best to avoid such a scenario.

That said, it is quite possible that what we will most remember from these events is what we learned from them. A few of the lessons that first stand out to me:

*We are all in this together.*

The observation is trite-and at once cries for deeper understanding.

The level of effective cooperation between countries today is less than we tend to imagine. Advocating global cooperation is easy. But to this point, it has been more a liberal ideal than anything realized. The threat of terrorism makes its need obvious.

It is important in this not to confuse cooperation of a mature sort from simple allegiance. Many have celebrated the coming together seen in response to these events. In the United States, people have set aside daily squabbles to unite as a country. Globally, nations have tempered historic animosities to present a unified front against terrorism.

Such unity is inspiring, but should not be misinterpreted. It holds the seeds of possibility, but only the seeds. Nothing new exists in people coming together at times of tragedy. And there is similarly nothing new in groups coming together in recognition of a common foe. That is exactly how we have most often done it in the past.

Indeed, a major danger lurks in the unity we have seen thus far. It could mask, even promote, more dangerous divisions. For example, in allying against terrorists, we could end up replacing the old cold war divisions with some version of the timeless polarity of haves versus have-nots. Besides being a deep moral mistake, in the end this would only escalate the terrorist threat.



But if such dangers can be avoided, these events may help catalyze a shift toward global collaboration that otherwise might take much longer to achieve. I am struck by level of cooperation we have seen between Russia and the United States. Without these events, the loss of face the level of collaboration might have entailed would have made it nearly impossible, at least in the short run.

*Since the time of this writing, we've see a strong "rally around the flag" Response in the United States. While initially an appropriate healing reaction, it is outliving its usefulness. The media, in keeping with their attraction to simplistic imagery, continue to strongly promote it.*

***We are not all in this together.***

The other side of the systemic coin. We have become infatuated of late, and I think appropriately, with images of a boundariless world. But, in the end, images of unfettered globalism are as partial as the sixties hopes of unfettered free love.

Most obviously, the kind of cooperation we need must be grounded in an appreciation, indeed a mutual protection, of difference. Cultural beliefs in Middle Eastern countries can be profoundly different from those in New York or Los Angeles, and in many cases deeply different from one another. Any kind of meaningful cooperation must grow from a respect for those differences.

With this, global safety must be grounded in an understanding of the power of boundaries. Terrorist networks are an ultimate example of the often idealized, global, decentralized, ever-mobile organization. Confronting them teaches us how to be just as mobile in response. But ironically, at once, it teaches us about the importance of centralized decision-making and sophisticated protective boundaries.

The United Nations has much to contribute to a safer world, but its slow, consensus-based structure makes it very limited for the task of confronting terrorism. And in a wholly decentralized world, our hands would be even more tied. In the face of a terrorist threat, the nation state, and other both regional and local structures, gain new respect as essential to a safe and prospering global world.

*Uncertainty is inescapable.*

It is this that most easily leaves people overwhelmed and immobilized by recent events. Terrorism brings us face to face with the uncertainty inherent to twenty-first century life. It does this at multiple levels, some timeless, some new.

Terrorism means we are less physically safe than we might have imagined. And nothing we do is going to completely rid the world of terrorism - not the best of intelligence, not the best of military tactics, not the best of international cooperation or cultural understanding. Part of this uncertainty is a product of the murky nature of what we pursue and how inescapably it is embedded in its social context. In the end we can't eliminate terrorism any more than we can erase our own unconscious. But our inability to fix things goes deeper.

Increasingly we hear calls to look at root causes, and more specifically at why others in the world could so hate the United States. I applaud such efforts. But the direction such inquiry too often leads - that such hatred is the inescapable result of insensitive and self-centered US policy - is partial at best. It would be wonderful if things were this simple. There would be an obvious solution.

But while the US has often been grossly insensitive, even a bully, in the Middle East, the most enlightened policy would not eliminate terrorism. Historically, those who have power have always been resented. And, at least to this point, enemies have always been part of the human condition. The mechanisms of social identity have required people to view their own as somehow "chosen" and to project their less savory parts onto neighbors. The almost medieval beliefs of Islamic fundamentalism amplify such polarization. The gap between the reality of Middle East terrorists and that of the modern West is a product not just of projection, but of different times in culture. No simple act of kindness will eliminate it. (And globalization makes us suddenly all neighbors, that gap becomes ever more explosive.)

Two additional sources of uncertainty might seem too philosophical to be immediately pertinent. But working with people traumatized by recent events has shown me how these deeper levels can be for many the most unsettling.

Addressing terrorism confronts us with the limits of familiar cultural beliefs. To get past one's need for "evil others" one must surrender also one's need to feel chosen. Absolute social truths - ethnic, nationalistic, or religious - necessarily come into question. At present, the coming to-

gether we see in response to the terrorist attacks hides us from much of this loss of moorings. But it will ever more deeply effect us.

Indeed, truths of all sort become more elusive. I emphasized in my earlier letter how familiar images of war are not enough. Familiar images of peace stop just as short. One of the things that most marks future leadership challenges of all sorts is how simple images can't depict what needs to be done. What replaces black and white depictions of moral truth? What replaces our "onward and upward" picture of progress as what we create gains the potential increasingly not just to benefit us, but to be our undoing? Wherever we look, moving forward requires a new complexity and sophistication of perspective and a new willingness to set aside once-and-for-all solutions.

Surrendering such handholds, whether cultural or conceptual, requires a degree of human maturity and responsibility we are only beginning to understand, much less muster. To have a safer world, paradoxically, we must be comfortable with a less certain world. Our times ask for an easily contradictory-seeming combination of humility to what we can't know and unswerving courage.

*Not only is bigger not necessarily better, it isn't necessarily stronger.*

Such is a basic law of nature (witness the lowly bacterium). The best thinking about leadership and organizational structure today emphasizes that being small and swift is often a more effective strategy than being large and overpowering. Our very success has made us more vulnerable. Confronting terrorism may challenge not just our ideas about effective social structure, but our ideas about success itself.

*We need to never stop asking what matters.*

That terrorism confronts us so directly with our mortality should further contribute to this questioning. There is no more powerful teacher about what matters than the face of death. Certainly the disaster will cause individuals directly involved to revisit priorities. But the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings was a reminder to everyone of the fragility not just of individual lives, but of our collective enterprise. If there exists a fundamental cultural crisis in our time, it is a crisis of purpose. These are times, both personally and culturally, to reexamine priorities, to ask afresh the big questions: What, for each of us, in the end most

matters? What does it mean to have a healthy country and planet? Indeed, what is our human role in life's grand story?

***Effective leadership in the future will require a new depth of systemic understanding.***

Each of the previous observations is in some way about leading more systemically. Effective cooperation will require a deepened appreciation for interrelationship, and also, like all mature systemic understanding, a deepened appreciation for difference. Global safety will require surrendering our need for allies and enemies, even if that makes truth less once and for all. Recognizing that bigger is not necessarily more powerful requires that we think about power and purpose more inclusively. And facing our fragility brings us back to the big picture.

I've been struck by how inescapably the leadership tasks of the last weeks have required a mature systemic response (and gratified - and often surprised - by how well, at least to this point, leadership has responded to the challenges). In my first letter, I used the image of a three-legged stool to talk about the elements of effective response: carefully conceived, but committed military action; enhanced national and global security; and a pursuit of ever more supportive and peaceful relations between the West and the Middle East at every level. I argued that not only was each leg important, it was essential to the effectiveness of each of the others. With the Vietnam War, the polar battles between hawks and doves - setting one leg in caricatured opposition to the others - often had a creative purpose. It helped us examine the functions of war and confront our own needs for evil others. But with terrorism, we don't have the luxury of advocating for just one leg. The leadership needed in these times - and for the future in all spheres - will require not just a larger vision, but a willingness to lie with unfamiliar bedfellows.

The causes of what happened on September eleventh will spawn endless debate, as will determining how best to respond. But the most important question in the end will be what these difficult times can teach us for the future. The lessons I have listed are just a start, those that for me have so far come most readily into focus.

I hope you will feel free to pass this piece along and to use it in any way you feel might be helpful. And I invite your comments. Tell me what you would add to this list of learnings?

I will know what I want to do with the two further letters only as events unfold. Unless the unexpected intercedes (which of course in some way it will), I suspect the next will focus on the third leg of that three legged stool. While the first two legs, the military and homeland security legs call for most immediate attention, the third will require the most of us.

I find it immensely valuable in responding quickly to events like these to have a framework in which to put my thinking. These reflections are rooted in the ideas of Creative Systems Theory. Creative Systems Theory is comprehensive framework for understanding how human systems change and for making sense of the multi-layered systemic relationships that define human complexity. CST offers perspective for addressing many of terrorism's key questions: How do we best understand the animosities felt toward the modern West by much of the Middle-East? What can we say about the kind of leadership needed to address the challenge of terrorism? How do we effectively cope with today's increasingly complicated and often ambiguous world? How do we implement what each of the stool's three legs suggest?

Most of Creative Systems Theory is well beyond the scope of this article. Its major ideas are presented in my books. But three concepts of particular help are worth noting.

The first is what CST calls the challenges of "Cultural Maturity." CST argues that our times demand-and simultaneously makes possible-a sophistication of understanding and leadership not before required in the human story. Many of the themes that run through the letters reflect attributes of that new maturity.

One example is the need to take responsibility in a world that is fundamentally uncertain. Some of today's new uncertainties are physical, such as the risk presented by widely available weapons of mass destruction. Some are more psychological and sociological, such as the weakening of cultural beliefs that have before protected us from the magnitude of life's uncertainty-from gender roles, to once-and-for-all moral dictates, to political and religious dogmas that claim final truth. But leading in the face of either kind of uncertainty requires skills not before needed of necessary.

The need to address new kind of limits further reflects this required new maturity. We face newly inviolate limits, both to what we can do and what we can understand. Some of the more obvious limits to what we can do include environment limits and limits to the safety past approaches to defense and global policy can provide. Limits to what we can understand

include the impossibility of fully understanding any complex human process and limits to what we can predict—such as the outcome of even the most enlightened response to terrorism.

A further place we face this required new maturity is in the need to think more broadly and systemically. We see this in the need to get beyond past defining polarities such as here, ally and enemy or hawks and doves. It is reflected in the need to bring new sophistication to how we think about leadership, cultural boundaries, and social organization. It is there in the need to better understand the multi-layered reasons culture's clash. And of particular importance with regard to terrorism, it stands prominent in the need to better understand how cultural systems and cultural beliefs change and evolve.

The second concept, what Creative Systems Theory calls "Patterning in Time," directly addresses the last of these themes. Most analyses of the causes of terrorism recognize the role played by cultural differences. But few adequately appreciate that the issue is not just diversity—differences in world view—but the collision of cultural realities that derive from different developmental stages in culture. Creative Systems Theory delineates how cultures go through predictable stages in their evolution. It proposes that the assumptions of fundamentalist Islam most parallel those of the West in medieval times. (I emphasize fundamentalist Islam as some of the Islamic world is quite modern.) Ironically, fundamentalist Islam's religious fervency and willingness to die for God is perhaps best mirrored in the beliefs of the eleventh century European crusaders. This observation can help us understand cultural differences. But it also offers that any depth of understanding is a more humbling enterprise than we might wish, and may often be at best one way.

The third concept is what Creative Systems Theory calls "Capacitance." CST argues that any system has a specific capacity for experience. Pushed beyond that capacity, systems regress and polarize. CST suggests that while part of the polarization that makes the West seem an incarnation of Satan is a function of cultural stage, as much is a function of the challenge to capacitance presented by globalization. The chasm separating the beliefs of fundamentalist Islam and the individualism, materialism, and sexual explicitness of the modern West is a problem only because we now live in such close proximity. CST offers that the regression that would predictably occur in response to this challenge to capacitance is a major cause of the rise of fundamentalism in the Middle East.

Creative Systems Theory, as with other mature systemic perspectives, helps bring a dynamism and subtlety to understanding complex events. It help us get beyond one-cause, one-cure thinking. In addition, it illuminates how that present circumstances, while disturbing, could be in the end a powerful catalyst for the sophistication of understanding the future will increasingly require.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that only to a limited degree can perspectives like Creative Systems Theory provide answers. I can lay out with some confidence the steps needed to address terrorism. But "Patterning in Time" and "Capacitance" in particular tell us that the tasks ahead are considerably more difficult and less predictable than we would like to assume. They tell us that subtle errors in our thinking could result in huge unintended consequences. And they offer that it is possible that we could do all the right things and still face a very unpleasant if not cataclysmic outcome. We are that much on a cusp - and that much in need of the best long-term thinking we can garner.

If you would like to receive the final two letters in this series, let me know and I will put you on the list.

