

REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN EFFORTS TO PROMOTE PROSPERITY IN A CHANGING WORLD

I

It was the first I had heard of a *fatberg*, the congealed lumps of fat and waste which conglomerate in the sewer systems of cities around the world. These by-products of human existence are illustrative of several facts: as people we are resource intensive, but leave behind plenty of waste from our consumption; these leftovers are messy to deal with (downright disgusting by the accounts of those who have encountered fatbergs close-up), but when tackled with an eye for opportunity and heart for helping, they can potentially be harvested in a positive way. I heard of fatbergs on the BBC podcast series ‘People fixing the world’, a show about “brilliant solutions to the world’s problems”. I wonder what Peter Drucker would have thought of podcasts? If video killed the radio star, it did not anticipate the popularity of its auditory cousin the podcast, which has grown against expectations to be an increasingly popular medium. Water-cooler conversations, it seems, have shifted from discussing the previous night’s television series to sharing thoughts on currently popular podcast series’. The podcast has also, in the age of withering journalism, provided an outlet for the most revered of journalistic endeavours to experience a resurgence. Investigative journalism has been democratised and popularised: in the hands of non-institutional reporters, it has captured the ears and minds of many listeners. Further, in the age of the 140-character tweet, the art of storytelling has attracted new audiences such that one friend even envies my long commute for its extended podcast time. The humble podcast medium, which began life as a neglected part of Apple’s media

pursuits, has against expectations become something of significance and illustrates Drucker's belief that "no one can foretell whether a given innovation will end up big business or a modest achievement."²¹

The podcast episode on fatbergs described the efforts of an organisation to convert these waste products into a form of renewable energy, thereby helping solve two problems with one initiative—clean up the sewers and provide energy for consumption. However, while the podcast series is described as a show about "brilliant solutions to the world's problems", it is more accurately about *potential* solutions to problems and investigates whether they work. This focus on potential solutions is because, really, there are no simple solutions to the world's problems; if there were, the series would be about 'People who fixed the world.' The verdict is still out on whether fatbergs can be converted to energy in an economically viable way. But, in the words of Teddy Roosevelt, "Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty" and this is no clearer than in relation to the most challenging problems facing humanity. Referred to as wicked problems or grand challenges, they encompass the likes of disease, poverty, food insecurity, coping with ageing populations, and challenges to the environment. These are 'public problems in a no-one-in-charge, shared-power world,'²² and they, therefore, require sophisticated collaborative responses because individually we do not have the resources, authority or leadership to address them.

While it is incredibly difficult to make progress against these challenges, I am intrigued by the people who nonetheless try: some of these are the people of the BBC podcast; some of them are the remarkable people I have met "making a difference" and promoting human prosperity in a constantly shifting world. During good weeks,

theirs are the journeys of “two steps forward, one step back” but often it is the other way around—the arduous task of progress against genuine challenges. Nonetheless, they keep stepping out in confidence, believing in the potential of people to make a positive contribution in their spheres of influence—these are my reflections from conversations with people fixing the world, one foetid fatberg at a time.

II

“Josie is part of a generation raised on hope, rebellion and collective responsibility”, I read on a website years ago. Having got to know Josie better over the subsequent years, I now realise how instructive this statement is of her character: it points to her grounded optimism and belief that we can collectively advance human prosperity—a sometimes radical view which others have struggled to keep pace with. I saw this first-hand when I was lucky to conduct research alongside one of her projects. Not one to spectate on life from the side-lines, Josie saw economic stagnation, the decline of manufacturing (as prophesied by Druckerⁱⁱⁱ), and looming catastrophic job losses in her home state as an opportunity to act—“We know it is coming,” she told me, “so it is a question of what can we do together to try shift to an alternative reality?” This is the question that drives people interested in fixing the world.

Josie created an organic cross-sector platform to accelerate her state’s progress toward new prosperity. The “platform” comprised public forums, conversations and collaborations, which together spawned projects that created new jobs, alliances and ways of thinking about and shaping the state’s future. Josie’s cross-sector collaborative initiative may be the kind of “social and political

innovation” that Drucker had in mind when envisaged the age of social transformation. In a nod to Drucker’s thinking,^{iv} the platform engaged the third sector as another important stakeholder in the collaboration. Further, I saw in the initiative an acknowledgement of the Drucker’s critique of “the sickness of government.”^v Government employees even relayed to me that their involvement in the initiative was due in part to excitement that the initiative was not looking to government for all the answers. However, the platform still recognised the important role which government plays in addressing complex problems in a shared-power world, and Josie engaged some (of the many) talented and inspiring public sector employees in the process.

Throughout the project, I saw Josie focus on people and leadership ahead of tools, technologies, processes, and so on—the preserve of so many knowledge workers these domains. She is passionate about restoring individuals’ *agency* and *relevance* where this has been taken from them by the curious patterns of life. These concepts, so consistent with Drucker’s appreciation of the values of employees,^{vi} are antecedental to individual purpose and dignity. If people are Drucker’s most valuable resources in organisations, they are even more valuable in society; if Drucker’s managers are responsible for preparing employees to perform in organisations, our societal leaders are obligated to empower citizens to advance human prosperity—this is, at the heart what education systems are about.

The forum I attended brought together a cross-section of the citizenry to identify ideas, activities and emerging opportunities likely to propel the state toward a desired future. The forum sought requisite diversity to draw on the collective knowledge, wisdom and inspiration of people. Involvement of individuals with differing levels

of seniority reminded me of what Drucker acknowledged—junior employees are increasingly more knowledgeable of certain subjects than their managers, but managers are responsible for leveraging the potential of these juniors.

Josie’s project has been “two steps forward, one step back”—there have been successes, but they are fewer than hoped for. “Why is it so hard?”, I asked her recently. “Why don’t we have more success stories?”

“It is the reality of collective endeavours”, she responded thoughtfully. “It is very difficult to drive systemic transformation, and very few people have the individual qualities to stand outside the system and hold their ground. These people are there, but they are usually isolated—and they are particularly courageous because they are isolated—but when you connect them and give them the opportunity to do what they do best, they catalyse and they help others tap that incredible well of human potential.”

III

Margie is another person I know trying to fix the world. We met at the collaboration forum which Josie organised, and hers is one of the success stories to emerge from the forum. Of the many ideas identified via the cross-sector platform, the idea to position the state capital as a centre for global bike innovation has advanced the most due to Margie’s persevering efforts. The “bike project”, in short, has highlighted the social and economic benefits which can be achieved by leveraging the state’s reputation for hosting world-class cycling events, its diverse cycling terrain and culture of innovation, and the support of a connected bike ecosystem. A successful bike project could help alleviate complex problems which cut across social,

economic and environmental domains. In the context of economic stagnation, a bike economy summit is scheduled later this year to explore these opportunities. Intrigued by the progress of the bike project, I sought out Margie’s reflections on this contribution to human prosperity.

By Margie’s confession, she is not a bike person, so I asked why she pushed the project ahead whilst others in similar positions decided not to do anything. Her reply, “It felt like such an obvious idea,” was ostensibly a reference to the state’s hosting of an international professional cycle race. However, she was referring to the potential that a connected bike ecosystem could have in “energizing of people through their interactions with each other.” As Margie humbly suggested, “this would be potentially helpful.” Progress also came when she stopped waiting for people to give her permission to act—an existential moment of agency realisation, but it nonetheless took “courage to put it into the world.”

Margie is the special breed of person to which Josie alluded: the person who can stand outside the system but drive systemic transformation by helping others tap into the well of human potential. This was evident when she explained her vocational calling to understand how cities, industries and people mobilise their potential. She saw unrealised potential within the bike ecosystem which could be helped if “it could be connected better.” Drucker saw managers as the dominant leadership group in modern society and loaded them with great responsibility: “If the managers of our major institutions, and especially of business, do not take responsibility for the common good, no one else can or will.”^{vii} However, in a shared-power world, leaders with this sort of responsibility can come from outside major institutions—indeed, to draw together diverse groups

to tackle complex problems, they should come from both inside and outside major institutions. To promote human prosperity in a changing world we require leadership which advances across several fronts.

IV

My friend Philippe cut his teeth in the world of corporate consulting before he was exposed to methodologies which promised results from carefully crafted activities to unlock what he calls “group genius”. It was in this world that we first met while I freelanced as a “Knowledge Worker”,^{viii} not strictly in the Druckerian sense, but as someone part of a transient consulting team delivering events designed to solve clients’ problems. Convinced of the untapped potential of collaboration design and group genius facilitation, in recent years Philippe has shifted his focus to promoting human prosperity by solving problems at a more systemic level.

Over the past two years, Philippe has been collaborating with a group of committed leaders from government, business and academia on an ambitious national initiative—the aim is to transition a country to an emissions’ neutral economy. My research interests and curiosity with people attempting to fix the world have resulted in many conversations with Philippe about his mission. The emissions’ initiative recognises that that single-sector efforts have and would continue to fail in driving this ambition—as Philippe says, “the systemic nature of our enterprise is probably the biggest differentiator and source of hope for our leaders.” Like Josie’s project, this initiative is truly cross-sectoral and draws on Drucker’s views by recognising the role of but limiting expectations of

government, while encouraging participation from the private and third sectors.

As someone inclined to seize opportunities rather than make plans, I was not surprised to hear from Philippe about his recent foray into the French political process. He is now also applying his considerable skill to designing and facilitating efforts to better connect the country with its citizens through practical projects. How does this fit with his stated passion of helping fix some of the systemic problems we the people have created? “Politics is an important force which has an impact on the system” he explains. While there is much taking place globally to support Drucker’s view on the “futility of politics,”^{ix} such positive accounts of people reconnecting with politics are a welcome source of encouragement for those of us concerned with human progress. My reflections on Josie, Margie and Philippe’s endeavours have led me to believe that a certain type of leadership and mindset are required to promote human prosperity in our changing world.

V

The privilege of being a research student is that it provides an opportunity to investigate what intrigues me, but really the greatest privilege is the opportunity to conduct research alongside people trying to promote human prosperity. Such work takes skill and perseverance. On this point, I am drawn to David Brooks’ explanation of the summoned life: the idea that, rather than looking within oneself to find your purpose in life by asking “What do I want from life?”, we should instead ask “What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?” However, Brooks warns that we should be wary of inflating our vocational importance, and we should humbly view our contribution in relation

to the expanse of history: “This perspective begins with an awareness that the world existed long before you and will last long after you. . . .”^x

Where does this leave me in terms of my reflections on human efforts to promote prosperity? Bold efforts to improve the human lot are praiseworthy but my conversations with people I respect hinted, similarly to Brooks, at the importance of humility in these pursuits. Promoting human prosperity in a changing world is arduous and can leave us questioning ourselves. And efforts to change the world are often accompanied by naivety and an arrogance which can set us up to fail. To counter this hurdle, Josie offered me some advice which she distilled from Margaret Wheatley’s recent book:^{xi} “All we can do is what we do locally. What matters is our connection to each other, and the outcomes really don’t matter as much.”

We may not fix the world, but there is honour in trying. The challenge is, to borrow from novelist Frederick Buechner, to find “at what points do my talents and deep gladness meet the world’s deep need?”

ⁱ Drucker, P. F. (1998). “The Discipline of Innovation”. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(6), 149-157.

ⁱⁱ Crosby, B. C., & Bryson, J. M. (2005). *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Drucker, P. F. (December 1995). “The Age of Social Transformation”. *The Atlantic Monthly*.

^{iv} Drucker, P. F. (1989). “What Business Can Learn from Nonprofits”. *Harvard Business Review*, 67(4), 88-93

^v Drucker, P. F. (1969). *The Age of Discontinuity*. New York: Harper & Row.

^{vi} See Drucker, P. F., Collins, J., Kotler, P., Kouzes, J., Rodin, J., Rangan, V. K., et al. (2008) *The Five Most Important Questions You Will Ever Ask About your Organization*, p. xix.

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- vii Drucker, P. F. (1973). *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, 1973, p. 325.
- viii “Freelancing”, as a manifestation of outsource, and “Knowledge working” represent the coming together of uniquely Druckerian concepts – see Drucker, P. F. (1957). *Landmarks of Tomorrow*. New York: Harper & Row, and Drucker, P. F. (July 25, 1989). “Sell the Mailroom”. *Wall Street Journal*.
- ix Drucker, P. F. (December 1995). “The Age of Social Transformation”. *The Atlantic Monthly*.
- x Brooks, D. (2015). *The Road to Character*. UK: Penguin Books, p. 21-22.
- xi Wheatley, M. J. (2017) *Who Do We Choose To Be: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. Berrett-Koehler.